

Finding hope for a generation of crises

To get through bad times now and in time to come, youth must adopt a new attitude with three key shifts



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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” Charles Dickens’ *A Tale Of Two Cities* begins.

The world of the late 18th century described by the English author is distinct in many ways from the world of 2021, but for many young people like myself, the core sentiment expressed in the quote above still saliently captures the spirit of the times.

It is the best of times, as the years of youth should be – a time of independence and of finally being able to chart one’s course in life.

But, because of the shadow Covid-19 has cast, it is also the worst of times.

The Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event in modern history, and has thus frequently been described as the “crisis of a generation”.

And yet, the worry and despair my generation may experience do not begin and end with Covid-19. The elephant in the room when contemplating the future is that the Covid-19 pandemic may well be only the beginning of a

“generation of crises”.

A DISRUPTED WORLD

From the uncertainty of the pandemic itself to the looming climate emergency, from the spectre of a possible future pandemic caused by “Disease X”, to the fallout from a more protectionist world and geopolitical tensions, the years ahead seem to be plagued by a generation of impending crises.

Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said at a Ministry of Foreign Affairs townhall meeting last year: “Post-Covid, we will inhabit a more dangerous, divided, and disrupted world.”

And it is in this new world that my generation must find our footing, build our lives and begin to lead our families and communities. My generation has shown resilience thus far in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, but facing up to crises as a sustained state of affairs is a whole other matter, one which has not been fully examined.

How can my generation find the hope we need to navigate the decades ahead?

A LEAF FROM OUR PIONEERS’ BOOK

How do we begin this monumental task? Perhaps by first remembering that we are not the first generation in Singapore to come of age amid crises.

The Pioneer Generation, many of whom came of age during the 1960s, had grappled with a different range of crises as they found their footing in a new society. If the Covid-19 pandemic is Singapore’s worst crisis since independence, looking at how our pioneers coped following independence may prove instructive.

Amid what was said during the immediate post-independence years, one particular quote by then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam stands out: “It is no use trying to meet the problems when they are sitting on top of us. In other words what we need is a population with a new attitude.”

And so, the Singapore population – more than 50 per cent of whom were below 19 – embarked on developing a new attitude to face a new future.

Today, might the way for youth

to find hope for a generation of crises also lie in adopting a new attitude? Much has been said about developing future-readiness on a macro level; but on a micro level, what precisely about their attitudes must youth shift this time round to be more ready for – and hopeful about – the journey ahead? I suggest three shifts.

THREE KEY SHIFTS

First, we must shift away from the idea that our life is an upward trajectory once formal education secures our dream job.

We grew up with the mantra, “study hard, get good grades, get a good job”; the implication of that mantra is that what happens next will be an autopilot cruise.

Covid-19 seems to have disrupted that trajectory, delaying the day when things can finally be smooth.

In actuality, what the Covid-19 disruption – and the spectre of the rest to come – has driven home is the reality that “life does not end at 25”, as some put it.

The wheels of fortune will continue to turn, and many more ups and downs await – opportunities may be derailed,

relationships may not work out and health can be unpredictable, as there will be disruptions throughout one’s lifetime.

Even if the Covid-19 pandemic had not happened, something else would have. The sooner we accept this enduring reality, the better prepared we can be psychologically for whatever comes next.

Second, we must shift away from the idea that hope is found externally, rather than within.

Another subtle implication of the “study hard, get good grades, get a good job” mantra was that happiness and hope could be found once we achieved these things. So we chased with vigour our grades and goals, only to find ourselves on a hedonic treadmill worried that we may fall off, a prospect heightened by Covid-19 and other crises.

To be clear, pursuing our aspirations is definitely a good thing, but tying our hopes of happiness to it is not. A bird can never find peace if it constantly worries that the branch beneath it will snap.

Let me elaborate on the analogy. Consider the following quote, whose origin is unclear (but which has been attributed to wellness coach Charlie Wardle): “A bird sitting on a tree is never afraid of the branch breaking, because its trust is not on the branch but on its own wings.”

To truly face the future with hope, we must shift towards finding that hope in ourselves. We must believe we can move on if the branch breaks; and if we are not too confident of that, we must take the time to develop our strengths – not to attain some specific goal, but to ensure that we can bounce back even if we do not.

Third, we must shift away from seeing crises as stumbling blocks to a good life and focus instead on the opportunities they present for positive change in our lives.

Over the past year, we have often heard that we must seize the opportunities presented by crises, but it goes beyond that: Throughout history, crises have always been critical junctures through which societies are changed.

We see this now with Covid-19, and we will see this again with future crises. As youth are often at

the forefront of change, we are best positioned to reshape society.

As the chief executive of National Youth Council David Chua and I wrote last July in *The Straits Times* in the run-up to Youth Day, the youth of today will be the pioneers of Singapore’s post-Covid-19 future.

This is where the Government comes in, to work with youth to channel their energies towards shared goals, as it has a key interest in helping youth drive the change society seeks. After all, as founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew said in 1966: “It is the young that will determine what happens to this society. And it is we and what we do now that determines what they can be.”

Mr Lee was speaking in an age of crises; as we face another, his words continue to hold true. As much as hope must be found from within, the Government will play a key role in ensuring that such hopes can be materialised.

There is a broader point to be made here – hope itself is not a solution to crises ahead, but finding hope gives us the strength we need to find these solutions.

Furthermore, finding hope will not mean that despair, resignation and anxiety will disappear; in fact, we should not want them to, for hope will then be nothing more than false optimism.

Hope is the counter to despair, but one that makes sense only because of despair – an uneasy balance at the heart of our humanity. As Dickens also wrote in the opening paragraph of *A Tale Of Two Cities*, “it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair”.

From this winter of despair, may we find the grounds from which hope can spring, a hope that can take us through the best and worst of times ahead.

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• We welcome contributions to the Sunday Views column. Write to us at stopinion@sph.com.sg