

1

Being a Son, Brother and Grandson

I grew up with a really clear understanding of the sacrifices that my parents were making for my sister and me. It would have been easy to feel resentful that they weren't there more often, but I was brought up well enough to understand that it wasn't by choice that they weren't around in the evenings. I was well aware that they were working extra hours to give us more opportunities.

This was the 1980s; interest rates were high and we knew it was a constant struggle for Mum and Dad to keep up with the mortgage payments and other bills. I wanted to repay them; not out of a sense of obligation, just because I felt from a very young age that I *wanted* to help them out, as a thank you for how hard they'd worked to help me. And I was prepared to work hard to do that. When you see your parents go through a hard time, making sacrifices to ensure you have opportunities, you want to make them proud of you. People talk of the Chinese culture and

how important family is, how it is very important for the family's *image* for the children to be seen to do well. But for me it wasn't so much about culture, or obligation, it was just a very natural feeling of wanting to make my parents happy, to thank them for what they had given to me.

I felt only gratitude – and a touch of sympathy – as I watched my mother race home after work, cook a meal and rush out again to catch a bus to her evening job.

At the weekends, they would enjoy their time off; they had a big circle of friends and we would always be taken along in tow. It was such a different time in the 1980s. Parents didn't sacrifice their weekends running around taking their children to parties and sporting events as much as they seem to now. I remember we were expected to go wherever our parents wanted to go and tag along wherever they needed to go – whether to the shops or for Sunday lunch with friends. There were long car journeys, sitting in the back of the car watching the world go by. There were no tablets and smart phones to play video games on. We talked to each other, or just looked out of the window. It was a different world. You were frequently bored, but you just got on with it.

My sister, Suet Lee, was a big influence on me; one of my earliest inspirations. Not in the sense that I felt I wanted to be *like* her – she was far more artistic and academic than me, and I was probably more commercially minded than her – but I admired many of her qualities. She was very measured and wise; she had her feet on the ground and seemed to make good decisions. She was very bright and I always went to her for advice. While Mum and Dad were out in the evenings, she was the one looking after me, helping me with my homework, talking to me about any issues I might have at school. She was a bit like a second mother to me. My mother was very good at maths, however, and would often help me at the weekends. I remember her teaching me fractions and being very patient with me while I worked things out.

Our household was calm. My parents would bicker, like most couples, and if I didn't behave, I was threatened with the legendary "wooden spoon", but I was never actually struck. There was no big drama. The more I hear of how some people grew up, with parents going through dramatic, acrimonious divorces, with the children witnessing really toxic anger, the more I realize how lucky we were. We sorted out our differences together; my parents were very united and they respected each other. We felt like a family unit at all times. Mum, in particular, always supported the decisions we made – even if she didn't agree with them – as long as she could see we'd thought them through and had considered all our options.

So, I remember our household as being generally happy and straightforward. Again, those were simpler times. Consumerism has radically changed the world today. In those days, you really appreciated treats. I'll never forget my father selling his car, a Morris Marina, for £50 (more than he expected). To celebrate, he bought us a bargain bucket of KFC. It was a huge treat; I remember the massive grin on his face. I could count the number of times we had "fast food" per year on one hand. These days, children expect a McDonald's several times a week. We were lucky if it was more than once a *year*. These days, I've been to birthday parties of my kids' friends where there are *four* different birthday cakes to cater to all the food intolerances and special diets, each one a carefully sculpted replica of a cartoon character. Our birthday cakes were a couple of Victoria sponge cakes stuck together with jam (a bit of butter icing on the top if you were lucky) and a circle of Smarties around the edge. You would be delighted with a sliver of that!

I think all parents have to work much harder these days to raise their children to understand the value of money. Even if you manage to teach your own kids moderation, they are surrounded by friends who are being given the latest phones, computers and fancy five-star holidays, so it's hard to remind them to manage their expectations. We are seeing more and more children suffer

with mental health problems, and I only have to look at how different things were when my generation was their age to wonder if their lives are just too easy. If things got rough when I was a kid, we had to roll up our sleeves and get on with it. We had to develop thick skins and solid backbones. That's not to take away from anyone with real mental illness, but it is worrying when we hear of a child suffering from depression at a young age and it turns out they are feeling insecure after seeing images of the "perfect life" on social media sites. If they weren't glued to their phones, they wouldn't see such pictures in the first place, and perhaps wouldn't develop depression and anxiety.

