



Introspections and Reflections

Text by Dr Tan Yia Swam

In these slightly over two years of enforced physical distancing, I have observed that everyone needs human interaction. Some need it more than others, depending on whether they are extroverts or introverts, but I daresay even introverts crave some form of human interaction – albeit on their own terms.

The personal touch

We joke about the changing numbers for social gatherings – in pairs, groups of five or eight, etc – but neglect its impact. Even my friends who initially embraced Zoom realised that it cannot replace face-to-face contact. One is unable to absorb the full spectrum of body language, nor give a simple pat or a hug over Zoom.

In the clinic, I encountered a few patients who sought tele-consultations for breastfeeding infections, which were diagnosed as mastitis, and they were prescribed antibiotics. However, their conditions did not improve, and when they saw me in person, it turned out to be a breast abscess. There was no way to determine if it was already an abscess at

the onset, or if it had progressed in those few days.

Member of Parliament Mr Louis Ng spoke on 15 February 2022 regarding the plight of migrant workers working in construction, many of whom have not seen their wives, babies and children in more than two years.¹ This is true for many others as well; take for example, any foreigner working in Singapore who has not been able to travel home for various reasons, Singaporean families living apart in different countries, or even different households during the circuit breaker and Phase 2 Heightened Alert. Of course, I will never forget the enforced separation of healthcare worker (HCW) families during the Tan Tock Seng Hospital outbreak in May 2021.

I also have friends and acquaintances who gave birth without their husbands at their side; some who barely got to see their kids via video call once a week; and a few who had to hear about their parents' passing via a phone call due to visitor restrictions.

The emotional trauma and wounds are invisible. There are some situations that need the human touch.

Personalities

How does one define one's personality? It is the composition of the ways one thinks, feels and acts. Various other professional definitions exist.² That is the reason why some people click and some do not, and some just hate each other on sight. That is also why some people are coping better than others during these COVID-19 times. *Has it been 27 months?*

Even though some restrictions have been lifted, I think HCWs are still under a constant chronic stress. It is no wonder that the song "Surface Pressure" from the movie *Encanto* has resonated with so many of us:

"Pressure like a drip, drip, drip that'll never stop..."

I hide my nerves, and it worsens, I worry something is gonna hurt us...

I think about my purpose, can I somehow preserve this?

Watch as she buckles and bends but never breaks..."

The constant disparity in guidelines, restrictions and advisories just feels

unfair, and contributes to a constant toll. Yet, for myself, life must go on, and I will just have to make the best out of a bad situation.

知己知彼，百战百胜 – meaning “to know yourself and the enemy, is the sure way to victory” – is a well-known adage from Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. As I age (and hopefully mature!), being exposed to so many different personalities in the diverse aspects of my various portfolios has made me even more introspective. I practise self-examination and analysis to better understand myself, and to do better in future encounters. For a more light-hearted analogy, readers familiar with role-playing games (eg, Dungeons and Dragons) would know the alignment chart (Lawful Good, True Neutral, Chaotic Evil, etc).³ I have since transited from being a Lawful Good to being a Neutral Good!

In the home arena, it means that instead of setting the rule that my child must sit and finish his dinner at the table, it now becomes just wanting to get some food into him, and not have him go hungry. It is much less stressful all around! In all aspects of life, it means that truly, one has to expect that it takes all kinds of people – and to accept that there are the rigid Lawful Good and unpredictable Chaotic Evil around us; and there is just no way to force others to see things the same way.

Personal reflection – growth

By the time this issue reaches you, I would have participated in the Committee of Supply Debate 2022, in my role as a Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP).

Trying for systemic change is tough – a good speech leaves a good impression, but will there be follow-through and actionable changes? A good speech may

not “go viral”; conversely, the elements needed for a successful and popular social media post may not exactly make for a good or meaningful speech.

Several studies have reported that globally and collectively, our attention spans have reduced in these days of fast Internet and instant answers by Google. Few have the patience to read through an article or watch a full video. We glance at headlines, look at a photo or an image, and jump to our own conclusions. We get bombarded by different news across all sectors, from all nations. New scandals replace current ones in the blink of an eye.

In such a distracting world, I go back to basics. What truly matters to me?

In my personal life: I prioritise my family – relationships with my spouse, my kids, my parents and my siblings. I give attention to my health, both physical and mental. I try to grow in my faith.

In my professional life: I aim to keep patients at the heart of what I do. This includes keeping my medical knowledge and surgical skills current and up to date, and refining my counselling skills to better provide emotional support for my patients.

These past two years have been an amazing growth journey, in all aspects of my life.

The privilege of being an NMP has allowed me to speak on a national platform on healthcare issues, which is complementary to my role as SMA president. The SMA presidency term is for one year, and presidents are allowed to run again for up to three terms. I am approaching the end of my second year. This coming Annual General Meeting, I will stand for election again – and if successful, it will mark my last year of service till April 2023. And if COVID-19

is still a lingering threat, I might be the only president who completed three terms without an Annual Dinner event!

What kind of legacy will I leave behind? In these two years, I hope I have managed to inspire a few others to take on leadership roles in their communities, and to be change-makers. Are you one of them? ♦

References

1. Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report (15 February 2022) vol 95 (Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang, Member of Parliament). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3C4eRkL>.
2. Cherry K. What Is Personality? Verywell Mind [Internet]. 12 August 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3LTb0eQ>.
3. Sargeantson E. D&D Alignments Explained + Character Examples + How to choose. My Kind of Meeple [Internet]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3JGVGQs>.

Dr Tan is a mother to three kids, wife to a surgeon; a daughter and a daughter-in-law. She trained as a general surgeon, and entered private practice in mid-2019, focusing on breast surgery. She treasures her friends and wishes to have more time for her diverse interests: cooking, eating, music, drawing, writing, photography and comedy.

