

THE BEST IS YET TO BE

- forty years in retrospect -

(Full text)

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF WAH YAN COLLEGE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

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INTRODUCTION

Good evening, President Gus Yeung, esteemed teachers, fellow Wahyanites, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for inviting me to speak tonight. It is a great honour indeed, especially when I realize that last year, you had Dr. Tak Mak, the world renowned scientist and researcher, as your speaker. My qualification tonight is only as a fellow traveller in this journey that we call life.

The year being 2001, it has been 40 years since I took that dreaded Hong Kong School Certificate Examination. Occasionally I still experience nightmares about that exam, such as arriving at the exam hall in my pyjamas, and being totally unprepared. I think some of you may share the same "childhood trauma".

On the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of my graduation, it is time to reflect. Speaking for my peer group, we have passed the mid-point of our working life. We are confronted by more rapid changes than ever before: our parents are getting old - some may have left us. Our children are growing up - some may have left home. Some of us are grandparents. Some of us have retired. We ourselves experience the relentless ravages of age.

Faced with all these changes and challenges, we can no longer take life for granted. The two big questions that each of us may ask:

1. What have I achieved in life so far?
2. What lies ahead? "*Que sera sera*" is not the answer I am looking for.

IDENTITY

In an attempt to answer the first question, I would first address the question of identity, i.e., "who am I?"

A physician friend said to me rather sadly: "Peter, I can't picture you not being a psychiatrist!"

This statement showed much sincerity, much caring, much regret and even a sense of loss. I truly appreciate the sentiments expressed by my friend in his statement, which makes me feel valued as a psychiatrist. For this I am very grateful.

On the other hand, this question raises a rather troublesome question for me: Is my identity now inextricable from that of a psychiatrist? In other words, do my friends see me only as a psychiatrist? More seriously, do I see myself only as a psychiatrist? Am I defined by what I do? What if I change what I do? Would I still be me?

But then, who am I? What am I?

This is the eternal question of human development. You hear it in the form of quizzes for school children. I believe it would take a lifetime to answer, if at all.

When I was 8 or 10, I remember looking into the mirror and asking: If I inhabit another body, would it still be me? It remains a mystery, right up to this day!

Let's take a moment to see how identity is formed. There are, of course, many external clues.

One may be defined by one's relationship to other people. Son of so and so, brother or sister, friend, spouse, father or mother of someone.

One may be defined by institutions, e.g. a student of Wah Yan College, or membership in the Hong Kong University Alumni Association, member of Mon Sheong Foundation, of Hong Fook Mental Health Association, of Ontario Medical Association, etc.

One may be defined by one's employer: I.B.M., Ontario Hydro, the Public School Board, Scarborough Grace Hospital, to name a few.

One may be identified by one's legal status: a Canadian citizen, a landed immigrant, a visa student, etc.

One may be identified by what one is currently doing, i.e. diner at New World Restaurant, or shopper at Fairview Mall, or driver on Don Valley Parkway.

One may be identified by one's profession.

What is the problem with these identifiers? Some are transitory, some are group-based, and with the exception of biological identifiers, all are changeable.

Robert Browning (in his poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra") wrote:

"Thy body at its best, How far can that project thy soul on its lone way?"

How do you identify a soul?

ON CHANGING PROFESSIONS

To put my own change of career in perspective, I want to point out that I am not unique in having done so. Many of you have also changed careers, maybe even more than once. My better-half has changed career at least four times.

Going back to school as a mature student (age 45) took a certain amount of foolhardiness, a lot of work and sacrifice, and it caused a lot of stress to my spouse and family. A personal note of thanks to all those who helped me in my adventure.

"WASTE"

Many have said to me: "Isn't it quite a waste, to give up your psychiatric practice?"

No life experience is ever wasted. I believe that everything I have learned earlier is useful to me now. Certain skills are transferrable, e.g. counselling, dealing with people. Knowledge in one field may come in handy in another. The compartmentalization of knowledge is illogical because in the final analysis, all things are interconnected. When I face a challenging problem, I feel that I have been preparing for it all my life.

Many of you left Hong Kong in midlife, and may feel that your Hong Kong experience is wasted. Take heart, your knowledge and experience from Hong Kong will serve you well here. The only thing you have to do is to integrate it with what your new experience in Canada.

