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Mass Call 2019 Speech

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President

Mass Call Speech 2019

1. May it please Your Honour, on behalf of the Law Society, I seek Your Honour's leave to address the cohort of 2019 to the Singapore Bar.
2. Congratulations are in order to each and every one of you! At the end of this Mass Call ceremony, you will have the extraordinary privilege and attendant responsibility of being part of an elite, exclusive group of professionals. Placed on the roll of advocates and solicitors of the Supreme Court of Singapore.
3. I have two main points to share with you in this message. First, the power of passion. Secondly, practice makes perfect.

The Power of Passion

4. Returning to my first point. The power of passion. A power that will sustain you through the darkest hour. Keep you energized and enthused for the long haul. Enable you to overcome with resilience the setbacks and adversities that will come your way in your work life. It applies to all of you irrespective of whether you practice law or not.
5. Steve Jobs, then CEO of Apple Computer and Pixar Animation Studios, gave us the following classic lines in his famous Commencement address on 12 June 2005 to Stanford University :

"Sometimes life hits you on the head with a brick. Don't lose faith. I'm convinced that the only thing that kept me going was that I loved what I did. You've got to find what you love".

“Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do.”

6. These words were true for the listening graduates of Stanford University. They also hold true for you - the newly called lawyers in this august ceremony.
7. Steve Jobs was neither the first nor the last to touch on loving what you do. An anonymous epigram that continues to be cited and recited in different settings is to *“Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life”*.
8. Statistical evidence supports the negative effects of a lack of passion. Alison Robins writing in officevibe.com in an article published on 27 March 2017 refers to a Deloitte's comprehensive report. The Deloitte's report found that 88% of employees do not have passion for their work and as such do not contribute to their full potential.
9. It boils down to passion. To align your calling and your life's work with passion. So that your work life will see life at work.
10. There are a few dimensions to passion that I will unpack in this message. Curiosity, configuration and compassion.
11. Stay curious. There is much to learn. Passion will engender a sense of curiosity. Curiosity may have killed the cat but it will enliven the lawyer. Picking and perking him or her up. Whether it is the young litigator taking instructions asking probing questions on a narrative leading to the climax or denouement. For corporate lawyers and conveyancers, even meticulously prepared checklists, boiler plate clauses, forms and precedents *per se* are meaningless unless used intelligently. Cultivate an innate sense of curiosity to ferret out the unique facts pertaining to a given deal or dispute. A brief no matter how brief has points to be plumbed.
12. One skill is to sharpen your questions so that they are incisive and decisive. Litigators learn to ask good questions in the boardroom even before you ask them in the courtroom.
13. Intellectual curiosity is not just for learning in the hallowed halls of the university. It is a truism that while wandering through legal practice, you need to also be a wonderer.
14. One of the great modern exemplars who still remains strongly passionate about learning is former Law Society President Michael Hwang SC. He not only speaks in stellar fashion at seminars. He proactively participates in seminars and conferences as an attendee - eager to learn from others. What an example for us of lifelong learning! But the inner driver of that learning is an innate sense of intellectual curiosity.

15. You will know some areas of law very well by now. And would have supplemented that knowledge by taking note and taking notes during your Part A and Part B courses. There are definitely new fields of practice to master in the course of practice. Part of these include :-

(a) a distinctive specialization in law. The Singapore Academy of Law runs specialist accreditation courses that build niche legal expertise in areas such as building and construction and maritime; and

(b) industry knowledge and domain expertise. For instance, fintech, cybersecurity, infrastructure projects could give you a unique and cutting edge in practice. You would be speaking the language of, and operating on the same wavelength as, the industry practitioners.

16. This is the deeper expertise. But you can only gain these gems if you drill down deeper with an insatiable thirst for knowledge that comes to the inquiring mind.

17. To fuel the fire of passion in learning, you need to read. Dr Johnson's view in Boswell's Johnson was that *"the greatest part of a writer's time is spent in reading, in order to write: a man will turn over half a library to make one book."* In his words, *"Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it"* An important skill in practice is not only knowing what to read but how to find out what to read when you need to analyze a problem.

