

Life's Lessons

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Bangkok between 1996 and 1999. In MFA HQ, he held various posts which included Deputy Director in the Policy Planning & Analysis Directorate I (1994–1996) and Deputy Director in the ASEAN Directorate (1999–2002). He was Director of the Technical Cooperation Directorate from 2002–2004. Mr. Anderson was appointed Ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia from 29 March 2004 to 18 April 2007. In 1993, he was awarded the Raffles Scholarship and obtained a Master of Arts in Area Studies (Southeast Asia) from the School of Oriental and African Studies, United Kingdom.

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he world has changed a lot since I joined the Foreign Ministry, not just politically, but also in terms of values and ideals. I joined MFA in 1984, straight from the university, which means 24 years at a job.

Nowadays, that is called inertia, though in pre-dot-com days, loyalty was regarded as a virtue. Back then, I was looking to build a career doing something meaningful which I believed in personally and felt I had found it in diplomacy and foreign affairs. This, thankfully, has not changed. Both in good times and in those not so happy ones, the varied experiences of working in MFA HQ and postings abroad to New York, Washington, Bangkok and Phnom Penh have been equally enriching and eye-opening. In this essay, let me share some personal vignettes from the early days, which have served invaluablely as life's lessons throughout my career.

Before the Little Red Dot there was Lake Toba

In 1988, as a fresh-faced young diplomat on his first posting to our U.N. Mission in New York, I remember attending my very first ASEAN-New York Committee meeting. As with ASEAN gatherings, the mood was warm and convivial. A senior Indonesian colleague who had made me feel most welcome during the morning coffee preliminaries, quietly drew me aside to an adjoining room. As we stood barely two feet apart, the grey-beard said solemnly:

“Pak Lawrence, Singapore is a great island. But do you know Indonesia has several thousand islands? In one of them, Sumatra, there are many many volcanoes. In one of the volcanoes, there is a big lake, *Danau Toba*. In that lake, there are several islands, each one, larger than Singapore!”

Bapak’s point put to a young Singaporean diplomat was abundantly clear. As he stood there smiling, I replied, seriously:

“Precisely, Pak; which is why I can’t understand why Indonesians go on and on about our defence forces. We are so small you can easily fit all of us into one of your volcanoes!”

Bapak frowned, quizzically. Then, he clapped me warmly on the back with a loud guffaw: “Yes, Pak, precisely! Singapore is our best friend, still...”

Grey-beard left it at that and we rejoined the others. He never mentioned it again.

Size does matter, of course. During my assignment to Washington, D.C. in 1988–91, I often had to explain to my American friends, the constraints facing Singapore due to our status as a small island state. Like most people, Americans use themselves and their country as their basic reference point for norms, behaviour and achievements. They are favorably impressed with what we have accomplished, but more so when they realise what Singapore is, relative to the U.S.

“As you know,” I would begin, earnestly, “the U.S. is made up of 50 states ranging from Alaska, the largest, to tiny Rhode Island. Well, Singapore is one-fifth the size of Rhode Island.”

This simple fact always makes them sit up and smile!

Three Wise Men

I was fortunate early in my career to serve under three of our most able and distinguished diplomats: Ambassadors Kishore Mahbubani in New York, Tommy Koh and S. R. Nathan in Washington. Each was different in his personality, management style and temperament, but they were all brilliant and inspirational men. Through observation, instruction and deduction, I learnt so much about the diplomatic craft and how to deal with people.

Kishore Mahbubani is an intellectual, a thinker and a strategist. He taught me about the importance of giving face and being generous to an opponent without compromising your interests. In the 1980s, one of the most critical issues for Singapore was the Cambodian problem, or to be more precise, mobilising international support against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. At the U.N., it meant lobbying for as many votes as possible for the annual Resolution. In 1988, a nuanced change in the language of the Resolution critical of the Khmer Rouge was not happily received by China, hitherto one of our key supporters. Given China's prestige and influence, few believed that ASEAN would not climb down and amend the text, but eventually with the help of our supporters, we prevailed upon our Chinese friends to come around.

It was some achievement, but we did not gloat or revel in it. Kishore saw to that and more. He had masterminded the strategy that finally persuaded the Chinese to accept our formulation, but he also took pains to acknowledge, both verbally and through a written statement, China's magnanimous action and support. Seeing how much the Chinese appreciated this gesture, I understood then, the

importance of giving face and goodwill to your opponent, which also ensures that he does not become your enemy.

Washington Days

Tommy Koh is the most humane person I know. He always has a good word for everyone and treats all people, from the receptionist to the President, with kindness and consideration. He possesses a keen mind, coupled with a generosity of spirit, tolerance and compassion, which probably explains why he is so good at diplomacy — the art of bringing warring sides together.

