

The Enlightenment

SEUNGHYUP OH



WRITER'S COMMENT: When Dr. Pamela Demory gave us the seemingly easy task of writing a documentary about our own family history, I was actually lost. I had thought that there is nothing interesting to share about my family. That's when I started to question myself: "Who am I? How could I be here today? What shaped me who I am now?" My questions continued as I interviewed my father and heard previously untold stories of my grandfather during Japanese colonial period in Korea. The stories of my grandfather enlightened me as to what brought me here in America today. I realized his selfless acts of valor, unwavering determination, and noble desire for education still flow through my veins. I instantly knew that this has to continue to flow to the next—and the next—generation. Everyone's family history, their legacy, may not seem prodigious but, thankfully, that is what enabled us to be here today. I hope this essay allows you to think of the importance of your family and ancestors.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I structure my advanced composition courses around the idea of "documentary work," as defined by Robert Coles, for whom "documentary" refers to "any attempt to engage, represent, and understand the lives of others." I challenge my students both to analyze documentation produced by others and to become documentarians themselves. For their final essay, I ask the students to write a "family history paper," drawing on both primary research—interviews, photographs, family lore, objects, official documents . . . whatever they can find—and secondary research (online or in the library) to set their family story in some sort of larger context. It's a challenging assignment—figuring out how to focus the essay, identifying story elements and narrating them in a compelling way, and integrating secondary research that supports and explains the story

without taking away from the narrative flow. Seunghyup's essay seamlessly integrates secondary and primary research so that the essay's narrative flows effortlessly. But my favorite part is in the second paragraph where the fragments of memory—"an old tile roof . . . squeaky noise of a rusty iron door . . . a faded folding screen . . ."—are represented in a series of intentional sentence fragments, beautifully melding form and content.

—Pamela Demory, *University Writing Program*

On August 22, 1910, the Daehan Empire, Korea was annexed by the Empire of Japan after years of war, coercion, and political machinations. Japan's oppressive occupation of Korea lasted 35 years until August 15, 1945. During the occupation, more than five million Koreans were forcibly conscripted into the military. Schools and universities were forbidden to speak Korean or teach Korean history. Hundreds of thousands of Korean women were forced into service as "comfort women"—sexual slaves in Japanese military bases (Blakemore, 2018). For me, the period of the Japanese imperial colonial administration was merely one of the troubling moments in the 5,000-year history of Korea. But that changed when I saw a four-inch-long stab wound on my grandfather's right shoulder to his chest.

An old tile roof house at the end of a narrow tortuous dirt road. The squeak of a rusty iron door. A faded folding screen in the left corner of a small room next to the bedding. The smell of disinfectant from an intensive care unit room. A few fragments of my memory about my grandfather start to piece together and stir up my blurred recollections. Untold stories of my grandfather revealed by my father enlighten me as to what brought me to further my education in America.

My grandfather was born on September 8, 1920, during the darkest moment of Korean history, in the Chungcheongnam province of Korea. He was the firstborn of a family of poor farmers. When he started to walk, his small hands were already holding a rusty hoe and he had to spend his early years in paddy fields to scrape out a living. In spite of his family's hard work, the amount of grain they yielded was always not enough to feed the family since Japanese police plundered half of their crop on the slightest pretext. He had to assuage his hunger with tree-bark and water. At the age of 18, my grandfather, along with his cousins, borrowed money against their house and started a brick factory. Despite Japanese interference, his diligence shined, and the business started to

flourish. With his support, his siblings could go to school and receive a proper education. However, their happiness did not last long. In 1939, the Japanese government began legislating names. Under the new law, Korean families were “graciously allowed” to change their surnames to Japanese surnames (Blakemore, 2018). My grandfather was uneducated; yet, he was an incorruptible man and he knew right from wrong. He refused to change his name, showing resistance to the government. A few days after that, a group of Japanese policemen barged into factory and started to hunt down Koreans who still used Korean names. My grandfather did not submit to their threats; he asked them to leave, and one of policemen’s long sword penetrated his right shoulder. He was put in jail for five months. When he finally was set free, his factory was burned down. Only scattered ruins remained.

In the 1930s, a rural enlightenment campaign—“an attempt to involve directly the masses in nationalist consciousness raising and mass education”—swept across the country (Pieper, 2011). Despite the suppression of educational opportunity and Japan’s striving to silence Koreans, some Christians and nationalist groups continued to teach the masses Hangeul, the Korean alphabet (Miller, 1999). Against harsh reality, the public’s desire for education and independence did not dissipate but rather strengthened. After my grandfather was released from the prison, he had to get back to the paddy fields, but he was not the same person who sowed the seeds in the field just to appease his hunger. He was enlightened. He knew the nation needed an education so as not to repeat the sorrow of losing its own country, so as not to pass down tragedy to the next generation. Although he was not given time for himself to be educated, he did his best with what he *was* given: an acre of paddy field and a hoe.

