

Coronavirus: The Great Disruption

Letter to my grandchildren in a time of pandemic

After the Covid-19 disruption, there will be three important values to look back on and hold dear



Tommy Koh

For *The Straits Times*

Dear Toby, Tara and Tommy,
I am writing this letter to you during a great health and economic crisis.
There are different theories about how it began, but the one I believe is that the trouble began when someone in China ate the

meat of a bat and caught a bat virus. The lesson is: Do not eat the meat of wild animals.

The virus has spread all over the world, and has infected more than two million and killed more than 140,000 people. The economic cost is very great: millions of people out of work and many businesses destroyed.

When we look back on this painful period, I want you to remember the importance of the three values which your Chinese names stand for: compassion, trust and praise.

THE MOST IMPORTANT VIRTUE

Toby, your Chinese name, Shan, 善 means kindness and compassion. It is the most important virtue extolled by the world's major religious and ethical traditions. There is even a Charter for Compassion, formulated in 2009 by leading thinkers of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism, led by Karen Armstrong, the famous writer of religion.

The message of the charter is to treat others as you would like others

to treat you. This is often referred to as the golden rule.

In Singapore, I saw many displays of kindness and compassion during the crisis. In one case, four restaurants owned by people I know decided to collaborate to send free food, every day, to the healthcare workers of one of our public hospitals. In another case, a group of kind-hearted

Singaporeans, including children, would set out each night to look for Malaysian workers who were stranded in Singapore without accommodation. The good Samaritans would take them to hostels set up to provide free accommodation for such workers.

At the hawker centre which Nai Nai (granny) and I often go to, I was pleased to learn that the humble uncle who prepares my coffee was offering free coffee and tea to the cleaners of the hawker centre.

The poor are often more generous than the rich. The billionaires of Singapore have been conspicuously silent during this crisis. We have, unfortunately, no one like Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos among our super-rich people.

I am happy that several of my friends have used social media to highlight the plight of our hawkers and to appeal to our netizens to support them.

Many of our hawkers make only a modest living. They do not have much in savings to fall back on. If their patrons desert them, they have no income. With no income, they and their families will be reduced to a state of poverty. They desperately need our help.

Coronavirus: The Great Disruption

The coronavirus pandemic raging across the world is taking a huge toll on lives and economies.

Already touted as the biggest global crisis since World War II, it has forced countries to take unprecedented measures – slamming borders shut, quarantining millions, shutting down workplaces and schools, and giving out massive stimulus and job rescue packages.

As the crisis unfolds, expect orthodoxies and established relationships to be challenged, with some upended and others reshaped.

How will global institutions, nations, economies and societies respond? To make sense of the impact and fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, leading opinion leaders share their views of this global upheaval with *The Straits Times* in *Coronavirus: The Great Disruption*, a special series that runs this month in the Opinion section.

THE SECOND VALUE

Tara, your Chinese name, Shin, 信 means trust.

Trust has played a very important role in the way in which Singapore has coped with the crisis.

Trust has to be earned. It cannot be commanded by law. It cannot be demanded by a person or institution. A teacher, for example, cannot say to his students, "please trust me", if he is an untrustworthy person. A hospital cannot expect to be trusted if it does not have a good reputation for competence and honesty. The same is true for a political leader. He must be honest and transparent. He must be willing to tell the people the truth, even when the truth is unpleasant.

We are fortunate in Singapore to live in a high-trust society. We trust our doctors, hospitals and government officials. We trust our political leaders. Because there is a bond of mutual trust between the people and the Government, the people are willing to abide by the advice and edicts of our Government.

If the people did not believe in the Government's assurance that we have an adequate food supply, there would have been worse panic buying at our wet markets and supermarkets. People have mostly complied with the advice to keep a safe distance from one another and to work from home, because they know that the advice is based upon the best scientific evidence and international best practice.

The people in some other countries are not so lucky. In those countries, they do not trust their leaders, because the leaders have shown themselves to be untrustworthy. Some of the leaders do not have a good reputation for truth. Some leaders are irrational and do not believe in science and do not listen to expert advice. In such a situation, where trust is absent, chaos is often the result.

THE THIRD VALUE

Tommy, your Chinese name, Song, 颂 means praise.

When this nightmare is over, we must not forget to praise the many people who have acted with courage, kindness and selflessness.

The first group we should praise are our doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers. As was the case in 2003, during the Sars (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic, our healthcare workers have behaved like heroes. The reason why so few Covid-19 patients have died in Singapore is probably due to our excellent doctors, nurses and hospitals.

I wish to point out, in this respect, that our heroic nurses are paid about half the salaries of nurses in Hong Kong, Japan and Australia. We should put our money where our mouth is and increase the salaries of our nurses.

The second group we should praise are the officials, consisting of civilians as well as police and army officers, who have been interviewing the Covid-19 patients and tracing their contacts. It is because of their detective work that we are able to implement the policy of detect, isolate and contain.

The third group are our front-line workers, at our airport and seaport, police officers and other individuals who work around the clock to ensure our security.

The fourth group are the workers who look after our amenities, such as electricity, water, sanitation and waste disposal, as well as our bus captains, train drivers, taxi drivers and private-hire car drivers.

The fifth group are the workers in our wet markets, supermarkets, hawker centres, coffee shops and restaurants, and the people who deliver food to our homes. They have ensured that we have adequate supplies of both cooked and uncooked food.

The sixth group of people we should praise are our indispensable foreign workers, such as our domestic helpers, cleaners, construction and shipyard workers, and others who work in jobs that Singaporeans are not prepared to do. We owe the foreign workers an apology for the atrocious condition of their dormitories.

The seventh group of people we should praise are the members of the multi-ministerial task force, especially its two co-chairmen, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong and National Development Minister Lawrence Wong, and Associate Professor Kenneth Mak, director of medical services at the Ministry of Health. Their near-daily press conferences have done much to keep our people informed and reassured.

Finally, I want to say something about the people of Singapore. In normal times, they have often behaved in a manner that is below my expectations.

However, most of the people of Singapore have risen to the occasion. They have remained calm, united and resolute.

There is, unfortunately, a small minority who have indulged in panic buying and refused to abide by the safe distancing rule.

I hope the bad behaviour of this minority will not compel the Government to take even more stringent measures than the circuit breaker.

Your loving Ye Ye

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Professor Tommy Koh with his wife Poh Siew Aing and their grandchildren (from left) Tommy, now two, Toby, nine, and Tara, five, celebrating Prof Koh's 82nd birthday last November. In an open letter to his grandchildren, Prof Koh shares what he feels are the most important values in the current coronavirus crisis, and how his grandchildren's Chinese names reflect those values. PHOTO: COURTESY OF TOMMY KOH