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Response to Readings

Dear _____,

I started reading a book today – *The Spirit Catches you and You Fall Down* – by Anne Fadiman. I just read the preface of the book and I think that Fadiman's story is one that is interesting because the author immediately talked about the conflict around which the story evolves. Fadiman found several old cassette tapes of conversations between her and the Lees, a family of Hmong refugees. In 1980, the Lees traveled from Laos to the United States. One of the many reasons why I immediately took interest in the book was the way that Fadiman described her feelings about her time with the Lees. Fadiman spoke fondly of the Lees in such a way that made me interested in knowing more about them. Furthermore, Fadiman also shared her own experiences, which made me feel that she wrote from a genuine or authentic perspective.

Although normally it would be difficult to talk about one's personal life, especially when it concerns our family that we love, Fadiman openly shared the problems she encountered while she was dealing with the Lees, particularly with Lia, while at Merced Hospital. It was during this time that Fadiman thought about motherhood and what it meant to be a doctor. Hence, I also find this book interesting because Fadiman explores different perspectives in the book. Moreover, I found Fadiman's words inspiring. In the preface, she talked about one final thought, which also relates to culture. Fadiman's thought about the cassette tapes, particularly about hearing different voices of the Lees and the doctors. Fadiman believes that if only it would be possible to put together the cassette tapes, then maybe there

would be a way to listen to the Lees and the doctors' voices. It would sound as if both groups understand one another. I found this particularly inspiring because it tackles a serious issue about culture, specifically differences, and the hope that these differences may be addressed through unity. I wrote to you about this book because I am hoping that maybe we can read it together and discuss the narrative and the themes about culture that Fadiman raised in her book.

Dear _____,

In this chapter of the book, Fadiman talked about Mao Thao, a Hmong woman who went to Laos for a vacation after living in the United States for a while. She went to the Ban Vinai, a refugee camp in Laos. Once there, people in the camp asked her about life in the States. Surprisingly, most of the people's comments were about the peculiarity of medical services in the US compared to that of Laos as well as cultural practices among the Hmong when it comes to medicine and health care. I realized then that conflict between cultures exist because they fail to understand practices and traditions observed in the other culture. The disbelief among the Hmong who asked about the culture and way of life in the US, for instance, do not understand the way that doctors handle patients in America. As a result, they offered differing opinions about it. On the part of the doctors, they fail to take into consideration their patients' culture, and therefore, make decisions that their patients would oppose because they do not suit the latter's culture.

Mao Thao's story in this chapter is insightful because it raises one of the primary issues that must be taken into consideration when people from

different cultures work together. I learned that for people from different cultures to understand one another, there must be opportunities for them to learn more about other cultures. If the Hmongs at the refugee camp learned more about the American culture and way of life, then they would have gained a deeper understanding of medical approaches or procedures in the US. Conversely, if health care providers such as the doctors took the time to know more about the culture of their patients, they would be able to implement appropriate measures. Hence, I learned that people must take the time to know more about other cultures. I think that this would be able to address issues among people pertaining to culture.

Dear _____,

In High-Velocity Transcortical Lead Therapy, Fadiman explores what it means to become a doctor. As I wrote in a previous letter, the Hmongs at the refugee camp expressed disbelief about medical approaches and practices in the US, but they particularly focused on American doctors. In the beginning, Fadiman felt curious about the Hmongs' interest in the way that doctors treat their patients and later on realized that they feel the way they do because medicine is part of their culture. The Hmongs tie religion to medicine, for instance, which means that when it comes to this aspect, they would expect a religious approach when it comes to medicine. Fadiman's analysis of the way that the Hmongs responded to the description of medical care in the US. Another important finding that makes the book insightful was the results of Fadiman's research study about the experiences of Hmong society in the US when it came to medical care. Based on the research, most of the Hmongs talked about being treated unfairly or inappropriately by the

non-Hmong doctors that treated them.

Based on the foregoing discussion, I believe that Fadiman clearly explored the disparity when it came to treatment in such a way that exposed the flaws of medical care practices in the US, particularly in the way that medical professionals dealt with patients. Within this context, we would be able to determine the flaws and shortcomings of medical professionals. The debacle made me realize that cultural conflict is two-way street, such that the resolution of this issue must come from both sides - the Hmong and the doctors.

Dear _____,

I was a little affected by this chapter because of the way that the doctors responded to the case of Lia. Ideally, doctors should display utmost care for their patients. Nonetheless, the doctors told Fadiman that there was nothing more to do on their part when it came to Lia's condition. What the doctors said were difficult to read because it shows the unwillingness on their part to address the unique and specific concerns of their patients. I would say that doing so is a violation of the roles and responsibilities of doctors because they are supposed to uphold the interest and wellbeing of their patients. Addressing Lia's situation should have been effortless for the doctors at MCMC. If only the doctors took the time to know more about and understand the culture and situation not only of Lia and her family but of the Hmong community, then they would have understood that injecting a semblance of spirituality in their practice when dealing with the patient would have brought about significant change in the Lees behavior or attitude and in the efficiency of health care services. All of this seems saddening to me because

the doctors should have easily made adjustments to improve medical services for their patient.

Dear _____,

I continued reading the book and the next chapters were about the Hmong. I found it interesting because Fadiman discussed many types of information about the Hmong including the background of Laos and the people that she and the Lees knew. I was engrossed while reading this because it brought about images of the Hmong culture, from their way of life. I believe that the next two chapters were also highly important because Fadiman talked about the way that the Hmong took care of the sick in their community. As formerly noted, Hmong medicine is highly spiritual and the shamans rely on natural remedies to help the sick.

Another interesting view of the Hmong culture is the way that Fadiman described the effect of Western imperialism on the Hmong. It is heartbreaking to read the impact of war on the Lao government and the people and somehow I found myself thinking that the backlash against the US government then, particularly during the Johnson and Nixon administrations were justified because of the inhuman treatment of people in Laos. At this point, I realized the importance of respecting people and cultures and finding a way or opportunities for them to sustain it themselves.

Dear _____,

Realizations about the importance of culture continues in the following chapters, particularly chapters 12 and 13. In Chapter 12, Fadiman talked about some of the Hmong people's escape to Thailand during the war. As we

already know, the Hmong people are highly spiritual people especially when it comes to the sick or the dead. During their travel to Thailand, some people, particularly women and children got sick and died on the journey. After reaching Thailand, due to the precariousness of their situation, the Hmong people had no time to bury their dead and follow their own rituals. At this point, one realizes the importance and significance of beliefs and traditions among the people.

Fadiman also talked about Lia, particularly the cultural disconnect in the way that the doctors treated her. For one, the Lees were informed about Lia's impending demise. The Lees were enraged because in the Hmong culture, doing so brought about bad luck. This situation similarly proves the incompetence of the doctors in dealing with Lia's condition, particularly in matching their practices and approach to the culture of Lia and her family. In a way, this disconnect justifies Nao Kao's response, which is to take away Lia from the place that they believe is bringing about negative vibe or energy to their family. Yet again, this situation proves that had the doctors took the time to get to know their patients more, they would have known the importance of spirituality in the way that Lia should have been treated. We then realize that being a doctor means adjusting to the particular needs and situation of patients, particularly when it would significantly affect their response to medication or therapy and state of mind.

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Works Cited

Fadiman, Annie. *The spirit catches you and you fall down: A Hmong child, her American doctors, and the collision of two cultures*. Macmillan, 1998.

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