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How **Babbling** came about

I have always loved writing and sharing my thoughts. In fact, that was almost the only pastime in my school days. When I did my weekly journal writing, whether in Chinese or English, I would go on and on. So here I go writing about my joys and pains, my views and thoughts, about my love ones as well as what I see and hear.

These articles are not any great literary works but they are all words from the bottom of my heart. I would be most gratified if you can resonate with any of the articles or even a few lines of one of the stories.

All these articles have earlier been uploaded to the website of Hong Kong Women Teachers' Organization <www.hkwto.org.hk>. Feel free to download or photocopy. The fun is in sharing and the honour is mine if you like the articles.

Pauline

Summer, 2014

Finger counting



It is close to the end of the year and time for me to count my blessings again! I have started doing so ever since I turned 50.

Life has been full of challenges for me: poverty, betrayal, desertion, office politics etc. And I can always blame my parents for giving me my freckles, the only child among eight with freckles.

But why torturing myself with these negative thoughts? Why keep recalling bad memories? I am my own master. I decide how I feel. This awakening brought in my new life!

I am, generally speaking, healthy. I am still a useful person in many ways. At my senior age, I still have my mother. She is diabetic but well taken care of by the public health system. And she is a really good girl controlling her sugar intake. I am not rich but my wants are always satisfied. My son has a loving wife and an adorable daughter. I live in this clean, safe city of Hong Kong.

Everything is relative depending on which way you look - positive or negative. And so will your mood go! Trust me. I have learnt it the hard way!

Freckles



I grow up in a family of eight children. I am the only child with freckles all over my face. I was truly upset with this “addition” of unwanted pigments. Now as I grow older, age spots come in creating patches!

When I was a little girl, my mother would give me slices of egg-plants, cucumber and lemons as she was preparing food saying that these could help lighten the undesirable spots. I diligently followed the advice.

As I went on to middle age, I asked my family doctor whether I should receive laser treatment to remove the unsightly speckles. Today I can still remember his words. “Freckles make you look young.” What a comfort to know!

Since then, I have bravely accepted my freckles. Though I still put on whitening essences and creams, I have never for one moment considered any kind of intrusive treatments.

I can understand why the celebrities are trying every means to retain their young looks because as I look into the mirror, I feel disheartened. I don't have to count on my looks for a living and after all, I have never been beautiful. Yet, I still feel saddened. For those who have been born beautiful and have their looks adored by fans, how can they face aging? I can empathize with them resorting to botox and every available method to keep their pride.

Hair



My hair is thinning! I used to wear a fringe until about two years ago. Now no matter how hard I try, I can't! I am losing my last frontier.

I am not too sure if other ladies think the same – hair is identity. I used to have very thick shoulder-length straight hair with a fringe. This “Cleopatra” hair-style was my signature since I was barely twenty. And now without the fringe, I find it hard to convince myself that the person in the mirror with a head of thin hair parted on the right is actually me.

When I was young, much younger than now, I had to ask my stylist to trim my hair thin so that it would be more manageable. I used to comb my hair with heavy strokes. But then it started to grey and I had to get it tinted. That was the beginning of tragedy. My hair, after being subjected to chemical treatments, started to protest. Strands of hair began to fall off especially during the change of weather or when I was under heavy pressure. All kinds of shampoos, conditioners and potions have been tried to no avail.

“I am not counting on my looks for a living. Why should I be so concerned? This is really stupid of me.”

I “educated” myself into accepting the phenomenon thanking for the hair I still have and teaching myself to take tender loving care of it. But the trouble is without the fringe, I look thinner. Friends I don't always see would remark “Oh, what's happening? You look so much thinner. I hope you are okay!” I have to explain apologetically that it is my hair that has created the impression and that I am perfectly fine.

Here is a photo of me and my grand-daughter, Hayley taken on the first day of the Year of the Horse.

Indulgence



Every Sunday I enjoy my four-hour indulgence routine from 9 in the morning to 1 in the afternoon. I am pampered with facial treatment and body massage! I try to keep this ritual to the best I can though it means I have to get up at 8. Regretfully, sometimes duty calls would deprive me of this weekly pleasure!

I am a firm believer of work hard, play or rather relax hard. When at work, I am focused. I am a person of no particular hobbies unless if that four-hour weekly pleasure is to be counted! I don't cycle, sing, swim or play any sports.

When I was at school, my family was so poor that we had to worry about the next meal! Certainly, there would not be any spare money for interest classes. As far as I can remember, life had always been difficult until late 80s. Every dollar had to be carefully calculated and holidays would only mean a stroll in the park.

I am very contented with my present life thanking whoever is up there every morning when I get up for being granted another new day !

Couch potato



There is a quote that goes something like this: Working hard pays off in the future. Being lazy pays off now.

This is so true. Sometimes, after exhausting myself for a week, there is nothing I want except to collapse on the sofa and stay there - a couch potato! I could be all sharp and alert attending hours of meetings but once I sink into my sofa, I could fall into a coma right away for at least 30 minutes with my full work suit on! I am afraid that if I clean up or get changed, I would lose the drowsiness.

Sometimes, I can stay awake until I finish dinner. But it would be absolutely disastrous if I sit down. I would be fast asleep for hours and wake up at midnight not able to sleep again. So I have started a new plan - not to sit down but remain standing, clean up and go downstairs to take a walk. Unfortunately, this plan doesn't work every day.

Jogging



Every evening after dinner at around 8:30, I would face my biggest challenge of the day – whether or not to leave the comfy couch and go jogging in the park downstairs!

I am never a sports fan. I can't swim. I don't cycle. I am a total loser when it comes to sports. But ever since I turned 50, I have tried to coax myself into developing some sporting habits. I attended yoga classes but only succeeded to perform a few basic postures. I quitted though I still practise the postures that I have mastered.

This evening, I did jog, a habit I have been keeping on and off three times a week for more than 10 years. What I engage in is not strenuous running or the type of hard work in preparation for marathon. For a duration of about one hour, I walk briskly at first and then jog. Even in cold days with the temperature standing at below ten, I can sweat a lot.

Thanks to the one above looking down on me and taking care of me, I am physically quite fit for my age. I maintain my weight at around 60 kg. My weight does swing but not too much. I stand upright and my shoulders are not bent though just this morning, I slipped and bruised my left knee.

While I jog, I listen to my favourite old songs undisturbed. It is perfect relaxation. Sometimes, I stop to enjoy the beautiful harbor views watching the glittering ferries sail by. When I finish my one-hour exercise, I feel so powerful and so energetic as though I had climbed Mount Everest. My self-esteem is boosted. The “can-do” feeling is indeed invigorating! And after a scented bath soak, I fall asleep easily and soundly!

But in the first place, I don't always succeed extracting myself from the couch!

Sleep



It was holiday! I decided to treat myself to a morning with no "wake up" call and I went to bed extremely early last night - 10:30! I only do that when I am sick!

But unfortunately my biological clock has adapted to the 6-hour sleep regiment. So what happened last night was I woke up at 4:30! I tried every means - counting sheep, getting up to have a drink and of course tossing and turning to get into the right posture that would put me back to sleep. Finally, I was vaguely asleep but the quality was poor.

We are all suffering from sleep deficit. While we are taking supplement, getting facial treatment, putting on expensive cream and are forever in pursuit of longevity and good health, we have shelved the best formula - a good night sleep and appropriate amount of exercise!

Love is in the air



The best Valentine's Day present I ever received was from my son, a stuffed shih tzu toy dog in a transparent plastic box. That was in 1988 and he was 14. His father had just left us. It was my son who taught me that Valentine cards and gifts could be sent to family members and I was all he had!

Twenty - six years have passed and he is now 40 with a family of his own. I bet he has forgotten that once upon a time he gave me a present on Valentine's Day.

When people fall in love especially in the case of first love, they become short-sighted. All that they care about would be that one single person. A former student of mine now studying architecture has just started dating. She complained that the boy didn't call her often enough and she began to wonder if they were in love. I warned her not to scare the boy away!

Love is not always passionate. It cannot be forever intense which is so exhausting! It does not have to adopt a materialistic expression. It can be subtle, understood or appreciated. As a relationship ages, it does not have to go stale. It is still there though it might have taken a different form – care and support for each other. There is a Chinese saying which goes “a small stream goes far”.

So make use of today, a day of love, to surprise your Valentines!

Happy Valentine's Day! May all days be Valentine's Day to you and your love ones!

Love story



I want to share the story of a young couple. They are in their mid-twenties.

Mary (not the real name) has just turned 24. She graduated from university in 2011 summer and is therefore in the second year of her advertising career. She announced in September that she would be married on New Year Eve and that she is already three-month pregnant.

Though growing up in a single-parent family, Mary has always been very well looked after by her mother. We all found her a docile, quiet, sweet girl. And as we were worried how she was to hide her big tummy under the wedding gown, she said that there was nothing to hide when after all, many of her friends were “doing the same things.”

Times are truly different! We were not brought up to be this open! We could never be this casual! Dating would be limited to holding hands and hugging at most! I am glad for Mary because she will be married! I wish her all the best as she embarks on her married life with a baby girl to come along very soon!

1:10



“If you are unfaithful to me once, I will pay you back tenfold!” said wife to husband!

This couple are in their forties and both are very concerned about their looks. They take facial treatments including intrusive laser sessions. They visit the gym regularly and have their own coach. The wife has the fairest complexion and the husband is the coolest guy in the accounting profession.

The wife puts on the most expensive skin products and cosmetics which she only washes off before going to bed and only when the lights are out. She gets up earlier than the husband to make sure she has time for the morning ritual. And yet, she still does not have faith in her own looks and worries sick that one day when her beauty fades, she will be dumped. In her moment of desperation, she declares the ultimatum!

What kind of a relationship is this? When romantic love is built on looks and youthfulness, it can never last. We all know no matter how hard we take care of our body, all that we can do is at best holding back the aging process! We will still grow old and wrinkled!

Are couples not to care for each other in health and sickness till death parts them? Is this too good or too old-fashioned a vow for modern day people? I don't know. Call me traditional. When I make a choice, I will honour it! I have never broken any commitment not in the past, not now and not in future!

Contract



Throughout our adult life, we have all signed various contracts. A contract is a legal document binding the signatories to a set of terms or agreements. Technically, there is no honour involved because otherwise, we do not need this legal endorsement. It is pathetic that we humans are so weak that we ask to have our commitment institutionalized. Spouses cheat! Employers abuse! Country heads torture! But they have all pledged publicly, some with their hand on the Bible, that they will honour their declarations.

The saintliest of all relationships, parenthood, is never entered into a contract by the parties concerned, namely the parent and the child. Yet, nothing can sever this blood relationship, not the law and not death!

Parenting is life commitment but before plunging into this high-risk “career”, candidates are not interviewed. There are no objective benchmarks or qualifications to meet. Credentials are not verified. There is no probation period. Neither is there any age requirement. And yet so many people, even minors rush in to become parents. On the other hand, there are people with seemingly outstanding qualifications who hesitate so much and for so long that they miss the chance to be biological parents.

I rushed in four decades ago ignorant of how unfit I was or how inadequate the objective conditions were. At that time, information on parenting was minimal and people seemed to accept that problems, big or small, would resolve themselves. It was by trial and error, by remorse and regrets that I stumbled through the journey.

Now that my son is the father of a six-year old girl and I am grandma, I can see what a huge difference lies between the two generations in the perception of parenthood. Mine was uncharted with only my passion to rely on. I succeeded at times but collapsed many times. My son became a parent after all possible planning had been undertaken. It was an informed decision he proudly and whole-heartedly honoured.

Having said all these, I feel both proud and privileged to declare that motherhood is the best blessing of my life while being a teacher the second.

January 23 2014, Thursday

Sub-contracting



About ten minutes ago, I called Hayley, my grand-daughter. I wanted to remind her to stay warm. The helper said that she was in Putonghua class and would be back after six. Then I remember that Hayley is leading a life typical of Hong Kong kids. She has extra classes every day of the week learning English, Mathematics, Putonghua, drawing, swimming, track training and Taekwondo.

All parents are determined that their children are to be well-provided for and well-equipped right from the start to make sure they won't lose out in this highly competitive society. Children are thrown into the arena and engage in combat at the tender age of three or even earlier. Children with both parents working full-time are entrusted to the care of the domestic helper and the coaches.

