

Was 2024 a good year for you? Let's review your yardsticks...

You have limited time and energy. Think of what truly matters to you and focus on that to lead a more meaningful life.

Tan Seow Hon and Lim Su Ching

In June 2024, then newly minted Prime Minister Lawrence Wong encouraged Singaporeans to broaden their idea of success, find meaning and fulfilment in what they do, and strive to be better versions of themselves.

As we approach the end of 2024, it is good to take stock of whether we have lived meaningfully.

Answers to three powerful questions can help you assess the past year and guide your decisions today and in the future.

WHAT IS YOUR YARDSTICK OF MEANING?

Ask yourself what is truly meaningful to you. Are you drowning in hyper-competition and endless comparisons?

It is easy to forget to ask ourselves what we truly value when chasing the 5Cs (cash, car, condominium, credit card, and country club), being overwhelmed by the daily demands of life, or even joining the "tang ping" (lying flat) culture. Yet, as psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl put it, humans have a drive to find meaning. Meaning is what motivates individuals to keep going in difficult circumstances. Meaning can likewise order how we spend our time and energy.

Ask yourself what you value instead of drawing comparisons with others, who may be driven by different beliefs. Everyone is in a different situation. Our abilities are not comparable. The demands

on our time are different and vary with seasons. Someone may have an ailing loved one in the last phase of life, which may call for spending more time in caregiving, rather than accepting a senior role at the workplace with increased responsibilities in that season.

Values also depend on our world view. Do we believe we are merely composed of a multitude of atoms in a purely materialistic universe? Or is there a higher being to whom we must account for the way we live?

We must do what truly brings meaning to us. Indeed, such decisions should be made early. We are good only for so long. How should we optimally channel our time and energy in a finite lifetime?

ARE YOU THINKING OF YOUR LEGACY?

Second, think early of the legacy you'd like to leave for others,

beyond the financial.

A helpful question to ask is whether we inspire others and touch lives. Or, are we merely evoking envy in others?

When the late aesthetic doctor, Dr Richard Teo, was diagnosed with end-stage lung cancer and confronted with the question of what truly brings meaning, he reflected on what he had accumulated in material wealth, and observed that his possessions had elicited only envy, jealousy, and hatred in others.

As 2024 comes to a close, ask yourself: If life ends now, what are you most happy with, and what do you most regret? Your answer may call for some changes in the way you apportion your time and energy.

Are your talents and credentials empowering and enabling, rather than restricting, you?

It's important to remember that talents and credentials should not become millstones that we feel obliged to carry on our journey which hinder us from living flourishing lives and being true to our values.

This point seems somewhat counter-intuitive in an East Asian society, where we tend to believe that if we are presented with a sought-after opportunity – such as a professional degree – we should seize it and maximize the gains.

However, talents and credentials should be enabling. We have to ask ourselves which talent or opportunity we want to pursue, and in what area we should apply our resources in the finite time at our disposal.

Society may overvalue some credentials as measures of success. How we spend our time and energy depends on what we value as meaningful.

Also, apart from talents and credentials, relationships also need to be nurtured. Loving and caring for your child or an aged parent are invaluable but easy to neglect when you are chasing material success.

Sometimes, the years when you

can prioritise work are also the years when a loved one needs you the most.

A parent who accompanies a child on the ride home from school can find spontaneous deep bonding as the child excitedly shares from an overflow of what just happened at school.

An elderly parent having their hand held by an adult child, assisting them, finds it far more meaningful than the same act by an employed helper.

Some things are too precious to be delegated, if we can help it.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

As the saying goes, the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago; the next best time is now. As you take stock of this year, assess how you have apportioned your time and energy and lived by your yardstick of meaning.

Consider five main areas: your work, whether paid or unpaid; cherished relationships; playtime and rest; personal growth; and building your legacy.

Should you be prioritising your time and energy differently in 2025? Are major changes required?

Small steps count. Decisions each day eventually become footnotes to your eulogy. Focus on what you truly value rather than being enslaved by the fear of missing out. And instead of feeling that past efforts are wasted if you decide to change course, rethink "waste". Look for gold in the past season: What have you gained in terms of character and experience that may help in your new season?

Looking towards 2025, it may be time to discard your old lens and receive new vision.

• Dr Tan Seow Hon, an associate professor of law at Singapore Management University, is working on a research project on success and flourishing. Lim Su Ching is a lawyer-turned-life coach who helps professional women flourish in their workplaces and at home.