

A Life Well Lived

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They say that a life well-lived is a life well-loved, that the business of life is not just about being busy with personal achievements but also about building up those around us. So often, purposes and processes are divorced from the very people supposed to perform them. Worse, people are, at times, considered material to be used, exploited and discarded.

Like many public personalities, Dato' Dr Mahani Zainal Abidin lived her profession. She was an economist and passionate about what she did. And she was comfortable with whom she was. Whirlwinds of activity were not unusual whenever she was around. In stark contrast to those who were complacent, compromising and disorganized, she was decisive, persistent and meticulous.

While she often tolerated fools, she did not accept shirkers — those who took much and gave little in return. Her standards did not allow it. Personal popularity was not particularly high in her list of priorities. More than once, we listened as she shared her distress at shameless self-serving behaviour. More than once, she acted hard on those who had used and abused the system.

But there was another side to her that soon became obvious to those who knew her — a kind, gregarious and generous side. One that took you in, made you feel at home, and proud that she had taken you into her confidence. This was not restricted to subordinates but included her many professional friends and acquaintances as was evident from the many spontaneous and genuine outpourings received after her passing.



(From left) Steven Wong and Mahani Zainal Abidin

Her worldview was greatly shaped by her discipline, more specifically trade and development economics, and by her deep and quiet confidence in her Islamic faith.

When asked what the source of her greatest satisfaction in her career was, she pointed to her being made a member of the Working Group of the National Economic Action Council. Clearly, this was a defining moment, for it thrust an academic into the public policy arena, with all the responsibilities that came with the position. This experience enabled her to get an up-close and personal encounter with economic policy as practiced rather than merely taught. One cannot say for sure what would have been her trajectory had this not occurred, but I would venture that it would have left us all the poorer.

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Although much less read today than it deserves, her book, *Rewriting the Rules: The Malaysian Crisis Management Model*, stands as an intellectual contribution to the whole issue of economic crisis management. Her other published articles on trade and investment, regional integration, labour markets and infrastructure do the same. In the later part of her career, with the weight of organizational responsibilities on her, time for research was constrained but she still

managed to produce a steady stream of articles and papers that were well-received.

I am fortunate to have been able to call Mahani a friend for over ten years and a colleague and superior over the past five.

Besides economics, she also taught life lessons, including this one in her own words:

'In life there are many challenges. I would not call them failures. I believe when a door closes, another one opens, because Allah SWT is most compassionate. It is then up to us to make the best of this new path. The future is not known to us, so the door that closed may not have been all that we expected of it, and the new path is in any case our *rezeki* (the path meant for us).'