

Teardrops don't always drip down

My grandmother once likened my mother's fortune in having me for a son to winning the lottery. She then asked me for my secret to working hard and keeping out of trouble without constant oversight. I thought about her question continually throughout my teenage years, wondering where my discipline originated. Eventually I realized that my good character was not a gift I had laid at my mother's feet, but a gift she had laid at mine. I remembered that my mother had shared with me the story of her arduous journey to America in pursuit of a better life and the values she drew from it. When I expressed this new understanding to my grandmother some years later, she taught me the Vietnamese proverb, "Teardrops drip down." She said the tears symbolized parents' love and support that fell onto their children. Conversely, parents expected no love or support in return, as teardrops did not naturally flow upward. The children's love and support would in turn be reserved for their posterity. Despite my admiration for the principle her metaphor embodies, I cannot help but disagree with my grandmother. Being in America indeed affords me the prospect of providing my children a better life than my own, just as my mother has provided me a better life than her own. But my mother's sacrifices are fundamental to my identity as an American and I am obligated to repay her.

Growing up, my relationship with my father was hollow at best. He adopted a thoroughly materialistic perspective on American life, believing that his success as a parent rested upon the number of things he could buy for me. One day as we sat in front of the television—a common scene in my early childhood—he pointed out the money and fame of the people on the screen. He said, "Son, money is everything. Money buys you the toys you play with, the clothes you wear, the food you eat, and the roof over your

head. Life revolves around and depends on money. Remember this well. If someday you become rich and famous, I will be proud of you.” His teachings did not reach far beyond this sentiment. Vietnamese custom held that fathers provide while mothers nurture; accordingly, he usually ignored me or left me at a babysitter’s house. My father’s neglect and the consequent resentment I felt drove me to reject him and everything he stood for.

Life at home hardly matched the American ideal of well-to-do middle class families trading stories across the dinner table in a spacious, well furnished suburban home. Our luxuries were sparse and our constant struggle to keep the lights on compromised the strength and complexity of our family bond. My mother worked several jobs at a time during my childhood, so I did not see her often. Her distant toil compounded the pain of my father’s willful estrangement from me. But in stark contrast to his parental delinquency, my mother showed me affection and concern, struggling in our limited time together to teach me everything from the alphabet to respect for elders and peers. She made it clear that she did not expect me to become wealthy or famous. She would mark herself a successful mother if I lived an enjoyable life without the hardship she had to endure. My mother’s genuine devotion moved me and I loved her tremendously. One day, my mother did not pick me up from the babysitter until late at night. When I asked her to explain, she replied that she had to work in order to buy me toys. I told her that I did not want anything else in the world other than to spend time with her. Soon afterward, she shortened her work hours.

In the extra time she spent with me, my mother sought to teach me about her past. I became very interested in her journey to America. I imagined her trip as one full of adventures, culminating in her escape to a new and better life on the other side of the

world. As her story unfolded, however, I realized it was no great or easy escape to paradise; it was a seemingly endless struggle filled with fear, starvation, illness, and death. My mother stressed that although her past was marred by sweat and tears, and although she still fought to find joy in life, she was extremely fortunate to be in America.

My mother began by relating that she was one of seven children born into a comfortable upper middle class family in Saigon. As a teenage girl, she had graduated from the highest rated female academy in the city by the end of the Vietnam War and had aimed to become a pharmacist. When the communist government took over the commercial sector, many without connections inside the new regime saw their businesses and other property stripped from them overnight. My mother's family, having no such ties, lost everything. She was denied admission to attend university and forced to relinquish her professional aspirations. The repression of many South Vietnamese families and its implications for future generations disillusioned my mother.

In 1979, at age 20, my mother and her siblings risked escape from Vietnam. Like many other refugees at the time, my mother sought a better life for herself abroad. She and her siblings circumvented armed security and departed on a 20-meter, two-story fishing boat headed for a Malaysian refugee camp. With nearly 400 desperate Vietnamese escapees on board, she and my aunts and uncles squatted uncomfortably for hours. En route, two parties of Thai pirates strip-searched and robbed the refugees. The boat eventually arrived on a small, dilapidated, overcrowded island with very few resources. With no money or food, my mother and her siblings began their stay in the refugee camp, hoping a Western nation would offer her and her siblings asylum. For 15 long months they faced unspeakable hardships and illnesses, drinking mud-tainted water

and barely fending off starvation on meager rations. Finally, Canada extended an invitation to my mother and her siblings. They had survived.

After arriving in North America, my mother spent two years in Canada, working several jobs at once and studying English. She then married my father, formerly her neighbor in Saigon and now an American citizen who had escaped Vietnam a little earlier than she had. At that point, she herself became an American citizen and moved to California. Just four years after fleeing a life of incalculable misery, she began a new chapter as a resident of the United States, a land of endless opportunity for her and her children.

But my mother's sacrifice would not come to fruition so easily. With neither a college education nor fluency in the English language, my mother was forced to work countless hours at a series of minimum wage jobs in order to support my family. Her intensive labor combined with my father's persistent indifference left me largely without support in my foray into the public school system. Upon entering elementary school I hardly spoke English at all and lacked both the discipline and the curiosity of my peers. Lost and distracted, I quickly fell behind.

