

An Indefatigable, Innovative Exemplar

Lesley Lyle, M.Sc.

I am extremely honoured to be asked to contribute for the Festschrift in celebration of Dr. Paul Wong. To have my name associated with his in any way is beyond any expectation I could ever had considered when I first came to study positive psychology, and I cannot overestimate what it means to me. I am a great admirer of the work of Paul Wong the esteemed academic, but I also appreciate him as the wonderful, generous, and loving man that he is. However, it didn't start out this way!

I first heard about the subject of positive psychology when I was studying Clinical Hypnotherapy and Brief Strategic Therapy at St Mary's University in UK. I was immediately drawn to the concept of evidence-based interventions, and I had fantasised about being able to study the subject but never dreamt I would have the opportunity. When I discovered that a new Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) course was starting at Buckinghamshire New University, UK, I applied. When I was accepted on the first cohort it was a dream come true for me.

I remember exactly the moment I was introduced to the name Paul Wong. It was during the first semester of the MAPP programme, and I have to admit that my initial reaction wasn't very charitable! Although the lecturer was singing the praises of Paul's work, what I heard was "There is someone challenging the concept of Positive Psychology (PP) and suggesting that a new paradigm, PP 2.0, is needed." Good grief I thought, here am I, only a few weeks into embarking on a 2-year study of this subject and already there is a debate that questions whether positive psychology is relevant and useful! Paul, I was told was an expert on the subject of suffering. How ironic! I immediately cast myself the role of victim to that of the villainous Paul Wong who, it seemed, was about to ruin all my plans!

Armed with my very best "fixed mindset," I went home and started to research the question "exactly who is Paul Wong" with the intention of finding evidence that would show me that Paul Wong was actually Paul Wrong! Initially, I was impressed that in addition to his academic career, Paul was also a musician, singer, and songwriter as well as lead guitarist of a rock band (such is the folly of those who rely on Wikipedia as a research tool)! However, a subsequent search for Dr. Paul Wong, brought up more than 41 million results. To say that Paul's contributions to the academic world have been prolific is a serious understatement.

Once I discovered how much has been written about and written by this great man, I was compelled to read more of his work. Of course, Paul was absolutely right, how could we understand and find meaning in positive emotions without a full acceptance and understanding of the negative ones? Instead of seeing things as black or white, good or bad, positive or negative, Paul helped me to appreciate the dialectical nature of the human experience. Furthermore, I discovered that his theory of the "dark side" was not at all pessimistic but instead inspired feelings of hope and reassurance that although some things may feel uncomfortable at the time, great things can emerge from them.

Like many people who have been influenced by Paul's work, I started to reframe negative experiences in a new way. Instead of asking myself the question "Why me?" I changed the question to "What can I learn from this?" and the result has been truly life-changing in the most positive way possible. I became and remain a great admirer and follower of Paul's work and instead of the role of villain I had initially assigned him, he became my "go-to expert" and I joined the multitude of people who admire him greatly.

I think it is impossible to read Paul's work without it evoking pertinent, insightful questions that lead one to reflect and come to a better understanding of what is really important in one's life. In a courageous and compassionate manner, he constantly reminds us that life is a journey of growth and awakening. He encourages us to keep our feet on the ground, to let go of judgement and appreciate the commonality in humanity and life. Paul talks about things that others frequently deny or avoid. I love his honesty, directness, and willingness to openly discuss his personal feelings and experience of the "dark side" of life.

When I had the opportunity of hearing Paul speak at a conference, I got a much better impression of what he is like as a man. I had expected him to be very serious and maybe even a dour, yet what I saw was a man who laughs often and clearly enjoys life to the full, and I have yet to see a photograph of him when he is not smiling. He exudes a powerful combination of humility, wisdom, and passion.

At the end of my MAPP course, I suggested to my cohort that we should create something to make positive psychology more accessible and relevant to people. My partner created the website and Facebook group, The Positive Psychology People (TPPP). Aware that there are many definitions of positive psychology and curious as to how some of the leading academics and practitioners might describe it, we decided to approach some of them and ask whether they would agree to comment in a recorded Skype video call. The first person to be asked was Paul, and he replied to my email immediately and agreed. The fact that Paul had already participated made the invitation to others much easier, and we are so grateful to everyone who contributed. Paul has supported this project from the outset, and he is a regular contributor. In a short time TPPP, had connected with more than 30,000 people from more than 65 different countries and currently the website has more than 600 articles written by positive psychology practitioners who describe exactly how positive psychology can be applied in the challenging circumstances of "real" life, just as Paul describes in his work.

It would impossible to pay tribute to Paul Wong without mentioning his wonderful wife, Lilian. I met them both at the 2015 IPPA conference in Orlando, and I immediately felt as though I had known them for years. The most accurate way I can describe them is to say that they are the sort of people that you want to hug and spend time with. I imagine being part of the Wong family is bliss, especially if you are one of their grandchildren. To quote Paul, "Meaning is all we have—relationship is all we need." It is impossible to calculate how many people's lives have been changed because of Paul, but I am grateful for the opportunity to thank him for the profound effect he has had in mine. Dr. Paul Wong really is a legend in his own lifetime.