

PublicationDate: 07-06-2001
PAGE: 01

PUBLICATION: BANGKOK POST
KEYWORD: Billi Lim, Lim Peng Soon

HEADLINE: Survival of the wittiest

SUBHEADLINE: Billi Lim is a man with a mission: Daring people to fail _ and to learn from their failures and become stronger in the process

BYLINE: Story by

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

BYLINE: Pictures by

BYLINE: SOMKID CHAJITVANIT

Slight of stature, round of face with an unusual hairdo _ shorn in a tight circle topped with a tuft _ and a smile running from ear to ear, Billi Lim is full of lively gestures, an accent you could cut with a knife, a roller-coaster voice.

Malaysian-born, Billi, aka Lim Peng Soon, is the author of the number one best-seller Dare To Fail and founder of the ever-expanding series of Hardknocks books, comics and merchandise _ and a character in his own right.

Although he would blend in perfectly in an eye-catching cartoon, there has yet to be a replica of him anywhere. At least not yet.

If one believes his steely faith and iron will, the time is not far off when Billi Lim's disciples will take the world by storm, creating a new breed of ``Dare To Fail" men and women, who will, according to Lim, ``flourish in any circumstances, crisis or country, capable of creating something out of nothing, such as opportunities, jobs, industries ..."

The secret? Switch to a different mindset, know that life is not always a smooth journey, understand success as ``a step by step journey towards a goal" and that failure is ``part and parcel of this journey, a part and parcel of success, of the growing process, like stumbling is unavoidable when learning how to walk, like dead cells are a part and parcel of the ageing process, like both the rain and the sun are needed to obtain a rainbow ..."

To Billi Lim, the upcoming recipient of the Malaysian Book of Records award for being the world's only ``Failure Guru", this different mindset and ``Dare To Fail" philosophy is the sine qua non of man's survival.

``We are living in a new era; an era in which the individual becomes very important, as will his talent and intellectual property," says a radiant Lim, who styles himself the ``New Millennium Man".

``Freedom to fail, courage to dare is my philosophy. This same idea is flourishing in Silicon Valley," he said, his voice rising as he states jubilantly: ``Most of the people at the top of the world have emerged from failures. All these men, such as Bill Gates, are failures. They were all school drop-outs!"

Lim is in Bangkok for a series of seminars until mid-July. Equipped with a load of Dare To Fail books, cartoons and well-turned quotes _ hot off the Selangor-based Hardknocks press _ and fortified with the conviction that all men and women will sooner or later come round to his theory, Billi Lim is on a crusade.

His mission: Develop the Dare To Fail spirit, transform people's attitudes toward failure so that failed attempts are not condemned by society, but on the contrary supported, and if possible _ before retiring and after having pocketed lots of money _ create a world movement such as the FFF _ the Failure Foundation Fund.

``I was born on earth to create these Dare To Fail books," Lim declared with conviction. He believes that violating the taboo that most societies have concerning failure is actually beneficial.

His mission came, not from the heights of a mountain nor by the lips of an angel, but in the midst of total distress in the early 1980s.

``As a result of various failures and a break-up with my girlfriend, I was living in an emotional hell. I could really feel my heart aching. I couldn't eat or sleep. I was spiralling down to the brink of death ... At that point _ perhaps out of some kind of well-meaning vengefulness _ a driving conviction came to me that said, 'Let me show the world (what I can do),' " Lim explained.

``Down there, in the middle of depression, there is some kind of fearlessness which makes you become more thick-skinned. You have nothing to lose anymore. So you move out again."

That he was able to extract himself from that obscure meandering which engulfs so many souls must also have been thanks to his lifelong stamina. Born in 1950 into a family of 14, his father a butcher, his mother a housewife, Billi and his brothers and sisters learned about life the hard way.

``Our childhood was tough and not a day went by without one of my brothers, sisters or my mum being scolded or beaten up by my father," he wrote in 1993 in the first book of his Dare To Fail series, which has since been reprinted five times and translated into seven languages.

``My father had been brought up to think that the 'tough' and 'hard' were the best ways of bringing up children whatever the circumstances. He once told us that during his childhood there was not a single day that he didn't get a thump on the head by his adoptive mum. Somehow he believes that he is better off and more intelligent than his other adopted siblings because of all those 'knocks'," writes Lim, who remembers being fed on leftover bones and pork from their father's counter at the end of each day.

Lots of failures followed, which checkered his days as a teenager, student and later businessman. From failing to get into the local university on his first attempt, to failing in his love life and failing in business _ seeing his entrepreneurial ventures rising to great heights before seeing them crashing down _ Lim has experienced defeat in a great variety of forms.

Yet he managed to obtain, along the tormented way, a bachelor of science degree, a diploma in education from the University of Malaya, a marketing course certificate from the University of Singapore, a managerial course certificate from the Asian Institute of Management, Manila _ and to come out a winner.

