

**Let's Babble** is the sequel to **Babbling** published in 2014. This time, not only is Pauline writing but also teachers from different primary and secondary schools. Also included are three essays written by Pauline for **Action Research Journal**, the annual publication of Fukien Secondary School, Kwun Tong, Kowloon.



Pauline CHOW can be reached at  
[chowlosai\\_new@yahoo.com](mailto:chowlosai_new@yahoo.com)



香港女教師協會  
Hong Kong Women Teachers' Organization

### Hong Kong Women Teachers' Organization

Address: 4/F Rammon House 101 Sai Yeung  
Choi Street Mong Kok Kowloon  
Telephone: 2787 7311  
Fax: 2787 7312  
Website: [www.hkwto.org.hk](http://www.hkwto.org.hk)  
E-mail: [hkwto\\_2006@yahoo.com.hk](mailto:hkwto_2006@yahoo.com.hk)

# Let's Babble



## How *Let's Babble* came about

Last summer, *Babbling*, a collection of my blog entries, was published and almost all of the 4,000 copies have been given out to teachers and students as well. This is great encouragement to me.

So this year, while I continue to babble, I have also invited teachers to babble with me. Their articles are here included. The articles have been arranged in alphabetical order of the writers' family names. My heartfelt gratitude goes to all of them for their support.

Also included are three of the articles I wrote for *Action Research Journal*, an annual publication by Fukien Secondary School. I served the school as the Assistant Principal (2003 - 2004), the Deputy Principal (2004 - 2013) and the Consultant (2013 – 2015). I was also the Executive School Manager of Fukien Secondary School Affiliated School (2009 – 2013) and retired as the Consultant in 2015. These 12 years have given me valuable experiences in both teaching and management and for that I am and will remain indebted to the School Management Committee.

I have always loved writing and being able to share my views and thoughts with others is a dream come true.

Pauline  
Summer 2015

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# Teachers Babbling (2015)



# Thailand: a country of happiness

Mandy CHAN

To most people, Thailand is a wonderful tourist destination: good food, relaxing massages and spa treatments, nice hotels and beautiful beaches. These are what I enjoy as well but on top of everything else, the country offers me something more, that is, the happiness Thai people pass on to me.

People who know me well understand that I always have special attachment to the country. Over the past 12 months I have travelled to Thailand for over 10 times. This summer I spent 3 weeks to travel around in the country. What I didn't expect to happen in my trip is I had food poisoning, quite bad one. I kept on having diarrhoea and vomiting, but still I insisted on taking my friend to go sightseeing instead of staying in the hotel room.

One afternoon I took her to go on a boat trip in Ayutthaya, a province 64 km north of Bangkok. As we were waiting to get on the boat, the owner found that I didn't feel well. I told her I was having diarrhoea and felt sick. Then she went back to her booth and returned with a bottle of liquid medicine. She



poured me two spoons of the medicine and said it was effective for gastrointestinal illnesses. I thanked her and took it without the slightest hesitation. After the 2-hour boat trip when we got back on the bank, she asked me how I felt and if I had dizziness. With her friendliness and care, I was so warm in my heart that I felt much better.

The next day I took my friend to another province called Prachinburi. I still felt sick and needed washroom every hour. Since it is not a major tourist area like Bangkok, there are no shopping malls or chained fast food restaurants, so it was almost impossible for me to find a public toilet. The only option I had was the washroom in any of the local shops. I went into a shop selling local cosmetic products. I politely asked the shop keeper in Thai if I could use the washroom and he gave me a positive reply with a smile. To express my gratitude, I gave him a “wai” (a gesture used by Thai to show respect by both palms touching each other in front of the chest). I experienced the same when I was in Phuket and Bangkok even if I didn't make any purchase in the shops where I used the washrooms. I was really so grateful and impressed by the friendliness of Thai.

Here in Hong Kong what we can see in some restaurants is a sign saying that their washrooms are for their patrons only. Why do people set themselves a condition for offering others help and convenience? Next time when you travel to Thailand, try to feel the hospitality of the Thais and see how they pass on happiness to you.

*Mandy CHAN is an experienced English teacher. She is currently teaching in a DSS through-train school. She has taught both the primary and secondary sections of the school.*

## Cat cafés

Mandy CHAN

There is an increasing number of cat cafés in our city. A cat café is a theme café where there are cats for patrons to play with. As a cat lover, I had loved the idea until I visited one in Tsuen Wan this July.



The café is located on the first floor of an old residential building. There are around 20 cats of different breeds. During the time of my visit, there were over 30 customers, which I think is a bit crowded for a flat about 700 sq. ft. big. Most of the cats looked sluggish and some were sleeping, but still, some customers kept on disturbing them by trying to stroke them, take photos of them or even hold them in their arms. Actually cat keepers know very well that cats need more

sleep than other animals. They sleep 13-14 hours on average every day. Also, cats are nocturnal, meaning that they are active at night rather than during daytime. I feel pity for the cats in cat cafés as they are deprived of sleep. They can only be undisturbed out of the opening hours. Isn't it a form of cruelty to animals?

When I was in the café I observed the following potential threats to the cats, which makes me develop a negative attitude towards the idea of cat cafés.

- It will cause injury to the cats if the patrons or the cats themselves carelessly knock over any hot drinks being served.

- It is difficult to monitor the patrons when the café gets crowded. Chances are that they will feed the cats with the food served, which can cause serious food poisoning to the cats.
- The patrons can hurt the cats if they do not know how to hold the cats properly.
- The cats are more prone to getting sick as they come into close contact with a number of customers every day. Cats can be allergic to the perfume and make-up used by people.
- The cats are left unattended when the café is closed. The result can be disastrous when a fire breaks out. I suppose it is another form of cruelty to animals.
- If the cat café closes down, where will the cats go? Will the café owner be able to find them a home if he/she cannot keep them all at home?

I hope in the near future there will be animal welfare organisations which will do something to draw people's attention to the problems associated with cat cafés.



## A responsible warrior

Phyllis CHEW



In counselling women, a common issue which surfaces is the problem of alienation and estrangement faced in a deteriorating spousal relationship. Counsellors often listen with compassion and detachment; never dismissing, judging, commenting or rescuing; and hopefully through this process, the woman herself will come up with her own answers to solve the problem.

In such scenarios, women often claim their innocence by asserting: "I didn't do anything, I was loyal, I was obedient, and I tried to please him in every way. It wasn't my fault." They assume and become entrenched in the victim mode - that it was not their fault. This line of thinking works in the short run because it reaffirms their innocence and worth; however, in the long run, it completely erases any power that they can have in the situation and over future ones. This is because by psychologically claiming a "blameless" position, they had also simultaneously assumed a "helplessness" in preventing themselves from being victimized again.

It often doesn't matter whose fault it is when one is hurt by one's spouse, friend, parent, employee, peer or boss. What's important is that we have the power to let the hurt continue or to end it. We have

the power to stand up to the perpetrator or leave, or to meekly accept the situation. However, most women assume the passivity position—and wait for it “to get better”. Often, it does not.

Certainly, life is not so wretched! If we are a strong capable person, we learn from that experience and will not allow it to happen again. We all have power.

A warrior takes responsibility for his actions, even the most trivial of actions, unlike an average person who acts out his thoughts and never takes responsibility for what he has done. Top performers do not see themselves as victims. Even if hurt or attacked, they never take the identity of a victim. They know full well the rewards that come with a full ownership of any problem that arises and take steps to prevent it from happening again.

*Dr Phyllis CHEW is Past President of the Association of Women for Action and Research, (AWARE), Singapore; the University Women's Association (UWAS) and the English Language and Literature Teachers' Association of Singapore (ELLTAS). She shares her views on the importance of taking full responsibility for the circumstances of one's life.*

# Packing

CHIN Tik Kar

Every year when it comes to the end of school term, all teachers in our school need to clean up their desks and pack everything to get ready for the new school term. Some schools let teachers use the same seats as long as they are staying for the next school term, but some of them will be assigned other seats. Different teachers have different styles of packing. For me, I like to first look through all my stuff and check if anything can be thrown away. Then, I will sort out those I can give away or return to the right department or place. After that, building those cardboard boxes is a must, or else you will have to use those BYOB (bring your own bag). School provides each teacher with 2 to 3 cardboard boxes, but obviously for those who like to keep stuff, they will need more than 3 cardboard boxes. When you get everything ready, it's the fun time to start PACKING! From my experience, it takes a teacher around an hour if he/she has worked in a school for a year. Time will be doubled up as the working years grow. Packing can be pleasurable except for those who hate packing. You will be surprised when you see something you have kept for so long and yet has been forgotten. It is like, you have found a new toy or got back your long lost memory. I have been teaching for nearly a decade. You can imagine how long I usually need to pack my stuff!



*CHIN Tik Kar is an English teacher. She enjoys teaching and has made some good friends at work.*

# Working Holiday

CHIN Tik Kar

I love adventures; therefore, I travel a lot. A few years ago, I applied for a working holiday visa (WHV) to Australia. That was a country I had never visited before. I didn't know anything about it except it is a land with not much water. I was just like a sheep when I decided to go on a working holiday. Teaching was too stressful at that moment and I couldn't handle it right.



So, I decided to escape. I didn't care where I was going or what I was doing in another country but I had to get out of Hong Kong ASAP! I didn't even care which city to land. Some may say I was lost, but I didn't care then. There was a voice telling me to leave in my mind, just get away, or else I would turn crazy. Everyone may

have experienced a burnout like this too. Some people can handle it wisely; however, some may get too stressful and start to do silly things. To me, I guess leaving home was the right choice. I didn't know that going on a working holiday would bring me a lot of new challenges, in a good way. I've grown and I've changed because of that. I've learnt not to avoid problems but to face them. Learning how to face problems needs knowledge and courage. Learning how to survive is a long journey. Life can be challenging, but I know one thing for sure, that is, I've got family and friends who would support me no matter what. For that I am grateful.



# Christmas cake

CHIN Tik Kar

There is a saying, a woman's age is like a Christmas cake. Christmas cakes are usually baked within the Christmas week but before Christmas Day. Therefore, it is important to reserve one for your family or Christmas party at least a week ahead. Before girls become women, we call them teenagers. That is the period for the Christmas cakes to be baked. Once it gets closer to the Christmas week, you can see a lot of beautiful and delicious Christmas cakes shown in the display windows at any cake shops. When it comes to 24th December, Christmas Eve, many people are so desperate to purchase any kind of Christmas cake if they still haven't got one, because the next day is already Christmas Day.



Christmas Day is the most important day to be celebrated with a Christmas cake. It's the 25th, in terms of a woman's age, the best time to get married. After 25th December, no one would care to have any Christmas cakes until the next Christmas. If the cake is not sold out by 25th December, it's not worth anything anymore.

These days, many women are not married by the age of 25. At least it's not for our generation. Women who are over 25 can be more gorgeous, more feminine, and more confident. The most important thing women believe nowadays is to live within the moment. Who cares how old you are?

# The Blue Pearl of Morocco

CHOI Po Ming

Have you ever watched a movie called 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'? In this movie, the main character Walter Mitty walked out of his ordinary, miserable life and went to adventures in Iceland and Himalayas. I was amazed and inspired by what he did.

Therefore, last summer I decided to have an adventurous discovery of somewhere unique and fascinating. When I was surfing the internet about wonderful places in the world, all of a sudden, I was attracted and immediately fallen in love with that place. It was a small village painted in amazing light blue. Light blue has always been my favourite colour. It was Chefchaouen, the blue pearl of Morocco.

Without a proper travel guide, I still made my choice for discoveries in Chefchaouen. Predictably, there were loads of problems for me to solve every day, even every hour. I wondered why the place was not very well-known to Asians. However, after getting on the coach, the answer popped up into my mind at once. This was a 66-seat air-conditioned coach. Unfortunately, the air-conditioner was not working and the windows could not be opened. The locals seemed to be used to it. But for me, it was a test of endurance as it was around 35°Celsius and I was inside the coach almost without ventilation. The lung of the coach was the tiny opening at the top of the coach. It was like a glass of water in the vast desert. No Hongkongers



can endure such heat without air-conditioning.

There inside the coach, I shared enjoy same moments of silence without internet and no one to talk to. On the contrary, it was really noisy as the Arabian music was quite loud. However, I was enjoying the silent moment inside my heart. This enabled me to review the past, think about the present and plan for the future. After five hours, I arrived at the dream place which I had been longing for. I pointed to the blue sky with excitement as if I were a primary school student.

The picturesque town of Chefchaouen was very charming. Streets were narrow, paved with whitewashed and powder-blue houses. Restaurants, hostels, craft shops and food stalls were everywhere. You could feel the charm and the relaxing atmosphere by simply walking down the street for a few minutes. In order to capture the valuable moments, I took tons of photos during the three precious hours before sunset. With great excitement, I realized that I should really go to every single wonderful place in the world if possible. The sensations you feel can't be experienced until you actually go to the place.

That was not all. Before I left Morocco, I experienced myriads of adventures such as no means of transportation, overpriced taxi, unknown destinations impromptu itinerary, tour guide caught by locals, no train tickets available, travelling in a private car with strangers, disappearance of driver at midnight, overnight travelling, Islamic worshipping at three etc. I am sure I won't forget all these snapshots for the rest of my life.

Try to walk out of your routine life for a while. I hope you can find your Chefchaouen.

