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THE BIRTHDAY BOOK

*What Should We
Never Forget?*

Edited by Sheila Pakir & Malminderjit Singh

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Foreword

Welcome to the second edition of *The Birthday Book*!

When this project started in the backseat of a taxi less than two years ago, we hoped, through this publication, to create a following and rally fellow Singaporeans to share their thoughts, ideas and aspirations for the nation with others. This, however, was a long term goal: that we would make considerable progress in our first year was something we did not expect.

Selling out two print runs of the inaugural issue, the team involved in this project has been kept busy since its launch. For one, we registered The Birthday Collective—a non-profit that will use the proceeds from the sale of the books to catalyse ground-up initiatives and follow-up activities. We also intensified our outreach efforts, leveraging on the depth and breadth of our contributors' expertise to engage students in secondary schools, junior colleges and universities, members of self-help groups and community organisations, and the public at large.

The book has received important endorsements: A local non-profit organisation gifting the books to their global partners; a mention in *The Economist*; a secondary school making the book a part of their recommended reading list; *Today* newspaper running a series of essays from the book; and an international young global leaders forum gifting it to their participants. And, we must mention: the Prime Minister of Singapore commending the project on his Facebook wall. These have provided more than enough impetus and encouragement for us to continue with what we started last year.

For this year's edition, to commemorate Singapore's 52nd birthday, we posed the following question to 52 contributing writers: "*What should we never forget?*" The choice for this prompt is a natural follow-on from last year's, "*What is Singapore's next big thing?*" Even as we cast an eye to Singapore's future, it is also useful to remind ourselves of what we should continue to hold dear. What should we bring along with us, to help us remain true to ourselves even as we navigate an uncertain future? We

hope that this year's book will provide you with the opportunity to reflect and identify what you should never forget as well.

When we reviewed the essays submitted for this year's book, three broad categories emerged, evoking in us the image of a tree. The first section of the book, titled *Knowing Our Roots*, presents the essays which spoke to the importance of not forgetting where we came from, of better understanding our heritage and history, and of drawing deep lessons from our culture(s) for the future. The second section, *Standing Tall*, contains essays exhorting us to be unafraid, to draw courage from ourselves and those around us, and to boldly move forward, both as individuals and as a nation. The final section, *Lifting the Canopy*, comprises essays which discuss the importance of having empathy, of going beyond our comfort zones to understand the challenges faced by those unlike us (however we might define "us"), and of taking concrete steps to build bridges in our community.

We hope this year's edition of *The Birthday Book* will play a part in moving Singapore and Singaporeans to—much like the many trees lining our streets—draw strength from our roots, stand tall in the face of challenge and adversity, and do all we can to lift the collective canopy of our society, not just for some but for all.

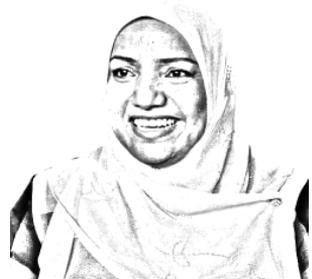
Thank you for being a part of this project. We hope you enjoy this collection.

Sheila Pakir, Malminderjit Singh
August 2017



Messages for Forever

Mariam Aljunied



A letter to my daughter, Sara, on her 21st birthday.

Dear Sara,

You've been a blessing and a gift to both me and your dad. Your late Habib (granddad) once reminded me that the two things we must bequeath to our children are “roots to stay anchored, and wings to fly”. I've never forgotten this message. So, in this significant year, your 21st, I want to share with you some things that I hope you too will never forget. These are messages that I've learnt in my lifetime: messages from the past, present and future, and messages that are forever.

Messages from the past

Sara, you're part of the 6th generation of Aljunieds in Singapore. In 1819, the same year that Raffles arrived in Singapore, your ancestor Sheikh Omar Aljunied came to Singapore from Tarim in Yemen, via Palembang. He was a merchant, a trader and a philanthropist. His contributions as one of the founders of modern Singapore and his legacies to the nation are well documented in the National Archives and National Museum. There are two things, in particular, about Habib Omar's legacies that we should never forget:

Habib Omar came to Singapore with his wife, Sharifah Alwiyah Alkaff. They had five sons and two daughters. All of his children were born in Singapore. Clearly, Habib Omar was not looking for “hotel Singapore”; he was finding a place to make a home for his children and his children's children. He was neither a refugee nor a runaway; he did not come to Singapore because of despair or desperation. He chose to come here to pursue a shared dream: the collective belief that this place was special, and could become even more special in the future. For the next 200 years, when things were good, this dream was the driving force that spurred Habib Omar and other pioneers like him to reach for new successes. When things were bad, it was this belief that propelled them to persevere and fight on. Never forget that you and I are inheritors of this inspiration they shared.

