9-2004

Learning to live a life that's full

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The Straits Times (Singapore)

September 22, 2004 Wednesday

SECTION: Commentary

LENGTH: 819 words

HEADLINE: **Learning to live a life that's full**

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BODY:

WHILE Singaporeans have not been known to be a philosophical people, the age-old question of the meaning of life surfaced recently. In his National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong talked about the importance of 'learning to live a life', of 'learning to be a full person' or, as the Chinese say, xue zhuo ren. Mr Lee suggested that this, and not the mere preparation of the young for a job, was the task of education.

Whether or not we ask ourselves what it means to live a meaningful life, this issue is implicitly addressed in our commitments. Our choices as to how to employ our limited time and resources testify to a practical commitment to specific views as to what our lives mean.

While teaching a legal philosophy class a few weeks ago, I asked my students whether they thought they lived a meaningful life. To set the context, the subject matter was Professor John Finnis' theory of natural law.

Prof Finnis suggests that a legal system should provide a framework that enables each person to secure seven goods essential for human flourishing, or a meaningful life. These goods - knowledge, life, play, aesthetic experience, sociability, practical reasonableness and religion or a concern for a higher order - are supposed to be self-evident.

While I had meant it in class as a prelude to the concept of law, I was heartened that some of my students were more engaged by the deeper questions about the meaning of their own lives. One pondered aloud outside of class: 'Does this mean my life (as I've lived it) is meaningless?'

I am neither surprised nor distressed by the interest over the question - cliched as one might have thought it should seem to university students in their early 20s. In a post-modern culture more accustomed to doing than thinking, in which the worth or value of a project tends to be set by peer, parental or societal standards, the question is usually not addressed precisely because it is regarded as trite.

In view of these circumstances, how can one guide another how to live a life? Socrates, in the Platonic dialogue, Gorgias, suggests that the best kind of life is the examined life. I think there are three broad principles.

First, one's commitments should be authentic. As Education Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam reminded the audience at an NUS Students' Political Association event last week, passion and doing what one loves are paramount.

To add to that, determine for yourself what is worth committing to and, having done

that, persevere in measuring what you do by those standards rather than the different standards of the world.

The second principle is, in determining what is of worth, your achievements shouldn't constrain you from pursuing your calling. For example, being a skilled professional who might earn much more in a conventional job should not stop you from pursuing a less conventional calling - after the issue has been given careful thought.

The third principle comes from the sub-text in a recent movie, A Beautiful Mind. Throughout much of the movie about the life of Nobel Prize winner in economics, Professor John Nash, one is led to believe that his code-breaking work was for real, and it was perhaps the secrecy surrounding it that was part cause of his mental condition.

This is before he meets his psychiatrist. The depths of his delusions are dramatically revealed only when his wife barges into his office to see magazine snippings and scribblings all over the walls, clearly the work of a man out of touch with reality. In that poignant moment, she asks: 'Is this all he's been doing every day - cutting up magazines?'

The utter worthlessness and futility of his life's work, which had hitherto seemed so impressive, hits us hard because we had been drawn into Prof Nash's world. Until the moment of revelation, we, too, assessed his work through his eyes, using his standards. We were, like him, deceived. When truth was unveiled, we were shocked because what had seemed like gold was but dross.

Albeit unintended, this is a powerful metaphor for a life that is lived unexamined, without a standard for a guide, or with a standard that one finds to be false at the end of one's life. Will one then find that life has been spent just 'cutting up magazines'?

So the third principle is this: The possibility of a different standard at our deathbeds, morbid as it may sound, ought to compel us to realise those things that truly matter to us.

The alternative? Hugh Grant's character in the movie, About A Boy, spends his time on leisure and nothing else. In one moment of angst-filled revelation, he remarks that all in all, he leads a very full life: It's just that it doesn't mean anything.

In your hands lies the power to choose life. Today.

The writer dedicates this to her jurisprudence class of 28 enthusiastic National University of Singapore students, who are a delight to teach.