It used to be the father kicking football in the pitch with the boys and mother cooking in the kitchen with the girls or parents preparing children for admission interviews etc. When family size was bigger, children learnt how to manage arguments through daily conflicts with siblings. Now these parent-child or sibling activities have all been taken over by professionals.

I don't know which mode works better in the nurturing of children's character. But one thing I am sure – nothing can replace the tender loving care of parents.

In combat



Over dinner, my son posed me questions that I found hard to reply.

“What kind of character traits do high-achievers possess? What kind of parents do they have?”

That was hard. Trained as a historian, I believe it is dangerous and even criminal to generalize! Not parents! Not children. Every child is unique. Even when we try to draw some patterns, there are bound to be exceptions.

It is obvious why my son is asking for such information – he wants Hayley, the daughter to be successful in life and hopes that he and his wife can become successful parents.

I bet such questions have never come across the mind of my mom and dad, parents of eight children. Parenting these days has become quite a huge “curriculum” with experts of all kinds having a say in it. Parents themselves are not lazy either. Those with children born in the same year pro-actively pool their experience for the betterment of their children by creating chat groups and Facebook accounts to share almost everything. They also hold regular parent-child activities to meet and have fun. While they are cementing unity and support, they are also unknowingly brewing trouble.

When one child starts babbling, parents of other children who haven’t begun doing so panic. When the travel photos of a family are posted on the Facebook, other families begin to plan a similar trip. As children grow up, parents begin comparing the schools their children go to and then their performance in academic and extra-curricular activities. The peer pressure is so oppressive that there is no time and space to keep a sane mind but to catch up with the norm. These parents set high targets for themselves and their children. Family life can become stifling and children overwhelmed. As the family wrestles with meeting high expectations, anger, anxiety and even depression will be built up. I know times are different and that Hong Kong is a highly competitive society but life cannot be all about meeting targets especially not for children.

I did try to generalize a few common traits for my son’s reference putting much emphasis on “exceptions”. But still my heart was not at ease.

Parents



It was Secondary 1 admission interview today. I interviewed around 40 students and had the chance of talking to parents from all walks of life. Some are typical local parents fixing a busy schedule for their children who are not really enjoying all the music and sports courses they are thrust into. Then there are some lucky parents who don't do anything and yet their children are doing very well in everything including academic studies and sports. Some parents know nothing about our school while of course, there are parents who have done extensive research including site visits and "spying" on our students etc.

To me, all these parents share one thing in common – they want what they think is the best for their children. But parents need to remember that the correct choice of schools for their children is not to pick the most desired school in Hong Kong but to find one that best matches the needs, interests and ability of their children.

Parents of teenagers



I was at the Tsim Sha Tsui East Station going down the escalator to the platform for the train to Kowloon Tong on a Sunday afternoon. I couldn't help overhearing the conversation of the middle-aged couple standing two steps behind me.

"I talked to Katie last night and she agreed! She promised she and David would only hold hands and no kisses!" said the woman, perhaps the mother.

"You actually believe her? Look at the TV drama she is watching – all the kisses and sex scenes!" exclaimed the man, perhaps the father.

"Well, what can we do? She is 15 and we cannot watch her all day long!" sighed the mother.

Children have been brought up in fairy tales of the prince and the princess and all the gossips about who is dating whom in the entertainment world! When a boy meets a girl, and this is happening every day, they are teased and in a way encouraged to start what they think is "dating". Parents should be concerned but instead of stopping or reprimanding their children, they should broaden their social life and maintain cordial relationship.

In Chinese, there is a saying: bringing up a child to a hundred years old, you worry for 99 years! There is so much truth in it except why not that 1 year too!

Dragon fruit



For the past week, I attended a number of spring banquets organized by various educational bodies. These are always great occasions for meeting old friends and making new ones.

At one of the dinners, I was seated next to a kindergarten principal. We chatted happily over fun matters as well as serious issues. Soon, we

started to comment on children these days. I remarked that for lack of siblings, children only start to learn co-operation and resolving conflicts when they begin schooling. Then the principal told me a few incidents that were truly thought-provoking.

The kindergarten teacher gave the pupils halved but not yet peeled bananas as snacks. Looking at the halved banana, one child was quite puzzled and asked how he was to eat it. He had never seen bananas with the peel. To him, bananas were diced to be picked up with a fork! There was another child who asked the teacher to remove the black sesame seeds from the dragon fruit slices. In another activity, children were taught to use chopsticks. A boy cried out that chopsticks were too dangerous and that he was only allowed the use of the spoon!

Children these days are simply being cocooned in the warmth and safety of their parents' protection. They are never given any chances of "trial and error". But no matter how hard parents try, there will come a day when their children are faced with challenges they have to deal with by themselves. If they don't experience failure and disappointment or suffer a few bruises at an early stage, they might find even the smallest setbacks or injuries traumatic. Then who is to be blamed for their fragility and vulnerability?

Bar table conversation



Last Sunday morning, I went for a hair colour treatment, something I hate but have to undergo every two months. My hair greys quickly and as I am still working, I do want to look not my age!

I made a mistake with the opening hours of the saloon and arrived too early. I was not mad but happy that there was time to treat myself to a full set of breakfast at the McDonald's which I seldom visit. But the whole restaurant was surprisingly crowded with queues at the counter and all tables occupied. So instead of having a full set, I opted for an egg and sausage muffin and a coffee. I managed to get the last high stool at the bar table. Sitting uncomfortably, I gobbled my food and washed it down with the lukewarm coffee.

Though clumsily engaged, I couldn't help noticing what a mother and daughter were doing right in front of me. The girl looked like six or seven years old and she was dressed in a pink tutu ready for ballet class while the mother looked in her thirties. She was writing hurriedly on the flattened cover of the breakfast set while the girl was narrating a school trip.

"Now that I am writing for you, when we are home after your ballet class, you only need to copy this into your exercise book! See, you can have composition to submit tomorrow!"

To this mother, the whole point of doing the writing task is for submission! Doesn't she know that the process of transferring ideas into writing is a learning experience her daughter has to accumulate? I pray that this mother is only ghostwriting for her daughter once in a blue moon!

Manners



It was Sunday afternoon, I was having lunch in a quiet corner of a hotel cafe. There were not many customers. At a table nearby were two westerners who nodded with a smile as I sat down.

Just when my soup arrived, two guests, mother and son speaking in Putonghua, were seated right next to me. The mother looked young and the son probably 6 or 7. At that moment, I prayed to myself that they would be an exception to the hideous stereotypes of mainland travellers as depicted so vividly in social networks. My prayer was not answered.

In the first place, they were conversing at the top of their voice though the whole cafe was so tranquil. After they had placed their order of orange juice and a steak with fries, the mother asked the boy to recount all the cities they had visited starting with Shanghai, their home city. He did loudly and fluently. Indeed, they had almost travelled round the world. All the while as he talked, the boy was not sitting properly. He had one leg stretched out and the other on the chair.

When the juice came, the boy tore up the wrapping of the straw and threw it on the floor. Next came the steak, he cut it up violently with the fries falling all over the table and the floor. The cutlery screeched on the plate raising eyebrows at him. What was the mother doing? Texting!

The above is a first-person experience with no exaggeration!

Stuffing



This is an incident that happened in the lift at around 8 this morning, a normal school day.

As the lift doors opened, I walked in and there were already two grown-ups and a school girl aged around 5. I assumed they were parents and the child was their daughter. What the parents were doing and how the child reacted astonished me.

The father was tidying up the girl's uniform which was quite crumpled and combing her hair which was messy. The mother was stuffing the child with a bun murmuring that she had to be fast or else she would miss the school bus. The girl, still drowsy, just stood there.

I felt odd witnessing this family scene. What a terrible way to start a day for all three of them! Couldn't the parents manage the morning routine better?

"Is this happening every morning or just this morning?" For the girl's sake, I truly hoped that it was an extraordinarily hurried morning because the alarm was not working!

Breakfast is important for everybody especially kids. Their growing bodies and developing brains need regular refuelling from food. When kids skip breakfast, they don't get what they need to be at their best. When breakfast becomes so sloppy, parents are communicating the wrong message to their children – breakfast is not important.

A healthy breakfast does not have to be elaborate. Simply splash some milk over cereal with fruit such as berries or banana added. A toast with cheese and tomato slices is refreshingly tasty!

Stuffing a child with a bun and dressing her in the lift is no way to start a morning!

Daughters



It was Good Friday morning, I was in a taxi taking me from Hung Hom to the airport. The driver in his sixties was quite courteous greeting me with “good morning”. And as the ride was long, I started a conversation with him by asking if I was his first passenger for the day. He replied pleasantly that I was and that he had had breakfast with his wife before starting work.

We went on talking about children and schooling. He told me that he had three daughters with two already at work and one still studying. He proudly said that they were all in English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) schools and that the two elder daughters were both professionals. The eldest, 30 was an accountant and the other, 26, a physiotherapist. I commented that he must have worked very hard to support the girls’ schooling. He didn’t! They were awarded scholarships after scholarships!

Contented as he was, this father had one worry though – he didn’t know if his two elder daughters had started any romantic relationships yet! He reminisced about the times when people in love would be talking a lot on the phone and parents would know a relationship was developing. But now that there is the smart phone, parents would not have any clue whether their grown-up children are already in a relationship! And what’s more, people don’t talk. They just swipe!

That brought me back to the scene almost half a century ago when my father received my first call from a boy and how he interrogated me for details!

My mother



My mother has just celebrated her 86th birthday. She is diabetic and has been so since 1983. But she is still going to her old neighbourhood to play mahjong two to three times in a week. She is concerned about her looks. “Oh, my hair is thinning!” “Oh, my skin is so dry!” are among some of her usual complaints! She is my idol for her resilience.

Brought up in a rich family in Shanghai in the 1920s, she moved to Hong Kong with my father and me as an infant in 1949. With the family financial situation fast deteriorating and with the number of children growing to eight, she ended up washing and cooking for a family of ten at the time when there were no washing machines.

I can still remember how in the 1960s when water supply was limited to four hours every four days, she was running up and down the stairs carrying buckets of water! She was amazing then! And she still is!

Now, my mother is enjoying life cautiously avoiding all the sugar, high potassium foods etc. Though she does not say it, she wants to live. It does not mean that she has no worries. She worries about me being too busy, my sister sleeping too late, the grand children not getting married etc. Her head is so clear that she keeps record of all her mahjong gains and losses.

Today her only worry is that I am not warm enough. This afternoon, my mother actually called me reminding me to wear a coat.

What matters



These days, the weather has not been too stable. Temperatures rise and fall! Who are most concerned? Besides the fashion-conscious socialite, it would be my mother. Every evening, she gazes at the television in all seriousness to see what the temperature for the next day will be. If it drops to below 15°, she will call her friends announcing most unhappily that she is not joining the mahjong game.

When the game is on, my mother becomes energized! She gets up early, has breakfast, showers and gets dressed at a speed much faster than her usual. She is ready to go at 10. The game is to start at noon but all the four players meet for early lunch, yum-cha at about 10:30. Since her fall some years back, my mother has agreed to be chaperoned by Maria, our domestic helper. Maria takes the taxi with my mom, has lunch with the other players and virtually sees to it that my mother is safely seated at the mahjong table.

The rise and fall of temperature matters a lot to my mother but I am sure not so to most of us. Whether something matters or not depends on how the person feels at that very moment! I used to cough a lot when winter came. In between all those coughing fits, what mattered most would be I stopped coughing!

I have learnt to respect my mother's major concerns. They are important to her and therefore, to me !

Last back garden



As my mother ages, she announces that she is not taking overseas trips with me anymore, afraid that she will be my burden. Well, I can understand that. So instead, when it is school holiday but not public holiday to avoid the crowd, I will coax my mother to leave her comfy sofa and venture out to the countryside. The itinerary is I drive around, park the car, dine and then go

home. Simple as it sounds, it is a good enough break from my mother's routine of "eat, sleep and watch television". So late this afternoon, I drove to Sai Kung with my mom without any particular destination in mind.

