

I have heard, firsthand, some of the stories from Lay Leng but reading them inspires me again. These stories from the heart inspire and add courage. I like the way Lay Leng uses simple language to relate the stories and express her thoughts and feelings so openly, yet she does not sound “preachy”. I can’t help but feel thankful, together with her, for the many precious moments she has experienced. None of the moments were wasted.

**Miss Wong Wan Lin**

*Subject Head (Pastoral Care)  
Tanjong Katong Primary School*

*Precious Moments of a Teacher* inspires teachers to make a difference in the lives of students. We all have our moments when we teach but Lay Leng’s stories appear more amazing, amusing and awesome. Her stories also reveal while many moments are divine, precious moments can also be engineered. This book has a place in the teaching circle and it echoes many teachers’ and counsellors’ experiences.

**Mr Tan Teck Joo**

*Teacher, Temasek Junior College*

I find the stories amazing, touching and very funny!

**Miss Lim Li Pheng**

*Full-Time School Counsellor  
Radin Mas Primary School*

Lay Leng is an excellent teacher and counsellor who cares not so much about teaching and counselling but more about touching and improving the lives of those she teaches and counsels. That is the right attitude to adopt. How else can one teach and reach someone who is broken and beaten, and whose heart is not in the place of learning? The strategies reflected in Lay Leng's stories focus how restoring their 'being' and being in the classroom are the first keys for many beginning teachers.

**Mrs Mary Seeto**

Teacher, Metropolitan South Institute of  
Technical and Further Education  
Australia

Tears welled up in my eyes as I read every story. I was moved by Lay Leng's stories about her journey as a teacher and counsellor, making a difference in so many children's lives. Lay Leng has her unique ways of touching their hearts. In all my 10 years of teaching, I only had one mission. Nothing was clearer to me than that mission that I set out to achieve when I took the plunge into this noble profession — to impart knowledge to develop young into pragmatic intellectuals. There was no room for social-emotional learning. Lay Leng's stories have inspired me to see the importance of soft skills. These stories are written from the heart by a teacher for fellow teachers in Singapore schools.

**Madam Anissa**

*Subject Head (English)  
Tanjong Katong Primary School*

# Precious Moments of a Teacher

Tan Lay Leng



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## Principal's Message

Lay Leng is very passionate and enthusiastic about her job. She is always ready to give the benefit of doubt and see from the child's perspective, even when it sometimes defies logic. In our journey together, I have found her to be the complete opposite of me; while she may be emotional, I am rational. This helps us complement each other when we discuss school matters on how to improve the children's welfare. I am reminded to see things from a more "humane" angle when I manage issues with some children. I am happy we share a common objective which emphasises character development and values education in our school. I look forward to our ongoing journey, where we can bounce ideas off each other on elevating the character development arena in our school as we support each other for the betterment of the children.

**Mrs Cheong Ye Ling**  
Principal

## Vice-Principal's Message

Lay Leng joined our school as a trained teacher in September 2004 with a wealth of teaching experience in local and international schools. We found her particularly effective with pupils who are struggling emotionally and socially. With her caring ways, she is able to empathise and connect with these pupils. In 2007, with the generous support from the Ministry of Education (MOE), the school was entitled to have a full-time school counsellor (FTSC). We knew that we had a right candidate for the job. Lay Leng possesses the positive traits of an ideal FTSC — a very good listener, sincere and encouraging. Furthermore, with a sound understanding of specific school-based issues, she would help the school to work with this group of pupils effectively. The school was fortunate to have her as a FTSC from 2007 to 2009, but we lost a very good teacher in the process. In 2009, she rejoined our school as a teacher. Her leadership, experience and knowledge gained from her role as FTSC enable her to see things from different perspectives. She was appointed Senior Teacher in 2010.

Lay Leng brings to the table the experiences and the practical wisdom — the craft knowledge — gleaned from the success and failure of her work with

children. She does not ignore or dismiss the challenges she faces in her roles. In fact, she offers a generous dose of realism and reminds us that there are as many reasons, some of them quite valid, to think that we cannot solve every problem of our pupils. Her usual cheerleading encouragement peppered with creative slogans helps us to confront and tackle many formidable challenges as educators. Her stories also provide the strength and courage required to stay on in this difficult and stormy course of our work.

