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### **Tough times not all bad**

**Economic hardship can teach us to be resilient and make the most of what we have**

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It was a quiet Sunday morning. I was doing my step aerobics and looking out of the window of my Singapore General Hospital room.

One of my editors had previously noticed that several of my articles begin with me looking out of the SGH window. That is because I have spent many hours looking out of this same window in 2001, 2002, 2003 - and yet again this year.

As my mind freewheels while I exercise, I often have thoughts which I later write up.

Over the years, I have observed more multi-storey buildings crowding the skyline from this window. But parallel with that is the growth of trees and flowers, making the scenery more soothing to the eye.

The description of Singapore as a "city in a garden" is indeed apt. Despite the current gloomy economic situation, Singapore is a better place to live in than many other countries. But it was not always like this, nor will it always be so.

On Aug 9, 1965, the outlook for Singapore was bleak. We were suddenly cast out of Malaysia. This tiny city state had no hinterland. What would become of us?

Aged 10 then, I did not comprehend the difficulties we faced. But I watched my father cry on television and knew that all was not well.

My mind fast-forwards to Sydney in 1988. I had accompanied my parents on a state visit to Australia. The premier of New South Wales hosted a dinner for us. Our high commissioner to Australia told my father that the host would make a brief speech and my father need only reply with a few pleasantries.

Instead, the premier delivered more than an informal speech and my father had to respond with an off-the-cuff speech - which, as usual, outshone his prepared speeches.

"After your carefully thought out and eloquent speech," my father began, "I am hard put to try and live up to the billing."

The part of my father's speech that made the deepest impression on me was this: "I am quite sure if I come back to New Zealand or Australia 100 years from now, there'll be as many sheep (as now), if not more, as many cattle, and at least as many human beings living comfortably off the land."

“But I am not at all sure that this man-made artifice called Singapore will be there. That gives the people a certain edginess.”

What was true in 1988 remains equally true in 2009. Looking forward 79 years or 100 years from now, no one can guarantee the political, economic, demographic and physical state of Singapore.

Former A\*Star (Agency for Science, Technology and Research) chairman and current Spring Singapore chairman Philip Yeo e-mailed me the other day a speech he had given at the Nanyang Business School recently. (Yes, Mr Yeo and I are friends, despite our disagreements about Singapore’s investments in the biosciences.)

“The current turmoil is reminiscent of what happened in the year 2000,” his speech said.

“In 2000, the dot.com bubble burst, wiping out \$5 trillion in market value of technology companies.”

Despite that, Jurong Chemical Island was officially opened in October that year.

His speech clearly illustrated Singapore’s vulnerability, as well as our ability to defy the odds with novel ideas like Jurong Chemical Island and hard work. Singapore has come further than my father, the governments of Britain or of Malaysia could have imagined in 1965.

This is the worst recession most of us can remember. Singapore has faced down many crises since its inception, but the current economic downturn is the most severe since World War II. Years of good living have made us soft.

Even when apparently desperate for employment, some Singaporeans are still picky, shunning jobs that entail shift work, or too long a commute, or too much time on their feet, to say nothing, of course, of any work that requires donning a hard hat at a worksite.

Temasek Polytechnic and human resource consultancy company GMP Group carried out a study late last year to gauge the work attitudes of Generation Y - those born in 1981 or later. The study polled over 2,600 participants, including working adults as well as university and polytechnic students.

The younger workers felt they were putting in enough long hours at work, while their older colleagues and bosses felt they were not putting in enough. Generation Y workers felt their bosses should be caring, inspiring and competent, preferring relationship-oriented leaders. But their managers believed in a more task-oriented approach.

While both groups cited career advancement opportunities as a way to retain staff, younger workers also wanted good work-life harmony and good relationships at work. Their bosses thought that learning and development and good compensation were more important. GMP said it was advising fresh graduates to expect salaries this year to be lower by as much as 15 per cent than in 2007.

Perhaps all Gen Y needs is a dose of harsh reality. I was heartened to read in The Straits Times earlier this month that graduates are becoming more realistic about their job prospects. They are willing to accept a lower starting salary, with one Singapore Management University graduate being willing to be an intern for as little as \$700 a month.

I may have underestimated Gen Y. Perhaps this economic crisis may be a blessing in disguise, teaching those who have never ever faced hardship that no one promised us that life would be a bed of roses.

We must make the best of whatever circumstances we find ourselves in and emerge from the present crisis more resilient, mature and united as a nation.

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