

REMARKS BY MR ONG CHONG TEE

SAJC 39th COLLEGE DAY, 29 JULY 2016

Mr Tan Soo Kiang and members of the Board of Governors, Principal Mr Mark Lo, teachers and staff (past and present), parents and students of SAJC.

I thank Mr Lo for his warm introduction and for the very kind invitation to speak on this occasion. This is a really sentimental “homecoming” for me.

I have been a Saint for my entire school life, before university: right from the Church of Ascension’s kindergarten, to St Andrews Primary, crossed over to St Andrew’s Secondary and then, as the pioneer batch of students in SAJC in 1978.

My time in SAJC [in Malan Road] was a particularly memorable period – not just because of the excitement then of being pioneering group of students, *the* Batch Number 1; but in retrospect, it had been a wonderful learning and nurturing environment with very progressive teachers under then Principal Rev Tan Teng Wai. He and the SAJC pioneer group of staff provided both guidance and latitude to us students, to do things and to explore. We only had about 600 students then compared to what I am told is about 1,300 now. Then as a science stream student, we could form the Chemistry, Physics and Biology Clubs – literally whatever we wanted to do! We even participated in an Inter-school Physics competition for which this new SAJC kid in the Pre-U school system got second prize! One of the most important things that we did, was to set up Saints for Christ (SFC) which I gather remains a vibrant and committed grouping. Under our new student council, the student cohort collectively even got to propose and vote on the current school uniform, designed the school tie and so on. We were treated and respected as young adults.

So I am delighted to be back at SAJC, more so that the JC has since returned to this beautiful Woodsville/Potong Pasir site as part of a larger St Andrew’s Village under the banner of One Family Unbroken.

There are clearly a lot of things that I can talk about but allow me – given the time – to just talk around one theme; something which I wish I had given more personal thought and focus to, if I could turn back the clock.

When Harold Macmillan, the UK Prime Minister from the late 1950s to early 1960s was asked what he worried most about the future, his reply was “Events”. I would paraphrase this by saying that if I were starting out again as a young 18-year old student, I would want to be better prepared to handle change and unpredictability. At my time, many of us saw our sessions in school as one of developing technical mastery – to be able to do a particular profession. But when I and many in my cohort were about to enter the workforce in the mid-1980s – we were confronted with a major recession. Some of the parents here will remember the deep economic downturn of 1986.

Put another way, many of us could not find jobs or at least, those jobs that we thought we were being prepared for. I was simply more fortunate than some of my university mates

because I was on a government scholarship, and as one who was originally earmarked to work in the petrochemical industries in Pulau Ayer Merbau, I somehow ended up at the Monetary Authority of Singapore.

You see, many of my school mates and I were not only unprepared for dramatic decline in the economic environment. We were in essence caught in a state of decision paralysis, like a stranded deer staring into oncoming headlights. A few disgruntled ones sought to emigrate. The more successful ones somehow decided to ride the economic wave – not to be beaten by it but exploiting it to pursue other areas of interest.

There is an author/philosopher Charles Handy who is a guru of organisational behaviour and management. He has an insightful book entitled: *The Empty Raincoat – Making Sense of the Future* written back in 1984 or 1985. I read it only some years later and there are many interesting ideas in it but a particular one that resonated with me and what I observed around me.

Charles Handy characterised organisations as entities that evolve in a sigmoid curve (or an S-curve) over time. This thinking, to my mind, can be relevant to individuals too.

Extrapolating this thinking to a person, there is always an initial period of experimentation and learning – just like when we are in school – as defined by a rising S-curve when the slope starts to steepen. This is followed by a time of growth and development – which I liken to those of us entering the workforce and contributing to output. The slope of the S-curve steepens further reflecting that progression. But eventually, as Handy has argued for organisations, every individual S-curve will start to slow down, and eventually flatten out or even turn downward. We can liken this to a period of job stagnation which may be from aging, loss of interest, illness and so on. The only thing that varies from person to person is the length and duration of each part of the curve. But the pattern is universal.

A company that cannot reinvent itself eventually gets displaced or becomes redundant, by new incumbents that replace it by starting a new and rising S-curve just as the old one flattens out. So we have the likes of Kodak Film Company and the Nokia phones that have now been moved into oblivion from new start-ups like digital cameras and smartphones. Well, this is also true for individuals.

To keep on growing and developing in one's working career, the successful individual (just as for an organisation), must therefore develop a second replacement S-curve *before* his prevailing one starts to hit a peak. We need to change and consider how to raise personal productivity and effectiveness –and to do so before there is an actual catalyst to change.