Given the multitude of roles she has played over the years and her deep reflection over professional issues, she has diligently spent a large amount of time and effort in putting these complex dilemmas she faced into simple stories. These stories also reveal the heart and soul of a teacher who has influenced many people in different ways. While she has classified her stories as different moments she experienced, the learning derived is by no means short. In fact, the stories carry a powerful and lasting message of love and care for our pupils. By documenting these stories into a book, readers will have a better appreciation of the thinking and actions taken based on the values and ethics of a teacher. Therefore, I am pleased to see the publication of this book by Lay Leng.

**Mr Chua Chye Hock**  
Vice-Principal

## Preface

I love putting authentic experiences into words. Doing so helps me reflect and savour those precious moments. It is also therapeutic. It perhaps explains why I am such a restless soul. I love to taste adventure and, after that, to share it through writing.

In June 2010, when I was spending moments reflecting at McDonald's, I had an Aha! moment. Why not put together all those stories and anecdotes I had written for the past ten years? The title of the book was then birthed. It would be called *Precious Moments of a Teacher*.

My family and friends have shared this incredible adventure with me. It gives me great privilege to thank them.

Thank you, Pa and Ma, for your loving care and understanding. Thank you Aunt Mary, Uncle Jason, Hong, Choon Wei, Tuan, Irwin, Ching, Daniel, Joo, May, Cherwin, Caleb, Cyrus, Chernice, Rachel, Faith and Lexi.

Thank you, Mrs Cheong and Mr Chua, for your leadership and for writing the message.

## Precious Moments of a Teacher

Thank you, Siew Ling, Yi Ting, Anissa, Li Pheng and Wan Lin, for your friendship and for coming alongside with me on this journey.

Thank you, Living Word Cell Group, for all your support.

This book is dedicated to each and every student who has given me these precious moments.

**Tan Lay Leng**

## Precious Moments of a Teacher

*“We do not remember days, we remember moments.”*

**Cesare Pavese**

A moment to remember  
Is precious for the teacher

The sparkle in a kid's eyes  
Yes! The Aha! moment has arrived  
Teaching and learning have happened  
Efforts have brought returns

The smile on a kid's face  
Upon being affirmed and praised  
Yes! The sweet moment is to be savoured  
The kid experiences the joy of being favoured

The chit-chat-and-makan that seemingly never ends  
With colleagues who are also friends



Unknowingly something has crept into the soul  
Time spent with colleague-friends is a refreshing moment — behold!

Then there are trying and challenging situations  
When the kids act out their frustrations  
A quiet moment is needed to reflect  
And allow the mind to collect

Canteen one-on-one moments are fun  
Casual conversations on the run  
That’s when many interesting things surface  
Catch hold of the ones who are “storytelling” enthusiasts

Too many precious moments to recount  
Count my blessings — now!

## A to Z Precious Moments

### **A** — A Precious Moment

A precious moment is when my heart feels a tug and I know something or someone has touched it.

### **B** — Building Bridges

A precious moment is when relationships are bridged.

### **C** — Care

A precious moment is when I handle the kid with care.

### **D** — Difference

A precious moment is when I know I have made a difference in the lives of the kids.

### **E** — Empathy

A precious moment is when I exercise the power of empathy.

**F** — Friends & Feasts

A precious moment is when I get refreshed as I spend time feasting with friends and colleagues.

**G** — Grandeur

A precious moment is when I experience the grandeur of joy in small deeds of kindness.

**H** — Home

A precious moment is when I get recharged in my home, my refuge.

**I** — I

A precious moment is when I exercise self-care.

**J** — Jar of Clay

A precious moment is when the kid tells his story. He is sharing with me his great treasure within a fragile jar of clay.

**K** — Kids

A precious moment is when they accept your friendship so readily, offer their trust so quickly and give you the privilege of journeying into their world so willingly.