*CHOI Po Ming, a primary school teacher, loves travelling and adventures. He believes every single journey is a learning process.*

## A happy meal

CHOW Lo Ling

The USA is a really interesting country. This evening I had a hot pot dinner with one of my pupils almost 40 years ago. In the party, there were me and my son from Hong Kong, my pupil who came to the States almost 40 years ago, two friends who came to the States many years ago and three Malaysian Chinese (if I am not wrong).

During the whole evening, we talked about events in the States, in Hong Kong and also about those in China. We exchanged information about different cultures and cities. We talked sometimes in Mandarin, sometimes Cantonese, not to say English. The dinner was good, the chat was interesting and all the people are interesting too. We shared our photos, of course, Facebook uploads. We are friends now. I enjoyed this meal. As the McDonald slogan goes, "Happy Meal".



*CHOW Lo Ling has been a teacher for more than 40 years. She finds teaching a rewarding job as she sees students living a successful life.*



# Have you ever witnessed students bullying others verbally in class?

Jenny LEUNG

I believe most of you may have come across similar situations and would stop them immediately. Maybe sometimes, you may issue punishment so that they will be scared to bully others in the class again. Yet, students would turn to take hidden actions and it is even worse as you may not be aware of the happening.

Recently in one of my classes, I realized students are becoming more and more disrespectful to others. They may call others names or they may be very sarcastic whenever someone has made a mistake. I felt very uneasy in an environment like this. No one deserves to be looked down or being mocked and disrespected even when they've made mistakes or they have any difficulty.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnDgZuG1hHs>

So I decided to teach them a lesson with a video that I've watched online. It's called 'Love has no labels'.

In the video, you will see different groups of people through an X-ray screen. They may be of different races, ages, genders, and religions, but under the X-ray screen, all you can see are only sets of skeleton.

I didn't know how much my students had learnt from this video. At least, they didn't talk for a minute after the video. I didn't expect them to have immediate improvement, but we should never give up nurturing them with positive message when there's a chance.

Instead of simply stopping them from verbally bullying each other, I'd rather make them learn the importance of respect. No one has the right to judge others and we should always learn to accept others' differences. If there's more sympathy and understanding and acceptance of different opinions, the world will surely be a better place for you and me.

*Jenny LEUNG teaches at a through-train school. As an English teacher, she believes that drama and theatre education can influence students to be better persons to make the neighbourhood a better place in the world.*

# Cooking

SHUK Boon Koo

I have been daydreaming a lot lately...about cooking. I am a slightly weird person who enjoys almost anything but doesn't really have a deep passion for anything either, except playing with kids and shopping. Cooking is something that I believe will stay with me for a really long time. This new hobby develops slowly when I first read those cooking blogs one after another in the staff room when I was still a teacher assistant in a primary school in Tin Shui Wai. Then I started buying print cook books and cooking memoirs by different authors. I watched all those cooking shows on TVB Pearl. I was in a 'not-so-good' state back in 2011. For the following two years, those cook books and memoirs by these sweet ladies saved me from getting worse. I gained my strength and picked up my spirit through reading and imagining myself cooking all the delicious and heart-warming dishes for my family and friends.

I started to cook properly for myself and a few of my friends from 2014 and I even joined cooking classes, not those formal ones, but the ones where people gather and learn making dishes and share the food together. So far, I have tried making vegetables stew, egg frittata and hot soups that are suitable for singles, especially during winter. I tried to make a blueberry cheese cake for my ex-colleagues once. Now, I am counting my days to summer break, to fly back to Malaysia and cook for my family the Portuguese style pork and clam stew I have learnt recently.

I am really glad cooking has found me, instead of me discovering cooking. Cooking is an art, a beautiful art that has a lot to offer!

*SHUK Boon Koo is a primary school teacher who loves teaching young children. Her family is in Malaysia and she goes back home twice a year.*

## The career path has come to an end...for now...

SYEDA Momina Saleem

This article is about my teaching career and that it is time to say goodbye to it since I'll be leaving Hong Kong to move to Chicago to be with my husband.

To begin with, caring and respecting others no matter how young or old they are has always been my utmost priority in prolonging a special bond. It basically comes from within and how a person has been brought up. I've seen my parents building strong relationships with family members and friends and being there for them whenever they are needed. My profession as a teacher has also taught me to create those strong bonds, not only towards the students but every person I happen to meet at school!



In the classroom, I had made sure that my students had memorable and funny moments at least once in every lesson so they were bound to laugh. I acknowledged their hard work with many appreciative praises and encouraging words. I taught them to respect others and themselves and to give themselves a 'pat on the back' whenever they felt they achieved their goals. My classroom had been



their domain in which they felt safe and free to involve in engaging activities, carry out discussions and most importantly have fun!

Spreading friendly smiles and stopping for a quick chat when passing by other teachers or students I've taught in earlier years made me feel content deep within. In the staffroom or outside, spending time with my colleagues; new and old, listening to their worries and sharing mine has created fond memories and ties that I will always cherish!

The trick is to do a little extra... walking that extra mile... listening to someone for an extra minute... or giving someone extra attention. My professional life has been so worthwhile. I wish I would not have to say goodbye but as they say "Life goes on and we move on, too". I am looking forward to a bright future ahead!

*SYEDA Momina Saleem or Mona in short taught for 11 years before she left Hong Kong for Chicago, USA. She holds fond memories of her times with the children she taught and is pleased to share a bit of her life with readers.*

# My love affair with classic literature

Sophie TANG

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (Jane Austen, 1813, *Pride and Prejudice*). What? Are you out of your mind! This is the twenty-first century! Stop, wait a minute...this was exactly how

it was like in nineteenth century England. Women were socially inferior to men and marrying a 'good husband' was marrying into wealth and status. This is the most famous first line in the novel.



Looking back, I was first drawn into the fascinating and intriguing world of English literature by my secondary school English teacher back in the UK. Her name was Mrs. Muriel who, I remember, looked like Mrs. Pepperpot from the

Mrs. Pepperpot series by Alf Prøysen because she was petite and had boundless energy. Mrs. Muriel was very enthusiastic about Literature and she introduced me to my first love of classics. I fell totally and utterly in love with Jane Austen's world and the society of *Pride and Prejudice*. I was glued to watching the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. I was a starry-eyed teenager sitting on the sofa when Mr. Darcy, tall dark and exquisitely handsome, came into my living room, emerging from the lake, dressed in white and with dripping wet hair. I was smitten 'hook line and sinker' with the dashing and evasive Mr. Darcy. Many would argue this reason is very 'airy fairy' and a

superficial one. Afterwards, I started reading streams of classics from Emily Bronte's *Jane Eyre* to William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. I would lock myself in my room day and night, only to come out at meal times. I was a "readaholic"!

Why do I love classics so much? First, they give me a glimpse into a different way of life; relaxed, elegant and charming that is totally awe-inspiring (when the heroine conquers all her adversities) and is captivating! Second, reading classics gives me a boundless and endless appetite which feeds my imagination. Third, the romantic love; love will conquer all.

The theme of love in *Pride and Prejudice* runs strong. The protagonist, Elizabeth Bennett is on a journey of self-discovery to find out what makes a strong and sincere romantic relationship, an idea that is still very relevant today for modern women. Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones sequels were inspired by *Pride and Prejudice*. This is why *Pride and Prejudice* is still hugely popular and relevant in our modern society. For me, I associate *Pride and Prejudice* with fond memories of my GCSEs school days, sitting in a classroom looking out of the window, visualising myself as Elizabeth Bennett. Elizabeth was my heroine, she always knew what to do. Just like in the nineteenth century society of *Pride and Prejudice*, there are many trials and tribulations to love. In modern day society, you cannot help who you fall in love with — you can only pray you fall for a good husband who loves and cares for you.

*Sophie TANG came from the UK. She is a Native-speaking English teacher. She has been teaching for seven years. She is passionate about teaching and enjoys working with young children.*

**Pauline  
Babbling  
(2014-2015)**

## Meaningful assignment

I wanted to take their photo but on second thought, I didn't. They were two boys of around twelve. It was only 8 early Sunday morning. The boys were diligently studying the railroad map on board the West Rail Line leaving the Hung Hom Station for Tuen Mun. I was pleasantly amused and so though I would be getting off at the next station, I tried to start a conversation with them.

They were shy and replied rather reluctantly. I knew they were Secondary 1 classmates co-operating on a project to visit various landmarks along the rail line. They had been given 4 hours to finish the task of taking a photo at each of the destinations. And so their discussion was about how best to finish the trail in the shortest possible time. They had several information sheets to guide them.

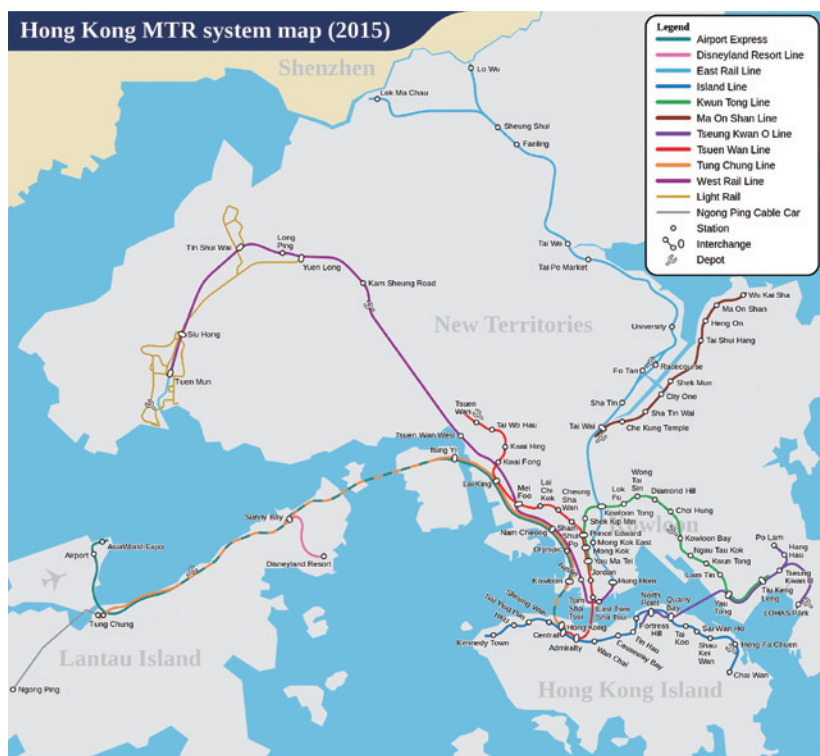
That was a really engaging assignment with the boys truly enjoying the process. The teacher must have devoted a lot of time in preparing the task. These students were applying knowledge in real life situation and were practising team spirit and communication skills.

But then as a school administrator, I started to sense risk. These boys were not accompanied and they were charting unfamiliar territories. All the "what if" came to my mind and sent chills down my spine.

For fear of accidents and the subsequent insurance claims etc., school heads find their hands tied. Primary school pupils are not allowed to run in recess. There are prefects and monitors yelling at the top of their voice "Don't run!" We all know after sitting in the classroom for two hours, what can be more relaxing than a good run in open space! Teachers are afraid of children bumping into each other in the corridor and so the rule is children are to walk at all times except

during Physical Education lessons which are once and at most twice a week or on Sports Day and Picnic Day which come once in a year!

This situation is not unique in Hong Kong. I read in newspapers that some schools in England are not holding Sports Day anymore because they cannot afford the insurance!





## **I am just bored!**

School children grade their teachers “like” or “dislike” according to whether the lessons delivered are boring or interesting. Pupils love participating in activities but their enthusiasm easily evaporates once they know what to expect. So conscientious teachers have to keep updating the strategies adopted to sustain students’ interest and motivation. What worked last year with a particular class cannot be “copied” and “pasted” for even the same class this year not to say a different class.

**I'M  
JUST  
BORED**



Easier said than done! No matter how hard teachers try, they cannot reach that level of sophistication comparable to the audio and visual impact offered by online games which students are so used to enjoying. And the crux of the issue is that sometimes the means becomes the end. And the lesson objectives are not achieved. Or teachers can become so engrossed in the activities themselves that the lesson content is thinned.

Last week, I observed how a Primary 1 English teacher successfully incorporated meaningful and interesting activities to guide the students in learning the targeted language. This was one rich and vibrant lesson. A total of 25 students were fully engaged using English all the way when interacting with the teacher and classmates alike. Information technology was utilized as the starter. The teacher designed a simple animation with herself as the news announcer. It worked! The students got aroused. Transition between activities was also smooth.

For consolidation, there was the worksheet. How did the teacher help the students check their answers? Instead of the usual practice of asking the students to stand up and give the answers, the teacher had designed a routine termed as "Decision Alley". All students stood up and got into two rows facing one another. When one student gave the answer, the others would say "Yes, you are right!" When the answer was wrong, the others would give the correct answer. In this way, the whole class got spirited and involved.

The secret of success is simple. Be reflective and think out of the box.

## Crimean Peninsula

I have not always been an English teacher. I taught both History and English until 2001. Well, actually, my university degree was in History. When my memories went back to those years as a History teacher, the two emotions that I felt strongly then would once again surge through me. The first one was my anger over the humiliation suffered and the loss of territories since the Opium War in 1839. The next was my frustration over the intrigue situation of the Crimea and the Balkans.

For the past few weeks, the Crimean Peninsula has caught the limelight for the same historic reason — the struggle between Russia and the rest of the western world. The Crimean referendum held on March 16 reminds me so much of what happened in Austria 76 years ago on March 12 1938. In both situations, people at gun point voted for secession from the ruling sovereignty and be incorporated by the “invaders”, Russia in the case of Crimea and Nazi Germany in the case of Austria.

