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**SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND SECOND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE, DR NG ENG HEN AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF PRE-UNIVERSITY SEMINAR 2009, ON 2<sup>ND</sup> JUNE 2009 (TUESDAY), 9.45 A.M. AT LT 27, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE**

Mrs Josephine Teo, Chairman, GPC (Education)

Mrs Tan Ching Yee, Permanent Secretary

Miss Ho Peng, Director-General of Education

Distinguished Guests

Principals, Teachers, Students

Ladies and Gentlemen

**YOUR BACKPACK FOR LIFE**

**Introduction**

1. The last time I spoke at the Pre-University Seminar was five years ago in 2004. The theme then was “Thriving in Challenging Times”. Singapore had been through a rough patch after 9/11 and SARs, and the theme was topical. But I did not want the participants of that Pre-U Seminar to only focus on our immediate difficulties. Instead, I wanted them to look into their future, to a Singapore that was transforming before their very eyes. I wanted them to see themselves as leaders in the making, who would one day decide on the next phase for Singapore and be responsible for the well-being of Singaporeans. As it turned out, good times returned after the 2004 Pre-U Seminar. The economy rebounded with growth ranging from 7.3% to 9.3% between 2004 and 2007, compared to only 3.8% in 2003. I'm glad that I focused on the longer term issues for participants of that Pre-U Seminar. It is now five years on and the memory of that recession has diminished or forgotten altogether. But I hope what they experienced and learnt during that Pre-U seminar stays with them.

2. Here we are again in the midst of another crisis - a severe global economic crisis on a scale unprecedented since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The theme for this year's seminar, “From Crisis to Confidence – Lessons and Opportunities”, is therefore apt.

3. By now, some of you would have concluded that perhaps it may be the norm for every generation to face a series of crises in their lifetimes – after all, we do not live in Utopia. If we take those who lived a full generation before you – those in their 60s today - certainly had their ups and downs. Born in the 1940s, they would have been cradled in their parents' arms when the bombs fell on Singapore in December 1941. Many did not attend school because of the Japanese Occupation and the recovery phase after the War. In the short span of 25 years, they would have gone through war in 1942-45, political struggle against the communists in the 1950s, self-government in 1959, merger with Malaya in 1963, race riots in

1964, then separation from Malaya and independence in 1965. All these experiences would have left a lasting impression and shape the prism through which they viewed their world henceforth. Even after independence, they were not spared further shocks. The Oil embargo in October 1973, pushed prices of oil up by 4 fold within a year. When interest rates were cut simultaneously, the resultant stagflation hit economies worldwide severely.

4. In 1985, another severe recession hit. One senior Cabinet colleague of that generation recounted how he had just graduated and the job market was tough. He sent out about 100 applications hoping to find a job. This would not be tedious now, but his was the time before the Word processor and copy machines. Old-fashioned mechanical type writers were used and copies were made using thin carbon separators slipped in between sheets of papers. There was a limit to the number of copies that could be typed simultaneously – around three or at most four. Keys got stuck, and mistakes had to be ‘blancoed’ on each copy.

5. In the 90’s a momentous change took place in their lives - you were born! In the last two decades, the same events would have impacted you and the older generation. But the way you respond can be quite different. Having heard what they have gone through – war, riots, recessions - you can appreciate why their perceptions and reactions may be different from yours. We are all moulded by our past; we are products of processes that harden and hardwire our beliefs and prejudices. All these will shape our responses to life’s challenges. Forty years hence, you are likely to view events differently compared to your children.

6. If each generation gets its quota of adversity, then how do we prepare best for it? Through every crisis, some survive or do better and others don’t. This applies individually and collectively as countries. What is it that produces different outcomes when difficulties arise?

