

Pang Houa Vang

Language Places

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### Learning to Say 'Push'

I stared at the clock and choked back the tears that were burning in my eyes. The ticking of the clock seemed so slow to me as I sat there anxiously waiting for the principal's door to open. I started fidgeting with the ice pack on my right knuckles because it was starting to lose its effect. Or maybe I just couldn't feel the cooling sensation from the ice pack because my knuckles were starting to get numb. *My parents are going to kill me!* I kept thinking to myself. I tried to imagine what I would say to my parents. I was starting to get restless. I was thinking about ways in which I could get out of this dilemma that I had I put myself into. But what would I say? I mean it wasn't really my fault that that little Hmong boy Sue made fun of my broken English. His English didn't seem *that* much better than mine either. Was it my fault that he pushed me down on to the black top? I had to retaliate didn't I? I couldn't have let him get away with that? It's not my fault that his bloody nose was the result of my fist was it? What should I say to my parents? I figured that it would go something like this:

"Niam, tsis yog vim kuv na! (Mom, it's not my fault.)"

Next, my mom would probably frown and ask me to explain. Then I would go on to elaborate on how that terrible boy Sue made fun of me and pushed me. Of course my parents would understand! Sure maybe I shouldn't have hit him, but I couldn't just let him make fun of my broken English! Yeah, mom and dad would understand. Wouldn't they?

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I thought a little longer about what I was saying. Yeah right, like they would really understand! They probably would complain and tell me not to cause any more trouble. I could hear my parents' words echoing in my ears already.

“Mi ntxhais. Txawm hais tias lawv yog tus txhaum lawm los, kav liam. Peb niam qhuav tuaj tshiaj xwb, koj tsis txoj ua teej meem rau peb rau qhov peb tsis paub lawv txoj kev cai thiab lawv cov lus zoo heev! Tsis txhob txhoj pob lawm! (My daughter, though it is their fault, we are new comers and it's not good for our family if you are getting in trouble because we don't know this language well nor do we understand their customs very well.)”

There's no point in arguing with my parents. They were always right! Every time that I tried to prove them wrong, one way or another they always managed to prove me wrong. Mom and dad were like the queen and king to me. It seemed as though, every time I spoke out against something that they said, they always got me back. My dad would often say to me in Hmong, “Pang, you are a girl. You should not speak out against your parents. That is very rude. Just do what you are told.” I thought that maybe they would make it a special case this time. I thought to myself that maybe, just maybe this time it would be different when I told them that it was not my fault. But I knew that this wasn't the case. My dad often told me in Hmong, “You should never blame others for your own mistakes. You should always humble yourself. Even when it isn't your own fault. No one likes to be around those people who think so highly of themselves.” I took a deep breath and hung my head in shame. I was doomed.

I glanced up at the clock one more time. Why on earth was it taking so long! Although I couldn't tell time, I knew that the longer hand would mover over one spot every time a minute went by. But to me, this clock seemed broken. Of course in actuality it was working just fine,

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but because I was so anxiously awaiting my 'trial', it seemed as though the minute hand would refuse to move.

I started to wonder what I should say to the principal as well. Would he be able to understand my broken English? Well, whatever I was going to say, I had to figure it out quick because the principal's door opened and he stepped out with the little Hmong boy who was stuffing his nose with tissues to prevent the blood from pouring onto the carpet. He walked passed me and gave me an evil stare, as if to say, "I'm gonna get you!" He went next door to the nurse's office.

"Come on inside," the principal said.

I was suddenly reminded of the situation that I was in. I took a deep breath and walked into the office. He gestured for me to sit down and I did. He sat down next to me and folded his hands on his lap. Then very gently he asked me, "So tell me what happened?"

I was ashamed to look at him. Avoiding his eyes I said in a broken English voice, "He..he.. hurt me. I...am.. good girl. I..."

"Yes, yes, but I need to know what happened. This is serious." He seemed impatient. The only thing running through my head was the fear that my parents were going to find out about this incident.

"My mom and dad...they not know?"

"I'm sorry but we've already called your parents. They will be here shortly. Sue tells me that he did not do anything to you and that you just punched him for no reason. Is this true?"

"No! He start it!"

"What did he do?"

"He...he... he start it..."

Unfortunately, I could not remember how to say 'push' in English. I ended up getting in trouble of course because I could not communicate in English properly. I think back to those days in Franklin Elementary and ask, "Where were all the interpreters?" I guess they assumed that since I was going to school, I should be able to understand the English language. The thing is, I understood it but I just couldn't speak it very well. So I became very determined to learn the language and use it correctly.