But it must also be remembered that ethnic Russians account for 58 percent of Crimea's population, while Ukrainians make up 24 percent. Crimean Tatars, who were once deported by Soviet Russia but returned to the peninsula from exile after the fall of the Soviet Union, comprise only 12 percent of its population. These are the very people who are now awaiting to see how their fate fares!

The greatest fear in western Europe has always been that Russia, already with the Black Sea fleet based in Sevastopol, Crimea, will continue the process of expanding south in the Black Sea region and will possibly even reach Istanbul — a gateway of immense strategic importance between the Balkans and Asia.

To Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, Crimea would be a dazzling conquest, once Russia's imperial crown jewel, a lush land seized by Catherine the Great in the 18th century. Russia is expected to face strong sanctions from the U.S. and Europe. But by far, the western reaction including that of the USA has been quite feeble.

Though Hong Kong is nowhere near to Crimea or Ukraine, we have to bear in mind that we are part of this big world and we should not be merely engrossed in our own local matters. The media should also provide the readers and viewers with in-depth analysis of global issues.



## Flame of the forest

"That's the phoenix wood. Say it after me, phoenix wood. Good! You can recognize this tree by remembering the red top with the small flowers and the tiny green leaves." Pointing to a Flame of the Forest growing by the roadside, the mother in her late twenties was eagerly explaining to her young daughter who looked like still in kindergarten.

All the way along Ede Road, that is the route of the mini-bus I was aboard with this mother and daughter pair, there are four Flame of

the Forest trees. I love this tree. When in full bloom, the broadly-spreading scarlet, lacy foliage creates a gorgeous almost regal crown. And yet, when all the leaves are shed, it can remain a bare trunk for months.



The mother and daughter attracted my attention because this mother was taking her role most seriously. She made full use of each opportunity to teach her daughter about general knowledge,

etiquette, road safety and more. The moment they walked up to join the queue behind me for the mini-bus, the mother ordered the little girl to say "good morning" to everyone! I was pleasantly surprised.

"Here is one good mother." But I was making my judgement too early! That part about the Flame of the Forest was repeated four times.

Then there was the incident of a man dashing out from the pavement to cross the street when the light for pedestrian crossing was flickering. Time for road safety lesson.

"You should never cross the road like that! You know what will happen to him? Yes, hit by the car. If not this time, then he will be the next time. "

A few minutes later, the bus passed by a street cleaner. The mother pointed to the man and said to the girl, "If you don't study well, you will be the one cleaning the street 10 years from now! Do you want to do that? No? Then you have to get 100 in all your dictations. Understand?"

All along, the girl uttered responses not very audible to me but definitely loud enough to her conscientious mother. By the time we parted at the bus-stop, the girl had all my sympathy! It was exhausting listening to this mother during a 10-minute bus ride! Well, the girl has to listen to her for no less than 12 hours a day!



## Hair-cut

What was your childhood experience of haircuts? Has your mother repeatedly teased you about how you tearfully endured the ordeal? I witnessed one such scene when I went for my hair treatment last Saturday afternoon.



The victim was one cute-looking little boy of around 5. Flanked by his mom and dad, he was not facing this battle alone. They came prepared. The moment the boy was seated, the mom took out the tablet computer and ran a cartoon for him to enjoy. The father was not idle either. He unwrapped a chocolate nugget and put it in the boy's mouth mumbling at the same time about a visit to the Disneyland the next day.

Then came the hairdresser, a young man. While he was draping the boy, the parents were busily tugging the cape to make sure it fitted properly. The 15-minute haircut was one melodrama of 6 hands working on the boy's head. After combing the boy's hair, the hairdresser parted it and began to move his blades from the back to the front, around the perimeter and at angles. Meanwhile the parents were dancing round the poor young man, sometimes straightening the drape, other times removing the hair that happened to land on the boy's face or coaxing him to fix his eyes on the cartoon. In fact, the boy was quite at ease with his eyes glued to the screen.

I checked with my son asking about Hayley's salon visits. He said they were uneventful!

## Resonance

A teacher has just sent me an article as submission for *Let's Babble!* She wrote to recommend a YouTube video. This is so touching. My loud cry into the wilderness has won resonance.

A couple of days ago, as I was tidying up my various email accounts deleting long-time messages, I came across the mail from a reader about 10 years ago. At that time, I had a column on the fun of learning English in a local Chinese newspaper. There were quite a few fervent readers who wrote to me regularly. One of them was a police sergeant. He called himself a language fanatic writing to me in excellent English telling me about his work and family. There were several messages that were truly heart-warming. He talked about how he and his wife disagreed on parenting matters, how they planned their family trips and how he was on duty in the street during the anti-World Trade Organization demonstration etc. Sometimes, he would respond to the points I raised in my column.

It is amazing how two people who had never met were able to engage in such buddy talks. Though contacts had stopped for many years, I typed him a brief message hoping to re-establish contact. He wrote back almost immediately telling me he has a new hobby now – photography. He even sent me the photos of sunrise he took on New Year Day!



## Reunion

I was at a luncheon conference today. It was a table for ten professionals from two sectors: education and engineering. As a social etiquette, we started off with small talks and an exchange of name cards. When Dr. HO To-ming, Associate Head of the Department of Economics and Finance of the Faculty of Business of the City University of Hong Kong, received my name card, he looked up and with a broad smile, he said, "You were my English teacher. I graduated in 1973!" Then he proudly presented me to the people round the table. I was so touched!

Oh my goodness! Decades passed and he could still identify me! He asked to be seated next to me so that we could do some catching up. He detailed to me his career path and how happy he is with his current position. He has two daughters, one a doctor and the other still at school.

I told myself that I must have done something good to be so blessed as to be remembered!



## Birds of a feather

What do people talk about when they congregate and chat over a cup of aromatic coffee or simmering hot-pot? People who hang out together must have something in common that they share – same likes and dislikes, same foes and friends, same fears and joys, same celebrations and problems etc. And of course, they also set up chat groups to facilitate the flow of information. In other words, even when they are not meeting physically, they keep on chatting.



Lately, I discover that the hottest conversation topic among me and my long-time classmates, whether actual or virtual, is definitely health! We would share first-hand personal experience or internet information about healthy diets, early detection or prevention of various illnesses, surgical operation details etc. Next would be around our children but these days more about grandchildren. We also love to share our travel logs. What else? Do we bring up political issues? No, we don't simply because this would stir up commotions and sabotage the party! We prefer to hold our political stance to ourselves.

My classmates and I were all born in the same year, only older or younger in terms of months. Previously, we did not often meet, only on school anniversaries. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of our secondary school graduation, I suggested that as we advance in age, we should meet more frequently. To my pleasant surprise, they concurred with me. Now, we are meeting every other month.

## Helping hands

In recent years, I find myself always at train stations not because I have somewhere across the border to go. I make weekends my car-free days. I like to take the train commuting from my home in Kowloon Tong to my mom's place in Hung Hom. When I go to Tsimshatsui for my Sunday indulgence of facial treatment and body massage, it is again the train from Kowloon Tong to Hung Hom and then Tsimshatsui East. If I have meetings at HKWTO venue which is on Sai Yeung Choy Street, I take the train too. There is a bit of walking involved but if I am wearing the right sneakers, I actually walk briskly telling myself "you've done your exercise for the day!"



Very often in the concourse or at the platform, I come across bewildered tourists. Be they mainlanders or westerners, I would offer to point them the direction. Most of the time, my helping hand is

warmly accepted. There were, however, a few times, I was shied away from! Well, it seems like mothers across the world have successfully indoctrinated their children into believing that they should not talk to strangers – the one creed we hold onto even when we are grown-ups. Or our human society has become so evil that there should be no angels left.

Last Sunday morning at Kowloon Tong Station, I brought smiles to the faces of a distressed couple! They were in their early fifties. They stood there trying hard to decipher the leaflets for tourists when the man decided to approach me. He told me that they came from Changsha, Hunan and that it was their first visit to Hong Kong. They wanted to go somewhere for bargain goods. I told them pleasantly that they should get off at MongKok East but then the stalls would not be open yet. They should first go for breakfast at our *cha chaan teng*, local tea restaurant.

I could never forget how broad the smile was on the man's face. His words to the woman still echo in my ears. "Who said that HongKongers are hostile to us mainlanders?"



## Make my day!

It was early in the morning when I drove to school. Traffic was smooth. When I stopped at the red light, I noticed the car next to me on my right had the hazard lights on. It was clear that they were not meant to be on. Perhaps the driver had earlier signalled to stop and had forgotten to turn off the lights after he had pulled out. Without any hesitation, I gestured to the driver with an exaggerated version of "Lights"! He got it, smiled and saluted me to thank me! I felt great!

What a nice way to start a day! Doing somebody I don't know a favour is actually doing myself a favour. Once my mother remarked that when I got behind the wheel, I grumbled a lot. It was only then that I realized I had joined the road rage regiment. Hong Kong drivers, though relatively civilized, do sometimes misbehave such as tailing, sounding horns, cutting lanes and not signalling etc. Upon my mother's advice, I drive much more courteously and the calmness it brings is blissful.



## Let's right the wrong!



I wonder if you have ever noticed this poster. "LETS RUN TOGETHER".

As an English Language teacher, I am furious that such a mistake can be made! It should be "Let's Run Together" with "let's" meaning "let us". "Lets" can only be used with a third person singular noun or pronoun such as "Tom lets (allows) his wife bully him." Of course, we can also use "lets" in "She lets (out) one of the rooms to make some income."

Mind you! This poster is everywhere transmitting the wrong use of the word "lets" to our impressionable young minds! All that is taught in class can

be forgotten! Or worse, students can rebut teachers when they are corrected using the word as it is in the poster. Indeed, this slogan is so eye-catching that it is adopted by many school teams in designing their sports uniforms. Teachers or students responsible assume what they see in advertisements cannot be wrong.

There are two Chinese idioms that succinctly capture this situation: 習非成是 and 約定俗成.

The literal meaning of the first one is that when enough "negative" or "wrong" things or opinions or responses are collected, then cumulatively speaking, this "wrong" will be taken as the "right"! The second one means more or less the same: when many people agree to do one thing together, then a custom is formed!

Chinese wisdom works again!

## Pain humbles me

I do everything fast. I do not procrastinate. I hate my desk cluttered. Documents are cleared every day before clocking out. Deadlines are met promptly. Matters affecting others are dealt with first and foremost. Trivialities are handled right away as they are easily forgotten. My limbs are still dexterous. I can make all the basic yoga poses. Wearing the right shoes, I walk fast. I don't lie in. I am proud that at my age, I am still agile and very much alive.

But last weekend, my back pain humbled me. Since two days ago, it has tailed off to an intensity I can bear.

Now when I am writing about my anguish, I realize that it's very tough to translate my personal experience into language others can understand. I will try.

It started on Friday night. Like all other Friday evening of a work week, I was exhausted. I decided to go to bed early. But when I sat on the bedside ready to lie down, pain gripped me at the end of my spine, more severe to the right and a little less so to the left. It was

as though someone was drilling me round my waist with an ice-pick! I had already let my back land on the bed inch by inch hoping to lessen the pain.

But even such gentle moves brought excruciating pangs. I screamed! My hard-of-hearing mom dashed into my room.



Upon knowing my situation, she took out two pain relief patches and pressed them on my back comforting me with words like “they work magic”.

I went through the night taking the soldier or rather the corpse posture because the slightest movement would bring another round of twinges. Yet it is the foetus posture that sends me to sleep quickly. So you can image what a night it was for me – getting glimpses of sleep in between tortuous ordeals!

Unfortunately I had a heavy schedule for the weekend. I attended the events surprising all my friends with a “slow version” of me – walking with small steps, standing up and sitting down with both hands pressed hard on the table. In other words, I had to slowly manipulate each segment of my spine whenever I changed postures.

I have survived the pain test on the daily change of the patches administered by my mom!

## Panty hose



As a member of the Council on Professional Conduct in Education, I have the duty to present talks at various schools on the Code for the Education Profession in Hong Kong.

That afternoon, I was to go to this international kindergarten in Tuen Mun. This visit meant two “firsts” for me – first time

ever to give such a talk and first time ever to visit this part of the New Territories. Rita, the HKWTO Executive and I met at Hung Hom Station for our lunch. As the restaurant providing traditional rice recipes was crowded, we decided to go to the coffee shop for sandwiches instead.

The trip was amazingly smooth thanks to the very efficient public transport system in Hong Kong. It took about one hour travelling from Hung Hom to Tuen Mun. The ride was comfortable showing me lots of greens as the train sped along. This was followed by a very short bus ride of about 10 minutes.

When I got off the bus, I was distressed to discover that I had got a long run in my panty hose probably from the seat of the bus. I have this habit of wearing it to “complement” my outfit when it is a one-piece dress or a skirt. Fortunately, we arrived quite early and so had time to shop for a new pair.

We walked round the housing estate popping in every shop and stall likely to sell this commodity. We must have asked over 10 salesmen and shopkeepers but the closest we could find were black tights or leggings but not sheer panty hose! Just when we were about to give up, we came to a wet market stall selling children's socks. Though not expecting it would have what I desperately needed, we asked one more time "Please do you have sheer panty hose for sale?"

"Oh, yes. Here you go! The last pair! 29 dollars!"

So after the formality as we walked in the kindergarten, I asked for the bathroom to change my panty hose. Then I sat down relaxed awaiting the teachers to present my talk.