7. Last month, I was in Germany to attend a live-firing of our newly acquired Leopard tanks. I fired some shots and was happy that our tanks performed to precision. The range was in the area of Bergen, near Hanover. During the Nazi rule, there was a concentration camp there. It was the first concentration camp to be liberated in April 1945. The British troops who arrived there found the camp littered with dead and dying prisoners. They buried 10,000 bodies in mass graves. Around 60,000 starving people required immediate help, but many still subsequently died, despite medical treatment. An estimated 70,000 Jews, Slavs, Roma gypsies, political prisoners and others were killed at Belsen.

8. I took the opportunity to visit that memoriam, which the Germans had erected. We walked solemnly along the mass graves, lost in our own troubled thoughts. A gravestone marked the burial place of Anne Frank and her sister Margot. It’s hard to comprehend the scale and depth of suffering. It reminded me of our human frailties, how desperately we can lose our way and the enormous propensity to inflict pain and suffering on one another. At the same time, I was also equally astounded by acts of bravery. Documented by first hand witness accounts, were stories of individuals who hid and protected those marked for death. They did this at great peril to themselves, and indeed some were executed when discovered.

We all hope that we will never be faced with such choices or horrific calamities. I hope we are fortunate and will never see war in our lifetime. But it set me thinking whether our education system adequately prepares our students for the tests of life. When faced with a difficult situation, will they know how to make the best of it? Will they be able to distinguish right from wrong? In complex situations, can they take charge and produce positive outcomes? What are their intrinsic motivations? When duty calls, will they answer?

9. Recently my daughter set out for Outward Bound School and my son, prepared for a 10-day field camp in NS. Sensibly, they had a check list of what to bring in their back pack. The usual items were included – items to ward off mosquitoes and prevent sun burn, antiseptic lotions, and yes, the humble but indispensable toilet roll! When you leave school at the end of your pre-university life, what would you have in your backpack to face life's challenges? I would like each of you to SMS your answers. I will give you my top four items that I hope our educational system has put in your backpack. Later, we can compare our lists.

### **The other Four “Cs”**

#### *Confidence*

10. I hope for four Cs in your backpack. No, they are not cash, condo, car and credit card. I have four other Cs. The first is confidence. **CONFIDENCE** must not be confused with ability. The two are linked, but not synonymous. Let me clarify with a real life example. Recently, I had a chat with Charles, one of the brothers of the famous local Charles and Keith brand that sells shoes and accessories. His story illustrated the difference and the link between confidence and ability. Charles told me that he was not academically gifted. In fact, he openly proclaimed that he did not do well for his O levels and went no further. From young, he helped out in his parents' shop selling shoes. Charles did not have academic ability, but he did have confidence to push for ideas and believed that if he worked hard and was not afraid to try, he would succeed. His parents' shop was one of those small shops you usually see in your typical HDB neighbourhood. But Charles believed he could build a global brand. Today, Charles and Keith have 215 shops in 23 countries worldwide with a turnover of about \$98 million in 2008. Did Charles have ability? Of course, he did and that's why he succeeded. But, and this is the essential difference, he did not allow others nor the system to define his abilities or limit what he could achieve. Charles could have succumbed to conventional definition. He could have dreamt small or adopted a defeatist attitude, but he did not. How often have you been limited by what others or you yourself think you are capable of?

11. If you are unsure and tentative, chances are, you are more likely to fail. But neither should we be over-confident and have unrealistic expectations. A sound basis for confidence comes from the ability to know what your strengths are, and where they can be best used. It comes from knowing your limitations, choosing the right battles and tactics, and recognizing how to use the strengths of others to complement your weaknesses.

### *Character*

12. Where then does confidence come from, if not directly from ability? **CHARACTER.** Good character provides that inner strength and certainty of purpose guided by a moral compass. Sadly, we read reports of those who do have ability but have flawed characters – they become tricksters or con-men.

