

My Daughter, My Friend

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# My Daughter, My Friend

*Letters to a Daughter*

IRENE CHUA HWEE KEE





献给

林杏芬  
邱璫英

*Dedicated to the two women who,  
by the way they lived,  
gave me valuable lessons in being a mother.  
The remembrance of them continues to inspire me.*

*My mother*

HARRIET LAM HENG FEN

*and my mother-in-law*

KHOO LOO ENG

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# Acknowledgements



I thank my God for answers to desperate prayers for wisdom and understanding as I brought up my children.

Many people have touched my life, and in so doing, they have contributed to this book.

I would like to specially mention a few.

The readers of the first edition who told me how much the book had helped them and wished to share it with their friends but couldn't find anymore copies.

My son Darren whose affirmation of me is a source of encouragement to re-publish.

My daughter Ming, my sounding board, who was always available to me to pique ideas, for her fresh insights and the preface to this new edition.

My husband Kok Kheng who shares my concerns for our children and who has stood together with me for the last 42 years.

# Preface



When my mum wrote and published these letters almost twenty years ago, I was slightly embarrassed to have my life made “public”, but also proud, especially when some of my friends thought that it was cool to have a mother to write stuff like that to a daughter. One even cried when she read parts of the book her mother had highlighted and handed to her.

The book became a mini sensation. Mum became a bit of an authority on dealing with your teen-age daughter. She went to meet-the-author sessions and was invited to various forums. Several passages from the book were featured in a top school test paper and in a secondary school text book.

I grew up, went to college, started working, and several years later got married, moved out and had three little girls. The book followed me to college, came back to Singapore and became part of my furniture, having found a comfortable place on my bookshelf.

One day, my mum announced that it was time to republish the book. Many years had passed, and many who had read the book were now mothers themselves. The world in which my three daughters are growing up is in many ways a very different one from the one I grew up in. However, the issues and values

and ideals I would like my daughters to hold dear to remain pretty much the same. And as for me, now as an adult, caught up with demands as a wife and mother, reading the book again truly reminds me of what is really important.

It will only be a matter of years when my daughters become teenagers, and my plan is to give them this book. And I know that they will read these same letters, cry a little, and smile to themselves, because deep down inside they know that someone is watching out for them and that their mother really cares and loves them. Perhaps they will experience the same feelings I had when I first read the letters years ago, even though I may have (outwardly) rejected all the advice.

This is a bunch of letters that one mother wrote to her daughter who was too busy to listen and thought she knew it all. I hope that this book will speak to daughters as it did to me many years ago, with words so many mothers find difficult to say.

*Sheena Tan Hwee Ming*

## Success

18 August 1994

Dear Ming,

Of course I want you to succeed in life. The sweet fragrance of success is a tonic to the soul. I have often asked myself what I hope you would be as an adult. I would want you to be a contributing member in society, someone who adds a positive dimension to the country, if not the world.

In your chosen field of work, I would like to see you among the best. But as a person you would have succeeded, if on your way there, you can at all times maintain your integrity.

Integrity is an old-fashioned word. It means 'wholeness', when the goodness you profess and what you do are the same. It is closely linked to another old fashioned word, 'righteousness'. This is not being self-righteous, which denotes parading your goodness in such a way that makes other people feel bad about themselves.

People may admire a righteous man, or he may never be noticed. Sometimes he may even be called a fool.

Lack of integrity is felt keenest when, as it were, someone knowingly pulls the carpet from under your feet; or when you hear of the better-off taking unfair advantage of the less well-to-do to increase their wealth.

It is difficult to recognise situations when integrity ought be practised. If you find yourself asking whether you can get away with it; or when someone tells you not to disclose a loophole which would disadvantage you; or you have niggling feelings that what you are about to do is going to put another person at a disadvantage, even when it is within your rights, then you could be treading on doubtful ground.

No one will ever find you out but God sees all your hidden thoughts and deeds.

Am I trying to use the fear of God's punishment and displeasure to frighten you? Yes.

It is in situations when normal moral judgement is 'teeter-tottering' in the face of overwhelming attractiveness of self-gain, that the fear of God may be the only hope to counter- balance.

But if you think you are above being frightened into subjection, then take this other guideline.

You are a Christian and your aim in life should be to please God. So in the context of Biblical teachings, imagine what Jesus Christ would do in a similar situation. And do that.

In Singapore, we are continually pressured to excel. We strive to perform well. The climb up the career ladder is beset by obstacles and competition. It does seem sometimes that honest and dogged hard work does not get obvious recognition, but manipulation or even elimination of competitors quickens the route up.

Why do ordinary people such as some taxi-men go out of their way to return the cash-filled wallets passengers leave behind? In their minds, they must have pitted counter arguments against the usual justification that 'finder keepeth'. It could be a

fear of supernatural repercussions, fear of being found out, or a strong moral conviction of right and wrong. It could be that they are just not greedy, and their values are not focused on self-gain.

When I come across people who lack integrity (after the initial anger has seethed), I am reminded that I must be watchful of myself in the way I deal with others. A proverb from the Holy Bible, Proverbs 3: 27,28 comes to my mind, which helps keep me on the right track.

"Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act.

Do not say to your neighbour, "Come back later I'll give it tomorrow - when you now have it with you."

So strive for the highest but not by all means. If on the way up, you are faced with having to compromise your integrity, you will have to find other ways, or reassess whether you want to go to the top at all.

So define for yourself the meaning of success.

*Love, Mum*

### **Think about**

---

- What would make you feel successful?
- Write it down and list the sacrifices you have to make to achieve it. Is it worth it?
- Are your views of success similar to what the world views as success? What is "success" in God's eyes?

## *Make me a part of your life*

18 March 1995

*Dear Ming,*

You are going to be an adult soon and I really wish we will be able to continue to be good friends. It is so easy to cut your mother out of your life — just don't talk and don't visit and don't call and shut your ears to her. But your mother is an undeniable part of your life, as you are part of hers. You realise it more so when you are older and catch yourself saying the same things your mother did, and perhaps you even begin to look like her at that age.

Most mothers spend their best years bringing up their children. Their children are the main part of their lives. As the children grow up and gradually stand on their own, they want their independence. When once upon a time their mothers were the source of all comfort, they now find comfort in their own privacy and with their friends. It's a difficult time for mothers because by sheer force of habit we still want to look after you and keep you under our wings. While you experience the new world out there and flex your wing muscles and with the glint in your eyes, look on the new horizon, we mothers are suddenly left without a job. We have to learn to let go.

Sometimes, we feel as if we are trying to catch a bird with a net and it seems to escape just as we think we are about to net



it. It takes time for us to learn to let go. We also know you need time to test your wings.

From being the main supporting actress in your life, your mother will be watching you from the sidelines when you are an adult. I want to share in your joys, to be informed of the major decisions you have to make, to enjoy your company and to be told in some ways that you love me.

So remember to make me a part of your life even after you have left the nest.

*Love, Mum*

### **Think about**

---

*“Sometimes, we feel as if we are trying to catch a bird with a net and it seems to escape just as we think we are about to net it. It takes time for us to learn to let go.”*

**Parents:**

- Have you shared with your daughter how you feel?

**Daughters:**

- Does your mother tell you how she feels? Think of one way you can tell your mother you love her.

## *Only one chance*

30 March 1995

*Dear Ming,*

Your six-year-old cousin, Hwei, put it very succinctly when I asked her what is the best thing about living with grandparents. “Only one chance,” she said. “Because they will die.”

Having living grandparents is really a bonus. I have no memories at all of my grandparents. They had died before I was born. I guess I am all the poorer in experience for not having had their input in my life. But you had, until Ah Kong (paternal grandfather ) died three years ago, the full complement of grandparents.

When I was a new mother, I realised that all the fuss your grandparents showered on you and your brother when you were newborns was really because you were their children too, but, of a ‘grand’ variety. You were not my children only. You two belonged to a larger extended family. That relieved me of the sole responsibility of bringing you up, as well as increased the onus on me that you should not bring disgrace to the entire family.

In a traditional Chinese family, grandparents are the head of the family. Anything grandparents say is law. Now with our fast-paced and changing society, the place of grandparents in our lives has changed. Now they are often child-minders for their dual income children’s families.



You are important to them. Remember your kindergarten days, when Ah Ma (paternal grandmother) used to take you home from school? She always had preserved orange peel in her handbag for you when you felt carsick. She has never forgotten your birthday year after year. As for exams, she is quick to find out about your results and reward you. As for Ma Ma (my mother), her Chinese herbal soups seem to make you feel better faster whether it was the measles or chicken pox.

Now that you are grown up, make them an important part of your life. We don't live with grandparents, so to maintain the bonds with them requires specific effort. We must make time to visit them regularly, to invite them, take them out, inform them of things happening in our family. Ask them for their advice because eighty years is experience long enough to have plenty of hindsight. Tell them to relate stories of their lives. They enjoy it. You see the sparkle in my father, your Kong Kong's eyes when he recounts how he missed getting his head chopped off during the Japanese Occupation?

As with all relationships, it's two-way. They get the pleasure of your company and your interest, and to know that you value them. You get their wisdom and an opportunity of a relationship which comes only once to a few fortunate people, while there is yet time.

Hwei is right. You have only one chance. That's what Ma Ma also means when she gives us *bak chang* each Dumpling Festival during the 5<sup>th</sup> month of the Lunar calendar. She wonders if she would be making these dumplings the next year. Time is against old people.

*Love, Mum*

# About the Author



**Irene Chua Hwee Kee** enjoys her children and grandchildren, reading, writing and drawing when she is not working as a dentist in her clinic.

She is the adoring grandmother of four grandchildren and with her husband babysits them when called upon by her daughter and son.

She started writing when she was in her thirties, and contributed to the Straits Times as a freelance writer in the 1980s and 1990s. She also wrote for magazines — *Her World*, *GO*, *Young Parents*, *Your Healthcare Guide* and *Impact*.

This is the new edition of her book first published in 1996.

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