When I drive, I have this habit of not turning on the air-conditioning unless it is really hot or I am stuck in traffic. It was the same this afternoon. When I drove down Sai Sa Road, I had the window pane down a little bit to enjoy the soothing breeze with the Platters singing in the background. We got out as we came to a roadside parking lot in Nai Chung. Slowly we walked down a flight of steps and found ourselves in a charming seclusion with tiny bungalows, shallow sandy beach and trees. Families were there fishing, flying kites or simply enjoying each other's company! We sat down on the embankment and watched the sunset – not stunning but heartwarming! First time for my mom!

Then we walked back to the parking lot. It was already six and so we crossed the road to the bungalows opposite. These are all residences turned into restaurants offering fusion menus and outdoor dining. My mom preferred indoors and so we sat down next to the fireplace, not a real one of course. Though the food was too salty, the relaxing ambience more than made it up. For a moment or two, I thought that I were in a pub in Edinburgh!

What a great way to spend an afternoon! I have to do this more often! There are so many beautiful places in Hong Kong that I have not yet explored! What a shame!

Auf Wiedersehen!



I've been visiting Delicatessen Corner since the 1980s at first only rarely then more often and now regularly, my Sunday sanctuary and where I treat my friends. May 25 is the last day of its operation!

Styled after the wood panelled taverns in Europe, Delicatessen Corner provides a warm and rustic atmosphere. The quality of the German and Austrian dishes featured is always reliable. The service is excellent and I know the waiters and waitresses by their first names. They know the dishes well and remind me not to order too much because the portions served are really generous. When I dine with my mom there, we usually order our favourite mushroom soups followed by the fish and the sausages or the knuckles. Each time we cannot finish the two main courses and have to take away the leftovers which become my packed lunch the next day! But my full stomach always has room for the German cheese cake complemented by double espresso.

I love the food, the service and the simplicity of Delicatessen Corner. After May 25, where am I to go at 2pm on Sunday after my indulgence routine? I am missing it already. I have made reservations for both lunch and dinner on that last day. I will surely take photos with those courteous young men and women who have served me so well for so long. I wish them all the best in their career.

You know what has this restaurant succumbed to? A monthly rent of \$1.3 million! A chain store selling second-hand handbags is to be opened!

May 17 2014, Saturday

Grandparents



I am blessed with a six-year old granddaughter Hayley. One Saturday, her parents brought her to my apartment to have dinner with me and my mother, the great grandmother.

While we were waiting for dinner, I took out a stack of word cards to play with her but she didn't think that was game. She said, "When I am in your house, I will only play. I study when I am at home." Oh, clever girl or should I say "lazy girl"!

Whenever I remark that Hayley is sweet or give her a bar of chocolate or a Hello Kitty wallet, my son will say, "Till you are with her every day." This doesn't mean that he loves her less; he is head over heels in love with Hayley. Once when he returned home from a 5-day business trip to India, he hugged her so tight as though they had been parted for years!

My understanding of being grandparents is to love whole-heartedly so as to give grandchildren a breathing space away from the tyranny of parents! Gene Perret, the famous comedy writer and producer, puts it succinctly, "What a bargain grandchildren are! I give them my loose change, and they give me a million dollars' worth of pleasure."

Pink suitcase



Today is the first day of a 5-day tour to Okinawa, Japan. I am joining Vincent, my son, Elly, daughter-in-law and Hayley, six-year old grand-daughter for a holiday. This is the first time ever we travel together.

We don't usually spend much time together as we live far apart. I am secretly hoping that this trip will make me a part of their life though only briefly.

So I am not going to write a journal of our sight-seeing in these five days but rather of my time with them three.

I did one thing quite annoying to Vincent and Elly. As promised on the phone, I bought a small pink suitcase for Hayley yesterday and took it to the airport. Of course, she was overjoyed! She skilfully unzipped it and put some books inside. Then she lengthened the handle and started taking care of it all by herself. Vincent told me that this was her pledge - the suitcase would be her responsibility.

Hayley kept her promise. Even when we had to climb up the flight of steps to board the plane, she pressed down the handle, picked up the suitcase and walked all the way up! She is quite tall but slender for her age. It was amazing to watch her from behind climbing up the steps in front of me!

Vincent must be very proud of Hayley though he didn't say it.

Hayley's card holder

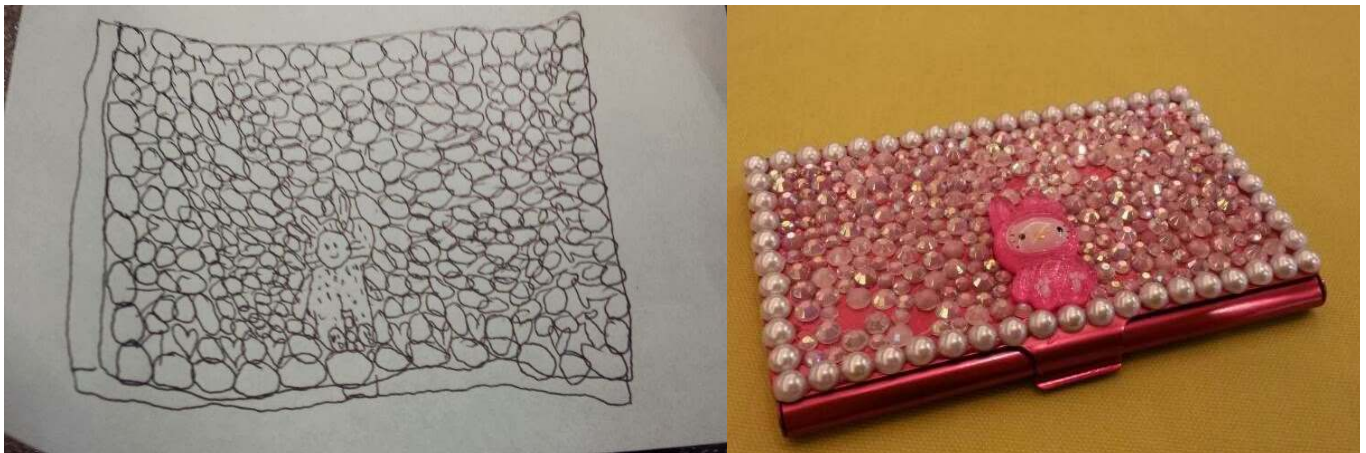
Hayley likes drawing. The wallpaper of my mobile phone is always her artwork.

This afternoon, we were taken to the outlet shops and left there for four hours! Hayley chose to go with her father. I don't like shopping at outlets and was therefore left alone in a coffee shop.

When we were finally back to the coach, Hayley happily showed me her purchases. One of it was a card holder with the cover fully studded with pearls. In the middle of it was Kitty.

The coach then took us to dinner. While we were waiting to be served, Vincent asked Hayley to draw the card holder. Very quickly, she took out her small notepad and started drawing right away. She drew small circles as pearls one by one.

Here are Hayley's drawing of the card holder and a photo of the object itself.



Salt



One of the highlights of Okinawa 5-day tour was Aoiumi to see a demonstration of how sea salt was obtained. Attached to the site was the visitors' centre where again lots of gift items were on offer - bags and bottles of sea salt. Tucked away in a corner was a snow scene with snowmen made of salt. As I was touring, the story of Shakespeare's *King Lear* came to my mind. The plot originated from an old English fairy tale.

An elderly rich man wanted to divide his property among his three daughters based on their responses to his question of to what extent they loved him. While the elder two sisters flattered the father to please him, the youngest said simply "I love you as fresh meat loves salt." The father was infuriated and disinherited her.

Before the invention of refrigeration, salt was extremely important as it was the main ingredient to preserve meat. Though in recent years, salt has been blamed as the culprit of high blood pressure. A reasonable intake of salt is important to our good health. It helps our hydration, muscle contraction and digestion. Important as it is, salt is inexpensive.

Living in this highly materialistic city of Hong Kong, we tend to assume that money is of paramount importance to good living. It certainly is but then we have to remind ourselves that many good things in life are inexpensive or even free!

Have a walk in the countryside and breathe in the fresh fragrant air. That's free!

Quit soft drinks and energy drinks. Boil some water, pour it into a big jug, cool it down, drop several slices of lemon and some mint into the water before freezing it. This water can definitely quench your thirst faster than any commercial soft drink. And it doesn't cost much! Be creative! Add slices of different fruits like green apples or strawberries to freshen your taste buds!

Dolphins



I hate to see animals perform whether it is a cute puppy or a huge dolphin. I used to like circus shows because that would be almost the only opportunity to see so many different animals. I would be very excited whenever a circus was in town.

That's not me now. When I watched the dolphins perform in Churaumi Aquarium, Okinawa, I felt ever so guilty. I am the reason why the dolphins have to jump four storeys high! Think of all the training behind such a spectacular performance.

Owners of pets also like to show off the little tricks their pets can do. But I am not at all for this. Pets are to be kept as companions and not as performers.

When I expressed these views to Vincent, my son, he had a thought-provoking reply for me. "It is this kind of performance that has aroused our interest in protecting dolphins." I could not disagree!

Wonton noodles



I am now at the food court of Naha Main Place, another shopping mall. The time given to us is 2.5 hours. This is the third round of shopping scheduled. In this trip, the total shopping time amounts to around 10 hours.

I have been to Japan several times but this time I feel differently. I am not excited by the shops at all. I have not bought anything for

myself. I must have outgrown shopping spree! What I spent on were boxes of local cakes and tarts and several bags of sea salt for colleagues, friends and relatives.

In recent years, my shopping habits have become quite routine. I buy my work clothes and shoes at the same two shops twice in a year. I interact with the same two sales ladies who know my preferences so well that my shopping is done most efficiently. Then throughout the year, I would not be spending much on wardrobe. Shopping, in my case, has become more like a scheduled task than a sporadic urge to buy! So in these few days, the kind of shopping in outlet shops, street markets and department stores with sales staff uttering or screaming in a language totally inaccessible to me is outside my comfort zone! It is simply too challenging! I have to retreat to the coffee shop which is closer to my experience of comfort!

Maybe, I have aged and am less ready to accept or adapt to new ways of life but this is in a way strange because at work, I like challenges. I feel exhilarated.

Oh, I miss Hong Kong and especially the aroma of wonton noodles! This evening, I will be home - Hong Kong. There is no place, no matter how heavenly, like home!

Bean Bean



He sleeps on the tiled floor in summer and pulls a cushion from the sofa to lie on it in winter.

He goes inside the cage to urinate and stands by the cage awaiting treats.

He knows how to guide me to the bowl of treats with his eyes.

He is not scared by thunder and lightning and would jump up onto the sofa to watch the changing sky.

He stands on two feet with his hands on my lap when he gets bored to remind me that I am not alone.

He jumps round and wags his bushy tail ferociously when I laugh.

He shies away when there is a heated argument in the house.

He waits by the door and refuses to go inside the bedroom even on cold winter days when the master is not yet back.

He goes to his soft bed when everyone is home.

He knows our names and would look in that person's direction when his name is mentioned.

He is choosy of his food picking out the brown pieces from the bowl.

He likes to have his ears cleaned and would lie still to enjoy the comfort.

He has survived two major operations and is now happy and healthy.

He is already 13 but looks like three.

He is Bean Bean, my baby .

January 8 2014, Wednesday

Loner



I hate being alone and yet I don't like crowds!

I love that feeling of easiness in the company of good friends. We can be chatting heartily or celebrating birthdays. But I do not like big crowds because then I can only talk to the one next to me and will not be able to really share the conversation of the others in the group.

I like being alone at home watching my favourite television channels without having to consider other family members' preferences. When I go to the gym or jog in the garden, I like to be alone listening to music and pacing my own speed.

But there are things that I hate doing alone. Take dining out for instance. When I enter a restaurant and ask for a table for one, I will be placed at the far end corner. Guests at the other tables will be talking so loud that I am forced into "sharing" their conversation. So in the case of eating alone, I usually go to the restaurants that I frequent or go to a fast food restaurant, ask for take-away and eat at home.

Except once when I was heart-broken, I never see a movie alone! I like to laugh or sob or shiver with someone I know and not with strangers. The darkness of the cinemas makes me feel melancholy.

I guess I am a sharing person. Or am I weak? I am not too sure!

Waiting



Which type of people do you belong to - the always punctual type or the type who is late for all appointments?