## To tell or not to tell

I am that kind of person who writes own feelings all over the face and verbalizes thoughts without modifications. Of course, experience has taught me hard lessons that I cannot simply pour my heart out to anybody anytime anywhere I happen to be. I have to practise euphemism and delay criticisms preceding each negative comment with two compliments etc. I think all these are absolutely necessary when it is professional relationship we are talking about.



But then when we are among family and friends, we become relaxed and less tactful assuming that we can be our true selves. When friendship develops, conversations become more personal. Words become more direct. Do we still have to decide what is to be said and what not? These days, with the widespread use of the smart phones, sharing has become more than just chit-chat. Messages, photos and videos are posted on the Facebook. We used to say "I am telling this to you only!" We might have to think twice. When friendship falls out, secrets might be broadcast for the whole wide world to know!

Maybe we should re-visit George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four written in 1949 or The Truman Show, by Andrew Niccol written in 1998.

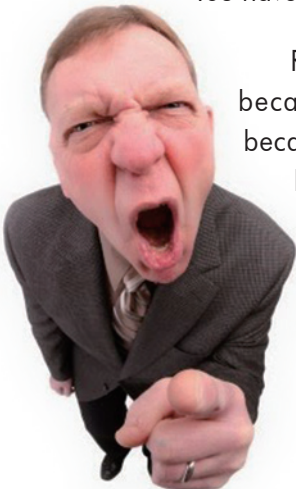
## Difficult people

Are you miserably surrounded by difficult people – people who are sulky all the time, who shout and never speak, who think they are always right, who boss you around? They can be your boss, siblings, friends or spouse! Have you ever tried to change them, reason with them, ignore them, or abandon them in the end? Or are you a difficult person yourself? Let me first assume you are not so that we can focus on how to deal with or even live with difficult people.

I have internalized two principles that work for me. These days, I am at peace with myself and with all those difficult people who happen to be in my path!

Rule no. 1: Have mercy on them! Don't hate them! Hating someone strains your energy and adds hideous lines to your forehead. Back off when they shout. Don't shout back! You are not being small. You demonstrate you are bigger! Keep your control. Empathize with them. Your calmness might put them head over heels! Wouldn't that amuse you? When the heat subsides, go and explain yourself. That's it.

You have done your part.



Rule no. 2: Never try to change them not because old dogs can't learn new tricks but because many people must have tried. If they haven't succeeded, why do you think you can? Take them as they are or leave them for good. As to those you can't leave, say your siblings, distance from them but maintain courtesy.

## Different rulers

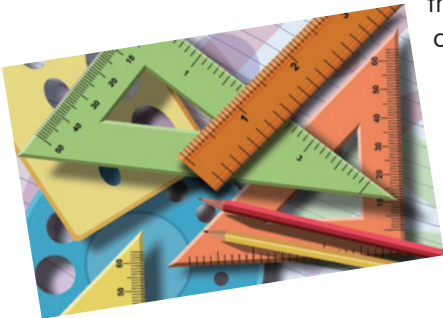
The Macmillan Dictionary defines a ruler as “an object used for measuring or for drawing straight lines, consisting of a long flat piece of plastic, wood, or metal marked with units of measurement”. These units of measurement are standardized meaning that 1 centimetre is of the same length across the world.

The same dictionary explains that the rule of law is “a situation in which everyone in a country is expected to obey the laws”.

Hong Kong has been my home since my parents brought me here from mainland in 1949 when I was barely 2. In this liberal though many denounce as undemocratic society of Hong Kong, equality and rule of law are our core principles. We apply the same rules and standards when we judge.

But in recent years, these treasured values are put to test. I falter in my convictions as I find that 1 centimetre is no longer a constant length or distance. It is stretched for some groups and shortened for others. And yet, such inequality is accepted as necessary for proclaimed bigger causes. I am confused. I am not happy.

Rude and disruptive behaviour are branded as righteous. Legislators throw objects at government officials during meetings. Schools and private buildings are stormed. People speaking on behalf of the police or the government are spat on. Use of fake identity cards is to be pardoned. Differences are not tolerated. Nobody has the patience to listen. Yelling and cursing are the trends.



It is a showdown. The demarcation is clear. You are either with me or against me.

## It takes two

It was one of those chain cafes with heavily-cushioned long couches fostering a lazy, cosy ambiance. But unfortunately just as I was into the mood of feeling relaxed, the quietness was completely shattered when a woman in her 50s walked in. As though to announce her grand entrance, she was bragging at the top of her voice to a younger female companion. They sank into the same sofa I was sitting on creating quite a depression on it. They quickly placed their orders. All the while, the woman did not, for one second, lower her voice.



The conversation or rather the public speech about her travels by that braggart was so loud that I was forced into hearing every single word. That was how I was able to make the conclusion that she was boasting! Her gestures were exaggerated with hands stretched out so far that I had to distance myself from her claws! Her speech was intermittently punctuated by quite a lot of ‘anyway’s and ‘you know’s in English as well as ‘you understand’ in Cantonese!

They two must be very good friends, otherwise how could an afternoon coffee break be so dominated by one with the other responding heartily. This responsive friend was actually doing very well her role as a “reflective listener”.

I had to cut short my coffee time!

## The ticket

My husband and I both drive to work not because we are environmentally-unfriendly but because by public transport, it would mean a green mini-bus ride, then MTR followed by a red mini-bus ride. That takes about one hour for me and even longer for my hubby. By car, the journey is 20 minutes for me and 30 for him! As our working hours are different, we need two cars and two parking spaces of course!

We live in a 45-year old block and each apartment is entitled to only one parking lot. In other words, we need one extra space. For quite some time, we rented one from a landlord who does not drive but lately his son is back and he drives. That started my nightmare. There are five spaces with parking meters a street away but with many families in the same boat like ours – owning two cars, these spaces are almost like raffle prizes!

That night all spaces were taken up by the time I arrived home. It was already 11. I waited hoping that those with metres expired would come and drive away their cars but that did not happen. I gave up after half an hour and parked my car near to our exit without blocking it!

The next morning, I left home at 7:35, half an hour earlier than usual. My helper was just coming up the stairs after cleaning our cars. She said cheerfully, “no ticket!” I was so relieved.

I was happy far too soon! As I was walking near my car, I saw a policeman in the action of sliding the fine ticket under the left windscreen wiper. He was unexpectedly courteous and sympathetic.

“I waited for a while knowing you must live here! There are too many complaints from residents about illegal parking blocking their driveways! Don’t park here anymore. We will surely ticket you!” He has the gentlest voice.

I could only say “I understand. Have a good day!”

## Young calves

The Chinese saying goes like this: New-born calves are not scared of tigers.

This is what came to my mind as I watched in awed admiration those young people on screen. They were screaming for justice, barricading streets, holding overnight vigil and getting arrested right in front of our eyes. I have the greatest respect for their courage and determination. But as a teacher, a parent and a grand-parent, I hope their deeds are informed choices. I am not worried about those organizers old and young because they know why they are doing what they are doing.



Calves are likely to be ignorant of what injury tigers can inflict on them and so they dare the tigers! Do these young followers know what they are fighting for? Do they know they might be physically injured or get a criminal record that would affect the rest of their lives? Now university students are crying out to boycott classes! These young people have exhausted the last ounce of energy to get themselves admitted and yet they are now skipping classes! And organizers are even encouraging secondary school students to join in! Legally speaking, these students are only minors.

I know fighting for a cause does carry a romantic appeal but as in all romantic affairs, there is a price to pay. Only mature adults who are well informed of the whole situation and who can afford the price should tread this path.



## So close and yet so far!

This New Year break, my friends and I went to Shanghai for 3 days to visit an old friend. The flight to Shanghai took less than two hours but I cannot say it was convenient.



We departed for Shanghai on December 30. It was the 0830 flight meaning we had to check in not later than 6:30. I had to get up at 5. If I took the airport bus, I would be late. Arriving late has

never been my habit. I left home at 5:45 and took a taxi.

It was my bad luck that I got on a taxi with a sulky driver. I greeted him nicely. Not only did he not reciprocate my courtesy, but he also did not help me put the suitcase in the boot!

I arrived at the airport early, met up with my friends, checked in, took our breakfast and boarded the plane. All these were uneventful!

We landed punctually at 10:30, took our luggage, went through customs and immigration and were warmly greeted by our friend. We got on the coach at 11.

Guess when we could sit down for lunch? At 2 in the afternoon! The 30-minute drive to city centre had become 3 hours! Absolutely ridiculous! That was my first-person experience of the terrible traffic jams so notorious of mainland cities. And because we were late, we had to eat dishes left cold if not icy. The waitresses were also very blatant in their expression of impatience!

## Being different is good!

We were dining with a friend's family of four, our friend and wife and their teenage sons. The elder boy, aged 18 and taking the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) this year asked what he should do in a discussion if he did not agree with his friends. He said that he usually held his silence because he dared not be different. He tried



to blend in with his peers but was not happy doing so. He wanted to air his view and have it debated but he lacked the courage to face accusations of being difficult or even taken as a weirdo!

It is truly not easy to be different because society frowns on individuality and quickly labels anyone who isn't like everyone else. This has discouraged a lot of people from being themselves. We love to belong and so end up understanding little beyond our own flock.

There is one celebrity we can learn from – Angelina Jolie! She dares to be different. She had just had her ovaries and fallopian tubes removed in a preventative measure against ovarian cancer. Only two years ago, she had a double mastectomy to prevent breast cancer.

Here is Angelina Jolie's acceptance speech at the Kid's Choice Awards on March 28 2015. She won the best villain award for her role in Maleficent.

*Different is good!*

*So don't fit in!*

*Don't sit still!*

*Don't ever try to be less than what you are!*

*And when someone tells you that you are different,  
smile and hold your head up high and be proud*

## A tale of two cities

I just returned from a four-day trip to Singapore. I have been to Singapore quite frequently in recent years not only for educational exchanges but also because my sister's family had moved to Singapore in early 1990s. More importantly, I have a very good Singaporean friend whom I crown as the Ambassador of Hospitality. He takes leave every time I visit and insists that he pays for all my expenses. In his words, he is "reciprocating" for what I do for him when he is in Hong Kong. But for sure I have not been as generous as he is in terms of money and time. I have never taken any leave driving him around. Nor have I put him up in world-class hotels. That is how this friendship of close to three decades has sustained.

While I was enjoying my holiday savouring local cuisines and fresh air, I couldn't help comparing Singapore with Hong Kong.

If the ethnic composition of a country can reflect the degree of its globalization, then the city-country of Singapore is intrinsically more cosmopolitan than Hong Kong. According to 2014 figures, of the 5.5 million people living in Singapore, 2.1 million people are foreign nationals. One-third of the 3.4 million citizens are foreign-born naturalized citizens. Ethnic Chinese predominate (74.1%) followed by significant minorities of Malays (13.4%), Indians (9.2%), and Eurasians. There are four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. English is the *lingua franca* of the country and you hear it spoken even at street stalls.



Hong Kong is predominantly a Chinese society. According to 2011 figures, ethnic minorities made up only 6.4% of the 7 million population. Our official languages are English and Chinese. Unlike Singapore, rarely do we hear English being spoken. Cantonese is everyday spoken dialect with the use of Putonghua or Mandarin catching up due to the increase of mainland tourists.


So which government has a tougher task to unify the people? Singapore for sure! And yet, scenes of confrontations between pro- and anti-government fronts have become quite a common sight in this demographically homogeneous city of Hong Kong. We can cheer that this is democracy in manifestation and despise Singapore for the lack of it. But at what cost and for what cause? We seem to have forgotten that conflicts can be resolved and differences can be tolerated for benefits and successes to be shared. Meanwhile with the government faltering and councillors filibustering, Hong Kong stagnates!

Look at our West Kowloon Cultural District project first proposed in the 1990s. Two decades have gone. On this wedge-shaped development site of 40 hectares, only a temporary promenade has been developed. In Singapore, the Marina Bay district built on reclaimed land, a concept similar to our West Kowloon Cultural District Project, is now complete with a 101-hectare Gardens by the Bay, the giant Singapore Flyer, and Marina Bay Sands etc. To name but a few, this resort complex features a 2,561-room hotel, a 1,300,000-square-foot convention-exhibition centre topped by a 340m-long SkyPark with a capacity of 3,900 people and a 150m Infinity Pool.

As Hong Kongers applaud Singapore for her many successes, maybe it is high time we examined the "why"!

Happy 50th anniversary, Singapore! May you stay united and prosperous!

## Are you brave?



Do you patronize the same restaurants and order the same dishes day in and day out? Is your family life on a mechanized routine? Have you been in the same post for years? Do you keep listening to the same oldies and watching the same classics for the hundredth time? Has your circle of friends ever expanded?

Yes, we all have our comfort zones in various aspects of our life! It takes courage to step out into the unknown and the unfamiliar! What if the new dish tastes awful? What else is there to do if not following the same routine? Oh, I am too old to change my career! I never listen to pop songs! God knows what they are singing! Friends are like wine. The older the relationship, the better friends they are!

There is nothing wrong in clinging onto our familiar life as it is. I agree to almost all of the above defences. But I do not harbour a steadfast loyalty to my habits and routines. I believe changes in life especially those we initiate are like lubricant to a car engine. Even when the car is running smoothly, we still bring it to the garage for regular maintenance. We need courage to be naughty occasionally. We might even discover that the life we are so used to can be further enhanced.

