

From the Kitchen

2 February 2011



We seem obsessed with best, worst, highest, lowest, first, last, youngest, oldest. Any extreme seems to do. People go out of their way to have their names in the record books. Recently, the world's oldest women died at the age of 115. Now her 'runner-up' is the oldest woman. It is a good thing that centenarians are not often given to bumping off their 'competitors' in order to make it into the record books.

Striving to be better and competing against others can be an ennobling activity but, like everything else in life, it can be taken to ridiculous extremes. I remember at university, taking part in and winning a crazy race. The challenge was to run back and forth over a 25-metre track between boxes of cream buns, devouring a bun on each lap. I was able to run the most laps and consume the most buns in the allotted time. The trick I hit on was to squeeze most of the cream out of the buns before eating each one. I remember feeling ill for two days after achieving my record-breaking feat, but I *did* hold the record.

We also get excited about 'the most' of anything that we have no control over, such as the fiercest storm, the highest flood, the biggest mouse plague, the most destructive earthquake, the longest run of high temperatures, etc., etc. If the next huge flood occurs sooner than the 'experts' expected ("They said that on a fifty-year cycle we shouldn't have had one for another four years.") people blame the experts. I have even detected excitement in the language of a journalist reporting that the previous day's top temperature was 0.1° C above the record set in 1951. Who could tell the difference and who cares? Really, I would like to know who cares and why?

I surmise that this fascination with records is related to the way many people are fascinated with 'information' surrounding sports and sporting events. I have to admit to only occasionally watching sports events on TV, although I was an active sports person in my teens and twenties. What makes little sense to me is all the analysis and discussion after games of cricket or football. "If only he hadn't dropped the ball ...", "If the batsman had just ...". Sports, especially team sports, are played in the moment, with dozens of decisions and judgements being made in each second in the face of hundreds, if not thousands, of variables. What makes even less sense are all the 'previews' of sporting games – talk of who *might* do what and what impact this might have on the outcome.

The same is true for political elections – mind-numbing 'debate' and discussion of what the outcome will be and what that will mean to the State or the country. And it happens with other unpredictable events, such as the Oscars.

What has so many people be so fascinated by what appears to others to be so much useless chatter? Is it because we want certainty in our lives? Or do we simply like to speculate, or argue over imponderables? Why do we put so much energy into things we cannot know at the time or, if we do know, won't be changed one iota by the discussions?

The keeping of records about environmental events, social phenomena, political decisions and our children's growth can be useful when it comes to recognising patterns that might help us navigate our way through life or recognise when something is not going as it ought. However, even though such records exist, as they do for the financial sector, we may fail to use them to predict disaster, as was the case with the Global Financial Fiasco recently – most

people failed to read the records correctly, if at all, and almost everyone was taken by surprise.

Another record that seems to not be used constructively by those who should is the historical record. Aldous Huxley perhaps said it most clearly:

“That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was more pessimistic on this same theme:

“If men could learn from history, what lessons it might teach us! But passion and party blind our eyes, and the light which experience gives is a lantern on the stern, which shines only on the waves behind us!”

What can we do to move that lantern to the bow? Can we teach children how to read the record and how to use it constructively and presciently?

As for me, I am going for the record of the longest-running unbroken weekly column, currently held by the late Krishnan Nair, who wrote without a break from 1969 to a week before his death in 2006. So, if you are still reading my column in 2047 ...