It is not easy being punctual. You are either early or late. You are able to arrive on the dot because you are early to make sure you are punctual. I belong to this type. I can still remember how 11 years ago I was one hour early for an interview in Sheng Wan to make sure I would be punctual. Of course, I did not barge in the interview room an hour early. I had coffee in a nearby cafe for 45 minutes.

On the other hand, there are people who are always late. They are so late that you begin to think you are waiting at the wrong place or you have got the time wrong. When they do arrive, they have all kinds of seemingly good reasons. But if they are habitually late, you can only choose to either tolerate or never to meet them again. Once you have got used to allowing them, they start to take you for granted. You become so numb that you bring a book with you to kill time. These days, you are lucky. You have Candy Crush to keep you amused or frustrated depending on whether you can clear the level.

Colours



As I drove out of my block at about eight this morning, I came to the double white line and I stopped, looked both left and right before I started the car again. It was then that I noticed a dozen people waiting for the shuttle bus at the bus-stop opposite. Men and women were all wearing black. Set against the hazy sky, it was close to a funeral procession.

Black is my favourite colour too. I have several black suits and of course, a few little black dresses! Black is such a versatile colour that it is not just for solemn events. With a jewelled brooch, I can attend a wedding. White by itself is formidable reminding me of hospital sheets. I don't wear white anymore except maybe a white top along with a black skirt. I love looking up at the white clouds floating in the blue sky. I like brown because I love chocolate, rustic wooden furniture and leather jackets. I have a lemon yellow coat. I bought it to the amazement of the saleslady who has been serving me for over twenty years! Everybody said that I looked young wearing it. I wear Chinese red on the first day of Chinese New Year. To me, denims have to be navy blue and no other colours. I love taking a stroll in the Flower Market in Mong Kok to appreciate the magic of pastels!

I had my mom's apartment painted shocking orange and green to create a Thai resort feel. My cell phone and iPad are in popular burgundy red. What else? Pink is for my grand-daughter – pencil case, dresses, coats, shoes, suitcase and knapsack! I once had a pink suit for the occasion of my son's wedding. That was then when I still looked good in pink. I am sure I would look most ridiculous if I were to wear it now!

Lipstick



This morning, as I came to the last step of my daily skin care routine, I picked up a lipstick. Then I realised that I had for a long time given up on pink or red! What I wear is only lip balm or gloss close to nude. Well, one has to cultivate age-appropriateness in all aspects of life. There is societal expectation we have to satisfy.

Talking about lipstick, a former colleague came up to my mind. He was a senior teacher, a big man with a loud voice. At the Staff Meeting before the school year started, he presented a talk on "what makes a good teacher". He pointed out that teachers who wanted to succeed must possess the qualities of successful artists - voice (聲), looks (色), art or skills (藝) adding that ladies should wear light-coloured lipstick because students were looking at the teachers' lips all the time.

I was so impressed by this simple recipe that I have abided by it throughout my career. Teachers need to have a clear and loud voice. They have to be neatly dressed and of course, they must keep upgrading their professional know-how.

Dinner



Next Sunday, December 22 is winter solstice. Already throughout this week, families are dining out to celebrate this important traditional feast day of harvest and family reunion. Our family will have this dinner on December 21, Saturday.

This evening, as we were dining at a small table tucked away at a corner of the restaurant, we saw big tables of families, sometimes four generations of the elderly in wheelchairs, toddlers, babies in high chairs, the parents and domestic helpers crowded round a table, the size of which was not for such a big party! But they were

all happily enjoying the meal, the conversation and even the noise. Of course, some had their eyes glued to their phones or were passing around their phones sharing photos etc. Yet, they were in each other's company.

Times are different and we have to allow changes. We cannot ask the young to pocket their phones during meal time. That is what families are for, understanding, supporting, tolerating and appreciating one another. This is one of the core values of Hong Kong we should all uphold!

Clutter



Today is the 28th day of the last month of the Year of the Snake, a day for clearing the clutter and tidying up the house for the red posters to be put up. What a good practice!

But it is really hard and slow to decide what to keep and what not! I could be sitting on the floor for hours clearing the drawers but in the end, the stack of things to keep was much higher than the pile to throw away!

This ticket was from the trip to a museum and that coin was a gift. That was a Christmas card signed by all the good colleagues of the school office! Next to it was the programme of the school musical! Can you believe that I still have my report cards from primary 5?

I also like to keep tins and cans. They come in all shapes and sizes. I give myself many excuses for keeping them such as they are good for separately holding my collections of coins, stamps, shells, book marks etc.

Well, in Hong Kong, space is most precious. If we want more space and can't afford big flats, we have to clear our clutter. I know but it is just not so simple!

So my resolution for the Year of the Horse is not to clutter from the start! By the way, the room in the photo attached is fortunately NOT mine!

Languages



I love languages but this love stops with only Chinese and English. I can endure the most wordy explanations. I read labels, posters and signs carefully as though I were proofreading documents.

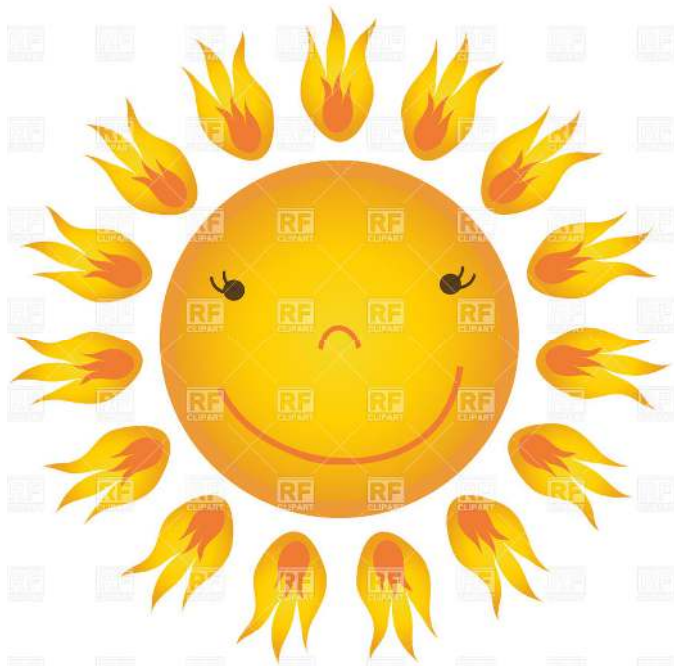
Some words I came across stay in my mind for a long time. I learnt the word "meadow" when I read *Heidi* at the age of ten. Then there is "negotiate" used to describe how an old man walks up the stairs.

My interest in languages is not limited to text alone. Thanks to Youtube, I can easily re-live those historical moments listening to inspiring speeches.

I keep reminding my students that language proficiency is not just for university admission but for life and so language practice should not be merely limited to examination drills. Use it and live it - the only way to improve.

And I have a dream - to learn one more language! Which one? Not sure yet!

Smile



What makes you smile or better still laugh? How often do you smile? Have you smiled more or less this year than you did last year?

For us ladies, we smile in front of the mirror when we check out our looks before leaving home. That's not a real smile! I mean a genuine smile because you are pleased! The fact is the older we become, the more difficult it is to produce a smile! In other words, we are hard to please! We have too many wants, desires and expectations to satisfy and etiquette to follow! Look at

the children. They can have a good laugh over the silliest things. We have to learn from them. There is no harm in being silly every now and then.

On reflection, I can still recall some recent cases of me smiling. Not when I bought a new coat or had a great meal! Last Thursday, I smiled when recognized by a student I taught forty years ago!

I have this habit of looking up to the sky. I smile when I see clear blue sky and cotton white clouds. I smile when my pain is gone. I smile when my love ones smile.

Keep smiling. One good smile deserves another!

Endurance



How much pain, frustration, disappointment or sacrifice can you endure before you say “stop” or “enough” or “I can’t take it anymore”? People differ! Some can take a lot and for a long time while others have no tolerance at all. Just look around you!

There is the Indonesian domestic helper, Erwiana. She was tortured for eight months before she said “no” and ran home. Then there was a wife who proclaimed that she knew about her husband’s ex-marital relationship and that she endorsed it! There are women who proudly crown themselves as “the fourth wife”, “the fifth wife” etc.! Well, government officials these days also need to practise the highest degree of tolerance to what is being thrown upon them, be it an egg, a banana peel or a paper coffin! It could be out of fear, love, etiquette or shame or for tangible benefits that all these super humans are demonstrating extraordinary endurance!

On the other hand, there are people who can’t take any disapproving look or negative comments. They reciprocate with their fist not to say a knife!

I have been labelled as a demanding person with not an ounce or should I say 28.35 grams of patience! But that is not how I see myself! I cannot tolerate laziness but I can allow ignorance! I cannot allow betrayal but I permit indifference! I do not enjoy flattery but I welcome criticisms!

Green mountain



Life is a roller-coaster ride. There are bound to be ups and downs. We have all suffered desertion, disappointment, betrayal or frustration of various intensity inflicting upon us different degrees of physical and spiritual damage. Some of us survive while others get stuck. Some would stay there at the bottom of the deep sea of depression drilling their hearts until they bleed. How do people extract themselves from down there? It might just be a timely hand extended, a quote that enlightens, an ear that listens or a shoulder to cry on.

There is a Chinese saying that goes like this - as long as you have the green mountain, you have wood to burn. It worked for me. At that very moment of darkness almost exactly 26 years ago when I was so engrossed in self-guilt and desperation that I dwindled to a minute dust too feeble to face the unknown future or if there were any future, it was this quote that saved me to rise and stand on my feet again.

Looking back at all the years that have gone by, I feel like I am looking at other people's stories. The hurt is long gone! I have grown to be more reflective, more independent and definitely more positive!

Friendship



These days, we live a life with lots of friends from school, work and of course, from Facebook. Friends can be the friend of a friend and the chain goes on.

I was born in the Year of the Pig. According to Chinese Zodiac Horoscope, I do not have too many friends but the ones I do have are all bosom ones. In this aspect, the prediction does seem to be quite true. I have had the

good fortune of having a couple of good friends who have salvaged me at those melancholy moments of deep depression. They were there all ears! They didn't do much. They didn't have to. They might have uttered a few words of re-assurance that I was not worthless and that there would be light at the end of the tunnel. Their ears and shoulders were the floats that saved me.

I also realize that friends do not have to come from the same age group. In recent years, I have got a very close friend and she could well be my daughter! She understands me and cares for me. That's what friends are for! My mother is also my best friend. She is the float that keeps me from sinking each time when I am in troubled water.

24 Hours a day



God is never fair. Why is she pretty and I'm not? Why was he born with a silver spoon in his mouth and me to a poor family? Why has she got such big eyes and mine are so small? We are always puzzled at how God, or anyone who is looking down from above, makes his decisions. On which cheek is he going to press a dimple etc.? But God is absolutely fair in one way - each and every person is granted 24 hours, no more, no less! And yet some people can achieve a lot in a day while others would just sit there wasting their life! A task can be accomplished in an hour while it takes another person double the time. I

am not talking about ability. That is again something we can't control. I am talking about focus and commitment and of course, time management.

I have this habit of planning my day at the very moment I open my eyes and before I leave my desk at the close of day. First things always come first but I don't sacrifice my routines, like my three meals though they can be simple or elaborate depending on the time at my disposal. My three hours of exercise per week and Sunday indulgence are also important but can be given up if really necessary to squeeze more time.

Once I start, whether writing, marking, designing worksheets or projects, I can dive right into it because I am prepared with the task all mapped out in mind, documents and skill books on the desk and of course, my coffee and water but no snacks. All armed, I can sit and work for at least two hours. All these preparations are important to ensure that I don't have any excuse to get out of my seat. I also set the timer to discipline myself. I don't feel stressed but actually feel focused and motivated. The sense of accomplishment is truly satisfying. Maybe it is true to say that pressure can be pleasure.

I never complain I don't have time for this and that because I manage time and not time manages me.

Coffee



I have been drinking coffee since childhood. Though my family was not rich, we were brought up eating bread and butter for breakfast. My parents would be drinking instant coffee and I as the eldest would have the privilege of enjoying a cup every now and then.

Now every morning, I have a single espresso and a piece of buttered toast. Throughout the day, I don't drink any coffee unless I am socializing over afternoon tea or it is a Sunday afternoon. I am not addicted to coffee. If I am not sure of the quality served, I would opt for tea. My impression of the taste and aroma of coffee is not to be blasphemed.

