

**RECOLLECTIONS OF MY MEETINGS WITH LEADING WORLD FIGURES
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MS. LE HOA LAM—MAYOR OF AUBURN, NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA**

“Your story should be called *Gone with the Waves*. You have lived a life of such turmoil, but it has been a life of true greatness. Listening to you speak brings tears to my eyes.”

These were my honest feelings.

Before me stood a small woman with a gentle smile. She was Mayor Le Hoa Lam of Auburn, New South Wales, Australia.

She replied modestly, “I did not choose to live the life I have. I had no other option.”

“Bombs! Run!” shouted Ms. Lam’s father when she was a young girl. The children hurried to the bomb shelter. Her mother ran, too, carrying her youngest.

The girl ran and, as she did so, she saw the panic and bloodshed around her.

Unarmed civilians were falling everywhere — even children. They weren’t moving. Were they dead? Why? What had they done wrong?!

“Help me!” someone cried. Then a dreadful, deafening sound. A bomb had exploded.

She looked up into the sky and gasped. A human body was falling, in pieces.

This was Vietnam in 1975.

Saigon fell in April. The chaos was tremendous.

Ms. Lam’s parents were Chinese immigrants to Vietnam, who went on to achieve success in business there. When she was young, Ms. Lam lived a comfortable life filled with love. Then, in her teens, her world was transformed into a living hell.

“We must escape,” she thought one day as she stood on the shore watching the waves break. “But why does the sea have to be such an obstacle?”

Her father told her: “You are the bravest member of our family. I’m counting on you.”

The first time, Ms. Lam tried to escape with her older brother. They failed. They tried again. They failed again. Each time they were caught, they were thrown in jail. She blamed these setbacks on bad luck.

During these escape attempts, classmates and neighbors died before her eyes. She was nearly killed more than ten times. But she survived. She was glad just to be alive.

Then a young man named Tuong Long Hua, or Tom, invited her to try again. She and her younger siblings joined him.

Tom had many talents, one of which was music. In fact, during his fifteen-month incarceration for a previous escape attempt, he even made friends with his captors, teaching them to play the guitar. Eventually, he received special permission to leave the country as a refugee and was given a small boat.

Tom also had some knowledge of astronomy, and he plotted their course. They set sail at night.

This time she would make it!

But they met with high winds and the boat capsized. Floating on the dark waves, they desperately called for help. Fortunately, a U.S. naval ship was passing by and rescued them.

It was Ms. Lam’s twelfth failed attempt to leave Vietnam.

Her mother encouraged her to keep trying. In 1977, she made her thirteenth attempt. There were 498 people in a small boat seventy-nine feet long and twenty feet wide. They were jammed in so tightly they could not move.

With Ms. Lam were most of her family and Tom. It pained them all that Ms. Lam’s father, whose leg had been injured by a bomb, could not make the arduous journey with

them.

The boat was launched. If only they would have a safe trip.

But then came the shout: “Ahoy! Stop!” They had been spotted by Thai pirates.

Would they all be killed?

The pirates approached. Ms. Lam’s mother volunteered to interpret. She came forward, at the risk of her life, with the hope that somehow she might save her children.

The pirates took what money the refugees still had, but spared their lives.

After four days of terror, the boat finally arrived in Malaysia. This was the day Ms. Lam had always dreamed of. But her heart was somber. How were they to live now?

Yet life goes on, and it must be lived.

Ms. Lam and her family later migrated to Toronto, Canada, where a new life began. With her mother taking the lead, the whole family worked very hard. Ms. Lam was nineteen. The only English words she knew were yes and no. She attended school while working. She was lucky enough to find a job as a receptionist in the office of a Vietnamese doctor. On the weekends, she worked as a housemaid in a nearby hotel and on holidays she worked at a photo framing shop. While doing all this, she managed to study economics at a university and eventually earn a degree.

In 1985, her father was finally able to join the family in Canada. The warm spring sun was shining on them at last.

Tom, with whom Ms. Lam had shared the harrowing ordeal of escape, had in the meantime immigrated to Australia. The two finally made contact, and their “trans-Pacific love” blossomed. Ms. Lam went to Australia to be with Tom when she was twenty-seven, in 1987.

Many immigrants lived in the area of Ms. Lam’s new home in Sydney. Although the White Australia Policy the government had promoted in the past had been abolished, lingering discrimination still prevailed, especially against Asian immigrants.

In Ms. Lam’s neighborhood, there was an immigrant girl of sixteen, married and with a child. Her lack of English proficiency prevented her from understanding the benefits available, and so she was not able to receive the public assistance that she needed. The path out of poverty was therefore blocked for her. Ms. Lam felt as if she were seeing her own family’s plight from many years ago being replayed. It bothered her. No one chose to be a refugee. Why were they treated so poorly?

“My own experiences made me want to help others who were suffering as I had. I came to feel that I had to do something, anything, for them,” she says. Ms. Lam changed her destiny into her mission. She decided to run for the city council of Auburn. She was elected, and then the really hard work began.

She was also a realtor, and after a fifteen- or sixteen-hour day, she had only three or four hours to sleep. Sometimes she went without sleeping at all. Yet despite juggling this taxing schedule, she still managed to raise two children. City council meetings sometimes ended as late as 11:00 at night. Ms. Lam became famous for bringing her children to the meetings.

What philosophy sustained Ms. Lam through all this? It was her conviction that government on every level must serve the people.

She says: “The representatives of local government in Australia are not authoritarian, for they are selected from among the ordinary citizenry. They are therefore dedicated to serving and improving the lives of the people. That is why, even though the pay is low, they don’t complain. They are different from authoritarian leaders who don’t understand the hearts of the people.”

These words carry the message of the twenty-first century.

From now on, there must be no difference between leaders and the people. Leaders must understand more than anyone else the hardships that people face. They mustn't live in a different world, looking down on those whom they are meant to serve. At the same time, the people must awaken to their responsibility for society's future and develop greater awareness and knowledge.

The leaders of the future must have a combination of the fresh determination of the amateur and the skill of the pro.

Immigrants make up fifty-three percent of Auburn's population. It is a microcosm of the world, with people from China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Lebanon, Turkey, India and many Arab nations. In 1996, Ms. Lam established the Asian Welfare Center to assist immigrants. She has formed a sister-city relationship with Kuangtung City in China, and has also pursued friendly relations with Hunan Province and Changsha City.

Her many achievements have been widely recognized. And last year, she was elected as Auburn's first female mayor of Asian descent. Mayor Lam is always thinking of the people. She says: "I believe that just because our cultures are different doesn't mean we can't get along. In fact, those differences allow us to learn from each other and help each other out."

This is an important warning for Japan, which is so quick to close ranks and exclude other opinions, while simply following the majority. Japan still hasn't rid itself of the militarist thinking that emphasizes homogeneity at all costs. Even today, Korean nationals with permanent residency in Japan are excluded from participation in local elections, though they have lived here most of their lives and pay taxes like any other citizen. On this point alone Japan deserves the criticism it gets as a racist nation, a country of closed hearts and minds.

This September and October, the Olympics and the Paralympics—two global festivals—will be held in Sydney, and the main venue is located in Auburn. Mayor Lam continues to fight for the people. "We are facing a crossroads today," she says, "that will determine whether we can change history and move forward or not."

All over the world, it is women who are standing at the forefront of this new force for change.