

Mother and I

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Abstract

This is a qualitative research paper. The author used interviews and a narrative approach to present the stories of the author and her mother. The methodology, background, educational experiences, marriage, and religious beliefs are recorded, as the author and her mother are participants in this living account. The main findings are as follows: Oral history is a way to collect history, which is derived from human memory. Education and marriage are related to patriarchal, religious beliefs can be redeemed

Keyword: oral history, education, marriage, patriarchal, religious beliefs

I interviewed my mother during winter vacation on Jan. 4 and 5, 2003, when she visited me in Taitung, Taiwan. We created a two-hour tape. Subsequently, she gave me a 60 minute tape about her marriage that she herself had taped. I had asked her to record her story so I would know her perspective on her marriage. We had a good talk. When I interviewed her she didn't cry; but in her own tape she cried considerably. Some stories were repeated. She was a really unhappy woman for many years. I had answers that I had sought for many years. For instance, why and when had she left our family? What happened in our family from her viewpoint? If I had more time I would also like to interview my grandma, aunt Pu (my father's sister) and my sister and brothers. Even we all lived together, each one saw things differently. In this article I'll present my mother's stories and mine. This includes our background, educational experiences, marriage, and religious beliefs.

Methodology

Oral history is a method of collecting and keeping historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life. The final product reflects the combined effort of the interviewer and interviewee in the recollections of a unique historical account. Oral history is an important way of keeping the experiences of past events and of imparting those experiences to young people (Everett, 1992). The original subjects of oral history interviews were the people who were significant in history, such as presidents or other great leaders or national heroes. Other people played a part in an event or experience, such as a soldier of World II, or a witness of 9/11 in the USA. However, a family history is an interview with certain people in a family who are passing along their views of family memories and events for future generations to know and understand.

I agree with Hudson & Santora (2003) who stated that "we hope that teachers who see themselves as part of history, as well as researchers and teachers of history, may have a stronger commitment to a transformative and more laboratory history education that upsets the one-way flow of knowledge from teacher to student and allow students to become partners in their own education."(p. 211). Oral history highlights the ways in which we have all been actors in and affected by historical events. We can learn about history through the personal stories of each other. "Silent dancing" is a personal narrative written by Judith Ortiz Cofer's (1989) recollections of the bilingual-bicultural childhood that molded her personality as a writer and artist. Ortiz Cofer was the daughter of a Navy man. She was born in Puerto Rico and spent her childhood traveling between the small island town of her birth and New Jersey. In clear, concise prose and in poems she writes many stories of her family, school events, as well as her friends and neighbors, etc. This book is a narrative text, a secret door opening to memories that have been locked away long ago. My paper will also use a narrative approach in presenting the stories of my mother and me, as we are also actors of our own lives.

Background

My mother was born September, 1930, in Tainan, Taiwan. I was born when she was 21 years old. In that era Taiwan people were poor. Japan governed Taiwan and its surrounding islands as part of the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895. Taiwan was under Japan's rule for 50 years from 1895 to 1945. On October 25, 1945, Taiwan was officially handed back to the Nationalist Government (Kuomintang or KMT) of China, led by Chiang Kai-Shek. This was because the Nationalist Government that took possession of Taiwan was itself defeated in the Chinese civil war that lasted from 1946 to 1949. This war saw the rise of the Chinese Communist Party to power and the establishment of the People of Republic China (PRC) in 1949. The lasting remnants of the KMT'S fighting forces and government leaders fled to Taiwan while the Communist led by Mao Zedong, were taking over the mainland. In the mid-60's, the US gave over \$4 billion to Taiwan for economic and military aid which enabled Taiwan to continue to invest in the military, while building our economy. We were a large family of 15 members, all living together. This included grandparents, grandfather's older brother (Great Uncle), my parents, three uncles, four aunts, my sister, and two brothers. According to my mother, my grandpa had had four marriages. My father's mother was grandpa's second wife. Unfortunately, my grandparents divorced. My aunt, Pu's mother, was the third wife and she died at a young age. Later, grandpa married his fourth wife. My great uncle, grandpa's older brother, also lived with us. His wife died early, too. His daughter, Plum, was married and moved out of our home before I was born. My grandpa and great uncle owned many acres of land. The main crops were sugar cane and rice. The rice and sugarcane were both sold for money. Some of the new young sprouts were fed to the cows. Yams were the main food, but for the Chinese Festivals a little chicken and pork were added to our usual diet. Many people living in the country ate food that came from nature; for example, wild birds, mice, rabbits, crickets, frogs, snails, clams and mushrooms. We ate wild birds, mice and rabbits by skinning them, then removing the internal organs before frying them in ginger and sesame oil. We removed the internal organs from the shells of snails and crickets before frying them. Frogs, clams, and mushrooms were cooked in soup. Perhaps we were like barbarians because the food was highly deficient. These foods provided nutrition, calcium and protein for me. I often ate the young leaves of the guava tree, with a little salt, which provided many vitamins. At that time we had no junk food, we had no insecticides and the population was less than now. Before I went to school, we did not have electricity; at night we used a coal oil lamp.

