

## Centre for Cultural Diversity in Aging

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It is a great honour to be here, speaking at an aged care conference, because everyone in this room has had a lot more professional and life experience than I have. So thank you for inviting me to this conference. I am very happy and humbled to be the other story teller alongside Arnold Zable, who spoke yesterday about the importance of creative listening and storytelling in migrant cultures.

People these days speak about 'the Generation Gap' like it's an unbridgeable abyss. They say things like, *young people these days don't understand old people* and vice versa. There are a number of ways this myth is perpetuated:

The first one is that the society in which we've grown up has inculcated us with a great fear of growing old. It's focused on age-defiance - No face is worthy of being seen unless it's a Maybelline face. The calligraphy lines of experience on old people's faces are wrinkles to be eliminated by all means.

The second reason for the 'generation abyss' myth is that the culture of today is a culture of success. It's a culture focused on *productivity* – how much you can work. Finally, our culture is a fast culture. It is all based on living fast – fast food, fast cars, fast service, speedy delivery of outcomes. It does not care how much insight you've gained from slow reflection. It's all about being 'dynamic' and 'full of energy' these days, as if that's the only worthwhile way to live unless you're the Dalai Lama – it ignores traits such as patience and mindfulness.

I remember speaking at my grandmother's funeral a few years back. I had to give a formal translation of a speech my uncle had delivered in Chinese. And while I was giving the translation, I suddenly heard what I was saying – and realised that the speech I was giving *was not about her life at all*. I remember saying things like, 'Huyen Thai successfully cared for husband and kids, successfully established a successful business, successful children who went on to all corners of the first world.' I was in fact just looking over the speech last night, and realised what a bizarre focus it had on this thing called 'success'.

I found out certain things at my grandmother's funeral that I had not known before. For instance, that she was born in 1910, and came from poor peasant parents who sent her to ChaoZhou teacher's college. They were quite enlightened parents for their time. In her youth she was a journalist, and wrote articles railing the injustices of landlords abusing the peasants. Things became unsafe for her in China due to her writing, and she escaped to Cambodia. It was there that she met my grandfather, and became his wife. Problem was, he already had a first wife and two kids! So she became his second wife, and raised ten children as a single mother, as he would often spend long stretches of time at the house of his first wife.

She was also a business woman. After my grandfather left her, she started a factory. She was a community leader and feminist – as the chairwoman of the Cambodian

Chinese women association, she received an invitation to the China national day celebrations and was warmly received by Liu Shao Qi and Zhou Enlai.

Yet the most extraordinary thing was that she was a survivor – she was the only old person in her collective of hundreds of people, to survive Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. She survived the Killing Fields, and emerged as an old woman in her seventies.

She was over seventy when she arrived in Australia. Australia gave her a new lease of life. She was in awe over 'Father Government', who gave her money every fortnight. She prayed to Buddha to bless Lord Lawrence and his kind-hearted fraternity for giving us clothes. St Vincent was the deity that provided used furniture. She made coffee for me from hot tapwater. After school, she would be there, with a snack of boiled McCains French fries. It was all a marvel.

For the first eight years of my life, my grandmother appeared to play a more primary role than my mother. As both my parents worked, my grandmother was always there for me. We even shared the same bed, and the same potty beneath the bed. She would take me on temple visits, visits to her friends in the housing commission flats, shopping at Footscray market, and she walked me to school.

I remember going to the supermarket with her, and watching her count out her coins. My grandmother used to tip out her purse and count out her one and two cent pieces at the register to buy me a stick of Hubba Bubba gum. I didn't realise why she couldn't just give them a gold or silver coin until much later. Not being able to speak English, she wouldn't know what to do if someone accidentally gave her the wrong change. So it was safer for her to count her one and two cent pieces.

Spending time with my grandmother gave me a perspective into the adult world, and into life. The kids of today grow up with teletubbies speaking down to them and treating them like imbeciles, but my grandmother imbued me with culture and morality. She taught me to eat slowly. To do things mindfully and carefully. She would always pick up rubbish on the streets of Footscray with her walking stick, in case somebody should slip on a chip packet. Once, she even bought a fish to release into the dubious depths of the Maribyrnong river.

Despite the societal and cultural expectations, when I was growing up, the generation abyss seemed more manufactured than real. In many ways, children and old people are very similar. Children have not learnt many of the societal inhibitions, and old people have learned to discard them. People are always going on about how old and young people don't understand each other – but my grandmother and I understood each other perfectly well. I was arm-support for my grandmother whenever she went for walks, and she always stood up for me when I was getting whacked. Because children and the elderly are from two of the most vulnerable groups in society, if you put them together, often they teach each other compassion. Unlike parents who have expectations of their offspring to become great successes; grandparents are not so driven by success, and appear to only want their grandchildren to be the best people they can become. They can teach a lot about unconditional love.

In many Asian cultures, the concept of 'filial piety' is not just about respecting your elders, but extends to looking after your parents in old age. In fact, if the aged care

system is completely foreign to elderly southeast Asians – that is, if they never have to live in an aged care facility or be cared for by anyone outside the family, then that is an indication of the success of the family. Quite recently, as a result of their ‘Confucian values’ push, the Singaporean government enacted the *Maintenance of Parents Act 1996*, and India is planning to following suit (although these initiatives might appear to be a plan to skimp on paying social security to the elderly and shifting that responsibility to children).

People often dismiss filial piety as ‘just an Asian cultural practice.’ Yet if you look through Western history, it is not confined to Asian cultures at all. Western history and literature had elderly parents living with their children for centuries.

Yet the more a society is bent on achieving the individual narrative of success, the more we try and fulfil the ‘Great Australian Dream’, the more people fall on the wayside – particularly children and elderly people. Seven years before she died, my grandmother had a stroke. It paralysed her entire left side, so she could not even sit up without help. She spent the most part of those seven years in a room, looking up at the ceiling.

Although I write about the joy of growing up with my grandmother in my book, *Unpolished Gem*, I have also written about this important, bleak period too. Instead of telling a story about dynamic new migrants making it in a new country, I wanted to focus on vulnerable and forgotten members of society, to bring them to the forefront – not as victims but as people. The Non-English speaking migrant woman on Zoloft. The dying grandmother. The young girl who has nervous breakdown.

We seem to have an obsession with being a productive people, a productive society, a successful society. It’s no wonder that in a society that places such significance on these traits – of youth, success and speed - young people do not want much to do with older people. I teach at a Melbourne University residential college, and I’ve see firsthand this in action – 99% of the time my students prefer to hang around people their own age! Often I wonder, where is the wisdom or insight in hanging around people who know about as much as yourself?

That’s why we – the younger generation - have to change the way we view old people – not as commodities or burdens, to be put in dark rooms to wait and die because they are no longer useful. In this modern post-Freudian quest to attribute blame somewhere, we seem to have forgotten to be thankful for things, and for people.

In the end, I think that what is more important than respecting your parents’ successes, is having compassion for their failures and vulnerabilities. And gratitude for their love. The greatest sign of an advanced and civilised society – a successful society - is how you treat its most vulnerable members – and it all comes back to that one image, of the grandmother and the child, who have no power, fame or money to give – but are able to offer each other what people who are focused on ‘success’ cannot possibly give – time, wisdom and love.