

We
all
Babbling



A Vote of Gratitude

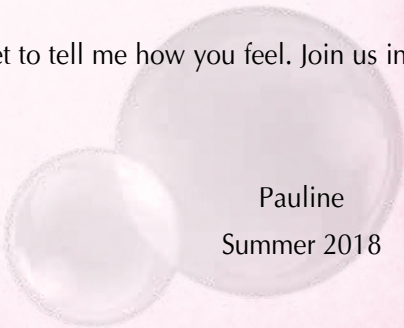
We all love babbling! is the third of the *Babbling* series started in 2014. Then it was but a collection of my blog entries. In 2016, I called for contributions from teachers. This they did. These articles together with my not yet published blog entries and three of my earlier papers made up the second book, *Let's babble!*

I am thankful to announce that *We all love babbling!* is on an even bigger scale. The first part of the book is a collection of 27 submissions by 15 writers from all walks of life. Of course, there are principal, teachers and even young students from the education sector. Among them is a family of three, the Hsiens. Others come from very diverse sectors such as a training professional, a pilot, a police sergeant and an accountant. Isn't that amazing? I feel so privileged. Some of these people I have never met. We share one thing in common – the love of writing in English.

There are three parts to *We all love babbling!* The first part is Friends Babbling with 27 articles arranged in alphabetical order of the writers' surnames followed by 38 of my recent blog entries. The last part presents 14 of my favourites from the previous two books.

We all love babbling! is a celebration of our passion for English, our second language. We are not great writers but we all have genuine views and sentiments to share with readers. The topics covered are wide. I am sure there will be one if not more that can stir up a few ripples in you.

Happy reading and don't forget to tell me how you feel. Join us in our next book!



Pauline
Summer 2018

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Friends Babbling

Travelling to Hokkaido in winter:

A word of advice

Mandy CHAN

I travelled to Sapporo and Hakodate, two popular touristy cities in Hokkaido, with my in-laws in January 2018. It snowed every day during our 5-day trip. There were two occasions of heavy snow and the lowest temperature hit minus 9 degrees Celsius. It was my first time to travel to such a cold place, so before the trip, I had spent considerable time searching for suitable clothing items and surfing the Internet to find relevant information. Once I returned from the trip, my parents and friends asked me how I survived such cold weather.

I found that it is really not necessary to wear several layers of clothes. A sweater and a down jacket will do you fine. The outermost layer should be water and windproof. The same applies to pants and boots. Avoid anything in turtle neck style, as indoor heaters will make you feel unbearably hot. If you think your ability to stand such cold weather is weak, consider wearing a T-shirt made of heat preserving fabrics in the innermost layer.

Once I arrived in Sapporo, I found a lot of choices of snow boots. Compared with the pair I bought in Hong Kong, they are of better quality and more reasonably-priced. I bought a pair and changed into it right away. Both the water resistance and heat preserving abilities are excellent.

Although keeping warm is the major issue, how to look photogenic should also be a matter of concern. Who do not want to take many great photos in the snow? While it is impractical to buy yourself a different jacket for each day, you need some clothing accessories to create different styles so that you do not look the same

in all your photos. Shop for hats, scarves, earmuffs and capes. You can mix and match these small items to turn yourself into a fashion guru.

Having been an English teacher for more than 10 years, Mandy CHAN decided to quit her job last year to explore different aspects of life. She still remains active in the education field by taking part in the various events held by HKWTO.



Not just a shop assistant

Mandy CHAN

I have been using iPhone for a good while, but it was not until recently that I started to sign up for the free courses held at Apple Stores. Here I am not trying to promote any of the Apple products, but rather their staff deployment.

In case you know nothing about their courses, let me explain. Every day at each Apple Store there are courses for users of Apple products to join. The courses range from teaching basic operation of iPhones/iPads/iMacs to introducing various Apps developed by Apple. The instructors are not IT professionals but shop assistants. They take turns to be in charge of the courses run back-to-back from the morning till late in the evening.



I did not have much expectation before I signed up for their courses. But once I attended my first course, I was impressed by how the instructor delivered his session. He spoke clearly with confidence and answered questions patiently. Above all, he managed to give a

lively presentation for an hour, so all participants could stay focused the whole time. I had more or less the same observation in the subsequent courses delivered by other shop assistants at different Apple Stores.

I am amazed by how good their presentation skills are. These are some important qualities teachers should possess. It is true that delivering such courses is not comparable with conducting classroom teaching, but when considering the fact that the course participants from all walks of life vary greatly in age and IT literacy, we could still say that these shop assistants have the same challenge as teachers do to cater for learner diversity.

I wonder what training Apple staff have gone through before they can reach this level of competency. But one thing is sure, their management team is so smart to create a win-win situation with such deployment of staff. While users of Apple products can learn something free of charge, it allows the staff to learn real presentation skills and instils confidence into them. This professional and personal growth will in turn benefit their retail business.

‘A whole new world’ outside the education field

Mandy CHAN

I had been teaching for more than 10 years before I left my last serving school. All the time since last August, apart from doing household chores, I have also helped manage the company owned by my family. Switching from one field to another of course has taught me a lot about things outside the education world, but what comes alongside is a feeling of confusion and anxiety arising from my day-to-day personnel management. At some point, I felt that moral values are disappearing in the business world.



The real headache for me is some young staff never arrive on time in the morning. Different measures have been tried out but in vain. Salary deductions have no deterring effects while a rewarding system gives no motivation. Even worse, I am the only person in the management who thinks that being late for work is a problem. Clearly, I have a completely different set of values and expectations from everybody else.

I talked to a few friends of mine to seek advice. It gave me quite a shock when they all told me punctuality almost does not exist in their respective fields. “It’s productivity that counts”, “Being late for 10-15 minutes is the norm in my company” and “You cannot run a business with the mind-set of a teacher” are some of the remarks made. They made me think that I was being too idealistic and did not fit into the business world. I struggled to hold onto my belief and convinced

myself that punctuality should always be one of the core values of my company.

I suppose we were taught the importance of punctuality at a very young age. It is not just a personal merit which deserves our compliance, but also a duty existing at all levels of society. We teachers definitely work hard to uphold this morality in schools. Our hard work, however, does not make all moral principles survive outside the school setting.

This upsetting reality shows that teachers have a challenging job when it comes to moral education. While we are instilling correct values into students, we should at the same time think about how to make good behaviour not only exist in schools, but also sustained throughout a student's life. The key is we should provide students with the kind of experience which is memorable so that it can have a long-lasting effect. This certainly benefits not only the students themselves, but our society as well.

Let us have faith in our ability to shape students into responsible and disciplined individuals who are committed to practising high moral standards.

Aurora

CHIN Tik Kar

Have you ever seen an aurora? It is a natural electrical phenomenon which can be seen as lights in different colours in the night sky near the northern or southern magnetic pole. People usually get to see reddish or greenish auroras in winter. All these magnificent lights of the aurora give us spectacular views when we look up to the sky and they also attract a lot of scientists who love exploring incoming energy. Lucky me, I have experienced the incredible enchantment which I will never forget.



When I was working in Canada back then, it was very convenient to visit places where auroras were seen easily. One time, I flew to Fairbanks, Alaska, during my New Year holiday. Generally, winter is always very cold and long in Fairbanks. However, I remember it was a very warm winter when I visited there. It was expected to be around minus 10 degrees Celsius the week I went there, but instead it was 20 degrees Celsius higher when I arrived! I was so surprised and worried that I might not be able to see the auroras.

I stayed in a big wooden house located in Chandalar Ranch.

People there would really use wood to make fire to warm themselves up and they would hang out in front of the fireplace during the night. It was so interesting to me because it was my first time to hang around with people by the fireplace. People who stayed there all went for the amazing auroras. I remember I was offered to stay in an eight-bedded female room next to the landlord's bedroom. When I stepped inside the room, it was madness! There was stuff everywhere on the mattresses and the floor. My goodness! I asked if I could move to another room because it was too chaotic! Then I was moved to another room which contained two bunk beds all by myself for the first two nights!

It is not easy to see an aurora even if it is winter. My first two nights in Fairbanks were not so lucky. Then on the third night, I went out visiting the town with some new friends. On the way back to the wooden house, we saw the amazing but fuzzy and greenish aurora from the car. We all screamed badly except the driver because she needed to focus on the road! We were so excited! I checked on my aurora app and it said my third night in Fairbanks would start having auroras for the whole week. We all knew it was coming, but we never thought it would appear so early in the night. So, we drove back to the wooden house as quickly as we could. The stunning aurora kept staying with us from the road to the woods. I hurried to get my camera from the room and started shooting in front of the house. I have to say, I got the best view of the auroras in Fairbanks without driving anywhere. Then, I looked up to the sky admiring all the beautiful auroras every night during my visit.

Auroras! It is such an unforgettable enchantment in my life! If you have never seen an aurora before, I hope you will have a chance to see it in your life. Put it on your bucket list because it is one of the must-do things before you leave the world!

CHIN Tik Kar is a primary school English teacher who loves travelling and meeting new people. She has recently participated in the 5th Young Women Actualization Training Programme organized by The Hong Kong Federation of Women..

Half the sky programme

CHIN Tik Kar

I have been teaching for over 10 years in the education field. This year, I am so lucky to be one of the selected candidates of the 5th Young Women Actualization Training Programme organized by The Hong Kong Federation of Women. We call ourselves 'half the sky'.



In this programme, I can meet people from different fields which I can gain insights on my capabilities not only in teaching. I can also broaden my international perspective by attending different seminars and events. This programme allows me to learn more about the Bay Area Development Plan and the opportunities arising from “Belt and Road” Initiative, in particular how Hong Kong capitalizes on the unique advantages under the “one country, two systems” formula and so much more.

The opening ceremony was held in mid-March this year. Mrs. Laura Cha, Shih May-lung, the Chairman of the Financial Services Development Council was invited to give a speech to the candidates. It was my first time to meet her and I was so impressed by her speech. As a mother of two children, Laura has managed to juggle the pressure and become a powerful and influential woman in both Hong Kong and mainland. To make it short, she is one of the best female role models a woman could have. In her speech, she told us that we should never

be satisfied with what we have at the moment but equip and upgrade ourselves for a better future and chances to come.

Two weeks after the opening ceremony, we went on a field study and practicum at enterprises in Shenzhen and Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. We had a chance to visit some enterprises such as Huawei, Hytera and Da-Jiang Innovations. By visiting these enterprises, we could see that China is really growing rapidly. For example, Da-Jiang is one of the top drone applications companies in the world nowadays. The latest drone has been developed into human body detection control. Drones can also be used in tourism industry which can merge with VR to let disabled and elderlies to visit sites accessed only via steps. For another enterprise, Huawei, while everyone is using 3G or 4G cellular frequencies, Huawei is developing the 5G cellular frequency and it is coming out very soon. Besides, the newest smart phone model of Huawei has made a serious competition to the iPhone X now.

More seminars, field studies, service projects and sharing sessions are waiting for me to join throughout this programme. Even though it is not over yet, I am already having a feeling that this programme is bringing a dramatic evolution to my life!

Interesting children

CHIN Tik Kar

My nephew turned three a couple of days ago. We celebrated his birthday with him last week. The first thing he said when he saw the chocolate birthday cake was, "We must blow the candles!" He sounded so serious with this determined look as if he had been looking at his treasure. His mom said, "This is already the fourth birthday cake he has had in a week". And his mom also said, "he says that every time when he sees a cake." He took it really seriously and he was sitting steadily waiting for the candle-blowing moment.

When my brother started putting up the candles and getting ready to light them up, all of a sudden, my nephew shouted, "No! No! You can't do that!" and he left the table and ran away. We were all surprised by his act. My brother asked him where he was going. Guess what he said. He said, "I have to go wee-wee!"

Everyone in the room burst into laughter. Oh my nephew is so cute! When he finished his business, he was all happy and we continued lighting up the rest of the candles and singing a birthday song to him.



Children are very straightforward. They express themselves directly without hesitation. It was a fun birthday night.

Travelling safely

CHIN Tik Kar

Do you like travelling? When you travel, what kind of accommodations would you like? Hotels, motels, B&B, resorts, your friend's home or all of the above? To me, cleanliness and safety always come first, so it doesn't matter the kind of places as long as they are clean and safe.

Have you ever considered using the safe in your hotel room to keep all your valuables safe? I never thought of using it, not because I didn't trust the safety of it, but simply because I like to

keep my belongings with me and it makes me feel safe, until one time I travelled to Langkawi, an Archipelago in Malaysia, with my friends for a few days. One day, we went for diving and we decided to put our passports and money in the safe. After we came back to our hotel room, everything was still there. It didn't occur to me how risky a safe could be and I started using it from time to time all over the world.



Then, on another trip to Bangkok, Thailand, my friends and I put our valuables in two different safes in two different hotel rooms on two different days before we went out for sightseeing. Everything seemed fine after we got back. I didn't notice anything until the last day of the trip. However, I found that some of my money was gone after we left Thailand. I was so absent-minded that I did not count my money before we checked out of the hotels. I couldn't tell in which hotel the theft had happened. Fortunately, the thief didn't steal our passports or all the cash. This is the most unforgettable experience of my travels.

Severe typhoon Hato 2017

CHIN Tik Kar

On 23 August 2017, severe typhoon Hato brought the first Hurricane Signal No. 10 to Hong Kong in the past five years. I remember I was supposed to attend my school meetings on that day, but all of them were postponed because of Hato. Heavy rain woke me up in the middle of the night. I couldn't sleep until the wind stopped hitting the windows in my bedroom. Unfortunately, when the fierce rain



came back, it cruelly woke me up once again and grabbed me out of my dream. This happened quite frequently the whole night. I forgot at what time I finally got back to sleep without hearing all the noise.

