

Life's Decisions

By Warren Fernandez

LIFE is full of decisions which, ironically, we often have to make on partial knowledge and information. You do your best.

So, there I was, at 18, at a crossroad, having to decide on a course of action which would shape my life for years to come. I sought older, wiser counsel.

My father referred me to his brother, a doctor, who seemed the best person to answer my question on whether I should become a doctor.

So, one sultry afternoon, I took the 156 bus down to Serangoon Gardens to discuss my future, with my dear Uncle Georgie, which was what everyone I knew called him. To the rest of the world, he was Dr Victor Fernandez, a successful and by all accounts well-regarded GP. His neighbourhood clinic in Serangoon Gardens Way was popular and well patronised. His practice in Specialist Centre served the well-heeled. He was President of the College of General Practitioners for a spell, and was involved in a string of community projects, with the Lions and Rotary clubs.

A kindly, jolly soul, he peered at me for a minute, then pronounced good naturedly: "Son, you need a profession. Either be a doctor, or a lawyer. That will give you a good future."

He tried hard to be dispassionate. But I knew from cousins and other relatives that he would dearly have loved for me to become a doctor, to carry on the practice he had painstakingly built up. Many others in the family had had similar conversations with him, I gathered. The opportunity of joining "Fernandez and Partners" was held out. It seemed like a good prospect, yet lamentably had been turned down by one after another as successive youths in the family picked other paths.

As the youngest in the extended family, I imagined that I was his last hope. It seemed tempting indeed. And I wanted so much not to let him down. So, more out of respect for him than

anything, I enrolled in the medical science stream at Hwa Chong Junior College, if only to give it a shot.

Not surprisingly, I soon found the going tough. I was never one for Physics or Chemistry, although I managed to do well enough in those subjects. And I had spent much of my time at secondary school finding plausible excuses to skip my Further Maths lessons, as these bored me to tears. In contrast, when it came to Literature, History, Geography, I was all ears. It was in these subjects that I won school prizes, quite to my surprise.

After three months of trying to memorize the names of bits of bone and intricate mathematical equations, reality finally struck. I was going very much against the grain in trying to be a doctor. Even if I stuck it out, I knew I would lack the passion to be a good doctor. My heart was not in it.

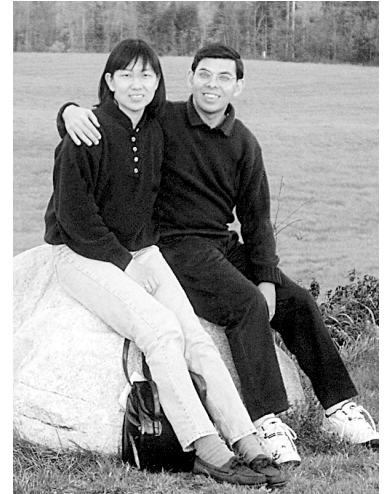
So, I plucked up the courage one day, boarded the 156 bus, and made my way down to Serangoon Gardens to break the news to Uncle Georgie.

He sat quietly for what seemed an age after I made the speech I had rehearsed. I explained why I thought I could excel in the arts, but would make a half-hearted doctor. He looked sad, like a man whose hopes had been dashed.

Finally, he said: "You must do what you believe in."

That was all the affirmation I got, or needed. I went home, told my parents about my conversation with my uncle. I added, perhaps as a sweetener, that I now wanted to study Humanities at Oxford. This made my decision to take up the arts seem less of a whim, more studied and considered. They agreed, somewhat reluctantly.

I went on to apply, and receive a Humanities scholarship, switching to the Humanities programme at Hwa Chong mid-way through my first year at college.



Life's Journey: Warren, with his wife, Sally, pause to take in the view while on holiday in Jefferson, New Hampshire, USA.

Later, I won a Singapore Press Holdings Scholarship to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics, at Trinity College, Oxford, where I spent three glorious years.

But before I left for Oxford, my uncle died suddenly of a heart attack on the golf course. At the age of 58, it came as a shock to everyone. I could not but feel that I had broken his heart.

Looking back, I sometimes wonder how life might have turned out had I taken his advice, and gone down the other fork in the road, as he had suggested. Instead of my career as a journalist with The Straits Times, I might now be tending to patients at some hospital or clinic. It would have been a different world, a different life. Sometimes when I am ill and encounter doctors who seem distant and distracted, I wonder if they too had once reached a fork in life, and alas took the wrong turn.

But I have no regrets. I enjoy immensely what I do, and have had some success in my career. Most importantly, I believe I am contributing in the best way I can.

Life is short. You have to pick a path. Like Uncle Georgie said, you must do what you believe in. ■

About the author:

Warren Fernandez, 35, is News Editor of the Straits Times. He joined the paper in 1990 after graduating from Trinity College, Oxford, on a Singapore Press Holdings Scholarship. In 2000, he graduated from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government with a Masters in Public Administration, also on an SPH Scholarship.