

Jayantha Dhanapala, Sri Lankan and Global Citizen

By Malinda Seneviratne

A couple of years ago when Tyrone Fernando was going around canvassing for the post of UN Secretary General, I wrote an article arguing that I would be a better candidate. It was a tongue-in-cheek affair that questioned the man's credentials to hold that august office. In retrospect I think I was a bit too caustic, but I believe I did make my point for Tyrone more or less gave up on that particular dream soon after.

Jayantha Dhanapala is not Tyrone Fernando. Indeed it was not even easy to put both names in a single sentence. Simply put, I would not humiliate myself by challenging his candidature. I believe, on the other hand, that he is endowed with all the qualities that a person aspiring to the post of UN Secretary General should ideally have. This then is an endorsement, humble and honest, not just because he is a Sri Lankan who embodies the highest virtues of citizenship but he has not allowed this fact to colour or discolour his internationalism, or more accurately, his understanding of human things that transcend identity boundaries, and an expertise acquired through experience and reflection that positions him as a person eminently capable of navigating the complexities of international discourse.

Dhanapala's curriculum vitae is on the internet. You can find it at www.jayanthadhanapala.info a recently launched site which has a wealth of information about the man and his work. There you will find what he has done during a career that saw him hold various important posts in the private sector, government, the United Nations and academia, the kinds of people he interacted with, the subjects that he delved into, the challenges he took on and a sense of what could be called his rate of success. It is all there and there is little worth in turning this into an exercise in enumeration.

One is expected to support the candidacy of a compatriot. It is argued that if chosen the prestige somehow accrues in part to the chosen one's country of origin. I am not sure if this does, though. In any case, nationalist pangs are hardly reason to support anyone for any post. Ideally, one's support should be predicated on matters such as suitability. Jayantha Dhanapala is suitable but that's too bland an endorsement, so I shall elaborate.

I first met Jayantha Dhanapala just a few days ago, at the website launching. I heard of him a long time ago. Having been a batchmate of my parents, his name came up in conversation frequently enough for it to register in my mind as 'Uncle Jayantha'. I knew that he was a 'diplomat' but what the term meant didn't amount to much in my sensibilities as a child. It meant he worked in another country, that's all. Until of course international affair and especially international political economy captured my interest.

He remained Uncle Jayantha, a friend of my parents who had studied English at Peradeniya and who was in another country, until my sister met him in the USA. She has lived in Philadelphia, New Jersey and in Maine and I believe worked for a short time in

New York City. She considered him a friend and always spoke warmly of ‘Uncle Jayantha’. That human dimension meant a lot, looking back. It added that necessary human hue to all his statements and presentations on the many facets of human interrelations he dealt with as per his official responsibilities.

Being a family friend is not reason enough for salutation, I am sure no one will disagree. What really makes me write this today is a talk he delivered at Peradeniya, which unfortunately I missed. I read the text, though. It was the Ludowyk Memorial Lecture delivered a few years ago, the title being “The diplomat as a creative writer – Pablo Neruda”. It interested me that he chose Neruda, who as Garcia Marquez once said, was like a King Midas of Literature, ‘everything he touched turned into poetry’. Neruda is one of the greatest poets this world has seen and I can think of no other literary figure who has inspired me in so many ways. Neruda was a diplomat by profession, but his life work went beyond the confines defined by his job description. He was an internationalist and a humanist.

I am sure it was not just the fact that Neruda belonged to the same tribe that Dhanapala chose to talk about him. Reading that lengthy piece, it is very clear to me that Dhanapala has embraced with great conviction the more abiding lessons for humanity as a whole that Neruda’s work embodies.

Although Jayantha Dhanapala’s name was occasionally mentioned as a possible UN Secretary General, this had not registered in my mind at the time of the Ludo Lecture. Today, when the whole world knows that he is not only a candidate but one of the frontrunners, when certain circles are flooded by credentials and we have a website that carries all we need to know about the man, the most compelling reason for me to write this in support of him remains his fascination with the human condition, as expressed in that talk which not many people outside Sri Lanka would know about.

I am convinced that Jayantha Dhanapala is not someone who will be happy just to represent me and my country at the United Nations. I am convinced that he will represent and/or give voice to the entire human family, regardless of where they come from, what physical or cultural characteristics they carry, what political agendas they strive to push through. I remember Neruda writing something like this: “Ah! If only a drop of poetry or love can placate the anger of this world; but that requires a resolute character”. This world has anger, almost too much to be subdued by love or poetry. If some part of Jayantha Dhanapala’s mind is made of love and poetry (and I am sure it is), it is also made of resoluteness (his track record speaks for itself) and the skills necessary to wade through rhetoric and history, anger and intransigence, and to discover the pathways that lead to meaningful common ground.

This man has seen the world, and more importantly, has seen the human being in all his miseries and triumphs. He knows what to celebrate, knows what to be wary of and I am sure has the wisdom to treat all these with equanimity, which is the condition that will allow him to be the effective global leader he aspires to be.

His work in the UN system has clearly taught what the parameters of pragmatism are. His reading of Neruda reveals his heart and this gives me confidence that he will employ his heart to test the strength of these parameters for the betterment of humankind. It can't be an accident that he has quoted the following passage from Neruda's 'Memoirs':

'I believe a man should live in his own country and I think the deracination of human beings leads to frustration, in one way or another, obstructing the light of the soul. I can live only in my own country. I cannot live without having my feet and hands on it and my ear against it, without feeling the movement of its waters and its shadows, without feeling my roots read down into its soil for maternal nourishment.'

The value of rootedness expressed here, Dhanapala must share. This is important because it allows him to understand other roots and rootednesses, so to speak. It allows him to be a better internationalist, I think. Neruda after all, fierce and patriotic Chilean though he was, never once forsook the larger human community, never stopped celebrating its victories or lamenting its defeats. Dhanapala will bring heart and skills into the office of the UN Secretary General, two things that are rarely resident in a single human being. I am glad he is up there among the top contenders and I wish him all the best, not because he is a fellow Sri Lankan, but a fellow human being who probably entertains Utopias made of similar geographies and, unlike myself or Tyrone Fernando, has what it takes to take us some distance along that less-travelled road. I am sure Tyrone would be gracious enough to agree.