



VAN FORUM NOTES

Life Stories of Ethnic Minority Elders

Tuesday, December 11, 2006

Unity - Unitarian Church

732 Holly Street,
St. Paul, MN

VAN Leadership Group member, Jane Leonard, opened the forum by asking the attendees to share a personal experience of being influenced by a person from a different generation. The responses from the group spoke to the power of stories, memory and of the lifelong impact that an influential person can have on one's life:

- Esther Peterson, who headed the Women's Bureau at the Department of Labor; I got to interview her; she influenced me to be a leader, but a "servant" leader.
- I was also going to say Esther Peterson. I read a book by her about women in Africa that influenced my current interest in meaningful work.
- A young Masai tribe naturalist that I met. The Masai life operates on stories; meeting this person made me realize the importance of telling my stories.
- I had a reading problem as a child and so focused on listening to others' stories – young, teenagers, and older people. Now I'm a story collector.
- I am the story teller in my family now because I'm the oldest. I will be teaching my son and his son how to make gefilte fish. When I make this dish, I don't need a recipe because my mother, who died in 1983, is in the kitchen with me. I can hear her.
- Cadre of female colleagues who taught me how to live single; many are now in their late 90s. I consider that one of the best gifts I have ever received.
- I worked in a nursing home for 35 years. I could listen to an older gentleman tell me about World War I, or ask an older lady about what spices she put in her pie. It was wonderful for them to share their stories and it also helped me to appreciate them as persons.

- I listened to stories about old St. Paul from my grandmother which I've passed on to my children.
- My father's stories about his two older sisters who were among the first nurses serving overseas in World War I. They became strong, centered and opinionated in a time when women did not have the opportunity to give voice.
- Stories were not prevalent or useful when I was growing up. "Tell it so" was the approach, so I'm here to learn the "ask and listen" approach.
- My Aunt Mary who never married, but lived to be 95 kept track of the history of the people, places and things in Cottage Grove.
- As a child I read a lot and my favorite story was Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves.
- My Midwestern rural farmer father, who loved telling stories. His line was "Do you want the truth or a good story?"
- My three great aunts, who spoke French, danced jigs and were "too mean to die." Neither wanted to die first. They lived to 99, 97 and 95. The stories of what they did to each other outrageous, very entertaining.
- My uncle Harry, the extroverted salesman in my father's family of rescue missionaries. He helped provide me with continuity and historical knowledge of our families.
- My mother, who just passed away on November 13. She always wanted to learn how to read and write but never got the opportunity. Yet she was able to influence children and inspire others to go beyond. She was not typical for a Hmong woman: conservative yet progressive, and not submissive. Young Hmong scholars came to her to get stories. She was 87 and there are only a few elders now who remember what happened in the 1930s and 40s. I have many cassette tapes of her stories.
- Roger Blakely, my advisor at Macalaster College. I remember meeting with him to discuss my independent project on rock and roll. He began drawing connections to opera, we discussed it, and the next thing I knew it was three hours later! He was a very big influence on the way I look at cultural connections.
- My Grandma's stories about the Depression in Shakopee that she would share during Sunday dinners at her house.
- My father is 83 and a fantastic musician, but the story I want to tell is about my father's mother, Grandma Gordon. She was so strong. She somehow – no one knows how – came up with money to send her son to college and made sure he had a piano. Then when he was learning trombone, somehow she got him an instrument. He benefited greatly from the power of that woman. And I did, also,

as her granddaughter. It was amazing as a child to watch her run a small business - collecting door-to-door on Curtis Publishing magazine contracts. Now that I am becoming the older woman in my family and becoming the one to influence grandchildren and coming generations, she is the one on whom I'm patterning my behavior.

- Stories were not a prevalent part of my upbringing until the upsurge in genealogy created the expectation that people would share stories. As a result members of my family delved into that and now there are wonderful stories to tell about immigration from Russia and the early folk's work, etc. It strikes me how incumbent it is on all of us to pass those stories on.

After thanking the group for sharing their memories of influential story tellers, [Dr. Daniel Detzner](#) of the University of Minnesota pointed out that in the past 30 years he has participated in compiling nearly 10,000 individual life histories for his classes on aging. His pedagogical approach has been termed "narrative gerontology."

There is therapeutic value to telling stories and reminiscing, Detzner explained, because people crave narrative and strive for a sense of continuity, a link to history and the people who came before them.

