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Ordinary to be extraordinary

The quest to become special can lead to unhappiness, so be careful about what you are striving for



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Locally, we have the woke Kheng siblings, Narelle and Benjamin, using their influencer status to promote mental health and sustainability, along with their music and acting careers.

We have Singaporean children as young as age 11 completing Grade Eight piano practical qualifications, while the typical age is 16.

In Britain, my 17-year-old daughter Happy's schoolmate, Ruby, at age 13, spoke at the United Nations, campaigning to end Period Poverty, where girls and women do not have access to safe, hygienic menstrual products.

Malala Yousafzai, at 17, became the youngest Nobel Prize winner in 2014. Two years prior, the Taliban tried to assassinate her on the school bus because she blogged of its growing influence in Pakistan. Malala survived the tragedy and continues to advocate for girls' rights.

There is 16-year-old Charli D'Amelio, TikTok's most followed person with more than 88 million followers, earning US\$50,000 (S\$68,890) a paid post on the lip-syncing app, whopping up US\$4 million in the last year.

More than ever, people are extraordinary and nearly all of us, at every age, want to be exceptional exceptions. This universal fervour has us lusting to be smarter, better-looking, richer, more famous than others. The more driven we are, the more we desire to stand out, to be anything but ordinary. For an ordinary life feels just wrong.



Perhaps parents are to blame: We do spend our children's developmental years telling them how utterly incredible they are.

In some variation, we were all told, "If you work hard, then you will achieve your goal", although we recognise few will become rocket scientists, famous actresses, Olympians or prime ministers, no matter how hard we persevere.

Technology, social media specifically, is among the salves feeding this "extraordinary" frenzy. Everyone wants a piece of the pie.

YouTube claims 31 million channels. More than 160,000 of those have 100,000 subscribers or more, while 16,000 YouTube channels have over one million followers.

TikTok, worldwide, claims 800 million active users and Instagram in Singapore has 2.1 million users. That is 34.4 per cent of the population, with 40 per cent between 25 and 34 years old, undoubtedly an advertiser's dream demographic.



ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

We willingly drink the Kool-Aid of advertisers who convince us their products will make us prettier, more fashionable, smarter, less ordinary. We are all about self-expression, following dreams, promoting a utopian life, made all the lovelier with the latest filter, enhancing our "perfection" for social media feeds. Our normal has us aiming to attract more followers to appreciate said specialness.

Striving for subscribers and "likes", we are addicted to the adrenaline rush brought on by our endless self-promotion.

The praise triggers our neurotransmitter dopamine, which I now know is involved in most addictive behaviours. As a result, social media keeps us obsessed, albeit miserable, yet keen to return and check, again and again, for another like.

I blame the "Cult of Me" culture on the Kardashians, who have fascinated the world since 2007. From their reality television show, Keeping Up With The Kardashians, we have witnessed how truly special they are. After the announcement that the show will conclude with the 2021 season, we need not worry. The resulting reality TV shows - hundreds of them, since their low production costs bring high revenue returns for the networks - will continue to show normal folks how un-special and run-of-the-mill we are.

So, we keep aspiring to stand out, to be superstars, because we are all extraordinary. But maybe, the time is nigh for us to return to that brilliant book we all read as children, Oh, The Places You'll Go! by Dr Seuss.

Recall the lines: "Wherever you fly, you'll be the best of the best. Wherever you go, you will top all the rest."

Sounds good, right? But wait, we know what is about to drop: "Except, when you don't. Because, sometimes, you won't."

We cannot always be the best, faster than the rest, smarter than the smartest and strongest in the pack. Why can we not accept that most of us are plain old ordinary? Average. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with this.

We learn to walk, talk, eat, drive and work, proceeding through life with family, friends and community as our focus. Only a few will visit the moon or discover the cure for cancer.

The never-ending desire for more, better specialness does not bring us contentment but, instead, a serial state of unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Living the unrealistic dream of how extraordinary we are leads to a genuine sense of inadequacy.

Since our society values and rewards overworking, stepping away from the madness, the spotlight or the slog of self-promotion is difficult. The promise of a potential payoff from overworking, convincing ourselves we are special, has us doing all kinds of crazy hours, consumed with getting ahead, receiving another promotion, buying a better car or condo, only to receive a divorce letter from our spouse.

How many children's awards ceremonies and track meets, even wedding anniversaries, can we miss before realising where the true priorities lie in a meaningful life?

For those married to careers, we learn often too late, with failing mental health, that personal relationships are far more fulfilling than professional ones.

Recently, The Atlantic magazine studied "success addicts", where people value being special over being happy. This is a real thing. We are addicted to success. People willingly allow themselves to suffer physically and mentally, working too long, too hard, pursuing that desired success.

But one can walk away. Look at chef Andre Chiang. The day before he closed his two-Michelin-starred Restaurant Andre here in 2018, he said: "This can't be all that I can do."

After eight years, he wanted more, so he left his extraordinary life - a chef with two stars is extraordinary - to return home to Taiwan, focusing instead on what he deemed important versus gaining that third Michelin star.

He, though, may be truly extraordinary, since his Taipei restaurant RAW received two stars last month, for the second consecutive year. My husband Jim says: "It's because chef Andre is happy. When one is happy, he does not need more."

I want to believe this, but I think most of us are consumed with success and, thus, not satisfied.

Thankfully, the circuit breaker did open some eyes. We found contentment in the "little things": spending time with family, baking together, enjoying walks and, in my house, completing tedious yet rewarding, old-fashioned jigsaw puzzles.

The pandemic allowed time to pause, reflect and reconsider happiness. With perspective, I have come to understand that it is perfectly acceptable to be extraordinary in a small way, in our own lives, with those who matter.

Since I was a little girl, I wanted to leave my small home town in the United States. Now, I recognise that deep-seated desire to "escape", to be where I was not, was more about not letting life elude me.

Once I moved to New York City, then travelled the world with Jim, this ordinary girl from Rocky Mount, North Carolina, became kind of extraordinary, earning a Guinness World Record for circumnavigating the globe, visiting 116 countries.

That adventure led us to move from New York to Singapore because we believed Asia was the future. We wanted our children to grow up here, speaking Mandarin. Both Jim and I were conscious of offering them an X-factor, an ability that might make them extraordinary, setting them apart in such a competitive world.

The irony is that Happy, as she prepares applications for universities, wants to attend schools only in the US. She feels Jim and I have stripped her of her American identity by rearing her on the other side of the world. "I want to know who I am, where I come from, mother," she says.

Now, she simply wants to be an ordinary girl. As a mother, I wonder if I should have given Happy and her sister Bee, 12, a more conventional life. One where they often visited their grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, as I did as a child.

Of late, I ponder if Jim and I made the correct decision leaving the US to make our home here some 13 years ago.

My gut says Singapore is home, but I have known both worlds. Happy now seeks to know her other home. That makes complete sense. Maybe she is a little bit extraordinary, while I remain content in my role as an ordinary mum, like most, wanting only the best for my children.

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