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Remembering Professor Sing Kong Lee of Singapore

05/19/2017 06:23 pm ET

My first conversation with Sing Kong Lee was over the telephone, four years ago. I was setting up a research and practice consortium to study and support public education systems in educating students to become architects of their own lives and contributing members of their communities. As part of the process of organizing this consortium I spent much time talking to colleagues around the world, in search for institutional partners. While the original vision was to find partners in countries with a sizable population of school children, several people had recommended that I reached out to Singapore's National Institute of Education, of which Sing Kong Lee was the director.

In our first conversation with Sing Kong Lee I found so much resonance with the vision for the consortium I was trying to build that it became clear that we would have to partner with the National Institute of Education in launching the Global Education Innovation Initiative at Harvard. Sing Kong explained that he understood the importance and the urgency of the mission we were trying to accomplish, to help transform public schools into more relevant institutions for the demands and opportunities of a rapidly changing world. He generously offered many valuable suggestions over the years. I am so grateful that he helped me build this partnership, over the last four years the Global Education Innovation Initiative has benefited enormously from the many intellectual contributions of our colleagues at the NIE to our shared work.

Sing Kong Lee would turn over the leadership of the NIE to Professor Oon Seng Tan soon after our first conversation, to become Vice President at Nanyang Technological University. His colleagues at the NIE, collated a scrapbook of remembrances upon his retirement, and invited me to contribute a short reflection, which read:

"Professor Lee Sing Kong has demonstrated, in his productive and generative academic career, visionary leadership of higher education and a singular commitment to the teaching profession. With the same care and attention of the gardener to his flowers, Professor Sing Kong has attended to developing a high performing team, sustained a culture of continuous improvement at the National Institute of Education, fostered innovative initiatives through the creation of NIE Global to extend the Institute's influence globally and more importantly steered the teaching profession towards preparing all students for a broad range of competencies and dispositions to live for purposes bigger than themselves, become architects of their own lives and contributing members of the communities of which they are a part. Like the lessons of the finest educators, Professor Lee Sing Kong lessons and inspiration will be long lasting and bear fruits for years to come, in Singapore and abroad."



responsibility to build the institutions of education, and he saw that task as a shared global enterprise, in which people collaborate across boundaries to educate all children. He led the engagement of the NIE in providing assistance to many nations, and was always generous in responding to invitations to work with colleagues around the world in advancing education. We worked together at a convening organized by Colombia's institution of technical education, where he shared Singapore's remarkable story of building 21st century technical higher education institutions. He brought to Harvard a delegation of colleagues from Nanyang Technological University, to learn first hand about the role of the residential experience in our approach to liberal arts undergraduate education. He was generous in addressing a delegation of educators from Massachusetts I brought to Singapore to learn about that nation's approach to building an excellent teaching profession and a high performing education system.



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I have good memories of the numerous conversations we shared over the years, in Singapore as well as in Cambridge. I remember walking with him through the beautiful gardens of the NIE, during one of my visits to the institute. Professor Lee was a horticulturalist, and had deep love for plants and a belief that integrating nature into educational spaces, and into the city, was essential to teaching us to leave in harmony with the environment. As he showed me the various plants and flowers which adorn the NIE, he spoke about them with the familiarity and affection people normally reserve for relatives or close friends.

I remember our last conversation, in his office as Vice President at Nanyang. I asked him what were some of the lessons he had learned as a leader. He took me to a wall in his office to look at a framed painting. He explained the painting had been given to him by the staff of NIE upon his departure. He asked me to look closely at the painting. It was a collage of many very small pictures with faces of people. Professor Lee explained that those were miniature pictures of all the staff at the NIE, about one thousand people. He said that one of the things he had tried to do as director was to get to know each one of those individuals, their interests, their strengths, to then find ways to help each person make their best contribution to achieve the shared mission of the institute. It was a good characterization of what I had come to learn about this good man as a leader, someone who took the time to appreciate those around him, plants as well as people, and to create the opportunities for each one to blossom and be part of an ambitious project to improve the world.

Rest in Peace Sing Kong. Thanks for your lessons to me and to others and for your work building institutions to make the world more peaceful, through education. I will miss you.



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