So don't be idle! Step out! Look up! Be brave! You can always retreat to your sanctuary but at least you have tried!

## Ice Bucket Challenge

In the past months, you must have all come across photos or videos showing friends or celebrities taking up the Ice Bucket Challenge for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) patients. How do you feel watching these people enduring the ice cold shower in various forms? I, for one, don't feel like watching! But as a fund-raising activity, it is extremely successful. According to the press release of Hong Kong Neuro-Muscular Disease Association on September 8, a total of \$20 million was raised, 20 times that of the target amount of \$200,000!

The Ice Bucket Challenge requires nominated participants to be filmed having a bucket of ice water poured on their heads and then nominate others to do the same. As can be expected in this internet era of social media, the activity has gone viral and attracted tremendous public attention. Prior to the challenge, public awareness of ALS was minimal but now we have become familiar with the disease.

I feel uneasy seeing people suffer even though it is for a good cause! This reminds me of Operation Santa Claus, a charity drive originated in the 1960s long before the time of the internet and is still very robust! The name itself suggests that it takes place during Christmas, traditionally speaking a time for giving. To appeal for donations, popular DJs would pull crazy stunts including jumping into the chilly Victoria Harbour, reading poetry on roofs and climbing flagpoles.

Anybody wanting to take the Ice Bucket Challenge must have a strong heart and must also do it in a safe place and in good weather conditions because news reports abound with accidents and even tragedies of these good Samaritans getting heart attack or being electrocuted while performing the act!





## Are you happy?

Do you have time to answer these five questions? Rate how you felt during the day from 0 to 10 with 10 being the most satisfying. These are the very 5 questions used in an international study to identify the people of which countries are the happiest or not happy at all.

1. Were you well rested yesterday?
2. Were you treated with respect yesterday?
3. Did you smile or laugh yesterday?
4. Did you do something interesting yesterday?
5. Did you have any feelings of enjoyment yesterday?

Let me see! My five answers are: 4, 6, 3, 0, 0! Oh, dear! I am one very unhappy person! It's time to reflect on my life and how it is impacting on my mood.

It is true that when I don't sleep enough and have to handle a long day, I am agitated and exhausted longing to go home and lie down. When my views are not taken or worst simply swept aside, I am disappointed and frustrated. If the day is like that, certainly there is no reason to smile!

Of course, I can still do something to salvage myself from the dark valley – do something silly or maybe interesting. That was what I did on Monday in the middle of the afternoon after a meaningless meeting. I walked up to an ice-cream store nearby and bought a sundae with marshmallows! I devoured it with a very guilty conscience and halfway through it, I decided to stop! My palate was not satisfied neither was my morale boosted! I did not feel any sense of enjoyment!

That is life! There are mood swings and we have to be our own savior all the time. Do what we can and then extract ourselves from the dead ends. Move on. The next moment is an unknown to be experienced!



## 7 billion Others Project

I want to recommend a project that opens my eyes and touches my heart. It reminds me that this Earth of ours is really big and that there are more than 7 billion other people inhabiting the Earth. They speak different languages and hold different beliefs but we all share the same fear and harbour the same hopes.

As I am writing, the world population stands at 7,198,881,680 and is fast growing.

It is the 7 billion Others Project (previously known as 6 billion Others Project). In 2003, Yann Arthus-Bertrand, the famous French photographer together with



Sybille d'Orgeval and Baptiste Rouget-Luchaire, launched the 7 billion Others Project. A total of 20 directors filmed 6,000 interviews in 84 countries. The Project is one gigantic collage of portraits of humanity.

The interviewees can be a Brazilian fisherman, a Chinese shopkeeper, a German performer or an Afghan farmer. They were all posed with the same questions about their fears, dreams, ordeals and hopes. There were 45 questions in total: What have you learnt from your parents? What do you want to pass on to your children? What does love mean to you?

Here are the words of Yann Arthus-Bertrand explaining why this Project is important to him and to us:

*...There are more than seven billion of us on Earth, and there will be no sustainable development if we cannot manage to live together. ...<[www.7billionothers.org](http://www.7billionothers.org)>*

## When a man loves a woman

How do men show their love to their ladies? A poem or a bouquet? A diamond ring or a watch? A sports car or a yacht? A hug or a tender word? Some quiet moments together? A walk on the beach? All these are too good to be true! Such scenarios only exist in fairy tales, movies and dreams! Any girls who entertain such fantasies will definitely go crazy! Yet even a mature lady like me do sometimes amuse myself with such an imagery – a surprise kiss!

As a romantic relationship develops, the man and the woman become husband and wife and then father and mother. Gone are the sweet talks and even the physical appeal. Their conversations are never about how they feel for each other but always about the third party – the children, the pets, their careers etc. Soon the wives find that the time spent with the husbands are always in crowds of friends or relatives or colleagues. They are not spending time alone anymore! Wives dare not make the moves as all ladies won't! They are waiting for their husbands to re-discover their femininity. While women can tolerate men's receding hairline, big tummy and untidy habits, men secretly pray that their mates can retain their youthfulness. When their wives can't satisfy their fantasy, they look elsewhere! These days, they don't have to look too far.

Once the first unfaithful step is taken, the husband sees everything wrong in the wife! Yet the wife who might have smelt disloyalty endures hoping the derailing is only a fling and the man will soon be back body and soul! He might and he might not depending on the pull factor. He keeps the wife and the family as they provide a safe haven he might have to go back to!

Here is part of the lyrics of The Carpenters' "Love Me For What I Am" which sums up how a woman feels the change in her man.

We fell in love  
On the first night that we met  
Together  
We've been happy  
I have very few regrets  
The ordinary problems  
Have not been hard to face  
But lately little changes  
Have been slowly taking place  
You're always finding something  
Is wrong in what I do  
But you can't rearrange my life  
Because it pleases you  
You've got to love me  
For what I am  
For simply being me  
Don't love me  
For what you intend  
Or hope that I will be  
And if you're only using me  
To feed your fantasy  
You're really not in love  
So let me go  
I must be free



## Perfect match



What makes a perfect match? Compatibility in age, zodiac signs, family background, credentials, richness, views and habits? In Chinese saying, there is "doors must be compatible with the wooden doors for the wooden doors and the bamboo doors for the bamboo doors". In dynastic China, there were strict rules regarding the style and structure of houses based on the office held by the owner of the house. These covered the height and design of the doors, the eaves and all decorative structures.

These days, the view is that couples should be complementary of each other. If one is of short temper, the other should have a cool temperament to manage adversity and for harmony to be maintained. If one likes to cook, then the other should love food!

But falling in love, in most cases, is more a "heart" rather than a "head" matter! We don't follow a compatibility checklist to evaluate our partner. Of course, I know falling in love is one stage while putting down the signature on the wedding certificate is another. Modern people commit themselves to marriages for a variety of reasons, some being despicably monetary!

Even at my senior age now, I still hold fast onto the fairy tale version of destiny bringing a man and a woman together though we have all read about how some women painstakingly choreographed for them to "bump into" multi-billionaires.

Once again, I want to bring in my life motto: choose what you love and love what you have chosen! If destiny puts you two together, then embrace it! Perfect or not, till death do you part!

## Love shattered

Winnie and Tommy (not real names, of course) had been dating for ten years since they met at work. Winnie was pretty and Tommy was handsome, a very matching couple. They had their wedding photos taken and started planning for the big day. It was to take place on Valentine's Day! Hotel reservation was made for a traditional Chinese wedding banquet hosting over 300 guests.

Then it was announced in January that the wedding would be cancelled and they wanted to be left alone! I am in no position to pry into what has happened. But I have been tagged to their Facebook uploads and have been watching them going places, enjoying desserts etc. as a couple! I feel heart-broken too.

Here is wishing them peace and bravery as they enter a new phase in life!





## Old couples

Have you ever been touched by the sight of old couples holding hands? I have! Their hair might be thinned and skin all wrinkled but the calmness of their countenance simply induces my admiration!



In this age when relationships can be so flimsy, we tend to wonder whether people do still hold hands and grow old together in health and sickness! And when we do see such couples, we become green-eyed monsters saying "how lucky you guys are!"

As in all matters, "luck" plays but a small part – that no "third person" has ever appeared in their life, that no major hardships have ever put them to test etc. Even when life is uneventful, to be able to grow old together and yet still cherish or at least care for each other is not entirely in the hands of the Almighty!

I don't know if there are some odd old couples around you or you have heard of. By "odd", I mean though they remain together living under the same roof, they hate each other's guts to the extent that the wife drives the husband out of the apartment in the morning, gives him some twenty dollars allowing him to come back only at dinner time! Such arrangement is not for a day but is a routine!

There is no equality in a relationship, no "win-win" situation but one yielding to the other for whatever reasons! So next time when you envy a happily married couple, ask yourself how far you can bear for the sake of a life together!

## Detachment

I never know "detachment" is a virtue until I attended the workshop entitled "The Virtues Project - the Singaporean Experience" delivered by Dr. Phyllis CHEW, Professor of National Institute of Education, Singapore. She explained with stories how the 52 virtues can help create a caring campus and kinder children. Because of time constraint, she could only elaborate on several of the 52 virtues.

One of the stories went like this. Dr. Chew had a doctoral candidate who kept postponing the completion of her thesis. It had been close to 5 years already.

Dr. Chew asked her to withdraw and yet she pleaded for another extension of half a year saying that her child was taking up too much of her time. That had been the reason presented all these years though her daughter was already 10 and there was a domestic helper around. Dr. Chew asked us which virtue could help her. I looked at the list of 52 virtues and asked if the virtue of "detachment" could.



I was right. It was like an awakening – very often we are depressed, distracted or disorientated because we are too attached. Our body and soul are into that something or someone. We grasp it or him/her as though there would be no tomorrow if we let go! We lose objectivity. Then it's time to back off a little to give ourselves and the people around us a chance. The virtue of detachment can be helpful.

All the participants in the workshop agreed that they would not only try to implement the Virtues Project in their schools but would also apply this positive mentality to their own lives as this can bring about peace of heart and energy to move on. If you want to know more about the Virtues Project and the 52 virtues, please visit: <http://www.virtuesproject.com/education.html>

## Lost but not found

At the school office, there is a big carton labelled "Lost & Found". Each time I pass by this box, I would smile to myself. "How positive is this – lost and found!" How often does this happen in life – you lose an item and then recover it?

Of course, I know that is not the meaning of "Lost and Found" as labelled. The carton is for storing items left unattended and picked up around the campus. Owners with things lost could come and check if they are so fortunate as to be able to reclaim their lost belonging.



Last week, I lost a diamond ring I bought for myself years ago when I needed "shopping spree" as therapy for my depression. The strange thing was I didn't feel devastated! It did cost tens of thousands when I bought it! I might have taken it off when I put on hand-cream and then forgot about it.

Will I buy another one as replacement? No, I certainly won't! In these two years, I have been quite successful in tuning my mood in face of material losses like the ring in this case or the illegal parking ticket weeks ago or mental frustrations such as being accused of things I have never said or being taken for granted etc.

Lost items do not have to be found. I have far too many earthly possessions to enjoy! Lost hopes do not have to be lamented. I can always knit new ones! My mood should be at my own disposal and not in the hands of others. When others treat me well, I feel blessed and am grateful. That is life's bonus! When people do not appreciate my kind words or good intentions, I step back without feeling upset. I don't fight back! I don't try to convince! I am at peace.

The diamond ring can be on somebody's finger or lying somewhere in my wardrobe waiting to be discovered! I don't care!

## Is life a stage?

I like driving not because I have one of those fancy sports cars that races along highways. Mine is only a Honda Jazz. I enjoy the feel of immersing myself in the tunes and lyrics of my favourite oldies. But at times, I would listen to the radio music programmes so that I would not be too out-dated.

It was nine in the evening on a weekday and the programme was hosted by a popular DJ who has a very soothing voice. As usual, he started off the one-hour programme with his comments on the theme chosen for the evening - "life is like a stage and we are all actors..." He continued by saying that we should dutifully do our part in this play called "life", that we should be "in" our character and know our lines.

I cannot agree with his views because I don't believe in destiny. It would be so pathetic waking up in the morning knowing well that "whatever has to happen will happen" and we are but doing what we have been ordained to do.

The fact that DJs own that one hour doesn't mean they can ramble on about whatever they like. They have to shoulder their social responsibility. Once I heard the DJ of a phone-in programme mocking a caller. "How can a young girl like you stay home on a Sunday afternoon? You have no friends?"

Oh well, I went back to my disc – the Great Pretender by The Platters!

## Longevity

Chinese aspire to a good life blessed with the three attributes of good fortune ( 福 ), prosperity ( 祿 ) and longevity ( 壽 ) each with a personified deity. With advances in science, longevity has become more possible and aging can be graceful too.

Just take a look at ourselves or the elderly around us. When tribal villagers living in deprived remote areas suffer from blurred eyesight, hard of hearing, loss of teeth or crippled movements, we are supported with artificial lenses, hearing aids, dentures and prostheses. We can perform daily activities such as reading, eating or walking nearly as well as when we were young. These put both dignity and meaning to a long life.

My mother has been wearing hearing aids for a few months now. She is getting used to it. As to me, cataracts have developed in both eyes and I am undergoing the two surgeries next week. We are both attended to by a very patient domestic helper. Not all old people are so fortunate.

