

# My Journey of Learning and Un-Learning

- by Kiang Faang Pyng, DTM

I joined Toastmasters with a single mission in mind: to explore and to exploit its education programme to the fullest and then get out. I didn't think I needed to hang around the corridors of Toastmasters too long as my idea of any growth corridor involved my participation in the larger business and more sophisticated corporate arena.

I became a member of the MII Toastmasters Club toward the end of September, 1997. It has been 11 years and I have certainly walked through many corridors of Toastmasters, considering my involvement as a member, Vice President Education (1998-1999) and Club President (1999-2000) of the MII Toastmasters Club, Area C7 Governor (2000-2001), Opening Ceremony/Advertising & Promotion/Forum Director of 'KL2002' Joint District 51 Annual Convention, Division C Governor (2002-2003), Organising Chair for 'KL2004' District 51 Semi-Annual Convention, District 51 Public Relations Officer (2004-2005), and now taking a smaller role as the Vice President Public Relations (2008-2009) at the Premier Advanced Toastmasters Club.

I had also taken part in and won numerous Speech Contests at various levels. I had organised and facilitated in speechcrafts and workshops; spoken at many corporate organisations as well as NGOs under the Toastmasters banner.

As I look over the corridors of Toastmasters now, I could still see myself leaning against its many pillars - for support.

And as I walk through the corridors once again, my heart is filled gratitude, for the many communication and leadership lessons I have learned and un-learned, through Toastmasters.



## THUS BEGAN MY JOURNEY OF LEARNING...

**My journey of LEARNING began** as soon as I made up my mind to complete all my 10 basic speech projects within 6 months. Unlike now, members back then usually took their time to complete their project speeches. Giving myself 6 months to complete 10 project speeches was really quite impressive, given that I did not intend to visit other clubs. I also promised myself that every speech I presented had to be better than the previous. My plan worked well for me, as I put in my best effort in crafting each speech, rehearsing well before presenting it before an audience, applying all the skills that I had learned.

It was also during this period when I developed a love-hate relationship with Table-Topics Session. I loved it because I recognised the importance of being able to speak off-the-cuff in an interesting, logical and yes, intelligent manner. As such, I began to read more extensively and I quickly learned the techniques involved in impromptu-speaking. I hated it at the same time because it often made a nervous-wrack out of me – for fear that I might be asked to speak on a subject I knew little or nothing about. This fear slowly reduced, as I began to creatively employ the concept of 'if you can't convince them, confuse them'... Sometimes it worked – but I had to sound intelligent enough!



I couldn't have asked for a better mentor. Mohamad Abdullah, DTM, who encouraged me to join Toastmasters, had been most supportive. 3 weeks into Toastmasters and I was invited as a guest speaker at a Rotary meeting; 3 months into Toastmasters and I was given a chance to be a trainer/facilitator in a Speechcraft organised for the recovering drug addicts. These speaking opportunities pushed me to excel further as they also fuelled my passion in public speaking. I must add that it did a lot to boost my ego as well. I was 1<sup>st</sup> Runner- Up at the Club Level International Speech Contest. Masdiana, who was the Club champion, graciously made way for me to represent MII at the Area Speech Contest. The weeks that followed saw me reorganising my speech and practising my delivery before a very strict Masdiana... She would later tell everyone that she coached me well except on what to do if I forgot my lines... At the Area Contest. I started off exceptionally well (and that smugness

must have been so evident on my face) and then I got distracted by the overwhelming response from the audience, and my mind blanked out. Not even trying to compose my thoughts, I decided to bow out – much to a surprised audience who didn't even realise my mind went blank...

I learned, the hard way, about managing nerves; about not letting the audience take control of my train of thought.

I also learned that there's a price to pay for being over-confident. No matter how prepared you are, sometimes you can still forget your lines...It pays to arrange your speech contents in a certain 'pattern' to help you remember the flow better.

## THE MORE I LEARNED, THE MORE I REALISED I NEEDED TO UN-LEARN

**That speech contest fiasco prompted me not only to learn, but to UN-LEARN.** I started to seriously address my weakness and to explore areas for improvement. Over the years I had developed this habit called 'selective listening' – I listened to what I wanted to hear; and turned a deaf ear to the less pleasant comments. I knew I was a good speaker, but I didn't realise that being merely good wouldn't take me far... To take myself to the next level of excellence, I had to force myself to change my frame of reference that was fixed by my own rigid perspectives. I began to listen to my own voice and review my choice of words with intense scrutiny. I listened to other points of view and took every relevant comment, every advice, seriously. It didn't mean that I thoroughly enjoyed listening to all the not-so-nice things about me and my speech, but I became more opened to ideas as well as criticism, I accepted my short-comings positively and I improved; I managed to kick some of the bad habits that dwarfed my growth. Dunstan Chan, DTM, was one of those who knew how to 'put me in my place' with his honest and sometimes ego-bruising comments. He wasn't right all the time, but he was right a lot of times. He taught me how to tear my speech apart and reconstruct it many times until I am totally happy with it. The result was simply amazing!

When I became an Area Governor, I was confronted with yet another rude awakening. I realised I had been interacting with only selected few in the Toastmasters circuit. Having seven clubs under my care, two of which were 'dead and waiting to be buried', meant I needed to reach out to the clubs and their respective members. I needed to develop people-skills and this proved to be much, much more challenging than preparing and delivery good speeches! I had to learn to be less judgemental about people; more tolerant and more patient toward them; more opened to sharing, coaching and mentoring... There was just so much I had to un-learn to learn, about leading and not merely managing, people, especially in **servant-leadership** such as in Toastmasters.



Mark Twain said it best when he said, "*Education consists mainly of what we have un-learned*".

That term as Area Governor had really, really been a great transformation for me. It forced me out of the comfort of my own home club and expanded my horizon. I grew - not just as a leader, but as a person.

My many giant 'pillars of support' along the corridors of Toastmasters include Past-District Governors Dunstan Chan, Datuk Adeline Leong, Maimunah Natasha, Christopher Teo, the late-Lilian Lau, John Lau, Dr Arul, Ho Fong Ming and Low Yat Seow; Past District officers like Mohamad Abdullah, the late-Wu Tze Sing, Tham Chee Wah, LeAnn Tang; my good friends Tan Saw Bee and Sheila Wong.

## CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENTS

Over the last decade, Toastmasters International has revised and improved its Communication and Leadership Programme to remain relevant in a changing global environment. In seeking change and improvements, its top leadership team has not lost sight of TI's mission of "Making Effective Oral Communication A Worldwide Reality".

I am still walking through the corridors of Toastmasters. I have witnessed members coming and going. Some moved out of the organisation altogether to pursue other interests in life; others, like me, have chosen to stay. Every now and then a small voice nudges me to get out of Toastmasters... but almost immediately, a



BIGGER voice reminds me that Toastmasters is about **CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENTS**, and I am certainly not through with that process.

I made a major career change 7 years ago to become a corporate trainer. It was possible because of what I had learned and un-learned through Toastmasters.

“So when will you be graduating from Toastmasters?”, my non-toastmaster friend often teases me.

It isn't time yet – not even after 11 years.