MOTHER'S DAY

Make it a gift from the heart for mum

BY TAN SEOW HON
For The Straits Times

RESTAURANTS, spas and jewelry shops have hijacked Mother’s Day from mothers. The occasion has become a racket to sell butterflies, bird’s nest, massage chairs and lots of “something special”, ostensibly to celebrate mums.

When I think of Mother’s Day, I think of a Peanuts comic strip in which Spike, the scruffy-looking lesser-known brother of the world’s most famous beagle, Snoopy, feels sick one night. The illness accentuates his loneliness, as he lives alone in a poor company of desert cactuses which cannot talk with or respond to him — perhaps cartoonist Charles Schulz’s metaphor for our disconnectedness in this post-modern world.

His famous brother — too busy with his various personas of the World War I Flying Ace, Legal Beagle, Joe Kool and so on — visits him only once in a while.

In the first panel, Spike mumbles: “It’s three o’clock in the morning, and I’m alone in the desert and I don’t feel well.”

In the second panel, tucked under his blanket, head lying on a stone, Schultz brings tears to my eyes as Spike cries out: “Mom!”

In Spike’s most desperate moment, his heart’s cry is that one simple word.

For many of us, like Spike, Mum is the one we turn to in times of emotional need. She is there for us when we are upset that we did not make it to head prefect, or when we bickered with our best friend, went through a break-up, are furious with our boss, or learning to burp a baby.

I was a 15-year-old when I was asked to talk about my hero during one conversational examination in secondary school. I picked my mum. The raised eyebrows of my examiner showed me how rarely mums got the vote.

It is a wonder that with the recent talk about the lack of heroes in Singapore, not many realise the heroic roles that mothers have been expected to play in our lives. Nor are we giving them their rightful place. We prefer, instead, our Singapore Idols, if we are impressionable teens, or our sophisticated castles built of careers and lifestyles, if we are working adults.

Of course, in the very imperfect world that we live in, not everyone gets along well with his mother or feels that she has been good to her children. Sadly, for those whose relations with their mothers need healing, the wounds tend to remain raw. Perhaps this is because of the special role that mothers play in our lives as the providers of a sense of security from our earliest days.

Our sense of self tends to be tied with the affirmation we received as children from the adults around us. Thankfully, for some of us, as we grow older and see our own imperfections, some healing takes place.

Many of us are ready to acknowledge that our parents — warts and all — love us and mean the best for us.

I wonder, though, at which point in time such head knowledge translates into heart knowledge. Or will knowledge of paternal love, or what the Greeks call sorge, remain purely at the cerebral level for the rest of our lives? Will we have heart knowledge only of eros, or love in the context of romance?

My mother was the first person I felt truly loved by. I have always been close to her. When I was young, the first day of each school term was always tough for her as I would end up clinging to her and refusing to let her go.

I knew Mum cared for me and made a lot of sacrifices for my sake. For example, though we were not wealthy, she paid much more to have us schooled at a church kindergarten so that we could begin our education in the kind of environment she believed was best for us. It was always our needs before hers.

Still, it was only in my late teens that I came to know and appreciate, at a deeper and more heartfelt level, her love for me.

I used to consume lots of M&M chocolates when studying. Sometimes, it would be late evening when I realised that my stockpile was running low. Invariably, during those times, Mum would have some groceries that she claimed she forgot to buy, and before I even realised that she had stepped out of the house, she would be back with candy for me.

One day, it struck me that if I was too tired by that time of the night to bother going out of the house, she was probably tired too. But she would go out time and again, never expecting me to do the same for her when she needed something, because it was a simple overture of her love for me.

I realised at that moment that the same applied to many other things she had done for me. It was a joy for her to do those things because it came from an overflow of love, not a grudging sense of obligation. I cannot describe that moment other than to apply the trite word “ephiphany” to it. That’s what love is, I thought.

While my moment was particular, there is something universal in this, I believe. For others, the connection may not have been M&M, but as we recover Mother’s Day from the pervading commercialism and use it to reflect on our relations with our mothers, may we return something from our hearts and get our mums a gift that comes truly from the overflow of our love.

The writer teaches law at the National University of Singapore.