Ambassador Koh showed me how people ought to be treated. When I used to accompany him to meetings with his important American contacts, he would often introduce me as his colleague who did all the work and who gave him all the ideas. Of course, this was blatantly false, as the American contact well knew, but it was Tommy's warm way of signalling that if he were not around and if there was follow-up needed, the American could turn to me. This, naturally, was a great morale booster, but a great burden too, because it made me acutely conscious of the need to justify Tommy's confidence and trust.

One example illustrates his generosity. Part of our job was to persuade the U.S. administration not to withdraw support for the non-communist resistance Cambodian forces. During a particularly difficult period, it seemed that withdrawal of such support was imminent. A Congressional friend advised us that as part of our lobby efforts, it was crucial for ASEAN to persuade the major U.S. newspapers to publish the call from the countries of the region for the U.S. to stand steadfast.

The task of writing the articles for publication fell to me. One article would be published under Ambassador Koh's name, while our ASEAN colleagues agreed to have another under the Philippines Ambassador's name as ASEAN Chairman at the time. The articles

were good, but why would the U.S. newspapers, who were not sympathetic to the ASEAN position on Cambodia, publish them? They probably would not, if Tommy had not used his considerable persuasive powers and wide array of contacts. Within a short space of time, we had two articles published in the op-ed pages of the influential and pre-eminent American newspapers — *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

Despite my protestations, Tommy generously told our ASEAN and U.S. friends that I deserved the credit for having written the articles and talking to the newspaper editors. The U.S. Administration duly postponed the decision on withdrawal of support, though certainly not just because of the articles. It was thanks mainly to Tommy that we achieved the desired results, but I was personally chuffed at having two articles published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, even though they were not under my name!

Mr. President

My second boss in Washington was S. R. Nathan, who succeeded Tommy Koh as Ambassador in 1990. Ambassador Nathan, who subsequently became our President in 1999, was the one who really educated me about what exactly made Singapore tick. He was literally “present at the creation” of our nation, and was intimately involved in many of our domestic and foreign policy challenges. Ambassador Nathan was also a great story-teller of anecdotes; I say story-teller because although they were true events, he had the skill to weave them like an adventure thriller! Read his accounts of the Laju hijacking incident and the formation of the coalition of disparate Cambodian factions in the first volume of *The Little Red Dot* to see what I mean.

Ambassador Nathan was the one who made me realise that I wanted to make the Foreign Service my career. It was not something he did nor did I experience an awakening of sorts at one of his

inspired sermons. It was more of a gradual conversion, by simply listening and learning what this wise man had to say about having a sense of duty, of service to one's country and a sense of purpose to life and by watching what he set by example.

But it was not always that way. In the early days of his stewardship, I had a difficult time understanding why, during our internal staff meetings, he was always so hard on us younger officers. He often tore apart our analysis mercilessly and was always finding fault with how we put forward our views. Then, one day, he called one colleague who has since left the Ministry and I into his office and asked if we knew why he was always so tough on us. Without waiting for a reply, he explained that he wanted us to develop a proper sense of humility and respect for others. He knew that we knew our briefs, but he did not want us to be big-headed about it because it would lead us to show off rather than focus on what was important.

“Look, one day, you fellows will be asked to brief PM on an important matter. If you beat-around-the-bush like you normally do, it will be a disaster. I am training you to be precise; to focus on the essentials and to put forward your views clearly and concisely!”

After that, the admonitions did not seem hurtful, while they, in turn, were much less frequent. We had learnt our lesson and were on our way to becoming proper Singapore FSOs. There were many more lessons before I finally left Washington in the summer of 1991, but by then, the respect and affection for Ambassador Nathan was absolute.

Last Thoughts

This year, I will have been in the service for a quarter century, a lifetime. Yet, it seems like only yesterday on that early Monday morning on 28 May 1984 that I bounded up City Hall, two steps at a time, eager to start my first day. Frankly, I never expected to stay

this long, but have done so with few, if any, regrets. It is with quiet pride that I watch my country grow and prosper and to feel that in our own small way, my colleagues and I have done our part. In 2007, when the great debate over the Ministers' salaries was raging, I was in my final months as the Singapore Ambassador to Cambodia. Over lunch in Phnom Penh, one of my Cambodian contacts told me earnestly that he did not see what all the fuss was about. "If you can guarantee us the same levels of integrity, efficiency and success Singapore has achieved, we would be happy to pay our Ministers twice as much as you are now squabbling over!"