

Andrew Phang

NAVIGATING LIFE

Reflections and Stories



Illustrations by Christine Phang

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To the Memory of My Parents,

Mr Phang Sing Eng and Mrs Peggy Phang

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CONTENTS

Preface	11
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Relationships

1 No Crushed Sugar Cane – How to Treat Others	18
2 Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries – Being Treated by Others	22
3 A ‘Royal’ Sacrifice, A Priceless Love – True Romantic Love	25
4 Climbing Ships, Carrying Boys – Parental Love	29
5 You are Indispensable to Your Family – Importance of Family	34
6 Walking Around in Someone Else’s Skin – Perspectives	37
7 Little Kindnesses – Power of Kindness	40
8 Before it is Too Late – Not Procrastinating	43
9 Receiving the Wisdom of the Ages – Importance of Mentorship	48

Values and Disciplines

10 Always Do the Right Thing – Integrity	52
11 Do Your Best, Regardless ... – True Excellence	55
12 Being Transparent – Sincerity	59
13 Yesterday’s Newspaper Headlines, Today’s Fish and Chips Wrappers – Fame and Humility	61
14 Uncommon Wisdom – Meaning of Wisdom	65
15 A Life that Goes Over into Other Lives – Imparting Wisdom	68

16 Do Not Hurry; Do Stop and Reflect – Patience	72
17 Keeping Life Simple – Living Life	74
18 Speak Only in Order to Edify and/or Uplift – Speech	77
19 Neither Envy nor Fretting, but Committing Instead” – Contentment	81
20 Beneficial ‘Forgetfulness’ – Handling Injustice	84
21 A Shattered Cup Can be Mended – Adversity	88
22 Do Not Despair, and Continue to Live Life Meaningfully – An Imperfect World	92

Work, Service and Rest

23 Of Cleaners, Locksmiths and Calling – Work	96
24 Serving Like a Fool – Service	101
25 How are You? – Meaning of Appreciation and Recognition	104
26 A Happy Worker is an Effective Worker – Further Reflection on Work	108
27 The Meaninglessness of ‘Busyness’ – Yet Further Reflection on Work	111
28 Jumbled Medals – Meaning of Success	114
29 Mountain Top or Mountain Help? – Further Reflection on Meaning of Success	118
30 Rest for Life – Sleep	122

Finding Meaning in Life

31 “The Failure of ‘Failure’” – Yet Further Reflection on Meaning of Success	128
32 The Limits of Reason and the Mystery of Life – Faith and Hope	131

33 The Limits of Human Knowledge	135
34 The Limits of Human Knowledge – Further Reflection	140
35 Looking Beyond Ourselves	143
36 Like Candles Burning Brightly – Living a Meaningful Life	147

Reflections on Life in a Time of Pandemic

37 Choose Life	152
38 Wealth Cannot Buy Health	155
39 Worldly Status Cannot Guarantee Health	157
40 Rest, Reflect, Recalibrate	160
41 A Reminder on the Importance of Family	164
42 An Opportunity to Show Kindness	166
43 Wisdom and Technology	169
44 On Life and Death (1) – Time is Limited	172
45 On Life and Death (2) – Life is Precious	175
46 On Life and Death (3) – Uncertainty and Randomness of Life?	178
47 On Life and Death (4) – Creation of Life	182
48 On Life and Death (5) – Existence of God	186

About the Author	191
-------------------------	------------

About the Illustrator	191
------------------------------	------------

Preface

As a lecturer, I found it especially enriching to talk not only about the law but also about life (and, in return, to hear from my students about both, especially the latter). Indeed, to a large extent, the law is about life – although, of course, life is much more than the law. And in talking about life, I often found it most impactful when I shared from my own life or from the lives of others. I was, essentially, telling stories. And I found that they were more effective than I could have imagined. Stories help those listening to remember far more effectively. And in remembering, I believe that they draw upon the lessons embedded within each story and are more likely to apply them to their own lives. There is also a sense of realism. Many life lessons are often conveyed in the abstract and hence perceived to be dry, arid and didactic, with no direct practical application as such.

Back in my youth, my mother was the most effective teacher I knew. She taught chemistry but her students remembered her even after they had left the subject behind them. Many would go on to be leaders in diverse fields. She also taught her children well – principally in the form of life lessons. She would illustrate them by reference to our everyday experiences and we could therefore relate to them and also remember the lessons taught. For example, she taught us never to use others and then discard them. She likened this to squeezing juice from sugar cane (a popular local drink). I could relate to that right away because, although I enjoyed the

drink very much, I also recalled how the vendor would push the cut sections of sugar cane stems through the machine to be pressed, and the extruded remnants were pretty awful to look at and would be discarded in wicker baskets behind the stall. I mention this particular story for two reasons. The first is that I have never forgotten that lesson and have always endeavoured not to use others but to encourage and uplift them whenever possible. The second is that I began to relate this story on occasion, at the commencement of each court term, to the Justices' Law Clerks (who are drawn from the top law graduates in both local and overseas law schools). This story has apparently been passed down from one generation of law clerks to another (even when I have not personally related it to a particular cohort).

