

# Fighting Covid-19: An appeal to S'poreans



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The 2019 coronavirus disease (Covid-19) has created fear and anxiety in the world.

The fear is understandable, because the virus has killed more than 1,100 people and infected more than 44,000 others in China. In Singapore, 50 people have become infected. The virus originated in Wuhan, the capital of the Hubei province. The scientists believe that the virus was from an animal, probably a bat, and had been transmitted to a human.

In this essay, I want to appeal to the better angels of our nature as Singaporeans.

I want to remind us all that, as a people, we have gone through much bigger crises before. We survived those crises. We showed the world that Singaporeans are a tough and resilient people. When faced with adversity, we remained united, courageous and caring. We can do so again.

## SURVIVING WORLD WAR II

I was a little boy during World War II. My family didn't run away. We remained in our modest home in Shanghai Road. The 3½ years of the Japanese Occupation were a period of fear, hunger and uncertainty.

The residents in Shanghai Road were a microcosm of Singapore. Some were rich, some were poor and the majority, including my family, belonged to the middle class. We had neighbours of different ethnicities. Among the Chinese, we belonged to different dialect groups. It was a very diverse community. Because the road was a dead-end road, and was not very long, we knew everyone who lived in the road.

I remember that we lived in harmony with one another. There was a high degree of trust among neighbours, and our front doors were never locked. We looked out for one another.

Food was scarce, and we planted tapioca and sweet potato on any piece of vacant land we could find. We caught eels from the monsoon drains to supplement our diet. When someone fell ill, the neighbours would share whatever medicine they had with the sick person. There was a strong sense of solidarity.

The lesson learnt is that by being united, by caring for one another,



Patients waiting to be screened for the severe acute respiratory syndrome outside Tan Tock Seng Hospital's accident and emergency department during the outbreak. The writer points out that during the Sars crisis in 2003, the people of Singapore behaved in an admirable manner. There was no panic. The people were calm, went about their daily activities and helped one another. ST FILE PHOTO

the residents of Shanghai Road survived the war. I am still in touch with some of my wartime neighbours.

## SURVIVING THE SHOCK OF INDEPENDENCE

The leaders of Singapore had believed that Singapore could survive only if it became part of Malaysia. They believed that an independent Singapore could not survive. Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia, in August 1965, was therefore a shock to our leaders.

Did they quit? No, after a brief moment of anguish, they decided to face the future with courage, determination and optimism. They set about the business of building a new nation. The challenges were formidable.

The economy was very dependent on trade and services, and did not have a manufacturing sector. It was not generating enough jobs for the young, and unemployment was high. The shortage of housing was so bad that the British had said that it was "insoluble". The people were not in good health, and tuberculosis was rampant. The different communities had their own schools and lived apart from one another. They did not feel that they were one people.

In the face of so many challenges,

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the Government and people of Singapore did not give up. Neither did they ask the rich world for financial assistance. Instead, they embraced the value proposition that the world did not owe them a living and they must earn their living through hard work, self-sacrifice and being open to the world.

The progress of Singapore, during the past 54 years, has been nothing short of a miracle. The miracle is, however, human-made and not heaven-made.

The miracle is made by the combination of competent and honest political leaders, an

excellent public service and a people who are hard-working, willing to learn and to adapt to great changes in their lives.

The people of Singapore, despite their many foibles and idiosyncrasies, must be admired for their qualities of industry, devotion to education and adaptability. They were able to move from living in kampungs to high-rise living, and from working on farms to working in factories, seamlessly.

In 1965, the people of Singapore faced an uncertain future with courage and determination. We must never lose the never-say-die spirit of our pioneering generation.

## OVERCOMING SARS

In March 2003, Singapore was attacked by an invisible enemy. The enemy was a new virus which caused a serious respiratory illness. The mortality rate was 10 per cent.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) had called it the severe acute respiratory syndrome, or Sars in short. The illness originated in Guangzhou, the capital of the Guangdong province, in China. The scientists believed that the virus was an animal virus. The virus was transmitted, probably, from bats to civet cats and to humans.

Three Singapore women, visiting Hong Kong on vacation, got infected and brought the virus into

Singapore. One of them died. The other two recovered. They were treated at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH). The hospital was later designated by the Singapore Government as the dedicated Sars hospital.

From March to July 2003, Singapore was at war with Sars. It was fought by the whole of Government and by the whole of the people. When the war was over, 33 persons had died. The WHO described the way Singapore fought against Sars as exemplary.

The victory over Sars was due to many factors. In this essay, I want to single out two factors: the role of the people and the heroic performance of our doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers.

It is said that a crisis brings out the best as well as the worst in people. In the Sars crisis, the people of Singapore behaved in an admirable manner. There was no panic. The people were calm and went about their daily activities. They observed the request to monitor their own temperatures and to wash their hands frequently.

Those who were quarantined complied with the restriction. They accepted the no visitor rule for Sars patients, and the one visitor per patient rule in other cases. Neighbours helped other neighbours who were unable to

help themselves. Many volunteered to take temperatures of visitors to markets, or to help disseminate accurate information about Sars to residents in HDB estates. There was a remarkable degree of solidarity among the people.

Singapore must never forget the heroism of our doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers during Sars. Unlike the situation in some other places, where some healthcare workers refused to return to work, the situation in Singapore was just the opposite. Doctors and nurses volunteered to work at the Sars hospital, TTSH. They did it despite the clear danger to their lives. Five healthcare workers died during Sars – a hospital attendant, two nurses and two doctors.

In conclusion, I want to remind fellow Singaporeans that we have been tested by other crises before.

Each time, the people of Singapore rose to the occasion and survived the crisis. We should do the same in facing the current crisis.

Stay united, be courageous and care for one another.

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