



Article written by Lee Wei Ling, the daughter of Lee Kuan Yew.

Slump time has arrived with a bang.

While I worry about the poorer Singaporeans who will be hit hard, perhaps this recession has come at an opportune time for many of us. It will give us an incentive to reconsider our priorities in life.

Decades of the good life have made us soft. The wealthy especially, but also the middle class in Singapore, have had it so good for so long, what they once considered luxuries, they now think of as necessities.

A mobile phone, for instance, is now a statement about who you are, not just a piece of equipment for communication. Hence many people buy the latest model though their existing mobile phones are still in perfect working order.

A Mercedes-Benz is no longer adequate as a status symbol. For millionaires who wish to show the world they have taste, a Ferrari or a Porsche is deemed more appropriate.

The same attitude influences the choice of attire and accessories. I still find it hard to

believe that there are people carrying handbags that cost more than thrice the monthly income of a bus driver, and many more times that of the foreign worker labouring in the hot sun, risking his life to construct luxury condominiums he will never have a chance to live in.

The media encourages and amplifies this ostentatious consumption. Perhaps it is good to encourage people to spend more because this will prevent the recession from getting worse. I am not an economist, but wasn't that the root cause of the current crisis - Americans spending more than they could afford to?

I am not a particularly spiritual person. I don't believe in the supernatural and I don't think I have a soul that will survive my death. But as I view the crass materialism around me, I am reminded of what my mother once told me: 'Suffering and deprivation is good for the soul.'

My family is not poor, but we have been brought up to be frugal. My parents and I live in the same house that my paternal

grandparents and their children moved into after World War II in 1945. It is a big house by today's standards, but it is simple - in fact, almost to the point of being shabby.

Those who see it for the first time are astonished that Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's home is so humble. But it is a comfortable house, a home we have got used to. Though it does look shabby compared to the new mansions on our street, we are not bothered by the comparison.

Most of the world and much of Singapore will lament the economic downturn. We have been told to tighten our belts. There will undoubtedly be suffering, which we must try our best to ameliorate.

But I personally think the hard times will hold a timely lesson for many Singaporeans, especially those born after 1970 who have never lived through difficult times.

No matter how poor you are in Singapore, the authorities and social groups do try to ensure you have shelter and food. Nobody starves in Singapore ..

Many of those who are currently living in mansions and enjoying a luxurious lifestyle will probably still be able to do so, even if they might have to downgrade from wines costing \$20,000 a bottle to \$10,000 a bottle. They would hardly notice the difference.

Being wealthy is not a sin. It cannot be in a capitalist market economy. Enjoying the fruits of one's own labour is one's prerogative and I have no right to chastise those who choose

to live luxuriously.

But if one is blinded by materialism, there would be no end to wanting and hankering. After the Ferrari, what next? An Aston Martin? After the Hermes Birkin handbag, what can one upgrade to?

Neither an Aston Martin nor an Hermes Birkin can make us truly happy or contented. They are like dust, a fog obscuring the true meaning of life, and can be blown away in the twinkling of an eye.

When the end approaches and we look back on our lives, will we regret the latest mobile phone or luxury car that we did not acquire? Or would we prefer to die at peace with ourselves, knowing that we have lived lives filled with love, friendship and goodwill, that we have helped some of our fellow voyagers along the way and that we have tried our best to leave this world a slightly better place than how we found it?

We know which is the correct choice - and it is within our power to make that choice.

In this new year, burdened as it is with the problems of the year that has just ended, let us again try to choose wisely.

To a considerable degree, our happiness is within our own control, and we should not follow the herd blindly.

With very warm regards,
Chwee Seng

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