

Remembering the childhood years

Our parents were firm but they never put pressure on their three children to perform well

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My father became prime minister of Singapore in 1959. At that time, we had two “black-and-white” Chinese maids.

When the election results became known, one said to me: “Now that your father is prime minister, we ought to call you ‘Big Little Mistress’”.

I replied: “It is my father who is prime minister, not me. Please call me by my own name.”

My parents always emphasised to my siblings and me that we should not behave like the PM’s children. As a result, we treated everyone – friends, labourers and Cabinet ministers – with equal respect. My father’s security officers became our friends. We called them by their personal names, and they did the same with us. One security officer who retired in 1970 still calls me Ling.

When strangers asked me who my father was, I used to reply truthfully that he worked for the Government.

I entered kindergarten just before age three. On the first day at school I was anxious and weepy. The teacher tried to pacify me by playing the piano. Eventually, she took me out of the classroom and showed me a very old *cempaka* tree that still bore flowers with a wonderful fragrance. I integrated into the kindergarten with no further problems, except for being naughty.

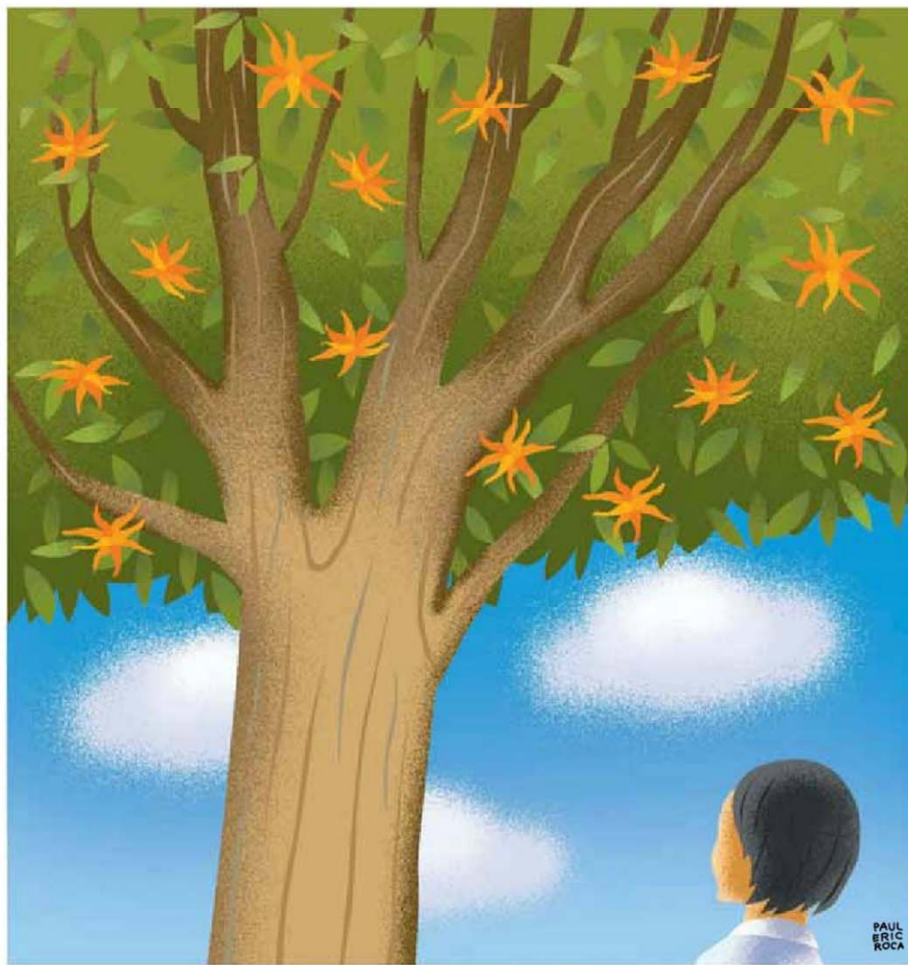
At the end of my kindergarten years, when I was nearly seven, there was a graduation ceremony, complete with mortarboard and black graduation gown. My father came to watch the graduation ceremony and had photographs taken with me by the press. My brothers and I knew even then that our father used us for larger purposes. He wanted us to be models for other children, though he never said so to us.