WHY CHANGE PROFESSION?

The question "why" came up many times. To tell the truth, I don't really know.

I spent 5 years in medical school, plus one year's internship, learning something about the human body, and what can go wrong.

I spent 2 years at Castle Peak Hospital in Hong Kong, plus 2 years of psychiatric residency in Canada, learning something about the human mind, and what can go wrong.

When I reached middle age, I became curious about the laws and institutions that govern my life, and of which I knew very little. At the age of 45, I asked myself: "Should I continue to do the same job for another 20 years, or should I explore a new domain?" The answer seemed obvious to me at the time, and I applied for law school.

BURN-OUT

Professional "burn-out" may have played a part, but it does not explain it all. I may be a little bit burnt out with psychiatric practice. However, the amount of effort and personal sacrifice involved in my adventure is simply too much to be a cure for a minor case of burn-out syndrome.

The paradox is that after I have become a lawyer, I actually enjoy my psychiatric practice more now, even though it means putting in extra hours on Saturdays.

Besides, Psychiatry is a wonderful vocation. It has given me the opportunity to learn about life without assuming the risks, i.e. by living vicariously through my patients who have taught me the endless ways of managing life's challenges. It has also given me considerable insight into how local Canadians think and act.

Above all, psychiatry has opened my eyes to the remarkable strength of the human spirit which can overcome incredible odds in spite of serious mental disorders. William Osler was absolutely right when he said that patients are our best teachers.

Mental Health For All

Psychiatry remains my "first love" as a career choice, as it were. While the human body is made up of cells, I believe that life is made of precious moments. Physical disease kills cells, and mental illness destroys those precious moments that make up life.

I went to Castle Peak Hospital in 1969, and I have walked in the field of psychiatry for 32 years. I believe that all pleasure and pain are felt in the mind. "Mental health for all" is my dream. It means that everyone can have equal access to mental health, regardless of cultural and language barriers. That is why for over 20 years, I have worked as a volunteer for Hong Fook Mental Health Association. It is a charitable non-profit organization which operates community mental health programs in the Greater Toronto Area for the purpose of helping patients to reintegrate into society after serious illnesses, to prevent relapses, and to promote mental health in five target communities: Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese and Cambodian.

How do I see mental patients? The more I practise psychiatry, the more normal the patients seem to me. If you meet a blind person, you would not consider him "abnormal". He is just an ordinary person having to cope with a visual disability. The same principle applies to a mentally ill person, who is just an ordinary person having to cope with a mental disability.

After a stroke, people need rehabilitation, such as speech therapy and physiotherapy. After major mental illness, people need help in re-learning social skills, vocational skills, and other life skills. A culture-sensitive and ethno-specific agency like Hong Fook has much to contribute to the rehabilitation of psychiatric patients, and to the promotion of mental health in our communities.

LEGAL PROFESSION

I was called to the bar in February, 1994, and I have practised law since then.

Why do people travel? To see new scenery, to meet new people, and to learn a new language. I have entered a new society, namely, the "law society", which has its own language, culture and

frame of reference. In other words, I have learned to think like a lawyer.

There are many nasty jokes about psychiatrists, and then I have discovered that there are even more nasty jokes about lawyers. There is even a website dedicated to such jokes (called "Lawyer Joke Emporium at <http://www.nolo.com/humor/jokes.cfm>). But all jokes aside, I have gained a lot of respect for the legal profession. The vast majority of lawyers that I have met are honest, hard working and intelligent people.

What do I like about it? It challenges my problem solving skills and people skills. There is so much to learn every day. Each case makes me an instant expert on the client's problems, that is, I would have to do research on the client's business and everything that may relate to his problems.

ROLE PLAYING GAME

We all go through a phase when we are too strongly identified with our respective professions. We think and talk of nothing else to the dismay of our companions. The danger at this stage is to take ourselves too seriously; not only are we a bore, but we may become so tunnel-visioned that we can no longer progress in our personal growth.

I have learned that every time I take myself too seriously I make mistakes. The only way for me to function properly is to be relaxed yet focused. In other words, I do best when I am merely role playing.