But most of us have no incentive to change when things are doing ok or well, unless we are forced to act out of circumstances, such as getting laid off. This is often too late. By then there can be issues of morale, energy or lack of resources and so on. It is difficult to change when we are down, even if necessity is the mother of invention. This is, by the way, true even for companies. It has been observed that over 40% of Fortune 500 companies of less than ten years ago are no longer around, at least not as independent entities.

The challenge of “extending” our personal S-curve or in overlaying a new S-curve is to find a way to do that while we are still building upon the success, learning and maturity gained from the first curve. I believe that this is the thinking around the government’s encouragement of continuous learning. It is about growing personal productivity and effectiveness continuously. But we can only keep doing the same thing in the same way “better”, up to a point. Economics teaches us that the only way to up individual performance is to work longer which has a limit, or to “add” technology i.e. doing smarter things or doing things smarter. That is key.

But there is also an ominous new threat. Other S-curves can intersect into our own to displace us. What does this mean for jobs?

At the January 2016 World Economic Forum in Davos, there was a *Future of Jobs Report*. This described the employment and skills for the future workforce in what was tagged as the “Fourth Industrial Revolution”.

That Revolution is underway and it is the Technology Revolution.

I predict that in the next 10 years, we will see far more changes to the workplace and to the nature of jobs than we have seen in the last 30 years.

Consider the progress of biotechnology and genetics science to robotics, 3-D printing, driverless vehicles, and artificial intelligence, nanotechnology breakthroughs and so on. Any and all of these can fundamentally alter work or jobs as we know today.

A few simple illustrations: think of what driverless car will imply for the motor insurance industry; or a manufacturing plant in a country in the face of 3-D printing and advanced robotics that can be done anywhere at more or less the same cost; or the connectivity of health insurance to medical or hospital health reports, that in turn are connected to the Fitbit-type wearables that keep track of our daily lifestyle. How will that change insurance costs and the middlemen in the various intersection points?

And we see innovations everywhere. Pokemon Go has made virtual reality *passee*, and now it is augmented reality. This is the advancement in geotech and to bring that technology to the masses. And the implications of this and other innovations are huge in the *Internet of Things*. And jobs will have to adjust because business models have to adjust.

Consider also: What is a bank? Who else can perform banking? What is a telco company? Who else can provide telco services? What is a post office? How do we define manufacturing? Can research simply be centralised in one location to serve the world? We are connected 24-7 in today’s world thanks to smart technology. Also, the advent of a shared economy has already led to the clash between the old and the new, as witnessed by conventional taxis versus the likes of Uber; or hotels versus AirBnB.

A report by Bank of America Merrill Lynch not too long ago created ripples when it forecast that 35% of workers in the UK and 47% of those in the US can be replaced by machines. This may be an exaggeration but the direction is likely not wrong. We are starting to see the displacement of jobs even in Singapore’s financial sector: in areas of stock broking, financial

advisory, exchanges – with new kids on the block such as technology matching platforms, robo-advisors or crowd funding sites – just as some examples.

So should students today be optimistic or pessimistic?

I know that in current times, it is “easy” to feel pessimistic amidst the technology-led tsunami to come. Then, there are acts of terrorism, cyber-attacks, hate crimes, hawkish political rhetoric, protectionism and so on. But we shouldn’t lose sight that we are actually, (as an ex-Saint LKYSPP Dean Kishore Mahubani said recently in a forum) in the most peaceful and prosperous period of human history. The acts that are repulsive seem more frequent only because the world has gotten smaller with information technology that can spread news quickly. There are many reasons to be optimistic in a globalised economy but we must be able to adapt to an evolving workplace to seize the different opportunities that arise.

The inevitable shifts to my mind, will be the transformation of industrial societies to information societies. Workplace hierarchies will trend towards workplace networking. Societies and jobs will increasingly turn away from traditional notions of manufacturing, trade, services to more blended forms of a shared economy.

And I can go on.

So how can a student today who will be the worker of tomorrow – keep your relevance?

Adaptation is not just science or art. It is a craft. If I were to re-live my school years, I will tell myself to use the time in school to be better equipped with not only the hard technical stuff (because it is important to build a capacity to learn, and to articulate what we know); but just as important, the softer competencies. Learning to learn, learning to collaborate, learning to influence, learning to recover from setbacks, learning to change course and to deal with unplanned situations – and these can start from schools, CCAs and OSA (outside-school-activities).

Let me end with something that is equally if not the most important of all. As you journey forward, never lose your bearing by losing your moral compass. That is something that should never be compromised. And to be truly successful, you must develop a sense of compassion for others who are less fortunate.

I have appreciated this emphasis on values during my time in SAJC and I commend the JC for the continued emphasis on character building as espoused in your WISE and TRUE values.

May I wish all the students here a very exciting and enriching future ahead.