

# Sweeping a Street of Stories

By Kun-chi Wu, Orthopedics Department, Hualien Tzu Chi General Hospital

Translated by Conway Niu



In 2005, in accordance with Hualien city's clearing project, our hospital committed to clean up the whole section 3 of Chungyan Road, which is our hospital sited. With this opportunity, naturally emerge the joy of sweeping our own front steps.

I usually wake up early on Sunday mornings for jogging and break out in a sweat. Autumn time, that Sunday morning, yellow foliage lighting on the ground, we who volunteered to sweep the streets got

together at 6:30am. We split into two groups, one to start by the hospital entrance, and the other to start from the parking lot across the street. After Typhoons Haitang and Longwang showed up days ago, every time on my way to drive to the hospital, I saw little rocks and pieces of glasses scattered all over the intersections nearby. The scenes made me nervous because sometimes rocks can be thrown up by passing vehicles' tires and then fly like bullets, what if any of them hurts someone. I felt great to have joined this task and we completed the first mission to have made the streets cleaner. Sweeping and then focus on sweeping, I sweat. My body felt soothing and comfortable.

Usually the streets are rather empty during early morning; no cars or people, especially in Hualien. Acting as if we were playing golf, we held the brooms and enjoying ourselves. The sweeping was not tiring and boring. Every time we came out for the street clean, my wife would tell me, "I've found money again." Mostly common to have found coins.

Sometimes, our daughter would get up early with us to sweep the street. While cleaning, she would make a game out of

cleaning the clogged pipes. She said, “This is really fun. As soon as I clear the mud from the pipe, the water runs again.” Because my daughter is especially afraid of mosquitoes, she knows that as long as the water is running, the likelihood of mosquitoes being present is smaller, and she knew this was a way to keep mosquitoes away.

### **Sweeping Out the Hidden Stories**

As the sun gently rises, we can gently see what's in front of us. In the street, a bent umbrella laid there, no longer useful. There is a story behind this umbrella; imagined it must have been raining, and the umbrella was broken, so its owner was angry to have thrown it on the ground. Fortunately I could pick it up and recycle it. As we sweep along the way, we also run into motorcycle helmets. Imagining a rider out there without a helmet, I have mixed feelings of both concern and well-wishing.

Even though leaves are biodegradable but



**Dr. Kun-chi Wu, his wife, and daughter, sweeping the street together and discover the stories behind the street. Joyfully, the street is cleared.**

they were also swept up. In the sea of leaves sometimes a red dot can be seen, and it turned out to be a lottery ticket. It must have been that the owner of the ticket didn't win, going from hopeful to hopeless. Now there was hope once again, hope for this paper ticket to be recycled and be put to use again.

As we swept on, we saw a receipt. In Taiwan, receipt numbers can be matched for award money, and we always donate these to Comatose patients' non-profit foundations or senior citizens' associations. With further



**Tzu Chi volunteers cooperate to sweep the street adjacent to the hospital, allowing patients to feel comfortable as well. ( The left one with white cap is Dr. Wu ).**

sweeping, we found syringes, and we recognized they were needles for illegal drug use; we pray that their users have the strength to quit these meaningless drugs. Living day to day under the influence and control of drugs is tiring, and we pray that they escape from that sea of suffering soon.

In the tall grass we can see many brown-colored glass bottles, and are of the favorite drinks of many construction workers. We picked them up one by one to prevent

breaking them and hurting others. Time and time again we learned the logistics of recycling, knowing what can be recycled and what cannot. Therefore, we cherish and recycle reusable resources whenever we found food packages, aluminum packaging, and spring water bottles. Like this, we continue sweeping the street onward.

In the street, many stories revealed, also we can witness peoples' actions. Betel nuts and cigarette butts can often be found at an

intersection from drivers spitting or throwing it away during a stop light. Once, we were able to sweep three kilograms of betel nut remains and cigarette butts. We can see the pride in many people as they spit out their betel nuts and throw their cigarette butts looking trendy and stylish. On the contrary, in the hospital, we see endless number of surgeries for mouth cancer and lung cancer, and know that these are the root cause of their sufferings. We truly hope that no one uses these items, so surgeries are not needed.

