

Fadiman – The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down – p 38-105

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2011

- Why is this book relevant to a course on “Living in our Globalized World”?
- In what ways does this book deliver something that Chavez and Steckley did not? Why?
- What points is this book making about ideas from this class, such as
 - cultural relativism?
 - cultural hegemony?
 - arbitrariness of cultural constructs?
 - othering?
 - incorporation?
 - networks?
 - social construction of knowledge?
 - the nature of truth
 - the status and image of western medicine
 - authority – of “experts”, the legal system, individuals...
 - essentializing
 - liminality and vulnerability
- How does the immigrant experience of Hmong differ from that of the mostly Mexican immigrants in Chavez?
 - push/pull factors
 - pattern of population movement
 - nature of liminality
- Note the narrative structure
 - Touches on a theme, then returns to it in a later chapter
 - Constantly brings in tangents
 - Bounces around, rather than telling a linear story
 - Fadiman is using the “fish soup” style of discourse used by the Hmong
 - why?
 - giving us a taste of Hmong culture through direct experience
 - showing how interrelated the different aspects of history, belief, language, physical health really are
- Ch. 5: Take as directed
 - Description of seizures
 - She knew they were coming
 - Status epilepticus: continuous seizures without regaining consciousness
 - Usually until given huge doses of anticonvulsants
 - Lia’s doctors: Neil Ernst and Peggy Philip, married
 - Good doctors, very concerned
 - Lia gets fat
 - Father Nao Kao likes her fat

- Parents care for Lia by holding and sleeping with her
 - Nurses protect her by netting her into a crib
 - Seems sadistic to Lees
- Hospital takes away control of child's care, does strange or awful things to them
- Lia is demonstrative, hugs, brash
- Complex, changing drug regimen
 - 23 regimes in under 4 years
 - Lee's didn't understand, couldn't follow
 - Lia resisted taking meds
 - All looked the same, same packaging
 - Couldn't read thermometer
 - Couldn't read labels
 - Couldn't measure dosages
- Many social workers tried to help
- Lees courteous but obstinate
 - Social worker thinks they didn't believe that the seizures had permanent effects
 - Change dosages, drop meds, etc. based on Lia's reactions
 - Both Lees say they distrust the system and are unhappy with the care
 - Come to think the meds cause the seizures and fevers
- Doctors who press Hmong to comply encounter their resistance to authority
- Merced jaundice case
 - Parents object to repeated blood samples
 - Threaten suicide
 - Doc has interpreter call a westernized Hmong leader
 - He calls head of family's clan
 - He calls father's father
 - Father calls the father
 - Father talks to the mother
 - They back down, accept the treatment
- p 52-3
 - 2-yr old boy Arnie Vang starts chemo, has expected bad side effects
 - parents refuse to continue treatment
 - cops sent to take child by force for Child Protective Services
 - mother gets out guns, threatens suicide and shooting both daughters
 - one of three remaining chemo doses given, doctor gives up on the rest
- Lia back after parents stop meds
- No longer says words, even though she did before
 - parents can't identify medicine bottles
 - Decide not to give this or that, double this or that
 - Put one drug in the bottle of another, don't seem to know which is which...
- Neil and Peggy frustrated, angry, hard to be compassionate
- Never got any thanks or deference

- Finally authorize Child Protective Services to take custody of Lia to ensure drug regimen is followed
 - Partly frustration: Lia could suffer more brain damage if not treated
 - Partly to send a message to Hmong to obey doctor's orders
- Ch. 6: High-velocity transcortical lead therapy
 - means: “the patient should be shot in the head”
 - p. 60 sorting out info for the book was like being in a bowl of fish soup...
 - everything is related to everything else
 - medicine = religion = society... economics... music
 - sounds like anthropology's concept of culture: culture is integrated, study of it must be holistic
 - p 62 Hmong interpretations of MCMC
 - doctors want to look in women's bodies
 - they experiment on poor people and kill them
 - they don't respect requests for medicine for symptoms
 - they think they know everything and we are ignorant
 - p 65 so many ways to err:
 - must speak to the oldest male, even if he has little English
 - eye contact is disrespectful
 - calling with a crooked finger is only for animals
 - must act authoritative, not informal
 - must not comment on child's beauty
 - many severe, unusual war-related ailments
 - “yes” just indicates polite listening, covers confusion, lack of understanding, protects dignity
 - might ignore everything afterwards
 - p. 69 Hmong don't share concepts of organs, etc., so English not really translatable
 - could not specify details of pain: it just hurts
 - won't do something just because they are told to; often refuse treatment
 - very high fertility rate (in mid-80s, 9.5 children/woman, vs. 2.2 for African Americans)
 - love children
 - needed many due to low survival rate, for agricultural labor, for religious rituals, and to return and defeat the communists
 - resist contraception
 - resist prenatal care
 - come to hospital late, just to get birth certificate
 - husbands interfere during birth p 74
 - won't approve cesarean sections, episiotomy, etc.
 - caring for Hmong causes great stress in doctors p 75
- Exception: Dr. Roger Fife
 - He doesn't cut
 - No curiosity about their requests for placentas, rejection of episiotomies, etc.
 - Just complies
 - Does not seem to see any moral problem, as most of the other doctors do