The first two years of my elementary school life we did not have shoes to wear to school. We did not have shampoo but used the husks from the fruit of a tree, instead. We had little toilet paper; so sometimes we used a stem of a bamboo tree. During childhood, I took care of my two younger uncles, Gin (5 years younger than me) and Thong (8 years younger than me). I often took the water buffalo to the pasture so it could feed on grass. Sometimes I worked with my grandparents and other farmers in the field, or I stayed home to cook meals for the family. I remember the pan above the stove was heavy. The other things that I was assigned to do was to plant rice, pull out weeds from among the plants, pick fruit from the trees, feed the pigs, clean the pig pen and prepare the pig's food. I was usually tired. Sometimes while we took a break, I fell asleep on a ridge between the fields where we planted rice. Each field had 5 parallel rows planted from end to end. Often our family members went down the mountainside to cut wood. We brought many loads of wood from the mountainside back up the hill. Then, the water buffalo pulled the wagon to carry the wood for the fire back home. These different jobs were tiresome, but helped develop my character and my courage. Today when I face a challenge or a difficult situation, I never give up. In those days, the girls took care of the younger children at home. Many girls were uneducated or had only graduated from elementary school. The women would stay home to cook and work in the kitchen or help with the family. In sunshine and rain we worked hard on the farm; I tasted the bitterness of sweat running down my body and dropping to the ground. I didn't want to do farm work or slave on the land all my life, so I made a decision to get a college education and search for a better job. I didn't like woman/farmer model - - I wanted to study and learn more so I could improve my life. One day my father said to me: "Yahui, if you were a boy that dream would be wonderful!" I didn't like my father saying that I had to be a boy to have that dream, because I couldn't change my gender orientation. Mother said that I was a baby girl and not accepted by family members. I was a second child and nobody liked to hold me. I cried a lot, my mother said.

Education

My mother received a Japanese education in elementary school. In an effort to destroy Chinese culture and national tradition in Taiwan, the Japanese introduced their style schools in an attempt to indoctrinate Taiwanese children with their language, culture and traditions, where neither Mandarin nor the local dialect was taught.

My mother had only the 6 years of elementary school education. She then cared for the children of her elementary school Japanese principal, whose wife was sick. At that time our society provided education for boys but neglected to do so for girls. My eldest uncle and I were the same age. He started kindergarten at 3 years of age, and continued to age 6, while I stayed home. I envied my uncle as he went off to preschool. When I reached the magic age of 6, I enjoyed attending elementary school. The school policy prohibited us from speaking our mother language, Taiwanese, as we were expected to speak Mandarin. But, my grandpa and parents had been educated in a Japanese school, so they spoke Japanese as well as Taiwanese. We did, however speak our mother tongue, Taiwanese, at home. Even language can be used as a control instrument to create the conformity. At this time (1950s) the United States government helped my country by providing us with milk for elementary school students. I really enjoyed this luxury. My father, having graduated from Tainan Normal School, became an elementary school teacher. Later, about the time I finished junior high school, he went to Japan for advanced study. After finishing junior high school, I attended a day of orientation for matriculation into Tainan Senior Girls High School. I didn't continue because grandpa couldn't support me due to the cost of books, room and board and other incidental expenses. Since high school was not an option I looked for other opportunities. It came to my attention that it was possible to attend Pintung Junior Teacher's College (it became a 4-year teachers' college in 1987). Originally, this was a 5-year college and included free tuition, uniforms, books, shoes and food. This was my choice because it gave me an opportunity to pursue my dream.

