

By Invitation

Reflections of an octogenarian

Three lessons from a man who helped make Singapore and the world better



Tommy Koh

For *The Straits Times*

In 1965, when Singapore became independent, the life expectancy here was 67 years.

According to the World Health Organisation, Singapore's current life expectancy of 83.1 years is the third highest in the world, behind Japan (83.7) and Switzerland (83.4).

The increase in our life expectancy over the past 52 years is a reflection of the progress we have made in human welfare, and also because we have a good healthcare system, brilliant doctors and excellent hospitals.

On Nov 12, I will turn 80 and join the Eighties Club whose unofficial chairman is my good friend and lifelong mentor, Professor Wang Gungwu, who is 87.

Straits Times Opinion editor Chua Mui Hoong has asked me to reflect on the past 80 years and to distil some lessons from my life and career for those who are younger. I will try to do so.

Lesson 1

My first observation is that success in life does not depend on who your parents are or the circumstances of your beginning.

Consider the lives of our fourth, sixth and eighth presidents.

President Wee Kim Wee had to leave Raffles Institution after only two years in order to help support his family. His first job was that of a lowly clerk at *The Straits Times*.

President S R Nathan had a traumatic childhood because his father committed suicide, leaving the family penniless. After being unjustly expelled by two Singapore schools, Mr Nathan ran away to Muar in Malaysia. His first job there was that of an assistant to a Malay hawker in a school canteen.

President Halimah Yacob also had a difficult childhood. Her father died prematurely. She had to wake up early every day to help her mother prepare and sell nasi lemak.

My advice to young Singaporeans, especially those who come from poor or fractured families, is not to be fatalistic and feel defeated. The future is what you make of it. Work hard, think positive and seize the opportunities

which come your way.

In your dark moments, feel inspired by the lives of presidents Wee Kim Wee, S R Nathan and Halimah Yacob.

Lesson 2

My second piece of advice to young Singaporeans is to have a positive mindset, be willing to leave your comfort zones and take on new challenges.

The only job I ever applied for in my life was to teach at the NUS Law School. In 1968, when the Singapore Government asked me to leave my comfort zone and become Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, I could have said no.

Many times in my life, I have been asked to take on new challenges, such as negotiating a free trade agreement with the United States, negotiating an agreement with China to establish diplomatic relations between our two countries, establishing the National Arts Council and the Asia Europe Foundation, leading the Institute of Policy Studies think-tank and transforming Singapore's museums. I have always accepted the challenges.

At the international level, I could have said no when I was asked to chair the Law of the Sea Conference and the Earth Summit, chair two dispute panels at the World Trade Organisation or serve as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy to make peace between Russia and its three Baltic neighbours, because the tasks were hard and success was not assured.

I took on all those challenges because I wished to be of service to my country and the world.

My philosophy in life is to have a positive and optimistic mindset and a can-do spirit. Life is a learning journey. I have enjoyed all the jobs given to me.

