

(continued from Page 19: Interview with Dr Zuraimi Mohamed Dahlan and Dr Elly Sabrina about Marital Bliss)

for our kids, aged parents and clinics whilst making sure each of us has time for selfcare in the form of exercise, religious classes, and other pursuits.

**CM:** What are three things that you wish to do together with your spouse in the next ten to twenty years?

**ZMD:** Attain economic independence together, travel the world together safely and stay optimally healthy together.

**ES:** In the next ten to twenty years, I wish to remain healthy and active with Zuraimi so we can hopefully travel the world and continue discovering new experiences and skills. In the same breath, we wish to have an active role in the care of our grandchildren, God willing. Finally, we hope to be better servants of God who have been so forgiving and caring towards us in our life journey so far.

**CM:** What are three tips on marital bliss that you will like to share with those who are contemplating marriage?

**ZMD:** Marriage is a journey in life. Death is the ultimate end point in this world. Why not journey life together and be a comfort to each other despite the ups and downs that we face in this world.

For the relationship to work, both must play their roles effectively and accountably. Like a kayak with 2 rowers. Both must humbly and amicably decide on a particular direction and row in sync. Only then the journey would be smooth and pleasant despite the current, wind and waves coming in all directions.

Do not ever cheat or lie to your spouse. The truth hurts but it is better than hiding the truth from your spouse. Be generous towards your family, especially your spouse. Shower her with love, comfort, and kindness always as we do not know whether we have the same chance the next day.

**ES:** Communication is key. Never stop talking to each other about everything, especially the difficult ones. No matter how much we differ in opinions or argue, try to resolve them by the end of the day. Never go to bed angry with your spouse. You will get a major headache that may linger for days!

Be loving to one another. Never shy away from showing or communicating your affections. Be each other's BFF. Share interests, passions and goals other than the bed to keep the love burning strong!

■ CM

## INTERVIEW WITH DR TAN SIANG HON *About Working Overseas and Bringing Up Children*

Interviewed by Dr Lim Khong Jin Michael, Family Physician, Editor (Team B)

**College Mirror (CM):** Hi Siang Hon, please share with us some background about your work overseas.

**Dr Tan Siang Hon (TSH):** I lived overseas for a period of 12 years in North-western China with my family. My two older sons were 5 and 3 years old when we first left Singapore. Our third son was born only after we were away from home for about 3 years.

I was initially involved in some community work amongst different Chinese minorities in a small city one-hour's drive from the Kazakhstan border. Later, I was involved in a medical project that looked after the healthcare needs of both foreigners and locals in the region.

**CM:** How did your family cope with living in another country?

**TSH:** Northwest China is very different from coastal or developed cities like Shanghai or Beijing. One thing for sure – all my children enjoyed their sense of space and freedom!

For education, they were enrolled in a local school for half a day. My wife would also do some home school with them to ensure they get their regular dose of English language and Singapore Maths. At secondary school level, the two older boys did full-time online school (so Home-Based Learning (HBL) was not new for them!)

As a family from urban Singapore, we had to adjust to a completely different culture and way of life! Our local friends often dropped by our home unannounced, sometimes even staying overnight. Over the years, we found ourselves shifting from being event or time-oriented towards becoming people-centred. In short, my wife and I have learned to slow down, drink tea, travel light, and live our lives without any plan B.

And when it comes to hospitality, we can never outdo our new neighbours in generosity and kindness! Though less materially well off than us, they never hesitated to make us feel like VIPs as they served us with the choicest portion

of a feast. Over the years and in our travel, our worldviews were redefined as we encountered such beautiful people and other life-changing moments.

**CM:** What were the challenges your family encountered or is still encountering on re-entry to Singapore?

**TSH:** My youngest son once asked me, "Papa, was the place we stayed in Singapore - whenever we visited Grandpa - our home?" It was a simple question, but one that revealed that his reference point for home was China and not Singapore. Returning to Singapore after having been away for 12 years, my family had to learn how to become Singaporeans again! This is especially so for our boys who were never part of our Singapore's education system or life. While saying our final farewell when we left China, a local friend rightly pointed out to me that while my wife and I were "returning" home, our boys were actually "going" to Singapore to start a new life. How tough that must have been for them!

For my eldest son who came back just in time to do National Service, life was especially difficult. Adjustment to regimentation and the entire Singaporean culture (even the nuances of our language) was challenging for him. My two younger sons only had short runways to prepare for their A-levels and PSLE. Later, Covid stress and Circuit Breaker compounded the problem as our family has clearly outgrown the space of our home over the decade with the addition of our third son and as we are also taking care of my elderly father in our home.

**CM:** What support did you wish you had for your family while you were overseas and on re-entry to Singapore?

**TSH:** I am indebted to many good friends and our extended family for supporting us in our time away from Singapore. Medical friends chipped in when I encountered questions or difficult cases in my practice. My church friends prayed for our safety. Close relatives visited us. We are grateful.

Reverse culture shock, however, is something less understood. Support came from other friends who also returned from overseas. Listening to each other's stories and sometimes crying together helped our family journey

through the initial phase of adjustment. There were many things gained in our experience of living overseas, but there were several losses too. Acknowledging these helped put some closure before we could begin life anew in Singapore.

**CM:** What are three tips on being a husband and father you wished someone had shared with you while you were younger?

**TSH:** For parenting, I think the first would be that while there may be many theories and books about raising children, none is more important than learning how to read your own children and accepting them for who they are. Every child is different - how he or she perceives love, his or her aspirations or fears, potential and outlook to life.

Secondly, we sometimes fail in our roles as parents. Instead of being too harsh on ourselves, it would be more fruitful if we learn to bounce back, say sorry to our kids, and seek to restore the relationship. In Singapore where we give high premium to success and perfection, showing

our vulnerability (and even failure) may help our kids deal with the disappointment of unavoidable failures they will encounter in future. Thirdly, for some of us who have children with special needs, it is especially important for us to learn self-care and to find the appropriate resources to support ourselves. Someone once said to me, "I became a better counsellor after I had a special needs son. You see, he's my best mentor." How true and liberating!

As for advice on being a husband, more than all the usual important tips on communication, I think we need to learn to embrace forgiveness if we desire any real growth in our marriage. Over time, couples, including committed ones, may encounter marital differences and may drift. Breakthroughs can only happen when we learn to humble ourselves and say sorry from our hearts. Forgiveness is the pivot that can steer strained relationships towards hope and healing. During this Covid pandemic, we talk much about social distancing. Forgiveness has the opposite effect ... it is the gift that draws us towards emotional restoration and intimacy.

■ CM



Dr Tan Siang Hon and his family celebrating Chinese New Year back in Singapore in 2020