

A FEW weeks ago, I was invited by a local private university to deliver the keynote speech in a scientific conference.

I blinked and read the email again just to make sure it was not a mistake or sent to the wrong person. I have given many keynote speeches over my decades in academia and they have been about architecture, politics, Islam and education – but never on science per se. What's going on, I wondered. So I called up the organiser and the invitation was confirmed. And they expected a title within the next week.

As the conference is in mid-October, I took a bit of time – two weeks, actually – to think of what I wanted to talk about. I decided on "Repositioning science in society".

Apparently, in many a discussion about science in academic circles, concern is expressed that science and sustainability issues seem to take a back seat to the politics of hate and extremism that are so prevalent nowadays. Science is nowhere in the eyes of most politicians, the public and the media.

There is also a concern among educators that fewer teens are opting for science at SPM in Form Five and this will affect the intake of students for tertiary engineering and science programmes in future.

How was I going to frame the issue? I have not researched and collected data on attitudes of Malaysians towards science. After some deep reflection, I decided to share how I myself had developed a love for science on my own without assistance from schools or universities.

Even though I was a science stream student when I sat for the MCE exam (SPM's predecessor), I

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chose Architecture which is part science, part philosophy, part history, part anthropology and part psychology of human behaviour.

So how did I get hooked on science?

It began when my father managed to buy a TV when I was five years old. I fell in love with American TV shows that offered the excitement and mystery of science in series such as *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, *The Time Tunnel*, the cartoon *Johnny Quest* and later, *The Land of the Lost*. There were also some Japanese TV series like *Ultraman* and *Johnny Sokko and His Flying Robot*.

The mysteries of the ocean, space, time and technology began to work on my imagination. In my teens, I began to read adventure book series, including the Tom Swift books featuring a teenaged inventor. I was also enthralled by the works of Jules Verne, such as *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *From the Earth to the Moon*, and *The Mysterious Island*.

I also enjoyed the old-fashioned English language in the writings of HG Wells in books like *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine*. Issac Asimov and his gang were too complicated for me at that age but I delved into Marvel

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Over the top

comic books like *The Incredible Hulk*, *The Amazing Spider-man*, *Fantastic Four* and *Silver Surfer*.

All these books fired my imagination of alternate futures and possibilities with new conceptions of outer space, relativity, time and the constructive and destructive forces of technology.

Becoming a young adult in the 1980s in the United States, I was caught up in the wave of science fiction movies like *Jurassic Park*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Star Wars*, and TV series such as *Star Trek*, and *Space:1999*. This was also when I read Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* and watched the TV series he presented, *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, deemed a milestone for scientific documentaries – I was particularly taken by a line that has become famous: "We are made of starstuff."

While many might forget their younger tastes, my fascination with science remained and I made sure to catch all the science-fiction movies that came out well into my 40s. Later on I also became interested in the Discovery Channel, settling on *Extreme Engineering*, all the space exploration shows, and the vastness of this planet's lands and seas on this planet along with all the creatures in National Geographic features.

I don't remember being inspired by my teachers at school. In the United States, there were professors who did inspire me at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. And I was fascinated by the two elective requirement subjects, Human Psychology and Environmental Science.

Even my spiritual journey into Islam has been influenced by science – Dr Maurice Bucaille's *The Bible, The Quran and Science* was part of my research alongside the political works that nurtured my ideals of an Islamic reform movement. The books published by the US-based International Institute of Islamic Thoughts are also in my library bridging science and spirituality.

In my 50s and 60s, I began to

buy books by thought leaders in science such as Michio Kaku, with titles like *Parallel Worlds*, *Physics of the Impossible*, *The Future of the Mind* and *The Future of Humanity*, among others. Now, with the Internet and platforms like YouTube, I can surf anywhere in search of any science documentaries or lectures.

Why was I so caught up by and interested in science? Firstly, it was a natural curiosity about how things work. I like to figure out how and why things happen or are made. Being an architect graduate suits this curiosity.

I was also interested in scientific truths in religious spirituality. I did not 100% trust lectures by religious scholars and their explanations of the world, especially when they use "faith" as an excuse for everything.

Lastly, I wanted to peep into the future instead of watching it form by itself in an uncontrolled way in our daily lives. I wanted a sense of control and to determine my own destiny.

So how do we reposition science in society so it engages minds young and old? Well, for one thing, narratives about science, both fictional and factual, are not promoted in our society. What does this tell us about our education philosophy, our academic achievements, our political direction, and our spiritual understanding vis-a-vis the natural world?

Boy, I think we have a lot of work ahead of us!

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SUMMARIES

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