

Publication: Mothership Online

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Headline: Pritam Singh gives uplifting Yale-NUS graduation speech with self-deprecating bit about going downhill after 44

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Yale-NUS graduates from the Class of 2021 had to make do with attending a virtual ceremony on May 17 as Covid-19 made its own plans to rain on their physical parade.

But that did not stop Pritam Singh, Workers' Party secretary-general and Leader of the Opposition, from delivering a pre-recorded speech full of self-deprecating bits poking fun at himself as a 44-year-old soon to be an over the hill, ex-exemplary Singaporean.

But at the same time, he used the six minutes to deliver a speech that imparted some of his wisdom he acquired over more than four decades of existence to deduce for his audience the four determinants of success.

According to Singh, the four major influences in one's life are wealth of experiences, personal relationships, attitude and adaptability, and luck.

Paid tribute to NUS

In his speech, he also paid tribute to his education at the National University of Singapore where he studied history before embarking on a law degree in the Singapore Management University, as well as talked broadly about the different factors that play a part in moulding one for success in work and life in general.

Singh also urged the graduands to take life by the horns and be cognisant of the unpredictability of it all, and offered himself as a prime example.

Singh deadpanned to the camera:

He also encourage those in attendance to take the path less beaten, and find meaning and fulfilment in what one does.

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Full transcript here:

Graduands, parents, and the Yale-NUS community.

Thank you president Tan Tai Yong, and Yale-NUS, for your kind invitation to speak at your graduation event.

To the class of 2021, my heartiest congratulations on your graduation.

Some say a person is at their peak at the age of 44.

They are old enough to gain some wisdom, but yet young enough to enjoy health, vitality and energy to get things done.

I am 44 now, and I am grateful to be here to speak with you today, because after this, it is all downhill.

While I am at the apex of my hereafter declining powers, let me share with you what I think are the four things that will determine your success after university.

The first thing that will determine your success after graduation is the kampung of experience that brought you here, kampung being the Malay word for village.

Your time at Yale-NUS and your liberal arts education are to be treasured.

Those studying for professional degrees right after junior college and high school, miss something that they perhaps don't even know, but maybe later in life.

Before I read law at SMU, I majored in history at the National University of Singapore, and I am forever grateful that I did.

I suppose reading history had practical value in teaching me analytical skills.

But beyond the practical, learning the liberal arts helped me understand people better, and to grow as a person before learning a professional.

Would I have taken law as my first degree had I attained better A level results, perhaps.

But this has shown me, what perceived failures in life, or how perceived failures in life can eventually enrich and reward.

The second thing that will determine your success after college will be your personal relationships.

Hopefully you have friends and family who will from a place of love, tell you the truth about yourself, whether directly or indirectly.

And as you set out to change the world your sincere family and friends will be a critical ballast that will help you distinguish and check between being righteous, as opposed to being self-righteous.

I've been fortunate to have been reminded of that ballast many a time, and I wish it for you too.

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Your third influence on success will be your attitude and adaptability.

You are entering a world where a lot of people talk, but fewer listen.

Not that people have changed. There was never a time when things were easier or better. There were no good old days.

Make sure you communicate well, and this includes paying attention to what is said to you.

The ecosystem of interaction and communication has fundamentally altered with social media.

But the real work, and real conversations, ultimately drive the agenda.

It is not enough to write well, you must be able to persuade.

Human-to-human interactions and how you adjust and adapt to differing situations will make a key difference to your employability and how you help your organisation succeed.

Don't be a difficult person in the guise of wanting to be seen as hardworking.

Disavow being self-centered and selfish, and avoid having as your real purpose, the climbing of the greasy pole.

It's greasy for a reason, and everyone can see through such a person.

At all times be clear-minded, attitude counts, always has.

As your experience of graduating in this time of Covid, don't resent it.

Accept it and turn it to your advantage in some way.

That brings me to the fourth influence of your success after graduation, and that is luck.

Call it kismet. Fate. Destiny. Luck of the draw, just plain life.

Your success depends on things which you have no control over, such as whether you get a good boss who cares about development, or a poor boss who cares only how useful you are as a cog in the machine.

But that is the reality of life, and you will have to negotiate that.

The opportunities and obstacles that come your way, will be unpredictable.

I did not plan to become secretary-general of the Workers' Party.

Nor did I scheme or plot my way to become the Leader of the Opposition.

Neither was it my life goal to be sued jointly and severally for S\$33 million. I have taken it as it comes.

And I intend to.

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And as the cliché goes, keep calm, carry on. I encourage you to do so too.

So, the four things that will determine your success are your experiences, your relationships, your attitude.

And yes, luck.

But here's the plot twist: What does success mean to you?

Only you can decide that, but have an open mind.

Your aim should always be to produce excellence.

Whether you decide on alternate paths of charitable NGO work, or even in a small enterprise or startup or multinational corporation, or if you decide to give tuition to kids or be a homemaker or do what something some people see as routine work.

Look first for fulfilment.

The sense of fulfilment counts for a lot.

And it is important for your mental well-being.

It is only with fulfilment that you will be able to truly make the best contribution to society.

Do constantly self-reflect and ask yourself, what difference you're making?

With that, let me wish you the best in your upward trajectory of life.

You still have some years to go before you hit 44. Thank you.