Detzner spoke of the Southeast Asian immigrants - Hmong, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao - that began to arrive in the late 1970s and early 80s, pointing out that today, the largest urban concentration of Hmong in the world is in St. Paul. His one interest in these elders was sparked one day when he observed a group of Southeast Asian immigrant elders on the street during a festival in St. Paul. He wondered about how their experience, transitioning to a youth-oriented, Western culture - speedy, fast, industrial - from the cultures of their home villages, where filial piety toward, and respect for elders is the highest value. "I began to wonder," he said, "what it was like to live out your story after the one you had imagined for yourself is disrupted."

In an attempt to discover who these new immigrant elders were, and what their stories might reveal, Detzner conducted life histories with a total of 40 individuals, 10 each of Hmong, Vietnamese, Laos and Cambodian elders - half of them men and half women. The resulting narratives formed the foundation of Detzner's book, "*Elder Voices: Southeast Asian Families in the United States*" (Walnut Creek, CA, Alta Mira Press, 2004).

Detzner used the technique of drawing a family tree, or "genogram," during the interview to guide the narrative and explore the family story. He and his student assistants recorded, transcribed and translated the interviews. Reading through the voluminous material that resulted, Detzner saw four dominant themes emerge. He discovered that he could characterize a given family history according to whether the overriding influence was one of separation, loss, conflict or resiliency.

Defining a "separation" narrative as one in which the elder has experienced separation from other family members, Detzner explained that separations could be due to war,

imprisonment, or transfers to different refugee camps. These separations sometimes resulted in families scattered across three continents.

To illustrate a separation narrative, Detzner displayed and explained a genogram that relates the story of a sixty-nine year old Laotian female whom he had interviewed. Her husband had died. She was living in the United States with her granddaughter. Her siblings were still in Laos. Her parents, deceased. Of nine children, two were dead, and one was living in France with her husband. Her other children and their families were living in Thailand. “Here is a 69 year old Laotian woman, separated from virtually her entire family except for one grandchild with whom she lives in Minneapolis,” Detzner commented. “Her stories tell of the separation from these family members.” She told of crossing the river with her children, of cutting down bamboo to clear the way – a story one can commonly see illustrated on a Hmong story cloth. At the time of the interview, this woman was living in a very small apartment with very little money. She worked as a caregiver for children in the building’s daycare center.

Family stories that Detzner characterized as “loss” narratives involved an accumulation of losses – both tangible (home, property, farm, animals) and non-tangible (culture, language, social capital). These narratives focus on what has been lost, left behind. Regarding social capital, Detzner explained the loss of status experienced by these elders when their roles were diminished to that of housekeeper or babysitter for their adult children, who must work outside the home to provide for the family. Detzner emphasized that while these are important roles, providing safety and a sense of continuity for the middle and younger generations, they are nonetheless of lower cultural stature than they would have held in their home villages.

Detzner used the words of one elder as the title of the story he used to illustrate a loss narrative. “I stay home all the time and now I feel like they put me in jail” is the story of a 65 year old Hmong man, whose family suffered multiple losses. He lives with son and daughter-in-law and their children. Married twice, his first wife died in a refugee camp. He remarried and raised a second family. Now, his second wife lives with one set of children and he lives with the other set because they are both needed for child care and food preparation. They live near each other but in separate households. Regarding the loss of independence, this man contrasts the self-sufficiency he knew in his own village with the helplessness he feels now. “When I think about all the freedom I had in Laos, I feel sad. Laos is not same as here. Here you have to be educated. You have to work. There, every penny you earn is yours. There is no income tax, no rent. Everything around you is free to use because Mother Nature provided it.”

With very little income - \$300 a month at the time of the interview – this man would rarely buy anything for himself, Detzner explained, needing it all to support his family. Detzner read the man’s words: “When I think about what my life is like now, I want to cry and I don’t know what to do.”

Turning to “conflict” stories, Detzner described how family narratives were sometimes dominated by stories of conflict between eastern and western values. In these narratives, the elders speak of their children disobeying, adding that this would never happen in Laos. Many elders expressed frustration because they’ve lost control over their

children's discipline. They are disappointed with the American school system's failure to provide adequate discipline and feel they have no effective way to control their children's behavior yet are held accountable when something goes wrong. Another source of conflict in these narratives stems from the feeling that children have lost their sense of obligation to elders, their sense of respect and humility. In Laos, Detzner explained, there is no "adolescence." Rather, the move from childhood to adulthood occurs at age 12 or 13. So while adolescence is difficult for all parents, for these Southeast Asian immigrant parents it is an even greater struggle.

Detzner presented the story of Lao male elder that illustrates a narrative dominated by conflict. This 58 year-old married man was separated from his wife. Spending many years in the military, this man would return to his wife for a week or so – long enough for her to become pregnant - then return to military service. His wife and children lived for 17 years with her in-laws. When his military service was over and he returned to his family, neither his children nor his wife really knew him. He wanted to reestablish himself as the patriarch, but his wife resisted. Ultimately the constant marital strife forced him to leave the home. The conflict also affected his relationship with his children, who visit him no more than once a month. This man, Detzner explained, was completely alone, living in an unfinished basement apartment. The overriding theme of his story was conflict leading to absolute isolation.

