

## War Is the Reason I Am Here Today

By Trinh Le

War is the reason I am here today. The Vietnam War, to be exact. If the Vietnam War had never happened, there would be a big possibility that I would not be here in the United States going to a university such as UCLA, but rather, I would be somewhere back in Vietnam. I would have had different experiences... a different life.

My father served in the Southern Vietnamese army. He fought against the Communists, and he had to pay the consequences. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, my father was put in "jail" for seven years. It was not until college when I learned that he was not really in jail, but what were called "reeducation camps." These were set up by the Communists as an attempt to "reeducate" the soldiers who fought against them. I picture these camps to be strict and torturous, and the prisoners had very little to eat and live with. I believe this experience and the war itself gave profound psychological damage to my father. It makes sense to me now as to why he was always loud or yelling. And I can't help but wonder if this was one of the reasons why my parents' marriage fell apart.

My parents were one of the many "boat people" that are pictured in the U.S. history books that I studied with back in high school. From what I recall from my mother, my parents were out at sea for more than two weeks. This is also when my parents converted to Catholicism, because one of my mother's friends on her boat was Catholic, and so my mom made a promise to God that if they survived, that she would worship Him for the rest of her life. She survived of course, and that is the reason why I grew up Catholic. My parents ended up in a refugee camp in Indonesia on this island called Galang Island. I know because I was born there. They stayed there for at least a year because my mom was pregnant with me, and once I was born, they migrated to the United States. I was only a month old when I arrived on U.S. soil.

Because my parents were refugees, they were not prepared for life in the United States. They had to work 10-hour days, 6 days a week, throughout my whole life. I barely ever saw them, and that has had consequences on my relationship with my parents to this day. My mom was a seamstress, and later became a manicurist. My father was a mechanic, but also later became a manicurist so that they can open up a nail salon together. We moved from California to Tennessee in the early 1990's where housing was cheaper and also less competition when it came to nail shops. Living in Tennessee has also had many implications on my life. Surrounded by mostly Caucasians and African Americans, I grew up ashamed of my culture, heritage, and history... something that I now sorely regret. I always felt I was different, but I didn't understand why. I never fully understood the concept of race until I got to college. We later moved back to California for my high school years.

Because my parents were refugees, they understood very little about the immigration and citizenship process. Although I've lived in the United States almost all my life, I never had a green card, and I still don't. When my parents applied to for my citizenship in high

school, I was denied because I did not have a green card. This took a toll on me because I grew up American, and yet I was denied citizenship because of a technicality. My aspirations of traveling abroad, of voting in the important election of 2004, and other such hopes were taken away from me in a heartbeat. This has also made things worse between me and my mother because of her ignorance, although I know it is not her fault.

The discovery of the intersection of my life with history is in many ways a “terrible” lesson because history becomes a part of you, whether you like it or not. It’s very hard to be proud of being a product of war. You can no longer distance yourself from history because by intersecting it with your life, that history becomes your own history. History can be tragic, involving war and struggle, and to have that be a part of your life history as well makes you feel a little burdened, but it also makes you feel more real.

The discovery of the intersection of my life with history is a “magnificent” lesson in that you feel like you have more ownership over your life because you know how it intersects with history. By knowing and understanding the past, you have the power to change the future. It’s an enlightening experience, to discover how much your life really intersects with history, and it’s something you can take advantage of. Because you understand how your life intersects with history, it becomes a lot more personal to you. History becomes your history, and knowing that helps you understand yourself better, as well as to why your life is the way that it is.

You can use your consciousness about the intersection of your life with history to shape the future in that you have the power to make history. You have the power to write history as if it was your own, because it is. One can create a history for future generations of Asian Americans by rewriting history from first hand accounts of Asian Americans and their family histories, and not have it written by someone else who feels so far removed from the history, from your history. Through this consciousness, one can also help others realize how their lives intersect with history, and with that can encourage them to do something about it, to make their future their own.