

THIS QUARTERLY

TIMELY
HEALTH
INFORMATION
& STYLE

ISSUE
4/4
2015



DR RALPH STANLEY

AS I LIVE & BREATHE

CRAVING TOTAL
DARKNESS

WINTER
VACATION
SPECIAL

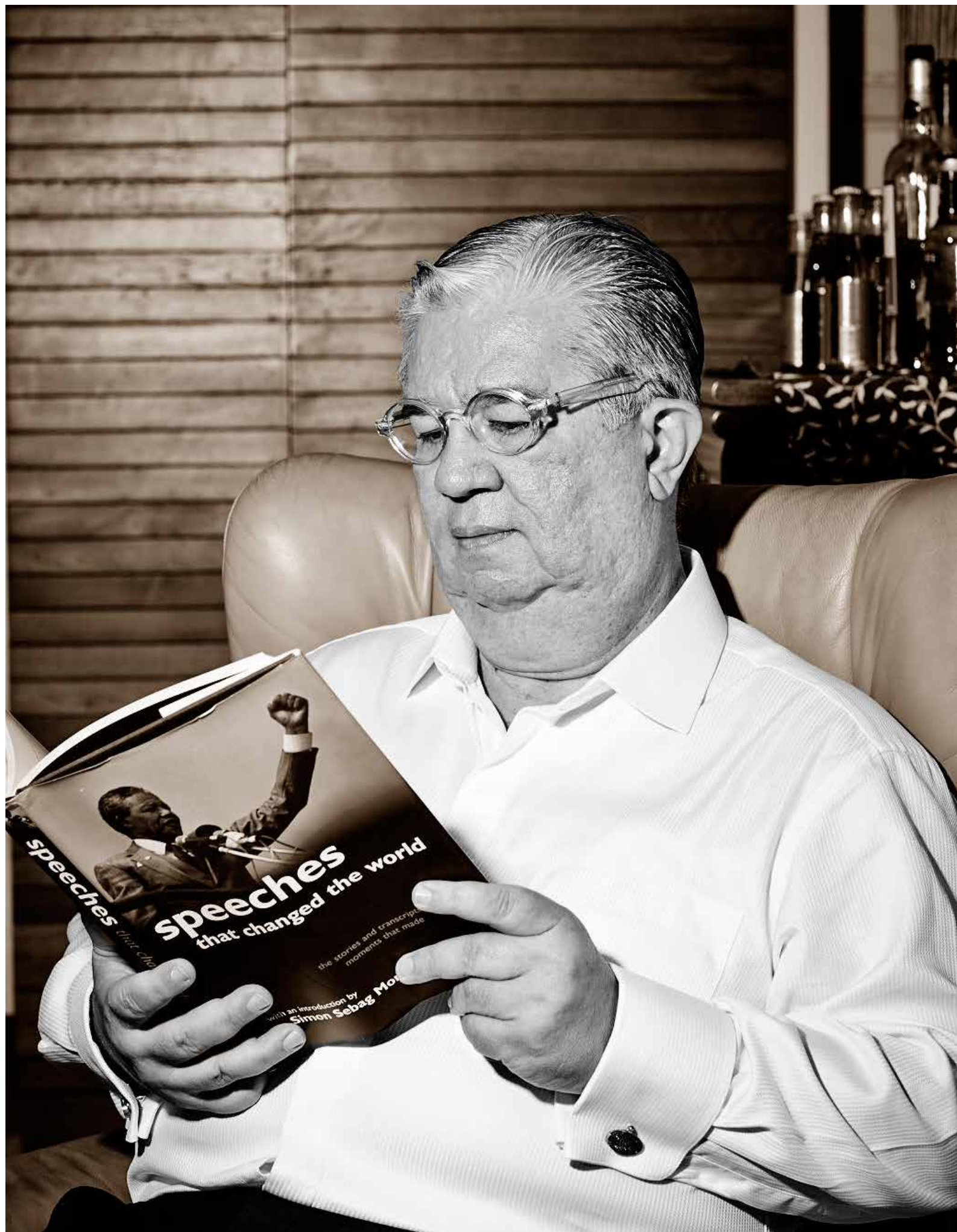
THE GLORIOUS,
GRACEFUL
CHEONGSAM

AS I LIVE AND BREATHE

PHOTOGRAPHY
JUSTIN LOH
HAIR & MAKE-UP
HUI MIN/
PALETTEINC

WORDS
AUDREY
PERERA

Dr Ralph Stanley, Ear, Nose and Throat Surgeon, is a passionate collector and art lover who appreciates attention to detail, fine craftsmanship and form in his personal life as much as he does in his professional practice.





"I am a Collector," he says, with heavy emphasis on the word, followed by a chuckle. And it soon becomes clear why being a collector defines his entire outlook on life and work.

Over the past 30 years, Ralph has built different types of personal collections. What stands out from these collections lies in the attention to detail, craftsmanship, balance and harmony. From the writing instruments and fountain pens that formed his first serious collections, to the antique medical illustrations which came shortly after that, to the cameras, eyewear, watches and art that were to follow, the appeal lies not just in the desire to acquire objects of beauty, but in the mastering of each subject, its uniqueness, its lexicon, and its fellow appreciators who span the globe.

"Collecting has been a great after-5 life for me for more than 30 years. It is about diving into detail and learning about something at a deeper level, understanding the philosophy and craftsmanship that lie behind each product, and then gaining the confidence to pursue it. Everyone should collect something – it is something to lose yourself in. Not to mention, collecting makes for great conversation! In the course of it, I have made friends with people from diverse backgrounds and from all over the world, all bound by the same passion."

Of all the collections, the most enduring has been the collecting of watches. "Watches have been the single biggest pleasure and adventure for me, especially through the friends I've made around the globe. There is so much to be passed down,

so many lessons in how connected the world is. Tokyo to New York to Singapore, we are just an email away," says Ralph, pointing out that he may wear up to three watches in a day, to reflect different personas and moods. "Why keep them locked in a safe when they should be enjoyed?"