18. On this first facet of curiosity, I will leave you with the words of His Honour, the Honourable the Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, in last year's Mass Call Ceremony on being passionately curious :

"Curiosity remains an essential force in your growth as a lawyer" and later *"In the words of Einstein, you should be "passionately curious" and extend your reading not just beyond the confines of your preferred areas of practice, but also beyond the law. Your increased exposure and knowledge will not only help you become a better lawyer; it will also help you become a better citizen."*

19. A second dimension of passion is configuration. To configure or align your passion to your talent.

20. Earlier this month, we received sad news that Singapore's oldest practising lawyer passed away at 89 years old. In an interview with the Straits Times published on 17 April 2017, the late P Suppiah was asked about his secret of longevity. His response was :

"The secret of long life is to take pride in your talent, which forces you to live up to it. That requires personal discipline in regular workouts and good food to maintain your pace. Then everything else falls into place."

21. You need to ask yourself if you are in the right job for your gifting and talents. Dr. William Wan, a veteran lawyer, used to head up a company in Singapore

that focused on matching people to job based on their talents. For instance, when they looked for receptionists for one of their clients (a six star hotel), they looked for people who smiled naturally. You get the point. Configure people with their gifts.

22. To aid in this process of configuration, the Law Society launched a career counselling service in May this year as part of our pastoral care services. Overnight, after we launched “Career Path” on 6 May 2019, we received more than 50 (fifty) requests - virtually all from juniors. We have three volunteer career counsellors : a former top corporate practitioner, a knowledge management professional and a family law specialist. Members can consult with the career guidance/counselling volunteer(s) on career and work-related issues. Career Path seeks to help you understand yourself better and your own strengths and weaknesses. The endgame is for the lawyer to chart one’s own career path and address work-related issues. The scheme is not job placement or career transition assistance or a head hunting agency. All requests for career guidance/counselling and subsequent sessions are kept strictly confidential.
23. In addition, we encourage you to gain new friendships via our relational mentorship scheme introduced at the end of 2017. By signing up, this is not an implicit admission or recognition that you are facing trouble or something is wrong with you ! Your relational mentor is a big brother or big sister in law in the profession. They will help you, in times of need in the future (if called on), to navigate ethical conundrums, give you stress management tips and offer practical career guidance.
24. A third facet of passion is compassion. Interestingly, the root words of both passion and compassion are the same. The Latin word “pati” means “to suffer with”. This can only come about when we develop empathy.
25. Atticus Finch, the famed lawyer from Harper Lee’s literary masterpiece “To Kill A Mockingbird” said : *“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”*
26. Walk where your clients walk. This means living their lives and seeing life through their lens. I constantly get reminded of this every time I analyse a problem in legal practice in detached, objective, clinical professionalism. While that’s critically important, the heartware is just as important. In communicating our answer, offering our analysis and rendering our advice to the client, we need to do justice with compassion. Unless we can feel the client’s pain of injustice, we will never experience true compassion. This is the “pati” distinguishing the best lawyers from the average ones.
27. With compassion in your heart, you will be perfectly poised and positively proactive to do pro bono. There is no better time to start that pro bono journey than in the burgeoning years of practice as a fledgling lawyer. Immerse yourself into the world of the indigent who is clueless about his rights and wrongs. Opportunities abound courtesy of our Law Soc Pro Bono Services for law awareness, law assistance and law advocacy. Law Soc reaches out to touch

the lives of the least, the last and the lost in law requiring criminal legal aid as well as civil legal aid complementary to the Legal Aid Bureau's fine work.

28. The Report of the Committee for the Professional Training of Lawyers identified three additional benefits for junior lawyers doing pro bono :-

- (a) contributing meaningfully back to the wider community;
- (b) adding variety to a lawyer's work and a more rounded professional development; and
- (c) for junior advocates, developing court craft early.

Watch this space in future when the Committee's recommendations, accepted by the Honourable the Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, get implemented.

