

# Preface

It has been more than a month now since I left the office of the Vice-Chancellor and President of the University. I am taking time to pondering on my past and I am planning my work ahead of me.

Is this book my memoir? No. Is it a collection of my blog over these years? More than that. This is my reflection as the principal of a university in the past seven years. It is also a gift from me to the youth.

I have always wanted to become a physician, since I was small. Never dreamed of being a teacher, never! Not to mention being a principal of a school, leading a university.

2003 was a turning point in my life. The pandemic of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) has brought pain and attacks to many families. It made me re-evaluate my values and my views about life. From the calamity, I realised that education and properly nurturing our youngsters, is the only way for mankind to survive future crisis and disasters. Therefore, I decided to leave the classroom and blackboard,

and really go into ‘education’. What I am going to teach, or maybe I should say to share, is not medical knowledge and professional skills, but lessons that I have learned as a person. And also, what I think about the meaning of life and death, disease, poverty and suffering.

That was my motive, and my dream, with which I started to engage our college students, medical as well as non-medical, by participating various college activities. Since I joined The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1992, I was assigned to be a member of Shaw College. The purpose of college life is to put teachers and students from different walks of life to live and work together. Through extra-curricular activities, communal dining and service learning, the colleges set to build a platform for whole-person education of students. And my close-range contact with our youth started to sprout.

In 2007 winter, I took off the white coat from hospital, and the halo of a university chair professor, to join the ‘Thousand-people Feast’ of Shaw College. Since I have never had much college activities before, I had absolutely no idea what ‘Thousand-people Feast’ was about. I eventually found out, by surprise, that this is certainly not a formal dinner nor an all-you-can-eat reception, it was literally a wild party organised by the students. Yes, it was a ‘wild’ party because there were singing, dancing, jumping, chanting and laughing in the whole evening. In the midst of the party, I was forced to sing a song on the

stage, the first time in my whole life. The next day I found that video of the whole party, including my singing, was uploaded on YouTube and circulated widely in the social media. For someone like me, who has always been sober and serious, at work in hospital and teaching in classroom, this evening had crossed the line of my self-image and opened a new page in my life.

Despite the fact that I am almost thirty years older than these young people, despite that we come from different backgrounds, despite that I was actually the chief examiner in the final examination, despite the fact that we had hardly met before, not to mention close encounter . . . that day, I found I fell in love with these kids. And these kids also embraced an old man almost the same age as their fathers. That is something unthinkable to me. That night, I opened my heart to the kids who suddenly became my own children. I am keen to share with them all that I have learned over the decades. If possible, I am keen to 'grow' with them.

Day by day, students got acquainted with me. My engagement with them increased by the day: singing, cooking and eating, hiking and many others. I started to get used to their lifestyle, understanding their ways of thinking. On the other hand, they started to get interested in this 'old man'. From my days of studies, my choice of career, my personal philosophy and my values, they seemed willing to listen, to

ask questions, no heat debate, no dispute, no barrier. Our relationship started from here.

2008 was the year when I was nominated as Head of Shaw College, quite a pleasant surprise. For two years, I had the golden opportunities to be with 1,200 university students. We ate together, we lived together, we grew up together. I was totally immersed into the college life, participating in all kinds of activities, from sports to cultural, from student-organised parties to formal festivals. To be honest, I thoroughly enjoyed this short period of eighteen months out of my twenty years of university life. I found my own student life and energy again.

But also at this time, the Hong Kong society has changed insidiously. Returned to the Motherland for 20 years, the real estate market in Hong Kong has not stopped soaring. Living becomes expensive and unaffordable. The discrepancy between the poor and the rich widens every day. For those who received higher education, their salary after graduation had hardly increased over these two decades. After almost twenty years of hard work at school, university graduates in Hong Kong found that they cannot even afford to support themselves and to build their own family. The opportunity for upward mobility for young people is closing down. Young people's grievances turned into satisfaction and even anger against the government. Difficulties to find jobs, unequal opportunities in the society, social injustice and many

others, fuel the fire of discontentment of our youth. The school campuses inevitably turned into a battlefield of social disputes. It is at this time that I received the appointment as the principal of my university.

In 2010 Fall, by the nomination of Prof. Ma Lin, I accepted the office of the Vice-Chancellor and President of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Through sincere dialogue, mutual respect and understanding, I hope I would be able to communicate with our youth to solve their problems. A book written by Harry R. Lewis entitled *Excellence without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* has touched me deeply in my heart. This professor of computer science and master of Harvard College criticises that the most famous universities have put research and technology commercialisation at their top agenda. They have taken university ranking in league tables and graduate salary as their key performance indexes. On the other hand, they have forgotten that nurturing teenagers to become a responsible adult, with the ability of independent thinking and responsibility, should be their mandate.

In my inauguration ceremony as Vice-Chancellor, I said the following: ‘Radical changes are occurring in university education worldwide. A silent crisis has started when nations thirst for economic growth, researchers are driven by the search for resources more than curiosity, universities look up to rankings more than nurturing young

souls, and professors are rewarded primarily by their ‘productivity’ rather than their scholarship. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will only be producing revenue-generating products and individuals, rather than responsible citizens; responsible citizens who can think for themselves, respect those who are different and understand others’ sufferings and needs. On the other hand, the imaginative and creative capability, the humanistic aspects of scientific research, and the capacity for rigorous critical thinking will diminish. The value of education will be lost.’