The next morning, the sound of water dripping woke me up. The water was from the curtains. And then water leaking problem occurred because of the typhoon. Nearly everything near the windows and the wall was wet, but I was lucky. I had time to remove my computer and some hard drives away from the table next to the windows so that they wouldn't be damaged. On second thought, I was more than lucky because my family was safe and we didn't have much loss whereas people in Macau suffered under severe typhoon Hato. I heard from the news that eight people were killed, may be even more; streets were flooded; cars were underwater; people needed to swim in the normal streets; electricity was down; things in street shops got washed away; people lost their homes, etc.

After the severe typhoon, the entire city needs to be restored and to recover. Even the big event, the 29th 2017 Macau International Fireworks Display Contest, had to be cancelled. It will take a lot of time and money for Macau to restore itself to what it used to be. Some may say, natural disasters are not preventable, yet, if we choose to protect our city or country, we really need to think ahead.

Book reviews

CHOI Wai Kam

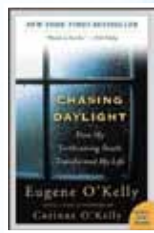
I was inspired by the following three stories and I would like to share my thoughts with readers.

The first story is from an English book called *Good Luck*. It is about two knights who tried to find a leaf which would bring them good luck. All the people in the forest told them that it was a “mission impossible”.

One knight gave up his quest. But the other knight used his wisdom and strength to prepare the best soil for the leaf to grow and he paid attention to details. Some details might not seem important, but they are the keys to success. I would like to advise that we should be well-prepared for challenges. We can change our fate.

The second story is about a Russian girl who lived near the border with China. She was encouraged by her father to learn Chinese as a second language because it might be useful in future. I really appreciate his wisdom. Apart from her mother tongue, she mastered Chinese as well as English. After a few years, she came to Hong Kong and worked as a translator. She was glad that she could help improve understanding between Russia and Hong Kong.

The last one is the story of Gene O’Kelly, the author of *Chasing Daylight*, which makes people think about the meaning and importance of life. O’Kelly was the CEO of a big accounting firm in America. He had a happy family, fame and power. In his early 50’s, he was told that he had brain cancer and had only 100 days to live. But O’Kelly turned the news of his forthcoming death from a curse to a blessing. As a professional accountant, he carefully planned his remaining time and created “perfect days”. Do perfect days mean earning more money or travelling around the world? The answer is no. He spent all his remaining days with his close friends and family.

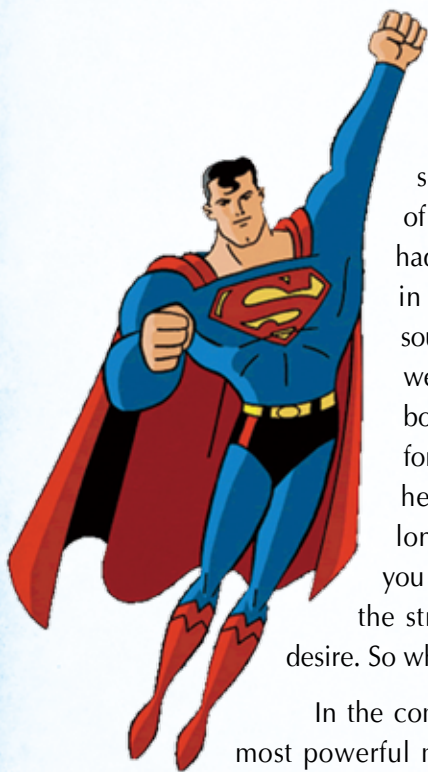


CHOI Wai Kam is an experienced English teacher. She enjoys reading, exercising and travelling.

Superman - my hero!

Vincent, CHOW Kin Cheung

I am a big fan of superheroes, but among all the big names, Superman is always my number one hero! He is unlike you and me, but in a sense, he is just like one of us.



Superman is an alien living among human. He looks like and wants to be one of us, but he is not. For a decade, he was not so sure about his origin or the sources of his powers. Lacking an identity, he had a strong desire for belongingness in the human world. Doesn't this sound familiar to you? Like Superman, we are also beings who want to have bonding with others. There is a desire for companionship deep down in our hearts. So when you find that you long for friendship and acceptance, you do not have to feel ashamed. Even the strongest man, Superman, has that desire. So why can't you?

In the comic world, Superman is likely the most powerful man, but he is not perfect. He is vulnerable to "Kryptonite". Why didn't the creator of the Superman figure design a perfect hero without any weaknesses? I guess the reason is that a perfect man is too unrealistic and he can't exist even in the fabricated world of comics! There are only good and powerful men but no perfect men. Weaknesses make you real and approachable.

In a world that values the latest trends and innovations, traditions definitely still have irreplaceable values. What Superman can bring to the world comes from what he has learned from the past among his own race. The past can give us a reference point to judge the present and anticipate the future. Obviously the past is not always right, but the past is an inspiring starting point a critical mind can use to analyze the present.

However, the past has values only if we are willing to learn from it, and likewise, history is meaningful only if there are people studying it. Superman learns from the mistakes that “Krytonians” made in the past. History can be a valuable lesson for everyone. You can learn from it and avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future. The lesson learnt does not only benefit you, but can also be extended to others and becomes a blessing to them. Sadly, Superman cannot save his own world. It was destroyed by the mistakes his people made in the past. He cannot undo what has been done. However, the sufferings he experienced had become a lesson which ensures that the same mistake will not be repeated in a different race! Will you be the blessing of others making good use of your past history?

Superman shows us that there is always a choice for us to make. When he came to the Earth, he was offered by the “consciousness” of his deceased father two choices. He could either use his power to rule the Earth, or use the same power to save humanity from the same mistake “Krytonians” made long time ago and guide humanity to a better tomorrow. The same power can be used in two different or even opposite ways. This shows that who you are is not determined by the power you possess, but by the choice you make about how to use it.

Flying is the power of Superman which I desire the most! Woo! You fly and float high up in the sky, forgetting all the earthly troubles! Isn't that the freedom which everyone longs for? Superman always hovers high up in the sky, listening to all the people's requests, in the

hope of locating where helps are needed. As the famous saying goes, power and freedom always come with responsibility, thus, the more power and the more freedom you have, the more responsibility you will have to shoulder! In a world where people overstress the importance of human rights and freedom, we no longer emphasize the responsibilities we have to take anymore. Superman is a warm reminder to us - a coin always has two sides. I guess you now understand why I am a big fan of Superman!

Vincent CHOW was raised in Hong Kong but has been living in Canada for over 20 years. He is an accountant working in the regulatory agency for the financial service sector. He is a Christian and enjoys reading. His favourite books are Wuthering Heights, The Thorn Birds, Le Grand Meaulnes and all of J.R.R. Tolkien's novels.

Snow White caught avian influenza

HSIEN Man Yin

The prettiest, kindest, and most well-known and loved princess in the world, Snow White, is down with avian influenza.

This was first reported by paparazzi and turned out to be true. Not long after the prince brought her to his palace, Snow White realized that she had that disease.

Snow White's fans definitely know that Snow White loves to play with animals, including birds. She sings and dances with them. Photos show that she is just too close to the birds. She is virtually kissing them. So it is hard for her not to suffer from avian influenza.



"Avian influenza is caused by infection with Type A virus. This virus turns up naturally among wild birds and can infect domestic poultry including chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, other birds and animal species." said Doctor Forrest, an experienced doctor.

Undoubtedly, Snow White is infected by the virus when she plays too often and gets too close with wild birds.

"I am very worried about Snow White," said the Prince. "I think so are Snow White's fans. I really hope that she will get well soon."

Snow White's fans are certainly worried about Snow White. They tagged Snow White on Fakebook and Instagram with comments like 'Speedy Recovery!' and 'Get well soon!!!'.

If you are a big fan of hers and you want to visit her, she is in the Dwarf Hospital, a hospital run by the seven dwarfs.

HSIEN Man Yin is a Year 8 student of an international school in Hong Kong. She likes reading, Chinese dancing and playing the violin. She hopes to work in the legal field in the future.

I can see

HSIEN Man Yin

Heavy clouds in the grey sky
seems to be falling on me
my ego drips dry
life sucks me up like a dried sea

Up and down and up and down
heavy stones bury me alive
in threat and sorrow I drown
sadness and grief, here I arrive

“Just try and look up
at the bright sky
just try one time, and up you fly”

So I glance up
at the grey sky
slowly the sun shines on my eyes

There I see the gap among the clouds,
where the sad clouds start to fade out
I can soar right out to the bright sky
float like a feather, freely I fly

There is more than just my world
I can see, now I can see
Life is full of hurdles
Like a seesaw, jerking around
Just so vulnerable
Every single thing goes down

“Just try and look up
at the bright sky
just try one time, and up you fly”

Now I glance up
no hesitation
for I know the sun shines upon me
There I see the gap among the clouds,
where the sad clouds start to fade out
I can soar right out to the bright sky
float like a feather, freely I fly
There is more than just my world
I can see, now I can see
Roses are red,
violets are blue,
see the world,
it's greater than any dream
Do you see the gap among the clouds,
where the sad clouds start to fade out?
you can soar right out to the bright sky
float like a feather, freely you fly
There is more than just our world
You can see, and I can see



Talent and friendship

HSIEN Pui Yin

Have you ever been left out when joining a new class in a new school year?

I experienced this at the start of this school year, my 4th year at school, when I felt being left out. That is because my friends from the past school year are now in separate classes. This year, there are only a few classmates from last year in my class.

From the first to the second week of Year 4, I had to admit that some of the boys did not have a good feeling about me. When I tried to talk to them, sometimes they just ignored me.



When it was recess, I could not find a friend who was willing to play with me. Luckily, I was brave enough to ask two classmates who looked kind and friendly. G.L. and K.L. were the first people willing to play with me in Year 4.

It wasn't long until I found a new friend, H.T. She was a friend who told me private things that probably not everyone will tell a friend.

This lasted for a long, long period of time in school. We also had a system called the "Golden time". This happens every Friday when we all get 30 minutes of free time to play board games or card games. At that time, boys still weren't so kind to me, except for a few magicians. D.H. and C.L. are good magicians in our class. I totally lost my mind when they introduced to me the first step of magic, The Spring.

When I went home, I searched The Spring online, and I found results of “Cardistry”. I decided to learn The Spring, and other cool cardistry moves.

One day I showed a performance to my classmates on my new hobby, and “talent”. After that day, all the boys were not mean to me anymore, and we even played whole-class tags every day. Also, boys and girls in our class started to communicate with each other.

Through this experience, I learnt that if we try and unlock our hidden talents, our originally dark and grey life can become bright and positive. Also, remember that everyone is loved, and we are never alone.

HSIEN Pui Yin is a Year 4 student of an international school in Hong Kong. She wrote this essay to share her experience of how not to be left out. She hopes this can help others to make more new friends.

A letter to my love

HSIEN Wing Keung

My dear CZ,

It has been eleven years since fate brought you and me together on a sunny day that summer. Endless reminiscences of romance between you and me had brought me back to the inside of the convenience store that very hot day in the year 2007.



The extreme heat lingeringly possessed me like an evil spirit, which was so obstinately irritating that it seemed like only an orthodox priest could cast it out. I had been sweating under the strong sunlight for long. Exhausted and uncomfortable as I felt, cold soft drinks tended to be the most immediate antidote to fulfill my burning desire to cool myself down.

As in no way would I be given hospitality in such a scenario inside a Seven-Eleven, I was, on my own, hesitating on making a perfect choice to satisfy my terrible thirst in front of some glass doors. You, dressed in black with a few eye-gladdening red stripes, unexpectedly popped up in my eye-sight, standing motionlessly in front of me with a cooling smile on your face. Pronto! You put a halt to the time of my universe.

"Should there really be 'love at first sight', this definitely is it!" I profoundly reckoned.

Face-to-face with me in stunning silence, your intimate coolness immediately reduced the over-heat of my body. At that particular

precious moment as I embraced you, I got you in me, for Cupid must have purposefully shot you and me with intangible arrows.

You turned my original life of solitude with a desperate shortage of taste into a sweet one, with a sugary-like companion as you, Coke Zero, my everlasting love.

Love,

WK

P.S. Coke Zero and Coke Zero Sugar have been sold in Hong Kong since March, 2007.

HSIEN Wing Keung is an English language teacher of a secondary school in Hong Kong and a big fan of Coca Cola, particularly Coke Zero Sugar. His hobby is going to movies with a Coca Cola in hand.

We need to put our students in someone else's shoes

Jenny LEUNG

In the school that I serve, we are having Term P for Project-based Learning(PBL) before summer vacation. This year, my panel and I have suggested to link a drama program to students PBL's projects. The program itself is not just a mere drama production. It involves a lot of in-depth discussion and research as well.

But I'm not sharing how good it is to join this program or whatsoever. I would like to share about an impressive learning task that we have done!

As the drama play is about relationships, disability, social networking and insecurity, I have arranged an interview with Mr. Billy Yau, a visually impaired passionate teacher, whom was introduced to me by Dr. Paul Sze in an English language teaching sharing occasion.