When I was in Primary 1, I was so far ahead of the other children that I did not listen to the teacher and became rather disobedient. At the end of the year, my teachers decided to solve my naughtiness by awarding me a double promotion to Primary 3.

As a result, I went from being top student in Primary 1 to eighth in Primary 3. From then on, I worked extremely hard, and I have at times wondered in later life whether my tenacity was the result of this double promotion.

It wasn’t till Primary 6 that I again topped my cohort. At the graduation ceremony, I was asked to deliver a speech on behalf of the students, and my father turned up in his white-and-white. Even his daughter’s school ceremony was for him part and parcel of nation building.

In both Nanyang Primary and Nanyang Secondary, the dress code



required a skirt not more than 2.5cm above the knee, and we were required to wear our hair not more than 2.5cm below the ear. I had no problems complying with either rule. I had always wanted to get my hair cut as short as possible, and running in a short skirt would have been embarrassing.

As for languages, my father wanted me to be trilingual. So instead of geography, I studied Malay in school. I still remember Chegu Amin who came to our house to give my brothers and me tuition twice a week.

My Malay was good enough to earn me a distinction in the Secondary 4 school leaving examination. I also won a Malay essay-writing competition. My father, of course, attended the prize-giving ceremony.

I was streamed into the sciences in Secondary 3. I found my science teachers teaching us in Mandarin but using English textbooks. I thought that this was an inefficient way to teach and so switched to an English school, Raffles Institution, for my pre-university education.

I chose RI, not National Junior College, because NJC, then new, had poached the best teachers from other schools, and had the best facilities. I have always had a sense of reverse snobbery, and so chose RI.

In my first year in Pre-U, the school was still at its old Bras Basah address. At that time, I already had

a black belt in karate. In one sparing session, when I blocked a kick, my block was slightly off and so the impact of the kick was felt in my metacarpal bones. It was rather painful.

I completed the training session, went home, told my mother about the accident, whereupon she rushed me to Singapore General Hospital. The orthopaedic surgeon said there was nothing to be done about the fracture other than put on a bandage, and made light of the whole thing. But my mother ordered me to stop my karate from that day. By that time, my curricula and extra-curricular activities – which included cross-country running and swimming – were taking up so much of my time that I did not protest.

In my second year in Pre-U, the school moved to its Grange Road site. The buildings were bigger and brighter, and there was no longer any danger of the roof suddenly collapsing on us. But most of us had on our minds the A-level exams that we had to sit at the end of the year.

I had always been a consistent student, not the type who studied at the last minute. Still, my self-confidence was low, and after every single paper, I imagined that I had done poorly.

After the exam, I travelled with my parents and my brother Hsien Yang to Britain, France and Egypt.

The trip was great fun, except that I woke up every morning dreaming that I had failed all my papers.

The results came out in early 1973. To my astonishment, I had topped my science cohort for the whole of Singapore. I was awarded the President’s Scholarship.

My mother advised me: “Take the prestige. Don’t take the money, so you won’t be bonded.”

My father said: “No, take the money. It makes no difference whether you are bonded or not.”

So I took the money, which was then only enough to cover the fees at Singapore University, with a couple of hundred dollars left over for pocket money.

I enjoyed my childhood and adolescence. My parents were firm but never put pressure on us to perform well. I studied hard and trained hard, not because my parents told me to, but because I wished to. In fact, they often tried to persuade me to ease off.

I take after my father in this respect. Indeed, he often chastises me for being even more intense than he is. He once told me: “Your misfortune is that you have my genetic traits, but in so exaggerated a form that they have become a disadvantage for you.”

Well, there is nothing I can do about that.

The writer is director of the National Neuroscience Institute. Send your comments to suntimes@sph.com.sg