### **Sweeping Street is a Practice of Politeness and Exercise**

When I was young, I saw a movie called “Emperor of the sky, empress of the land,” which documents the tragedy of a political era. In the movie, the activists were forced to sweep the street, but the shame conveyed was actually an affirmation of a Chinese tradition that no matter what is one’s status quo, the act of cleaning and cleansing is reaffirming to each person.

In fact, the act of sweeping takes a change in the hearts. One can easily think of himself overly qualified to sweep, but once we look past this disillusion, the heart opens up. With the act of sweeping, we can self-reflect, and can see the faults in others and self reflect. Simply stated, I did not sweep the area just because this is by the hospital and I am an doctor who serve in here. I did it to allow others to feel more comfortable, and

our patients to feel comfortable in a clean environment that welcomes them and ready to serve. As a small matter sweeping streets is, but we are accompanied by the falling leaves, gentle breezes, sunrise and waning moon. In addition, we have a free work out, sweat impurities from our bodies, as well as make friends and recycle the treasures we find. Cleaning the street is a task that is filled with deep philosophy and great activity for good health practice.

### **Witness Unfortunate Family**

On the eve of the Lunar New Year, under the leadership of Dr. Lin Shinn-zong and the guidance of Sister Yan Huimei, we the physicians and nurses went to visit a family in downtown Hualien city area. I wasn’t familiar with the background of this family. The only thing I knew was that the home had been lost in a fire; the young guy in the family were in some trouble. The two elders and their son in the household were sick and suffering, living in a shabby temporary hut.

From the large table for the shrine for their ancestors, we could tell that they once had a large home. On the table we could see the plaques for their ancestors, the glowing candlelight, fresh flowers, and fresh bananas, similar atmospheres for celebration of the Chinese New Year. Who knew that such a onetime glorious family would fall victim to a fire someday, then along with failures in business. It will be difficult to restore back to



their original lifestyle.

### Working Together for a Joyful New Year

Just like that, the family of three now lives in a fireproof alleyway, with no room to move around in their dwelling. The living room, kitchen, and bathroom were all clustered, and along with the many possessions, it was a tight squeeze. The day, one day before New Year's Eve, we visited the family, and I took out their bowls and chopsticks to take to wash at the nearest Tzu Chi Recycling Center. After washing them, I counted, 365 bowls! How wealthy they are,

with enough bowls for a family of twenty. It took us six people to carry all of them back to their home. I really hope that their home can return to their original state soon.

The other Tzu Chi brothers helped paint the walls, wash the clothes, bought a new bed, new sheets, and wished them a happy new year. Da Ai Drama actress Pei Feng also came to help out, her identity only to be discovered after she removed her mask. She quietly worked at the side, and presented the family with some flowers. I bought some candy, and used an old container from their home to fill it with chocolates. I hope that this family can have a joyous new year.



Witnessing the scene after Jogya earthquake in Indonesia, Dr. Kun-chi Wu sketched down an old man with traditional Indonesian hat sitting under a booth bench, looked deeply lost.



**Dr. Wu held any chance he could have to help the needy. He joined the relief team to Jogya for free clinic.**

A team came together without prearrangement, worked together to do something that brought joy to everyone. It didn't matter which department in the hospital you were from, or whether you were a physician or nurse or sister, we lifted heavy items together. Disregard our posts at the hospital, at this time, we were all equal, and doing something that made everyone happy—helping others.

We continued to visit this family afterwards. When we visit them again, we felt the atmosphere of an average family, with a living environment that was normal, and their hearts were more at peace now too. We wish them the best of luck in all they do.

In the Tzu Chi world, Master has created humanitarian activities in areas such as



charity, medicine, and international relief and environmental protection. These are all facets of humanities, and at times the road may be rough, sometimes one can see Master's face in despair with worries in her eyes. I know that I don't have the abilities to help Master bear the burden, but I know I can fulfill my duties, and do great in all I do, in hopes that I bring light into Master's eyes. Then, I will be satisfied. 🌸