



Reflections

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

There is that time of the day when we can sit down in a quiet corner of our home or when the day is done, and the evening sun is streaming through the windows and the last patient has left the practice, we sit alone by ourselves and reflect on how the day went. Very often these ruminations and whimsical ideas are transformed into thoughts about our lives. Time and again our thoughts wander into a place where we ask ourselves, what on earth are we doing, where did we come from and where are we headed.

The existentialists list the concerns about existence that we have as humans. These concerns are about loneliness, meaning, freedom and mortality. I recently came across an article, "The 2012 man-ifesto" by British journalist Tony Parsons in *GQ* magazine, which contained a total of 53 motherhood statements on how to live our lives. I was struck by some of them, disagreed with some of them and realised some of them were not appropriate for this column.

The ones that have left an impression on me had to do with a variety of matters, including health, manners, parents, work, personal ambitions, finances and how to negotiate through life with fellow human beings.

On a healthy note, Parsons writes, **"You should weigh yourself once a day. Less than that and you are letting yourself go. But it is only when you weigh yourself every day that you realise everything counts – the hours in the gym, the food delivered to your door, the empty calories of alcohol, the sit-ups and the snacks. Putting on a kilo a year makes you old."**

Bear in mind that the journalist is 59 years old, but what he says has quite some truth. Most of us have put on more weight than we have ever wanted. The waistline measurement of our trousers seems to increase faster than our age!

Some of us have done so because of the stress that seems to increase with age. The increment can be real or our ability to handle stress has reduced. I have a number of patients who have increased their exercise levels steadily as they progressed in their jobs and have to take on a greater burden of responsibilities. They tell me that the same amount of stress they withstood in their 30s has amplified in their 40s and 50s. As such they had to increase their exercise levels or risk a major cardiovascular event.

Weighing yourself daily just focuses your mind on the amount you consume on a daily basis. We all tend to end up having "big meals" far too often. Those who drink wine will find that the alcohol does play havoc with the scales. On the other hand, exercise burns less calories than we imagine. I find that on a normal working day where we do not have

any big meals, we have to be in deficit; namely that when we weigh ourselves the next morning, we have lost some weight. Otherwise the endless cycles of big meals in a land of plenty leads us into perdition. Sometimes we have friends who love to eat and often we have to tell them to stop calling us too frequently. At the end of the day, please strike a balance between seeing your friends and extended family over a big meal and having a simple day of calorie deficit.

“When you get back from the gym, you must immediately pack your kitbag for the next time. Because it doesn't end. It never ends.”

“There is a reason why a personal trainer will always get you fitter than you can get yourself – it is not rational to be pushed in the manner that a personal trainer will push you.”

“Pain is just weakness leaving the body.”

I like his take on exercise because you really have to be disciplined about it and push yourself hard. The idea is to have a sustainable programme, something you can carry out over years and not just over weeks! Packing your gear is trying to get you motivated for your next outing to the gym, your next run, walk or cycle; or your yoga or Pilates class. I often encourage my business executives to pack their running shoes for their business trips. As you are aware, a good job in Singapore entails flying enough miles to earn you a frequent flyer programme. The flying is to serve the Asia Pacific market as our own market is too small for economies of scale. Thankfully we doctors fly mostly for holidays and rarely for work.

Flying for the executives also means “big meals” as they wine and dine their clients or are wined and dined by their vendors. In the end exercise also needs to be at a certain level to have the desired effects. We always remember the old adage about the relationship between pain and gain. Ultimately we want to prepare ourselves for the final part of our lives where we still have quality of life and are not moribund, wheelchair-bound or bedridden.

“Prepare yourself for every task you face. Really prepare – you're too old to be doing your homework on the bus. When the time comes, be ready. As they say in boxing: train hard, fight easy.”

At first glance, this appears to be a quote on health and exercise, but is really about how you approach your work. I

think most of us need to remember that our work has to be of a certain quality or standard. This can be a procedure or an opinion. As I have always said to my friends in other jobs, if the boss or department head is incompetent, it quickly shows in the department statistics. The danger comes when we are moving on in our careers and do not update ourselves with new techniques or innovations whether within or outside our area of expertise. Self improvement and the internal drive to do so is sadly missing in some of us, or we have been so comfortable that we have disabled our internal engines whether deliberately or unknowingly. Sometimes I also find major risk aversion in clinicians, who have lost the appetite for work that may have a less than favourable outcome.

“Pay your way. Buy your round. Be generous to the point of absurdity. Avoid those who go to the loo when the bill arrives. No matter how much money they have, these are cheap people.”

It is true, isn't it? Haven't we come across Cheap Charlies? Some people just have a mental profit and loss account in their heads. They tote up the balance when it comes to parting with their dollars and intend to be in the black all the time. Generosity especially with friends is so important and translates into good feelings and goodwill. One never knows when one needs to call on the goodwill especially when we are in trouble. And we can always land up in trouble especially in our job. If we pile up goodwill and spread it around, it tends to have a life of its own and will come back to assist you when you least expect it.

“Money buys you the one thing that is really worth buying – time. Poverty makes a prisoner of every man. But if you love money too much, you're worse than a prisoner, you're a slave.”

I like this next quote because it is essentially talking about the sort of people to whom friends don't matter, but only rich friends do. Sadly, Singapore is becoming a different place compared to yesteryear. Perhaps it's that whole thing about increased competition, rising asset prices, core inflation, expensive cars, high rentals and the great divide in the social classes. I find attitudes changing rapidly, where friendships are discarded, because these unfortunate souls have fallen by the wayside and everyone wants to be friends with the winners.

Yet the reality about bartering money is that we need to buy time; time for family, friends, our loved ones and ourselves. That brings me to the next quote about our

parents. We often forget to spend time with them when they are well. If they are struck down by disease, they suddenly jump to the top of our priority list. This is really sad given the fact that we all live on a small island.

“Always treat your parents as if they are close friends who are soon to move to a distant land from where it will be impossible ever to return. Never take them for granted, no matter how busy life gets. You can’t imagine your mother and father dying. And then they do.”

After a certain age, we start to think of the possibility of our parents perishing. Though we may have families of our own, we are still someone’s child. When they finally pass away, we will lose the chance to turn to them in our hour of need, to seek comfort or solace, no matter how old we are. When that avenue is lost, we feel alone again in this world. Suddenly we realise that we are truly “adult” when all this should have been obvious a long time ago, when we passed the rituals of adulthood and parenthood.

This is actually my second last column as I intend to step down from SMA Presidency after the completion of a three-year term. It has been my pleasure to write these columns and I hope it has been your pleasure to read them. Finally, I leave you with a little pleasant quote, from the article, that I completely agree with.

“Eye contact. Eye contact with everyone. Eye contact and a big smile. These small, good things will transform your world.” SMA



Dr Chong is the President of the 52nd SMA Council. He has been in private practice since 1993 and has seen his fair share of the human condition. He pines for a good pinot noir, loves the FT Weekend and of course, wishes for world peace...