

Love Unspoken

by Ruth Lam

Ruth Lam and her husband Peter are currently ministering as poverty relief workers sent to East Asia as missionaries with the First Evangelical Church Association. Ruth was born to missionary parents and lived in three different countries during her childhood and youth. Vowing never to become a missionary herself, she encountered the quiet call of God during her junior year in University. In 1999, Ruth and Peter along with their daughter Kaitlin Emily abandoned the American dream of good jobs and financial security in obedience to the Lord's calling to serve the poor and the unreached in East Asia. Being a MK and TCK, Ruth is familiar with transition and loss as well as the gifts of grace from God to learn to love another culture, cultivate trust, and be surprised each day with the lessons the Lord teaches her as she serves others in a cross-cultural setting. She has a deep compassion for MKs on the field and finds it a privilege to walk alongside her daughters, Kaitlin Emily and Analynn Joy and other MKs in her field of ministry.

Article from Growing up Global, Cindy Loong, Shepherd International Church Limited, Hong Kong.
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Who am I?

One of the most challenging questions for an MK is the question, “Where are you from?” With this question, comes, “Who am I?” When I was in second grade, my parents and I moved to live in Singapore as missionaries. We happened to live where there were many foreigners. The previous director who held my dad's new job had the office and his residence in this part of Singapore. Some of our friends in the

neighborhood went to the American School. We went to local public school with the national school kids. After school, we would play baseball on the street, or on rainy days, walk in the drains filled with rainwater. One day, two Caucasian kids came over to my gate. We started to play. They asked me where I was from. I told them I was “American.” They didn’t believe me. They said I was lying. We started a shouting match.

“I am too!”

“Are not!”

“Am too!”

“No, you’re not!” The match went on. I had to prove that I was the real authentic thing.

“Wait till I prove it to you!” I shouted. And with that, I raced into my home and asked mom for my US passport.

She questioned me, “Why do you want your passport?”

“I just need it.” My mom would not give it to me. Being so flustered, I could not explain why it was so urgent for me to have it. Finally, I raced outside but the girls were gone. I couldn’t prove to them who I was. Who was I anyhow?

(Postscript: It is not until coming to know the Lord that the identity situation becomes less painful. I know I am the Lord’s child. Reading and learning about the Third Culture Kids’ Theory and experience has helped me put labels on who I am. Going to counseling has helped me grieve through events of my childhood and adolescence. I am a Third Culture Kid but also a Third Culture Adult now and I have two MKs of my own. I am OK with not being able to call one place my home. I am alright with the loss and the grief of losing valued friendships and familiar places, because I am a Third Culture person and that is how this life is. The trick is learning how to grieve and put my identity in Jesus)

Enculturation Problems

We didn’t have much extra money when I was growing up. And when challenges came, the motto was “Trust in God”. When I was in fourth grade, in Singapore, I struggled so much in Chinese class, and that was just the tip of the iceberg. The year and a half or so before moving to Singapore was spent in San Rafael, California, in a little sleepy town as my mom and dad furthered their study at Golden Gate Seminary. Mom and Dad tried to speak to my brother and me in Chinese while we were on furlough, but we were reluctant participants. We were Americans, not Chinese. So, my brother and I really lost a lot of our Chinese language when we stayed in America for that period of time. When we went to Singapore again for the second time, I had a hard time in Chinese class. My parents didn’t have extra money for tutoring. Everybody in Singapore had tutors, so it seemed, but we didn’t. Mom helped us the best she could, but it was a big struggle.

The struggle continued for the next 3 years. However, my recollection only becomes clearer when I was in 7th grade (Secondary 1). I was a very good student. I worked hard but no amount of working made me feel comfortable in Chinese class. When Wang Lao She (Teacher Wang) called me to read aloud, I would cringe inside. My palms would get sweaty and I stumbled through the words on the page. My sympathetic friend sitting behind me would whisper me the words I couldn’t read. It was such a hopeless feeling, that I think the teacher even gave up asking me questions or making me read. Once when we had a substitute, the teacher asked me to read and the whole class said, “Teacher, she can’t read. Don’t ask her. “I looked like everyone else, but inside, I was not all Chinese, especially not Singaporean Chinese.

However, my dad and mom said, "It's OK. Just do your best and trust." I trusted God, but I felt terrible inside about my Chinese. I felt stupid for struggling so much. Ironically, God has called me back to a Chinese speaking place. He has redeemed a lot of my childhood pain. My Chinese is still not that great!

Not Enough Closure

Faith was a big thing in my family. Talking openly, especially about negative things or uncomfortable things, wasn't done in a very healthy manner. When I was a child, from the time I was 2 to 15, I lived in 10 different places and three geographic locations in the world.

