

In memoriam GD Balakrishnan (1930-2016) & Helen Ong Yong Sang (1928-1998)

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We bade our final farewell to my dad today. My parents are now together again.

We would like to thank all of you for the solace from your kind condolence messages. I am sorry that I haven't been able to respond individually.

I made this tribute in honour of my father's life.

My father was the most cheerful, caring and loyal man I have ever known.

Everyone who has ever met my father will remember his smile and his infectious optimism.

Everyone who sought help from him will remember his wise counsel and helping hands.

If you ever found yourself in trouble, you could always count on my dad to loyally stand by you.

"Lord, you have given me all that I could ever want, and more than I could ever ask for. "

This was the prayer he made more than once - and most recently on New Year's Day 2016 when he held his great grandson for the first time.

This is a prayer that only a faithful man who is truly happy and contented could make.

He lived a full, happy and meaningful life.

He was a teacher, a lawyer, a dedicated church leader and, most of all, a loving husband, a wonderful father, doting grandfather and great grandfather.

He was born in pre-war Singapore on the 15th May 1930. His grandfather was a tailor who brought his father to Singapore a century ago. His father worked at the government printing office.

He spent the war years in India, escaping on one of the last ships to leave Singapore before the Japanese invasion in 1942.

On his return, he studied at St Joseph's Institution. He did reasonably well, but the family could not afford to put him through university.

TEACHER

So he joined the Teachers Training College in 1950. He said, "It was the best that we could do at the time".

He was initially posted to Griffiths Primary School. However the principal thought he was a rabble rouser who was standing for elections for the Teachers Union. So he was transferred to Bukit Panjang Primary School where it was believed a strict principal could keep an eye on him. He was put in charge of the class with the most disciplinary problems. But he won the students over, and ended up being highly regarded by the principal. His students told me he was strict but never shouted at them.

Even to this day, when I walk around Bukit Panjang, people come to me, shake my hand warmly and tell me they remember my parents teaching them - and that they truly cared for their students.

Of course, the best thing about Bukit Panjang Primary School is that there is where my parents met.

My dad recounts how my mum would take a 'Pah Wang Chia' (pirate taxi) from the junction of Jalan Besar Road and Rochor Road that would bring her all the way to Bukit Panjang. Today, you can take the Downtown Line MRT - much faster, but less romantic than a pirate taxi.

He made sure he caught the same taxi at the same time each day. And later when he got a car, he offered to give a ride to my mum everyday. He also offered to tutor my mum in English Literature so that she could pass the qualifying examinations. But it wasn't long before my grandmother noticed that this Indian guy was spending way too much time with her Chinese daughter.

In 1950s Singapore, inter-racial couples were unusual. And so my parents often told me they had to wait 7 long years before getting married in 1960. Just this morning, we found a Christmas card that he had sent my mum in 1954!

My father joined the inaugural part-time Law course at the University of Singapore in 1957. He graduated in 1963, but never practiced Law until he retired from the Civil Service in 1986.

He loved education. Continued to teach, was promoted to Principal of Ama Keng Primary School, subsequently became an Inspector of Schools and Staff Officer at the Ministry of Education.

He then became a lecturer at the Institute of Education - and I have now met many generations of teachers who recall fondly his impact on their teaching careers.

LAWYER

He was one of the oldest 'pupils' in a law firm in 1986, and was called to the Bar in 1987. Law gave him a second career, and he ran his own legal practice well into his eighties.

The field may have changed, but actually he was still doing what he did best all his life - giving help, providing timely appropriate advice and standing up for what is right.

CHURCH

Church was a very big part of his life.

He served so many years together with Rev Isaac Lim. He was the Chairman of the Wesley Local Church Executive Committee and Vice President of TRAC (Trinity Annual Conference).

There were three things he pushed for very hard, and sometimes somewhat forcefully.

He was always concerned for the welfare of the pastors. He fought for better terms of employment for pastors - believing that pastors deserved to be treated on par with teachers and principals.

He also believed in expanding the mission field for the church, especially through education. He served as the Chairman of the Methodist Church Education Board.

In 2003 the government offered Hwa Chong, SJI and ACS the option of starting an International School on condition that they raised significant funds upfront. There were doubts about the financial viability of this venture and a heated debate ensued. My father stood up and told the church leaders - "As long as there is a cross on top of the building, we should proceed". Today, when I witness the success and growth of ACS (International), I think of my father with pride.