If this predilection for collecting generates a certain "high", so too does his professional life, which not surprisingly, embraces the very same attributes: attention to detail, craftsmanship, balance and harmony.

Ralph shares: "I have been on a high for the past 20 years, ever since I opened my own private practice. I derive much satisfaction from having built an eco-system committed to the best service delivery to my patients. I have taken pains to set the tone of the overall environment at my practice – from the quality of my staff and their communication skills to the exacting standards I subscribe to as a doctor. My patients come to see me for my skills and experience, but what they receive in return is an 'entire package', underpinned by standards that I have honed and refined over the past two decades."

He adds: "I'm obsessive about details – and seeing everything come together, brings me a tremendous sense of fulfilment and achievement."

Switching lanes

"I've been privileged to have taken on leadership positions in my life – as Head of ENT at Singapore's largest ENT department at the Singapore General Hospital; Visiting Professor at Stanford University Medical Centre in Palo Alto, California, and significantly, opportunities to train younger eminent surgeons, many of whom are now in private practice.

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ADVICE FOR ASPIRING COLLECTORS

"When you collect anything, you must define the heart and head of collecting. Everyone understands the 'heart' aspect, but remember that if you spend on collectables, it has to hold its value. This is to ensure that your collectables can be encashed as and when you wish to stop collecting. You may sometimes lose a little, but you must know this going in. It can't just be physically there."

"Seen from the outside, these are 'small peaks' – but for me, they validate what I did.

"Working in an institution meant acquisition of medical, surgical and technological knowledge. In that setting, you aimed to do the most advanced surgeries, write the best research papers. Along the way, you saw lots of patients. You had to be very sharp and sure, no frills beyond medical questioning, meting out the most effective medical and surgical treatments you could. Within that system, it was great. But you couldn't really treat the patient in a holistic manner. How much can you deliver having to see 40 to 50 patients a day?

