

to the memory of Liew Mai Heng

by

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*You sought truths
Beautiful and eternal,
At levels of abstraction,
In realms of perfection
Fit for immortals;
Energies channeled
for others
Whatever little left
for yourself;
Precious moments
sacrificed
For others to keep;
The Bodhisattva
watching over
With calm and
compassion ...
A life lived,
A memory etched,
A spirit instilled.*

- Leong Yu Kiang

The year was 1984. I was a 14 year old teenager.

I boarded a bus and sat beside a young man. I was never a talkative person, and am certainly not the type who would spontaneously converse with a fellow passenger. On that particular day, for reasons which are still beyond my comprehension, I started a conversation with a young gentleman who was seated next to me. Both of us expressed an interest in mathematics. (In retrospect, this is the strangest possible opening topic which anyone would use in the first conversation with a complete stranger.) He turned out to be a teacher of a junior college at a rival school, and I viewed him with the immaturity and childishness of a young schoolboy looking at someone from a rival school.

One of the aspects of my character is that I respect loyalty. Throughout the four years of my secondary school, I was single-minded in wanting to continue my education with the affiliated junior college. On top of that, I persuaded some of my schoolmates to my philosophy. However, a new principal took over the school during my last year, and implemented some policies which I strongly disagreed. My disagreement

was so strong that I eventually decided not to study at the affiliated school. As luck would have it, I signed up at that particular rival school. I again met my fellow passenger. He then had become my mathematics teacher. I found out his name to be Mr Liew Mai Heng.

Mr Liew turned out to be a most pleasant and, perhaps, unusual teacher. He was not the typical teacher who walked into the class, taught all the necessary theorems, solved a few problems and then disappeared from the class. Neither was he the type to force feed his students and drill them into doing all the standard examination type questions. No, definitely not. He displayed a genuine interest in mathematics, and made every effort to ensure that the students enjoyed the subject. Lectures were not limited to topics which appeared only in examinations. We were taught different ways of looking at the same theorems and problems and even discussed the historical development of mathematics. To make the lectures even more interesting, cartoons were drawn to illustrate the meaning of the otherwise heavy and boring theorems. His tutorial questions always contained interesting and unusual problems which required in-depth thinking beyond the mere application of standard textbook theorems. (Of course, the weaker students called these the "killer problems".) I always looked forward to each and every one of his lessons.

What made me mentioned Mr Liew in this article was the fact that he was to be one of the Junior College teaching instructors who were to look after the Singapore Team for the International Mathematics Olympiad. Historically, Singapore had never taken part in this competition and that was the first time the country organised a team. No one had any experience at all, nor did anyone really knew what to expect from the competition.

To prepare us for the competition, Mr Liew conducted training lessons with some other teachers for this elite team on a weekly basis and we would spend our time debating and discussing solutions to the problems. He was a most humble and encouraging instructor. Often he would unreservedly praise the solutions given by some of the students, (even though his own solutions were most elegant) to encourage the students and boost their morale. There was never

an air of superiority in him. He mixed with us as if he was one of us, rather than our instructor.

During my second year in Junior College (in 1988), Mr Liew suddenly fell sick and ended up in hospital. It turned out that he had cancer of the kidney and this was a relapse. The essence of life slowly drained away from his body. Within months, he lost his hair and a frightening amount of weight. His strength left him and he quivered uncontrollably when he spoke. He could hardly walk without support. It was a very sad and frightening sight.

Nevertheless, Mr Liew remained strong of will to the end. Despite his weakening health, he continued to encourage the team to work hard. He always found the strength to give us encouragement and cheer us up. His spirit never left him.

I was deeply touched by him and made it a point to visit him at least once every week. He lived with his sister quite far away in Woodlands, so the total travelling time per visit exceeded two hours. Initially, I didn't mind, but as the deadline for my own A-level examination drew near, I began to feel the pressure of time.

On 16 August 1988, I paid Mr Liew a final visit. He was already going into and out of a coma. I could see the sadness in him, and he knew that he would not last long. Despite that, he gave me a smile and we had a short, but pleasant talk. I could not stay very long. I could see that he was tired.

The week after, my common tests began and I was ill prepared for my mathematics paper. I might have found a place on the Singapore Team, but the reality was that I was a terribly lazy fellow who put things off to the last minute. I gave Mr Liew's house a call and his sister informed me that he was in and out of coma more frequently. As I was pressed for time, I decided not to visit him that week. I would try to make up for it the next week.

Mr Liew passed away that week on Friday, 26 August, 1988.

It was a very strange feeling. All along, I knew that he would not last very long and that his last day would arrive. The doctors had long given up hope for his recovery, but it was still a shock when I finally received the news.

I was sad, so very sad. In the midst of my sorrow, I became angry with myself. Despite my so-called analytical ability, I had not been able to realise that the value of a life is far more important and valuable than any tests or examinations. Throughout my life, there had always been those who have told me of the importance of living. Money, fame or honour lost can always be gained later if worked at, but once a life is gone, that is the end.

Nevertheless, it was Mr Liew's death which finally hammered this message home for me. That was it. Mr Liew was dead. Gone forever. No second chance. I had just exchanged my very last chance to see him for the sake of preparing for a mathematics test. I can't even remember what my scores were as I sit to write this article.

Ten years have passed since then. In retrospect, Mr Liew had taught me his most important and valuable lesson. Always value each and every moment of the time which you spend with your loved ones and never take them for granted by neglecting them. Life has the highest value, and it is also irreplaceable. When the chance is lost, it is gone forever.

