

To My Church Family

October, 2016

Dear brothers and sisters,

Do you remember the days of using wooden pencils? Not long ago, Pastor Lin brought a few boxes of long wooden pencils for our use, remnants from his previous business ownership. I looked at the slender wooden pencils and took out one in my hand. As I suck in the special fragrance of the wooden pencil, many past memories came into mind. It has been awhile since I last held a wooden pencil.

Sunday afternoon, no meeting, I returned to my office. Soon after I sat down, the front door opened, a sister came in with two children, looking for Bible study information to photocopy. Both children seemed busy in the office, little boy about 5, was engrossed in playing games on the cell phone. From time to time, he would jump up, utter a few words which we did not understand. The girl was quietly and intently doing her homework. Suddenly, the girl came to me and asked me was there an electric pencil sharpener in the office? Her wooden pencil was dull and needed to be sharpened.

We do have an electric pencil sharpener, but, unfortunately, my office is in process of moving and things are packed in boxes and sealed. I suggested that she use another pencil; however, the girl shook her head and said she had no other pencil, and this was her "lucky pencil". She did not want to use mine and asked me for another idea. With no pencil sharpener, what else is there to do? I was about to shake my head like her, but the pleading expression on the face of the little girl, and eager expectation shown through her eyes softened my heart. How could I let down this child who so trusted me? My brain went into overdrive and I noticed a utility knife in the pencil container. Seeing the utility knife, a touch of inspiration, I remembered a few decades ago we used knives to sharpen our pencils. I removed the cap on the knife, picked up her pencil and began to sharpen it. Sure enough, old skill though latent was still there and as the wood was cut away, the lead was exposed; then I moved the blade from top to bottom, and slowly sharpened the lead. Throughout the process, the girl watched intently, as if seeing a miracle unfold, with an incredible expression on her face. After pencil was sharpened, on a whim, I engraved her initials on the pencil, which was what we used to do when we were little so we wouldn't lose our pencils. As I gave the sharpened pencil back to the girl, I told her not to try sharpening pencil by knife at home because accident may happen. The girl stroked her initials on the pencil and kept thanking me. Seeing the surprised look on the child, my heart was filled with many emotions and bunch childhood memories flooded my heart.

During my childhood we did not have a lot of material goods, school children must provide their own means of sharpening pencils for it was a daily task. Whoever owned a hand-operated pencil sharpener was looked upon as the favored one and object of envy, and no one has ever heard of an electric pencil sharpener. When a pencil got too short for fingers to hold, we would tighten the cap from an old Chinese calligraphy brush to the other end of pencil by rubber bands to continue using it. There were no calculators and we learned to use abacus deftly; there were no sneakers, guys played football games with bare feet on hot pavement, though the soles of the feet felt burning but we gritted our teeth to bear it and no one complained; there were no swimming trunks, one simply took off trousers, and jumped into the stream in underwear to his own enjoyment.

During those early years, as children, we were easily satisfied, every little new thing would excite us. At that time, my family was very poor, budget for our household of ten was ten dollars a day. As children, we loved to watch movies, particularly the Cantonese series of martial artist and physician "Wong Fei-hung" made in Hong Kong played by Kwan Tak-hing and Shih Kien. It was a must see because this was the only entertainment at that time. Occasionally the person in charge of our groceries/cooking, Yajie, out of compassion and with the consent of our mother, would manage to save a few dollars from menu and give us six children an exciting day. At that time, our home was across the street from a cinema which showed 2nd round Cantonese movies, at dollar fifty each and five years of age and under free of charge. If we want to see "Wong Fei-hung", we'll have to forgo buying groceries that day. Yajie would cook a few eggs, doused some soy sauce, fried some lard crumbles, placed them on the middle of the table. The children would excitedly gobbled down these mixed in with rice

because afterwards we would have money to watch a movie. While watching a movie, every scene was regarded as wonderful and worth pondering. Even days after, we would still argue about the plot some; younger brothers and sisters would applaud Wong Fei-hung's heroic acts whereas I sympathized with Shih Kien who played the bad guy and felt sorry for his sad final end. The happiness brought by a few dollars lingered in our hearts a long time. I sometimes wonder, how much money will take to make children these days to have the same degree of excitement to look forward to?

Do you recall? Children of that time did not have ready-made toys, what we could find was what we played with, anything plus our imagination became a treasure. I picked up two pieces of broken shells on the beach, a white one I set it on my right pointer, became the white eyebrow dancing lion of Wong Fei-hung; the black shell I set it on the left thumb, and it became the dark green lion of villain Shih Kien. Accompanied by gongs and drums uttered by my mouth, these two lions butt heads and danced, sometimes in fast tempo, sometimes slow, sometimes up high and sometimes low, I would be totally immersed in the action and did not know how much time passed away. I also collected old notebooks, took them to the stationery for wooden rulers. I would tie a clothes pin to one end of the ruler, insert rubber band in the middle, and pull it to the other end, and wooden ruler instantly became a rifle. When firing, press the cloth pin, rubber band flings forward, very accurately. Younger brothers and I each held one, our house turned into a battlefield; sometimes in close combat, victims when shot would yell in pain, which alarmed our mother, our weapons would then be confiscated and we had to have peace talks. Younger sister used father's discarded sock, filled it with cotton from old pillow, transformed the sock with holes into a beautiful doll, which she held and accompanied her throughout her growing years.

In general, the modern family is "one child precious, two children wonderful", parents don't have many children these days. Because not many children and families are financially able, six adults spoiling one child, so the child has whatever toy on market and does not have to do anything for himself. In the past, I often saw children holding/playing video games that cost more than \$200, immersed in the electronic world all day long. Over the past few years, due to technological advances, video games are on mobile phones now, and I see children, with phones in hands, have become oblivious to everything else. Compared with the previous generation, imagination of today's children probably has deteriorated because their minds are controlled by video games. In addition to video games, whatever the children desire, they have. We often see many parents, chasing after their children, wanting to buy clothes for them. If the children would accept the clothes, the parents would be elated. Most common response though I see is that of the children shaking heads and saying 'I don't like them!' These children have no clue that for their parents, growing up, their new clothes often were hand-me-downs from their older brothers or sisters. Occasionally these parents may get something new and they would be so happy that they would never utter anything negative. In addition, do you find today's children extremely difficult to please? Sometimes I think of the words from Bible: "The leech has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' they cry." The characteristics of a leech is that it is never satisfied. I often wonder, I do not know if today's children are happier or have fuller life than children of the previous generation. What do you think? In fact, same can be applied to ourselves, contentment is root of happiness, too abundant materially may not necessarily be a good thing. There are couple prayers from Proverbs that the older I get, I found them more thought provoking:

⁷“Two things I ask of you, LORD;
do not refuse me before I die:

⁸ Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.

⁹ Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’

Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.”
(Proverbs 30:7-9)

Yours in Christ's family,
Pastor Tran