A year of anxiety and compassion in 2013 may need to give way to a year when Singapore talks about shared values and principles.

By INVITATION

By DAVID CHAN
For the ST

For many Singaporeans, 2013 has been a year of anxiety and compassion. There was compas- sion for the victims of the Pop- ulation White Paper released at the start of the year influenced subsequent discussions on ali- ments related to housing, transport and employment. The year closed with the shock- ing rise of Little India, which trig- gered emotions ranging from dis- comfort to fear. Perhaps it is the power of the negatives and its contagion – it ap- pears that negatives are stronger than positives ones, have domi- nated much of 2013. But the nega- tive emotions have also yielded some good, it is useful to reflect on some positive outcomes that re- sulted from the negative emotions and contemplate how we can move forward as a country.

Negative emotions, positive outcomes

STUDIES have shown that nega- tive emotion can impede good judgment but it can also lead to positive outcomes. The narrative that emotion is a beast to be tamed by rationality is scientifically inaccurate and politically self-defeating.

Emotions are not just natural consequences of events or instinc- tive reactions to them.

People experience negative emotions when the progress be- yonds their goals is being obstruct- ed, or when they think their im- portant concerns have been trivial- ised. Conversely, people experi- ence positive emotions when they are making progress towards their goals, or when what they consider important is given high priority. This means emotions can be se- lective and signals to policy-makers to guide public discussion and formulate solutions. To do this, one needs to under- stand and address emotions by linking them to the rationales, argu- ments and goals in various seg- ments of the population.

For example, the strong nega- tive emotions experienced and ex- pressed in the population debate have been concerning the set of concerns such as housing, health care and aging. These are also anger, disheart- ment and disappointment associated with the population debate. The strong reaction to the Pop- ulation White Paper released at the start of the year influenced subsequent discussions on ali- ments related to housing, transport and employment. The year closed with the shock- ing rise of Little India, which trig- gered emotions ranging from dis- comfort to fear. Perhaps it is the power of the negatives and its contagion – it ap- pears that negatives are stronger than positives ones, have domi- nated much of 2013. But the nega- tive emotions have also yielded some good, it is useful to reflect on some positive outcomes that re- sulted from the negative emotions and contemplate how we can move forward as a country.

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