I am careful about the amount of coffee I am consuming, unlike some Americans who drink nothing but coffee all day long because I am wary of the detrimental effects of coffee on my health. Research findings are quite confusing. One report says that too much coffee can cause sleeping problems. But another study shows that caffeine actually improves memory.

I drink black coffee and so there is no worry that I consume too much sugar and milk or cream because then the coffee becomes a high-calorie beverage. I don't drink decaffeinated coffee which to me is not coffee.

Happy sipping! Maybe I should have one now!

Gastronomic satisfaction



Dining to me means differently depending on the time, the company and my mood, of course.

Breakfast on week days is simple, fruit juice, buttered toast and espresso. Lunch if not a business one is a lunch box either some leftovers from the dinner on the previous evening

or one bought from a nearby fast food restaurant. I have this “unhealthy” habit of chewing my lunch box over the newspapers. Dinner is more an enjoyment, soup boiled for hours, steamed fish etc.

I do like to try new restaurants but I am not too adventurous. There are several restaurants that I patronize and the good people there know me by my first name. One is a small Japanese restaurant tucked away in Kowloon City. My mother is my companion. Despite her old age, she enjoys sashimi especially salmon and peony prawn. A cup of chilled sake fits in just well. This type of gastronomic satisfaction would usually fall on a Friday and when there is no Saturday task. I would park my car home and take a taxi though I am drinking at most two small cups of sake!

Some people can go to extremes spending huge bucks to satisfy their taste buds. Others are more concerned about their health and can endure the most boring tasteless dishes. Then there are those who eat only to live! Well, as long as it is a personal choice, enjoy!

Chinese medicine



The pain in my stomach was excruciating keeping me awake until almost daybreak. It must be my gall bladder stones reminding me of their presence and complaining that I haven't attended to them in all these years! I had to call in sick! In the afternoon, I went to consult my Chinese herbal doctor.

In recent years, I choose Chinese medicine and acupuncture for most of my ailments. When I take western drugs in the form of pills, tablets and syrups etc., I feel like I am pumping a lot of chemicals into my stomach. Chinese herbal teas are more natural. I can see what I am drinking. All those roots, barks, leaves, even bugs, rocks and turtle shells work together to bring about gentle but effective healing effects. Now that there is the

mandatory registration of Chinese medicine practioners, the quality and safety of the service provided can be guaranteed. There have also been more and more world researches on Chinese medicines. Then there is acupuncture which can work wonders for my chronic muscular pains.

Last summer and winter as well, I received a total of six treatments of moxibustion therapy (天灸) which has become quite popular in Hong Kong. On the three hottest days which fell in the two months of July and August and then on the three coldest days in December and January, I had six nail-sized patches of herbs applied on six key acupuncture points on the spine to generate heat so as to boost immunity. The patches were removed after one hour. And I who cough every December did not cough last December – touch wood! The charge for each treatment was \$110 but it will be increased to \$120 this summer. I know because I placed my reservation already.

Running tap



I don't know what your habit is when you are brushing and washing up in the morning. When I am in a rush, I have to say I feel tempted to let the water run.

Then when you are in the shower, do you sometimes stand there enjoying the warmth of the hot water for far too long especially when the weather is cold?

Do you use both sides of the paper before trashing it? Do you shop until your wardrobe is full? How often do you throw away furniture or clothes when they still look new? Do you finish all your food when you dine? Do you bring your own bottle when you go out? Do you have the air-conditioning on all day long?

These are questions I pose to myself every day. It must have come along with age. I have started this campaign of taming my desires. That is my 2014 assignment - to leave the world feeling less guilty.

Extreme weather



This morning was freezing cold when I went to school. Before leaving home, I saw on TV that it was snowing in Vietnam! The newspapers were also reporting that last week Cairo known for its heat and sandy deserts, was blanketed in thick snow for the first time in 112 years.

Extreme weather conditions such as heavy rains, droughts, heat waves, snow storms and super cyclones across the globe have

become more common these days. And in the foreseeable future, abnormal weather will continue and could get worse overtime if global warming, the culprit of all this abnormality, is not arrested soon.

I am not here to talk about the adverse impact of global warming. We have heard quite a lot about this in recent years. And that is almost all that we have done – talking! Most governments have pledged that they will comply with The Kyoto Protocol to reduce the usage of greenhouse gases but the much needed actions are not forthcoming.

Lame as the governments are, we too are not less guilty! We can easily list the “crimes” we have committed – the relentless printing, the blasting of air-conditioners, leaving the tap running while we brush, the dumping of computers and mobile phones we grow tired of etc. Hong Kong as a society is so rich that we take everything for granted because we do not suffer any scarcity. But if we want our future generations to have the same affluent life, we have to be more prudent in our daily routine – use what we truly need not what we desire! The same message has to be passed on to our children not just by word of mouth but by our deeds. We have to practise what we preach!

Here I have attached the photo of a camel in snow! I hope this is enough food for thought!

Disposables



In the name of hygiene and convenience, we use a lot of disposables. Call me nostalgic – I am recalling how it was in the good old days! It was not too long ago. Until mid-1970s, when we recycled almost everything!

During menstruation, we girls used cloth napkin fitted with cut toilet sheets. We brought handkerchiefs and sneezed into them! Unimaginable now!

My son, Vincent, was born in 1974. That makes him 40 this year. When he was still an infant, we used cloth diapers made from old cotton clothes soft to the baby's skin. The soiled diapers would be put in a basin of water to remove the urine and faeces. This water

would be flushed down the toilet. The diapers would then be washed, rinsed and air-dried. I did not feel obnoxious at all washing these soiled diapers! See, there was no plastic involved!

Every now and then, an elderly man would come and knock on doors asking if we had any tins and cans. We children were very delighted to see him because in exchange for the 555 cigarette cans, we would be given malt sugar crackers. In the market, newspapers were used for wrapping virtually everything even fish and tofu and straws for the vegetables. Brown paper bags were used for take-aways and glass bottles for all the drinks!

In come all the disposables and convenience and we rejoice until it dawns on us that we are harming our future generations! Though late, it is better than never! Be reflective and protect our environment!

If girls want to try making own sanitary pads, browse this website:

http://www.ehow.com/about_5063452_did-use-before-sanitary.napkins.html#ixzz2yBT3ttL8

Songs



Our brain works strangely. Old songs don't just bring back vivid pictures but also the scent associated with the scenes. It is said that everybody has a song in his or her head. In my case, I have several and all from the 1960s when I was barely 20.

I bought a record player with my first pay cheque as a birthday gift to my father. The first record was a single - *San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair)* sung by Scott McKenzie. The scene was my father sitting in the rattan armchair and the scent was his Camel cigarette. He would play it again and again! I was so enchanted by both the tune and the lyrics that I swore I would visit San Francisco. That only came true in 1988. Here is how the song begins:

*If you're going to San Francisco
Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair
If you're going to San Francisco
You're gonna meet some gentle people there*

The next song is *Massachusetts* sung by the Bee Gees. My mother loved the song saying that the boys were all so handsome. The scene was my mom cooking and humming and the scent was the aroma of the pork stew, my favourite dish. Here you go, the beginning of the song:

*Feel I'm going back to Massachusetts,
Something's telling me I must go home.
And the lights all went out in Massachusetts
The day I left her standing on her own.*

The last one is *Kiss Me Goodbye* sung by Petula Clark. This song was so popular in 1968 that every record shop was blasting it out loud. In where The Shun Tak Centre is now was the old Macau Ferry Piers with the Sheung Wan night market in front of it. All kinds of stalls including cooked food stalls where people enjoyed their hot-pots in open air filled the whole space. It was winter and chilly but the steam and the noise brought warmth. Big plates of vegetables and seafood were piled one on top of another. I could still smell the succulent crabs boiling in the hot soup! Even here, the record was played. This song beautifully and concisely sums up the feeling of lost love. Here are some lines of the lyrics:

*So kiss me goodbye
And I'll try not to cry
All the tears in the world won't change your mind
There's someone new
And she's waiting for you
Soon your heart will be leaving me behind*

Study rooms



I took my Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in 1965. Education was neither free nor compulsory. Many girls of my age were working in the textile factories and getting good income to support their families which unlike today were quite big in size with five or more children.

We were a family of eight children crammed in a small flat of less than 300 square feet with one room let out to minimize the rent. So in the evening, there would be ten of us together with the three tenants, a couple and the wife's brother from Macau in the apartment. Wireless television was not yet introduced though there was already subscription cable television offering several hours of both English and Chinese programmes. As the fees were high, not too many families could afford it. Listening to the radio would be almost the only entertainment! My father had the radio on the whole day! And all we had during the hot summer was the electric fan!

Our apartment was no place for studying! Luckily, I had discovered a nice and cool place not too far away from home - the Kai Tak Airport. I walked from To Kwa Wan to the airport and read my books there for hours. As air traffic was not too busy, I could study undisturbed.

These days, there are air-conditioned study rooms all over Hong Kong. The Education Bureau is concerned about the provision of "a quiet place for students to study, especially for those residing in crowded and noisy homes". That would be me!

Obviously, this generation has their needs well attended to while our generation had to face adversity on our own. Which generation is more fortunate? Well, with hindsight, I think my generation is – bitterness before sweetness and that makes sweetness even sweeter!

Impulsive buying



Have you ever spent a fortune to buy something and yet have never used it? I have! These moments of rude awakening of our own stupidity usually take place when we are tidying up or moving apartment or office .

I am guilty as charged in the impulsive buying of an exercise bike, a treadmill, dumb-bells, silver tea-set, carpets, a heavily embroidered jacket and more. These were all products I bought and never or rarely used.

Now I don't do window shopping anymore. Instead, I do targeted purchases. I need a handbag. I go for one. I need a party dress. I buy one. I have already become much less impulsive but I am still very susceptible to marketing gimmicks.

The one trick I always fall for is the claim of "limited edition". I was shopping for one handbag and ended up buying two with the more expensive one being a "limited edition". I didn't actually need two but since I had been a patron of this brand for so many years, how could I be excluded from possessing this "limited edition"? I didn't want to feel bad afterwards!

Another of our weaknesses being exploited is our desire to save. Last December, I was at my favourite skin-product store. The offer was a whole set of travel-sized products worth \$500 with a purchase of over \$3,000. At that moment, I seemed to be very sane when actually I was not. "Anyway, I need these products! This is good bargain!" The bill came up to be over \$6,000 and I was given two sets! I left the store with two bags full of products telling myself that this was definitely not impulsive buying. But when I arrived home, I discovered that there were products bought in 2011 and still not opened.

As I age, I have become wiser, I hope. I am keeping a detailed list of all the skin products I have along with the month and year of purchases! I cannot afford to be impulsive anymore!

Women's Day



I have always been asked “If you had a choice, would you want to be a woman again in your next life?”

Well, that is a difficult if not absurd question to respond to because I can only use my own experience as a woman in this life and this world as reference when the world in my supposed next life would be entirely different with new social norms, values as well as scientific advances.

Here is my reply – I would still want to be a woman.

This does not mean that being a woman, I have enjoyed all kinds of privileges. Quite

the opposite – I have been posed with embarrassing comments like “Oh, you’re too tough for men to get along with!” or “As a woman, you shouldn’t push for higher education.” The harshest would be “You are strong! You can survive the trauma!”

And like many other women, I do care about my appearance. Men simply wear a suit and can attend all events! But women would have to change their shoes, wear the proper outfit and some women would even have their hair set just for a meal etc. As my hair greys, I have to get it tinted. I have to tuck my tummy in for photos. I am not complaining because all these add colours to my work life!

As a woman, I have enjoyed the whole process of motherhood. That is the one privilege men are not blessed with. Women have this choice – to be or not to be a mother. I hope no women are forced into being a mother and all women who have decided to be a mother will have their dream come true.

Chinese New Year versus Christmas



With Christmas and New Year celebrations over, Chinese New Year is around the corner. How would you choose between Chinese New Year and Christmas? Which one is your favourite?

Honestly speaking, I used to like both when I was a little girl.