On the night before I started middle school, my mother called me into the kitchen. She was sitting on one of our many folding chairs with a creased piece of paper in her hands. As I approached, I saw the shapes of bars and numbers through the back of the sheet. I immediately fell to my knees, begging forgiveness. I told her repeatedly that I was sorry, very sorry that I had never done well in school. She called me to come closer and look at the writing on the page. I looked and saw my California standardized test results. My performance in all the categories was in the "in danger" area, far below

average. She reminded me that she had never expected me to become any type of professional nor had she ever demanded that I achieve any particular grade in school. She simply prayed that at the very least I would one day lead a more comfortable existence than she had, hoping that raising me in America would help realize her vision.

I cried. At this sight, my mother started to sob as well. I believed she cried because she did not know how to help me with school or instruct me in how to establish myself in America. She feared that I would follow in her footsteps. She feared that I would live a life of struggle, working several jobs to feed myself and my family, not knowing the language well enough to command respect or have self-confidence, feeling powerless to improve my fate or that of those I loved. And in that moment, perhaps unwittingly, my mother bestowed upon me her own concept of Americanism, one in which hard work in the land of opportunity might allow me to rise above my background. Her sentiments inspired me even more than my father's had repulsed me. I promised my mother I would try harder in school and that I would make sure that she did not have to worry about me. The next day I became a student.

Somehow I had managed to finish elementary school barely knowing how to construct grammatically correct sentences or perform operations beyond basic multiplication. I knew that my first task was to catch up to my peers. At the time, my mother's knowledge of English and math was greater than mine. In order to complete my sixth grade homework, I would wait until after my mother had come home from work and finished her household chores to enlist her help in explaining my assignments. As a result, I finished my homework very late at night. My proficiency in language was so low that my mother, with her few years of formal training in English, had to read aloud many

of my assignments or translate them into Vietnamese. She helped me enormously during the first few years of my serious academic undertakings. We forewent sleep until one or two in the morning every weekday night when I was in sixth grade. In seventh grade, we went to sleep even later. After two toilsome years with my mother, my grades were finally on par with those of my classmates.

By eighth grade, I no longer needed my mother to stay up with me and the level of my assignments began to surpass her knowledge. During that time, I learned that many other students had strict parents who forced them to learn musical instruments at an early age and enrolled them in extracurricular activities without their assent. My friends told me that their parents were doing this in order to help them get into college. Since neither of my parents had gone to college, I had no idea what it entailed, but it seemed as though teachers were touting college as the pathway to a stable job. I was convinced and moved to pursue higher education. I recognized that if I wanted to get into college, I needed self-initiative. No one in my family had completed the venture and therefore no one I knew could offer me guidance. I also soon realized that although my mother worked multiple jobs, she simply could not afford to pay my tuition. I resolved to work hard in high school to make college financially viable through scholarships and financial aid.

Ultimately, I secured a nearly free world-class education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

As I progress through college, I remember what my father told me as a child. His vision of America as a place in which to acquire wealth and fame permeates the campus atmosphere. Students take great pains to carefully select their majors, outperform others on exams, prune their resumes, and build extensive networks. Many of them aspire to

reach a position that boasts some combination of advanced knowledge and expertise, numerous accolades, and material wealth. It seems, therefore, that my father was not altogether mistaken in identifying “fame and fortune” as the pinnacle of the “American Dream.” Superficially, it even seems that I am pursuing these same objectives. But although I may indulge in the same sort of careerism espoused by many of my classmates, my professional goals bear a fundamentally different purpose—to vindicate my mother’s sacrifices.

I define my own Americanism in my ability to do the things my mother could not. She was born into a prosperous family, seemingly destined for a comfortable life. But the Vietnam War changed her destiny. She left most of her family behind, suffered the terrible hardships of refugee life, and did not reunite with her loved ones for many years. And even after all of that, she continues to struggle. Three long and painful decades have passed with no end to her labors in sight. I believe that I am in a position to change my mother’s situation. I believe I can bring greater meaning to her years of misfortune. I hope that one day I can proudly say to her, “Mother, your life has not been wasted. Your efforts and decisions have brought me into the world and instilled in me values that make me a hard-working family man. And I am leading a comfortable life.”

My grandmother recently told me, “There are two types of parents: parents who live for themselves and parents who live for their children.” As one of the latter, my grandmother raised her daughter to value the lives and happiness of her children above her own. She said that she regularly felt the pain of my mother’s struggles and earnestly wished to see her out of her harsh circumstances. I now realize that through her relentless efforts to raise me as an American, my mother granted me a free education, the freedom

to choose the person I want to become, the opportunity to care for my own children, and the ability to repay her sacrifices. As my grandmother's eyes started to water, I told her to weep freely. My own tears will not drip down until I use my mother's gifts to rescue her at last from her tireless labor on my behalf and give her a chance to feel the comfort and happiness she has given me.