



Compared to What We Ought to Be

Description

[William James](#) (the father of American psychology), philosopher and historian, once said that we are only half awake (compared to what we ought to be). We are only using a fraction of our mental and physical resources. In other words, we live far within our limits – we have powers that we habitually fail to use.

As an idealistic youth, full of energy and idealism, the assertion that “we have powers that we habitually fail to use” took root in my mind. I begin to see renowned individuals that often excel in several fields. Take, for example, Dr Tan It Koon, retired head of Clinical Biochemistry (Department of Pathology, Singapore General Hospital) who served on the Executive Board of the International Federation of Clinical Chemistry and the WHO Expert Panel on Healthcare Laboratories.

Dr Tan has performed solo, duet (two-pianos), and in an orchestra (in public concerts and radio/TV recording programmes). He has also served on many national committees, for instance, Deputy Chairman of the National Theatre Trust, Chairman of its Cultural Committee, Chairman for Grants and Scholarships of Spore Cultural Foundation –to name a few.

I came across Dr Tan’s recently published [White Crane in a Lotus Pond](#). I have abstracted the text of the publication accompanying the painting (illustrated above).

The [crane](#) is one of the most loved birds in China. It is a symbol of noble character and represents longevity. It is not surprising then that cranes often appear in Chinese paintings, old and new. In Japan, the crane is one of the mystical or holy creatures and symbolizes good fortune and longevity. It is a favourite subject of Haiku poetry and the tradition of origami or paper folding



Lotus grows in ponds and marshes. In early spring, green leaves emerge on the surface of the water. By summer, it blooms profusely. Although grown out of dirty mud, the lotus flower rises above the murky water untainted, looking clean, pure, and beautiful. For the Japanese, this process symbolizes attaining enlightenment. In the eyes of the Chinese people, the lotus symbolizes purity, lofty character, and divine virtues.



The lotus bloom reflects four virtuous attributes: fragrance, cleanliness, tenderness, and loveliness in the Buddhist scriptures. In China, as early as the Shang Dynasty (1766–1122 BC), lotuses were often engraved side by side with cranes, clouds, and dragons on bronzeware, wood, stone, and ceramics. Lotus and cranes are evergreen subjects for paintings in Chinese and Japanese culture.

Dr Tan's painting was inspired by an ancient Chinese poem by scholar Wei Zhuang?? (836–910 AD) in the late Tang Dynasty (?????):

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The poem consists of four sentences of seven words each. The poem may be translated as follows:

“Standing at the beach and strolling to and fro at sunset,

The cranes spread their snow-white wings with the passing breeze in front of the red flowers.

Due to the uncertainty of where the resting place for the night would be,

they fly away and then return several times.”

This painting was one of several of Dr Tan's several paintings featured in a set of commemorative postage stamps produced in January 2021 to commemorate the 42nd Anniversary of the Sino-Japanese Peace and Friendship Agreement to promote peace and friendship and culture and art exchange between China and Japan.

William James also said that we are like islands in the sea, separate on the surface but connected in the deep. Looking at the achievements of Dr Tan, they look separate on the surface but are intricately connected in the deep.

What is this deep connection? Well, it is for us to find out for ourselves the deep connections in our lives.