

# ***GIVEN ANOTHER CHANCE***

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# **Dedication**

To my husband and four lovely daughters:  
my love, my inspiration and my life.



# Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to my eldest sister, Ms. Gan Siew Pin for critically reading the manuscript. In the beginning, I didn't find it easy to jot down my experiences onto paper till I met the writer and editor Robert Raymer at a writing workshop. He not only urged me to write my stories but also worked with me to make them more effective until finally the book was formed. I am forever thankful of this encounter and the learning experience gained from working closely with him.

Overall, the production of this book has both been a challenge and a delightful experience.

# Preface

One day I had what many refer to as a near-death experience when I nearly drowned. The event itself was frightening and though it happened a long time ago, it was still fresh in my mind. I have never shared it with anyone other than with close family members until the day I finally decided to write about it, hoping that my experience may provide useful insights into death for others. Indeed, I was lucky that fateful day to be gifted a second chance at life and I am eternally grateful for that experience.

This collection contains thirteen narratives which are based on true life incidents written sincerely from my heart. Not all are about dying; most are about living; about the importance of seizing every moment, of overcoming obstacles and of realising the dreams of both ours and others. I now understand

that every single thing that has happened to me has been preparing me for a moment that that has yet to come. For example, wanting to give back to the society when I was still a student, I volunteered to help at the Old Folks Home. However, I never would have thought that in serving others, I would receive much more than I ever gave. Essentially, as we help others, we are lifted up and eventually become a much more wholesome individual.

Overall, my unique life experiences have made me a stronger person and played important roles of shaping me into the person I am today. I hope that by reading this book, others can be touched in many positive ways and gain immense benefit, motivation and inspiration.



# ***CHAPTER 1:***

**Given another chance**



## Given Another Chance

I always thought death would be painful, but it's merely a separation of the soul from the body. At least that was what had happened to me when I nearly drowned.

I was seventeen and waiting for my exams results when I visited Perhentian, a beautiful island off the coastal area of Terengganu, with my extended family. There were ten of us: Dad, Mom, three elder sisters, a brother, a cousin and her husband with their young daughter.

We were nearing the end of our holidays and I was feeling sad to leave such a beautiful paradise as we waited under the coconut trees for the ferry to arrive. The evening was quiet, already drawing late, nearing dusk. The silhouette of the ferry grew clearer as it steadily approached. The soft, gentle breeze was lulling me to sleep as it blew across my pink cheeks and sun-burnt body that was thoroughly baked by seven days of sun. The sea shells I had collected in a

bottle were at my feet. Stacked nearby on the hot sand were our bags, some quite large.

Unable to come all the way to the shore, the gigantic ferry had to be moored a distance away in deep waters. A speedboat would have to shuttle us to the ferry. The boat, we were informed, could fit only three passengers and the boat driver, so this caused some confusion as to who should go with whom and which group should go first.

“Quick! Get into the boat! It is getting dark!” my dad shouted. As a police officer, Dad often yelled his orders at us, a bad habit from work. As a result of his intimidation, I grew up to be like mom, timid and meek, not daring to go against his words or ask questions, lest I would be called stupid or shouted at even louder.

My brother, my cousin’s husband and his daughter went first.

## Given Another Chance

After transporting the others safely, the speedboat returned for the next batch. Two of my elder sisters and my cousin climbed aboard.

“Quick! Get into the boat!” my dad shouted at me, his voice reverberating loudly against the silence, breaking my train of thoughts.

I hesitated. The speedboat already contained four people, the maximum load. If I boarded, it would make five. I tried to point this out, but my dad cut me off.

“You are the smallest,” he said. “It makes no difference!”

Seeing my dad’s angry face, I obeyed and sat quietly beside my second sister while my eldest sister sat in front with my cousin. The boat driver was at the back. I comforted myself with the thought that the speedboat would have to make only one more trip after us, instead of two. Again, dusk was fast approaching.

The speedboat raced us towards the ferry. The skyline was turning orange and red as the sun sank in the horizon. Fresh air continued to blow onto my face, bringing with it a spray of sea water. My hair seemed to have a life of its own, dancing uncontrollably in the wind. I felt free, alive, and very excited, yet also anxious to reach the ferry since I didn't know how to swim.

Several metres away from the ferry, the speedboat made a sudden jerk-like turn in the direction of the ferry. The speedboat jolted, as if in protest and dipped into the water causing the engine to stall. Reality quickly set in as the boat began to sink.

