Still passionate about life. Really

Poet and academic Kirpal Singh has been thinking about death a lot lately. But first things first—he’s working on two books and another two he wants published

prime time
Tan Dawn Wei

WHEN post-academic Kirpal Singh hit 50 seven years ago, someone reminded him that he was entering the “vulnerable decade”.

He was told that most men die in their 50s and 60s. “But I think most people die at the level of the mind,” he says.

“I’ve seen a lot of Stoichomachies become so habituated to the kind of life they have been living for the past five decades that their willingness to change in almost totally missing.”

Well, at 57, he is not resting on his laurels.

In between teaching communication skills and creative thinking at the Singapore Management University (SMU), he delivers speeches at conventions and seminars overseas, and is often called upon to comment on anything from police freedom to creativity to Singlish.

And there’s his business of writing.

After the success of his last book, 2003’s Thinking Hats And Coloured Turbans, he is now focusing on an “old pet subject” — leadership. His next book, Leadership Across Cultures, is scheduled to be published next year.

He is also putting together a collection of poetry from South-east Asia for Penguin.

He is a father of four girls, is married to a teacher. His parents divorced and his mother took me for a walk, pointed to the sun and said, look at all the stars out there. Night is their time for brilliance. During the day, you don’t even see them because the sun outshines them all. And, of course, the sun is the brightest star.

I suppose, it’s her own simple way of telling me: You’re not always going to be up there. There are going to be times when you’re going to be eclipsed. It was a lesson in humility.

“I would relive it with double or triple the kind of passion or conviction that I did. I think if I had that extra drink which I shouldn’t have taken, and if I hadn’t because people died without the ideas ever being made public.”

“I think about death, really. I think about death where is thy sting? I think that death is not a sting for those departed, but for those living. I want to be sure that I don’t have regrets on my death bed, that my death doesn’t come with me being a vegetable for five years.

I see it as yet another stage in life’s big journey. Maybe that’s romantic or sentimental of me. You could say religious, I’m not sure.

If I go now, yes, I’ll have regrets. There are still things I’d like to do, like the two books. I also want to spend more time with the family and see my children grow up happy.

I finally want a real chance to thank all the wonderful people who have always come forward to help me in my hours of need, a chance to show them just how grateful I am.

I’m, 77. She had come to Singapore to visit her children when she was barely 24. She met me. I celebrate multi-facetedness and diversity, and I’m not sure.

The greatest lesson I’ve learnt in life is to be humble. I did my PhD on a novel by Aldous Huxley. At his death bed — he died the same day that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated — Huxley said if there was one thing he wanted the world to be, it would be just a little kinder.

I would say that kindness and humility are virtues that no amount of money can buy.

The other day I heard American singer Wayne Newton say when a person dies, you just get his money. But when he gives you his time, you’re actually getting a part of his life. Value that.

I can’t live without... the love of my family, friends, colleagues, God and just what I call ‘life’. I always am an ethnocentric enough to know, if I read a book 10 times, it’s because the book loves me so much, it doesn’t want to let me go.

I’ll never forget... the days my grandmother took me for a walk, pointed to the sky and said, look at all the stars out there. Night is their time for brilliance. During the day, you don’t even see them because the sun outshines them all. And, of course, the sun is the brightest star.

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