



# 家書



LETTER TO MY FAMILY

Jan 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Christmas is just over and now unto the New Year. Quoting from an old famous poet Wong Wei: "Being a stranger in a foreign country, every holiday multiplies one's homesickness." resonates in my heart longing for my surviving siblings in distant countries but also feel grateful for our big extended church family. Chinese people are especially blessed because after the western New Year, then comes the celebration of the Lunar New Year. Western New Year is not that special to me; however, the Lunar New Year usually stirs up a lot of past memories and infinite sadness because former imageries of celebrations with parents and younger siblings could only be hoped now to find in my dreams.

For Lunar New Year, our family tradition is that no matter where you are or how busy you are, must come back to have dinner together. My wife usually starts planning the dinner menu immediately after Christmas. This past Saturday, we went to the Chinese supermarket to buy groceries for the holidays, as I passed the shelves that displayed sausages, I saw long time no see sausages, smoked duck leg quarters, etc. which evoked many memories from years past. During my childhood we were poor, only at Lunar New Year would we eat better food and always sausages was what we kids looked forward to at the New Year Eve dinner. My family had six children and on New Year Eve, mother would pass out the annual sausage to each child. My younger brothers and sisters would devour their sausages right away; I, however, would bury it in my bowl under the hot rice and let the rich thick aroma waft up through the rice. Accompanied by sausage fragrance, with a little pouring of soy sauce on the rice, coupled with few pieces of deep-fried lard, and little bit of fried peanuts, the delicious taste of that bowl of rice cannot be described by words. After finishing the rice, sausage was still left on the bottom of the bowl, with younger siblings watching me with their envious eyes, I would pick up the translucent sausage, with closed eyes and munch slowly, at that moment I felt I was in heaven. Living in today's abundance, I miss the simple life of the past: tofu with green vegetables, the whole family gathered around to eat dinner, and the children excitedly cackling non-stop. Although mother had limited money for groceries, she always managed for our food to be appetizing and healthy. As I thought of the past, I readily bought sausages, smoked duck leg quarters, lettuce, etc. ready for our New Year Eve's dinner be filled with old memories.

For the family to be together for New Year is God's most precious gift, should be cherished. Last November, I spent the loneliest Thanksgiving. During those days, my wife went to California to attend a reunion with her fellow classmates from Hong Kong Theological Seminary, separated by four decades, everyone is of old age now. My daughter and son-in-law along with their children went to Virginia for vacation, because I had Thanksgiving responsibilities at church, I could not get away, I stayed home alone. Usually with my grandchildren around, their noises like sea waves filled the home; now the house seemed not only empty but eerily quiet. In addition to being lonely, without my wife, there was the problem of meals. Everyday I am so used to just eat the food prepared by my wife that I took it for granted and with my wife gone, I had to think about what to eat for every meal, not an easy task. There was a well known pastor among Chinese churches, Arnold Yeung, who loved cooking and was good at writing too. His specialty was to connect these two tasks together. Pastor Yeung wrote a book titled, "Kitchen Philosophy," in which he used accumulated common kitchen experiences to highlight many ignored ordinary principles, teaching us the essence of life from mundane living. Reverend Yeung believed that many of the great principles of life are only discovered through ordinary living experiences. How true. The days my wife was not here made an unforgettable impression in my heart. Because I had to live, for survival, I, who seldom step into the kitchen, was forced to cook. I then realized that although for decades I've considered eating food as something "minor", it really was not a small matter. I was reminded that with every bowl of rice or porridge, hidden behind was lots of love and sacrifice. Cooking is not only an art, it can help people gain new insights into life.

For past dinners, my wife had to call several times before I, the macho man, would emerge nonchalantly; now I know the time and effort required to cook, men of the family should really treasure and show respect.

First of all, I discovered, what dishes to make every day is a pretty difficult task and there are three reasons: (1) every day one has to cook, if only know a few dishes, they have already been eaten many times, brain wracking. (2) few Chinese supermarkets, missing ingredients, may not be able to cook desired dishes, as well as too much time is needed for food preparation and lack of actual cooking skills. (3) I do not know why, but even with the simplest dishes, after I cook, the kitchen looks like an after earthquake disaster zone, dishes piled up like mountains awaiting to be cleaned, vegetable leaves and spills all over the floor, big headache. Moreover, no matter what I cook, a one person portion is most challenging, but also least motivating, because after all the time and efforts spent, as one sits down to eat alone, every bite seems tasteless. So every day, in addition to instant noodles, I only ate steamed chicken, eliminating the need to go through all the troubles, sufficient to just fill the stomach. However, eating the same daily, after two weeks of chicken leg quarters, I believe I contracted “chickenphobia” and just the thought of it makes me afraid.

Besides, I find buying vegetables not only bothersome but “recognizing” them even more vexing. Standing in front of produce stalls, I find myself at a loss. Most of vegetables are not labeled and don’t come with any instructions; to my eyes, they’re just piles of green leaves no different from one another. With thick skin, I asked the clerks, they thought I was joking, usually ignored me. After receiving several different responses, I concluded there are different types of produce department clerks: some are heartless, dismiss my questions or even say something nasty, making me sad for awhile; some are willing to tell me the names of the vegetables, but later I do not know if intentionally to take advantage of my ignorance, would give me those old and yellow ones; then there are some good old sympathetic people who sensed that I am like an idiot in the kitchen and they willing introduced me to different vegetables and explained how best to cook them. Once, a fresh fish worker stood nearby and heard my dilemma, saw how attentive I was, had compassion on me and insisted for me to go to his counter and struggled to teach me how to determine if a fish is fresh or not: are the eyes bright? any sticky fluid on the body? fish gills bright red? fish flesh springy to touch? etc. Unfortunately, the good fishmonger did not know I don’t eat fish.

My former colleague is a good pastor and a good cook, when necessary, he would look into the fridge, whatever he could dig out he will cook, and the food always looked, smelled, and tasted delicious. He said that good cooks are like housewives, did not always have to consider what ingredients to buy first, but to see what are the good things in the market, then decide what dishes to cook. This flexibility makes what may seem like routine tasks into creative art. The process of buying and cooking food takes on new dimension and gives one a great sense of satisfaction. Sometimes I wonder, isn’t it applicable to life? Just as the housewife can cook different dishes from ingredients at hand, although it is good for people to set goals and strive toward them, many things in life are out of our control; when circumstances change, are we able to remain calm and adapt to different environments, use what we have to do the best we can in everything to make life meaningful and to live brilliantly? The Bible says, "The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD." (Proverbs 21:31) Doing our best with what God has given us, be content and joyful, this is the greatest wisdom of life, and it is also the most difficult spiritual lesson to learn.

One sunny Monday, after eating a tasteless lunch, I drove to the nearby business district to wander around. There are not that many Chinese restaurants nearby, always just those handfuls. In fact, no matter how delicious the restaurant foods are, after awhile, one realizes that home cooking although plain, they nurture growth and one doesn’t get tired of it. Jesus said, "Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15) What makes one healthy is not a house full of silver and gold, nor a table full of rich and abundant food, but after a day of hard work, he goes home to his beloved ones, with rice and small dish of food, the fragrance of the food mixed with family love both relax and refresh .

As New Year Eve approaches, I wait expectantly. No matter how busy during the day, I will rush home early. Whatever maybe on the dinner table, even if just a dish of green beans, a plate of boiled cabbage, perhaps some sausage and cured meats, I will receive them with a grateful heart, with my wife, I will enjoy every mouthful and treasure every second and minute, thanking the Lord for being able to eat and chat with my wife.

Your family member in Christ,

*Rev. Calvin Tran*