Many elderly have to live in care centres either because they are bed-ridden and need intensive



care or their children are either too poor or too busy. This does not mean they are not loved. And yet once in nursing homes, their fate is in the hands of the nurses and attendants. When I saw on television how the staff of the privately-owned Tai Po Cambridge Nursing Home were stripping female residents bare before giving them the shower in full view of neighbours, I was heart-broken. These elderly are herded like cattle with every ounce of dignity ripped from them. They sat there helpless, voiceless, waiting for the final call!

Life is a cycle. Infants are feeble at the mercy of the adults and so are the old who can no longer take care of themselves. There is one difference, though. Infants have not been “socialized”. They do not know they should feel shameful when being stripped naked in public! Such acts of brutal abuse of the elderly must be severely penalized but the root of the issue is the urgency to tackle the aging problem. I am sure this incident of abuse is only the tip of the iceberg.



## What can 25 years mean?

A child can be born, grow up, go to school, graduate with a university degree and is in his or her second year of career if granted that life is plain-sailing all the way! It can also be for a man and woman in their 20s to meet, date, marry, have children, watch them grow and are now in their 50s ready to enjoy the golden years or are already taking care of grand-children if they are so blessed!



That is what 25 years can mean! But in real life, I wonder how probable plain-sailing is to most people! These days, everything is on fast track and we as individuals do feel helpless in face of unpredictable mishaps. When we have been groomed to believe in fairy tales, we tend to expect the predictable or the norm. When life turns out to be abnormal or rather atypical, we are left asunder!!

Life has taught me some hard lessons. For one, when I am overjoyed, I am also prepared for twists and turns looming round the corner. It doesn't mean that I have to restrain my happiness. I will still enjoy the moment. I just need to be ready. For two, I am contented with what I have. I don't compare myself with someone who has more but with those who have less. I count my blessings. I do not take anybody or anything for granted. One last lesson is I do not build my happiness upon how others treat me because I did that once and had suffered all the frustration. Now I give but do not ask for return even when the recipients are family members.

My life in the last 25 years has been most abnormal opening new frontiers and testing my resilience! But I have been able to uphold my one principle – be good to others though they may fail you! I am ready to leave this beautiful world with no regrets!

## What does 40 mean?

To me, the number 40 signifies a turning point! I was 40 going on 41 when my world tumbled down in a matter of three months! The husband I wedded for 15 years eloped with the secretary. The school I served for decades closed down. My son I treasured was hospitalized for acute kidney failure. Those dark days were difficult but I survived! Life is never the same! I have been exploring a new world with a new partner and achieving unfamiliar successes. My son recovered steadily, went to Australia for his university studies, returned, built a career and is now a married man with a seven-year old daughter.



Many of my young friends around me develop unknown fear as they turn 40. They begin to assess themselves comparing what they have and not have with those of their peers. Then they feel belittled upon discovering that their friends are doing better than they do. Somebody has a bigger apartment. Another has a fancier car.

This seems to be in contradiction with what *The Analects of Confucius* ( 論語 ) preaches: When you are 40, you no longer doubt. ( 四十而不惑 ). Maybe, it is only after re-assessing and re-assuring oneself to find his bearings, can one then move on.

If you have time, browse the internet and you will be amazed by all the interesting implications of this number. Just take the Bible for instance. It has been calculated that this number is used 98 times. Forty is used to indicate a long period of time such as the 40 days of fast of Jesus Christ in the desert, the 40 days between the Ascension and the Resurrection of Jesus and plenty more.

## Trading places

It was around eight in the morning. The lift stopped on the fifth floor. In came a woman and a little girl of about five. They had to be mother and daughter as they looked so alike, the same round face and sparkling eyes. As they walked in, the girl was clinging to the mother's legs nagging her at the same time.

"Mom, I want to be you! You don't have to go to school."

"Mary, I want to be YOU!"

This dialogue brought back to my mind a movie which I used for students' school-based assessment 11 years ago - *Freaky Friday*, a 2003 film based on the novel of the same name by Mary Rodgers. It stars Lindsay Lohan as Anna Coleman and Jamie Lee Curtis as her mother. In the film, their souls are switched due to an enchanted Chinese fortune cookie. The whole story is about how each copes with the new role and the problems that come along ending with mother-daughter relationship improved and their identities switched back.



How many times has such thought of swapping identities come to your mind? And if you were given such a chance, which person would you want to trade with? And how would you persuade that person to accept your offer? I know which person's identity I want to assume but I am sure he would not want to be me!

## The circle game

We all have such an experience – a state of captivity and numbness. These are days when we simply surrender to life's challenges which might be something overwhelming or the last straw on the camel's back or sheer boredom. We feel like trapped in a maze too exhausted to attempt the escape. "The Circle Game" by Joni Mitchell released in 1970 comes in handy.

*We're captive on the carousel of time  
We can't return we can only look behind  
From where we came  
And go round and round and round  
In the circle game*

Faced with mounting challenges whether from work or family, we feel so helpless that we stop fighting back or we find ourselves simply stifled by routines. Whatever the cause may be, we have to re-activate ourselves by first examining our situation.

Is it a situation we want to be in? How long can we stay there stuck? Why are we there? Is it the best for ourselves? These are solid questions we have to answer!

Want to stay in the situation – same job, same relationship? Then get re-energized to improve it. Get help if the challenges are too exacting. Voice your objection if the workload keeps increasing or if the relationship is upsetting you. If life is too monotonous, create new dimensions. Break your routine. Make new friends. Start a new hobby.

Want to uproot yourself from the situation? Make preparations for the change to come. Take it as a project and plan it but not to the greatest details. That would be too nerve-racking.

Life does not have to be a circle game.

## Waiting for the one!

Bean Bean, my dog for 13 years had been left at home by himself (sorry, itself) for close to 17 months since the last helper Daisy left. It must have been very miserable for him because Daisy had been taking care of him since he joined our family in 2001. Bean Bean is a good boy who goes to the cage for wee-wee but would urinate on the floor if we returned home past midnight!

Bean Bean is very dutiful. He barks at the slightest noise he hears and the smallest dust flying in the air. Whenever any "strangers" like the delivery men or repair men are in the apartment, he would bark from the moment they step in to the minute they step out.

We had been trying hard to hire a new helper. Not to say these days the demand for helpers far exceeds the supply, the mere

mentioning of a four-legged baby is putting off many potential helpers!



So every day Bean Bean stayed in his bed with eyes fixed on the door waiting for us to be back. He grew so tired waiting that when I did open the door, he would merely give me a look skipping the formality of getting up or wagging the tail. He did not even bother to bark.

## You are the one!

Then came a call in November. It was a friend saying that she had a friend who couldn't afford a helper anymore now that she had lost her job. That brought us our new helper Mharscod.

We interviewed Mharscod and were happy to know that she had looked after a dog before. That was the experience in a helper we had been looking for. So we didn't ask too many other questions and started the whole process of signing her. Mharscod's contract was terminated for financial reason and so the time needed for processing the papers would be shorter. Still it took one whole month.



Finally, Mharscod arrived. The moment we feared came.

"How long would Bean Bean bark at Mharscod before he stops?"

It was not long at all. He barked when he sighted the stranger. But almost immediately he stopped barking to walk round her sniffing her hard. Then he started wagging the tail!

It was like miracle - Bean Bean likes Mharscod! We are saved. Now we can take trips!

In less than 24 hours, Mharscod was taking selfies with Bean Bean.



## Bean Bean is aging

People who have never had a dog as pet can never understand or empathize with dog owners for treating dogs as children. I, for one, take Bean Bean, my dog for close to 14 years, as my child. I don't just feed him. That is the very basic. I will care for him till death do we part!



Dogs are routine creatures and so once they behave differently, something must be wrong.

Bean Bean excretes inside the cage covered with diapers and elevated with a basin underneath. About a month ago, I noticed that Bean Bean had difficulty getting inside the cage. He put the right fore paw first on the edge, hesitated, then as though gathering all his strength jumped inside!

I took him to the vet. The diagnosis was he had back problem but operation was not advised because of his advanced age.

Bean Bean has, since then, been taking pain killers. The drugs work miracle. He is back to his playful self jumping in and out the cage at ease! I knew all these drugs he is taking might bring along side-effects but there is no other option.

## Bean Bean's bowl raised

Have you ever noticed how a dog eats? Like a human eating from a bowl while doing push-ups!

I feed Bean Bean with dry food which comes in small bites for senior dogs. Each time, Bean Bean has to stretch his neck and exert great strength to pick up the food from the bowl. His muscle from the neck down the back is fully strained! I feel bad for him knowing well that he suffers from back pain.

"Only if I can elevate the bowl!"

It was Bean Bean's good luck that I bumped into a Japanese pet store offering all kinds of goods that pet owners can think of or have ever imagined! I entered and browsed!

There they are - bowl stands of different designs and colours. One of these was a wooden one for a single bowl. It came with extensions for the legs to be adjusted. It cost \$200.

I took the package home, unwrapped it and quickly assembled the pieces. But all the while, Bean Bean was barking at the stand ferociously. To him, it was an intruder! I had to tempt him patiently by putting his favourite treats one after another in the bowl placed on the stand.

Finally, after half an hour, Bean Bean put down his guard and took his dinner from the bowl. He did not have to lower his neck anymore!

Silly dog owners!



## Memorial service

I was baptized as a Catholic when I was six. I attended a convent school from 6 to 18. In those school years, I practised my religion fervently praying in the little chapel and attending mass every morning. My mother was worried sick that I might want to be a nun. I didn't but a couple of my classmates did.



After graduation, I was so engrossed in working several jobs to support my family of ten that I virtually stopped going to church. That could be an excuse. There should be other reasons. These years, church visits are limited to celebrations and commemorations. This

Tuesday, I attended the mass in memory of a nun, also my Chinese Language teacher who passed away a year ago. The mass was hosted by a young priest. He gave a brief but thought-provoking sermon.

He recounted to us how as a novice, he and other novices, men and women, had to do community service in some of the deprived districts all over Hong Kong. That evening, they were in Shamshuipo distributing rice-boxes to the street-sleepers. They arrived at a slum under a footbridge and these homeless people were anxiously awaiting. They were the opposite of refinement. Tattooed and foul-mouthed, they did not restrain themselves even with the young ladies there. One of the male novices believed these street-sleepers had gone overboard and walked up to these men about to reprimand them when one of the lady novices cried out "Don't! There is no need to stop them because I can see Jesus in them!"

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, or more fondly Mother Teresa, the recipient of numerous honours including the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize had this quote which, to me, should be indelibly imprinted on all teachers' mind.

*I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him. I serve because I love Jesus.*

## Death of a kind man

I didn't know the fire victim was him. He was the shop assistant of a local pharmacy I frequent. He was bald with a wrinkled face putting him in his sixties. That was, however, compensated by his well-built set. His voice was husky. He was always humourous and very nostalgic.



He was one of the three assistants serving at the counter of a popular pharmacy in Lok Fu Plaza. He lived up to his nickname "Gweilo" (鬼佬). Each time when he handed me the receipt, he said in perfect English "Thank you. See you again". When he was idling, he would be humming one of the golden oldies.

All these would not have impressed me had I not witnessed his kind side.

One afternoon, I walked in the shop wanting to buy a particular brand of shampoo only available there. There was already a middle-aged Filipino domestic helper at the counter. "Gweilo" was talking to the other assistant who was at the cashier register. From their conversation, I knew that this Filipina had returned to the shop to reclaim the receipt of a purchase she made earlier that morning. "Gweilo" was murmuring to his colleague that the fault was hers for not getting the receipt right after the purchase but still they should help her because otherwise she could not claim the \$230. His colleague found him annoying and burst out "shut up". What followed was a row. The shop owner had to pull "gweilo" outside the shop gently patting him on the shoulder.

He was Yeung Wai-ming, the 61-year-old man who ran into a blazing flat to rescue his 91-year-old mother.

"He was found on top of his mother in the kitchen. It is possible he found her there and tried to carry her in his arms but he inhaled smoke, passed out and fell onto her," a police source said.

## 8729

How would you remember a number like 8729? That is my car plate number. When I bought it in 2009, I had difficulty remembering it. Well, I must admit I am not good with numbers.

It was my mother who ingeniously thought of a way to remember 8729! Multiply the first and last digits, you get 72! Six years ago, she was already 82!



Despite her advanced age, she wants to live! She is the patient all doctors would love to have as she follows doctor's advice to the letter. She is most punctual in taking her medication. Walking cheerfully towards the dining table, she says in English to the helper "eat medicine now". As she has been diabetic for close to three

decades, she knows well what she should not eat. But all ladies in our family have a sweet tooth and so every now and then she would be tempted by the dessert we are enjoying, whether it is the crème brûlée, mousse or sweet dumpling. She would ask eagerly if it is sweet expecting us to give her the answer she prays for. Then she can have a bite!

Seeing how the elderly try so hard to live on, I can but sigh as I watch the young staying up late to play games, stuffing their mouths with charcoal-like chicken wings or puffing away their life!



## Salute to emergency ward staff

My mother was rushed to hospital at around 3 in the middle of the night two weeks ago. She was feeling dizzy and vomiting. We all panicked but she did not. She even instructed us what to do and what to bring. She was only very anxious to know what was causing her situation. She is 87 and has been diabetic for close to 30 years.

The emergency ward was quite crowded with most of the patients being the elderly. They were like my mom in stretchers lined up next to one another waiting to be triaged. Two drunkards restrained to the stretchers and accompanied by policemen were mumbling and screaming in extraterrestrial language. All staff was hectically engaged.



There were only a couple of seats with the signage "For patients only". So we dared not sit and actually stood all those hours while my mother was wheeled from one room to another to undergo various tests. At about noon, we were told the verdict. My mother had to be hospitalized.