"Today I am in a different space. I care less about what people in general think, and more about what people who walk into my clinic think. I don't see as many patients as I did in the public service – but this means I can now spend more time with every patient to dive deep into what may be troubling them. I am able to understand other physical conditions that the patient may be afflicted with, which means that I can deliver a more effective package of medical, surgical and holistic care. This is my benchmark – it's not about scoring brownie points, but it's because I want to do it, and to exceed this benchmark I've set for myself. Only I know what I can achieve, and when I do, that's my greatest satisfaction."

Sleep is all

Being able to deliver consistently, though, requires that Ralph practices what he preaches, especially when it relates to sleeping.

"How I am performing right now, how I perform at surgery, in my clinic, in

the evening...everything depends on how I slept the night before, so sleep is my top priority. I try to remove all excessive stimuli before I sleep, and maintain good sleep habits. For instance, drinking a glass of warm Milo, or, as your grandmother used to recommend, a glass of warm milk. Switch off the TV, settle down, reflect, get comfortable. Set the tone because you want to sleep well. That's the mindset you must have. Is sleep your first priority? It is mine.

"Most of us are looking at our phones, replying to emails and watching movies or playing games with our iPads on our chest just before we sleep. All this is too much visual stimulation and disrupts normal sleep. Don't wake up for the bathroom and check your messages along the way – that disturbs your sleep rhythm. If you have poor sleep, it is that your lifestyle has influenced and destroyed your normal sleep patterns."

Then there are sleep disorder problems like snoring and obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) syndrome. OSA is a condition in which the patient – while sleeping – stops breathing periodically or takes inadequate breaths. The measurement of both is used as an index to monitor the degree of the syndrome.

"This is the biggest lifestyle challenge which is at the forefront of society today. Snoring used to be laughed at and the myth was that since you snored, you slept well. The hard truth is that since you snore, you don't sleep well.

"Snoring is associated with OSA syndrome or other causes of upper airway obstruction that fragment sleep. Today this is a big part of our practice and needs to be addressed. It can be



corrected and reversed in a significant number of patients to promote a much better sleep and daytime performance. Most of us work in intense environments in which we need to perform well and be nimble in our thoughts and actions. To be able to do that and withstand the stresses of the day, you need energy reserves. OSA syndrome, if not dealt with, significantly affects these.

Over-reactions & solutions

Born in Malaysia, Ralph describes his young self as an "average" student until "a switch came on when I was in the equivalent of Secondary 2. I mastered the game of education". After his O Levels, he came down to Singapore on his own to attend National Junior College. "I was not sophisticated or worldly, but I had no fear and a "just do it" attitude. Born in a practical, streetwise generation, he laments the current reality of the young.

ALLERGIC RHINITIS AFFECTS AN ESTIMATED

24%

OF THE POPULATION

IT IS PARTICULARLY PREVALENT IN CHILDREN AGED

4-17

YEARS

IT IS ESTIMATED THAT AS MUCH AS

50%

OF CHILDREN IN THIS AGE GROUP SUFFER FROM IT



CHANGING ENT PATTERNS

NOSE “Today the nose is the leading problem in ENT medicine. The prevalence and incidence of nose allergies has increased tremendously over the years. The typical childhood issues of nose and ear infections arising from certain factors and so on, have been greatly reduced with the use of antibiotics, better nutrition, and environmental control. But now there is a high incidence of allergies in children and young working adults and that has a tremendous impact on productivity and lifestyle. Nasal allergies are also linked to asthma, which is the more common presentation. Some 90% of my patients have nose and sinus problems; these are linked to an ear problem or a chronic throat and cough problem, or to snoring and sleep apnoea.”

EAR “There is a condition called cholesteatoma, which is skin invading your middle ear, destroying it and the structures around it. When I was training, we would do two or three or even more mastoid surgeries a month in the department. This has decreased tremendously and surgeons in training have less experience dealing with it. Chronic ear disease on the whole has decreased because we have been able to better treat nose and sinus conditions over past few decades.”