Habib Omar's journey to Singapore was also an act of faith. He was deeply religious and believed that Allah's Rahmah (love) and compassion was for all humanity. Today, one of his legacies, the Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka, stands as the first and oldest

mosque in Singapore. Soon after Masjid Omar was built in 1824, Habib donated a plot of his land to the Anglican community, so that they too could build their place of worship. Today, St Andrew's Cathedral stands as a beautiful testimony to the fundamental belief that "if God is important to you, God is important to everyone else, too". Never forget this simple truth.

Messages for the present and future

While we recognise and acknowledge where we came from, we must never forget where our roots are currently planted. You and I have a historical link to Tarim and the Middle East, but emotionally, our connections are here. It is the people that we interact with daily—our families, friends, neighbours and community—that become "our people"; they are our Tribe.

It is with this Tribe that we share our everyday concerns and hopes for the future. An invisible thread joins our collective consciousness. Our Tribal Tapestry is special: its colours expand as we embrace anyone and everyone who shares the same collective dream. This is how it has been for the past 200 years. Never forget that we need to always strengthen this invisible thread. The stronger it is, the thicker and richer the Tapestry we can create for our Tribe.

I remember the first time I brought you to the National Day Parade. You were five years old, and we got tickets for our neighbour Eline and her mum, too. You and Eline had been best friends since you first met each other during the playgroup session at the Sims Drive void-deck centre. You became inseparable, and we enrolled you in the same preschool. You and Eline thoroughly enjoyed Singapore's birthday celebration, and were dancing and singing loudly throughout the parade. That day, you asked me a curious question, "Mama, Singapore was born today, right? Who is Singapore's mum and dad?"

Let me attempt to answer that question again.

Singapore does not have a mum or dad. Singapore is unique, because we are simply born out of an idea. When we became independent in 1965, there was no invasion, mutiny or civil war. Our birth was driven by the ferocity of an idea. The idea that different people can live side-by-side and pursue their dreams together, without giving special privileges to any one group over another, and at the same time, giving equal

opportunity to everyone. Fifty-two years ago, enough people believed in this collective dream to make it come alive. Fifty-two years on, we are still pursuing this idea. Never forget that it is our shared responsibility and collective action that can make this ideal become a reality for all of us. It is always a work in progress.

Message for forever

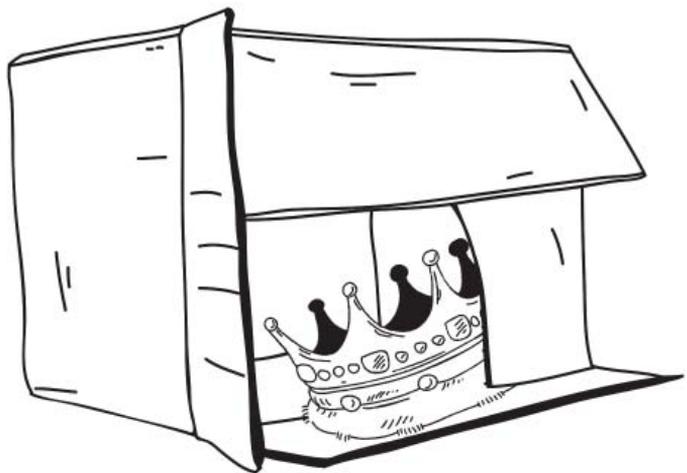
At 21 years old, you are on the cusp of many exciting adventures in your life. Many of the pathways the future holds are ones you have yet to even dream about. In navigating your future, I want to share one tip that I learned from someone much older than me.

A few months ago, while I was taking a group of students with physical impairments to learn dragonboat racing at Bedok Reservoir, I met Mrs Lim, an 85-year-old lady. She was one of a group of seniors in wheelchairs at the same session. As we were taught to paddle, Mrs Lim began singing. Her enthusiasm and exuberance were so infectious that soon we all joined her and became a "singing dragonboat".

Later, I quietly asked Mrs Lim, what was her secret? How did she maintain such vibrant vigour and positive energy? Mrs Lim smiled and whispered, "The secret is... to always do the things that makes you feel most alive." Over the years, Mrs Lim had taken on the jobs of a baker, a kitchen hand and a sales assistant. Regardless of the role she held, she took any opportunity to sing, because for her, singing was what made her feel most alive.

Happy 21st birthday Sara. Never forget to do the things that make you feel most alive.

Mariam Aljunied is a Chartered Psychologist with more than 25 years of professional practice and research experience in the area of special needs and disability support. She volunteers actively in several social service agencies, including Autism Resource Center, OnePeople.sg, Mendaki and Muhammadiyah Home.