But every generation looks back on their own experiences, marvelling at how different things were "back in the day." When I think of what my father experienced with his parents, I really appreciate how lucky I was that my parents supported my ambitions.

My father was the eldest boy of 12 children. When he started talking about moving to England, his parents were horrified. His father even hid his passport. When Dad finally found a way to leave, he got on a train and my poor grandfather ran after it trying to stop him.

Dad's journey – what he went through to get to England – is one of the key stories that has motivated me all my life. I will refer to it often and tell you more of the incredible details in a later chapter. The journey was epic – and he nearly died at one point – but he kept going because he *knew* he wanted his children to have better opportunities than he had growing up in a very humble Malaysian village. Everyone dreams of doing better in life, but only a few achieve it. I am so proud of my dad, of all that he has achieved in his life.

I remember my grandfather, my father's father, fondly. He died in 1984 when I was 9 years old, but I have a very clear memory of visiting him in Malaysia when I was 6. It was my first and only real memory of him. My grandparents had come to England

when I was a baby, to help look after me when my mother went back to work. I think they stayed with us for about a year. I obviously have no memory of them then, but I've seen some video footage of us all from that time.

For my grandfather, I was special. I was the eldest son of the eldest son, so he was immensely proud of me. He put me on his motorbike once (no helmet or safety gear!) and drove me to the village shop to buy some new slippers. I remember how proud he was when he said to the shopkeeper, "That's my grandson! From *England!*" It was almost like we were royalty, and he was announcing that the future king, the heir to the throne, had arrived in the village. He bought me an ice cream. It's a lovely, treasured memory.

My grandfather's father, my great-grandfather, came to Malaysia from China around 1910 (I am not 100% sure of the date, but believe it was about ten years before my grandfather was born, in around 1920). He was a very successful businessman. He had several houses, a rubber plantation, and eventually even a petrol station. It sounds like he was quite the entrepreneur, and I like to think I might have inherited some of my business acumen from him. My great-grandfather left a fair amount of money, but unfortunately my grandfather and his siblings squabbled over the inheritance and over time it all disappeared.

I clearly remember the day my father found out that his father had died. It was so upsetting for him because he only found out four months after it happened. A letter had been sent to our new address (that I assume my father had given to his family ahead of time), but we didn't move in for a few months as some building work was being finished. I clearly remember seeing the letter – a one-page letter in Chinese – that explained how my grandfather had died. He had been out hunting with his friends. A wild boar charged at him and he had a massive heart attack. The family had been particularly anxious about telling my father because he also suffered from heart problems by then.

After reading the letter, my father gathered us all together and told us we were “saying a prayer for Kong Kong” (which is what we called my grandfather in Chinese). My mum was very upset.

My grandmother lived another 12 years after my grandfather died. She had a very modest life and little money. I was very close to her. She came to live with us again when I was around 14 or 15, in 1989. She taught me Chinese – not Mandarin but Hokkien, which is the local dialect (many Chinese people have different dialects that are native to a certain region or culture) – because she didn’t speak English. She is the grandmother I sent money to every month for the six months before she died. I know it made a huge difference to her. It was a small amount to me but exchange rates made it quite a decent amount in the local currency and it enabled her to buy a few extra items (she loved her make-up and beauty products). I was very glad to be able to do that.

I didn’t know my mum’s mother as well as I knew my dad’s parents, only because we saw her less, although I naturally felt love for her. I remember her being very frail; she was quite a bit older than Dad’s parents. She never visited England, but we would go and see her whenever we visited Malaysia. We never actually stayed with her, like we did with Dad’s parents, because she didn’t have the room to put us up, so we would just go for day visits. She died in 1994 when I was at university.

Mum’s father died when she was only 3 years old. He was shot shortly before the end of the Second World War when Malaysia more or less fell into a civil war. My father has always felt a huge loyalty to his Chinese roots; my mother was more pragmatic and modernized. My sister and I always enjoyed the Chinese traditions, although Suet Lee gets more exposure to them these days as she settled in Singapore where she met her husband.