**L** — Listen

A precious moment is when I listen to what every precious moment tells me.

**M** — Memories

A precious moment is when I recall joyful memories.

**N** — Network

A precious moment is when I see the beauty of collaboration in a school system that is made up of many networks.

**O** — Ohm!

A precious moment is the Ohm! moment that gives strength to walk on.

**P** — Personal Growth

A precious moment is when I learn to accept and manage tension in my heart without letting it affect the people around me.

**Q** — Quiet

A precious moment is when I take moments to cultivate a spirit of quiet and calm.

**R** — Resilience

A precious moment is when I take courage from the kids who are more resilient than I think they are.

**S** — Special Needs

A precious moment is when I interact with the affectionate kid with ADHD. I often tell his success story with pride and joy.

**T** — Take Time

A precious moment is when I take time to reflect.

**U** — UPR

A precious moment is when I learn to extend Unconditional Positive Regard (from Carl Rogers' person-centred theory) to people who come to me with a story to tell.

**V** — Volatility

A precious moment is when I stay collected in volatile situations.

**W** — Writing

A precious moment is when I embark on the journey of writing *Precious Moments of a Teacher*. It is a dream come true.

**X** — eXtraordinary eXperience

A precious moment is when I decide to capture the moments of this whole extraordinary experience called teaching in a book.

**Y** — You

A precious moment is when you give me a word of encouragement and cheer me on.

**Z** — Zzz...

A precious moment is when I am renewed for a journey with people through hours of sleep and moments of solitude.



## The **Amazing** Moments

I had many amazing moments, but I learnt that it would take a heart that stood still to pay attention to them.

*“This moment contains all moments.”*

**C.S. Lewis**

## My Lunatic Fringe

I read suspicion and uneasiness in his eyes. I was giving a motivational talk on being resilient. “Be like the coffee powder! When the hot water of difficulties and discouragement surrounds you, produce the fragrance!”

The success of the talk was proven in many classes before, or so I had assumed. Students had responded in a delightful way, and a few had come to ask me for advice.

I wanted to let the thought that his dull expression to my talk was not very flattering sink in, but instead, I sensed huge compassion for him. He was the only boy asked to leave his previous sports class to join us in the present Primary 6 class. His self-esteem must have been punctured. He was evidently feeling uneasy in his new class. That was our first day at school.

On the second day, when I brought in balloons for sculpting as part of another motivational talk, he was absent. Many dull expressions greeted me. They did not seem impressed with my balloon sculpting skills or the motivational talk.

Since school started, I had been walking on the lunatic fringe. Despite being challenged daily, I remained at peace in my heart. I must confess that daily, I told

myself at least a hundred times not to give up working with these kids.

The dynamics in this class could be mind-blowing: from persistent homework-skipper to off-the-tangent answer-givers to unstoppable chit-chatters to a cry baby to eager learners and sympathetic mature girls. How could one not be on the lunatic fringe managing such a class?

Their written compositions reflected little sense of paragraphing, punctuation and relevance to the title.

They asked incredible questions from “Can I use a pencil?” to “How to paste the paper?” to “Do we use the small or big exercise book?” and “Must we leave a line?”

But I had asked for this! I had long accepted that I must be mad to have asked to teach this class. I was mad with that inner discontent driving me.

Let us come back to the boy who was asked to leave the sports class. On the third day, I carefully selected a comprehension passage on a village boy taking part in a cross-country race. I intentionally crafted opportunities to praise him for his great running speed. His face turned red immediately, and he looked down but could not control a smile appearing. It was an amazing moment for me.

Yet, every day, I was challenged. The delivering of an effective lesson, such that teaching and learning take place and self-esteem boosters are thrown in, brought me to the lunatic fringe daily.

On the lunatic fringe, miracles were not rare.

One day, all of them remained engaged in their work. The bell had rung. I had given them permission to leave. They were given a choice to complete their work in class or at home. I needed to get ready for a presentation at the staff meeting. When I went back to the classroom after the meeting, I saw to my surprise that a good number of them had actually completed their homework. Unbelievable!