13. This is why character development must be central to our education system and be one of its primary goals. The majority of Singaporeans agree with this emphasis. Last year, I appointed a Committee to review our primary education. It was chaired by SMS Grace Fu. They held many focus groups and talked to the cross section of stake-holders including parents, teachers, students, school advisory boards. When asked, what our education system should achieve – the answer was simple: confident children, independent learners and caring citizens. Confidence, independence and a caring nature can only spring from a well-formed character.

14. Our School Excellence Model, that guides our principals in managing their schools places emphasis on processes and programmes that allow character development to take centre stage. We should not relegate the importance of character development to incidental outcomes, nor hope for serendipitous teachable moments. Not all schools can have their students score As in all subjects, but it is possible for them to build good character in every student.

### *Crisis and Comfort Zones*

15. Confidence is built through dealing with **Crisis** and stepping out of one's **Comfort Zones**. We don't plan for calamities but when they do occur, crises either make or break you. A better way to build your confidence is to step out of your comfort zones to test your limits in a controlled environment where the consequences of failure are manageable. One of my favourite shows is "Ninja Warrior". I love watching the Japanese and foreign contestants dressed in ridiculous costumes, which they subsequently rip apart before attempting the most challenging of obstacles. It may look funny to the audience but it is not a joke for contestants, who train many hours and years, just to beat that obstacle. Why do they do it and what drives them? The answer must be the same as for our Singaporean ladies who stepped out of their comfort zones and conquered Everest.

### *Courage*

16. Like tempered steel, good character and experience will provide that resilience and confidence to help our students withstand the pressures of life events. If you are a porcelain vase, breath-taking to behold but precariously fragile, you will not be able to handle the vicissitudes in life. Put confidence in your backpack. You will need a plentiful supply. With it, you will get the **COURAGE** to try and improve your chance of success.

### *Compartments*

17. The second essential item would be **COMPARTMENTS** or storage-bags. Thank goodness for them! Drastic consequences arise when toothpaste is mixed with shoe-paste, dirty socks with clean clothes and when paper items are exposed to the elements. I'm saddened when I see students struggle because they cannot compartmentalize life's events and challenges. They mix up all items thrown at them – CCAs, relationships, personal goals, tests and exams, holiday trips, school trips – and naturally are overwhelmed. Compartmentalisation creates capacity, even with the same space. It requires simplification and categorization. It forces you to decide what needs to be discarded and what needs to be at hand; to differentiate what you must have compared to what would be good to have. In short, it reflects good judgement. I am seldom impressed by the harried person, seemingly always in a hurry, because he has too many things to do. But I am impressed by those who though having many responsibilities, seem always to have enough time to do what is important. Indeed, I look for such people to assign the most important task to, because I know that they will say no if they really cannot. But once they take on the task, they can be depended upon to complete it and do it well. Learn to compartmentalise life's challenges. It will lighten your load.

### *Compassion*

18. The third C I'd like in your bag is COMPASSION. Compassion is not needed just because it benefits others, although that would be the natural consequence. Compassion is needed more for oneself. Singaporeans are a compassionate lot. When the Indian Ocean tsunami struck on Boxing Day 2004, thousands of Singaporeans spontaneously stirred and gave money, clothing, food items to help victims across the oceans. Some individuals joined Mercy Relief and the City Harvest Community Services Association and went to these disaster-hit regions to give medical and humanitarian aid. Teams of doctors, nurses, engineers and logisticians voluntarily went into these disaster areas to render help to the tsunami victims. Our own President's Challenge over the last 10 years of fund-raising has successfully raised over \$70 million for more than 400 beneficiaries. This success was made possible with the strong and generous support of many organisations, schools, institutions of higher learning, private and public service organisations. This year's President's Challenge aims to reach out to more than 260,000 participants and hopes to raise at least \$8 million again. I am confident that Singaporeans will respond generously again.