In Pintung Teachers College, all students were required to live in the dormitories. All of us were training to become elementary school teachers. School life was like the army -- very militaristic. In the morning we got up and went to the sports field to do some gymnastics or running for our body's health. At night we were to be in the classroom to study by ourselves until nine o'clock. There was a teacher supervising us, recording whether we were in the study hall. After nine p.m. we went to the playground for roll call, to sing a song of a political group called "Save the Nation" and then returned to the dormitory. After bed check we often left the room and went to a lighted area to study, as there was never enough time for thorough lesson preparation. The first year in Junior College our class had forty-five girls and we lived together in one large room. It had twenty-three iron bunk beds. The washbasin and shoes were put on the floor beneath the bed; the towel, toothpaste and toothbrush were inside the washbasin. It was required that the quilt be folded into a square. A strict drillmaster checked on us many times a day. We took our bath in a public room where there was a hot pool in one corner and around the room were several long sinks with coldwater faucets. We put hot water in our basins, and then went to the coldwater faucets to cool the hot water. We bathed in front of this long sink and washed our clothes there. At first, I was embarrassed to bathe in this environment but eventually got used to it. Four years later a new dormitory was built housing only six people to a room with a bathroom and private showers. I had the experience of collective life in this college and learned how to respect my classmates when our customs and characters were different. Our college stressed sports, manual labor, and activities. We had physical labor classes two hours each week when we cut the grass and cleaned the campus grounds and/or classrooms, bathrooms, dining hall and swimming pool. During this 2-hour period, the school broadcast classical music that everyone could hear. Also, the instructor of each class worked together with the students. The instructors were very kind. Sometimes our instructors bought cakes and candy for the whole class. It was memorable. The first year our instructor was a young man in charge of forty-five, 15-year-old girls. This instructor taught us English and sometimes visited with us in the dormitory. We had nine Junior Teachers Colleges and three Normal Universities in Taiwan. They were training students to become elementary and secondary school teachers. We accepted the training; we read, we ran, we jumped, we danced, we sang, we drew pictures, we learned to play instruments (such as: piano and some Chinese instruments). We often had competition between classes. In college we also spoke Mandarin, for if we spoke Taiwanese, we were fined.

Marriage

When my mother was 18 years old and my father was 20, they got married. Mother had graduated from elementary school then spent 3 years helping care for the principal's children. At this age she was just learning how to work. She said that her father had spoiled her. When he wanted her to cut the grass she would say: "I'm afraid, it will cut my hand". Then her father would order her sister-in-law to do it. My mother also told me, in 1945, after the Japanese were defeated and "Taiwan recovery", many soldiers came from Mainland China and reached their village. The soldiers brought guns and wore ammunition belts. Some women were raped by them in the fields of cane and died.

My mother said that her father was afraid about she would be raped by the soldiers of China, so he wanted her to marry someone quickly. He would hide her in relative's houses in another county, Chintang. She didn't like that. Many matchmakers came to grandpa's home to introduce young men to her.

My mother said that my father visited her county where he was surveying 16 young ladies to decide if and which one he liked best. My grandparents, uncles and aunt Plum, at different times, went to Nancy to secretly observe my mother many times before she married my father. Then grandpa put mother's birth date and time beside a bowl of water on the table for three days. When nothing (i.e. fly or ant) fell down into the bowl, they said that showed mother was good and clean. Later, when they had a big wedding; she rode in a sedan chair accompanied by Chinese music with many people in attendance.

The next day mother wanted to wash the clothes but my grandpa instructed my grandma and aunt Pu do the wash. According to mother, they observed there was no blood on her underwear which made them doubt that mother had been a virgin. What they didn't know was that it was a week later before father and mother had their first sexual encounter and consummated their marriage. Mother said the first night she was afraid and slept in the corner of the bed. She didn't know what to do or how to behave at the outset of their marriage. Initially, father only touched her on the shoulder with his hand. She also said that her mother in-law saw that she had no dowry, so they treated her badly. Four months later, my father began studying at Tainan Normal School and was there for three or four years. My paternal grandmother was actually my father's stepmother. She was only 10 years older than my mother. Both my grandmother and my mother ended up expecting babies at the same time. My first uncle was born in June, 1951 and I was born the following November. As time passed my grandmother had an additional daughter and two sons, which I cared for, sometimes carrying or playing with them. We were a traditional family; living, working and eating together. The relationship among grandparents, great uncle, and mother was troubled from the beginning. My mother had never done farm work and couldn't cut wood or grass quickly. If neighbors helped her, our family suspected her of having an abnormal relationship with them. Two years after the marriage, she gave birth to my elder sister, due to my father hadn't made sufficient preparations to purchase the special tissue paper. She delivered my elder sister onto the dirt floor of the bedroom. She said my younger brother and I were born in a bed. Throughout these early years she worked very hard. Sometimes she was afraid to cook enough food for herself out of fear of the family. Everyone else ate first and didn't leave much for her. Often she felt hungry but continued working a full schedule. After father graduated from Tainan Normal School, mother took my elder sister and lived with him in Tainan for about 6 months during which time grandma gave birth to my first uncle. Grandpa wanted mother to come back home to take care of the family. The relationship between mother and father worsened. Prior to this move, my parents had many pleasant times and even some intimate love stories. For example, father taught mother how to ride a bike on Sunday afternoons. He bought a hat and umbrella for mother and even measured aunt Plum's body to make a dress for mother, because aunt Plum attended my father's elementary school. He also taught mother how to the spell in Mandarin and how to sing the song, "My husband left me 7 miles away, made me stay home alone; I can't eat and sleep, my hands and feet became weak; day and night I miss my husband, my heart was very sad".