Daily, as I reflected, I thought of different strategies. One week, the big word was “Routines”, so I went about re-establishing routines in class. These kids were still prone to breaking routines despite being trained for the past five years! Another week, the key word was “Visuals”. I was facing visual learners whose auditory processing was way below average. I used plenty of slides and video clips as my teaching resources and continued to give away colourful stationery as small tokens of incentive.

I also wrote small love and thank-you notes for several of them. One boy with mild ADHD appreciated the note so much he was holding on to it from the classroom to the computer laboratory. At one time, the note dropped from his hand and his friend attempted to retrieve it. He snatched it back from his friend, as if it was something very precious to him. I was humbled. Little gestures go a long way.

On my lunatic fringe, I experienced many amazing moments.

## My Journey with a Boy with ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a biological, brain-based condition which is caused by a minor difference of fine tuning in the normal brain (a slight brain dysfunction). The dysfunction of ADHD is thought to be due to an imbalance in the brain's neurotransmitter chemicals...responsible for self-monitoring and putting on the brakes.

Dr Christopher Green & Dr Kit Chee  
*Understanding ADHD (2004)*

**M**y journey with a child with ADHD taught me valuable lessons. His parents, teachers and I walked through helplessness at first. The child's impulsivity, manifested in behaviour that exhibited a lack of self-control, had escalated in intensity and frequency during the first month in school. He was getting hurt, his peers were getting hurt, and he was losing friendships quickly. He damaged his classmates' property and took things that did not belong to him. No one wanted to be his friend.

As he was attracted to gadgets, he was caught switching on the computers in several classrooms in the mornings. Once, he even cut an internet cable in the classroom because "the computer was not working". His teachers were challenged. His parents were challenged. As his counsellor, I was challenged.

ADHD is an explanation, not an excuse.

Dr Christopher Green & Dr Kit Chee  
*Understanding ADHD (2004)*

To help him, I sought help in turn. As I consulted his supportive teachers, many strategies surfaced. Taking a collaborative approach, we spoke at great length with his parents so that we could work on the same platform.

We started a reward system for the child and it worked well. It not only helped him to come to me during recess, instead of flying all over the school and getting into



A reward system based on collecting stars helped to motivate the student with ADHD.

trouble, it also created a structure and routine for him, and gave me opportunities to teach him pro-social skills.

The reward system worked like this: he was given three stars whenever he exhibited appropriate behaviour, but received a penalty of one star for inappropriate behaviour. When he had collected 10 stars, he received colourful materials as a reward. The stars he was given were folded from colour paper. He loved them because he was fascinated with colours and craftwork like origami.

With the short span of time between setting goals and giving rewards, he



Artwork by the student with ADHD — proudly displayed in the classroom for all to see.

was motivated to continue with “the game”, as we called it. To complement the school’s efforts, his parents also started using the reward system at home. When he had collected 10 stars from his father, his father bought him a set of poster colour paints as a reward.

Another strategy we adopted was for his teacher to give him a slightly bigger physical space in class, which he defined for

himself using colourful masking tape. In addition, his strengths were celebrated in class. For example, his artwork was displayed prominently. His classmates now gave good reports of him. Recently, when an older boy complained of his past behaviour, he quickly responded, “That was the past. Don’t talk about the past anymore.”

We fought hard to help manage his behaviour with rewards, positive reinforcement and lots of love. Just a few weeks ago, I had to fight back tears when I received a brilliant piece of artwork he had painted with the poster colour paints he had received from his father. He was a happier child.

He was also reaching out to his classmate, a girl with selective mutism. He told her one day, “When I say ‘Hello’, you follow me and say ‘Hello’ too, ok?” She actually listened to him. Subsequently, when two teachers and I persuaded her to sit down with us, she stood and kept looking at us. But when he gently led her by the hand to the chair, she sat down. Now, that was an amazing moment!

