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The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down - Chapter 1

Arguably the single most unifying event in the human experience is within child birthing; however, human diversity teaches students of anthropology to compare or contrast the intricacies of one set of traditions with the practices of a differing society to gain a deeper perspective and appreciation for the other culture. Harvard alumni and winner of The National Book Critics Circle Award, Anne Fadiman writes, "I am still learning from both of the cultures I have written about," as she prefaces her award winning memoir *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (ix). In the book, Fadiman shares experiences from a Hmong family she had contacted, and the clash of traditional Hmong practices with the medical practices of a Western hospital and clinic. Chapter 1 begins by introducing Foua, a mother and refugee whose family, between 1970 - 1980, fled from northwestern Laos to the United States where she gave birth to Lia Lee.

In her homeland Foua had already given birth to many children. Most childrearing and planned parenting appear to pay homage to obeying natural signs or else realize some punishment or curse from the spirits. Foua and her husband Nao Kao were together not infertile, but had they been, they would have likely called a *txiv neeb*, a shaman to summon the familiars and treat the problem in the spiritual realm. A *dab* is a malevolent spirit that the Hmong protect themselves from by following a somewhat abstruse doctrine to avoid the *dab's* mischievousness. For example, a pregnant woman going into labor must only deliver her child in her home or the home of "her husband's cousin, because if she gave birth anywhere else a *dab* might injure her,"

which does draw on some wisdom (4). In the Western world, it is also advisable to only give birth in a place suitably prepared for birthing to prevent infections, or other illnesses.

Some of the other traditional practices during pregnancy are not out of the range of acceptability in the Western view, though the consequence of inaction may be questionable to someone outside the Hmong culture. For a pregnant Hmong woman who “craved chicken and did not eat it,” the belief is “her child would have a blemish on its ear,” for example (4). The prospect of an expecting mother eating chicken is more than reasonable in the Western world, but to suggest some physical abnormality of a child from inaction might be objectionable to some. In any case, taking a step back would show that the Western world has adopted its own doctrine for expecting mothers, with consequences of actions and inactions too. Drinking alcohol or doing drugs while pregnant has the expectation of producing a child with difficulties or in some cases abnormalities, from the Western view.

There are many more specific examples in Fadiman’s book, but this goes to show that within the course of events in bringing new life into the world there are significant differences and similarities from one culture to the next. Even within the same culture there are differences of opinion. The obstetricians at the hospital Foua gave birth to Lia Lee illustrate this best. One doctor said “[t]he Hmong men carried these nice little silver cans to the hospital that always had some kind of chicken soup in them and always smelled great,” contrasted with the other obstetrician's view who said “[t]hey always brought some horrible stinking concoction that smelled like the chicken had been dead for a week,” certainly paints a picture for the reader (9).

Foua was used to delivering her own children, by herself, with no help. This is almost unthought of in the Western world, even natural births, delivered within a home residence instead of a hospital, would have a midwife assisting. Foua had many challenges to overcome

giving birth in a US Hospital. The language barrier, the disregard of traditions, all the way down to something as innocuous as authorizing consent or completing forms. Foua did not have an actual birthdate to complete applications so "[s]he invented the precise day of the month, like the year," to gain admission to the United States (7). Foua's experience giving birth on her in compared to 20th century Western medicine was vastly different for her. Between the "amni-hook" poke, the vaginal incisions and the IV medicines, all the way to placing a plastic wristband on the baby, it is clear the new generation of the Lee family were far from traditions.

In the Hmong tradition the placenta is "considered one's first and finest garment," that families will preserve and bury near the home (5). The spiritual belief is that when a person dies, their soul returns to the home and dawn the placenta and make way past spiritual hazards to a great beyond, where they standby ready to return in a new life later. In the case Foua's first US born child, "Lia's placenta was incinerated," although other Hmong women were able to convince doctors to keep the precious sac, still some doctors justify denying this request (6). Another important tradition for the Hmong is the *hu plig* "soul-calling," ceremony. It is believed that a baby is not "fully a member of the human race," until this ceremony is complete. It is a large gathering to confer the name of the newly born. Not naming a child immediately in other cultures alike has had the effect of postponing maternal attachment in the event the baby does not survive. The infant mortality rate for the Hmong for a period was about 50% according to Fadiman (9). The naming practices "in the United States...is usually celebrated at a later time," as well (9). Once a Hmong baby is born parents protect against the "most common cause of illness," 'soul-loss' which can occur several ways including being stolen by a *dab* (10).