THROAT “Chronic sore throat and coughs have always been there but we now have a greater awareness of the effects of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) on the throat. This is one of the known causes of a chronic cough, and chronic throat discomfort. These conditions used to be very difficult to treat because we didn’t know what we were dealing with. Every throat and its lining was red but no one knew the cause. With the advent of nasolaryngoscopy we can have a better look at the throat and arrive at a more reasonable diagnosis for a better medical outcome.”



Suddenly it is as if you can see the whole world. You grasp how the world connects and how to maximise every situation. Everything, career, business, school work, switches on... you 'connect' and take off.

"Kids today grow up in a sterile environment, not walking around in mud, throwing away food that they drop. Hands are wiped before they are given a cookie. The level of immunity to infections has dropped, which means the body becomes hyper-responsive to any foreign material, and that hyper-responsiveness and exaggerated defence mechanism, is what you call allergy," he says, citing an example.

"For instance, house dust mites cause a serious over-reaction of the immune system, which in turn leads to allergic rhinitis. This phenomenon accounts for the rising incidence of allergies, in Singapore, at least. Dealing with these overreactions involves identifying the causes, avoiding them and instituting short and long-term treatment, from nasal sprays and anti-histamines to steroid sprays, immunotherapy and surgery.

"Most opt for long-term use of intranasal steroid sprays. While the aim of surgery is to reduce the organ's responsiveness to allergens, it does not always

turn out as well as hoped. The alternative is simple – a daily spray into your nose. Intranasal steroids are the gold standard of treatment, and a game changer in the treatment of allergic rhinitis. We have to dispel the myths and educate the world about the use of steroids. Don't visualise athletes using performance-enhancing steroids. The usage of topical steroids for such medical conditions is safe. And the data speaks for itself: If we don't use steroids, every other patient will need surgery; if we do, maybe only 5% will need surgery."

The magic DNA switch

Much like surgery when it goes well, Ralph believes in a "switch" that comes on at some point in life.

"I'm a firm believer in intrinsic DNA. Some things can be trained and told, but certain things depend on when your DNA gets switched on. Suddenly it is as if you can see the whole world, you grasp how the world connects and how to maximise every situation. Everything – career, business, school work – switches on. The switch sometimes comes on late in life, and you see people blossom and 'connect' with and everything takes off."

This is reflected in his own life. After studying Medicine at University of Singapore, Ralph went on to the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh to obtain his Fellowship in Otorhinolaryngology. He has been a Visiting Professor at Stanford University's Department of Otolaryngology/Head & Neck Surgery and has lectured and conducted "live" demonstrations/surgery and given keynote lectures to ENT specialists in Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia, Brunei and Western Australia.

Diversity & contrarian views

With children deliberately schooled in different traditions – one in the British system and one the American way – Ralph is a great believer of diversity.

"In a family, there must be diversity, fundamentally different ideas, educational backgrounds, attitudes, yet all in family harmony and loving one another. That is the essence of family. "If I could, I would ask people to imagine what they would feel on their death bed. Whether they gave their best to their wife and family and spent maximum time, contributed their wisdom, provided for them and enjoyed every second with them – that is the ultimate advice. Then comes faith, and then your worldly ambitions."

Person revealed

Speaking of worldly ambitions, Ralph's clinic reveals a doctor at the top of his profession. Full of beautiful art pieces, he says: "Each piece has a message about me. It reveals how precise, how artistic, how careful I am. Aesthetic beauty and every colour is coordinated, from the lighting to the carpets and the fabrics used. Everything about me is out there, symmetrical, coordinated, integrated, and that is reflected in my surgery."

His playful side emerges as he describes his "fun" collection. "After cataract surgery, I had almost perfect vision. But all my life I had worn glasses and felt naked without them, so I made zero-degree glasses. These became a statement about me. At work, I wear clear, rimless glasses for their professional image, and when I want to be funky, I wear my Japanese bespoke glasses. Each pair has a message and allows me to change my persona to suit the occasion. 🌀