Since taking up the job, I spent a lot of time talking to students, building mutual trust and a platform for dialogue. I see this as the most important mission in my tenure as the principal. In one of my graduation ceremonies, I gave these departing words: ‘I pray that after you leave school, you will live a life that is worth living. . . . First, *live a simple life*. . . . Let me remind you that happiness does not commensurate with money and material wealth. A cosy home, simple clothing and healthy meals are the best you can ask for. Living a simple life instead of craving for luxury is more likely to give you unspeakable satisfaction. Second, *live a noble life*. There are dark sides of our society: unfairness, exploitation, deception. I urge you to honour your alma mater by holding yourself in a dignified way. Take no advantage of the underprivileged and be fair to everyone. Do no harm to yourself and

to others. A noble life is one with a clear conscience, an indulgence in justice and an uncompromised standard in morality. It is a rewarding life. Third, *live a humble life*. Humble as a servant to serve the others as needed. Always think of the betterment of the society, our nation and mankind as a whole. A humble person does not insist on his own view, but listen to the others with an open heart. A great person does not always look up to the summit of the highest mountain, but kneel down to wash the feet of his brothers.' And that was a blessing from the bottom of my heart.

In 2011, I lined up a group of passionate teachers in the campus to establish the I·CARE programme. This is a series of campaigns to promote humanity in the campus, through exploration in reading, through immersion into cultural activities, and through learning by serving the community. There was one year that the I·CARE programme launched a 'Flower Festival'. I saw students playing Western and Eastern music, there were others reciting poetry and songs, there were plays and dances. I was moved by the atmosphere of beauty of humanity. On that day I said, 'Young people should be romantic; university life are meant to be romantic.' Of course, by romantic I mean, while growing and learning at schools, students should try not to be too pragmatic, too calculated. Give your dream and your goal some room for achievement. 'Live out what it means to be a human being.' After that day, students

often quote my ‘romantic’ verse to organise various activities (including courtship!). I was gratified by the ever-increasing atmosphere of humanity in our campus.

In 2014, the serenity of campus life was smashed by the ‘Occupy Central’ movement in Hong Kong. On 28 September, seeing numerous students on the streets protesting and boycotting classes, my heart sank. I wrote in my blog: ‘My students, my children, please leave the street.’ The Occupy Central movement is an important page in the history of Hong Kong, and it is also a watershed of my tenure as principal. After the social unrest period of more than eighty days, the political landscape of Hong Kong has changed, the relationship of me with my students has also changed. In the social media and on the radio, students criticised me as losing my principle and my integrity. They thought I have stifled the freedom of expression and bowed to the government. The words they used in the social media, often critical but sometimes insulting, have broken my heart. For me, the bottom line is, they are still our children, our students and our future. I can understand their anger, but I cannot endorse the abuses.

Yet, my passion for the youth has not diminished, my trust for them has not been reduced. Although the outrageous behaviour of a small number of young people is disappointing, I still believe in the majority of local-born young men and women. They are lovely kids



with dreams, compassion and justice in their hearts. What they need is good education to guide them to develop their values and their morals, to teach them to respect and accommodate different opinions, to train them to be strong and resilient. Our younger generations need to understand the give-and-take between individuals and the community, to realise the importance of culture and identity, and to be cognizant that every right implies a responsibility.

Childhood should be the golden age but regrettably, there are not many happy kids out there these days. Every time when there is a case of student committing suicide, out of depression or desperation, my heart throbs heavily. I remember there was one such occasion that I pay a visit of condolence to a couple whose kid had taken her life in her own hands, I witnessed the devastation of parents. Since then, I often advice parents, 'Let's give our children a happy childhood! Happiness is a rare commodity in life. Let them dream! Even if the dream doesn't bring money or fame. To live a happy life is more important than to live one crowned with achievements, isn't it? To toil and sacrifice one's youth and happiness in exchange for a shelter of less than 600 square feet is not worth it, is it?' I advise young people, 'Life is a football match. To win the game, every team member has to find his/her own place in the team, he/she should know the field or environment, he/she needs to play as a team, and get up from where he/she falls. Most importantly, he/she needs to understand we

may lose today but there is always a tomorrow.’

In 2017, I felt that I have little to offer in this job. In those areas that I set my target, I have already given them my best shots. So, I decided to step down. Although I am no longer in the leading position, I still feel dearly for our young people. I choose to believe that our next generations are someone with dreams, innovation, energy and fairness in their heart. Looking back on the path that I have gone through, there were days with warm sunshine on my face, there were also days that I was hit by rain and gusty wind. There is a time to start, there is a time to call it an end. I like the beautiful words of Su Shi as it pretty much describes my situation today.

Heed not to the tree-rustling and leaf-lashing rain,  
Why not stroll along, whistle and sing under its rein.  
Lighter and better suited than horses are straw sandals and  
a bamboo staff, Who's afraid?  
A palm-leaf plaited cape provides enough to misty weather  
in life sustain.  
A thorny spring breeze sobers up the spirit,  
I feel a slight chill,  
The setting sun over the mountain offers greetings still.  
Looking back over the bleak passage survived,  
The return in time. Shall not be affected by windswept rain or shine.  
*(translated by Betty Tseng)*

As I was packing my stuff and moving my office, I got this opportunity of reviewing many photos and the blogs I wrote over these years. It brings back fond memories. When I flew back in time to the days when I wrote these blogs, I recalled the critiques made by the newspapers and editorials, I felt reminiscent of the comments made by colleagues, alumni and students, and the feelings are mixed. What I am certain is that my view about university education has remained unchanged, my wish and expectations to our youngsters have not wavered, my obsession about life and its good meaning has stood the test of time. Hoping that these blogs would recall some discussion on social issues and reflections in life, I resolved to publish these blogs. My desire is to bring readers back to the time and scene in the past, the social environment of Hong Kong, the turmoil in the university campus, the anger and challenges of our young men and women, ponder on it, and then look forward to our next step.

**Joseph Sung**

Spring 2018, in Houston