To prepare for the interview, I've asked my students to blindfold themselves or put themselves in wheelchair and complete some tasks in the campus. Even though it's just a one-hour game, students encountered problems and difficulties and they were shocked how much they didn't understand to be disabled. They reflected and came up with good interview questions that showed that they understood more about a disabled person.

In the interview, they were eager to ask questions, because those were the questions that were stuck in their head after their experience.

They could resonate a lot with Mr. Billy when Mr. Billy mentioned about his encounters. Throughout the process, I didn't force my students to sit down in groups with pens and papers and draw mind map to brainstorm for questions. I didn't ask them to just go on. They just experience. I simply asked them to write down how they felt and what question they would like to ask.

I believe I don't need to stress anymore how experiential learning can help students learn thoroughly. But most of the time, we neglect its power. We stress too much on delivering knowledge. We stress too much to do tasks that save time and allow you to finish your syllabus before exam. We expect students to answer questions and think of solutions based on the imagination in their heads. We expect them to brainstorm ideas out of nothing. This is not going to work. We just forget that we should put students in others' shoes in order to let them know how it is like to be in others' shoes.

Yes, it will take up some time for students to experience, to learn through the process. But we are the teachers. It's our job to manage the time and balance tasks right so their learning can be maximized. Yes, there are many limitations. We all face problems. But it shouldn't just be about our job. It's about students' learning. Isn't that what education is for?

Jenny LEUNG is an English teacher who keeps learning every day.

Joie de vivre

Lawrence LIAO

While traversing the night sky of Europe, I was also taking in the enchanting sight high up above. It was simply heavenly! The cold moon was accompanied by a host of glittering stars, which were like diamonds on black velvet of a cosmic scale. There was only gentle humming of engines in the background and the moments of tranquillity were occasionally punctuated by sparkling trails of shooting stars. Then from a distance, I could see the street lights of Paris slowly creeping towards me as they were trying to burst through a shallow layer of morning fog with brilliance that can only befit a metropolis!



Before long, I was touching down at one of the most romantic places on Earth. It had been quite a few years since I had last visited Paris. Many have

come in search of their dreams in this iconic city while others might never have quite found their rainbows' ends. To me, Paris would never lose its centuries-old charms. What's better than coming here with your loved one and sharing your joy while admiring the beauty of this great place! Lucky for me, my other half had managed to accompany me on this trip down memory lane.

It looked rather melancholy as we first stepped out of our hotel. A lingering mist and the morning chill awaited us. There were no whispers of early birds, nor warm glares of the rising sun. Champs-Élysées was paved with fallen leaves that had given the boulevard a tint of gold while the colossal Arc de Triomphe stood solemnly as testimony to France's heroic past. Without any set itinerary, we began our leisurely

ramble on this famous path and explored the city that had captured the hearts of many. Summer blooms had come and gone but the Jardin des Tuileries (Tuileries Garden) was still a great site for couples to walk tête-à-tête.

The Louvre Museum looked busy with the usual crowds. Perhaps many had come from afar to see that enchanting smile of Mona Lisa or simply playing sleuth to crack the Da Vinci Code. I began to get carried away while some age-old French melodies started playing in my mind.

Notre Dame's mystic Gothic facade with its unique gargoyles had evoked the imagination of many over the years. Nearby, the River Seine was serene as ever with the embankments dotted with struggling artists.

Whether one attempts to reach for the sky by scaling the height of the Eiffel Tower or tries to catch some stardust at the Café de Flore (<http://cafedeflore.fr/art/>), Paris has beautiful sites galore and has unarguably won its place in many people's hearts! Just as we were unwinding with a cup of coffee in hand, two phrases sprang to my mind: "joie de vivre" and "carpe diem"!

Lawrence LIAO, a native of Hong Kong, is an airline pilot whose career has spanned over three decades. An idyllic dreamer and an avid traveller since young, his backpacking ventures during his teens have metamorphosed into a lifetime adventure of exploring the world on a quest to experience humanity first hand. His wish is to continue with his wanderlust well into his golden years.

From Russia with love

Lawrence LIAO

It was a rather melancholy start of the day last Saturday when I first flew into Moscow, the heart of the Stalin State. While the glitters of the morning stars began to fade in the twilight glow of the northern sky, a thick layer of low cloud enshrouded the city below and hid the landscape with all its might. This only added to my curiosity that had long been aroused by the mystique associated with Russia.

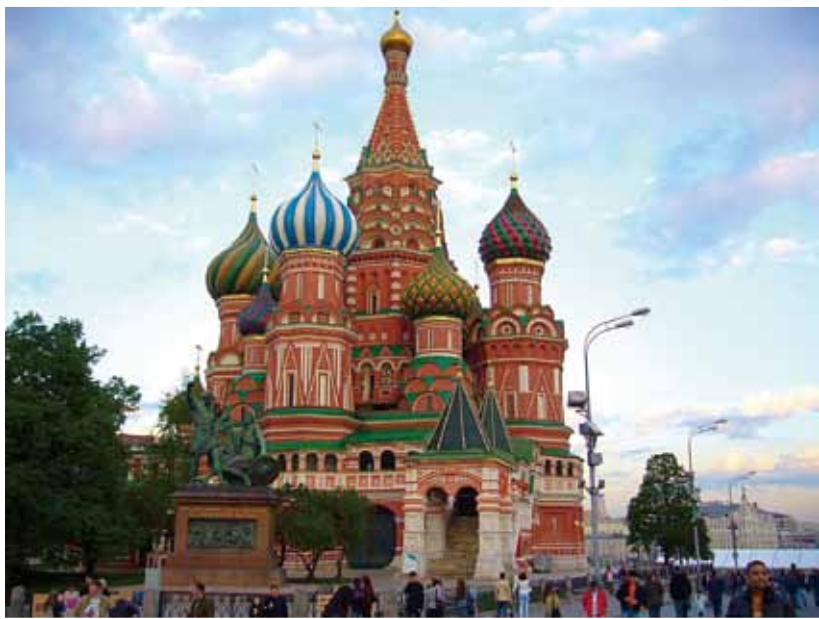
A quick nap upon check-in at my hotel had rejuvenated my weary body. I hastened to experience a normal day in a country that was once gripped in secrecy behind the iron curtain for decades. For the outside world, Russia was inextricably linked to incredible tales of espionage, drunken Russians with vodka or evil intents to conquer the world. What I saw in the following days had shown me that there was nothing further from the truth.

I first set out to visit the Red Square. While the cheers of “Glasnost” were all but gone, remnants of past glory were most evident. The opulent splendour of the Red Square was most impressive, to say the least. This vast cobbled expanse with the Kremlin and St. Basil’s Cathedral in its backdrop had witnessed Russia’s magnificent past and present. This awe-inspiring landmark would surely evoke one’s imagination of bygone soviet heroes and military maestros. Every statue and building that was masterly crafted to the most intricate details had all stood the passage of time and seemed to tell untold stories of love. What a monumental masterpiece! I lingered in the square for quite some time and then I promised myself that it would not be my last visit.

Many Russians might come across rather reserved but most were actually kind and helpful even to a visitor from most afar! Wide boulevards and numerous spectacular landmarks coupled with an incredibly efficient Metro system (Trains arrived at 20-second intervals!)

make Moscow one of the most visitor-friendly cities that I have ever seen. Visiting metro stations ornate with stained glass and chandeliers could well be an item on tourists' itinerary!

From Bohemian districts to luxurious promenades and Russian cuisines to Matryoshka Dolls, in Moscow, one would never run out of things that would capture your heart. My job as a professional globetrotter allows me to experience humanity first hand. I came away with a great sense of euphoria and if there is one thing that I have learned from this trip; in this global village that we call: Earth, we are all much more alike than we think. Спасибо (Thank you. Pronunciation: SpaSiba) Москва (Moscow) and до свидания (Good bye. Pronunciation: Do svidanya)



Idling afternoon

Lawrence LIAO

Back on terra firma, I am now enjoying a quiet afternoon in the tropics. A savoured moment to indulge myself with memories of idyllic trips and to rejuvenate my weary mind and soul!

In a flurry of flying activities, there is little time for my mind to catch up with my body. Before I realise it, I am already some thousands of miles away from the previous place!

While my foot-steps in the sand have vanished beneath the waves, all my traces are all but gone. Nevertheless, beautiful places often imprint my mind with indelible scenes. Such was the case when I travelled to Florence a few days ago.

The morning twilight had cast a somewhat magical backdrop for the spectacular landscape. Morning stars were still glittering like diamonds. The shallow fog that enshrouded the Tuscany Plains seemed reluctant to reveal its unparalleled beauty. When the autumn sun finally lifted the mystic veil, what I saw was most familiar. Indeed, this city that had defined Renaissance has not languished in the ravages of time. Its overwhelming atmosphere of culture and inspirations would instill into the mind of any philistine with a sense of refinement! I was a young backpacker when I first set foot in Florence some 20 years ago! Today, I would still stand in awe of its magnificent splendour. Its architecture is like jewels with the most intricate details imaginable. Every sight is a masterpiece of a great artist or scenery of a post-card. Its charms will surely imbue your mind with the utmost respect and appreciation of bygone artisans.

My re-visit had rekindled so much emotion. While I rejoiced in the sight of one of my most beloved cities, I could not help but sighed for the quick passage of time!

I had relished every moment of my "quick transit" in Florence. When I finally left for Rome that night, I came away with a great sense of euphoria. I hope it would not take another 20 years before I can re-discover this unforgettable city.



Morning call

Lawrence LIAO

As I held my coffee leaning against the railing of my balcony and gazing at the vast expanse of the Singapore Strait in front, some distant horns from ships faintly punctuated the morning calm while the gentle sea-breeze was still awakening my tired body with its gentle caress. That is my favourite moment of the day. The morning sun barely creeps above the horizon with rays that make the sea glitter like diamonds. Early birds awake with melodic tweets that would freshen any weary



soul. For some moments, time began to lose its reference as my mind started to drift back to my bygone childhood that really did not feel like a distant past. Images and laughs of old friends, and even scenes of my school years in England began to play out in my mind. Before I was completely lost in time and space in this morning escape,

the aroma of coffee started to permeate the air from the kitchen with beckoning that I could not resist. Time for another cup before indulging any further in this twilight nirvana! All I needed to wait for was another day for another spellbound experience!

Southern light

Lawrence LIAO

As the still cold midnight blue of the starry southern sky gradually lightened, a sleepy city slowly emerged against a backdrop, which was like a heavenly canvas tinted with a bright orange hue and glittering morning stars. The moon struggled to flaunt its fading brightness and the winter morning chill finally gave way to the warm glow of the rising sun. The sky suddenly turned into a celestial kaleidoscope that revealed a multitude of colours in all their brilliance. Ocean blue, golden yellow, crimson red, platinum white and then beautiful sky blue. Such was the welcoming scene that greeted me as I descended into the City of Johannesburg, South Africa in my Boeing 777.

A light winter breeze as I disembarked, somewhat rejuvenated my tired spirit and I totally forgot that I had just spent the last 11 hours flying. The ride from the airport to my hotel was interesting. There was no shortage of beautiful houses along well-maintained boulevards. In a distance were colourful houses on rolling hillsides, silhouetted against the clear sky, which reminded me of some charming Mediterranean landscapes. This seemingly perfect setting perhaps also belies some of the challenges that the city is facing. On closer look, I could see many elegant houses and well-manicured gardens fortified with high walls, barbed wires and metal grills! Some lost souls were just loitering aimlessly in search of their utopia.



Before long, my coach entered an area of utmost exuberance. My hotel, with its magnificent appearance stood defiant to the harsh reality of the "outside world". I could hardly fathom how the locals could live with such contrast. Well, maybe it was better for me to go straight to the realm of slumber land. Soon, I would be ready for a new day and soar to new heights towards Cape Town. Such is the life of a professional globe-trotter!

A captive of promise

Hana LIU

Orchidee still looks elegant at this age. Despite looking somewhat aloof and proud with her little narrow nose perching on an oval face and a mouth that comes with downward corners, she has a good heart and an unusually straight forward mind. It's not that she's unintelligent, in fact, it's quite the opposite. She is a business consultant after all and speaks several languages as well as Chinese dialects. It's rather that emotionally though, she's shy and old-school. She's also too trusting.



Once you are a friend or family, she takes everything she has been told as the truth. Even her daughter Swan knows better.

Swan doesn't really resemble her mother; her very tall and fine nose however, does. What makes friends say she looks like her mother is the air that she carries with her, especially when she is still or eating with her chopsticks.

These days, Orchidee is struggling. Beneath her calm exterior

is a tornado mind of heartbreak and turmoil. The emotional roller-coaster that her son Ralph has lately been subjecting her to, is giving her sleepless nights. She ponders over the reasons why Ralph chooses to victimize her when after all, she wasn't the parent who deserted the family. It's been 6 years but memories of the kids' dad's abrupt announcement of departure still haunt her, day and night.

She bathes in her sorrow, it has become a daily ritual; with the warm Mr. Bath strengthening and crushing her at the same time. She sinks her head in, the heat soothes her mind like the kind whispers of her concerned friends. The swing of the water caresses her very bruised soul. Before long though, she finds herself gasping for air; out is her lovely little head from the gallant embrace. And every time she rises from the water, her shivering shoulders inform her of what's out there. She knows at that point, she's once again beaten. Like all her loved ones who promised affection, loyalty and more, the Mr. Bath ends up cold and unkind and before long ... gone, leaving little trace of an encounter, save for the increasing number of strands of her hair lying there softly, listlessly, as if to tell Orchidee that who you love has cost you your youth, your beauty, your pride.