The school I attended, a Catholic convent school, would be all lit-up and we were treated to snacks on Christmas Eve. As my family was poor, we could not afford Christmas trees. My father would paste a big piece of black paper on the wall and then use chalk to draw a Christmas tree decorated with cotton balls. I longed for Chinese New Year because only then would I have new clothes and shoes. These were all good enough reasons to anticipate the two festivals.

Now that I am old, I don't feel that much longing for Christmas. I am actually quite annoyed by all the commercial activities generated in the name of Christmas. Aside from the church-goers, most people have forgotten the meaning of Christmas – the humble birth of Jesus Christ. But I must say I love listening to all the old Christmas songs. They transmit instant warmth.

I prefer Chinese New Year more because it is the time for family re-union. My brothers and sisters together with their children and grand children would be gathered in mother's apartment to express their good wishes to her – the most senior in the family. And she would be laughing all the while though complaining that there is too much noise.

Numbers



Every day, how many numbers do you have to remember? I bet a lot! You need to key in your password to activate your computer and your ATM or online bank account! When you go in and out of your building, it is either swiping your resident card or key in the password. Then there is the password to your various e-mail accounts. If you are a very private person, you might have your mobile phone protected by password too.

What else? Of course, your identity card number and your birth date! These are always requested if you are getting some customer service done online or over the phone! These days, we are lucky because we don't have to memorize any phone numbers. Our smart phone has taken care of that!

If you are health-conscious, you have to check your blood sugar level, calorie and water intake! You have to monitor how many steps you have taken in a day with a pedometer.

Have you ever got yourself into trouble because you have forgotten your passwords? I have and the frustration that follows is devastating! And yet, we have been warned not to keep a written record of passwords! Well, just keep me sane enough to remember all these numbers please!

Fountain pens



Have you ever tried using a fountain pen to write – not the kind with a cartridge but the kind with a tube inside for you to pump the ink from an ink bottle? I used to like the fountain pen because I liked the feel of the pen gliding smoothly across the surface of the paper. But the nib, once dropped on the floor, would spell trouble because it would scratch when I wrote again. Back then, we did not have to throw away the pen because replacement nibs were available. Those were the days when changes happened slowly. To think of it, we were more friendly to the environment!

A fountain pen especially that brand with an arrow as logo used to be a status symbol and the best gift idea. Now it has become a kind of antique to be appreciated by nostalgic souls who can afford. And to the impatient contemporary generation, a fountain pen is not exactly user-friendly. It has for a long time been replaced by ball pens and felt pens. In fact, we are not actually writing anymore. We use stylus or just our fingers to touch screens.

Those born in mid-20th century like me are lucky because we have witnessed changes in almost all aspects of our everyday life. The fountain pen is but one of those many darling objects that we have left behind. The world moves on and so must we!

Decisions



Every day, we make decisions, both minor and major for ourselves and for others.

In the morning, we have to choose what to wear, what to eat for breakfast and whether we should quicken our steps or there is still time to procrastinate. Then as the day progresses, we have to prioritize our tasks or to

whom the tasks are to be allocated etc. Come lunch break, we have to decide whether we should stick to a healthy diet or to indulge ourselves in some oily and fatty but absolutely tasty food.

“Should I finish this task? Oh! The deadline is next week! Well, I can leave at 5! Now it’s 4:45. Time to tidy up! Let me go to the washroom first!”

“Should I go home for dinner? Well, I better join my colleagues! Boss is going. I don’t want him to think that I am a loner!”

Other decisions such as which person to talk to are made sub-consciously because we are already conditioned.

At different phases of our life, there are major decisions to be made. Some are made by our parents while other decisions are in our own hands. There might be situations in our adult life that fate seems to have taken control and we are helpless. We might be fired or abandoned! And we cry out “Why me? Why now?” But in fact, it is at moments like these that we have to assume control! We decide how we are to move on!

A good friend once gave me these two lines which I find very useful:

Choose what you love. Love what you choose.

Expectation



If you bump into super star Chow Yun-fat in Kowloon City wet market, you would be pleasantly surprised. Why? The reason is simple – you don't expect him to be doing his own shopping! We regard these celebrities as “extraordinary” and therefore should not be doing anything “ordinary”. This is our expectation working!

Anybody with a mouth and has heard of foul language would be able to reproduce it. We can hear people screaming in such language over the phone while commuting on the MTR. All we do is we walk away! But when a teacher yelled out one such phrase at a policeman, the whole society of Hong Kong was shaken. Some people can tolerate deviance while others can't. Or some deviance can be tolerated while others can't be! To me, a teacher in whatever kind of situation should never utter any vulgar language. There is a fine line drawn and we have to observe it. This doesn't make us pretentious or less cool.

Very often, the “extraordinary” people choose to do something “ordinary”. A president can be picking up a baby from the crowd and holding him or kissing him! In his Lunar New Year video message, the Chief Executive and wife are both working in the kitchen and sharing a meal with “ordinary” people. These power figures condescend so as to appear more human. We can be amused but we should remain cool. These are only acts!

Have mercy on them!



One of the highlights of our Ningbo trip (April 18 – 22 2014) was a visit to the Putuo Buddhist Mountain in Ningbo. Putuo Mountain with an area of 12.93 square kilometres is one of China's four great Buddhist mountains and a Five-A tourism destination .

That day, we were lucky as it was only drizzling. The mountain would be closed in bad weather. The walk or rather the climb uphill was quite exhausting especially when there were crowds of people including hundreds and hundreds of pilgrims. Hands were all over my back pushing

me to move faster. But when I did not have to watch my steps and could spare a moment to look around, I savoured the green mountain with its native vegetation, plunging cliffs and rare rocks inscribed with famous calligraphy. The big bronze statue of Kwan-yin or the Goddess of Mercy shrouded in clouds watching benevolently over all the worshippers did give out a feeling of mystery and sanctity.

The day of our visit, April 19 was Saturday but not any of those particular days in commemoration of Buddhist events and yet the mountain was bustling with old and young, men and women. Some of these were organized pilgrims in uniforms of grey Taoist robes and geared up with padded knees and palms. They were chanting and performing the “kneel three times, kowtow nine times” ceremony all the way up the mountain. Among these worshippers were some elderly who could hardly get back on their feet after kneeling down. One old lady was wobbling so much that I couldn't help offering her my hand. I didn't know if it was proper for me to disturb her in her “trance”.

Our tour guide explained that these pilgrims were either going up the mountain to ask the Goddess for favours or they were expressing their gratitude because their wishes had been granted. It was believed that the more effort was shown, the more pleased Kwan-yin would be.

By the time I was face to face with Kwan-yin, I dared not ask for favour fearing that I would have to be back to thank her once my wish did come true. I might be too old or too feeble to return!

Fortune telling



It is still the first week of the New Year and many people like going to temples to burn incense, pray for favours and have their fortune in the coming year revealed to them.

There are many ways of fortune telling but throwing the bamboo sticks is the most usual method. On the second day of the Lunar New Year, local celebrities do that for Hong Kong even though I for one have not given them the permission to do so.

When people are at a loss or stuck in a situation, instead of confiding in someone, they go to a temple, get the bamboo sticks container, kneel down and ask a question like "Should I sell my stocks?" The next step is to shake the container and pray for an answer. One stick with a number will fall out and the person will

then go and get a slip of paper with that number on it. On the paper is a poem which is to be interpreted in the context of the question asked. The poem may sometimes be too difficult to understand and help from the experts will be needed. Usually there is one if not more in the temple.

Though brought up as a Catholic, I think there is no harm in going to temples and praying to whichever deity chosen because all deities are to help and not harm us. And this is a big part of Chinese tradition that we have to honour. But all fortune telling, whether Chinese or Western, is not to be taken too seriously. At most, it is to be used as reference.

Textbooks



When I was at school, there were no English Language textbooks per se. A grammar book and a couple of readers were all that we had. With these tools, we learnt to master the basics of language: grammar rules and vocabulary. It was the time before photocopying machine and needless to say computer. We had the mimeograph, a kind of duplicating machine. Printing was both expensive and inconvenient. Rarely did the teachers give us any handouts. During lessons, we were practising listening and note-taking all the time.

These days, students have a whole array of textbooks, workbooks and sets of practice books for the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Students preparing for Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) scramble for more books. And yet, they are not reading much except when they have been assigned to do the reading of a book or viewing of a movie in preparation for discussion or individual presentation as part of the English Language subject requirement of school-based assessment.

Local students are taking the learning of English as an examination subject and so they keep practising the various examination papers. Teachers tend to drill their students too. Our students are actually not using the language in authentic situation. They might still be browsing the English papers or watching western movies with Chinese subtitles. But seldom do they use the language in everyday life. They don't listen to English radio programmes or write in proper English. Neither are they conversing in English! This explains why many children find the learning of English so uninteresting. I would be bored too!

Campus horror story



The principal of a primary school received a 4-page long letter from the mother of a primary 2 student. She detailed how her daughter, let's call her Ada, was suffering from severe headaches and had

been extremely unhappy since the beginning of the school year. The situation deteriorated to the state that Ada was not able to sleep! The mother panicked and took her to see the doctor. Only then did Ada pour out what had been happening at school in the past few months.

Cecilia was the monitress of Ada's class. The two girls were high-achievers and were friends in primary 1. Last year, Ada was the monitress and this year, the post went to Cecilia. The class teacher wanted to give both girls the chance to assume leadership role.

Cecilia took her duty seriously paying particular attention to Ada, demeritting her for every minor wrongdoing. The class teacher was aware and had been coaching her to moderate her bossy behavior. But Cecilia became more focused in her vengeance on Ada to punish her for "reporting" to the teacher.

Cecilia designed a plan – wooing Ada's friends away from her and making up nasty tales about her. On top of that, she started building a "gang" of her own to spy on Ada and the class teacher. And one of these "pawns" was even assigned the "undercover" mission to act as Ada's friend.

Isn't this a horror story? School bullying is taking place among such young children! Aren't they supposed to be sweet and angelic? Where have they got all these evil almost criminal ideas of undercover, boycott and "big sister" mentality? What have these 7-year olds been exposed to that they act like Lucifer? And of course, the big question – who should be responsible for having created or creating little monsters like Cecilia?

Not too long ago, a school girl died from a fall on campus in the early morning of a school day! We were all shocked but we would soon forget.

Let's NOT forget. Let's snip bullying at its first buds! We as teachers have this responsibility!

Gap-year students



Every year, two gap-year boys from Sandbach School, a drama specialist school in Cheshire, United Kingdom would be sent to our school to help out with English drama activities. Such practice has been going on since 2006 and so we have had the wonderful experience of working with fifteen very responsible and well-mannered boys. They are a valuable asset to our school.

Gap-year refers to the year between secondary school and university. These students have already been offered university degree places but they ask for deferment to see the world. Cheshire is an upper-middle class suburban city. Everything in Hong Kong from the packed streets, the long opening hours of shops, exotic restaurants, the efficient public transport to the mega buildings is amazing to the Sandbach boys!

In recent years, Hong Kong young people have jumped on this gap-year bandwagon too especially when more and more countries are offering working holiday visas. I have a student graduated with an engineering degree. He spent a year in Japan helping earthquake victims. Meanwhile, he indulged himself in his hobby – photography. He is now back in Hong Kong and last week he presented me with a 2014 calendar, twelve scenic pictures of Japan - all his masterpieces.

Right now, I am looking at the January calendar, a snow-clad shinkansen or "bullet train". Thank you, Daniel.

Travelling



Hong Kong people like travelling overseas when they have holidays. Some like package tours so that they will be worry free. Others take their trips as projects and plan their own itinerary. Trips are to satisfy different desires. The prime objective would be to have a few days of relaxation. Lately, more and more holiday-makers target at shopping either for bargain goods or exotic finds. And for frequent travellers, they have more sophisticated wants to pander to! They might be looking for thrills, gastronomic satisfaction, religious fulfillment, photo-perfect shots etc.

I have known people who travel just to be able to brag about their exposure and yet they get so confused about the cities they have visited that all they can remember would be “oh, the usual, churches and museums”. Some retirees sign up for a series of trips as soon as they step down from their post. They get themselves more exhausted than when they are at work.

