

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Chinese New Year was just over. In fact, we don't just celebrate the New Year on one day. Therefore, I still want to use this festive occasion to wish you as members of our big church family Happy New Year, Health and Peace and daily walk with our Lord. The phrase "New Year brings new hopes" is familiar to us since our childhood. What is your hope for this New Year? In our youth, "my wish" was often the topic teachers assigned to us for Chinese essay class. Although it seems to be an easy topic to write on, it was difficult to me. On one hand, my teacher instructed my class to write honestly. However, if we did express our honest wish, we often got a C grade, or had to rewrite. Even worse, our parents would whip us for poor performance. An old friend of mine used to admire a garbage collector. He would stand on the side of the garbage truck; once it stopped at his home, the worker would jump down from the truck, pick up the garbage can and dump its content into the truck, hurl the can back to the street and climb back onto the truck to leave in style. What a job it was and one could even make money on it. However, after he honestly expressed his wish to be such a garbage collector, the teacher in front of the class humiliated him. I, on the other hand, had a secret wish in my heart and dared not express it in view of what happened to this classmate. Once I did write down my wish truthfully after reading the story of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree, I experienced the same fate of being humiliated in the class.

My childhood aspiration is closely tied to my self-image. As I was growing up, I had very low self-esteem and often felt inferior. This was in part due to my negative destiny predicated by a fortuneteller and also due to the fact that I was in ill health. I only weighed two and half pounds at birth due to premature delivery at 7-month pregnancy, bearing the name of "seven-star baby". Sickness, major or minor, continued without interruption every month. At that time, I was the only beloved son in the family with several sisters before me. My grandma treated me as her treasure and worried about my health day and night. She invited a blind fortuneteller to cast lot on me when I was five years old. Afterwards, she solemnly pronounced that the fortuneteller told her that I was the creditor of my dad and came to the world to demand payment and sickness would follow me, in lieu of principal and interest, until all the money that my dad owed me was exhausted, and only at that point, I would depart from home. That fortuneteller predicted decisively that I would not live beyond ten years of age. From then on, my status in the family fell precipitously. With grandma's attitude to me changed and my parents worrying constantly, the whole family appeared to be waiting for my ultimate fate. Although the foretold fate never realized, I became very quiet and lived my life passively. This happened during the height of the Vietnamese war. My wish then was to join the army in order to get shot and to disappear from the battlefield, thus relieving the family.

Then, I became a Christian and Jesus Christ changed me. I realized that I was a precious child in God's eyes because He chose me before the world was created. I no longer paid attention to others' attitudes toward me, treasured my life and established my own value. As to new year's wishes, valuable lessons were also learnt. I no longer wished for success in everything but for the desire to pray upon any circumstance befalling on me, following Jesus example, "Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will!" (Matthew 11:26). Several decades have now passed. I dare not wish for calm wind and sea but hope that even in the midst of changes, I will stride forward, hand-in-hand with my wife, to face storms and to enjoy the blessings of God under the sun. I dare not expect for America's continuous prosperity but hope to live a simple life without being burdened by unnecessary things but learning to be content. I dare not anticipate sunshine everyday but hope to be grateful under the sun, calmly enduring storms and not losing peace in the midst of changes in surroundings. The Proverbs taught us "Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the Lord?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God."

I once read an interesting article on the joint school project of a Tsinghua University professor and his primary school son. As school project, the son played the role of a reporter interviewing his father, asking him for his wish in life. Father answered, "My first wish is to be able to eat!" This was surprising to the son who thought that his father was joking. He sternly told his father that this question was important in the exercise and had to be answered seriously. But the father told the son that a professional reporter always writes down answers truthfully. "My second wish is to be able sleep well", said the father. The reporter son really panicked and protested by saying "Other fathers often wished to become doctors or scientists in order to reach high stature in society, but why my father wished for such trivial matters and it really hurts," and he cried. The father nevertheless did not wave. The little reporter had to write it down dutifully. "My third wish is to be able to laugh." That's the end of it the son thought and handed in his assignment in despair. On the day the paper he received the paper back, he excitedly went home to tell his father that to his utter surprise, the teacher gave him the highest score and read out loud to his class. The teacher also said that those were also her earnest wishes. Being able to eat, sleep and laugh is in fact not a trivial matter at all as those with experience in life would testify. Things in life do not go one's ways most of the time and what else can one ask for if being able to eat a hearty meal, to sleep soundly at night and to laugh from the depth of one's heart.

Fresh after graduating from seminary forty-three years ago, I had a youthful aspiration of becoming a good pastor in building churches. However, God led my walk on an uneven road and He took me to different places and to different services. As I reminisce, my experience of serving as a pastor was quite distinct from what I originally thought about that position, with one aspect staying the same- what was a dream has stayed as a dream. My sense of gain or loss in life is fading in my mind to the point of disappearing in my memory, let alone that of others.

Childhood experiences are often reminders for my judgment on gain or loss in my life. When I was in first grade of primary school, the teacher assigned me to play a role in a drama for a festivity to my total surprise. I was elated but also scared because the teacher never gave me any assignment before. My mom was equally happy when I told her the news that day. She bought me a new costume, a "lantern dress" that was of fashion at that time. The weird thing was that they never invited to rehearsal unlike other players on the list. The teacher said that the rehearsal was not needed for me and I could just show up early before the final performance. My mom was suspicious too but dared not ask. On the day of the festival, guests invited by my parents to watch my performance all showed up. I put on that costume and arrived at the backstage early to wait for my instruction. I realized then why there was no need for me to rehearse: my role was actually a tree made of thick paper. I was to hide inside the tree trunk and peep through a small hole. At the proper moment, I would move the "tree" to the center of the stage and that was it. From the curtain rise till its fall, I stood silently and motionlessly in the darkness of the "tree trunk" with sweat streaming down my new dress. Through the peeping hole, I looked for my parents and siblings in the audience but did not see them, nor could they see me, as I was merely a "tree" on the stage. That was my role throughout the play.

Does this experience similarly reflect life in general? As long as we stand in our assigned position and do the rightful thing, does it matter if we are noticed or appreciated by others? Our gains or losses through the decades of our life resemble footprints on the beach. When tides come, they are washed away without a trace. "How can things all follow one's desires? What matters finally is a clear conscience." After doing my best, I wish only to surrender to His lordship irrespective of the outcome. "Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will," the Bible teaches us. "Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun." With my dear wife by my side, other than being able to eat well, sleep soundly and laugh to our heart's delight, we have no other demands.

Your family member in Christ,  
Rev. Calvin Tran