



Leave Me Alone

(by Dr. Albert Lim - published in The Star, August 2007)

The unmarried Malaysian Chinese woman in her late 20s gets a supposedly friendly jibe during the Chinese New Year festivities. "When will you be dishing out ang pows instead of receiving them?" (It is a Chinese custom that married women give out ang pows and unmarried ones receive them).

It gets more tiresome and strident every year as she continues to stay single through her thirties. To some women, this is light, friendly banter. To others, it is annoying and intrusive. Our love lives (and by extension our sexual orientation) should be a very private matter if we so wish it.

"How much do you earn?" is often asked thoughtlessly in conversation. In some quarters, it can be construed as the height of rudeness. On the other hand, there are those who freely tell you how much money they make.

This brings me to the third sanctuary in our lives where we have the right of being the ultimate gatekeeper. When we are unfortunate enough to suffer a major illness - heart attack, AIDS, stroke, Parkinson's disease, insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus, cancer - it is really up to us to talk about it or to keep it totally under wraps. We should tread carefully and respect the wishes of the patient if she does not want to share her misfortune. It does not matter what her reasons are.

An Englishman, resident in Malaysia for years, was diagnosed to have cancer of the tongue. He returned to England for treatment, which comprised surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

He e-mailed his friends and relatives in Malaysia often to keep them informed of the progress of his illness and the treatment he was undergoing. Pictures of his face, which was distorted as a result of treatment, were for all to view. Telling his friends about his illness was his choice and perhaps his way of coping.

Another equally acceptable way of coping with cancer is to keep the pain and suffering a private matter.

Cancer can be disfiguring and humiliating. If a cancer patient does not want to tell you about her stomas (bags of urine and faeces that hang externally on her torso), so be it. Just put yourself in her place. I can think of many other reasons why a cancer patient may not want to breathe a word of her disease.

The telling and retelling and retelling ad nauseam of a sad tale can be a very soul-destroying experience. Unless we are in that most unenviable position, we won't know how so.

Death, for some, is a total obliteration of all that life is. How can she be expected to easily speak of something which may lead to an early end of everything as she knows it? Allow her time and space to work through her existential issues.

Unsolicited advice comes gushing in when someone is diagnosed to have cancer. The motives are many and range from the purely altruistic to the banally materialistic like trying to sell health foods and alternative therapies.

To talk to a cancer patient is not as easy as one thinks. Counselling is a highly professional matter. When in doubt, it is best to say less or nothing at all.

I had a young woman with advanced cancer who asked me point-blank, "Doc, how long will I live?" Her husband, mother and sister were with her. Something told me she was a thinking, individualistic person with a mind and a will of her own. I sensed that she was not quite ready to share with them what I had to tell her. I then asked her if she would like me to talk about this delicate matter with her loved ones around. She politely, but unhesitatingly, replied "No".

Sex, money and illness are as public or as private as you want to make it. It is all about respect for yourself and respect for others. We cannot make demands on others to disclose their illness and we cannot and should not analyse their motives for keeping it to themselves.

What is it that we should regard as private to an individual? The very essence of the word begs the only possible answer: whatever she wants it to be.

"We are put on this earth not to see through each other but to see each other through." - Anon.