He was heavily involved in the Seniors Ministry of the Methodist Church. He was the founding chairman of the TRAC Board of Seniors Ministry. Today, many Methodist Churches have 'GYM' - the 'Glowing Years Ministry'. This ministry provides seniors with fellowship, fulfilling activities and mutual support.

FAMILY

I was reminded of how deeply he loved my mother when my son, Mark, shared his last prayer with him last week. He was on a ventilatory mask, but called my son up close to pray with him. At the end of the prayer, he reminded my son to "cherish your wife all the days of your life". And he did - all the days of his life.

I was a difficult child - a fussy reluctant eater, an obsessive perfectionist and overly attached to him. Frankly, I think I made the most demands on my parents time and attention as a young child.

But dad was always super patient, always took the trouble to reason with us instead of simply putting his foot down.

I recall regular trips with him to places like Magnolia snack bar and Komala Vilas - in search of food that I would like to eat.

He instilled in me the love of reading. He bought tons of books, especially when he spent two years in 1967 and 1974 studying in the UK. He subscribed to Readers Digest, Time and Newsweek magazine when I was in primary school.

He bought me my first computer - an Apple II plus. It cost him more than a month's salary but he took a loan.

He coached me for debates. We had many fierce debates at the dining table. He believed in speaking up forcefully for the good and the right.

I consulted him on every single major decision of my life. He gave sound advice but always left me to make the final call.

He was attentive to all his children. He was always there for us. My brother and sisters will all have their personal accounts of what he did for them. He appreciated that each of us was unique, and had to make our own way in life. He gave to each of us according to our need. He was proud of us all. And he continued to care for each and every one of you. I recall so many private conversations where he would share his concerns for your families.

My parents prioritised family time. Dad would send and fetch all the children to and from school everyday. He specially ordered a car with a bench seat so that all seven of us could be in the same car - three in front, four at the

back. For the first eighteen years, all family holidays were road trips to Malaysia, usually with my cousins in a convoy. We spent so much time together as a family. Values, norms, behaviour patterns, identity and memories were transmitted.

We had family meals together. Even after we all got married and moved, my mum and him made sure there was always a family lunch every Sunday. Chinese New Year Eve Reunion dinner was a compulsory fixture. My dad was not Chinese, but he insisted on maintaining this tradition even after my mum passed away.

My parents did not make demands. They inspired by example.

Even today, everything I do for my own children is modelled on what my parents did for me. I know that I have fallen short of my father's wonderful standards of fatherhood.

Both he and my mother were wonderful grandparents. They made it quite clear that it was the parents responsibility to discipline their own children, but the grandparents' privilege to spoil the grandchildren.

I still recall when we first had Natalie. We were still living with my parents. Natalie was almost as difficult a baby as I was. When she was fussing and inconsolable, we would come out of the room and find my parents waiting quietly outside the door - not interfering but making themselves available.

He was so thrilled when Theo, his great-grandchild was born. Throughout his illness, his face always lit up whenever he saw him or watched videos and photos of him.

Mark reminded us the other night that Theo would never remember him the same way we do. But the way my dad lived his life defines the way we live our lives and our beliefs. The point is that we will be a living legacy of my father.

As the song goes - 'Let us leave to those behind us the heritage of faithfulness passed on through Godly lives Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful May the fire of our devotion light their way May the footprints that we leave Lead them to believe And the lives we live inspire them to obey'

THANKSGIVING

My father was an old school gentleman in the fullest sense of the word. He was unfailingly polite. He did not offer empty courtesies, but sincere concern. Everyone who met him saw his smile and felt his heart. He paid no attention to race, language, religion or class. That is why he had so many diverse friends for life.

My family would like to thank you all for the many decades of love, friendship and support that you all gave my parents. You all know how deeply they treasured loyalty, sincerity and steadfastness in friendship. You all know who you are. The journeys in life you took together. The things you did for one another. The battles in life. The good times, the tough times. The love, the pain. All of you will have sacred memories.

The doctors and nurses who took great care of him all became far more. You were friends, almost sons and daughters. I saw the tender loving care you bestowed on him. And I knew that he had a personal relationship with each and every one of you.

My family can never thank you all enough.

In this moment of sorrow, let us try to be happy.

My father repeatedly told me "Life has been good. All is well".

Bishop Solomon messaged me. "We praise God for him and take comfort he has found his eternal rest in the God he served."

Have a wonderful reunion with Mum. Wait for us.

We love you dad and mum.