If we understand where they (children with ADHD) are coming from, if we don’t isolate them or humiliate them, if they know we care, as days progress, they will want to learn, they will try their best, and we will be able to do a whole lot of things with them.

Mr Prakashan Kelaver, Principal  
St Clare School for Children with Special Needs



## My Journey with the Kids to Sarawak

In 2007, 23 kids in the financial assistance scheme and four adults returned safe, sound and satisfied from Sarawak.

For many of them, it was their first trip overseas and their first time on an airplane. A few did not have a travelling bag. They came with just one haversack for a four-day-three-night trip. One or two came without a windbreaker. Many brought along low self-esteem. Coming from tail-end classes in terms of academic performance, they had been bombarded by poor examination results and their own perception that they were failures.

They screamed when the plane took off. I wished I had captured the excitement, apprehension, fear and joy written on some faces.

With lots of encouragement, they conquered the team-building obstacle course, the adventurous jungle trail nature walk and emerged more confident, having overcome some of their fears. They sat stiff and tight on the exciting longboat ride to the Iban longhouse but enjoyed the cultural journey thoroughly. They paid a heartwarming visit to the Salvation Army Children's Home, did balloon sculpting and interacted with the orphans so well they said they nearly

cried when they had to leave after only an hour there.

Even the weather was for us! It rained on our way to the adventure campsite. It stopped raining when we reached the campsite and so we were able to complete the obstacle course. It rained again just when we completed the activities. It was beautiful weather throughout our longboat rides. It rained just when we reached the longhouse. The rain stopped when we were scheduled to take the return ride. Amazing!

I was also amazed at how it resonated in our hearts when it came to talking to these kids. At our daily reflection sessions, my three colleagues and I were eagerly bombarding them with many words of affirmation and seemingly could not stop imparting many learning points. We simply wanted to pour our hearts to them. It was a privilege to have taken this amazing journey with all of them, adults and kids alike.



Helping one another succeed at the obstacle course.

## My Journey into the Village Schools in China

*“Is there a shortcut?”* With a cigarette in his hand, the principal of the first village school I taught in asked. I had just explained that counselling is a relationship between the counsellor and the counsellee established for the purpose of helping the counsellee to deal with his problem. He established that building *guanxi* (relationship) would take time, and teachers did not have time. He was asking for a quick fix.

During the welcome dinner the evening before, he had already asked how to deal with those children raring to get to know the opposite sex. I suggested that the rapport between teachers and students must be established so that in a trusted environment, the child could share his heart, and we could then impart sex education and teach values. He maintained it would be almost impossible in China — “Teachers are the authoritative figures, be a friend to the students? Impossible.”

It was with this mindset of the leadership in the background that I embarked on my first training session at the school. The teachers were absorbing this entirely new approach. Be genuine, they were told, and respect the child. Show

empathy, exhibit warmth. The teacher as a person is crucial to build the bridge and gain trust from the child in order to help him. Their minds were reeling with questions: How is this possible? Are the children ‘gods’?

They listened attentively to the stories of my work with my students. They played the games and enjoyed themselves.

They wrote great feedback in the forms. Even as I recognised that the application of these skills, and hence the transformation of hearts, would take time, what was important was that the seed had been sown.

At the second village school, the heavens opened. The principal and teachers were teachable, passionate and responsive. They literally sucked every ounce of energy from me. They asked good questions. They role-played, they watched me role-play, and they embraced the teaching. I presented many cases, I shared more



Telling a story through role-play.

theories, and I imparted everything I could. I felt the Ohm!, and I was drained. It was an amazing moment.

In the midst of the session, I asked for comments and responses. One teacher shared he did everything contrary to what I had shared and was convinced to change the way he had been teaching the children. Another teacher felt guilty about the way she had just scolded her student.

At the end of the training, the principal and teachers stood up and broke into spontaneous applause. That was yet another amazing moment.



Teachers writing words of affirmation for one another.



## The **Aha!** Moments

I had some Aha! moments that changed my thought patterns and liberated me to becoming a more effective teacher. The statement “My being is more important than my doing” gave me the greatest enlightenment.