

# Uselessness

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

I was intrigued by the widely reported speech given by Prof Tan Chor Chuan, President of the National University of Singapore (NUS), at the NUS Freshmen Inaugural Ceremony on 3 August 2011. I thought about the speech, titled "Pursuing the 'Useless'", at length. The first thing that leapt to my mind was Steve Jobs' famous example of how he attended calligraphy class in college out of interest, and learnt about typefaces like serif and sans serif. Later on, when he built his first Mac with Steve Wozniak, he put in these beautiful typefaces, and when Microsoft adopted ideas for their Windows software from him, every computer in the world had beautiful and artistic typography. When I read Prof Tan's speech, I realised that he also alluded to the same example. I will pause for a moment here to distance myself from the "great minds and fools" analogy that you may jump to.

Perhaps why the connection was so karmic was because there was lots of press coverage on Jobs' resignation from Apple Inc and his ongoing battle with pancreatic cancer. He most likely had a Whipple resection with his liver transplant the first time around. We can guess that he had deteriorated with his loss of weight over the last year and the news is now capped by his resignation.

Perhaps pursuing the useless is not a bad idea, as it allows us some latitude to deal with our lives. Very often, we have lots of hobbies that may actually give us great joy. Quite a number of doctors play music and some have gone on to make music their career. One of my medical school classmates has migrated to Australia and is now running a business, but his first love is producing albums and records in the recording studio.

We know of doctors who compete in Ironman races, run marathons, collect stick insects, paint, rock climb, critique wine, waltz or enter politics. One of my council members is presently pursuing her law degree. Quite a number of us have huge bandwidth for hobbies and projects that may eventually occupy a large space in our little universe. As to whether uselessness is actually useful or not, it remains to be seen over the course of a lifetime and often only in retrospect. What such pursuits give us is the quality of life that we desire and hope for, the happiness that such pursuits bring, and the focus and passion we can harness to those pursuits.

Such pursuits may also involve the academic trail. I was struck by a recent postgraduate student who entered Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, after graduating from a famed liberal arts college in the US. In the liberal arts, honour and integrity is everything. Examiners will let you bring your examination papers home to complete on your honour that you will do your own work and not plagiarise or cheat. I thought to myself that the building of such an ethos from ground zero was absolutely vital in our medical studies. I also recall how a patient of mine, who sits on the board of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, had told me that what Singapore really needs is a good liberal arts programme. We should look into how this ethos from liberal arts can be infused into our medical schools here.

In my ruminations above I also recollect the recent Presidential Election and how Dr Tan Cheng Bock had conducted himself during the campaigning period. Although he was not officially endorsed by the ruling party, he grew in stature over the course of the campaign, and was able to cross establishment and opposition lines to win votes from both sides of the divide. I put this down to his personality and how it was shaped by his years of doctoring in a rural general practice in Ama Keng. That he lost by a sliver of votes was, of course, quite heartbreaking to those who had supported him, but I felt his manner of campaigning had shown up certain aspects of our evolving society. This is a society that is, at its very heart, a caring one because of our largely immigrant roots. As immigrants arriving at a strange land, we had no one else to turn to but our fellow immigrants on the same literal boat.

Iconic immigrants have shaped our nation through their philanthropy and selflessness. I was aghast that a citizen had written in to complain about the naming of the Tan Kah Kee MRT Station. I still remember his name, as one of the "houses" in my alma mater was named after him. I am glad that my boys still know this name and what it stands for, from their education in my alma mater. We do not want to erode the prevalent spirit of giving to and taking care of the less fortunate among us, even as it is threatened to be demolished by the forces of selfishness reminiscent of "every man for himself". I can only guess that is why Dr Tan Cheng Bock chose to resign from the board of a public hospital in protest.

So what do useless pursuits, hobbies and passions, a presidential campaign and philanthropy have in common? The connection is that of a media link, my neural circuitry and a sense of the type of life that we as a group of professionals are trying to attain. Our job is one so closely tied in with human nature, frailty, suffering, joy; the whole gamut of human emotions. Though we try to maintain a professional stance on this rollercoaster of emotions, we are only human and invariably buffeted by these waves crashing into our psyche. Our job consumes us and yet we need to also feel our own passions and happiness.

These four disparate matters in some strange way bring unity to the pursuit of our own lives. We feel the need to lead exemplary lives, care for those around us, feel the goodwill and gratitude from those we help, make our mark, hold ourselves up to a higher standard and in so doing leave some form of legacy to make it all worthwhile.

After all, life is but a fleeting dream, and I would like to take the opportunity to wish all my Muslim colleagues a belated Selamat Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Maaf Zahir Dan Batin. May the spirit of Ramadan live on in all our lives. **SMA**



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