A chance encounter one fateful day in 1970 ``with a particular book lying on the table in front of me" definitely had something to do with his social-climber nature. Although Lim says that, until this day, he does not know how or why the book landed on the table of his dad's sundry shop, Lim came across the pompous and ego-pampering Think and Grow Rich by Napoleon Hill.

Lim was to read it a great number of times, and also to listen to the recorded cassette of the book and even attend the ``Think and Grow Rich" seminar.

There is no doubt that Billi Lim followed this book's magic recipe to the letter. Lim indeed thought and grew rich.

With a handful of childhood friends, Lim started a direct sales company, Fortiss Incorp SDN BHD, at first selling only a multipurpose liquid cleanser. Lim appointed himself managing director of the company before starting a division within the same company _ the Institute of Hard Knocks _ to train dealers through seminars called ``Born To Be Free".

Lim thus stumbled across a goldmine. His ``Born To Be Free" seminars became a Malaysian source of pride, and the Dare To Fail (DTF) movement expanded his scope.

Contributing immensely to his notoriety was his first DTF book launched in 1993 which would soon capture the first and second spots on the best-seller list of the New Straits Times.

``I thought about trying to quantify my knowledge into a product that I could sell. I made myself into a product, and so was able to duplicate myself," Lim said.

After squeezing himself into the book, he set his sights on his own external appearance. His look became a kind of trademark, a blatant sign of his uniqueness. His rather eccentric hairstyle was adopted in the midst of the Asian financial crisis, along with the vow that ``my hair will not grow until the economy bounces back".

Completely serious, he pointed to the top of his head and its small circle of hair, he said, ``This is Malaysia's stock exchange first board"; pointing towards the rest of his head \_ shaved \_ he said, ``this represents the second board"; and then grabbing the scrawny, dyed pony-tail, he said, ``this is blue chip stock, which is in quite good shape".

``People in Malaysia are wasting so much time looking at the stock exchange _ they can just look at me."

The 51-year-old added: ``I ask that speakers in my seminars have the same haircut as me, so their skin becomes thicker and thicker."

He's planning to have a little doll made in his guise.

Nothing is left to chance, neither his hairstyle which he trims every week, nor his assumed name, phone number, even his birthday.

``According to numerology, my name, Billi, my phone number, my birthday ... everything corresponds to the number `one'. One is the number of the sun, of creativity and confidence. It is quite an aggressive number which doesn't suit just anybody."

He believes his financial well-being rests on three words _ which are in keeping with his ever-increasing television appearances _ ``Billi On Air!"

By 1999, much sought-after as a speaker, trainer and consultant, Lim dared to run in the 10th Malaysian General Election as an independent candidate, collecting a tiny 198 votes.

``The elections were scheduled on the day of my birthday _ I had to run for it."

``When you listen to Billi during a seminar, you don't even have time to go to the toilet," one Malaysian participant said about the writer's seminars, which concentrate on Dare To Fail topics like ``Dare To Dream" or ``Superstar", ``Effective Speaking" and the more eccentric ``Flying Through the New Millennium" seminars.

His three-day seminars cost around 20,000 baht per person. During such a seminar, participants are deprived of all possible connection to the outside world _ no watches, phone calls, newspapers, television _ and they are asked to get rid of all distinctive marks such as jewellery ``in order to come closer to their true self". This doesn't always goes down well and some participants run away before completing the programme.

A self-made man, reared in suffering, taught by failure and hardened in self-confidence, Lim is very genuine in his thought processes. Well-intended, he converted to Buddhism in the early 1980s and religiously spends time meditating every day and chanting ``the great compassion mantra", ``sending merit to all people in the universe".

Three multibillionaires on the wane in Malaysia and Thailand _ he won't name names for anything in the world _ are under his wing.

``I am monitoring them. I asked them to keep their multibillionaire mindset _ they are achievers anyway, it is challenge that drives them ... I will prove to the world that these multibillionaires can bounce back."

To him, the main ingredients of his success are as follows:

``Have understood the definition of success and failure, have understood and felt that `he was a man of a mission', be emotionally strong, have a great vision and be working at implementing it."

``It is not about ordinary day-dreaming but about an effective business plan, which one would implement day after day," Lim said. ``When you think about the good, you don't see the bad anymore. It is about a shift in mindset."

Marketing should not be overlooked, of course.

``The ability to market is so important. Even a lousy book can be a best-seller. My book is surely not the best-written book but it is a best-seller. You understand the difference?"

A patchwork of Dare To Fail incentives and encouraging examples of eminent failures, the series is all the more heartening when you see that life in these modern times is an ongoing struggle. Learning to recover from failure and to detach oneself from the fruits of one's actions might indeed be the key to many treasures.