

## **MASS CALL SPEECH**

**THE PRESIDENT OF THE LAW SOCIETY OF SINGAPORE**

**22 AUGUST 2015**

May it please Your Honour, I speak on behalf of the Law Society to welcome the cohort of 2015 to the Singapore Bar.

Congratulations. You have been called to the bar and many of you will start in private practice. You will take the first step in what I hope will be a long and fulfilling legal career.

Some millennials think that the idea of a career is an antiquated notion in today's world, where change is the only constant, where job mobility across industries is common, and where the conventional wisdom of the long term is a three year plan.

Our statistics are sobering. If history is any guide, a large chunk of you, within 7 to 12 years, what we call our "middle category" will leave the profession. Only one-quarter of your cohort will remain in practice. Some leave for real, or perceived, greener pastures; and others do stay within the larger legal community as foreign solicitors, in-house counsel, or government lawyers. But, for a variety of reasons, many burn out, lose interest, get disillusioned, or are simply unfulfilled.

Yet, if you exit the profession too early, you lose something. To put it candidly, being a lawyer becomes more fun and more satisfying, the longer one stays in practice. Longevity pays off. You get to be lead counsel and engage in the sharp end of advocacy, strategise and structure corporate transactions, engage in business development and build networks and ultimately, find yourself in a position to use your knowledge to meaningfully give back to the community. There is inherent satisfaction to be gained from committing to, and mastering a craft.

I recognize that being a young lawyer in Singapore is tough. You need to survive the associate years. How do you "hang in there"? Let me offer some modest proposals for survival beyond "outwit, outplay, outlast".

**Develop intellectual curiosity.** If you see practice as “just a job”, you will not survive, or you will be intensely unhappy. Cut your losses now. The practice of law must interest you. It does not have to be an academic obsession with legal esoterica. It could be an interest in people or psychology, because the law deals with and impacts human beings. It could be an interest in business, and how the law can be used to regulate, encourage and shape enterprise or innovation.

Legal practice is often a portal to understanding other fields of knowledge, be it medicine, engineering, corporate finance or technology. Part of the thrill of practice is constant and continuing learning, which both edifies and enriches us as human beings. Aspire to understand the law. But as the former Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong observed:

*“you need more than knowledge and experience. You need to know something about the vast body of knowledge of human endeavour, especially politics, economics, history, social science and maybe literature.”*

So embrace lifelong learning.

**Next, Be engaged.** No man is an island. You are part of a larger community of what I hope are like minded fellow professionals. If you silo yourself, bury your head and only generate work product, your boss may be happy, but then you become a legal zombie. The job becomes drudgery, albeit challenging, difficult and relatively well paid drudgery. Being engaged in the legal community gives you a holistic perspective of the law and its significance in our lives. So, get involved in the Law Society or the Academy of Law. Get involved in something beyond your immediate and direct interests as an associate. Develop relationships and connectivity in the legal community. Find a mentor. It may or may not be your boss. There are a lot of senior lawyers out there who are willing to impart their wisdom, war stories and passion to younger members of the bar. They will help you see the law as more than the sum total of your paid briefs.

This segues to my next point.

**Volunteer.** It may seem that the call to participate in pro bono work is in danger of being overused. That doesn't make it any less true or important. Practising law is a privilege. Give back. Do good. That's a moral imperative. Take advantage of the plethora of pro bono schemes that the Law Society initiates. Dealing with regular people with real problems will remind many of you why you went to law school in the first place. In many ways, it is the sharp end of the law. And it is where the nobility of our calling lies. As far as I know, nobody who undertakes pro bono work suffers regret. It may not always be as intellectually challenging as complex litigation or high end transactional work, but there is real satisfaction and real meaning in helping the poor and vulnerable, the widows and orphans. It makes you stick around, because you then realise how much good your skill sets allow you to contribute. Find a firm or find a boss that allows you to do this.

**Next be ethical.** For obvious reasons. And getting into trouble is not fun. As your seniors might say – don't get "lawsoced". But there's a bigger picture. Earl Warren, once Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court said "*in civilised life, law floats on a sea of ethics*". As lawyers, as professionals, as decent human beings, good ethics must become hardwired in us, a part of our DNA. Closer to home, our Court of Appeal in *Lim Mey Lee Susan v Singapore Medical Council* was emphatic: "*To be a member of a profession is to declare oneself to be someone of whom more than ordinary good conduct may properly be expected.*" Take pride in your professionalism. If you litigate, familiarize yourself with the formalities and niceties of court address, figure out when to speak, stand, sit or bow. Just as importantly, be courteous and collegiate. This makes sense. Today's adversary is tomorrow's ally. If you never give your learned friend a break, you are never going to get one yourself. If you have friends in practice, you reduce friction in transactions and in the courtroom. It allows you to treat your opponents as worthy competitors, exhibit magnanimity when things go your way, and grace when things work against you. Your professional life doesn't become a series of unremitting conflicts. It doesn't have to get personal. It doesn't have to get ugly. There is a little red book published by the Academy of Law. Two of my Council members are part of the team of authors. It is called "A Civil Practice: Good Counsel for Learned Friends". Get your hands on one. Read it cover to cover.

**Balance or "work life balance"**- This is a phrase dreaded by most law firm partners. Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, famously said, "*there's no such thing as work life balance. There's work, and there's life, and there's no balance*". The associate years are hectic, even frenetic. It is not about finding balance, but finding a way to decompress, "chillax" or reboot the brain. And to do it quickly. Running, reading, diving, family, drinking, travel, baking, whatever does the trick. Something that can be done intensely, passionately...and legally.

**Last. Focus.** Have a plan, have a vision. It may be an aspiration to partnership, excellence and recognition in a specific area of practice, or domination within an industry or client sector. Work out a series of sequential professional goals you want to reach. For example, lead counsel in your first High Court trial, leading the deal team for the first time, independently bringing in your first client all by yourself. Having a definable reachable target helps to keep you in the game and separates the important from the urgent.

Some of you here, are going into practice with the noblest and best of intentions, to strive for the benefit of your fellow men. You may be disappointed. You may get disillusioned. There will always be some clients that are ignoble, dishonorable and wholly unappreciative.

Some of you here are going into practice in pursuit of wealth, to earn as much as possible and as fast as possible. You too, may be disappointed. You may feel tainted by mammon, or face an existential crisis in worship of the billable hours.

Stay the course. Take off those rose tinted and green tinted lenses. I have benefited from the clarity of hindsight. As with life, the truth lies somewhere in between. To be a true professional is a life in tension, you must balance the noble calling with the demands of commerce, and keep your sanity, and sense of humor, while doing it.

Nevertheless, may all of you survive the associate years, and make it into our middle category! I look forward to seeing you in Court, meeting you at a pro bono event, or working with you under the umbrella of the Law Society in the course of your careers. Thank you and enjoy this day. You've earned it.