Growing up in school was always a struggle for me. I had a hard time learning the English language. I did not remember getting much help from my teachers and in a way I always felt as though they found me a bit of an annoyance. I was always talking in class. My teachers always got sick of hearing my whispers. It wasn't that I was trying to act up, but sometimes, I wouldn't understand what the directions were and would ask around. I chose not to ask my teacher to repeat the directions because I got yelled at a couple of times for 'not listening', when in fact I was listening, but was having trouble processing what was said to me. I didn't remember getting any ESL (English is my Second Language) help until about the end of second grade or so. And even so, I only attended ESL classes once a week. That was not nearly enough for me.

I remember spending countless hours watching PBS shows such as Sesame Street and Reading Rainbow to try to understand the language better. In fact, I believe that if I did not have access to these two programs, I would not have been exited out of ESL in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Most of my Hmong friends remained in the program until they passed the examination in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grades. I remembered the years I spent trying to perfect the English language. Like Gerta Lerner in her essay *Living in Translation*, who became obsessed with the English language and

chose to let go of her own native tongue, I myself made the decision to let go of my native language to focus solely on perfecting the new language.

At first, I was infatuated with my English skills and proudly exercised it. All up until my senior year in High school, I thought of myself as a wonderful Hmong student because I had achieved a great status in the American society. I was in the National Honors Society, an active leader in many groups and clubs, as well as received several plaques and letters of recognitions. There were no teachers I knew that did not have high hopes for me and my supervisors at work have continuously asked for me to return when I have left a job. I was proud of how well I had emerged into the American society. At home, I no longer spoke in Hmong to my parents. Instead, I would answer everything in English. My parents would get so upset with me. To upset them even more, I would often talk back in English. This only upset my parents even more as one can imagine. Yet I continued to do it all throughout my elementary and high school years. Every time my parents got upset with me, my favorite words that I often responded with was, "so" and "I don't care." I would make me so happy when I was able to upset my parents. In some ways, I felt as though I was better than them because I could speak the English language so well. I felt superior to them. But that all changed that day I received a scholarship from the Hope Women Foundation my senior year in High School.

Upon hearing that I had received the scholarship, I was also informed that I would be required to give a speech as well as answer questions at a mother-daughter banquet. The thing was, this was a mother-daughter banquet for other Hmong women. Gerta Lerner went through similar experiences when she had to give speeches about her writing. She would mentally prepare answers to explain why a native-born German like herself, could not speak her language very well. I myself tried to do the same thing. They wanted me to be an inspiration to these girls

as well as a sign of hope to the older Hmong women. Appealing to the daughters was not a big deal to me. I could just give them a speech about my struggles and accomplishments. Appealing to the older women was a much bigger issue for me. How would they be able to understand me if I only spoke in English? There was no way that I could stand up there and only speak in English. The older women would find that disrespectful and probably be upset that I was chosen to represent the Hmong community. I thought that by switching off between English and Hmong, I would be able to solve this issue. But then I realized that that would not do anything but make it seem as though I am not fluent in either Hmong or English.

When that big day came, I walked up to the stand and took the microphone. I stared out into the crowd and paused. I kept telling myself to just breathe. I had spent so much time trying to figure out what to say that I ended not having anything to say. The older women started to look at one another and whisper. Some of the younger girls started giggling to themselves. I was ashamed of myself. The lady who was hosting the banquet noticed that I was having trouble so she took the microphone from me and asked me to tell everyone who I was and where I was going to go to college. She also told me to tell everyone what I was planning on majoring in. After that she handed me the microphone. With a shaky and semi-broken Hmong accent, I answered her questions. I tried not to switch off between Hmong and English, but found it utterly impossible. There were just too many words in English that I did not know in Hmong. How do you say *school* in Hmong? How do you say *undecided major* in Hmong? Some of the adult women stared at each other and other Hmong girls wandered off in their own conversations. My face started burning and I wanted to hide. Never in my life have I been so embarrassed! Here I was, an excellent student who was going to go to one of the finest schools in Wisconsin, and I could not even give a whole speech in Hmong! All of the sudden, I started

to feel so small. Was this the same girl that received all those awards and all those letters of recognition? Was this the same girl whose ex-boss keeps asking to return to work after she had quit? Was this the same girl who once thought that she was better than her own parents because she could speak a different language that they couldn't? My father's words started echoing through my head. "No one likes to be around those people who think so highly of themselves." My father had been able to prove me wrong again. Unfortunately, that was when I realized how much of my culture I had lost by suppressing my native language. In the American culture, I had excelled as an excellent student and leader. Yet in my own culture I had failed as a Hmong daughter.