"This is it!" I thought. We not only didn't know how to swim, but also none of us wore life jackets.

"This is how we will end our lives."

The water was deep, almost black in colour. What a horrible way to die, I thought. Being a

## Given Another Chance

Buddhist, I recited silently in my heart a prayer that my grandmother had taught me whenever I was afraid, "Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha!"

Everything was happening so fast. My cousin, who was front most, was tossed into the water. My two other sisters followed suit, either tossed or they jumped after my cousin. With three struggling ladies in the water, the boat driver seemed confused as to whom he should save first. Meanwhile, sea water continued to rush into the boat relentlessly as I remained inside to buy myself a few extra minutes.

My cousin kept screaming at the top of her shrill voice that quivered with a strong fear of death. Each scream ended abruptly in a gurgled sound, like an animal in pain; only to start again as soon as it ended. It not only made the chaotic situation worse, but also eerie, too. Her husband was rushing here and there on the ferry, a nervous wreck, not knowing what to do, while his daughter ran after him, also screaming

for her mother.

The boat driver went from one lady to another, pushing and propping each of them up whenever they sank into the water.

From inside the sinking boat, I turned to look towards the island and saw my anxious parents and another sister pacing back and forth, not knowing what to do. Three strong villagers, despite the distance to be covered, jumped into the water and swam towards us. Deep down inside, I knew they could not make it in time to save us.

Water continued to rush into the boat, so I said another silent prayer, "Oh Buddha, if anybody were to die from this incident, please take me....I am the youngest and have no attachments. My cousin desperately did not want to die because her family needed her. My two sisters have bright futures, one eager to get married and the other, to start a new career. Rather than any of them, please take me; I am

## Given Another Chance

not afraid to die.”

After a while, the boat, which was nearly full of water, turned over. The side of the boat hit my head, sending me straight into the sea. Immediately I began to experience what I thought was death. Images, one after the other, ran through my mind. I was forced to see all the bad things I had done, starting from when I was a child. I saw myself stealing playing cards from my brother when he wasn't looking. I saw myself telling my mom I was sick when in actual fact I did not want to go to school. These images appeared in chronological order. There was no way I could escape them.

Then I realized that “I” or my soul rather (or my mind, energy or consciousness; whatever one may choose to call it), was hovering from about four metres above the commotion in the water. I was actually looking down at my own body struggling in the water. The energy of my being had suddenly left

## Given another chance

my body as if someone had switched off the electricity....I realized at that moment that death was not painful at all. Death was merely the energy leaving the physical body, a very natural process. I also realized that the body and the soul were two separate entities. So "I", which was only my soul, was looking at the body that once belonged to me. It seemed and felt surreal to be looking down at myself. The confusion of seeing my own body turned into sadness when I realized that I was at the brink of leaving the world, leaving my family and my friends.

When the bad images had ended, the good ones started to appear, again in chronological order. I wondered how all of the images could fit in, passing through my mind so fast, in just a split second it seemed to me. I then realized that the images were energy too, created by me when I was alive, but now leaving my body. I saw as a child, when my mom and I were walking on the pavement, we saw a



## Given Another Chance

beggar. Mom quickly shoved some coins into my hands and said, "Hua, run over to him and give him these." I saw myself as a little girl, eagerly following my mom's instruction and handing him the money. Witnessing his face breaking into a toothless grin as he held the coins, I realized that my mom had taught me about kindness.

I saw so many other images of good things that I had done and felt tears of happiness. When the good images stopped appearing, there was a profound feeling of knowing that the good things I had done were much greater compared to the bad ones. I could not explain how, but I had this insight or knowledge that everyone would be safe and no one was going to die. Again, I do not know how, but the feeling was there, strong, real, giving me so much confidence and happiness; so much bliss and joy compared to anything I ever experienced on earth!

## Given another chance

My soul, to my surprise and delight, rejoined my body. Again, this was a unique experience. It felt like my brain had slipped and I was trying to hold my brain to prevent it from falling down only to realize my hands were with my body, below, in the water. However, due to the profound knowledge that I just secured, I was very calm as my soul rejoined the body, which allowed my body to float up to the surface. As I remained floating, I began to laugh uncontrollably... from all the happiness I suppose. To others, I seemed to be acting crazy or even delirious, but I had been given a second chance, another chance of life! The feeling of joy was so intense. Perhaps, in some ways, it was like experiencing heaven on earth itself. I didn't want this feeling to stop. Ever.