Lesson 3

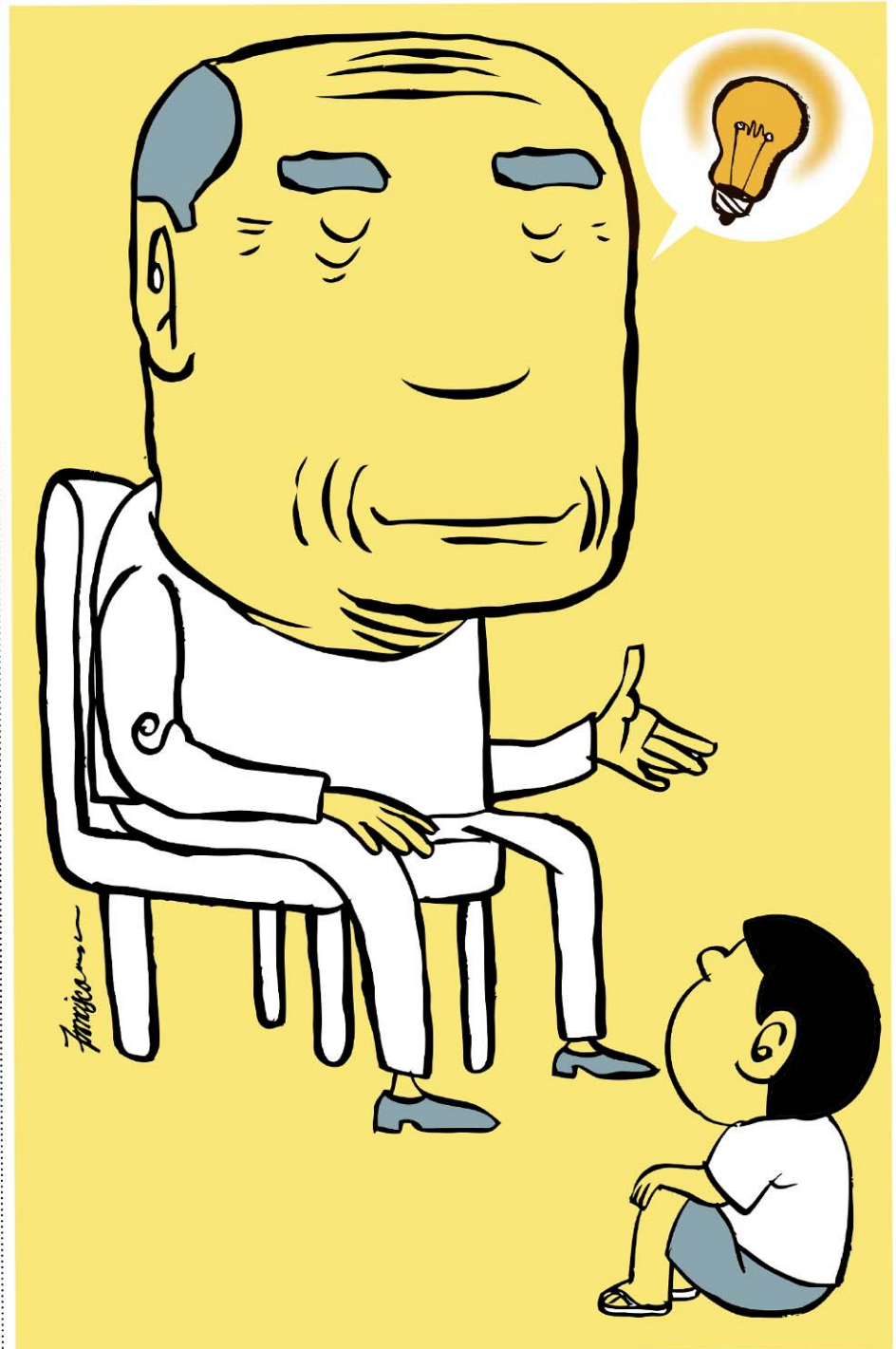
My third piece of advice to young Singaporeans is on the importance of making friends and building relationships.

Most of us are social animals. We are happiest when we are in the company of friends, especially old and good friends. We enjoy working as a member of a team rather than as a solo player.

Because of my work, I have made many friends, both in Singapore and in many foreign countries. My friends have brought joy to my life. They have also helped me to succeed in my assignments, especially those involving working with foreign countries or international organisations.

To succeed in life, we need at least three kinds of intelligence, namely, cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence and cultural intelligence.

Singaporeans are admired for



Singaporeans are admired for their high cognitive intelligence. We are less admired for our emotional intelligence because we are often perceived as cold, arrogant and condescending. We must try to change this negative perception by being more modest and humble and more respectful of others.

their high cognitive intelligence. We are less admired for our emotional intelligence because we are often perceived as cold, arrogant and condescending.

We must try to change this negative perception by being more modest and humble and more respectful of others. We should always remember that people think with their heads as well as their hearts. If they do not like us, this can become an obstacle in our work. Our ambition should be to win the hearts and minds of our regional neighbours and other interlocutors.

Why is cultural intelligence important? It is important because it helps us to understand our foreign friends better and to manage our relations with them more smoothly and effectively.

When I was asked to chair the first Asia-Middle East Dialogue in 2005, I spent several months studying the histories and cultures of our Arab, Iranian and Turkish friends. I encouraged the chefs of

the caterer we engaged to learn to cook Arab, Iranian and Turkish food. I learnt to avoid serving spicy food to our Middle Eastern friends.

In my work as a diplomat, when I have to entertain a delegation from India which includes several vegetarians, I usually pick a vegetarian restaurant. When I entertain a delegation from a Muslim country, I usually take them to a halal restaurant.

Singaporeans are not in the habit of embracing each other or kissing each other when we meet. At the UN, I observed that my Arab male friends kiss each other on the cheek when they meet. In order not to offend them, I conformed to their ritual.

I also observed that my African friends had the habit of hugging each other. In order to be accepted as a "brother", I was happy to be kissed by my Arab friends and hugged by my African friends.

On one occasion, I observed that a visiting African head of state wanted to hug his Singapore host at

the Istana before he left. Instead of hugging him back, the Singapore leader stepped back in order to avoid being hugged. After the African leader had departed, the Singapore leader asked me whether he had made a mistake. I said yes and explained the hugging ritual of African men and the kissing ritual of Arab men.

I shall conclude by recapitulating the three lessons which I would like to share with young Singaporeans. First, the future is what you make of it. Do not feel that you have no chance in life because of your difficult circumstances.

Second, have a positive mindset and be willing to leave your comfort zones and take on new challenges.

Third, develop your cognitive, emotional and cultural intelligence and make lasting friendships.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is a professor of law at NUS and an ambassador-at-large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.