

By Dr Lee Chung Horn

## What Time Is It?

Some people think self-awareness is the key to a fulfilling existence, but I'm not buying.

The way I see it, there are so many layers to life that any position that begins and ends with the big "I" is bound to leave you tetchy at best, and unhappy at worst.

I am in Toronto for ENDO 2007. This is one of the two big scientific conferences in North America that I hoof it to every year.

I go for two reasons: first, the academic stimulation is terrific (and doctors need to keep abreast of developments in their fields); and second, I like putting myself now and then in an *extra-ordinary* situation. *Extra-ordinary* not in the sense of alien or hair-raising, but in the sense that you are not in the comfort zone of your mundane 8.30am to 5.30pm existence anymore. For me, that is to say, I am not treating people lying in hospital beds or solving patients' problems in my clinic; not taking calls from people who are worried sick they had been given *Avandia*, or writing letters and medical reports; not plowing through email, not fighting morning rush-hour traffic to work.

In other words, I am in a situation where I can think and reflect.

Therefore Toronto, like the many other destinations where overseas scientific meetings are held, is a world away. Mind you, these meetings are not an idyllic retreat on a golden pond. For one, there are always five or six concurrent programme tracks going on at any time, and if you intend to get a bang for your bucks, your hours are more likely to be a march up and down crowded escalators, hurrying through corridors session to session, inside a chilly, humming metropolis.

But this *extra-ordinary* scenario gives me a rush. Doctor friends I have spoken to agree – while conferences are not blood sport, there

is pleasure to be had in the giddy challenge of maximising your learning opportunities.

The scenario is made more complex because you also want to protect your sightseeing agenda. (Some doctors I have attended conferences with never wander out of their hotel rooms or the convention centre because, well, there are guns and knives on the street but, trust me, these damaged souls are a minority.)

So I am trying to stretch my hours in Toronto while fighting jet lag. Toronto the Good – the city of Margaret Atwood, Norman Jewison, Banting and Best, Donald Sutherland and Atom Egoyan!

After six hours of taking in the newest in downstream post-translational changes in beta-cells, I find myself on Yonge Street with Jack, a Canadian colleague.

Yonge is a landmark in downtown Toronto. While it is not the permissive strip it once was, it is still the heart of the city. If I had come to Toronto when I was 26 years younger and walked down Yonge the way it was 20 years ago, my initial moments would have the awe of big-city clichés: crowds of people, stores open late into the night, Swiss chalets next to sex toy shops.

But Yonge Street today is not what it used to be. In fact, it is a bit boring. Gentrification has changed it in many ways, and the tide of urban renewal, corporate chain set-ups, and red-hot property deals has altered, no, whitened, its soul.

Jack who knows about these things points out that although Yonge still holds a mythic place in the Canadian psyche, it is not Toronto's main shopping street anymore. We walk down The Strip – every North American city has a Strip, and on Yonge, it is the section between Richmond and Wellesley – and look at people looking into the stores there.

"In its glory years," my friend laments: "this area was what the internet is for us today: the



Dr Lee Chung Horn, MBBS (S), MRCP (UK), FAMS, is a consultant endocrinologist at Gleneagles Medical Centre. He is the chairman of the Ministry of Health workgroup for clinical practice guidelines on diabetes mellitus. He publishes an online magazine called *Beta* at <http://www.betamusic.com.sg>

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place where sex, drugs and rock n' roll are a click – or a step – away from all things moral and upright.”

Sure, I see how life in 2007 (and my life) has no way of getting away from the internet. Not for poorer Torontonians either: if you do not own a computer, you only need to step into one of the numerous internet cafes that dot the Strip. “Check your email! \$1 for 20 minutes!” a signboard pouted.

At Yonge's corner with Gould Street, we come upon Sam The Record Man. The giant spinning neon platters above this legendary record store reflect the glow of better days. In 2002, Sam went bust, and the national chain shut up shop. But stubbornly, the flagship store at Yonge survived on a bail-out from Sam's sons. Known for its high quality jazz and soul sections and for promoting Canadian artists, Sam's still has a mom-and-pop vibe, and its prices are the lowest in the city.

“Let's go in,” I say. My friend, not a big-time music fan, shrug and follow me.

Inside, I immediately see notices that make my heart fall. *Sam The Record Man is closing down 30 June 2007*. For good. Some of the shoppers in the store know this already and are combing the racks for knockdowns and discounts. Magazines are all going for 20% less. Boxsets are down 10%.



Sam Sniderman



Sam the Record Man

A lady in an afro with a basket of CDs asks the store clerk: “Is it true? Is Sam's going to turn into a \$1.99 store?”

So the axe of real estate pressure will fall on Sam's. I have been to hundreds of music stores all over the world but never to Sam's. Now, wandering along the aisles of the store, poking at the Curtis Mayfield, Baby Huey, Johnnie Taylor, Erykah Badu, Bobby Hutcherson and O V Wright records, I feel the sad finality of the news keenly. Another institution would soon be no more! I am surprised I feel like a conspirator in a contract. Music the way it was experienced and loved is changing. People now ask: “Why buy a CD that has 10 to 12 songs when you can buy an iPod that holds 10,000 songs?” In the peeling of layers, the new page on display is our new routine of clicks and downloads, our preference of the smooth touch of functionalism over the fustiness of emotion.

High above our heads, we see a sign that says: “Sam The Record Man thanks Toronto and the world for 70 glorious years”. Another sign quotes rocker Neil Young, one of Ontario's favourite sons: “Keep on rocking in the free world ... and doot doola doot doo.”

I wonder if a new generation of Torontonians would miss Sam Sniderman. Maybe not. I peer at the dozens of framed photos that line the walls. There is a photo of Sam with Tony Bennett. There is him with Elton John. To future Torontonians, this would be just memorabilia, and while memorabilia is history, and history gives us perspective, it is still, well, memorabilia.

I am ready to go back on the street. It is now dusk. Outside, the lights are changing. The rich kids are out in their GAP, Louis Vuitton, and Zara. A man in a business suit waits to cross the street. Gangsta rap rend the air as youths cruise the streets in cars.

So where have you gone, Yonge Street? Or for that matter, Massachusetts Avenue, Gualalupe, Pitt Street, Wardour Street, Orchard Road? What have we lost in our lives, what time is it?

“Do you have the time?” A man in unwashed shirt and sandals interrupts my thoughts. “It's almost half-seven,” I tell him.

“Do you have a dollar? I'm a homeless man.”

I fish out a two-dollar coin. I had given him the time, why not also some money? I may have escaped from home but not from time or human needs. Jack tugs at me and we walk off in search of dinner. ■