Meanwhile, the people on the ferry had tied ropes to some floats and threw them to us. Salt water splashed onto our faces as the floats hit the water. My cousin got the first float, followed by my sisters. One

## Given Another Chance

by one they pulled themselves above the water surface and hung desperately onto the floats.

Finally, I got the last float and was pulled up the ferry. My whole body was physically shaking from the experience; I could hardly stand up on the ferry. My two sisters hugged me and we cried together. After some time, we started laughing when we noticed that one of my sisters was still clutching her slippers so tightly as if her whole life depended on them.

The three villagers who had swum to us finally reached the ferry and offered their assistance. We thanked them profusely for their courage.

Later, Dad, Mom and another sister came to the ferry, on a slow paddle boat, an extra boat from the ferry. Dad was unusually quiet, perhaps due to the guilt for having shouted at me, forcing us to overload the speedboat, knowing that three of his daughters and a cousin could have drowned. Deep

## Given another chance

down, we knew he was glad that everyone was safe, that we had survived such a terrible ordeal.

The incident changed my outlook of life. I became more grateful for the slightest thing. After all, I had died briefly and lived again. I got another chance. Nothing trivial or petty could ever make me feel sad or upset. Death, I now know for certain, is not painful as I had previously feared. The experience also reminded me that I should be careful of all I do in life because my actions will appear once again before me one by one, the bad and the good.

I also know that one day my soul will be separated from my body again, but this time for good. After that I will have to wait, like the rest of us, to see what is in store. For now, I am just happy to be alive...

My sisters and I also learned how to swim... just in case.

“Mom, there must be a reason why you were given a second chance,” my ten-year-old

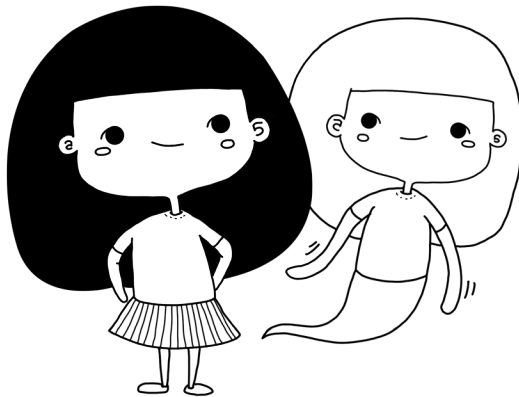
## Given Another Chance

daughter said, when I related the story. “Find the purpose and develop it to the best of your ability.”

Wise words from someone so young, but she was right.

Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.

– Norman Cousins



# ***CHAPTER 2:***

**Finding my motivation  
to study**

## Given Another Chance

I am the youngest of a family of eight. Mom is a homemaker while Dad was a policeman – not the usual policeman one sees on the street but the one in the field-force. This meant that we lived in a police camp, usually stationed miles away from the nearest town. Often, Dad would disappear for a couple of months into the jungle to hunt for communists, only to turn up suddenly at our dinner table. Only Mom knew his schedule.

This also meant that Mom was often left with a household of six young children to fend for herself. When times were bad, she would fry a few eggs, which we would share by carefully breaking it into small pieces, to be mixed with soya sauce and consumed with rice. That would be our main meal. Kids in school often laughed at me because they knew for certain the content of my lunch box: rice and egg sprinkled with soya sauce. Sometimes, Mom would open a can or two of sardines found in

## Finding my motivation to study

Dad's backpack following his jungle operation. We would divide the small fish into several equal pieces enough for six kids and two adults – a luxury for us. Often, Mom would pretend that she did not want her portion, when in actual fact, we knew deep down inside she wanted to ensure that her children had enough to eat.

Despite our financial difficulties, I had a noble ambition of becoming a doctor to help others. I figured if I were to be in a life-long profession that saves others' lives, I would always be doing good work. Unfortunately, I lacked motivation in school and often failed in my studies.

Maybe it was because I had low self-esteem from wearing oversized, hand-me-down, faded uniforms to school. My hair was also cut by Mom, a nondescript hairstyle, cropped close to my head with short bangs right above my eyebrows "for convenience". Mom insisted that practicality was



## Given Another Chance

more important than style.