I like to think I helped my sister and brother-in-law formalize their relationship because I was visiting Singapore when my sister met her future in-laws for the first time. I was 18 and it was when

my sister cashed in the rest of her round-the-world ticket to fly me out to see her. That's not to say that it was about the in-laws thinking *I* was the bees knees, but I know my presence put my sister at ease so that she could be more herself – especially as the dinner was at quite a fancy country club – and the novelty of me being there helped to stop the focus being solely on her. *And* it wasn't hard for me to get along with my future brother-in-law... he was a keen Liverpool supporter! We also played some badminton together during that trip, so I think I generally gave a good impression.

Being there for my sister at such an important time in her life, the first time she met the in-laws, is an example of how supportive we have always been as a family. I wasn't being charming in order to win points for myself, it was all motivated by wanting to help my sister to feel at ease and give a good impression. Our mother had really taught us the meaning of family support. She was the type of person for whom nothing was too much trouble if she loved you. She would do *anything* for us. She always said: "If you need anything, I want you to know that I'm always there for you." My sister and I have always given each other that level of unconditional support, too. In 1995, I flew out to surprise her when she had her first baby. Mum and Dad couldn't afford to go, but I saved up money by working at Chessington World of Adventures and bought myself a ticket. I know my sister really appreciated having me there for moral support when she was so far from Mum and Dad. She did the same when Samantha and I had our first baby. She came over as a surprise. I was thrilled to see her at that special time.

Again, I know there is a perception that Chinese families are always supportive of each other out of a need to "save face" and "preserve the family honour", but I have never quite seen it like that; to me it's just about having solid support – family loyalty – taking care of each other come rain or shine.

That loyalty, and support, was put to the ultimate test last year.

In early 2018, my beloved mother started to feel unwell. She was travelling at the time. Forever the globetrotters, my parents were on holiday in Japan. After what feels, now, like such a short period of time, she lost her battle with her illness and we had to say goodbye to her for the final time in November 2018.

Losing my mum last year and watching her health decline so rapidly was agonizing, and it really put life into perspective for me. In fact, I think it gave me the impetus to get on and write this book that I have been planning for so long. Life really is so short; you never know when you'll be gone. I wanted to make sure I wrote down some of the advice I want to leave for my children.

I know that we are extremely lucky, as a family, to be as close as we are. Everyone needs people in their lives that they feel that way about. It doesn't necessarily need to be your family, but you need to know that someone has got your back and that you're there for them, too.

Having a close family is one stroke of good luck, but I'm doubly lucky as I also have a second family – the people I work with. I really felt that when Mum's health was failing, and in the weeks and months after she was gone. My team were so supportive; they were really there for me during what was such an incredibly tough time. I've always tried to be there for them when they've gone through challenging personal experiences, so I am eternally grateful that they offered me the same support.

My father has also been beset with health problems and has been in and out of hospital in recent years. My sister and I monitor his condition carefully. But I accept the cycle of life. Having been raised a Buddhist helps with that. We believe in some form of eternity, so I feel my mum's spirit around me all the time. And I was extremely fortunate to have all the years I had with her. For that, I am so grateful.

In an ideal world, I'd love Dad to be in the UK with us now that Mum is gone, but it wouldn't be fair on him. He'd just watch

TV all day and eat! We all have such busy lives – Samantha, the boys and me – so he'd probably only see each of us for about 15 minutes a day as we race in and out between work, school and all our activities. He sees a lot of my sister in Singapore – he was practically living with her when Mum was sick and in hospital there – so it's a relief to know he has family in close proximity.

Dad loves to travel, which might not help his angina (which he has had since his early 40s), but he is happy and, as I've just said, life is short. He has the right to enjoy it while I can. He makes the most out of his life and that makes me happy. I know he's still quite raw after Mum's death, but he's got a strong spirit and is living in the moment. I can't begrudge him anything; he has earned the right to enjoy his life for all the hard work he put in while looking after his family. And Mum enjoyed their retirement for the last 20 years of her life, too. I'm glad I was able to help them do that.

They say people born today have a good chance of living well past 100, even to 200. Well, fine, as long as you have a good quality of life.

Quality of life is everything.

I'm so glad Mum didn't suffer pain any longer than she did.

