

## Primer

# A good life is not achieved alone but with and for others

This is the last of 12 primers on current affairs issues under the news outreach programme by The Straits Times on issues of interest to younger readers



People enjoying the evening sun and breeze at the Marina Barrage. Purpose can be found in more than career success, and National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser says a meaningful life is one that is self-actualised and ambitious, "in which one can do the things that affirm one's identity and achieve one's aspirations". ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG



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People differ in their views on what makes for a good life.

Let's take as an example a much-discussed topic – the inflow of foreign workers.

"Some people think the influx of foreign workers is threatening our Singapore identity," says Associate Professor Adrian Kwek of Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), "whereas others think immigration is a source of economic well-being".

When people cross swords on a topic like immigration, the clash often spills over into politics, and can result in deep divides that become difficult to bridge.

Such clashes can result in shouting matches, whether in cyberspace or in person. They often spill over into politics, and can result in deep divides that become difficult to bridge. How might societies learn to embrace diverse and conflicting aspirations for a good life?

What might help is if more people take the time to try and understand how and why such differences arise, to begin with.

## WHAT IS GOOD CAN CHANGE OVER THE COURSE OF SOMEONE'S LIFE

The competitive, capitalist societies many live in today celebrate career success. But meaning and purpose are not to be found in success alone. Often, such societal goals are too

narrowly defined, observes sociologist Nilanjan Raghunath.

"You draw the boundaries yourself," she says. "Some people draw inspiration and strength from religion or some kind of spiritual awareness, philosophy or nature, for example."

Dr Raghunath, who teaches at Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), says good health, financial stability, emotional and mental wellness, and being socially connected create the optimal foundation for the pursuit of a meaningful life.

Having the resilience to handle change and adversity – whether it is dealing with illness, end-of-life issues, war or poverty – also adds meaning to one's life, she says.

National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser defines a meaningful life as one that is self-actualised and ambitious, "in which one can do the things that affirm one's identity and achieve one's aspirations to the furthest extent possible".

He adds, however, that pursuing a good and meaningful life can be a process of evolution.

For example, when it comes to investing time and energy in child-rearing, developing one's career, and achieving work-life balance, couples may find their life goals colliding.

Dr Tan says: "It may not be possible to achieve these goals at the same time. We would need to space them out across the different stages in our life cycle."

## PEOPLE MUST BE FREE TO ACT, BUT NOT AT OTHERS' EXPENSE

A good life is not defined in isolation but in the context of the societies that people live in.

## About The Straits Times-Ministry of Education News Outreach Programme

For 12 Mondays between March 21 and Aug 8, this paper's journalists have been addressing burning questions and offering Singaporean perspectives on complex issues in the Opinion section. This primer is the last in this year's series.

The primer articles are part of The Straits Times-Ministry of Education News Outreach Programme, which aims to promote an understanding of local and global issues among pre-university students.

The primers broached contem-

porary topics, such as competition and collaboration in health-care, and economic growth in South-east Asia.

Other issues in the series included the hype surrounding the metaverse, and Singapore's future as a global city in a "de-globalising" world.

Each primer topic gives a local perspective to help students draw links to the issues' implications for Singaporeans.

This programme is jointly organised by The Straits Times and the Ministry of Education.

That is where laws come in. They set limits on what each person can and cannot do, thereby making it possible for people to be free to act as they wish, unless their actions cause harm to someone else.

SUSS' Dr Kwek points out that "what constitutes harm ...differs in each society".

Some societies define harm mainly in terms of what endangers individual life or property. Such societies might well write their laws to grant widely accepted freedoms – such as the freedom from being targets of crime and violence, and the freedom to practise one's religion.

But other societies prize not just individual freedoms but also social harmony, and enact laws to protect the stability they consider a priority.

Citizens have both rights and responsibilities, says Dr Mia Lee, a senior lecturer at SUSS who trained as a historian.

"Laws matter, such as legislation against hate crimes, cyber bullying and sexual harassment. Hopefully they change the way people see what is acceptable or not. It takes time."

Dr Lee points out that lawmaking is an ongoing process, and that laws can and do change over time. Concepts once viewed as "unnatural" can be taken for granted in later epochs, she says.

Another example concerns what society deems to be good and right when it comes to women and what they should do with their lives.

The entrenched notion that a woman's role is primarily that of caregiver still reverberates today in the gender pay gap and other gendered stereotypes, says Dr Lee.

## PEOPLE NEED TO FEEL THEY BELONG

Beyond laws and systems, there is deeper soil in which a person's sense of meaning and purpose is cultivated.

"The important thing is to have a sense of belonging, that deep sense that you are accepted for who you are," says Dr Lee.

Being connected to others boosts the desire for people, however marginalised, to contribute to society.

That has implications for social discourse, which today can all too often descend into shouting matches between tribes of people with opposing political beliefs and cultural values.

"Cancel culture is so dangerous because neither side listens," says Dr Lee. "There's a lot of fear, where people reinforce their sense of comfort when faced with the unfamiliar."

Cancel culture refers to the practice of expressing disapproval and withdrawing mass support for public figures or celebrities who have done or said things that are now deemed socially unacceptable. The social pressure involved in "cancelling" someone is typically exerted on social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter or Facebook.

Dr Lee adds that the broad parameters for societies to support diverse aspirations need to be based on mutual respect and a recognition of each other's human dignity.

"The basic question is, can I recognise that (my opponent) is my equal in humanity? Wherever we want to exclude a particular group, what are we saying?"

## NOT JUST INDEPENDENCE, BUT INTER-DEPENDENCE

What are the broad societal parameters within which human flourishing can occur?

That is the question Nanyang Technological University sociology professor Kwok Kian Woon poses when asked to share his views on defining a good life.

Prof Kwok, who is also NTU's associate vice-president of well-being, says that modern challenges require more urgency in discussing concerns beyond the individual, because they require collective action.

He says: "There has to be a sense of deeper solidarity for human flourishing (in all its forms). We cannot merely think in terms of independence, we have to realise our inter-dependency."

"Many of the youths I encounter are profoundly concerned about climate change. They're moving into a future they feel they did not create. We are in a time of crisis. Besides climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic, there is also widening inequality and deepening polarisation."

The concept that people working together can not only serve their own interest, but also that of the wider community, is found in many cultures, Prof Kwok notes.

Africans have a traditional concept called "ubuntu" that denotes people's common humanity and is sometimes translated as "I am, because we are".

Writers such as Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote Democracy In America back in the 19th century, held up the concept of enlightened self interest.

More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, which continues to this day, has helped many understand that when it comes to public health, "no one is safe unless everyone is safe".

That catchphrase, says Prof Kwok, points to collective action as part of the answer to the age-old question of how best to embrace diverse definitions of excellence.

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