Mom herself was illiterate and could not offer any assistance in our school work. Secretly, I would envy kids whose mothers read to them when they were young. In our house, there were not many books. We couldn't afford them. After school, during our spare time, I would be with my siblings catching fish from the big drains near to our house. We had to be back by sunset or else Dad would belt us if he were home.

School was very far from home, so we had to wake up at 5.30 am just to be on time. The journey itself would take at least one hour. Often I would fall asleep at the back of the police truck only to be rudely elbowed by my brother when we reached our destination. At school I was always sleepy, so it was no surprise that I hated being there. Frequently, I envied my classmates who could go back to their homes, get refreshed by having a proper bath, a good

## Finding my motivation to study

hot meal for lunch, and a new change of clothing, before the start of the afternoon extra-curricular activities after school. Instead, having no choice, I would run around with my friends in the oversized school uniform that were smelly and dirty by the time the extra-curricular activities began, thus worsening my already low self-esteem. By the time the police truck took us back, it would be dusk; we would be even smellier and dirtier from wearing the same clothing as when we left the house at dawn. Overall, school was something I disliked and as a result, I did poorly in nearly every subject.

Most of the time, Mom would sign my report card that had a big “F” written in red across many of the subjects, her face trying hard not to show her disappointment. I know to a certain extent she blamed herself for our failures, for being illiterate, for hardly having time to look into our schoolwork, for being poor and for all the shortcomings we

## Given Another Chance

encountered as a family.

Nevertheless, Mom kept reminding my siblings and I that we were poor; therefore, we should appreciate every single opportunity that we have. Dad said on more than one occasion that he had nothing to give us upon his death except for our school education. So, we should grab every opportunity to study to the fullest. My parents, however, hardly had the time to take proper care of us, let alone look into our homework. Dad's job was to provide money for the family while mom's job was to ensure that we were well-clothed, had food on the table, and we got to school on time.

One day, my attitude drastically changed toward my studies. My siblings and I had overslept because Mom, who was very tired, failed to wake us up at the usual time. Instead, we were awakened by the rumbling of the police truck outside our house that would charter us and the other children

## Finding my motivation to study

from the police camp to our respective schools.

“Hah, what’s wrong with missing one day of class?” I thought, tossing in my bed gleefully, happy at the prospect of not having to go to school that day, lulling myself back to sleep.

Unfortunately, the incessant rumbling of the truck’s engine kept me awake. Curious, I peeped out of the window and saw Mom’s silhouette against the big vehicle. She was on her knees begging the driver, with a full load of other children sitting inside to wait for her kids who were still asleep. She was trying to explain to the driver that it was her fault; that she had overslept and had failed to wake us.

“Please, would you be kind enough to wait only for five minutes. I promise I will be quick with them.”

Despite being uneducated, Mom did not want us to miss school even for a single day. She wanted a different fate for us. That was the first time I ever saw

## Given Another Chance

her begging like that. I suddenly realized how important it was for Mom that we went to school. Important enough for her to fall on her knees and beg. My eyes teared. I quickly changed into my school uniform.

From that day onwards, despite our shortcomings, I vowed to put my studies as my top priority in life. I would not let down my parents, especially Mom. I studied extremely hard. I even asked permission from Mom to take extra classes after school, despite the fact that I hated to stay back. However, this time I was highly motivated. I was completely transformed. I wanted to excel. My best friend, Lau Jo Ann, who was always top in class was kind enough to guide me. She would create some questions on a piece of paper for me to attempt after school whenever we had some free time and offered me help. Having her full support fueled my desire to excel even more.

## Finding my motivation to study

I was consistent in my efforts. Whenever I felt like giving up, the image of Mom begging against the giant truck appeared before my eyes. I didn't want to see her in that position ever again! Gradually, I advanced from being among the "worst three" in my class to the "top three". Later, I advanced to being the "top three" in the whole school.

Mom was more than happy at the positive change in me. Dad, too. I went on to receive one academic award after another and was selected by my teachers to represent my school, and later, the state, in several academic competitions. Finally, I won a scholarship from the Malaysian government to pursue a degree in Manchester, England.

I could never have achieved this had I not been highly motivated by what I saw that fateful morning. Thank you, Mom for not giving up on us and for teaching us good values. Without a doubt, your love and warmth and your sheer determination, had

Given Another Chance

made all six of your children successful.

Straight roads do not make skillful drivers.  
– Paulo Coelho