One day, it occurred to me that these life lessons were more valuable than even the latest legal principles. After all, the law keeps changing and one has to keep up with the changes. However, these life principles are universal and unchanging in nature. More importantly, they are also indispensable to life – and living a meaningful life. And I therefore began to record these life lessons, commencing with the above “No Crushed Sugar Cane” story. In addition to my mother's life stories, I began to realise how, by his conduct (in particular, his self-sacrificial love), my father also “wrote” stories – not in a conventional sense but, just as importantly, by living his life as he did. As I continued to record these stories, I began to realise that, having now lived well over six decades, I had life stories to tell as well. I must confess that I was quite surprised initially. I am not a dynamic person; on the contrary, I am a very quiet person and very private by nature, although I come out of my shell when I feel very strongly about something and/or have a mission to accomplish (such as teaching my students).

I also realised that we *all* have life stories that might be of interest to others, if nothing else, because we are all so different.

What we might consider routine and mundane might not be considered as such by others, especially if they can draw life lessons from our stories. I therefore added my own stories as well as experiences. I have often wondered why we do not often share from our own lives. I think that this is because of fear. However, a lesson learnt that can be conveyed is always useful and we should never be embarrassed to share from our lives (even if, perhaps especially if, it does not put us in particularly good light). If others would think less of us as a result, then, in my view at least, that is their problem, not mine. Indeed, from my own experience, I have learnt that authenticity is especially valued – perhaps because it is becoming increasingly rare in a world where weakness is frowned upon and material success highly valued.

What you have in this slim collection is a distillation of my own experiences on life and the nuggets of wisdom which have guided me in my life's journey – hence the title of this book, *Navigating Life*. As already mentioned, it comprises reflections, many of which are in the form of stories, hence the sub-title, *Reflections and Stories*. It is a slim volume because, quite frankly, there are only a few truly essential or core principles to living a meaningful life. The reader will also notice a pithy summary right at the end of each reflection. This was quite essential, as it turned out, because if I could not summarise the core thought or lesson to be drawn from the reflection concerned, it might mean that the life lesson might not be appropriate or might not have been expressed clearly enough. I should add that these reflections were written over a period of several years. I did not write for the sake of writing but only set out my thoughts when I felt inspired and guided to do so. As life is “messy”, there are inevitable overlaps between some reflections and I have therefore endeavoured to indicate this by cross-referencing them where appropriate.

I have written and edited many professional law books. However, this slim volume may well be the most important book I have ever written. As I have alluded to above, getting our life principles in order and then applying them are far more important than anything else. They are the foundations upon which our lives – both personal and professional – are built. I hope that you will find these reflections of interest and, most importantly, of at least potential reflection or even application in your own life.

As evident from the dedication of this book as well as the first few reflections, this book was inspired by my parents, who imparted to me the values that are reflected in this book. I would not be the person I am today without their love, guidance and sacrifice. I would also like to thank my wife, Sock Yong, for always inspiring me to be a better husband, father and person, and my daughters, Rachel and Christine, for their love which brightens my every day. All of them read the various reflections and gave me much valuable feedback. Christine, an accomplished artist, provided the beautiful illustrations in this book while Rachel, a far more accomplished wordsmith than I, provided valuable feedback on the text of the reflections themselves. In addition to reviewing the text, Sock Yong was inspirational in constantly encouraging me in my journey to complete this book and was instrumental in pointing out important values that were required to be considered. Professor (now Judicial Commissioner) Goh Yihan also provided much valuable feedback in helping me to fine-tune the categories under which the reflections were placed.

There are also many others who provided me with much appreciated feedback and assistance. In particular, I would like to thank Ms Carol Yap who assisted me in the preparation as well as formatting of the text in her spare time. I would also like to express my deep gratitude to Mr Melvin Neo for his vision, insight and encouragement, as well as to Ms Anita Teo for her able editing

which made this book much better than it would otherwise have been. Above all, despite the fact that this book is intended to be accessible to everyone, regardless of belief or worldview, I cannot end without acknowledging the divine guidance which I have felt throughout from the Lord, who not only provided the inspiration but also the wisdom and strength to complete this work.