On the altar she knelt, delivering the wedding vows that to this day she remembers oh so well. Till death do us part! A promise...ah yes...and she...is the captive of this sugary promise.

Hana LIU is a veteran Human Resources Consultant now based in Singapore. She was born, raised and educated in Hong Kong.

The enlightenment of watching dramas and films

SHUM Siu Ying

Watching TV dramas and movies is one of my favourite hobbies. You might not understand but I am so fond of it that I turn into a 'couch potato' every night. Yeah, I know. I'm quite a person with 'ambiversion', i.e., dual personality. I like sports, especially 'extreme sports' such as skating (when I was young) and skiing (when I earned enough money to travel overseas), and then snowboarding (when I want to take on more challenges). Recently, I've been thinking about learning skateboarding, too. Going out to do exercise or sports in the daytime and getting hooked to watching TV at night is my 'art of life' during holidays.



To me, what watching dramas and films offers is a combination of recreation, knowledge and culture, and it serves the function of ethnic exchange, decompression tool and philosophy lesson. I'm not exaggerating. Watching

dramas and films is both a miraculous cure for many problems and a series of encyclopedias in different languages.

Recreation is the activities that everybody needs to keep his/her life balanced and healthy. For me, after being buried by a pile of documents on the work desk for a whole day, the best pastime during dinner time is to watch a good film or drama. Feasting myself with a mouthwatering dish, lying comfortably on the sofa and seeing a box-office-record breaking movie is no doubt the best way of 'recharging my battery' once a day so as to keep me both physically and mentally healthy.

Another advantage of seeing films and dramas is ‘knowledge absorption’ as some of them are very informative and/or educational. One film that impressed me a lot with cultural difference is ‘Bend It Like Beckham’. In the film, an 18-year-old Indian girl, who has a talent for playing soccer, is asked to hang up her football boots by her parents owing to Indian customs. However, she acts according to her own will regardless of the negative opinions of others and strives for achieving her goal. As it turns out, she is admitted into one of the best soccer teams in the United Kingdom.

Another film that impressed me much is ‘The Ring’. Though I had already read the fiction before I saw the film, I still found it fascinating because it took me to ‘another world’. I don’t have to get on a plane and spend a fortune before I can see all those magnificent mountains and rivers. The bird’s-eye view photos of the beautiful landscapes taken by drones create stunning visual effects that take the audience’s breath away.

Apart from widening our horizons and broadening our mind, seeing films or dramas can teach us life principles. I recall a dialogue in a Japanese drama ‘Misu Pairotto’ (Miss Pilot), in which a mechanic in the aircraft maintenance department said, “Each plane is made of millions of parts, of which most are tiny but essential.”. That is to say, each and every one of us can play an important role in the society and thus we should never underestimate the value of our own existence. Sometimes, conversations and dialogues in films and dramas are very inspiring and can shed some light on our lives. So, in my own opinion, it is a panacea for all ills and hence, in the coming weekend, I’m going to get stuck in the sofa as usual and be a ‘couch potato’ again!

SHUM Siu Ying is the principal of a local secondary school. She is very keen to promote learning English inside and outside of the classroom.

My first Beijing visit

SY Chun Chun

Born and brought up in Hong Kong, with travel experiences to various Western countries, I recently made a trip to Beijing, which was also my first visit to the mainland. When the plane was approaching the city in the late evening, part of the outline of the city was clearly distinguished by the lights, which has already implicated that the city is busy, prosperous and full of life.



I eagerly got off the plane and walked into the airport that is so big that I could not see the end of the walkway. Facilities are all modern. I went through the customs easily, since the signage was very clear. It was a pleasant season to be in Beijing with comfortable temperature and

the gentle wind. A taxi took me to a gorgeous hotel downtown where people were still enjoying the cosmopolitan night life.

The following day, I visited the Imperial Palace where many kings once lived. The tour guide briefed me the history. The Palace with many rooms was built long ago. Official functions such as celebrations and ceremonies were held in the front part of the Palace. Emperors and royal members lived in the middle section with the females who were the queens, concubines or maids in the back. Nearly everything in the Palace has a story. I have learned from the visit that China is rich in history with fascinating stories. The Imperial Palace is but a small part of the Chinese history.

Next, I visited the Great Wall which extends from one hill to another, with a beacon tower on each hill top. It is such a great work to block the invaders. Built thousands of years ago, it was more than 10000 kilometres long in the past, and is still more than 8000 kilometres at present. How much manpower had been resourced for the building remains unknown. I am sure that our ancestors must have worked very hard to construct such a piece of great work in the world. I wonder how many people were once stationed on the Great Wall to secure the territory, how they lived and how they looked like in the past. How many more people will visit this wonder of the world in the future?

On the plane back to Hong Kong, I was still thinking about the history of China, the prosperous dynasties as well as the weak times in the late Qing Dynasty when our country was devastated by invaders. Luckily, we are now on the way to revival, and our country will soon stand as one of the most powerful and prosperous nations in the world again. I am proud to be a Chinese, in particular as I am living in such a great reviving time of Chinese civilization. Finally, the plane landed at Hong Kong airport. Leaving the history dreams behind, I was anxious for a cup of Hong Kong milk tea and local newspapers. Even more fortunate is that I live in Hong Kong, one of the best places in the world. I love Hong Kong, as much as I love China.

SY Chun Chun is a secondary school English teacher. She enjoys teaching and believes that learning is never-ending since knowledge is endless.

Alone in the darkness

Anthony TO

Night

With your powerful weapon - Loneliness
You almost conquer every living soul
You freeze up the sizzling heart
You engulf the warmest enthusiasm
You dissolve the formidable toughness

But you never defeat me
Because I have an unbeatable companion - Dignity

With him I'll never fear
With him I'll never be alone
With him I'll never lose

I'll enjoy my own solitude
I'll be what I'm supposed to be

Hey, see me in the eye

I'll survive the endless darkness
I'll outlive the beamless emptiness
I'll surpass the timeless hopelessness

And I'll surely grow and be flourish in the dawn



Anthony TO already reached the year of Knowing the Destination, that is what age 50 means to Chinese. Having served as a law enforcement agent for over 30 years, he will soon retire. He takes retirement as only the end of his career but not the end of everything. Ten years ago, he started taking two activities as his life-time leisure, one is hiking and the other is photography. Every now and then, he incorporates the two into one, that is, hiking while taking photographs although it is very hard to achieve both considering the heavy equipment as well as the time needed in shooting the right photographs. There is no limit to hiking in terms of geographic destinations as well as landscape photography. He has decided to visit all the beautiful places of Hong Kong and share the photos with others. To him, age is not so much an obstacle but a stepping stone to a new life

Birth and death of Yan Yan

Anthony TO

Time flies. It has been ten years since my lovely puppy passed away. Born in 1992 through caesarean operation and watched by me, she was Yan Yan, one of my five dogs. All along she was a healthy, funny and energetic puppy and was the apple of my eye.

Two years later, when my daughter arrived, I was pushed by the elderly family members to abandon all the dogs in order to have a more hygienic environment for my baby. I ignored the suggestion and insisted to keep my dogs as members of my family.



Years passed and aging struck! Yan Yan became infirm, lost her teeth, had difficulty in swallowing, contracted cataract and suffered from abnormal heart beat. Finally, I had to make an uneasy decision. I brought

her to SPCA for euthanasia. Seeing her being tortured by diseases, I rather put her away. At the clinic, she panicked over the vet and the circumstances. I embraced her to go through the horrible process. She became motionless, so did my heart. I could not stand crying out loud until my last drop of strength ran out.

Having witnessed her birth and death, I was struck hard by agony.

“Thank you God for giving me such a lovely dog who accompanied me for 17 happy years. Now I am sending her back to you. Please let her rest in peace beside you.”

A Sea adventure

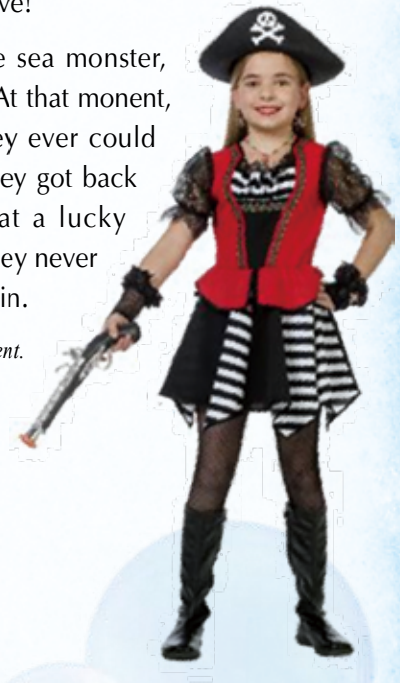
Hayley WONG

100 years ago, the pirate family from the Pirate Land was very famous. The pirate family set off to an adventure to the scariest place in the world, to the middle of the sea! You may think. 'It's not so scary!' But there's a giant sea monster living there! And now, the pirate family is ready for adventure!

After an hour, they arrived at the middle of the sea. They couldn't see the sea monster, but they could hear its snoring. 'I guess the sea monster is sleeping!' The pirate's daughter Lucy said in a deep voice. But suddenly, the sea monster had woken up! It spotted them and started chasing them. The wise girl Lucy thought of a great idea. She said to her father, 'Let me drive!'

Lucy drove the ship around the sea monster, and soon, the sea monster got dizzy. At that moment, the pirate family drove as fast as they ever could to escape from the monster. When they got back to Pirate Land, they all said, 'What a lucky adventure!' But after this adventure, they never went back to the middle of the sea again.

Hayley WONG is a local primary four student.



Thanksgiving

Sandra WONG

Recently, I had a dinner with Pauline Chow, the founder of *Babbling*. We share a lot of stuff in our teenage and grown up days. Thanks for Pauline's listening ears that she has given me many encouraging words and advice. It keeps me up and I will work hard too.



Why is this piece of work called 'Thanksgiving'? I want to thank everyone who brought me to this world and came across in my life. First, thanks to my beloved mum and dad. They gave me and my younger brother a good shelter even though it was messy and dark

outside our home. Second, thanks to all my teachers and colleagues who gave me their hands in need. I got the insight of life from them too. Thanks to all my friends and relatives who counseled me or accompanied me when I was in doubt, or unhappy.

Finally, thanks to all the doctors and nurses who provided appropriate treatments when I was sick. All in all, thank you God who prepared me to become strong and independent. Although I went through a lot of obstacles and difficulties in my first half life, I kept moving! This is the best time of my life, I wish I could use my past experience to help those in need and our new generations!

Sandra Wong graduated with a Distinction Degree of BA in English as a Foreign Language from Stirling University in 1999. When she returned to Hong Kong the same year, she started her teaching career and finished her PGDE trainings in English, Music and Special Educational Needs in a decade. She is a humourous but strict English Teacher.

The background is a soft purple gradient with numerous translucent, iridescent bubbles of various sizes floating throughout. The bubbles have a rainbow-like sheen and are scattered across the entire frame.

Pauline Babbling

Dried up!

I have not been writing for over a year! Not so long ago, I could ramble on and on across the pages if I did not restrain myself. My eyes were open and so were my ears. Ideas were abundant and fingers agile though I cannot type properly. An essay a day was not a problem back then. And every time when I finished an article, I was exhilarated.

But in recent months, I have not seen or heard anything interesting. Even when on some rare occasions, I do spot or eavesdrop something that mildly amuses me, I am in no mood to write about it! What's happening? I cannot just give up this hobby tenderly nurtured since childhood. My numb senses have to be reinvigorated! How? By charging them with some strong currents – reading!

I have not been reading much. I can always excuse myself by saying that I have been too tied up with my work! But if I have time for napping, travelling, watching television and fine dining, then I can have time for reading! This is what I have decided to do – cutting the couch potato time for reading! I have made use of the book coupons I had

been presented with to buy several best sellers, in both Chinese and English. They are now standing neatly on the shelves demanding to be read! Yes, I will.



Water lilies

There is a star-shaped pond in the school front court. Though small, the pond is the most elegant attraction of the campus and students' most popular hangout.

Every now and then, one or two water lilies in different colours ranging from salmon pink to lavender purple would blossom in solitude at different corners of the pond. They close as the sun sets. We joke that these flowers work shorter hours than we do.

One morning as I stepped in the campus, Uncle Hon the gardener, with a broad smile on his face, pointed to one water lily and asked me to have my phone camera ready. There it was – *bingdi* lily or “a lily with two corollas” that should actually bloom into two flowers! Needless to say, this flower became the campus talk for a couple of days.



I could have just walked past this rare sight had I not been kindly directed by Uncle Hon to appreciate it. That is us – we take our neighbourhood and the people around us for granted with little attention and rare appreciation. We do not see beauty in our city but travel far for exotic views. We are numb to the loving care of our family but keep chasing for fatal attractions. Since that day, every morning when I arrive at school, I do not just glance at the lilies but instead circle round the pond to savour the fragrance and to take a good look at the delicate flowers and waxy leaves!

Gym or park

I have a free pass to all the 23 branches of a leading chain fitness centre. That means I should have no excuse not to maintain my exercise routine. Well, I do have one good reason - I prefer jogging in the park and around the neighborhood of where I live to working out in the gymnasium.

Not that I have never visited the gyms. I did make an effort to familiarize myself with those work-out machines like the treadmill, the sky walker, the exercise bike, the vertical climber, the rowing machine etc. They all come with state-of-the art consoles complete with information on my heart rate, my speed, mileage covered and of course, the calories burnt.