According to mother, when they slept, father held mother tightly and sometimes they talked all night. My mother said that my father took off her clothes and helped her to dress after they had made love; he loved her very much. Sometimes when they went to cut wood, my father would read a book while my elder sister slept on the ground and mother cut wood. Then father carried my sister and mother carried the wood home. The first two years after he was out of school, father came directly home to my mother and the family at the close of the school day.

Mother had come from a poor family which had very little, so father's family disliked her. When she was pregnant with my sister, she needed to climb on the roof of the chicken house to work with my grandparents. She felt wronged because she couldn't move as quickly as they expected. She carried many buckets of water from the well. Because we had 3 sows, 4-5 boars, 20 plus baby pigs, she had to cook 3 huge pans of pig food. When she went to the mountain to cut the grass, a young male neighbor occasionally helped which upset the family and brought accusations of having an affair. It was sad..., at midnight one night and because the door had been left unlocked, my grandfather's elder brother went to her bed and asked my mother to have sex with him. Mother told father and he said, "Why didn't you lock the door, do you want to invite ghosts to write your prescription?" (Chinese slang, which means by leaving the door unlocked she was encouraging anyone to come and hurt her; even to this day we lock our bedroom door at night while sleeping.) Father didn't comfort her. Mother thought that maybe the children had gone to the bathroom and forgot to lock the door. The toilet was wherever we squatted on the ground nearby in the fields.

About this time mother discovered that my father had brought a lady home and had gone fishing with her. Little by little the relationship between my parents changed. Life in our home was very hard. During mother told me she had taken a golden necklace and two rings to a friend's home to protect them. One evening my father found that the golden necklace and rings had disappeared. She wouldn't tell him where they were. I vaguely remember my parents fighting on the living room floor (dirt floor). My father sat on my mother's upper body and hit her face. Mother said that my grandpa said "Give her urine!" (Piss on her) Later that night she went to the river where she cried and cried. She visited a great uncle who was a brother of grandpa's third wife (Aunt Pu's mother). He insisted that my mother saw a doctor, who checked her over. She obtained documentation of her bruises and sued my father. She went back home to her parents. My father went to her home twice to try to get her to return home with him, but she didn't go. She said a neighbor told her she needed to talk to my father about moving out of my grandparents' house. Father countered by telling her he couldn't afford to support her and us since he planned to return to school for further study. The negotiation failed, so my mother returned the NT150 (Taiwan dollars) that father had given her for medicine. Soon thereafter father went to Japan to study and mother decided to attempt to again live with father's family. However, grandpa told her that my father wasn't home and he didn't want her to bother his family. Mother went to her own family home where she began working for her neighbors. They paid her NT10 dollars a day. She said that her sister-in-law mistreated her, so she went to Tainan and worked as a servant in private homes while at night she learned how to make clothes. Later she became a sewing teacher for many young women. Mother left our family when she was 27 years old. She continued working in other peoples' homes in Tainan. Father told me that mother was very clever and devious. She sued him and the newspaper reported this news which decreased his self esteem, therefore he said that he could not forgive her. Father finished his bachelor's degree in Japan. Subsequent to this, he had an affair with a female student and had a baby boy out of wedlock. During this period my father sued mother for a divorce. Curiously, this girlfriend sued my mother, claiming damage to her reputation, but later, married another man. I remember when I was in fifth grade that my parents divorced; mother was 34 years old. She remarried when she was 38 years old. My father remarried when he was 36.

In our large family, I was lonely. I also felt nobody loved me. Many family members lived together and the interaction was complex. Mother did many farm chores and found the pressure of work extremely difficult, plus she didn't get the love and attention she should have from my father. My grandparents taught us that my mother was a bad, crazy woman who had deserted us. For so many years I truly disliked and had contempt for her.