When I came to college, I took a summer course in Hmong and attempted to re-learn my language. I was a little ashamed to tell my parents that I was attempting to re-learn my native language again. I had spent so much time trying to prove to them that I was better than them because I could excel so well in the American culture. I remembered all the times I would refuse to talk to them in Hmong. I remembered the rude comments that I would often make in English back to my parents. I remembered all the times my parents asked me in Hmong, "Why don't you speak Hmong anymore? What happened to you? Don't you care about your ancestors and your roots?" I remembered how I would often respond with a, "So, I don't care," in English. I took a whole lot of courage on my part, but I was finally able to humble myself enough so that I would be able to tell them. To my surprise my parents only smiled and told me how happy they were that I was trying to regain my roots. They did not rub it in my face of how foolish I had been the entire time that I was obsessing over perfecting the English language.

Since, I took this class during the summer, I only had eight weeks to learn the language. The clock was ticking again, but this time it was ticking too fast and before I knew it the summer

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was over. It was ridiculous how I found myself spending countless hours learning to read and write in Hmong. I couldn't remember the last time it took me three hours to read a five-page story nor could I remember a time in which I pulled an all-nighter to write a two-page essay. There were several times when I just broke down and cried continuously because I could not read without stumbling over words and write without spending fifteen minutes on trying to spell one word. It reminded me of being a kid and trying to read and write in English for the first time. Unfortunately though, this time, I did not have any PBS shows to watch that would teach me how to properly say words and write words in Hmong. But it really made me think a lot about my identity and who I really was. Was I only Hmong in nature? Have I really been able to successfully become 'white?'

I remembered my first assignment upon taking the Hmong course at the University of Madison. The assignment was to write about our identity. Since it was our first assignment, my teacher did not require that we write it in Hmong. I was extremely happy about that. When I got home, I sat and stared at the paper for a while. Finally I started writing:

*My name is Pang Houa Vang. That translates to flower cloud fence in Hmong. I come from the refugee camp of Ban Vinai Thai Land. I came to the United States as a Hmong immigrant...*

I stopped writing for a moment. What else was there to say about me? What else is there to say about my identity and who I am? I already talked about what my name really means. I also already talked about where I came from. I also wrote down that I came to the United States as an immigrant. So what else could I say? Oh yes..

*My dad's name is Khoua Doua Vang, and my mom's name is Mai Vue Vang. I like to play videogames and draw. I also enjoy watching Japanese animations and hanging out with my*

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*friends. I don't think I'm smart, I just think that I try hard in school. I have five brothers and no sisters. So naturally, I'm a big tomboy, even though I don't look like it. I think I'm just a tomboy in disguise because everyone tells me I dress so 'girly' and that I'm way too quite to be a tomboy. They don't know how wrong they are...*

I stopped again and read what I wrote. Video games? Japanese animations? Hanging out with friends? A true tomboy in disguise? Was this really all to *me*? Was this all to who I was? Only the beginning talked about being Hmong. Everything else was just gibberish on what I liked to do. Is that all I know about my parents? Why didn't I talk about any things that reflected my own culture? Maybe I could write more about my homeland in Ban Vinai Thai Land. So I picked up my pen and wrote:

*My homeland is Thai Land. I come from Ban Vinai. That is a refugee camp that holds a lot of refugees...*

I looked at my sentences and erased it. I had already written that. What else could I say about Ban Vinai? After several minutes of pondering I decided to write about something else. What about my parents?

*My mom married my dad when she was very young. She was only about 13 or 14 years old! In Thai Land, they wouldn't even let her learn to read and write and go to school. She had to do back breaking work all day long instead while her brothers went to school. She told me that when she was in Thai Land, her parents always told her that only boys were allowed to go to school. My dad on the other hand decided not to go to school. His family was poor, so all they did was work in the fields to try to grow enough food to eat and sell. I don't think that my dad should have gotten married so young and he should have gone to school instead. I also don't*

*think that my mom should have gotten married so young. I think that she should have told her parents that she was going to go to school no matter what and fight for it...*

I stopped and looked at the paragraph that I had just written. Was this really all I had to say about my parents? Didn't I have anything good to say about them? Why was I so arrogant? What made me write such terrible things about them? What made me think that I knew better than them?

I realized that although it was a great thing to be able to excel in the American society, I still had to remember that I am still a Hmong girl who was born in the refugee camp of Ban Vinai, Thai Land. Gerta Lerner writes in her essay *Living in Translation*, "The Nazis robbed me of my mother tongue, but the rest of the separation, of the violent severing of culture, was my own choice." (Lerner, p.48). I felt the same way that Lerner did. Going to dominantly white schools made me feel as though I was forced to learn the white culture and language. But in the end, it was my own choice to forget about my roots and learn to adapt to a different world. I started out trying to figure out how to say 'push' in English. In the end, I was trying to remember how to say it in Hmong.