To tell the truth, I have never enjoyed any of these visits to the gymnasiums. I don't like the pungent smell of sweat, the deafening music, the stamping of feet on treadmills, the dazzling big television screens and in fact, the whole combat vibes of a boot camp. After all, I am not preparing for any major sporting events. I just want some physical activities for my aging body. Exercising to me has to be pleasurable and relaxing but it simply isn't like that in a gymnasium.

I know, I can talk myself into liking the gym. I can exercise there rain or shine undeterred by weather. I can have whole-body training. I can enjoy various television programmes. Then there are shower and drinking facilities.

But all these can hardly be compared to my jogging in the park. First of all, the air is fresh. When accentuated by the fragrance of the mock lime and the gardenia, it virtually puts me in paradise. If I go in the late afternoon, I can still savour the sun. In the evening, then I can have fun watching the lunar phases with the tune and the lyrics of Teresa Teng's "The Moon Represents My Heart" vividly playing in my mind.

As I jog, I meet real people so unlike the combatants in the gym – people walking their dogs though sadly not always the masters but the domestic helpers, couples chatting as they keep in pace with each other, families playing basketball in the nearby court, a man flexing his muscles under the tree, a kind-hearted lady attending to the stray cats or some elderly ladies sitting on the benches catching their breath. We might exchange a few words of greeting or just smile as we pass by one another.

So with my favourite tunes playing and my eyes so richly feasted, I am actually enjoying the jogging as I sweat and pant! How can I be persuaded to give up all these for the gym?



Sunday morning walks

Sunday is my day for walking and public transport rather than driving. At about 8 in the morning, I walk down Ede Road to Festival Walk shopping mall, go up several floors to the food court to have my breakfast and then walk back to Kowloon Tong Station for the train to Hung Hom. Instead of changing to West Rail Line at Hung Hom, I get off there and walk to Tsim Sha Tsui.

Walks on Sunday mornings are really relaxing. There is not much traffic nor are there many pedestrians. Cornwall Road, for example, can actually be vacant with neither cars nor people. And when I arrive at the footbridge overlooking the Cross-Harbour Tunnel, I would stop and sometimes even snap a shot of all those lazy-looking traffic lanes. One to two hours later, these would be filled with all kinds of vehicles carrying anxious drivers and passengers. I can also detour to



the waterfront and walk along the promenade. The much down-sized Victoria Harbour is still stunning despite the maze of monstrous-looking mega buildings clustering the waterfront. One thought always comes to my mind as I stand there – we Hongkongers are miracle-workers. With

our hands and those of generations before us, we have built this safe, clean and prosperous city we call home.

The footbridge brings me to the fountain in Urban Council Centenary Garden in Tsim Sha Tsui. I love fountains as the water columns transform the place into a fairyland. Sometimes, I would tip-toe closer to feel the mist. I become childish and girly! Well, there are not any on-lookers. The street-cleaners are too busy with their work as to pay any attention to me.

After crossing Chatham Road South, I arrive at Granville Road, one of the popular streets to tourists. But it is too early for shopping sprees. Shops except for some local restaurants offering breakfast are not yet open. A big garbage truck is parked near the restaurants with cleaners busily removing bags and bags of rubbish from the door fronts and loading them to the truck. At the turn of the street, the newspaper vendor is doing the last bit of tidying up.

By then I would be all sweaty and hyper with contentment for having exercised for about 30 minutes. I arrive at Carnarvon Road and only minutes away from my weekly 4-hour beauty session.

A leisurely afternoon

I don't always see my son's family. In the first place, we don't live in the same neighbourhood. And when I am less occupied during the weekend, Hayley, my grand-daughter is busy. As to the long holidays, either Hayley has to prepare for examinations or the family has travel plans.

I proposed weeks ahead for a ride in the New Territories. Elly, my daughter-in-law came up with the idea of going to Lake Egret Nature Park and the Wishing Tree in Taiipo. With destinations decided, we



waited for the right Sunday.

Came October 9 with mild sun and gentle breeze, I drove to pick up the family at Middle Road, Tsimshatsui. They were punctual. Hayley was disappointed to find out that she was not sitting in the front with me. Instead Vincent my son took the seat. I had to rely on the Google map for directions and so he functioned as the co-pilot! It worked. We

arrived at Lake Egret Nature Park in about 30 minutes.

We dined at the restaurant which was almost full. Then we had a tour of the place as this was the first visit for us all. Next came the feeding time and finally the boat ride.

Hayley enjoyed herself very much paying \$10 for a bunch of grass to feed the anxiously awaiting goats. She also pedalled ferociously in the boat. She was the first to spot the egrets, one perching by itself on the rock in the centre of the man-made lake and another flock of four resting on the branches of the trees.

The place, though not really expansive, is a popular venue for corporate training sessions and family activities including birthday, wedding and barbecue parties. Here is a vivid example of what makes Hong Kong – innovation and entrepreneurship!

We left with Hayley nagging why the DIY classes were closed for the day. The next stop was the Wishing Tree in Lam Tsuen!

The Wishing Tree

The next stop of the leisurely afternoon with my son's family was the Wishing Tree at Lam Tsuen, Taipo.

This particular banyan tree is famous because of a colourful local Chinese New Year tradition-throwing *Bao Die* literally meaning "precious plate" to the tree to get it successfully hung up on the branches for wishes to come true. *Bao Die* includes an orange tied with a yellow paper on which the name and wishes of the worshipper are written.



However, as years went by, the tree gradually gave way to the heavy load of *Bao Die* and on Feb 12, 2005, the fourth day of the Chinese New Year, one of the branches snapped injuring an elderly man and a young boy. The tree was subsequently diagnosed as having been infected and had to be left to heal. The tradition of throwing "*Bao*

Die” was soon banned. Months later, a fake plastic 25-foot small-leaved banyan tree was erected for worshippers to carry on the tradition. This time, even the oranges thrown are also plastic.

Hayley, my grand-daughter said that the original tree standing there near the narrow entrance with its branches supported by various structures looked “extremely sad”. I had to agree. It did resemble an elderly celebrity lady from the last century wearing heavy cosmetics making her appearance on crutches. Instead, the plastic tree with its luxuriant foliage and the many red “*Bao Die*” right in the centre of the Lam Tsuen Wishing Tree Square is one young athlete flexing his muscles before a game!

We had a tour of the square including the temple and the award-winning washrooms. We also enjoyed the local cuisines of the sweet bean curd and the tea cake.

That is how Vincent, my son and wife spend their weekends – going places with Hayley. The difference this Sunday was with me tagging along as the chauffeur.

It was yesteryears once more!

I must be one of the happiest teachers in town! In March alone, I was re-connected with two former students, Tina and Lawrence. The stories of re-connections are quite dramatic. I feel so flattered that I can't help sharing my pride and joy.

On March 5, I was invited by HKKKWA Sung Fong Chung Primary School and Bowie Anglo-Chinese Kindergarten in Taipo to give a talk on how parents can support their children in learning English. That topic has been quite welcomed by parents of kindergartens and primary schools. In the past years, I have delivered this talk quite a few times with school hall at full capacity each time. I keep updating the content though the framework remains the same – parents are to encourage and support not to teach and that they should respect school efforts!

Tina has her two sons studying at Bowie Anglo-Chinese Kindergarten. The audience was adorable responding most appropriately and raising thought-provoking questions. At the end of the one-hour talk, as I was leaving the hall, a young lady approached me and spoke to me awkwardly. She told me that I was her English Language teacher and that she herself is also an English Language teacher of a primary school in Kowloon Tong. She acted as though she had just met her superstar idol. We chatted as she walked me to the bus stop. She even boarded the bus though she lives next door to the school. Tina reminiscenced all the loving memories emphasizing that it was my strict demand of grammatical accuracy that led to her taking up teaching as a career. She was so full of compliments of me that I almost blushed. I invited her to join the 10th Anniversary Ceremony of the Hong Kong Women Teachers' Organization.

On March 23, I received an email message from a former student, Lawrence. He is now a senior training Captain of Singapore Airlines. He and his classmates are trying to organize a reunion event. So he

searched for his teachers and found my blog entries. In his first message, Lawrence wrote fondly "You would be pleased to know that many of the students that you had nurtured have achieved great accolades in their respective fields today." He repeated a number of times that it was because of me he has a strong foundation in English. We have been in correspondence for a week now by both email and WhatsApp messaging. He even sent me stunning photos of halo and lightening as seen from the cockpit. I have promised to attend their gathering to be held in July.

What more can a teacher ask for? I am blessed!



More reunions

"I so wanted to touch your bang then," said Lily.

"I am sorry, Lily. I would love to let you but it's already gone!" I said apologetically.

It was the second gathering of the 1981 graduates in nine months. There were 22 of them and two teachers including me, their revered English Language teacher. Though those attending the two events were not all the same, the fondness was abundant in both times.



These students are now in their 50s but once they started talking about the classroom days, they were teens once again. They happily reported to me that they are all successful in their own fields and that they hold their alma mater, Wellington College, a private school closed down in 2001, most dearly. They keep

telling me they owe much to their teachers who were all very strict.

Then I was in my late twenties, a trained teacher with only matriculation or passing the Advanced Level Examination as academic qualification. I was teaching around 60 periods per week with over 50 students in a class. But in their recounts, I knew I was serious with my duties and they loved me for that.

That makes me so proud. What matters most in a teacher is not just the credential but the heart that is anchored in the welfare of the students.

Guilty as charged

Call me a foodie or a gourmand or whatever. I love food and the satisfaction it brings to my taste buds and stomach but more importantly to my spirit. A good meal paired with the right wine in good company is heaven on earth.

Food does not always have to be expensive or exotic but must be made from fresh raw materials, simply seasoned and served at the right temperature. Presentation is important as the eyes are also feasted. But it shouldn't be overdone. I hate to think of all the fingers going over the food to have it elaborately arranged into a peacock or a panda. As to wine, I am not a sommelier but can tell good wines from the bad. One glass or at most two are all that I can and will consume even among close friends. And such relaxing evenings are not too frequent, hopefully monthly.



Companionship is of paramount importance for a truly enjoyable meal. Bills are usually split but the birthday girl will be treated. So even though there can be one who does not fancy oysters, another can't stand lamb, each pays the same. There shouldn't be finger-pointing in restaurant choice. The principle is "if it is good, there can be the second visit or else it will be one-off".

Whenever I dine out, I refrain from any calculation or consideration of calories, nutritional value, health risks etc. and just let go. But underneath there is always a twinge of guilt of what I am doing to my health. I usually "punish" myself to have a simple salad the next day to keep the balance. I love fruits and never drink coke or those cartons of sugary water in all kinds of pretentious names.

Once in a blue moon, I cook. I also love watching cooking programmes and restaurant reviews. So before my teeth yield or my health deteriorates, I will keep this love of mine.

Twelve meals

It has never happened before – I have been treated to twelve meals in celebration of my birthday! These twelve parties are my family members, former colleagues and friends, the good people who have their paths crossed with mine at different times of my life journey! We savoured tender Angus beef, exquisite Chinese seafood dishes, exotic Thai food and dainty Japanese delicacies on top of the usual dinner buffets.



I am not here to write a food review but to share the joy of being so treasured by friends. I can expect family members to celebrate my birthday but not friends especially when these are young people who were my former students and colleagues – people to whom I should be of no relevance! And yet, five of these parties went to great extent to ensure that I would enjoy the meals they had arranged.

One of these good people was my secretary, a sweet young lady. She planned ahead of time. Via Groupon, she bought an expensive Cantonese meal for two complete with abalone, sea-cucumber, swallow bird's nest etc. There was so much to eat that we had to stall.

Then another friend had dinner with me right after returning to

work from a 5-day trip. She even brought a bottle of red wine to pair with the Angus beef. She was so thoughtful! It was only when the waitress gently reminded us that it was time for the last order did we realize we had been talking for three hours!

Two parties treated me to two different high-end Cantonese restaurants. To name one dish – the crispy Peking Duck perfectly matched with full-bodied red wine. The fine-dining was further extended by a round of drinks at the bar! We four ladies vowed that we have to be good to ourselves!

Another meal was in a restaurant with the Ferris wheel right behind us. The two ladies, my former colleagues, joked that they wouldn't have thought of this restaurant had it not been the occasion of my birthday. At the end of the meal, we were pleasantly surprised when the captain presented us the steamed Chinese birthday buns!

Then there was the Japanese meal with three former students now in their thirties. One of them is getting married next month and the conversation was, of course, surrounding her romance, the lucky groom and the wedding arrangement. We were all so happy for her as she was the last one of the three to be married.

I am loved. I am cherished. I am lucky!

Private kitchen

Last Saturday evening, we four ladies were out for fine dining as we try to do at least once in a month.

The restaurant is one of those private kitchens that have mushroomed in industrial buildings in Kwun Tong. My friend scouted it in one of the popular dining apps and made reservation the day before. Unlike other private kitchens that keep patrons in suspense of what they will be served, we were given the menu which could be changed

according to our preferences. We did ask for the risotto with foie-gras and eel be changed to prawn.



The place was not fancy and could even be described as a bit untidy with the guitar tucked behind the door and the tables, three of them, pushed to one side of the small room. There were some classic posters on the wall. Our table was the only one properly laid with glasses and plates. We were the only guests.

To serve us, there were the chef, a cool guy who never uttered a word in our two-hour stay and the chatterbox waiter who commented on almost all our conversation topics. A bit annoying I must say!