The emergency ward is definitely the one place I would not want to be in. In fact, in 1966 I was successful in my application to be a student nurse. But I did not take the offer after careful consideration of two facts. Number One - I could not stand the sight of blood! And I did not know how to say words of consolation. Whenever I visit friends or relatives in distress, I have to keep back my tears! And after this visit to the emergency ward, I can add one more reason – the situation is so stressful that I am bound to make mistakes! And yet every minute has to be error-free as life is at stake.

## I never knew

I never knew this would be the last summer, the last Sunday, the last conversation, the last meal, the last holding hands, the last shopping spree, the last trip with my mother. Had I known, I would have stayed with her the whole summer vacation. I would not have taken the Balkan trip. I would not have arranged the massage on that Sunday. I would have lingered longer after the meal. I would not



have let go of her hands to go to the canteen for lunch. Only now I realized why she was nagging for round-the-clock companionship. She would not want to leave this world alone. She didn't. We were all there.

Oh how I regret not to have treasured her more! Why was it I couldn't see it coming? She knew her days, hours and minutes were on countdown. But we were not sensitive enough! She had always been such a fighter! Only a week after the operation, she was discharged from the hospital with the doctor declaring that her recovery was satisfactory. And yet when home, she was not her strong agile self anymore. She was so feeble and fragile that she seemed to have shrunk. Five days later, she complained of breathing difficulty and was rushed to hospital on the sixth day. She died two days later at 11:35 in the morning on September 2 Wednesday because of multiple organ failure.

Now she is lying all alone in the freezing box awaiting cremation. She would love to have her hair done and cheeks moisturized.

Mom, I miss you so! I could have done better!

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## **"Each and every word, spoken or written, matters."**

### **Prologue**

Thomas CHAI is the Senior Executive Chef of Tung Lok Restaurants in Singapore. He is, in fact, one of the celebrity chefs thronged by the media. In a recent television appearance, Thomas was asked to prepare a banquet with all his signature dishes for a person important to him. Thomas invited his English teacher.



With Thomas CHAI and Bert Koh at My Humble House

When Thomas first arrived in Singapore from Malaysia, he was not able to communicate in English. He had to attend the in-house evening English classes. But then because of the long work hours, he was always late to class and sleepy during lessons. He felt very embarrassed each time he dozed

off. Yet his teacher smiled, patted him on the shoulder and gave him extra lessons when he was free. When it was the last lesson before the examinations, the teacher called the four weakest students to her room and gave each one a card with words "I expect no less than 4As in your examinations" written on them. That meant straight A. And that was what Thomas achieved. Upon getting the result, Thomas ran to the classroom where lessons used to be held to announce it to his teacher. He was disappointed to find out that she had been re-deployed to another centre.

Eleven years passed and so when the teacher and student met at the banquet table covered with bowls and dishes of exquisite food, it was one touching scene. There seated was one elegant elderly lady with a broad smile on her face, then in came the meek soft-spoken student, Thomas. He approached her and they hugged. The next second saw Thomas feeling about his pocket and taking out a card – that very one his teacher gave him. In the gentlest voice, he said, “ I got 4As. I thought you would like to know. Thank you for your confidence in me” as he handed the card to the teacher. All eyes were teary.

This summer I was in Singapore. When I was dining with my friend, Mr. Bert Koh, there Thomas was bustling around in the kitchen. Bert got excited and told me his story. We approached him with Bert pointing out that I am an English teacher. We had a photo taken. The next day, Bert gave me the recording of that television program and so I came to know the story of Thomas.

## **My awakening**

One teacher has touched a person and he in turn touches the world. Isn't this amazing? And I am blessed enough to be in this enviable profession of teaching. But to be honest, I have not always felt like this in the long years of my career.

Too often in the past, when lessons were over, I collapsed into my chair grunting how students were unmotivated and unwilling and that teaching them was a total waste of my time. But with the passage of time, I was enlightened. Perhaps it was the reading of an article, or the sharing I had with some guru or a talk I had attended or perhaps I had learnt it the hard way or had tasted the sweet fruits of some successes but trust me I have forgotten when and why I became converted. I changed.

I no longer engage myself in depressing indictment of students' hopelessness but instead I have become most critical of myself taking on the blame and the responsibility for their non-performance. I do not indulge in self-deceiving beliefs that my lessons are the best and therefore deserve their full attention, that they are lucky to be in my class and they should render their very best efforts to the learning tasks, that they should be active learners getting the most from my lessons. These would be thoughts too beautiful to be true. And I know when such "paradise" scenario does not happen in my class, I cannot just conclude that my students are lazy and not worth my devotion. That would be the easy way out. But what would subsequent lessons degenerate into? Two worlds or more in one classroom – my pathetic cocoon world of profound knowledge and the students' different worlds of their own? Hours to become days and days to become years? That is not to happen in my classroom. No, I would not allow that.

### **Biting the bullet**

What takes place in an effective classroom is learning not just teaching. Too often there is teaching but no learning. Teachers who are nervous, frustrated or are engrossed in catching up with the syllabus keep teaching or rather talking regardless of whether the students are learning or not. Paying attention to the situation of learning demands adjustment, adaptation and even improvisation. All these may seem too much to ask for but as teachers, our responsibility is to foster learning. Teachers who are experienced or prepared should know their students well and should have taken every possible situation into consideration when preparing lessons. The crux of the issue is to bite the bullet - be accountable for the failure of learning in the classroom. That requires a lot of painstaking soul-searching. Admitting failure and accepting the blame is only the first difficult step. How to prevent future failure and ensure permanent success is the challenge.



We teachers often blame students for not paying attention to us but do we to them? Do we know what they are doing under the desk? Are they following the lesson or reading a comic book or messaging? Reflective teachers would try to decipher all those passive looks or nodding heads or the absolute silence. In their little ways, our students are telling us that they are not tuning to our channel or are not even on the same planet as ours. How often do we notice all these?

“If they don’t understand, why don’t they ask? They just don’t bother!” says the teacher. No, they might not know they have the right. Or they don’t know where to start. Their behaviour is a conglomeration of years of pleasant and unpleasant classroom experience. They might have been told off many times when they opened their mouths. They might have been warned not to ask stupid questions.

And we have to admit that in many ways, classrooms have basically not changed much though the whole world around us has. Young people who are so used to all the audio and visual sensations would for sure find the traditional classes prolonged and boring. As teachers, we have to believe or if you don’t, then convince yourselves that all students are willing to learn and can learn, they just cannot endure the way they are taught. If we really want self-motivated students learning in our classroom, we ourselves must first be strongly motivated to learn.

### **No quick fix and definitely no panacea**

Problem students or rather problem behaviour comes in all forms and severity and for all kinds of reasons. Teachers should never nurture the wishful thinking that there exists somewhere in the world a magical potion to cure all ailments. And what works in other classes all the time may instead bring havoc to another. A cocktail recipe might work more effectively than a single shot of a particular remedy. We need to

be alert, patient and appreciative of improvement however small or insignificant it might be. When it does occur, recognition is due so as to nurture its further growth.

### **Dosage 1: Individualization**

In fact, what our students hate most or take advantage of is when we teachers see them as a homogenous mass. Those seeking attention would be so disappointed when they discover to their dismay our eyes never fall on them. On the other hand, others would feel so comfortable when they successfully remain invisible and anonymous amidst the big crowd. What can be more disastrous to happen than a teacher having to point at students and not being able to name them even by the end of the school year?

Students all want to feel that we are treating them as individuals with their names, character and needs well grasped by us teachers. We should never simply label students according to their performance. They are humans and should be treated with respect. Conscientious teachers would assess their students individually and set achievable tailor-made targets for them. Instructions are always specifically worded to foster and exploit students' talents. Students want caring teachers who have an eye on them in class, check on them, pat them on the shoulder in recess, jump in to help when hearts are broken, appreciate the slightest effort and regularly design a variety of learning activities and tasks that give them the opportunity to learn in modes that suit their individual needs, styles and levels. All students want to be positively challenged and not depressingly demoralized.

### **Dosage 2: Honesty, humour and humility**

Often enough there are times in class when a teacher simply has to be honest, honest that he is not in control, honest that he has spoken a word too harshly, honest that he has wronged a student,

honest that he cannot answer a question posed by the student and honest that he has allowed his own personal emotions to get in the way. Only when teachers are truly honest to themselves and to the classroom situations will they be able to address the problems and put classes into perspective.

There are ways out. Teachers have to be humble and good-humoured and take the bull by the horns. Humble because only the humble are open-minded enough to learn. Good-humoured because a joke or a smile can save face when heat is rising. These are moments when teachers should loosen the iron fist and look at the students with fondness rather than impatience and frustration. Teachers nowadays are all trained professionals armoured with techniques to handle all sorts of difficult situations. As long as they remain calm and not irritated, they know what best to do. A word of apology to the wronged student, words of confirmation to the one who shouts out the answer, a dramatized laughter, a question rephrased for that “dumb” student who has his lips sealed, a promise that you will look up for the answer to that “naughty” student who has asked you a question you should know but cannot answer are all contingency measures you know and can resort to.

### **Dosage 3: Compassion, commitment and conscientiousness**

When in the classroom, teachers should see beyond the surface. Hostility can be a mask for fear. Compassionate teachers would respond to such hostility by persuading students to remove the mask and reveal their fear. Teachers should remain composed and restrain their temper. Direct confrontation is a “face” matter and “face” is a big issue not only to teachers but also to students. While we want to maintain our dignity, so do the students. We should keep in mind that when we put students down in front of others, the entire class

might turn against us. Shouting and screaming would not defuse the situation. The misbehaving students have to be allowed to respectfully retreat from the confrontation. But this does not mean the teacher is to let go. The case must be followed up when everybody is calmer and when the contention is clarified.

These days, all teachers and not just those assigned counselling and guidance duties have to learn communication skills and counselling strategies. Adverse situations can happen in any class and anytime. It is not wise to wait for the cavalry to come to your rescue. A mere command of the subject knowledge is no longer the sole criterion a teacher has to possess.

For teachers to be able to “control” the class takes more than a kind heart. It takes strong commitment to the profession and a very conscientious attitude to constantly reflect on their teaching and update themselves. When a student is entrusted to us teachers, he becomes our responsibility. We cannot allow the student not learning and not achieving though to what extent he does learn varies from student to student. We cannot have a student not being “touched” by us. Changes have to take place intellectually and emotionally.

### **Booster dosage: Prevention is better than cure**

Though there are always ways out of difficult situations, we should in the first place never allow them to take place. There is bound to be casualty whenever adverse situation happens no matter how well you get out of it.

In Hong Kong, teachers’ workload is so heavy and diversified that it is not uncommon for us to become forgetful. We might go back on our own words. We might lose our sense of relativity when we inflict penalty. We might be habitually looking at the same students for the whole lesson while neglecting the rest. We might not see hands raised a dozen times.

We have to make our “house” rules clear and stick to them. We cannot assume students know what we want and how they are to behave. Different teachers have different sets of regulations and they hold different levels of tolerance as to what can happen in class. Students are faced with not just one teacher every day and they might get confused.

In order for adversity not to happen, we have to be in the best physical and mental conditions all the time. We have to feel good about ourselves and in particular we have to be proud of our profession. Every day we should do all we can to ensure that we step inside the classroom at our best as this pre-determines the success of the lesson. We should be addressing the whole class and yet each of the students is to feel that we are looking at him as an individual person. When we see any breach of our house rules, we have to stop it at the start by a critical look made obvious to the offender and if the misbehaviour continues, we have to stop whatever we are doing and attend to the matter. Short of these actions, we are sending the wrong message to our students and in fact we are encouraging others to follow suit.

## Conclusion

I have been a teacher for over forty years. I cannot say I enjoy every minute of it. But I can declare that right now at my present position at school, I am at my most cheerful self when I am in front of the students as the English Language teacher and not behind my desk as the Deputy Principal. Teaching is instantly rewarding and it is even more so if you enjoy it. Teaching is tough but as we are doing God’s job of touching souls, it cannot be easy.

2008

## "Sir, I beg to differ!"

### Prologue

"I think this is the first time ever a surf-board rider is used on the cover of a book on education management." If my memory serves me correctly — and the hundreds of distinguished guests laughing on the



occasion of the Hong Kong School Principals' Conference 2008 held at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) on May 29 2008<sup>1</sup> can bear me witness – this was the exact opening remark made by Professor Brian J CALDWELL, world-renowned school transformation expert, as he presented a powerpoint slide similar to the one shown here.

Professor Caldwell was virtually equating the principal of a school with an extreme sport player – a surfer going solo in the big blue waves! If Professor Caldwell was being dramatic, if he wanted to be politically correct or if he simply wanted to be funny, then judging from the response of those present, he had certainly achieved all these purposes.

I was among the audience. That opening remark and the resounding laughter disturbed me until the end of the speech. During the question and answer session, I had to hold myself back from raising my hand. The question I wanted so much to pose the professor was on the tip of my tongue – How can you draw an analogy between a school principal and a surfer? Eventually I did ask him the question, but that was at the end of the session, when I walked up to him as he was being whisked off by other celebrities. I wasn't honoured with a response.



## Extreme sports

According to Wikipedia<sup>2</sup>, an "extreme sport" is "a media term for certain activities perceived as having a high level of inherent danger. These activities often involve inherently uncontrollable variables such as speed, height, high level of physical exertion, highly specialized gear or spectacular stunts." Athletes participating in these activities compete not only against other athletes, but also against environmental obstacles and challenges including snow conditions for snowboarders, rock and ice quality for climbers, and wave height and power for surfers.

