

Home for Dinner

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Lianhe Zao Bao, 9 December 2012

In the past month, I received two invitations to the future, one in 2022 and the other in 2050.

The Institute of Policy Studies organised a scenario-planning event, inviting participants to envision Singapore in ten years' time. The results were showcased at the National Library through multimedia art experiences. There were three national scenarios presented: a business-driven government that prioritises economic growth; a welfare oriented society that promotes pro-social values, and a self-regulating and self-correcting society that emphasises citizen empowerment.

As for 2050, it is a call to return joyously to the origins of humanity, a time not framed by the current concept of days, months and years.

Both invitations share the same quest to listen to the voices of our hearts and to reflect on our inner wishes. Regardless of one's concern with national welfare or monasticism, to a lay person like you and me, do we have the capacities to participate in these futures enthusiastically? Will the initial excitement and zeal dwindle like a dissipating cloud or will it eventually bloom like a spring flower?

My quest is simple, it seems, and that is to go home for dinner in 2022 or 2050. On its own, "eating/dinner" is a survival instinct to satisfy the organic body, while "going home" signifies emotional comfort and spiritual peace.

Not too long ago, many Chinese used to greet each other with, "吃饱了吗 (Have you eaten)?" In contrast, modern urbanites greet each other with, "忙吗 (How are you? Busy)?" Others simply declare "忙死了 (I'm dead busy)!" without being asked.

Why are we so busy? Many would blame it on work. And so why do we work so hard? To earn a living to put food on the table so we would not be dead hungry. However, many of us have forgotten this basic relationship amidst our busi-ness. The Chinese character of "busy" is "忙", which is made up of "心 (heart)" and "亡 (death/dead)". These two words can also form the character "忘 (forget)". And so in our busy lives, we forget to feed our body and end up being "dead busy" and "dead hungry".

Try recalling in the past week, how many times have you been so busy that you forgot to eat breakfast or had to gobble down your dinner? To some, "busy" becomes a symbol of one's value and identity. And we have also grown accustomed to congratulate each other that we are

lucky that we are busy despite the constant waves of retrenchment, in other words, that our hearts are lost in our busi-ness.

Anthropologists studying family dinners find that the dining table is a site for cultural transmission, where children learn about cultural heritage, life values, as well as the social meanings of food and eating. Family dinners also facilitate communication (language as well as wisdom transmission), build character and nurture psychological well-being. To simply have a meal is easy. However, to have a good, nourishing and happy meal requires a lot more care and efforts.

A while ago, I attended a lunchtime seminar where the invited speaker was from a local organisation that encourages a father's parental involvement in child development and healthy family life. He was proud of his centre's achievement in successfully launching the "Eat With Your Family Day" with the relevant authorities. Set on the Friday before the June school holidays, it encourages working adults to leave work an hour earlier to have dinner with their families. Indeed, eating with your family has become an activity that needed to be promoted. How many times have you also eat "with" your family while still actively communicating with/on the television, computer or mobile phone? The Chinese custom of "eating in silence" has achieved a new meaning on today's dining table.

In the year 2022, regardless of the political landscape, my wish is to be able to go home from work to prepare a nourishing and heart warming dinner for my family. This may seem like a simple personal wish, when extended to a quest of the general public, it will indeed become a major cross-ministry project that requires the review and rethinking of national development direction, social values, working hours and welfare, public food quality control, as well as organic farming regulations, etc. The successful implementation of this project would potentially improve familial and social problems that have plagued the country, like low birth rate, late marriages, rising divorce rate, teenage delinquency, child obesity, and other illnesses like high-blood pressure/cholesterol and diabetes that stem from unhealthy eating habits.

A dinner without a "home" is incomplete. And "home" conjures mixed feelings; it can be a place of comfort, worries, anxieties or even frustrations. An article I once read stated that, returning to home is an obeisance to a simple and ordinary way of living. The obeisance must be accompanied by a sense of joy, an intrinsic motivation from the heart. Otherwise, even the most sumptuous delicacies would not nourish the body or the soul. Home is where the heart belongs, it could narrowly mean the space in which you and your family members reside, it could also refer to larger realms of your organisation, the school, the country or even the origins where we all came from.

In order for the excitement and zeal of the invitations to bloom like a spring flower in the future, perhaps we could begin with the following exercises:

- 1) Close your eyes and visualise your ideal “home”. What kind of a place is it? Who lives there? What are they doing? How do you feel about this “home”? What can you do to make it a joyous space?
- 2) Visualise your life in ten years’ time, and think about your goal of happiness. Externally, what can be done to achieve this goal? Internally, what can you do to make it happen?
- 3) Look inwards to your “heart”, where is it? Has it been lost in your daily busi-ness? How can you retrieve it and let it sit stoically in your body and mind?
- 4) Listen to your own body. Have you ever noticed the sensation of your tongue while eating? Do you taste what you eat?
- 5) The next time when you hear someone lamenting that he/she is busy, say this to him/her, “don’t lose your heart, go home for dinner.”

(The author is a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. This article was originally written in Chinese. Translated by Chiang Wai Fong and Zhou Rongchen)