Do people really feel relaxed during and after these overseas trips? Unfortunately, not all the time! In the case of package holiday, the service of the tour guide and the coach driver as well as the behaviour of group members determine whether it is a dream holiday or just a nightmare! We all love to have attentive tour guide, cautious driver and punctual group members but we are not always this lucky. As for those who plan their own trips, accidents either with the reservation of the hotels or transportation or even arguments among the travel companions may happen and upset the apple cart.

The kind of mentality we carry with us when we travel is one other factor that matters. Some cannot forget Hong Kong when they travel in the sense that they can't stop comparing the city they are in with their beloved Hong Kong complaining that the food is not good and that the people are too slow etc.

In fact, to really enjoy a holiday, we just have to open up our mind and heart and welcome whatever we see, hear and eat as new experiences!

Urban adventure



Two rooftopping photographers, Vitaly Raskalov now 21, a Ukrainian and Vadim Makhorov, 24, from Russia hit world headlines with their daredevil photographs and video shots from some of the world's tallest buildings such as the Shanghai Tower. They started their urban adventures about four years ago after they had bought cameras and discovered that they could take good pictures from the roofs.

While we look for peace and stability and fidget with the slightest changes to our routine life, there are people out there seeking extreme thrills! And this is not limited to the young or the males but encompasses the senior and the females! Maybe to them, life is too safe and therefore too boring. The pump of adrenaline during a roller coaster ride is just too mild and the experience too common. They live on the admiration or rather the adoration of their fans when they accomplish another breakthrough. Don't think that these daredevils are impatient with their life. In fact, they don't rush in unprepared. They take all kinds of safety measures because they want to live to listen to the cheers and applause.

Well, even in our daily life, we do take risks though not on such blatant scale. When we make friends, fall in love, get a domestic helper, invest in shares and stocks or buy a property etc., we are taking risks.

A ten-dollar coin



What is the use of ten dollars in Hong Kong these days? Not much! If it is the coin, people even refrain from putting it in the red packet as *laissez*. Instead, the ten-dollar note is used.

I have just checked the public transport fares online and discovered that ten dollars is definitely not enough for a cross-harbour round trip. The bus fare from Kennedy Town to Kwun Tong is \$9.80. An MTR ride from Central to Tseung Kwan O is \$12.70. With the wide use of the stored value Octopus Card and the automatic reloading via our credit-card account, we become unaware of how much we are paying each time when we commute unless we pay particular attention.

It is almost possible to go cashless in Hong Kong. We pay with our Octopus Card at supermarkets, convenience stores, fast-food restaurants and plenty more sales points. Those who drive well know that for many parking lots, cash is not accepted. Besides the smart card, we also use credit cards to accumulate points in return for flight mileage or cash rebates.

While enjoying all the convenience, we have to remain cool-headed. Resorting to making only the minimum payment at the end of the month is the beginning of a one-way trip to degradation. Keeping an itemized account of our expenses is a good exercise to monitor our spending habits. I have been doing this for several years. It doesn't take up too much time. An Excel spreadsheet will do. But it does hold back my insatiable desire for more.

Four slices of bread can cost \$8.50 at one bakery but only \$4.50 at another. I have to rationalize to myself if the extra four dollars does make a difference. When the answer is negative, I choose the cheaper one. I want to maximize my money! Call me thrifty if you want!

Pressure



We all face pressure every day – pressure coming from self, family, peers, colleagues and society in general. At different stages of life, we have to attain targets and meet deadlines either self-imposed or imposed on us.

Be the top in class! Achieve distinctions in public examinations! Embark on an enviable career! Get married by twenty-five! Own a property by thirty! The list is endless! So is pressure!

People handle pressure differently. Some yell out all the time that they are under pressure. Some endure quietly. When up to the neck, they explode like a volcano wreaking havoc on themselves and others. And of course, there are those who take life easy and refuse to yield to any demands. They claim that their life is pressure-free!

To think of it, I am actually quite experienced in managing pressure. I was at school before free education. I had to study hard and be among the top three to enjoy scholarship so that I could continue my schooling. At that time, my only relief from pressure was writing. I created stories to nurture my fantasy and have myself lifted from the gruelling reality.

In my decades of teaching career and life as a working mother, I have faced really exhausting challenges. I have tried various relief measures. Some work. Some don't. Here is a summary of "what works" – the 4R Approach:

1. Recycle experiences to look for inspiration
2. Reduce expectations to enjoy successes
3. Reuse happiness to recharge
4. Replace depression with three cheers

Whatever you do to release pressure, don't vent it on people who get in your way!

Job applicants



I have been interviewing teachers these few days. Once the vacancy advertisement is out, we get lots of applications. Most of the applicants are fresh graduates.

Their application letters are of almost the same format and so are their looks in the photos because they are all dressed in black suits with a white shirt. There is a

general lack of personality. It seems these days young people are more comfortable being one of the mass rather than being different and standing out!

When reading application letters, I am very serious. I read each letter. That takes hours of work. Then I short-list interesting ones for interview. What do I mean by interesting ones? What kind of applicants can attract my attention? Here are just a few examples of applicants I interviewed.

One applicant quitted her private tutoring and spent four years to do a degree programme majoring in English and a one-year full-time teacher training. She responded to my questions gingerly though she was still able to demonstrate her passion.

Then there was a fresh graduate with coach certificates in all kinds of sports. His academic performance was not outstanding. He did not graduate from esteemed secondary school but his enthusiasm for sports was written all over his face!

One more interesting applicant – a law graduate applying to be a teacher! At the interview, she explained that she studied law to satisfy her mother and that she did not even attend her own graduation ceremony. She described how unpleasant her internship at law firms was and expounded that she wanted to be with children and pursue a career in education.

Bank queue



Today is a school holiday to make up for Parents' Day last Saturday. What better than fulfilling my duty as a good daughter – helping my mom with bank matters!

We first had a good dim sum lunch – a rare pleasure on a week day! Then we went to the bank. There were already several queues of various lengths. People at the long queue looked frustrated. As my mom's account was one of those privileged priority accounts, we didn't have to wait too long. My mother wanted to update her signature which had become quite different from the one she gave years ago. But as it was an integrated account with quite a few other accounts attached, there were a lot of forms that had to be filled in and signed. She also wanted to withdraw some cash and to transfer some of her money to do a time deposit. The whole process took one full hour. During the whole time, I was standing while my mom was seated on the bench nearby. She popped up every now and then when her signature was required. This 86-year old lady with a stick simply couldn't be on her feet for that long!

During this one-hour long close encounter with the counter lady, I witnessed what a stressful job she had. Since it was taking her so long to serve us, the customer who stood right behind me complained that he had waited far too long and that he had to rush off to work. Then there were her colleagues probably new ones asking her for advice over various matters. All of a sudden, a lady walked up and demanded the counter lady to come out to talk to her. All these happened when she was either filling in forms or counting notes.

Though working under such pressure, the counter lady kept her smile and even apologized to me several times for not being able to speed up the procedure!

This is the kind of service Hong Kong is proud of!

Sales pitch



I wonder if you have ever had the experience of being bombarded by sales pitches. These days, they attack in the form of cold calls or direct pitches as you stroll past the counters of department stores.

“Hello, Miss, how are you? My name is Anna. I am the customer officer of XXX Beauty Parlour. You have been selected as our VIP to enjoy a free facial and body massage. You can make the booking now. Oh, you don’t want to? But this is free?”

“Hi, how are you? I am John. I am the representative of XXX Bank. We can offer you a loan of up to \$100,000 at no interest. We only charge handling fees. Oh, you don’t want it? But there is no interest at all! How about taking this loan as a stand-by fund for investment? You can make a lot of money out of nothing! You don’t want it? Strange!”

“Hey, Miss. Oh, you have so many freckles on your cheeks. Have you ever tried any cream? You have? Then your cream is no good! Come and let me show you our cream! Don’t be shy! This is free!”

I usually respond politely and hang up the phone or I smile and walk away. These sales people are only doing their job though not an enviable one.

Kettle



It was 9:30 at night and the department store was half an hour away from closing for the day. Most of the sales people were winding up. Reluctantly, I walked to the household department upon the order of my mother to buy a kettle. I always avoid “bothering” people including my colleagues when they just clock in or are about to clock out.

I checked the shelves and found one that was of the right size. Like most customers, I walked up with the kettle in my hand to the

sales lady nearby and asked for a new one. She was in the middle of some calculation. Without looking up, she murmured “1.5 or 2.5?”

I was disappointed with such service and rebutted though in the gentlest voice, “if you look up, you will know!”

Hong Kong is famed for being the shopping paradise but with “angels” like this sales lady, visitors will skip Hong Kong! There are other more welcoming paradises around!

This is also an apt reminder for us teachers. We should never bring our temper to school. We all have a part to play in building a happy, healthy and harmonious campus for everybody to flourish!

Telephone call



I was working late. It was about eight when the office phone started ringing. As it was already past office hours, there was no clerk to answer it. So I picked it up. It was a lady asking if application for Secondary One places was still open. I politely replied that it was.

I was quite perplexed why people could call for enquiry past office hours. What were they assuming? They might just have the thought at that very moment and therefore made the call!

Have you come across other cases of "matter of course"? The lift door opens and you are about to step out only to find a person standing there right in the middle. You are almost pushed back. Another situation - you push open a door and hold it for the one behind you and that very person walks past you without any gesture of courtesy!

Some might think that courtesy is pretence and is not for "cool" guys. I cannot agree. Courtesy makes us civilized humans. So next time when somebody holds the door for you, do say "thank you" or at least give that kind person a smile.

Ideas



Last Wednesday, when I was tutoring my Secondary 6 students, I told them I had started a blog. I asked them to read my entries and give me their views. Torres, a student very proficient in English, posed me an interesting question: are you not worried that one day you will run out of ideas?

Well, the brain works differently from our physical energy. The more we use our intellect, the more ready we are to deliver!

I am talking from experience. I usually drive but whenever I do take public transport, my mind works vigorously! I start examining the passengers around me, describing their looks, guessing their relationship, their occupations and where they are going etc. I actually use them as characters to compose stories. I don't need any paper or pen or tablet computer! All these take place in my mind within a short trip of 20 minutes.

A tram ride becomes a fulfilling creative journey! I get rich input and create meaningful products. So why do I need to worry about ideas drying up?

Trapped



It was Sunday morning and I was, as usual, going to Tsim Sha Tsui for my weekly indulgence of facial treatment and body massage. I like taking the train instead of the MTR as there are fewer stops. At around 8:10, I got off the mini-bus at Kowloon Tong Station and walked to the platform for the East Rail train heading for Hung Hom to change to the West Rail for Tsim Sha Tsui. I was very pleased to see a

train there with doors open. I thought I was lucky as I did not have to wait. But my happiness came too soon.

For the next couple of minutes, the doors remained open and passengers began to get off. There came the announcement that the train would be shortly delayed. I was not in a hurry and stayed. Time passed and the same announcement was repeated. I thought I had to decide. So I followed the other passengers and got off to take the MTR.

By the time I arrived at Tsim Sha Tsui Station, there was the broadcast of the suspension of East Rail services due to a signal failure resulting in the MTR's control centre "being blinded" about the whereabouts of its trains. I felt lucky that I had made the right decision of alighting instead of trusting the announcement of the train being "shortly delayed".

Every time, these announcements end with "apologies for the inconvenience caused". But for passengers especially those who are going to work in the morning, every minute counts. Train delay means people being late for work resulting in penalty or loss of bonus. What good is the apology to them?

I am all for the increase of fines for train service breakdown and for the highly-paid senior management to be penalized with their bonuses deducted. Pay cheques have to come with accountability!

Kindness



It was just a typical scene at the platform of the MTR Admiralty Station at 6:30 in the evening.

The two platforms were virtually joined by the sea of passengers standing in tight rows. I was in this crowd. Once a train arrived, I was being pushed until I finally got on board. The whole tortuous ordeal lasted about twenty minutes.

When I was inside, I could hardly stand on both feet. As I was regaining my composure, a lady with loads of shopping bags stood up. Speaking in Putonghua, she offered me her seat. This was the first time ever I was offered a seat. I must appear dreadfully old in need of sitting down.

This good Samaritan looked like one of those Canton Road shoppers! I have had unpleasant experiences with mainland tourists. I was once inside a fitting room when a mainland lady barged in. The saleslady simply could not stop her. But I would not dare to generalize. I know no groups are homogenous. To think that "seeing one is seeing all" is pure naivety.