I remember it was summer school in 1979. We were in San Rafael. My mom and dad had enrolled my brother and I in summer school. I did gymnastics. That was so fun. All my friends like Nikki, Alexander and Alice were all there. On the last day of summer school, my mom drove me to Alice's apartment complex. I gave her my blue bike with the silver handlebars. We had a station wagon then, and the back of it was all packed with our belongings. We were leaving. I don't remember packing up our stuff or talking about it. I don't remember mom and dad dealing with the sadness and grief of leaving. It was just something we did, and we just packed and left. There weren't many words that were spoken to each other about the loss. If I did talk about it, dad and mom would negate the sad feelings and say that we would be okay. At least we were together. However, I remember the tears staining my face as I waved goodbye to Alice, who stood at the curb with my blue bicycle.

Inadequate closure brings much grief and negative coping patterns. My parents are western in many ways. They are not traditional or stereotypical Chinese parents who expect you to be high achievers or have good professions. They just expect us to do our best, love and follow the Lord. They are however, quite Chinese, when it comes to emotions and the communicating of hard emotions.

When I was fifteen, a few months shy of sixteen, mom and dad dropped me off at my grandmother and my aunt's home in Massachusetts. I was going to go to 12th grade and live in America. I was excited but didn't foresee the pain that would come with separation from my parents. Though we moved a lot as a family, we were always together. I took for granted what that was like. I did well in Singapore but the school system was very rigid. There were not many choices. I was a good student and tracked in the Pure Arts stream, studying subjects like Literature and History. There was no chance to study Computer or anything different in your stream. So, together with mom and dad, we decided that it was better system for me to go back to America.

On a snowy first day of school, I was going to attend Newton North High school, a few blocks from my aunt's home. My mom and dad had to leave. They had to catch a flight to some city where Dad was preaching. The snow fell hard that day. Through the window, and through my tears. I saw the flakes fluttering down. My dad didn't say much. He just said he loved me and was proud of me.

Before that day, we didn't talk about how hard it would be to leave each other. We never discussed why life was like this or why they couldn't stay in America for a while. We didn't express the sadness in words of missing each other. I didn't dare ask dad to stay because I knew he couldn't. There were meetings, schedules to keep; he was on the deputation trail. All the unspoken questions I had, laid dormant in my mind. So, I left for school as they hopped into the car to go to the airport.

I mustered up all my courage to walk into that school building. There were kids all over; black, white, very tall, very big, very loud. I willed myself to stop crying and just make it. Just find the classes

and go to school. Don't think about the pain of not seeing mom and dad for a long time. Don't think about missing them. Block out the screaming voice that says, "Why can't it be different?" I walked to my assigned locker and tried to open the door. As hard as I tried, I couldn't get it to open. I never saw a locker in real life, only in the movies. Finally, after several minutes of pulling and pushing and biting my lips to avoid the despair that filled my heart, I spoke to a very tall brown-haired boy next to me. "Could you open this for me?" The look on his face revealed the disbelief he had that someone would not know how to open a locker. "Click" went the locker and the door opened. I muttered "thanks" and that began my life in America. It also ended for me the reality that our family was going to be together in one place at one time.

God is Faithful

As a sophomore at Biola University, one of the most stressful times for me was "Pay Day" at the Financial Services office. My brother Mark was also at Biola and he was a junior. In order to attend Biola, my brother worked two jobs and took a part-time load so he would not have to take out a loan. I had a partial scholarship, took out a small student loan and worked to get some money to pay the school tuition. Since we did not have enough money to pay the full semester cost of the tuition up front, we would pay in installments.

It was the fourteen of the month. The next day was the dreaded day to hand in tuition funds at the Financial Services Office. Mark and I sat at the cafeteria discussing our plan of action to face the Financial Service office. "We'll just have to tell them we don't have the money," Mark reasoned. "Will they let us pay a little bit?" I questioned. We decided the only thing we could do was pray." Lord, you know our needs. We can't come up with \$ 4000 today. Please help us. "After talking it through, Mark and I decided to go to the office after chapel the next day.

Students streamed out of the gym on the fifteenth of that month. It was THE DAY and we didn't have the money. Passing by the post office where we would collect our personal mail, Mark and I went to check our mailboxes. His box was around the corner from mine. Putting the key into the slot, I opened the box. "Junk mail, junk mail; hey, what's this?" It was a letter from North Carolina, Westover Church. I quickly tore the envelope open.

"Dear Ruth,

This Christmas, our church took up a special offering for all the MKs we support. The offering total was _____ and we have divided this equally among all the children of our missionaries. Enclosed is a check for \$2000. Have a good year at school."

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