I remember watching my young children at play in Edward's Gardens. The grass was green, the children were laughing, running free.

Looking at my children now, they are older, but in my mind, they are still at play. The playground is bigger, the rules are more complex, but nevertheless, they are at play.

Looking at adults, the playground, as it were, is infinitely more complex, and the stakes are much higher. The rules are more subtle, often unfathomable, but nevertheless, we are at play.

Have you come across role playing games of teenage children? I find them fascinating to watch. For example, Dungeons and Dragons, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Startrek, Dr. Who, to name a few.

A role playing game involves the assignment of a role to each player, who is given a set of attributes, assets, liabilities, strengths and weaknesses. The game usually involves a quest, which may be the finding of a hidden treasure, rescuing of a damsel in distress, or both. At the start of each game, the roles can be reassigned.

William Shakespeare wrote, in *As You Like It*, : "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players".

When we are adults, the career that is assigned to us by destiny is similar to the role assigned to a child in a role playing game. The process is just as random and haphazard. The meaning to our identity just as peripheral.

A career is not sufficient to form the basis of our identities. Therefore we should feel free in picking a new career with the same abandon of a child in a role playing game. In the words of Robert Browning:

Once more on my adventure brave and new
Fearless and unperplexed,
When I wage battle next,
What weapons to select, what armour to indue.

There is a very good reason in terms of mental health for my position. If one's identity is merged with one's career, what happens when one is forced to change career, e.g. due to immigration, retirement or sickness? It would be devastating to lose ones career and identity in one fall swoop.

I believe that to view one's identity as distinct and separate from one's career is essential to achieving mental health in midlife and old age.

WHAT, THEN, IS THE QUEST?

Back to the question, who am I, what am I, if not a psychiatrist?

My identity ought to be something more central to my being, which is not affected by what I do, or by who I relate to. For clues, I read from the Gospel according to Matthew, c. 16, v. 26:

"What does it profit a man if he wins the whole world, but suffers the loss of his own soul?"

In some translations, the word "soul" is replaced by the word "spirit". In the Latin Bible, the word "anima" is used, which has the nuances of "soul, spirit, or essence".

Matthew points out the futility of worldly success, and highlights the importance of one's soul, spirit and essence. To find this essence, worldly possessions are actually a hindrance. The Gospels mention a number of times that one has to dispose of one's worldly goods in order to save one's soul.

Another method of finding one's spirit is to be a child again. I am not talking about the fountain of youth here. I mean the ability to perceive and think like a child. With a great deal of imagination, I try to remember what it was like when I was a child. Everything seemed fresh. Colours were sharper, brighter. Food was tastier.

In the Gospel according to Mark, c. 10, v. 13-15:

"Let the children come to me, he said, do not keep them back; the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you truthfully, the man who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a child, will never enter into it."

Please excuse my liberty and naivete, as I interpret this passage as such: only if we can see and think like children, then we can find our souls, i.e. the Kingdom of God.

To me, it means we must keep an open mind vis-à-vis our identity, to perceive the world as it is, and not permit our own expectations and desires to colour our vision.

CONCLUSION

At midlife, we should feel liberated by the knowledge that our identity does not depend on what we do, and will not be destroyed when we stop doing it. By the same token, our value as people goes much beyond our individual achievements, but lies in being individuals in our own right. We appreciate not only the spirit dwelling within each one of us, but also the spirit inherent in other human beings, whatever their station in life, whether they are rich or poor, fortunate or unfortunate.

For the first time, we confront our own mortality, and learn to appreciate our very existence. Time is limited. I feel a sense of urgency, that we can no longer take anything or anyone for granted. It is time to consolidate our gains, to make peace, or relax one's grip on our children for they have their destiny quite separate from ours.

In this context, the first question posed, "What have I achieved in life so far?", is actually irrelevant.

What lies ahead?

Let us live life to the fullest, to feast our senses on the world, and to look at the world with the freshness of a child, to see things like it is for the first time.

What is the freedom of midlife? We cannot be free from our children, nor from other responsibilities of life. The freedom is in our attitude, in our outlook. The life experience we have gained so far will serve us in good stead.

May I end by borrowing from the words of Robert Browning:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand

Who saith "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all nor be afraid!"

Thank you.