Andrew Phang

March 2023

RELATIONSHIPS

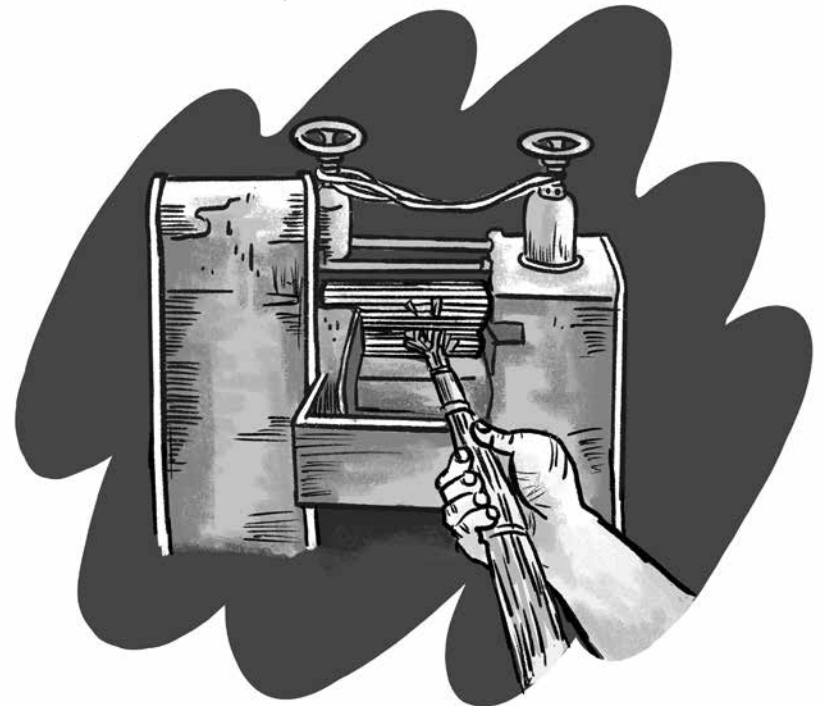
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No Crushed Sugar Cane

How to Treat Others

My mother was an excellent teacher (and, subsequently, school principal). This was due mainly to her wonderful ability as a communicator. As a mother, she was concerned with values. This has influenced me deeply. As the years went by, I became increasingly convinced that without a strong value system, one cannot live a life that is truly meaningful. One way my mother would communicate values to us was through stories – which often (as in this reflection) constituted “word pictures” and which were all the more vivid and memorable as a result. I think that stories are powerful teaching tools, especially about life. People tend to remember stories as opposed to arid, technical facts. Stories also furnish the opportunities to convey values “in action”, as it were. It is true that each person’s experience is different. However, one person’s experience may still be valuable insofar as it contains a kernel of wisdom, the value of which is demonstrated in the life of the person concerned. At the very least, it might provide encouragement to those who hear the story.

One such story which has been indelibly etched in my memory is that of sugar cane – or, more accurately, crushed sugar cane. Sugar cane juice is a common drink in Singapore. When I was young, I would sometimes watch these vendors (often by the roadside,



occasionally in coffee shops) pushing cut sugar cane stems through a machine. The stems would be crushed as they were run through the machine, with delicious sugar cane juice flowing down into a container below. These stems were passed repeatedly through the machine until they were crushed utterly flat. I was always fascinated by how the vendor would almost invariably take these flattened pieces of sugar cane – already long devoid of any juice – and pour some water over them before running them through the machine one last time. This was, presumably, to extract the very last drops of sugar cane juice possible. And then the inevitable next action – casting the now really pathetic-looking pieces of crushed sugar

cane into a wicker basket which, when full, would be emptied and its contents ultimately carted away to the rubbish dump.

My mother constantly cautioned us *not to treat people like crushed sugar cane*. More specifically, she would tell us that we ought not to use people and then cast them away when they were no longer of any personal use to us. She would advise us not to squeeze personal benefits from people like juice from the sugar cane stem but should always be polite and respectful to all, regardless of who they are. Some might cite the view of Immanuel Kant that we should treat people as ends and not as means. Others might speak of the Golden Rule that we should do unto others what we would like others to do unto us. However, to a young Singaporean boy who enjoyed sugar cane juice, my mother's imagery was a far more effective way of conveying the same message.

There is another – and closely related – lesson. Just as I enjoy sugar cane juice, I have also learnt to be appreciative of people – in particular, the kindness and assistance that they render to me. Such kindness and assistance entails effort and (on occasion) even “crushing” effort. Many of us tend to take kindness for granted; some are even worse – they take kindness as a sign of weakness. In my view, this is unacceptable. As I have just mentioned, the complete opposite should be the case. We should all learn to appreciate people more – particularly those who help us and are kind to us.

I would just like to conclude by observing that, decades later, when I became a Christian, I found that this was how the Christian faith required me to act as well. You see, it is a natural human trait in most people to be selfish, resulting in a tendency to make use of others like crushed sugar cane. This is an imperfect world. Indeed, I must confess that I found it very difficult to conduct myself selflessly. However, after becoming a Christian, it became a little easier as I could draw on the wisdom and guidance of God. This is

not to say that I became a much better person. But what I will say is that it made it a lot easier not to treat people as crushed sugar cane and, on the contrary, enabled me to be more appreciative of others and not take them for granted.

*Do not treat people like crushed
sugar cane, using them and then casting
them aside. Learn, instead,
to appreciate them more.*