- “It’s their body”
- Ch. 7: Government property
 - Neil Ernst on why he had Child Protective Services take Lia
 - She might become retarded or die without proper drug regime
 - Wanted to make this a lesson to Hmong
 - Adults are legally granted autonomy
 - But children are protected by state law from abuse, because they can’t protect themselves
 - State can force a treatment against the parents’ religion
 - Parents are free to become martyrs, but they may not make martyrs of their children
 - First for two weeks, then for six months when tests still show insufficient drug dosages
 - Foua away, Nao Kao can’t stop it
 - Hmong outraged
 - Dee and Tom Korda, foster parents 85-6
 - Jeanine Hilt, Child Protective Services caseworker 86-7
 - Lia seized more than ever when with the Kordas, despite proper medication
 - Kordas confirm that the earlier drug regime made Lia “drunk”
 - One-week trial return
 - Lees did not give meds, instead had coin-rubbing done
 - 4 days after the visit, Lia had multiple seizures
 - suffered considerable brain damage p 90
 - Jeanine Hilt teaches Foua to administer a new, simplified single-drug regimen
 - Foua does it during a few short trial stays
 - Nao Kao thinks the Americanized Sue Xiong, translator, was working against them
 - Threatens to beat her to death...
 - Jeanine Hilt is still able to be a relativist even after that
- Why does Fadiman use so many block quotations?
 - To drown us in excessive detail?
 - Tempering the authoritative voice of the author
 - Mimics the ethnographic method: presenting data for the reader to draw conclusions from, rather than telling the reader the conclusion
 - We can trust the conclusions we draw from the people’s own words more than the author’s generalizations about them
 - To show us some of the different voices involved
 - Author gives up total control and authority
 - Respects individual identity and differences, the contributions of the people she is writing about
 - Shows that Western medicine is made up of individuals, is not a solid body
 - Not all doctors, nurses, etc. saw things the same way
 - Yet some regularities are apparent in the quotations
 - Quotations allow us to appreciate these similarities without ignoring the individuals and their differences
 - Mostly in sections about hospitals and government, like Child Protective Services

- Why?
- They are literate, Lees are not?
- They are bureaucracies?
- Ch 8: Foua and Nao Kao
 - Many people warn Fadiman of pitfalls of meeting Hmong
 - First meetings set up by a lowland Lao Hmong speaker nurse's aide from MCMC
 - She was coming from a mistrusted institution
 - First two translators were high-status middle-aged men
 - Would translate 5 minutes of talk as “He says no.”
 - Then she met Sukey Waller
 - Merced Community Outreach Services “hippie-ish revolutionary”
 - Respected by Hmong
 - On bilingual business card: “Fixer of Hearts”
 - conceptual translation of “Psychological Services”
 - since all problems are spiritual
 - why is she respected?
 - Anarchist sub-personality
 - Doesn't like coercion
 - Believes long way around is often shortest (fish soup)
 - Prefers “**consensual reality**” to facts p. 95
 - What does this mean?
 - What are “facts”? Who gets to decide?
 - why is this sometimes a fruitless debate?
 - Why do these things suit her to the Hmong?
 - Says: dump all the complicated rules for working with Hmong
 - They don't expect foreigners to know the rules, anyway
 - Just ask first: “is it OK?”
 - Why does this work?
 - gains entry to Hmong leaders when with Sukey Waller
 - insists on using “**cultural brokers**”, not simply “**interpreters**”
 - what is the difference?
 - is this a practical idea, applicable in other contexts?
 - May Ying: cultural broker. Well suited because:
 - Well-known, respected father: First Lieutenant in Royal Lao Army, renowned shaman
 - 2nd runner-up in national Miss Hmong pageant: poised
 - low status due to youth and gender, like Fadiman
 - makes them less threatening to the Lees
 - Meets Lees through a Hmong contact unconnected to MCMC
 - May Ying's husband in same clan as Lees
 - 3-room apartment with 9 people, little furniture
 - parking lot full of potted medicinal plants, grown by Foua
 - Lees cooperate, but also have own agenda: “so you can understand our way and explain it to the doctors”

- “Doctors can fix some sicknesses that involve the body and blood, but for us Hmong, some people get sick because of their soul, so they need spiritual things. With Lia it was good to do a little medicine and a little *neeb* [“neng”], but not too much medicine because the medicine cuts the *neeb*’s effect.”
 - *neeb*: healing spirit; shorthand for shamanic ritual in which an animal is killed and the shaman barter its soul for the wandering or stolen soul of the sick person
- Foua dresses up Anne Fadiman in *paj ntaub* [“pa ntau”] for her boyfriend
 - He proposes a week later
 - She says Hmong and her friends are proud of her *paj ntaub* work
- Foua describes frustration at being “stupid”, unable to do anything 103-4
- Foua describes daily activities on the farm 103-5
- She does not miss hunger and torn clothes, but she does miss autonomy, freedom, owning her own farm