29. Interesting insights for employers and employees are found in an article published on biospace.com published on 28 March 2018 headed "*How Important Is It To Be Passionate About Your Job?*"., These include : "*A large body of evidence-based career advice says, yes, employees who are passionate about what they do will be both happier and more productive at work. Their passion stems from caring deeply about what they do or where they work and being personally invested in and motivated by its mission.*"

30. As a junior, carefully stoking the fire of passion inside of you will cause you to overcome professional burnout and navigate extraordinary stresses and strains in practice. Being happier and more productive at work? That will ineluctably be the winning proposition for both you and your employers.

Practice Makes Perfect

31. I will devote less time to my second point (although no less important than the first point). Practice makes perfect. No prizes for guessing which side of perfection practitioners are presently standing on! Practice will eventually make us perfect.

32. But on a more serious note, Professor Scott Galloway, Professor at New York University's Stern School of Business and author of "*The Algebra of Happiness*" makes a compelling case for practising at what you are good at. His advice :

"Your job is to find something you're good at and, after 10,000 hours of practice; get great at it. The emotional and economic rewards that accompany being great at something will make you passionate about whatever that something is. Nobody starts their career passionate about tax law, But great tax lawyers are passionate about colleagues who admire them, creating economic security for their families and marrying someone more impressive than they are."

33. Jennifer Long in a published article in Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning entitled "*The Importance of Practice And Our Reluctance To Do it*" summarizes the thinking this way :

".. Learning something new is hard, especially at the beginning when we're likely to struggle and make mistakes. The reality is, the only way to learn something new is to practice. In his book, Outliers, Malcolm Gladwell suggests that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become expert at something, Perhaps more of a realist, Josh Kaufman, author of The Personal MBA writes that to go from "knowing nothing to being pretty good" actually takes about 20 hours of practice – that's 45 minutes every day for a month. So whether you aspire to "pretty good" or "expert", practice is essential. Yet practising can be difficult and painful when we're used to having a high degree of competence."

34. Lawrence Peter "Yogi" Berra, an American professional baseball catcher, has been attributed apocryphally with the following quip: "*in theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice – there is.*"

35. Practice is about constant application. Writing letters to express rather than impress. Drafting your questions word for word even for an examination in chief. Knowing and arguing the plain vanilla interlocutory applications again and again like a set piece. Becoming so at home in court, albeit not overly familiar with the judge, so that court decorum and etiquette are second nature to you. It's like playing piano scales again and again and again. Or practising your driving repeatedly even if you know the book theory inside and out.

36. Mastery is essential to go from good to great as Professor Galloway's quote reveals. In the final analysis, it comes down to attitude rather than aptitude. If anything is worth doing, it's worth doing well. Dive into new areas of practice with gusto and gumption.

37. Some of you listening to this speech may perhaps be curious or wondering whether the two main propositions I have proffered in this message are contradictory. No. There is a paradox involved and the two points are reconcilable.

38. If you know your passion, harness that power and go for your dream. But sometimes in life, you may not be in the theatre of dreams. And so, if you truly have zero passion for what you are doing, keep applying yourself again and again in practice. Passion may fill your soul later even while doing the routine and mundane.

39. This is consonant with Professor Scott Galloway's words: "*Don't follow your passion blindly or at all depending on the passion. You should do something that people will pay you to do, something that doesn't suck, and something you're good at. By having all three of these things you will become passionate.*"

40. Perhaps, the drudgery and dry parts of work is part and parcel of the “pati”; to be precise, “suffering” for your craft. One day, even if you are not in the place of passion today, you could reconfigure at the right time with the right opportunity.
41. In closing, heartfelt congratulations once again to all of you on being called to the Singapore Bar. A word of acknowledgment and appreciation also goes out to parents, family and loved ones of those being called today who have supported, strengthened and stood by you to achieve this major milestone in law. This moment is also yours to share and celebrate. I hope you will feel a beaming sense of pride as your son, daughter, brother, sister or loved one enters the calling of law as a newly called lawyer.
42. And to our newly called lawyers, keep the flame of passion burning brightly within. And keep on practising and practising and practising until you hit the high notes all, if not most, of the time.