

By Dr Cuthbert Teo Eng Swee, Editorial Board Member

What Christmas Means to Me



The first time someone told me she loved me was just before Christmas, when I was in my early twenties. I was in her room, on the sofa. The lights were low and there was a soft Gregorian chant playing in the background.

“BUT I LOVE YOU”

No, this was not some romantic situation. “She” was the university counsellor, and I had been referred to see her because I was not doing too well in my Paediatric posting as a medical student – I had been refusing to go to the wards.

I explained to the counsellor that it was because there were too many students interviewing the kids, and I could not bear seeing them so distressed by interview after interview. I was particularly heartbroken by the kids who were chronically sick and left alone, and those who had been abused. I felt so bad that I refused to go to the wards to participate in what I (then) naively thought was a form of abuse. I just could not face the children who I thought were unloved, and suddenly blurted out that I also felt unloved.

She must have sensed that under the still waters were turbulent currents, and that I needed to hear the words from someone. So she said: “But I love you.” Having talked to her for a few sessions previously, I knew she meant it in a supportive way, and I knew she meant it. That simple sentence was truly the best Christmas present that I have ever had, because those were words which I had never heard before.

I never told the counsellor the real reason

why I was doing so badly in my Paediatric posting. I could not cope with seeing children in distress, because I was overwhelmed by strong feelings – I was a neglected child.

GROWING PAINS

When I was in primary school, I did very badly in all my examinations in the first two years. I was constantly scolded by my form teacher for talking too much, and hit with a ruler for copying from my classmates.

But no one in the school authority ever asked me what was going on – I was severely myopic, but I did not realise it then. Everything was a blur. Even sitting in the first row, I could not see what the teacher was writing on the blackboard. I had to keep asking my classmates sitting next to me what the words were on the blackboard, or I had to copy what they were writing in their books. I had told my mother about not being able to see, but she said I deserved it for sitting too close to the television and that if I talked about it, my eyesight would get worse. So I never told my teacher.

My first pair of glasses in Primary Two after a school health screening was a godsend; I cannot remember why the school did not pick up my poor eyesight sooner. After that, I did much better in class, and no longer had to whisper to my classmates or copy from them.

However, I continued to get into trouble for other things in primary school. I was caught stealing food from my friends and more canings followed. No teacher asked me why I was stealing food – it was because I was hungry. My mother cooked for my other siblings, but I was only allowed to eat the food



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that was labelled with my name – and the food never had my name. My father was totally indifferent to the situation. I like to think that it was because he was caught between his wife and his mother, but I do not really know. Home was just a hotel, and also hell.

When I began to grow quickly at 10, my two sets of school uniform threatened to burst at the seams. Fortunately, a change of school between Primary Six and secondary school brought along a new set of school uniform and underwear.

Shoes were also a big problem for me in primary school. Not only were my feet getting bigger, my shoes were also fraying, and there were holes on the soles. My feet were always wet when it rained, and during the rainy season, my feet would stink, and that was when the name-calling began. My shoe situation was made worse when while playing with my friends near the school pond, I stepped into a pile of cow dung. When I pulled my foot out of the dung pile, my left shoe was still stuck in it. But as it was a precious shoe, I had to retrieve it, and I stank of dung the whole day. I spent days re-washing and re-drying my shoe. Because I had only two pairs of shoes, I never wanted to go for PE (physical education) classes, because I was afraid that they would break and I would have to go barefoot. So I found all sorts of reasons to skip classes, and when the reasons ran out, I got punished by the PE teacher who made me go for detention classes each lesson.

Later, throughout secondary school, junior college and university, my mother constantly told me that I was untalented. I only had the most basic textbooks in school, and always borrowed books from the old National Library at Stamford Road or from the school library.

The lack of parental supervision led to truancy in my early secondary school years; I went to a Christian school. Again, no one asked me why I was skipping classes. The few times when I interacted with the principal were when I got scolded and caned for truancy – the easiest way to solve the problem was corporal punishment. I remember being tempted to try drugs by thugs who hung out in school, but luckily for me, I was too scared to do so.

Fortunately, in upper secondary school, I had a great English Literature teacher who instilled a fascination with the written word in me, which I still have. This fascination led me to read more, and as school became interesting, the truancy disappeared. I remember the first

book which captured my imagination. It was Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, a book which to this day carries so much meaning for me. It gave me my love for books. But it was also a book whose dark undertones I identified with during my teenage angst. I have always wondered why I never ended up like the book's principal character, the teenage sociopath Pinkie Brown.

I do not know how I ended up in medical school. I suppose it was partly because I wanted to become a paediatrician and work with children (only later did I find out that Paediatrics was too painful). In medical school, it did not help that I was out of sync with most of my classmates. I was two years older than most, as I had done my National Service first. Friendships in medical school seemed to be very fleeting and unsatisfying. When it came to competing to see the new cases in the wards before the patient declined too many interviews, it was a dog-eat-dog world, and friendships did not seem to matter.

Money-wise, things initially got a little better in medical school when I took a part-time job. But having to pay more attention to studying instead of working during the clinical years meant that often I did not have the money to buy books. I did not qualify for grants as my parents were not poor, but I was not getting any money from them. Fortunately for me, medical school fees were quite low then. I would also go to the library and photocopy textbooks, and sometimes to save money, I would copy out whole books with pen and paper. I spent a lot of time doing this, but it meant that I could not read very widely. My classmates must have wondered why I never seemed to get very good grades even though I was often in the library.

THE GIFT OF LOVE

Throughout my childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, making friends was never very easy. Possessiveness and social ineptitude harmed many of my relationships. I grew up envying friends who I saw had normal and happy families. I grew up thinking there was something wrong with me. The path to change only started when someone – the university counsellor – told me she loved me, just before Christmas.

So what does Christmas mean to me? It is not about sending cards and giving presents. It is not even about religion for me. It is about the time when someone cared enough about me to say "But I love you.". Four simple words,

but they meant so much to me.

So parents, spend time with your children, teach them, guide them, and help them grow into confident and honest adults who will respect others. This Christmas, tell your children you love them – please – and give them the best Christmas present that they can ever get. If you are not a parent, look out for that neglected child – gather the love you have inside you and lighten the darkened spirit of the neglected child who has never felt that he or she has been the source of anyone's pride. ■

“The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless, of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart ... cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with grief and humiliation that even now ... even that I am a man; (I) wander desolately back to that time in my life.

– *Charles Dickens (1812 - 1870), in his autobiography. (His father was in jail for debt. At age 12, Charles was sent to work for 12 hours a day in a rat-infested shoe-polish factory. When the father inherited enough money to pay his debt, his father moved the family into a house and left Charles to work.)*