

# **SPEECH BY MR ONG YE KUNG, MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT, AT THE NATIONAL KINDNESS AWARD CEREMONY, 27 JANUARY 2021 AT LTA AUDITORIUM**

Dr William Wan, General Secretary of the Singapore Kindness Movement

Mr Richard Magnus, Chairman of the Public Transport Council

Friends and colleagues

1. I am happy to join everyone here today to recognise the acts of kindness of our land transport workers and commuters.
2. This year, we are awarding the highest number of Transport Gold awards – about 530 – since we launched the National Kindness Movement for the transport sector in 1999. Let me share a few of their stories.
3. There is Mr Tan Chwee Hock, an SMRT workshop manager, who cancelled his leave plans to help with the inspection and repair of a vehicle used to ferry potential COVID-19 cases. He understood that the vehicle needed to be repaired as soon as possible given the urgency of COVID-19 operations. Kindness is often about being responsible, even if it means putting the needs of others above your own.
4. Another story is that of Ms Siti Rafe'ah, a commuter. During her free time, she would take the initiative to sit herself at the Heart Zone at Outram Park MRT station. The station is near to the Singapore General Hospital, and there are always many commuters who need directional help. Kindness is also about being helpful, going that extra mile to help strangers.
5. Another story is Mr Subramaniam, an SMRT bus captain. When Malaysia first announced its Movement Control Order in March 2020, a few of his Malaysian colleagues stayed back in Singapore but they missed home dearly. Mr Subramaniam offered to prepare home-cooked meals for his colleagues, to keep their morale up, and hopefully make them feel less home-sick. Kindness is also about caring for your fellow men and women.
6. I am convinced that many kind people live amongst us, and in fact I think are the majority. Kind acts happen all the time, with or without us noticing.
7. Unfortunately, kind people being the great majority does not mean kindness will necessarily prevail in society. Because most struggles in life are asymmetrical. A lot of good can be undone or negated by a little bit of bad.

8. One can spend many years leading a healthy lifestyle – eating well, exercising – but one bout of disease, or one weakness in an organ, is all it takes to deem us unhealthy.

9. We have an army of well-qualified specialists in our organisation maintaining our IT systems, with constant updating of anti-virus software, providing backups and uninterrupted power supply. But to create havoc, you just need a hacker who can be a lone wolf with a laptop, or one careless staff who sticks a foreign memory stick into his USB port.

10. In my constituency, we have a road separating the MRT station and the HDB blocks. Residents have been asking for a covered linkway across the road. But being a four-lane road, the linkway will have to be big, ugly and expensive. So instead, we implemented an umbrella sharing scheme. There are racks on each side of the road, and residents will contribute by putting their umbrellas in a rack, so others can use them to cross the road, and leave them in the rack at the opposite side of the road.

11. The majority of residents use the scheme properly. But a minority will bring the umbrellas home and not bring them back, and an even smaller minority will wilfully break the umbrellas. Notwithstanding, it is amazing that a couple of years after we implemented the scheme, the contributors never gave up and will continue to donate their umbrellas, despite knowing that they might get stolen or broken. I think the civic-minded is making a statement, that we know promoting kindness is a struggle, and shall not give up.

12. These are not meant to be stories of pessimism and resignation, but to recognise that life is in that way unfair, as bad things seem to have the upper hand. An abundance of good things often goes unnoticed, a small ounce of bad things is disproportionate in impact. And we know that social media has made the asymmetry worse.

13. That is our struggle in promoting kindness. That is why it has to be done en masse, at a society level, just to overcome the negativity of a small minority. Two things that we are doing are particularly decisive.

14. First, education. Our Citizenship and Character Education lessons in schools centre around values – integrity, care, mutual respect, and kindness. Values-in-action expand the lessons beyond the classroom, so that students can experience doing something that help others. Every year, entire cohorts of young children go through it.

15. Second is national efforts, such as the Singapore Kindness Movement, to highlight and recognise kind deeds year after year. Because we know kindness begets kindness. Because bad news travel by itself, good deeds need to be broadcast

as loudly as we can. And thanks to all the volunteers of the movement, we have been able to keep the momentum going.

16. But beyond what the Government and national campaigns can do, what is most critical is what we collectively do as members of society. In some countries, if you litter or do not return your tray in a cafeteria, you will get a firm tick-off by passers-by. Likewise, in Singapore you cannot cut a queue without someone telling you off. In these instances, the kind acts have been ingrained in society and become self-policing.

17. COVID-19 tested this concept to the fullest. We can have the best healthcare system, and most capable doctors and nurses in the world. But the virus just needs a few careless and inconsiderate people to spread and potentially cripple the healthcare system. The only way to contain it is for everyone to play their part.

18. The Government will have to orchestrate, but the people are the players and actors, operating not as individuals, but a network of eyes and ears watching out and taking care of each other. In this, I think the positive impact of the majority of cooperative Singaporeans is overcoming the negative effects of the minority of rule-breakers, which is a reason why Singapore is containing the virus much better than many other countries and regions.

19. So in promoting kindness, all of us have to step up. Hence, today, we want to especially highlight the acts of Mr Muhammad Mu'tasim and Mr Clement Tan, who are in the audience today as the recipients of the Outstanding Caring Commuter award.

20. Many of us know the story. A few months back, a bus captain reminded a commuter to wear his mask. The commuter refused and assaulted the bus captain. Fortunately, the two gentlemen came to the rescue and got the assailant arrested.

21. To carry out a kind act is virtuous, to step up and prevent an unkind act is special, which is what Mu'tasim and Clement did. I mentioned earlier that kindness is about being responsible, helpful and caring. I think above all, it is also about being courageous, and standing up for what is right even if you are the odd one out.

22. To all our award recipients today, thank you and well done! My hope is that in time to come, we will not need to celebrate acts of kindness. Kindness should live in each and all of us, and every kind act will not go unnoticed, and will be appreciated. Thank you.