My father was born on December 25, 1956, and my grandfather’s indomitable will benefited his first son. Unlike my grandfather’s childhood, when my father started to walk, his small hands were holding a pencil and notebook and he was sent to school. Those grains of rice, an outcome of his honest perspiration and hard work, were not used to make my grandfather’s life easier but to educate his son. When my father went on to college, my grandfather sold his cow. The money from selling his only asset was imperative for his livelihood; the farmer enabled his son to further his education. Regardless of whatever difficulties he was faced with, my grandfather did not refrain supporting my father’s education, did not

give up on his principle. As a result of my grandfather's determination, my father obtained two PhDs, in Energy and Environmental Policy, and in Education.

*Until the day I die
I long to have no speck of shame
when I gaze up toward heaven,
so I have tormented myself,
even when the wind stirs the leaves.
With a heart that signs the stars,
I will love all dying things.
And I will walk the way
That has been given to me.
Tonight, again, the wind brushes the stars.*

—“Prologue,” *Sky, Wind, and Stars*, Yun Dong-ju
(Korean poet during the Japanese colonial period)

“I do not know how to read. I hadn't had a chance to learn. . .but my son can read that poem and so can you.” My grandfather quavered out a few words and paused with his eyes fixed on an old moldy scroll. I did not know he cannot read until the moment when I asked him about the poem hanging on the wall of his room. After a long pause, he continued: “I want you to cherish the poem throughout your life. He did not explain further, about the poem or anything else. He probably wanted me to find out the meaning of the poem myself, just like he did. Or maybe he wanted to imply that one's own doctrine cannot be shaped by others but only by oneself. The poet was once jailed and tortured for writing poems about resistance. After long severe torture, he succumbed to Japanese imperialism; he was released after changing his name to Japanese name, Hiranuma Doshu. In “Prologue,” Yun Dong-ju confesses his shame and displays his internal willingness not to live a shameful life even in the dark reality of the era (Park, 2014). My grandfather certainly related to him and this poem reflected his life. My grandfather was not ashamed of his ignorance. He was not ashamed of a single moment in his life. He saw his illiteracy in the light of raising such highly-educated but humble children. From the smile on his wrinkled face, I could see that

his harsh life yielded great pride.

When I was five, the age children begin to grasp the concept of death, it was not delightful to enter my grandfather's dark, fusty room. Yet to me, death simply meant "Someone is going on a long trip and I won't be able to see him until I join the trip." My grandfather was given a week to live; spinal cancer started to spread to all adjacent organs and his airways would continue to restrict, ultimately leading to his death. A day before he had to move to the intensive care unit, my brother and I were sitting next to him. No one was speaking; only the sound of a clock's busy second hand could be heard in the room. "How's your school? Aren't you two supposed to be at school?" My grandfather's raspy voice broke the silence, and he held my hand with his callused, shaky hand. His hand was cold. I could barely feel the warmth of a living person. However, I did not sense anything odd at the moment, as I did not find any incongruity in his questions. I answered matter-of-factly, "We came to see you, Grandpa." He smiled and fell asleep due to a handful of medications he had taken earlier. In retrospect, I can't believe that the questions were coming from someone on the verge of death. He surely was worried about our education and probably was not happy that we skipped school to come to see him. My grandfather was a man of great principle, courage, and love. The fear of death was not enough to break his spirit, to stop his desire. As he devoted his entire life to stopping the passage of ignorance and poverty to his next generations, as he sacrificed all of himself to educate his offspring, his noble tenacity lasted until the very end.

On 25th September 2000, his life ended on a cold bed surrounded by his loved ones in the intensive care unit. As his airway was completely constricted, we could not hear his last words, but his last teary gaze comes across my mind every night. When three days of traditional funeral had ended, and all families were gathered at the family mountain to mourn his death, to see him off at his burial, I grasped what his death meant. I would never get a chance to tell him again that I love him, that I appreciate him for enabling me to be here today.

I proudly am a product of my grandfather. My grandfather's selfless acts of valor, unwavering determination, noble desire for education passed

down to my father. And my grandfather's perseverance continues to flow through my veins. Although I can no longer talk to my grandfather, I know parts of him live within me. Now I stand here in the United States. My parents brought me here to California to provide a better quality of education, just like my grandfather sacrificed his life for my father's education. With my grandfather's recitation of Yun Dong-ju's "Prologue" cherished in my heart, I will try my best to live without any shame, to reflect his belief in my life. I will proudly pass down his stories and spirit to my children, hoping the family legacy, my grandfather's determination, continues to flow to the future generations.

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