19. I am thankful that Singaporeans are compassionate. Without compassion, we become a little less human. When we exercise compassion, we reaffirm our humanity and our solidarity with the human race. We remind ourselves that in life, we often don't deserve what has been dished out, for good or for bad. Through compassion, we exercise the ability to alter outcomes, even by a little, and become makers rather than slaves of destiny. With compassion, we develop the humility to accept things which we cannot change, and at the same time we hope that through our individual acts, life can be made better for someone else.

Perhaps these are reasons why it is more blessed to give than receive.

### *Company*

20. My last C in the bag would be COMPANY. Company should be differentiated from the Crowd, which is attracted by bright lights or an exciting show. Crowds vanish quickly when things become less interesting. To have good company, you first need to be a good friend – to be someone whom others enjoy hanging out with, who is there when needed and who shares as well as accepts help. So take time to build strong ties and friendships with those who will travel life's journey with you, through thick and thin. Yes, this means being present at the many family occasions. No matter how hard you try, you cannot build ties through being absent. Family and friends colour your life and create your memories, so invest in them wisely.

21. Company also refers to your life partner. I am not here to promote the government's Marriage & Parenthood package vigorously today but will only share one observation for you to ponder. As educational levels and wealth increase, traditional reasons to get married become weakened. In agrarian communities, fertility was an economic lifeline – you needed manpower to till the fields and harvest the crops. But in modern urban industrialised cities, the economic rationale for marriage and children has weakened considerably. Even the social reasons for marriage- companionship and parenthood - have competing alternatives of singlehood, marriage without kids and the singular pursuit of one's career. This explains in part our rising singlehood and falling fertility. Recently I attended a wedding of the son of one of my close colleagues. The son was a lawyer in his 30s. In his speech, he disclosed quite un-romantically why he proposed to his wife. He said half-seriously, half in jest, that he worked backwards from when he wanted a child, including the average time from marriage to the first child. So after this back of the envelope calculation, he decided it was time to “pop” the question! I'm glad he only told this story after the marriage ceremony, and I would not recommend this tack when you do propose. But there is a kernel of truth in his reasoning. It may be that for modern lifestyles, just as they do in their careers, people need also to actively plan to meet, fall in love and marry. I remember Steve Ballmer from Microsoft related how he plans his life on a spreadsheet, with goals, deadlines and regular reviews! The cynic would say this was just to promote Microsoft Excel, but he said this in all seriousness.

22. Wait, my backpack is incomplete. You forgot another two crucial Cs – “CERTIFICATES and CASH”. Why have you not emphasised good grades? After all, we spend so much time on studies and grades are so important to enter the best universities, to get a prestigious degree and to secure the most lucrative job. Yes, of course grades are important, and certainly will give you a good start in life. Ditto, if you were born well-off and have resources. But in life's marathon, cash and grades can only get you so far, and may not be enough to help you finish well. I meet many top leaders who have spent years interviewing countless number of people for jobs and promotions. Rarely, do they look at the size of your bank account. They look at grades, but the most important quality they look for is your character, your judgement and your track record of being able to motivate and lead people with a clear vision and purpose. Cash and certificates don't determine this – you do.

23. I can hear another group raising protests. Aren't you going to paint the future for us, so that we can plan and know how to make the most of opportunities? I would have liked to provide you with a map, but I suspect it would be outdated soon. Life is full of surprises. So I'm afraid from my speech, you will just have to "retain the best, and improvise the rest". It should be enough.

24. There is yet another group with lingering cries for another 2 Cs – our Commitment and Contributions to Singapore? No, I won't add these to your backpack because it is already filled with the right stuff. I believe that you will always stay attached to Singapore. The qualities in your backpack are a homing device. This place - your home, your family, the community - gives you the confidence and capabilities to do well anywhere in the world. I believe that you will give back to Singapore and do what is right when duty calls.

### **Conclusion**

25. In two to three years time, all of you will start another journey. After about twelve years in our school system, I hope that we have equipped you well for life's journey and tests. You're off on your own great adventure. So have a great time and do good. On this note, I wish all of you a successful and fruitful seminar.