Canton Road



The Sunday rally against mainland tourists staged on Canton Road by a small group of radicals was barbaric. I am not here to defend these mainland tourists listing the enormous revenue they bring us. I simply want to say that whatever grievances we may have, we should never resort to such stupid and destructive means to vent our frustration.

Contrary to what some pessimists fear, Hong Kong is still “a protest city” even after the reversion of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty. But unfortunately, rallies which used to be orderly and civilized have become both disruptive and rowdy. Open forums have been turned into circus shows of abusive language and unruly behaviour. Differences are no longer respected. Minority

don’t even have a chance to speak. Many politicians and activists are adopting this strategy of “the louder, the more righteous”. Justice is depicted in numbers. In this fast society of Hong Kong, nobody seems to have any patience for reasoning or dialogue. Chatty slogans win followers. Views are classified as “right” or “wrong”, “black” or “white”. Compromises are branded as “kow-tows”.

What are our honourable councillors doing? Instead of dwelling on whether they should thank the Chief Executive for his Policy Address, they should be demanding the Tourism Board and all the relevant public servants what plans they have to receive the 100 million tourists by 2023!

Locusts



In recent months, “locusts” as a species of insect has been made known to Hongkongers who are basically urbanite and should never be threatened by locusts which are a kind of grasshoppers that can breed rapidly. Locusts form swarms as adults and can strip fields and damage crops. They can eat the equivalent of their own weight in a day.

In the biblical book of *Exodus*, there is the story of The Ten Plagues of Egypt and the eighth plague was locusts. At that time, the Hebrews or the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians. Moses commissioned by God had been asking Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. Pharaoh capitulated after the tenth plague.

The threat of locusts was worded like this:

Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow. They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. (Exodus)

When Pharaoh refused, God then had Moses stretch his staff over Egypt and a wind picked up from the east. The wind brought a locust swarm which covered the sky, casting a shadow over Egypt. It consumed all the remaining Egyptian crops, leaving no tree or plant standing.

To these locusts the mainland tourists have been compared and a so-called anti-locust movement has come forth organizing various rallies in Tsim Sha Tsui and Mong Kok. This is just not fair! True, these tourists flood our streets and shops. But just think of all the revenue they have brought to Hong Kong and the workforce in the service industry they are supporting! What we should do is to make our government officials brainstorm for ideas to, on the one hand, cater to the needs of these tourists and on the other hand, defuse the frustrations of the locals!

We should not vent our anger on them! After all, out of the 5.5 million tourists visiting Hong Kong in January 2014, close to 80% (4.4 million) were from mainland!

Talents



Talents are people who can do what we can't. Poets can put scenes vividly in words. They describe moods that we can only feel. Painters do dramatic works of portraits that photographers pale. Dancers present movements that make us doubt if their bodies are different from ours. Musicians compose pieces that move our heart and rock our body. Jewellers breathe life into rocks. Sculptors carve statues with lines that can show both strength and weakness.

I can go on with the list because I have so much admiration for all these great people past and present that have immortalized beauty! I am not a talent. When I see a rainbow, I can but say "Oh! So pretty" And then the lyrics of "Somewhere over the rainbow" would come to my mind. When I watch the harbour view at night with all the sparkling lights, the famous jewellery pieces would be right there in front of my eyes. When I see the willow swaying by the brook, the few ballet performances I have watched would be presented once again just for me!

I who am not a talent am fortunate enough to live in a world where all the great masterpieces are only a click away.

Here you go – the most famous woman, Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vince painted between 1503 – 1506.

Snow White and Cinderella



As a child, I was brought up reading and listening to a lot of fairy tales. Some of these such as “Snow White” and “Cinderella” are still the favourites of many children. Movies, cartoons, picture books and online games are made telling their stories. Also available are various products from dress-up dolls to household items bearing their images. Even my grand-daughter Hayley has a lot of “princess” stuff such as blanket, rug, school-bag, lampshade, chopsticks, lunch box, water bottle etc. Parents and of course, grand-parents are intentionally or unintentionally immersing their children and grand-children especially girls in this “princess mentality”!

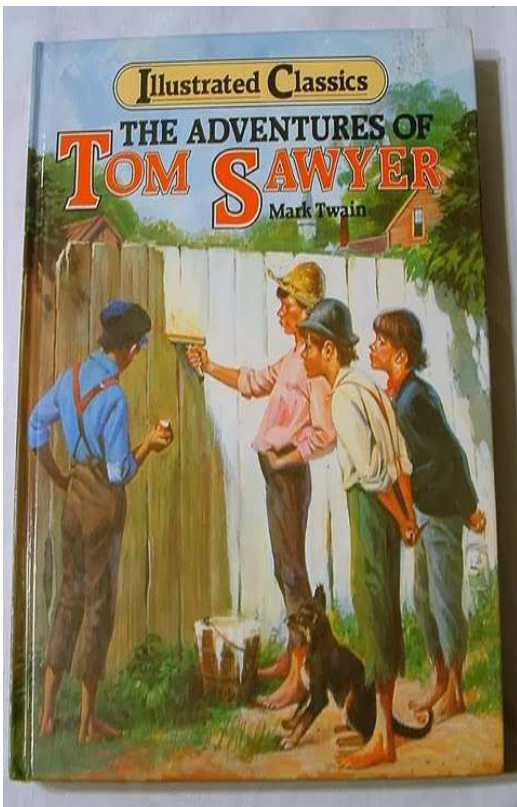
But if we educated adults are actually using our head, we will discover a lot of imbedded biases which as parents, we would not want to instill in the young minds of our children.

As a woman, I detest all the feminine stereotypes depicted in the stories. Physical beauty is associated with virtues while ugliness with evil. Princess Snow White and Cinderella are both beautiful and virtuous while the antagonists, the Queen or the step mother and her daughters are all ugly and therefore, wicked! Also, both heroines await the handsome princes to save them from their misery and then they live happily hereafter! I bet no mothers upon reflection would want their daughters to develop such prejudices.

The stories of “Snow White” and “Cinderella” were folk tales known across Europe centuries ago. The Grimm Brothers collected them in *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, first published in 1812. That was a different time when women’s only career was their marriage and family! So when read by 21st century children, these stories need to be re-interpreted or read under parental guidance.

The one moral we want modern girls to learn is that while it is great to be born

Tom Sawyer



Statistically speaking, Hong Kong students read a lot. Well, that is one of the performance indicators looked into when External School Review Team visits schools. But as teachers, we well know the quality of our students' reading is not that ideal. Like any other activities they are engaged in, many students are doing it for the sake of getting it done.

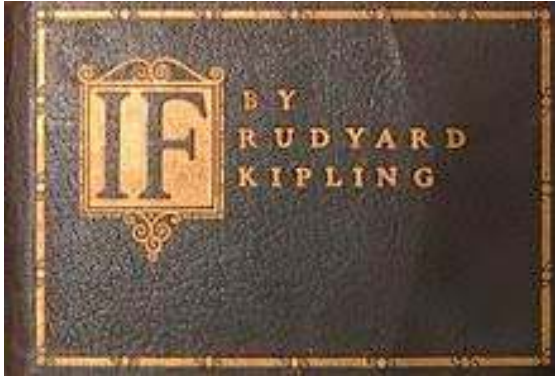
One of my favourite questions I ask applicants on the occasion of Secondary 1 admission interview is: "You have been doing online reading for quite some time. Please tell me about one of the articles you have read?" Very often, the reply is "I have forgotten." This is the same reply I get when I ask applicants who have been practising piano to introduce to me one of their favourite music pieces.

Reading, to most of our students, is an assignment, a book report. It is not enjoyment as evidenced by the fact that if given a choice, they tend to pick easy books to read.

This morning, I recommended to my students *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* written by Mark Twain in 1876. Tom Sawyer, modelled on Twain, was a young boy growing up along the Mississippi River. The plot is intriguing and the book is not exactly difficult though students might need some help in understanding the setting as this is absolutely unfamiliar to our urban students.

To help students, teachers themselves have to be reading! Books, of course!

If by Rudyard Kipling



On the wall next to the school lift on the ground floor of our school building, there is a big framed poster presenting the poem *If* by Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936).

I love this poem which is actually a set of highly demanding rules for growing up. Each line is a motto and maxim for life – the very positive energy we need at confused moments. And the elegant imagery is so vividly presented that illustrations can be easily done.

Kipling did not have an easy life - an abused childhood, failure at school and deaths of his children. But he achieved fame quickly with his poems and stories. In 1907, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The lines I love most are :

If you can dream - and not make dreams your master,

If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two impostors just the same;

According to Kipling, to be successful in life, we have to dream but we should not just stay dreaming. We have to make our dreams happen. Very often, we indulge in thinking too much and acting too little. The consequence is nothing ever happens!

Of course, we often lose our heads rejoicing when sailing is plain and give up in desperation when faced with tragedies. But Kipling reminds us that these moments always come and go as they are imposters. We only have to take life as it comes along!

Read the poem and find a line that you resonate with.

Here is the link: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175772>

The Help



It was an unusual Friday evening – I was alone at home accompanied by Bean Bean, my dog. By chance, I saw a movie on television, *The Help*, a film adaptation of a 2009 novel of the same name by American author Kathryn Stockett. At the 84th Academy Awards in 2012, Octavia Spencer won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role as Minny Jackson.

The story is about African-American maids working in white households in Jackson, Mississippi, during the early 1960s. Though long ago in 1863, Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, had already declared the emancipation of slavery and proclaimed that everybody including the black was free and equal, racial equality did not really exist.

The Help is about three women: Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter. Aibileen Clark is a 50-year-old black maid spending her life raising white children. Her best friend Minny Jackson, an outspoken black maid who has worked for Mrs. Walters for so long that they are very comfortable with each other. Skeeter Phelan is a liberal young white woman returning to the family home after graduating from the University of Mississippi. She gets a job with the local paper. Increasingly, Skeeter becomes uncomfortable with the attitude of the whites towards their "help" such as believing that "black people carry different diseases to white people".

Skeeter has the idea of writing about the relationships between whites and their black help. The maids are very reluctant to cooperate, afraid of retribution from their employers, but Aibileen agrees. Eventually Minny co-operates. The other maids approached are not interested at first but later support the idea. The book goes to print and is a big success.

Here in Hong Kong, we have the Filipina helping us at home. Many of them have left their children to the care of their family while they raise our children. Maria, our helper since 2009, is now my mother's best companion. They understand each other. My mother manages to speak a few words of English and Maria has already mastered quite a profuse Cantonese word bank. When Maria is away on leave, my mother counts the days she will be back. She urges Maria to see a doctor for the slightest coughs. Maria secretly tells me how my mom scolds the taxi-driver for detouring and over-charging. I have taken Maria as a member of our family. These helpers are closer to us than family members we meet once or twice in a year! We live under the same roof! How can we not love them?

Life is ...

THE MEANING OF LIFE IS_____.

I guess we are all too busy to think of the meaning of life. We would only do so when we are frustrated, challenged, disappointed or defeated! When we are celebrating success, we won't be our own wet blanket to think of what life is about. But as we age with some of our dreams fulfilled and others busted, we might at some quiet moments start meditating on what life means.

Life means differently to different people at different times! To me, life is about reaching targets though recently I tend to cheat myself by moving the goalposts closer to make targets more attainable. I was not this wise when I was younger. I used to think I was invincible. I have learnt enough lessons to know I am not and that I have to yield an inch or two to survive.

Are you at that age already to think of what life is to you? Here are some quotes for you to meditate on.

 *Life is a box of chocolate. You never know what you are going to get.*


 *Life is a bus ride.*

 *Life is a marathon race.*

 *Life is not a spectacle or feast; it is a predicament.*

 *Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It's the transition that's troublesome.*

 *Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.*

 *Life is full of surprises and serendipity. Being open to unexpected turns in the road is an important part of success. If you try to plan every step, you may miss those wonderful twists and turns. Just find your next adventure - do it well, enjoy it - and then, not now, think about what comes next.*

Babbling is a collection of articles written by Ms Pauline CHOW Lo Sai, Chairwoman of Hong Kong Women Teachers' Organization (HKWTO). These articles can also be accessed at the HKWTO website (www.hkwto.org.hk). They are all photocopiable.



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