For HK\$500 per head, we enjoyed a five-course meal including pan-fried scallop with mango salsa as the starter followed by mushroom soup with black truffle, risotto with prawn, smoked A4 Wagyu and

baked banana cheese pizza as dessert. To complement all these, there was a bottle of Semillon Sauvignon Blanc.

The meal was good value for money because the ingredients were all fresh and the chef though looking quite young had all the dishes delicately flavoured, carefully done and presented to us right away. Only the dessert was a disaster. We even began to wonder how this place was able to survive. The waiter who had been overly attentive showed us the lunch menu saying that the place could be full-house during lunch time on week days because prices are much lowered. As to the evenings, like other such dens, they only open when there is booking in advance.

It was an enjoyable dining experience worth re-visiting. I would surely recommend it to other foodies. Such eateries are often dreams come true for young adults and they rely on word of mouth. I shall do my part as a show of support for small businesses.

The Senior Citizen Card saga

Rita treated me to a beef *hodai* (all-you-can-eat) in Tsimshatsui as an early celebration of Mother's Day. This was so sweet of her!

We arrived at 7 and were told that we had two hours to enjoy the food. So we started ticking off our favourites from quite a number of colourful forms. There was broad variety ranging from salad to seafood and of course, all kinds of meat. Drinks were also included.



We had lots of fun barbecuing the meats, burning some and chewing over others. It was good value for money. Then at about 8:15, it was time for the last order. We had some sweet potatoes as desserts.

The whole evening was rather uneventful. We had our usual laughs and selfies. Customers were not that many.

We asked for the bill at about 8:45 stating that the charges would be for one adult and one senior citizen. The waiter, with the broadest smile, asked for my Senior Citizen Card. I showed it but he insisted to have it taken to the cashier. And I gave it to him obediently.

A few minutes later came another waiter with the bill and my card. He said to me that since we did not clarify our status when we were seated at 7, I would not be entitled to pay the senior citizen charge which was about 60% of that of one adult. I rebutted that if that was the policy, then they would have to state it on the phone when the reservation was made or when we were seated. Our years of experience tell us that this claim is always made when the bill is asked for.

The waiter explained that we were ourselves to blame, I was irritated and threatened that I would post this mal-practice online. Then he retreated pleading that he would lose his job if I were to do that. Rita, not wanting to spoil the fun of the evening, asked me to let him off. I stood firm. The waiter begged that he would pay the difference in cash to me because the company has this policy and he should bear the blame for not asking me when seating us in the first place.

Why should I accept that? Redemption? Personal favour? I did not even know him!

In the end, Rita paid for two adults and I am writing here instead of posting this on popular dining websites!



What to do in 12 hours?

I will be flying to London tomorrow midnight. It's going to be a 12-hour flight.

It should not be pleasant - confined to a small space flanked by strangers. In recent trips, I have found passenger seats getting narrower. Or maybe I have grown bigger! The first 5 hours can be bearable. I can flip through the Shopping Catalogue or choose a movie or two to watch.

Soon, the pain creeps in. My neck, shoulders and legs cramp. Time to get up! I pluck up enough courage to do the hateful task of waking up a sound asleep neighbour and stand up to get out from my window seat. Sometimes, I wonder whether it is worth all the trouble when after

all the manoeuvring, there is only that short corridor to stretch out in. I have to be most gentle in my moves to make sure that my hands would not land on somebody's face.



Toilet breaks are not pleasant either. The washroom is so small that I have to hold my breath and tuck my tummy in to get the door locked. And worst of all, it is not always clean.

Then comes meal time. For Economy Class passengers like me, it takes a lot of balancing skills and focus to finish the task. Once a tour guide said that we should move our arms forward and backward like a grasshopper and definitely not sideways. If we want to spread out freely like a bat, then we have to pay for the expensive Business Class or First Class. Poor me, I have always been the grasshopper!

Well, when it is into the 8th or 9th hour, I can actually see my skin crumple with lines appearing all over my face and hands. My eyes might be shut but I am not asleep despite all the fatigue. I put up my hand and ask for water which comes in a tiny cup! Another movie! But my head is so heavy, the screen so small, the sound so blurred that I can hardly follow the storyline.

Usually at the time of the final two hours, I doze off only to be harshly woken up with lights glaring. I am there – end of the ordeal! I have survived!

Beautiful people

They took such attentive care of me - Peter and Susan, John and Jane that I will remain forever grateful. I was invited to stay in Peter's beautiful garden home in Sandbach for two nights and then together we stayed in John's 3-acre manor house in Cumbria, the Lake District.

Peter and John were respectively the Head Teacher and Deputy Head Teacher of Sandbach School, Cheshire, England. They have both retired from their posts with Peter still flying around reviewing schools in various countries while John is busy working on his house.



These couples are very endearing with the wives fully supporting their husbands in all their endeavours.

Susan was a nurse but she took early retirement when Peter retired and started his African visits. The couple have stayed in countries like Kenya and Saudi Arabia. Susan has to take care of Peter in an alien land so different from the settled life at home in Cheshire.

John was the brain behind the highly acclaimed Sandbach School Theatre. Upon his retirement, he decided to start a new life away from the crowds. The couple purchased the stately manor house which comes with the extensive woods. John actually painted the eight rooms, walls and ceilings. The live fire warming us during those chilly spring mornings was made with the logs chopped by John who is now the lumberman!

This tour was so special with no "must-see places" or "must-buy things" checklists to tick off but strolls in the vales and terraces, drinks by the fireplace, chats over bar foods of fried fish and sausages and playtime with Max, the most welcoming giant terrier.

Booth talk

She virtually collapsed right in front of me burying her face in the seat and murmuring that she would be leaving while apologizing at the same time.

We used to work for the same school and have been friends for three decades. We meet every now and then for festive celebrations or simply to catch up. It was Saturday afternoon. We met for lunch. We were comfortably seated in the booth enjoying some very exquisite cuisines.

It was a simple “How are you? Are you sleeping well” that sent her to tears with face twisted. I was not prepared for this and couldn’t respond. She was one scene of desperation. I was telling myself that if she really stood up to leave, I would have to hold her in my arms. How could I let her leave by herself?

I had never seen her like this until then but that was her true self and her real state of mind! All along, she had appeared to be calm and composed though with a melancholy touch. She must have been masking! How dumb of me not to have detected!

I know she has been bullied at work by unfounded vicious gossips but I have no idea she is in such pain. I thought that her sleeplessness was once in a blue moon but in fact, it has turned habitual.

She did calm down but her parting words saddened me. “I better hide myself!”



Readiness

Every Sunday, I pamper myself with facial treatment and body massage. But before that, I treat myself to a set breakfast at one of the fast food restaurants rather than the usual cereal, toast and espresso at home not for the food quality but for a break from the weekday routine.



So this Sunday, I arrived at the food court at around 8. I noticed that the restaurant on this floor which only opens at noon was already bustling with activities. I couldn't help watching what they were doing.

The two young men in crisp white uniforms were preparing fruit and cream sponge cakes. One was whisking egg whites while the other was applying coats of cream to the cake. They were focused paying no attention to me who was staring curiously at them through the glass divider. That was four hours before the restaurant was to open. I was sure that they were not the only two staff working. There should be even more in the kitchen - cutting, dicing, slicing, peeling, defrosting, boiling, blanching and tenderizing etc.

The French names this whole process as the *Mise en place* literally means "set in place". That means all is ready before the actual cooking. The hours of preparation work are to ensure that the whole cooking process can be smooth and efficient and that perfect dishes can be brought to the customers' tables the soonest.

I stood there feeling the greatest respect for them and telling myself not to gobble my food again but to nibble and savour every mouthful! I also learnt a life lesson - preparation is the key to success! The greatest inventor of all, Alexander Graham Bell, had put it so aptly. "Luck" is but "an opportunity" and for success to be ensured, there must be good preparation!

The recipe is simple: success = opportunity + readiness!

The pianist

I was going down the escalator of a neighbourhood shopping mall when I was pleasantly captivated by some beautiful piano music – Somewhere over the rainbow! I quickened my step to get a look of the pianist.

He was a very typical middle-aged bald man. Seated with his face to the big floor-to-ceiling glass wall, he was all absorbed in his own world of music. I stood and admired from some distance. His fingers were almost flowing effortlessly across the black and white keys while his feet were stepping on and off the pedals with equal lightness!

I started imagining what made him sit down and start playing the piano. He could not be showing off because he was not fussing around. Was he too early for an appointment? Did he forget his house key and get locked out? Did

he own a piano? Was he simply re-visiting some long gone hobby? He could not be a piano tutor trying to attract some business! For sure, he was not one of those buskers for he would

have played in the busy streets of Tsimshatsui or Mongkok! But of course, the piano is too inconvenient for street performance. He could not have been a mall employee because otherwise, he would have been all dressed up like one of those performing in the posh shopping arcades in Central!

Well, I had fun lifting myself somewhere over the rainbow way up high!



One MTR ride

It was Saturday evening. I was on board the MTR on my way to Kwun Tong. The weather with a typhoon lurking around had been humid and stuffy. The compartment was not only packed but also filled with rank body odour. Close to standing on one foot, I felt suffocated.

Suddenly, the man standing next to me shied away from the woman in front of him and started to lean back a little towards me. I looked to find out what had caused the commotion. That woman who perhaps found her sweaty blouse too body-hugging had put one hand underneath her shirt to have it lifted from inside! Cooling! I did one very unkind act - taking a photo of her in action.



Then there was a teenage girl with a big rucksack standing near the doors. She was minding her own business – using her mobile phone. But unknowingly she had occupied the space of three passengers – herself, her rucksack and her two outstretched hands! As passengers elbowed their way to get off the train, they all murmured and rolled their eyes upwards.

Earlier, the MTR had issued public announcements calling for passengers with backpacks to unload them when boarding the compartments. There have been many other reminders. The familiar ones include asking passengers to stand behind the yellow line and giving way for passengers to get off first.

We would have taken these to be acts of common sense not worth making a fuss and yet corporations such as MTR make sure that reminders have been issued for the sole purpose of shirking legal responsibility!

So tired!

It was the Monday following Chung Yeung Festival or the Double Ninth Festival, the day we pay respects to our ancestors. I had arranged with my sisters to visit my parents' niche in Diamond Hill Columbarium. As the columbarium is conveniently located and we still miss my mother who passed away not long ago, we go there quite often not only on ancestor-worship days. There is no elaborate practice. We just bring her flowers and stand there in front of the niche. With eyes fixed on the photo, we talk to her.

I boarded the MTR at Kowloon Tong Station at about 11 in the morning. I was so pleased to find the compartments not crowded at all. As I seated myself, the man at the other end of the bench caught my attention. He was sound asleep. He must be dead tired. I started making up stories around him.

"Can he be a night-shift janitor on his way home?" I know a security guard taking two shifts for three days of the week. Or "Is this a long homeward-bound journey?" I was almost sure that he was heading home because otherwise, he would not be this relaxed in such deep slumber.

This observation of passengers and exercising my imagination had always been my favorite pastime when commuting until phone games captured me. In recent months, I succeeded to redeem myself and I am now back to this fun-filled mind game.

We are much smarter on our own without the smart-phone.



Mothers

It was a bit chilly this morning. I was in a queue waiting for the green bus going down to the MTR station. Right behind me were a mother and her daughter who looked like a primary 4 student. The girl was in her summer school uniform of a white shirt and shorts.

As we were waiting, draughts kept blowing bringing shivers to us all. The mother immediately took her blouse off to wrap round the daughter. I was so touched though this might be the response of most if not all mothers.

In the morning, the school neighbourhood abounds with love. There is a primary school just opposite to the MTR station where I get off. Every morning after the children have walked inside and the gates are closed, parents would still linger peeping through the small holes of the intertwined chain-linked fences until their children disappear beyond eyes can reach.



Mothers and these days fathers as well are so tender and prompt in rendering themselves to their children in dire contrast to parents of our times. This does not mean they love us less. The difference is in the lack of those small deeds and minute acts of display.

As much as parents love their children selflessly, they have to “educate” themselves into not just giving but also considering if that love is really felt or detested. Too much nagging is hated. Hovering round all day is loathed. And as children grow, parents have to practise detachment. The one ultimate principle they have to internalize is not to expect their children to reciprocate.

Respecting life



Every night at around ten, a neatly-dressed petite woman in her fifties would go to the small park at Eastbourne Road to perform an act of great charity – feeding a family of three yellow cats!

This gentle lady brings along with her a picnic basket complete with a big cardboard or sometimes a plastic sheet, plates, cans of cat food, bottles of water and tissue paper. The feline trio would sit there quietly on the bench waiting for her to open the cans, dish out the food and water before they jump down to enjoy their dinner. Then the lady would take a walk nearby before she returns to collect the plates and clean up the places. When days are cold, she would use the cardboard to make a shelter which she put among the bushes.

After bumping into her and watching her daily routines several times, I started chatting with her. From our brief conversations, I come to know that she is a Korean housewife who has come to settle in Hong Kong because her banker husband was transferred here from the headquarters in Seoul about a decade ago. Her Cantonese is limited and she doesn't speak English. I don't speak Korean. But we are still able to understand each other. She told me that last month when the kittens were six months old, she had taken them to a vet for neutering.

The above is an eye-witness account of kindness to animals taking them as living beings to be respected and loved in ways that we can. There are many such good people in our city caring, sheltering or campaigning for animals. But on the other hand, every now and then, we hear news reports of gruesome animal abuse cases.

