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My Life Is Like a River

Christine Tsou, Ed.D.

What a woman does in writing, in telling, is to search, sifting through the many versions and possibilities to find the shape and truth of her life, the story she doesn't yet know, the image and narrative she struggles to bring, like herself, into being. (Modjeska, 1994, p.31)

Reflecting on my life journey, I realize that my life is like a river, no holding back. Like the river flowing from one place to another, my life constantly changed and was always on the move. In due course, the river itself changed, so did my life. On the eve of my journey to study in Canada, I was so sure of my dreams for the future and myself. Unexpectedly, my life took a different turn and I have never stopped changing. The decisions I made years ago, eventually led to multiple transformations of my social understanding, educational philosophy, teaching practice, and character.

As streams may slowly join to form a river, my character was shaped by multiple influences from my school education, spiritual belief system, cultural adaptation and transformation, as well as from learning *Chinese Cultural Dance*. These experiences prepared me to face life challenges, and formed me into the person I am today. The intense study for endless tests/exams from my early education gave me strong self-discipline. Learning and performing *Chinese Cultural Dance* shaped my cultural heritage. Similarly, I adopted various cultures that transformed how I perceived the world. Religious hopes sustained me in the face of trials. These experiences influenced how I look at and make sense of the world around me.

Like the water flowing in the river, sometimes moving gracefully with brilliant sparkling in the sun, sometimes surging and gurgling over rapids, my life history was up, down, excited,

frightened, and thrilled all together. Sometimes I tried to challenge my destiny and make the best of awful situations, but always, despite best efforts and intentions, my life kept rolling along up and down. It was often difficult to cope with each culture I encountered. Frequently, I had to step outside my comfort zone and learn to adapt. When coming to a dead-end situation, I applied different strategies to overcome obstacles to make things happen and moved forward. There were times when I had to break through my long-held assumptions by changing perspective, fighting fear with faith, staying focused, seeking inspiration, and undertaking personal development. Gradually, I gained understanding and became more open-minded about various indigenous cultures.

I was transformed like a river, widening and deepening. Reflecting on my youth in Taiwan, I am amazed how much I have changed. My schooling was from a different lifetime. I was indoctrinated with absolute Taiwanese nationalism, but now the perspective of the old ideologies is so remote for me. Experiencing various cultures forced me to think beyond national boundaries, to embrace western educational pedagogy. As I assimilated the educational culture valued by Canadians, I constantly adjusted my personal views about homework quality, mathematics teaching, and implementing technology in the mathematics curriculum. As a result, I gained a deeper understanding of teaching mathematics for understanding and skill proficiency.

Like a moving river picks up pieces of rock and carries them downstream, breaking them into smaller and smaller pieces of sediment, I took on western culture as well, and was shaped and reshaped by it. In the process of becoming a global citizen, I experienced the Canadian culture mosaic, America's melting pot, and the Māori culture in New Zealand. The multiple jarring changes of my life amplified my global citizen experience. Each cultural adaptation shaped my worldview on economic, politics, and social justice. Furthermore, manifold episodes

of my life influenced how I value and respect diversity, as well as how I perceived different causes of social injustice.

The dark moments following my separation/divorce after years of marital trials and struggles, had nearly crashed my spirit. However, as I experienced the complexities and realities of life, it became clear that I could choose my direction and control my decision making, and continue my life passage with hope. In the process of facing injustice in the proceedings for my son's custody, I gained strength. After repeatedly being defeated in family court, I found that I was not alone weathering the storms. My personal trials opened my eyes to see the vulnerability of immigrant women and fueled my desire to create a website that might kindle activism around Canadian Family Law Reform. As I decided to take on the Mother-for-Justice campaign for other minority-immigrant-single-mothers, I received many readers' comments and support on my website encouraged me to continue the struggle.

As the river carved and moved rocks, running water changed the earth's surface; I worked extremely hard to establish a mathematics enrichment program and implement community-based projects to build a community within a multicultural school. I provided opportunities for character education through the Adopt-a-Street program, while training gifted students to develop a passion and achieve even greater success in mathematics via the enrichment program. I initiated these programs to give students a place at school, and met their needs for autonomy, competence, and relationships. As a result, the school's profile was transformed.

As if a river expanded and deepened, my teaching career shifted from novice to experienced teacher. I renounced the teacher-centered pedagogy, adopted student-centered method, and applied cooperative learning strategies. I learned to help students be successful as

mathematics learners in a society lacking a mathematics culture, as well as learning to deal with difficult parents who resist homework. This challenged my skills to the limit and forced me to reflect constantly. Furthermore, analyzing the practice of classroom assessment led to searching my conscience and professional ethics in order to reconcile conflicting obligations to students and with the agreed upon rules and expectations of my school. Juggling summative assessment and formative assessment, I tried to find a balance between zero and no-zero assessment. In the end, despite multiple challenges in my teaching career, I perceived a sense of reward even in a time of unpleasant school politics.

As the river passed a shadowy gorge, my life expedition faced uncertainty when school politics depleted staff morale. During the school's financial crisis, I had to watch my step carefully when people were backbiting and when the administrators did not handle staffing effectively, particularly for those teachers who were laid off or had their teaching hours cut. As a non-Catholic teacher working at a Catholic school, I needed to handle discrimination strategically, for example, responding to an administrator's "unprofessional conduct" handling of my job title and stipend. In order to cope, survive, and thrive under the leadership of a Eurocentric-Catholic administrator, I had to focus on the big picture to develop student character as well as academic excellence, and think like a river to leave a living legacy for future generations.

Looking back my life expedition, I discovered my purpose in life and myself, though the next chapter of my life remains unknown. My trials and struggles have dramatically transformed me to become more sensitive and understanding toward others' needs and afflictions, in particular toward my students. I may not have walked on the path I intended to long ago, but I have acquired my share of rewards a life can bring, both professionally and personally. A good

friend once told me I have created my own destiny with my determination and actions, but I knew that it was the indescribable spiritual power that led me through many dark moments in which my character was shaped and reshaped in the eye of a tempest.

As a child, I often prayed to Buddha for a life of enlightenment like Buddha himself. After I became a Christian, I repeatedly asked the Holy Spirit to guide me through every step to build a meaningful life – a life without regrets. There were times, I deeply regretted how naively I believed in love and married to a man whom I did not truly know. This brought much agony upon myself. Nevertheless, whenever I looked at my two children and my personal growth as the result of my nightmarish marriage, I feel regrets no more. Similarly, with my career choice of teaching, there were challenges, but from what I gather from most students' feedback, the response I provided gave reassurance. I knew I had done something right in which I was able to leave a positive impact on some students' lives. Through conducting an autoethnographic study and learning about the depths of my character in this journey of humanity, I have come to reconcile with my past and recognized "A Time for Everything," as well as having gained the strength to move on for whatever the end may be.

A Time for Everything

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:

a time to be born and a time to die,

a time to plant and a time to uproot,

a time to kill and a time to heal,

a time to tear down and a time to build,

a time to weep and a time to laugh,

a time to mourn and a time to dance,

a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,

a time to embrace and a time to refrain,

a time to search and a time to give up,

a time to keep and a time to throw away,

a time to tear and a time to mend,

a time to be silent and a time to speak,

a time to love and a time to hate,

a time for war and a time for peace. (Bible, Ecclesiastes 3, p. 699)

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