Emphasizing that not all of the elder stories were negative, Detzner indicated that 20 of the 40 stories he collected fit into the category he called "resilient." While their lives were certainly not without hardship, the elders in the resilient narratives drew on strengths – toughness, adaptability – that enabled them to overcome the separations, losses and conflicts in their lives. "These are survivors. Incredibly tenacious survivors," Detzner said.

As an example of a "resilient" narrative, Detzner shared the story of a Cambodian woman who lived and worked in a restaurant in Pnomh Penh. When the Khmer Rouge took over, she fled north. Taking just one of her many children with her, she planned to open a restaurant and then return for the other children. Sadly, she never saw them again. At age 63 this woman was living in Minnesota with her one remaining child. She was never able to reach any of her other children, and while she assumes that they are all dead, there is a certain degree of ambiguity. Referring to the work of author and U of M social scientist, [Pauline Boss](#), Detzner stated that ambiguous loss has been shown to be the most difficult of all losses to experience. This woman, then, for all practical purposes has a narrative of overwhelming loss and grief, but, says Detzner, "she doesn't think about it. She reads her bible daily and is committed to keeping herself alive and positive for her one living son because of her belief in the importance of family."

Detzner said that the overwhelming hope and strength that characterized the "resilience" narratives he compiled were influential in shaping his current research on family strengths. Specifically, he is studying successful Hmong and Somali immigrant families to determine if there are similarities in the family characteristics that contribute to a positive immigrant experience. His preliminary results indicate that good communication - especially between generations and between genders - is critical, because of the need to renegotiate relationships for the new culture. Also, religion – any

religion – provides an important sense of shared values within a family. Lastly, Detzner mentioned love, “which may seem like an obvious thing,” he said, but went on to explain that there are cultural differences in the expression of love.

In closing, Detzner encouraged the group to consider immigrant elders as individuals, each with an incredible life story that can help put our own lives into perspective.

Note: In the group discussion that followed the presentation, Gaoly Yang of the Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging suggested that one way to assist immigrants is by volunteering to help them prepare to take the citizenship exam. She promised to send a list of organizations that use volunteers for this work. That list appears on the following page..

METROPOLITAN AREA AGENCY ON AGING, INC.
2006 SPECIAL ACCESS AND OUTREACH PROJECTS
Serving Minority/Ethnic Elders

(Latino elders)

CLUES

797 East 7th Street
St. Paul, MN 55106
Fax: (651)292-0347
Tel: (651)291-8174
Erin Delaney-Monjarrez
Email: emonjarrez@clues.org

(African American, Hmong & Korean elders)

VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA

2021 E. Hennepin Ave, Suite 130
Minneapolis, MN 55413
Fax: (612)331-6772
Tel: (612)617-7848 – Kathy Mosavat
Email: kmosavat@voamn.org
bvue@voamn.org (Hmong)
kwonksc@gmail.com (Korean)
dharris@voamn.org (African
American)

(Hmong elders)

HMONG AMERICAN PARTNERSHIP

Hmong American Partnership
1075 Arcade Street
St. Paul, MN 55106
Tel: (651) 495-9160 - Fue Heu
Email: fue@hmong.org

(Vietnamese & Cambodian elders)

VIETNAMESE SOCIAL SERVICES

1159 University Avenue, Suite 1
St. Paul, MN 55104
Fax: (651)641-8908
Tel: (651)644-1317 - Cam Hung Le
Email: camle@vssmn.org (Vietnamese)
saly55101@yahoo.com (Cambodian)

(Lao elders)

**LAO ASSISTANCE CENTER OF
MINNESOTA**

503 Irving Avenue North, Suite 100
Minneapolis, MN 55405
Fax: (612) 374-4821
Tel: (612) 374-4967
Sunny Chanthanouvong
Email: sunny@laocenter.org
Bounleuth@laocenter.org

(Oromo elders)

**OROMO COMMUNITY OF
MINNESOTA**

1505 South 5th Street
Minneapolis, MN 55454
Fax: (612) 340-1596
Tel: (612) 340-0282 - Alemayehu Baisa
Email: baisaa@puc-mn.org
hassann@puc-mn.org

(American Indian elders)

**MINNEAPOLIS AMERICAN INDIAN
CENTER**

1530 E. Franklin Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55404
Harriet Denomie, Senior Program Director
Phone: 612-871-4555