Animals kill for food. We human beings are killing for fun! We have to end this! Our police have to start treating dogs and cats as living things and conduct criminal investigations into animal abuse cases.

The message is clear - zero tolerance for animal abuse!

Street food

I spotted him walking quite briskly in his flip-flops right in front of me – an elderly man with all the tools of the trade on his shoulder. It was something like a made-shift wooden stand with a plastic bag labelled “Love the Earth. Recycle the bag” hung on one side and a container with bamboo sticks on the other. He might be one of those street-hawkers selling traditional Chinese tea-cakes, those steamed in bowls and extracted with bamboo sticks! He was quite light-footed, perhaps because he had sold off all his tea-cakes and was now on his way home.



This man took me down memory lane. These days, there are fewer and fewer hawker stalls not only because government policies do not encourage hawking but also because we are so worried about hygiene and in particular food-poisoning that we hesitate to patronize. In my childhood days, there were no big shopping malls but only small stores and street hawkers. The latter offered all kinds of delicacies – the aromatic bovine offal and braised squid, stinky tofu, sugar crepes, egg puffs and pickled carrots soaked in vinegar throughout

the year. There were seasonal delights like roasted chestnuts, sweet potatoes and ginkgo in winter and popsicles and frozen fruit slices in summer.

Streets in many districts whether industrial or residential were lined with *dai pai dong* or the street cooked food stalls preparing fish ball noodles, sweet soups, steamed rice rolls, stir-fried dishes and clay pot rice right there before the customers. Dining there in open air could be steaming hot in summer though a big electric fan might be roaring behind and chilly in winter days though fire was raging in the charcoal burners.

These days, hawker stalls can still be found in some parts of the old districts. Most of these street goodies have now been upgraded and “housed” in posh restaurants. To hope for the best, the taste is still there but what is missing is the coziness and the intimacy of interactions that we are now deprived of. Or perhaps, it’s all so beautiful in my memory as Barbra Streisand sings *The Way We Were*!

*Mem'ries may be beautiful and yet
What's too painful to remember
We simply choose to forget
So it's the laughter we will remember
Whenever we remember the way we were*

Unspoken compassion

I walked past the couple every time I took the footbridge leading from Kowloon Tong train station to Festival Walk. Rather humbly dressed, they looked like in their 70s though the man could be a few years older. Using a simple iron cast box placed on a wooden stand as the counter, they were selling a traditional Teochew snack – the crispy candy roll. The wrapping is one flimsy white flour sheet while the main stuffing is crunchy maltose bars.

This small business was run quite smoothly with the woman collecting the money and the man preparing each order upon request.



Carefully he took out one sheet of wrapping from the box, laid it flat, put a candy bar in the middle, sprinkled some sesame and coconut shreds on top and then rolled up the whole thing which he put in a small brown paper bag. They even had a speaker on broadcasting

“Crunchy, crunchy, you miss out a lot if you don’t try it out”. It was the hoarse voice of the man.

I did try one. Crunchy but too sweet! Business was not exactly good most of the time.

Yesterday I was on the footbridge again leaving Festival Walk. I was amazed to see a queue waiting in front of the snack stand. But it was not the man preparing the rolls. It was the woman while another woman was handling the money.

The scene brought to my mind the news story. The man of this small business passed away last week and the woman after crying her eyes out decided to resume business. The news went viral resulting in the queue waiting patiently and silently to be served. The broadcast was still the same familiar coarse voice of the man.

Not the usual kind of graduation ceremony

This is the season of secondary school graduation ceremonies. One of the schools I work for held it last Thursday. It was the most touching ceremony I have ever attended. Having served the education sector for decades, I have attended tens of such ceremonies.

There would be the school report by the principal or supervisor or both, speeches by the guest of honour and the student representative followed by certificate and prize presentations. Sometimes, there would be student performance.



Teachers and students spend an enormous amount of time and effort to make sure that the ceremony would run smoothly so as to impress the guests but more importantly to create indelible memories for graduates and their parents. Ceremonies can last two if not three hours and when they come to a close; teachers are relieved while graduates are exhilarated.

But this ceremony was not the same. After the routine items came the part of the class teachers presenting their parting words to the graduating classes. One teacher recalled how her class took care of her when she was not well and how she would be forever grateful. She then sang a song encouraging her students not to fear but be brave in face of challenges. She was all tears while her students cheered her on.

Then another class teacher came up to the stage. He recounted how he and his class practised so hard for the choral speaking and finally they worked miracle - champion of the category beating top schools. He called for his students to carry forward such headstrong spirit. His class applauded.

I was among the audience. As I listened, images of what these students and their teachers had experienced kept popping up in my mind bringing tears of appreciation to my eyes.

Mingling

Have you ever taken the route from Mongkok East Station to Sai Yeung Choi Street via the footbridge on a Sunday? If you had, you would have, like me, thought that you had, by mistake, landed in Jakarta, Indonesia!

Indonesian or a language I don't know but sounds familiar, is the only language heard. Indonesian songs are sung along with guitar played. Indonesian food of all kinds including fried fish, bowls of sticky rice, puddings and many more are displayed on plastic sheets



or cardboards laid out on the ground! The maids are on holiday and somehow for many years, this footbridge has been taken over by the Indonesians as the Central District by the Filipinas! Businesses of every type such as money exchange, hair-cut, reflexology, tailoring, tattooing, manicure and pedicure and many more not just the selling of Indonesian cuisines are conducted here. The air filled with spicy aroma, perfume and body odour smells exotically East Asian.

The maids spread themselves out along both sides of the whole length of the footbridge leaving the middle section for pedestrians. With broad smiles on their faces, most of them indulge themselves in various activities while a few others are just lying there on the cardboard resting. They are so at home!

Hong Kong is home to around 340,000 domestic workers – about half are from Indonesia. Some wear head-scarves but most don't. Some refrain from eating pork but others don't. Some speak fluent Cantonese but others speaking neither English nor Cantonese are almost utterly incomprehensible. In other words, they are not really a homogeneous group as no groups really are. But on Sundays, the one day in a week, they gather here enjoying one another's company as though they had never left home.

This Indonesian occupation of two-thirds of the width of the footbridge if not more has definitely inconvenienced the locals as this walkway is the direct route going from the train station to central Mongkok. Of course, one can take the street but that again is always jammed with shoppers. Though some pedestrians would complain about the noise and smell of the Indonesians gathering on the footbridge, they still opt for this route. Sometimes, when it is really crowded, they might be rubbing shoulders with the Indonesians who get carried away partying. And yet, no rows have ever happened though eyes might be rolled with disgust or foreheads frowned with annoyance.

That is the spirit of Hong Kong – a city of tolerance of differences!

Common sense

Common sense says that we don't use our mobile phone when we cross the street. But why are people still doing it? Don't they have this common sense of danger?

Why is there the need for MTR to make public announcement telling passengers not to look at their mobile phone when using the escalator? That is not the only "gentle reminder". Others include beware slippers get caught when standing on escalator, loosen clothing when in compartment etc.

Obviously, what makes sense to some doesn't mean so to others. Besides, what constitutes the "common"? A dozen, a hundred or more people? These people need to have the same history or same likes and dislikes to make up "a mass". Then they might share the same "common sense".

This can explain why parents and their children, husbands and wives, employers and their staff, teachers and students cannot agree on their respective "common sense" issues. They have to make deliberate effort to understand the other party, accommodate differences and build ground for common sense to be nurtured.

So next time before we make a comment using "common sense" as the argument, we have to first establish if there is anything in "common".



It's a different world now!

There was a time when we helped strangers asking for directions most readily. When neighbours knocked on the door asking if we had an egg to spare, we happily gave a couple. Telephone lines and refrigerators, expensive luxuries then, were generously shared. Grocery store-keepers delivered rice bags to our doors with the bill settled monthly. That was the world I grew up in. We were not rich but were generous. There were no desires but only satisfaction.



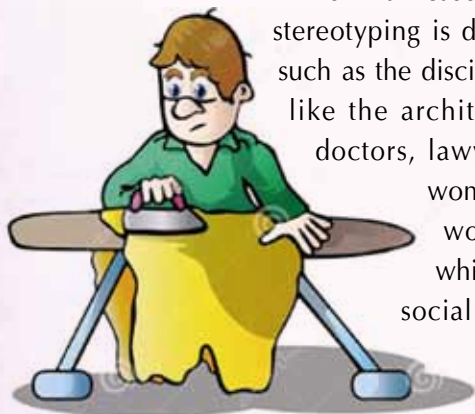
All these seem like fairy tales now!

Strangers wandering on MTR platform shy away from interaction when offered help. In public transport, seats for those in need have to be labelled as though commuters cannot decide for themselves to whom they should offer their seats. Backpackers have to be persuaded to unload. Neighbours no longer greet each other. We dare not knock on doors for help. And yet we know and let friends know about one another's lives in details. We react with our thumbs and smileys. There is no human touch at all. We nestle in our own isolated world comforting ourselves that we have tens and hundreds of friends.

Oh! I miss the good old days!

On Women's Day

Sexual equality has never meant “sameness” between men and women when after all men and women are not born, groomed or socialized in the same ways. Stereotyping the two sexes is still unfortunately the norm. Boys are stronger, tougher and less articulate etc. while girls are meeker, weaker and more expressive. In Hong Kong, males in their forties and are still single are crowned as “diamond bachelors” while the female counterparts are teased as “residual girls”. Married women with no children are looked at as “incomplete” or even condemned as “not delivering their duties”.



As in all cases of generalization, sexual stereotyping is dangerously naïve. Careers such as the disciplinary force or professions like the architects, engineers, medical doctors, lawyers etc. have long taken women on board. These days, women can bring in money while men do the laundry. But social conceptions are not easy to change. It takes time. Quitting jobs to attend to children is expected

of women and yet is regarded as an act of sacrifice or stupidity when it comes to a man opting for it.

Institutionalizing sexual equality is not to promote “sameness” but “fairness” of not discriminating between two persons on the basis of sex. They are to be judged on the same criteria or standards irrespective of gender. They are to be given the same opportunities and granted the same rights. But even in this modern society of ours, such is sadly not always the reality. Women are still earning less. There are more men

than women in top positions. Why are housewives not classified in the employed category? They are doing a “no-thanks” job putting their body and soul into the big business of taking care of the family and bringing up children. There is Women’s Day but no Men’s Day! Why not let us have Human Day like the 7th day of the first month of the Chinese calendar!

As the Chairperson of Hong Kong Women Teachers’ Organization, I have been criticized as sexist! I am not. Our activities or classes held at Hong Kong Teachers’ Centre are open to all teachers, men and women. And it is because of the limited space we have at our office that the classes held there are for women only.

So sisters, with heads held up, let’s celebrate our greatness - Happy Women’s Day!

Elegance

Elegance does not come with a price tag! A woman can be wearing haute couture carrying a Hermes bag with face and hair perfectly done and yet does not exuberate an ounce of elegance. Neither can elegance be linked with age as it is beyond skin-deep.

Elegance is in the way a lady gestures or talks and the gracefulness she impacts on people. It is gentleness and calmness displayed in the most beautiful way! The lady can be all wrinkled wearing an old sweat shirt working in the garden, but the pleasantness about her creates an aura that transmits simplicity and dignity. In other words, "elegance" is in the eyes of the beholders!

Elegance comes from peace of mind and heart backed up with culture and confidence. There are no negative sentiments because they have all been resolved or internalized not merely subdued. But elegance is not to be interpreted as weakness. One can fight for a cause without resorting to foul language or the fist.



Can elegance be learned such as by attending etiquette classes? Well, one can master all the table manners without displaying any elegance if she follows the steps robotically. Elegance is more than knowing how to fold the napkins or which fork to use!

I am a woman

I am a woman. In the eyes of the world, my function as a woman has been fulfilled – I reproduced. But I do not always look at myself as a woman, the female of human. In other words, I do not always show or exercise my femininity as some women are so skilled in executing. When I work with my colleagues or socialize with friends, my behaviour is never decided by the gender of the person I am with but rather a number of other factors such as the occasion, the degree of familiarity etc. In fact, I have been posed with embarrassing comments like “Oh, you’re too tough for men to get along with!” The harshest would be “You are strong! You can survive the trauma!”



Women should always hold themselves with pride and dignity. But the problem is we care too much about how others look at us rendering us live a life in others’ shadow. This eagerness to please or to reach up to people’s standards brings in compliments at times but more often disappointment, self-degradation and even self-destruction.

Women can go to extremes to meet the expectation of their men or the circle they are in – plastic surgery to enhance their looks, child-bearing even in their 40s to satisfy their men’s hope of a descendant etc. But surgeries can fail. A child cannot hold a cheating heart. Children born of such relationship are most unfortunate. Horrific child abuse cases are not uncommon.


Women do not need men to live a fulfilling life. We should not whine and moan and yet stay there in a victim mentality. We have choices. We get stuck in a situation only because we allow it.

May all women love themselves and be their own masters! Happy Women’s Day!

Love thyself

Have there been moments in life when you feel so negative inside that you actually hate yourself? You are in desperate need of support and yet too private or proud to seek help! Time to switch on the self-rescue mechanism!

One tends to eagerly dive into pleasing experiences but bury unpleasant ones. Fine-dining! Binge drinking! Shopping sprees! Going on a trip! Changing oneself physically! The list can go on. But to one's



*To love oneself is the
beginning of a lifelong
romance.*
OSCAR WILDE

dismay, the transient comfort these bring just comes and goes and the negative emotions resurface. One is again drowned in the sea of desperation.