There are several characteristics common to most extreme sports. The first would be they have a younger-than-average target demographic and that they tend to be more solitary than traditional sports. An additional hallmark of an extreme sport is its counter-cultural aura - a rejection of authority and the status quo by disaffected youth.

## Surfing as an extreme sport

Surfing, like all water sports, carries the inherent danger of drowning. Although a surfboard may assist a surfer in staying buoyant, it cannot be relied on for floatation, as it can be separated from the user. Anything that a surfer's body comes into contact with may be dangerous to him. This includes sand bars, rocks, and reefs. Collisions with these objects may cause unconsciousness or even death.

In terms of history, surfing was a central part of ancient Polynesian culture, and the chief was the most skilled wave rider in the community with the best board made from the best wood. According to the Wikipedia entries, surfing permeated ancient Polynesian society, including religion and myth, and Polynesian chiefs would demonstrate and confirm their authority by the skills they displayed in the surf.

## **A surfer as school principal? Principal as a surfer?**

After reviewing what we should know about extreme sports and surfing as an example of such a sport, let us for a moment examine if in any way a school principal should be a surfer or whether a school would benefit if the principal were to become a surfer.

First, surfing projects the image of a dissatisfied youth who has a protest statement to make by intentionally riding the challenging waves risking the dangers of drowning and collision with rocks or reefs. As he stands there all alone, he is executing various manoeuvres such as turning and carving to prove that he is the strongest. He might even be rotating his turn and re-entering backward. The rule of the game is that the more dangerous the procedure is, such as "tube riding" when a surfer manoeuvres into a position where the wave curls over the top of him forming a "tube" with the rider inside the hollow cylindrical portion of the wave, the more coveted and sought after goal it is in surfing.

When a surfer wins the championship, he has but himself to congratulate and nobody else to thank. If he fails, he alone is both the culprit and the victim. Of course, a champion has a coach or maybe a sponsor to get him started but that is not part of the image. In brief, surfing represents a diverse culture based on riding the naturally occurring process of ocean waves. It is definitely not fair to generalize that all surf-riders are reckless people but then that is the exact image of a surfer as perceived by the general public.

Do we want an egoist, a soloist or a non-conformist of a diverse culture to serve as school principals? Do we need such character traits in a school principal, qualities including self-adulation and reckless risk-taking? We certainly don't! Well then where is the analogy?

## Organizations do need great leaders but not egoists

In his book *Good To Great – Why some companies make the leap... and others don't*, Jim COLLINS reports what his research team discovered as the key concepts that permitted some companies to go from "good" to "great". Although principals of schools are not exactly chief executive officers (CEOs) of companies, schools are organizations and so the same principles should apply.

One of the good-to-great companies examined in Collins' study was Kimberly-Clark. Darwin E SMITH, the CEO from 1971 to 1991 created a stunning performance. "It was an impressive performance, one of the best examples in the twentieth century of taking a good company and making it great."<sup>3</sup> And yet Darwin Smith, "a man who carried no airs of self-importance" was not much known.

Jim Collins describes Smith as "a Level 5 leader – an individual who blends extreme personal humility with intense professional will". So "extreme" is not in risk-taking but in "humility". Collins goes on to elaborate how Level 5 leaders, the highest in his 5-level leader hierarchy, deals with "ego". Needless to say, these high-ranking executives do have ego and self-interest and are extremely ambitious, but "they channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company...their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves"

In this book, Jim Collins reiterates that he gave his research team "*explicit instructions to downplay* (writer's own italics) the role of top executives so as to avoid drawing the over-simplistic conclusion of crediting or blaming the leader...yet extensive researches found that leaders do make the difference from good companies to great companies and what makes a great leader is "humility + will = Level

5" leadership. And great leaders like Darwin Smith shunned public adulation whereas public attention and personal adulation are exactly what a surfer riding the waves is aspiring for.

### **What kind of leaders do organizations need?**

Peter SENGE in his *The Fifth Discipline – The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization* poses groups of managers this question: Imagine that your organization is an ocean liner, and that you are the "leader". What is your role?<sup>4</sup>

When evaluating these managers' various replies, Peter Senge has his own answers ready: the leader is the designer with tasks concerning developing vision, values, and purpose or mission, the steward of taking his own vision as a calling he is responsible for. And for organizations that truly excel, the leaders should be able to "tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization". Such organization has no place for self-seeking egoistic leaders.

In *Primal Leadership – Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence*, the writers describe the CEO Disease – the leaders are so feared that the people around him "withhold important (and usually unpleasant) information."<sup>5</sup> Any school principals who dare to surf the big waves must be seriously ill of this disease. Leaders are to provide safety for the organization to grow. Their focus should be on "relationship management – teamwork and collaboration". Great leaders are themselves able team players who "generate an atmosphere of friendly collegiality and are themselves models of respect, helpfulness, and cooperation. They draw others into active, enthusiastic commitment to the collective effort, and build spirit and identity. They spend time forging and cementing close relationships beyond mere work obligations."<sup>6</sup>

## What kind of leaders do schools need?

The same message of caution is echoed in Anderson's *Accountability in Education*. Successful schools are stable schools because "stability in terms of commitment to the school over time, is needed to shape the school culture and climate".<sup>7</sup>

The literature review on leadership in Caldwell's collaborative work with Spinks, *Leading the Self-managing School*, does mention that an element of risk-taking in the management of human resources is needed but should be "selective" and started "on a small scale".<sup>8</sup>

The book includes an extensive discussion on the role of principals in achieving the culture of excellence in schools. Principals are first to work with others in the school community "to define elements of excellence which are relevant to their setting, and to identify and resolve inconsistencies between these and the various manifestations of culture in their schools." For this to happen, "a shared commitment and concerted action among individuals" is needed with the school leaders able to 'see the larger picture'. They should also be adept in focusing the attention of members of the school community on matters of importance when they manage the school symbols including words, actions and rewards. Schools are and should be accountable to students, parents, local community, education system, the local government, national government and community in general. There is absolutely no room for risk-taking of extreme intensity and uncertainty.<sup>9</sup>

At a more recent symposium<sup>10</sup>, while drawing from the findings of a study in six countries, including Australia, China, England, Finland, the United States and Wales, Caldwell emphasized that four sets of synergies would need to be created in schools.

He was referring to:

- Accountability, autonomy and choice
- Intellectual, social, spiritual and financial capital;
- Education, economy and society; and
- Passion, strategy and trust.

He went on to say that "the key to secure success for all students in all settings and school transformation is to bring strategies together and make them effective. To build this strength and secure such alignment requires outstanding leadership and governance."

This was the same theme Caldwell presented at the Hong Kong School Principals' Conference 2008. "In the 21st century setting, concerns of education, economy and society have to be aligned. Schools need to find the right balance between its intellectual, social, spiritual and financial capital, and school leaders are required to articulate a compelling vision with passion, strategy and trust." In the same breath when he was presenting the school principal as the surfers, Caldwell was also calling for principals to strike the right balance.

Also at this conference, Professor CHENG Yin-cheong, Acting Vice President (Research and Development) at HKIEd and Chairman of the Organizing Committee, echoed Professor Caldwell's call for synergies. "This Conference is testimony of the common desire of school leaders, academics and policy makers to develop a closer working relationship. The participants came in anticipation of creating synergy from their collective experiences and working together."

## Conclusion

So after the initial laughter over the surfer analogy, everybody at the conference was once again sober. Risk-taking was not in the agenda. Afterall, salt at its best is for seasoning. It is not food. Less



is better than more. Schools do not need extreme sports players as principals. And principals do not need to go to extremity to prove their authority.

If analogies are required to present a clear picture, why not the school as the philharmonic orchestra and the principal as the director?



## Notes

1. *The Hong Kong School Principals' Conference is an annual event jointly organized by HKIEd, the Hong Kong Subsidized Secondary Schools Council and the Subsidized Primary Schools Council, and co-organized by the Hong Kong Special Schools Council. This year, the one-day event, with keynote speech and seminars covering educational policy, leadership, and learning and teaching drew around 1,000 school principals and deputy principals of primary and secondary schools, together with policy makers and education practitioners. Professor Caldwell was the keynote speaker.*
2. *Wikipedia is the free open content encyclopedia project operated by the United States-based non-profit Wikipedia Foundation. By April 2008, Wikipedia had over 10 million articles in 253 languages. The English edition had over 2,400,000 articles as of July 2008. These articles have been written collaboratively by volunteers around the world and can be edited by anyone with access to the Internet. The contents, therefore, contain original research or unverified claims, which are to be handled with discretion.*
3. *For details on Darwin Smith, read Collins, J., (2001) Good To Great – Why some companies make the leap... and others don't. London: Random House Business Books, Chapter 2.*
4. *Senge, P. (1999) The Fifth Discipline – The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization. London: Random House Business Books, 341- 352*
5. *Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002) Primal Leadership – Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 93*
6. *ibid. 256*
7. *Anderson, J.A. (2005) Accountability in Education UNESCO: The International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) & The International Academy of Education (IAE), Education Policy Series, 6*
8. *Caldwell, B.J. & Spinks, J.M. (1992) Leading the Self-managing School. London: The Falmer Press, Chapter 3*
9. *Ponton L., (1997) The Romance Of Risk: Why Teenagers Do The Things They Do. New York: Basic Books.*
10. *Professor Brian Caldwell presented this paper at a symposium and conference on the theme of 'Sustainable Leadership in Education' organized by the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney, September 21-22, 2006.*

2014

## **Vignettes – from attachment to detachment**

Five years came and went. Fukien Secondary School Affiliated School (FSSAS) has delivered what The Fukien Chamber of Commerce Education Fund, our school sponsoring body, promised in the Proposal bidding for the operation of the campus in June 2009. Through providing a caring student-centred environment, the school strives to nurture children with these CHARACTER traits. Students are to be caring, happy, active, responsible, articulate, confident, talented, enquiring and respectful.

Here I would like to share with readers several snapshots that are dear to me.

### **Attachment**

#### **One early Monday morning in May 2009**

I was in my office ready to start the day's work when Dr. LAM Kin Wah, our principal passed by my room and said "Have you heard of the closing down of Pegasus? Let's try to bid for it!"

"Why not?" I replied with great excitement. It was a relatively less busy period of the year as Secondary 7, the class I taught had already left.

Almost immediately I started searching for information about the school but I was disappointed to discover that the school website had not been updated for a long time.

## **Summer 2009**

Once the sponsorship was officially granted to our school sponsoring body, everything went into turbo drive. First there was the press conference, then came planning meetings with teachers, parents, contractors and many more. Time was pressing as the school had to open for its first school year on September 1. We worked almost round the clock and in the lime light of the media.

One night past ten, as Dr. Lam and I stepped out of the school gate, a reporter was there with the flashing camera. The picture of us looking totally exhausted was in the newspaper the next morning and our supervisor called us to offer her concern for our health.

## **One afternoon in May 2010**

In the school year 2009 - 2010, I taught one class of the first cohort of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) at Fukien Secondary School (FSS) and served as the Executive School Manager of FSSAS. I juggled between my teaching and administrative duties at FSS and the various challenges at FSSAS as I started the now familiar 15-minute drive between the two campuses. But even this short trip could become excruciating when rushing for meetings.

Then came May and preparation was made at both schools for the forthcoming school year, Dr. Lam suggested that I gave up my teaching at FSS so that I would be free from time-table constraints and could devote more time to FSSAS. Most reluctantly, I had to agree and explained the situation to my class who had become very fond of me. They surprised me with an album loaded with their baby photos, class photos, good wishes and promises that they would continue to work hard. They kept their words and scored excellent results in 2012 HKDSE.

### **One afternoon in May 2011**

Based on my one-year experience at Victoria English Primary School (2001 – 2002), I had been brewing this idea of “Homeroom Mode” for quite some time. Building on the favourable teacher-student ratio at FSSAS, this new mode of one Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) and one local teacher to serve as class teachers and to teach the three core subjects of English Language, Mathematics and the school-based curriculum of Thematic Studies would first be implemented in Primary 1 in 2011 – 2012 when all Primary 1 classes would adopt English as the medium of instruction (EMI) with Chinese Language taught in Putonghua. The school would then be on its way to become an EMI primary school. This Homeroom Mode not only minimizes the number of teachers Primary 1 students have to adapt to but also builds an English-rich environment for students to actually use the language.

In 2012 – 2013, this Homeroom Mode was phased in to Primary 2 and the first cohort of students are now in Primary 4. With Homeroom Mode into the fourth year, a concerted effort has been made to enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching in these classrooms.

### **Evening of July 6 2014**

It was a gala evening with guests and the whole school gathered at the school hall for a dinner officiated by Mrs. Cherry TZE LING Kitching JP, the Permanent Secretary for Education. Votes of gratitude flowed throughout the evening which ended with the principal, Ms KO Wai-kuen presenting the team of management staff. That was a truly gratifying moment ushering in a new era.



## Detachment

I am most privileged to have this opportunity of participating in the re-birth of the school. With clear goals, strong determination and team work, Fukien Secondary School Affiliated School is on solid ground to prosper. The number of Primary 1 applicants grew from 106 in September 2009 to around 1300 in September 2014. However, there is no room for complacency. Current practices and policies have to be reviewed in the light of the school vision and mission to ensure sustainable development.