A State Without a King

Tan Min-Wei



Singapore is a republic. We know this. We put it in the name.

I choose the banner of republicanism over that of democracy because I think it better suits where we are. These two ideologies can be very complementary, and being a democratic society is one of the things we do pledge ourselves to. But to call us democratic now is to invite an argument over democratic standards, and the best we can hope from that is a reminder that our pledge is aspirational.¹

A republic is our present. It is what we are now.

Republicanism is a simple thing to put into words, but harder yet to elaborate its meaning:

A republic is a state that is not ruled by a king.

This is a very technical definition, and the only trait that is really shared by all republics (except North Korea, I suppose). I know the fact that our current Prime Minister is the son of our first Prime Minister unnerves many. I think it even unnerved the both of them, for they spent much effort trying to draw a line between their private and professional relationships.

But I think that unease will serve us well in the future. It strikes at the heart of what it means to be kingless. It means that our leaders are expected to draw their legitimacy from the electorate. Not from a divine will, not from hereditary position, but from a capability that is innate to them.

No one is born a leader of a republic. His or her leadership position must be made.

The bending of the arc

If former US President Barack Obama was right that the arc of history does indeed bend towards justice, then we must remember that we are the ones who bend it. Maybe a divine will or our common humanity, or even self-interest, directs us towards it or otherwise aids us, but we will need to be active in this.

This means that the solutions for our future should emanate from us, not just our government. No doubt they have a massive and important part to play, but the tail does not wag the dog.

This republic is not the possession of the government, it is ours. Even the current government talks openly about the possible scenario of them not being in power.² Whatever they do to or for our republic, we will have to live with it one way or the other. Some citizens choose to leave, some might choose to disengage, but ultimately, we will bear the entirety of the consequences.

And we shouldn't forget, in a republic, the government is of the citizenry; what they do to us, they essentially do to themselves—our politicians, both government and opposition, our civil servants, our police and armed forces (especially with so many being conscripts).

So as their success is ours, their failure will be ours too.

A borrowed heritage

Another concern that I have is this: Singapore's geographical position in Asia, specifically Southeast Asia, leaves us a cultural heritage that we cannot break free from. That heritage is that, up till the end of the Second World War, there were no republics in Asia.³ There were barely any democracies, certainly no liberal ones.

So when reading critiques of Singapore, I do wonder if they expected us to emerge, fully-formed, holding the same governing norms as a Western European state. The thing to note is that today's proud republics represent the most current form of an ever-evolving form of government, which once prevented women, ethnic minorities and non-land-owning men from being represented in the governing process. Many have existed for centuries, and painfully grew to where they are now.

It takes time to get it right, and we're still quite young. We have a lot of learning yet.

When I look at what is yet to be done before we can be unquestionably acknowledged as a democratic society, rather than just a republic, I think we have done okay so far. We won't have to fight the battles over universal suffrage, we generally agree that healthcare should be reasonably available. We agree that our government should be accountable to the people and that it should not be corrupt. We even know that our media should be fair and unbiased, even if we can't agree when that will be or what it will look like.

The work of generations

All this leaves much work to be done in the future. There are many debates to be had and hopefully all our battles will be with words. But I would argue that we are on a reasonably good foundation. The building and tending to of a republic is a work of generations. It is a work that we will never see the end of and our children will never see the end of. There will be no final state for us.

This, to me, is a glorious task. What we have received from previous generations and what we hope to leave for future generations is an ever-growing promise: That we might leave them something good and they will always have something better to pass on. We do not give them a *thing*. We give them a *chance*.

¹ Lee Kuan Yew, when speaking about the pledge in 2009 (specifically about what it says about racial equality, but I take it he includes the whole of the pledge in this statement): "Was it an ideology? No, it is an aspiration. Will we achieve it? I do not know. We will have to keep on trying. Are we a nation? In transition."

² I highly recommend listening to Ong Ye Kung's panel session at IPS's Singapore Perspectives 2017, where he talks about his belief that Singaporeans will always favour a dominant party system, with a second party as a check, regardless of the party that actually dominates. In the four years I have looked at Singapore's domestic politics, I believe this is the first time I have heard a government politician articulate at length the possible permutations of a non-PAP Singapore government

³ There was one, *maybe*. It was called the Lanfang Republic, and existed in Borneo before it was extinguished by the Dutch. It was a curious case, for its president acted as King to some, president to others, and supplicant to others still.

Tan Min-Wei has been studying politics and policy at the Institute of Policy Studies for the past four years. He's delighted to discover both that his degree was relevant, and that he still has his optimism intact.