I have a friend who has not been sleeping well for years and another one who sobs all of a sudden and seemingly unprovoked! Both of them have tried all sorts of self-help devices but they are still not able to salvage themselves!

If my two friends truly do love themselves, they have to take the

bull by the horns - rationally analyze the causes of their negativity! But they don't. And until now, I do not have the courage to frankly talk to them fearing that I might lose them!

Can I tell them that they are but numbing themselves? The vacuum is not filled! The relationship is still sour! They are still swept aside! The gap is not closed! The career is still going nowhere! Years of observation have told me they have become so used to the pain that eradicating it might leave them at a loss.

My two friends share one commonality – they love someone or something more than themselves. In one case, it is her man – someone's husband. For the other friend, it is her job! They spend all their time and energy on these "love affairs" totally ignoring themselves and yet are not "rewarded" as they think they should be.

The first step they should take is to slowly step back to examine their own needs and desires. They should find time for self-care and self-love! Enjoy the me-time pleasure! They might feel guilty at first but once they get past it, salvation is close!

Losing faith

I was brought up as a Catholic and had been a fervent disciple of the Lord for two decades. This school year and for the first time in my long career, I am working in a Christian school. As to the in-between years, God was virtually gone from all aspects of my life. There are moments of exception though such as when I visited churches on my various European tours or when I attended church weddings and memorial services. Then God in His Almighty touched upon this prodigal daughter and inflicted a fleeting twinge of guilt for having abandoned Him. But once I am outside the House of God, I am my irredeemable self again!

But this year at school, I attend the various Christian activities, be they the regular morning assemblies or the annual events and programmes, I must say I am quite moved by the earnest sermons, the frank self-reflections, the harmonious singing, the cry for awakening and other rituals like singing the hymn “thank you for the food” before students start their lunch. Teachers and students alike have incorporated God in their lives. They thank Him for happiness and successes as well as failures. They deplore Him for blessing and support. They entrust everything to Him, their meeting, their examinations, their pressure etc. Though my religion is Catholicism and the school is Christian, it is the same God we believe in.



And yet, the fire that broke out in the industrial building at Ngau Tau Kok Road on June 21 had shaken my flimsily restored faith in God. The blaze took two precious lives. As these two young zealous firemen entered the inferno, where

94 was God? This put my memory back to the 60s when I was studying the Nazi genocide of the Jews! “Was God taking a leave?” I asked.

A fighter

About a week before Chinese New Year in early February 2016, I discovered that Bean Bean was refusing food. Not even his most favourite treats could tempt him. He used to weigh 5.7kilo and weighed only 3.4kilo when we took him to the vet. After various tests, the diagnosis was abdominal cancer. Given chemotherapy, he would live two more years. If not, he would have only two months. So being responsible owners, we agreed. There would be more than 10 treatments to be administered every two weeks, sometimes in the form of injections and other times in drugs.



Bean Bean responded differently to the sessions. Generally, he would vomit for two days. As he was too feeble to eat from the bowl, we syringe-fed him. As he did not have the strength to stand on four legs to wee, we held his hind legs. Steadily he improved. He was even able to eat from the bowl and got up on all four legs to greet me.

But something must have gone wrong in the last chemotherapy he received. A case of over-dose? For the whole week, he vomitted even the water we gave him. He was lying there all the time. He was a bag of bones as I held him in my arms. I whispered to his ear "You have tried very hard already. You are a fighter. Go now!"

We knew the end would soon come but we didn't take him to the clinic anymore not because we didn't love him. The treatment was just too much. Every night, he would only crawl inside his own bed after we were all home. Otherwise, he would be lying by the door waiting for the one who was not back yet. In the small hours of April 9, he breathed his last just when I dozed off.

We were blessed to have had Bean Bean for 15 years. He was clean, disciplined, and dutiful! We miss him! And there remains a pang of guilt - should we have subjected him to chemotherapy and brought him all the tortuous pain?

Bean Bean lives on

It was around this time of the year in 2016 when Bean Bean lost the fight against cancer and left us. He was 15.

On the first day of the Lunar New Year, we have this practice of taking a photo with our furry child. So last year though Bean Bean weighing only 3 kilos was almost a bag of bones, we still had the photo taken. He was not the cheery self anymore but lying almost limply in our arms.



We missed him very much and the house was quiet without us yelling his name or him barking for food. We couldn't have another pet as we worried he might outlive us. Then what would happen to him?



Soon the silence in the house started to depress me. I must have another pet. We agreed that we would not buy but adopt. However, Mervyn insisted that we would only adopt a Pekingese, same breed as Bean Bean. I browsed various animal adoption websites until my heart bled. There were just too many pets being abandoned, starved and tortured. The worst would be those abandoned by breeding farms. And I discovered that dog owners are quite trend conscious. There were lots of poodles, corgis and terriers but no Pekingese.

Just when I wanted to stop the hunt, sheer luck brought Mimi, a Pekingese to us. Her owner had passed away and the other family members did not want to keep her. She is already 10-year old, overweight with bladder stones, infected eyes and ears.

On January 24 just before the New Year, we adopted Mimi. She quickly adapted to us, the new bed, new pan, new diet and new ball. She takes all medication quietly and complies with all the urination rules.

Bean Bean lives on in Mimi! The house comes to life again!

Animal care in great demand

We adopted Mimi about 15 months ago when she was already 10. She was not in the best of health - overweight for being fed with "growing" diet, dry eyes with sticky lashes, blood in urine, dry skin etc. On top of all these, she sometimes gasped with the tongue out.


Mimi is a beloved member of the family. We have been doing our best to attend to her problems. The expenses involved are horrendous. Her special diet for dogs with urinary stones is \$150 for a bag of 1.5 kilo. Three small bottles of eye drops cost \$922. We simply cannot understand why animal medical care is so costly.

But it is not just a matter of money, there is so much inconvenience.

Last week, I took Mimi to the family vet to check on her heart problem. Recently, she pants and goes into spasm whenever she gets too excited such as when she hears strangers passing by our door. The vet said that there are abnormal heart murmurs and advised us to see a veterinary cardiology specialist. She gave me the phone number to call.

I did the next day and was told that appointments for the week are only made on Tuesday. The lady said that I had to start making the call right after the line is open at 9 in the morning because time-slots are usually filled within an hour.



So the following Tuesday at 9 sharp, I made the call. But once the call was put through, it ended. Fortunately, I just had to touch that icon  to redial. That I did. Guess how many times in total? 183 times! My friend said that they had such experience when they were making online ticketing. But this was the very first time for me. At 9:23, I was

put through and a recording told me I was number 21 in the queue. Another wait of 20 minutes! A human voice finally sounded at the other end at 9:43. In 2 minutes, the appointment was arranged. I was also told the charges, examination is \$1800 and any thorough echocardiogram, electrocardiogram and thoracic radiographs etc. would start from \$6000.

Of course, there is the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. I am sure the charges would be cheaper. I would definitely look into that!

We need more animal care providers. Hurray to City University of Hong Kong for establishing the College of Veterinary Medicine and Life Sciences.

The accident

In the late afternoon of December 20, I was careless and missed the last step as I walked down the staircase after a meeting at The University of Hong Kong. My 120-pound plus weight landed on my right knee. My friend Mandy, who was with me, though petrified could still say that I should go to the clinic nearby immediately. I gestured that I only had to sit down for a few minutes. It must have been an awful sight.

Two other events had been lined up for the rest of the day. I limped to the two meeting places and managed to present myself properly. But by 10:30, the pain crept in and I could hardly move my foot without moaning. The injury had to be taken care of. Ken, Mandy's husband who had arrived to take her home drove me to the emergency ward of the Baptist Hospital. By then, the slightest movement of the inflamed right knee would bring chronic pain enough to make me scream. It was already 11 at night.

I was the 15th patient waiting to be attended to by the one doctor. If each would take up 10 minutes, my turn would be past midnight. As expected, the doctor examined me at 1:00. He insisted that I would first be x-rayed and then hospitalized. Might as well because there was no way I could walk up to our apartment on the third floor of an old block with no lift service!



The treatment

Mandy and Ken kept me company until I was admitted. Their drowsy eyes told me they were very tired. They even brought my helper from home to get me a change of clothes. I felt so indebted.

My knee was x-rayed right after. Luckily, no bones were broken or dislocated but the kneecap was very swollen. I had to wait till morning to be examined by the orthopedist. At about 11 the next day, I was

wheeled to the room of Dr. Chang, the Resident Consultant in Orthopaedics and Traumatology. He suggested magnetic resonance imaging of the injury to evaluate the situation of the ligaments and cartilage in the knee joint.

That took place after another hour. Later in the afternoon, Dr. Chang showed me the images taken earlier. Fortunately, there was only a slight bone fracture but the joint was

surrounded by fluid causing the swelling and the pain. He suggested arthrocentesis or using a syringe to draw out the fluid so as to reduce the swelling and therefore, the pain. However, I had to endure twinges during the process. Arthrocentesis was a treatment I had never heard of but I did not think I had a choice. So I agreed.



With the needle inserted and the doctor's hands pressing hard on the swelling, three syringes of dark red blood were drawn. To distract me from the pain, Dr. Chang joked with me saying that the process was like milking a cow. And I replied saying that too bad, the blood was not good enough for donation. Here was one good doctor with a heart!

I was discharged the next day, 22nd of December, winter solstice, carrying a heavy knee brace to actually immobilize the right knee joint for it to heal itself! But home is on the third floor of a building with no lift!

Last Christmas

I had never imagined that I would be left home alone for Christmas! Oh, yes, there was Mimi, the 11-year old Pekingese I adopted a year ago.

I was discharged on December 22, winter solstice, just in time for the traditional festive dinner with family. The doctor instructed me to wear that hard gear for a month so that the fracture in the knee joint could recuperate. But Hong Kong Women Teachers' Organization had planned an exchange tour of 40 teachers to Chengdu from December 23 to 26 with me as the group leader. I could but forfeit the paid tickets. The Vice-chairperson and the Consultant had to take up the leaders' role.

To make my fate even worse, I had earlier allowed my helper to take extra days off since her mother was in town. That would mean from December 23 to 26, the situation was me, an old woman and Mimi, an old dog sitting in front of the television watching whatever programmes we were fed with. I began to contemplate how I was to spend the Christmas night.

At about 6pm on 24th, came Teresa, my youngest sister with her basket full of goodies – salmon sushi, pizza, pasta and even the Christmas cake from my favourite cake shop. That was a very pleasant surprise because she has a phobia of dogs and Mimi has a phobia of strangers. I could not imagine the two of them spending a quiet silent night together in the same room. But that evening, except for the initial few barks, Mimi settled down very quickly. Teresa could sit comfortably without fidgeting or worrying that Mimi would bark.



Miracles do happen. After all, it was Christmas!

The background is a solid light pink color. Scattered throughout are numerous translucent bubbles of various sizes. Some bubbles are larger and more prominent, while others are smaller and more subtle. The bubbles have a soft, glowing appearance with a slight yellowish tint, giving them a dreamy, ethereal quality. They appear to be floating in the air, creating a sense of movement and lightness.

Pauline's Favourite Oldies

In combat

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

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

These two questions were difficult. 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 both bondage and support, they are also unknowingly brewing trouble for themselves.

When one child starts babbling, parents of the other children who haven't begun doing so panic. When the travel photos of a family are posted on 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.



Flame of the Forest

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

All the way along Ede Road, that is the route of the mini-bus I was

aboard with this mother and daughter pair, there are four Flame of the Forest trees. I just love this tree. When in full bloom, the broadly-spreading scarlet, lacy foliage creates a gorgeous almost regal crown. And yet, when all the leaves are shed, it can remain a bare trunk for months.

The mother and daughter attracted my attention because this mother was taking her role most seriously. She made full use of each

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



“Here is one good mother.” I said to myself.

But I was making my judgement too early! That part about the Flame of the Forest was repeated four times.

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

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

A few minutes later, the bus passed by a street cleaner. The mother pointed to the man and said to the girl, “If you don’t study well, you will be the one cleaning the street 15 years later. Do you want to do that? No? Then you have to get 100 in all your dictations. Understand?”

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



Meaningful assignment

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

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

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

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

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

twice a week or on Sports Day and Picnic Day which come once in a year!

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



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 combing the girl's messy hair and tidying up her crumpled uniform. 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 being served.

I felt odd witnessing this family saga. 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 do 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!

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.

A kindergarten teacher gave her pupils halved but not yet peeled bananas as snacks. Looking at the halved banana, one child became quite puzzled and asked how he was to eat it. He had never seen bananas with the peel. To him, bananas were peeled and 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 screaming 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 there will come a day when 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 age, they might find even the smallest setbacks or injuries traumatic. Then who is to be blamed for their fragility and vulnerability?



Hair-cut

What was your childhood experience of haircuts? Do you still remember your first visit to the salon? Or has your mother repeatedly teased you about how you tearfully endured the ordeal? I witnessed one such scene when I went for my hair treatment last Saturday afternoon.

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

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

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



Let's right the wrong!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chinese wisdom works again!



It takes two

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

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

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

I had to cut short my coffee time!



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 away. 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!



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 always wonder 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 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.

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, 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 the 1970s. 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

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.



Detachment



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

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

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

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

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

We all love babbling! is the third of the **Babbling series** started in 2014. There are three parts to this publication. The first part is a collection of 27 submissions by 15 writers from diverse sectors while the second part presents 38 of Pauline's recent blog entries and the last part comprises 14 of her articles from the previous two books.



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