Of course, my stepmother loved her own children to the same degree that she disliked my father's children from his ex-wife and girlfriend. When I visited them, I needed to be very careful of my family's reputation in speaking with other relatives, servants or father's students who might be in the house. I couldn't even call my father "Papa". As time passed, my father resigned from his job in the Ministry of Justice and went abroad again to study in Japan, this time at Ming-Ze University, where he received a master's degree and Doctorate of Law. He had been an elementary school teacher, then a professor and a lawyer. My stepmother didn't like my idea of doing advanced study because it would necessitate spending more money. My husband and I met at the church while we were both teaching in the same town but at different schools. Both of us sang in the choir which went on several field trips as a group. Our wedding was simple and wonderful. It took place in Christ Presbyterian Church, Taitung, Taiwan, in July, 1980. My grandpa, father, Uncle Gin and my elder sister came to my wedding but my mother didn't take part. She had come the day before the wedding and brought a gift but I was so afraid the family would fight that I wanted her to leave. After I was married I was free to visit my mother. She was able to visit me, also. This was a relief, but the greatest blessings came from my church family.

Religious Belief

After finishing a year of teaching in an elementary school in Taipei, I went to Changfa University to study in 1974. I majored in Guidance and Counseling. It was a wonderful time where I found a new sense of fellowship with Jesus Christ and more fully recognized the love of God. It was amazing that I was able to rise above my background. All feelings of inferiority, wrongs, upsets, etc, were being removed little by little. It is impossible to avoid parental divorce. However the children should not be denied the privilege of visiting and receiving the love of both parents. My religious beliefs have enabled me to forgive my grandparents, my parents, uncles and aunts who badly mistreated me. I felt I was a sinner, too, because when my mother left and then revisited us, my grandparents encouraged me to hit my mother.

They lined up all her children and said, “Hit her to make her leave.” I remember she cried. I wandered in the dark for many years and could not bring myself to forgive others. However, as I have learned from the Bible, I know that forgiveness is not denying the painful consequences of the evil actions or forgetting those actions, but forgiveness is allowing the Lord to remove all the obstacles in our hearts that prevents an intimate relationship with Him and others. As a member of God’s family, I was released and freed from the deep hurt little by little. I have a good marriage. My grandpa-in-law and parents-in-law lived with us four years before my grandpa-in-law passed away. With the love of the Lord, we have gotten along well. I know there are difficulties in a large family. The Jesus' commandments in the New Testament are guidelines for individual behavior. This is truly good for today’s life. Not because it is a western belief but because these values are good for all times and for all citizens of the world. I have a sweet Christian family. My husband is a high school teacher. My daughter and son, they both are smart. They were obtained the Master degree, and had the sweet marriage. In Christ I know I am a significant individual; I am His child. He has helped me become what I am today. I am realistically aware of all the things that have happened to me in the past. The memories remain but now I realize they have become blessings. I studied at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) where I received a master's degree in Educational Psychology in December, 1995, and a Ph.D. of Educational Psychology in December, 2004. Through God’s leading and protection, my academic dreams were realized. I compared the painful experiences of the family to the many trees I have observed on the campus of UNC. Notwithstanding the many scars and knots on them, they stand firmly anchored in the ground and stretch their bodies and limbs in all directions and under all conditions, whether it's blowing, raining or snowing. Frattroli (2001) states that disequilibrium, falling down, and bumping into people is good. Indeed, from a psychotherapeutic perspective, they are not merely good but essential to a fully human existence. I know the Lord will give me many chances to learn to glorify Him. I know very clearly that I can do anything. I am merely His instrument. I purpose that the Lord will guide me the rest of my life. When I transcribed the tapes that I interviewed with my mother, I found our history and background was poor, with little food, no paper, and not enough money. The family members didn’t have enough love. I try to depend on God to help me forgive people that have hurt me. I hope mother will believe in Him. To this day she is a Buddhist. I respect her religious belief, and pray for her healthy continuingly, because it is very painful she washes her kidney three times a week. May God bless her!

Conclusion

My background influenced how I have managed my career because I came from a very unusual and dysfunctional family. Now I have the chance to excel. My educational experiences provided knowledge and training to teach and prepared me with a strong will and the healthy body that I have. I have learned a lot of social skills in relationship with classmates and teachers, and, in addition, basic abilities for guiding students, staff, community, and my family. Recalling the many years that have come and gone; I see my training was a benefit even though it was an uphill challenge. I like Denzin’s words (1989): “This sharing will allow us to write life documents that speak to the human dignity, the suffering, the hopes, the dreams, the lives gained, and the lives lost by the people we study.” (p. 83). Oral history is a way to collect history, which is derived from human memory. I think it is meaningful to write my mother and my own story. Education and marriage are related to patriarchal, religious beliefs can be redeemed. I pray this document will become testimony to the ability of a human being to endure, to overcome any threats of the moment that surround and bombard us in all aspects of life, including education, history, and everyday life.

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