

Violence Never Stops

'They raised me up with the trauma and effects of war.'

Violence has been so much a part of my life that I never thought about it; it was so natural to me. I thought it was normal. A lot of it came out working with my therapist in prison. I remember the parole board asking me a lot of questions about the things that I think about -- my habits, my belief system -- and I always traced it back to the gangs. I remember them telling me that it's not the gangs; it's before that. I have this identity crisis linked to a sense of abandonment. This great deep sense of confusion and not knowing and also accepting that that's just how it is. At the present moment, I'm living with my parents in Bloomington. I'm coming out of prison; I'm coming back to them.

I was born in 1977. I lived on an island in South Vietnam where I remember being alone a lot. At four years old, I was left with my paternal grandparents. It's not a reflection on my parents. They grew up in war and raised me up with the trauma and effects of the war. War is all about violence. The war was already over, but we know the violence never stops—the effects of violence—especially with war.

The country was in chaos, political and social disarray. People were literally fighting for their lives. They'd lost their livelihood or family members. It was normal for me to know relatives were missing. My parents would tell me, 'Oh such and such a family had nine kids, but maybe three survived.' I never questioned what happened. I just know they died. That was the beginning of my introduction into violence.

At four years old, I remember wandering around the beach where my grandparents lived. I remember seeing dead bodies washing up on shore. I remember this so vividly. I stood there and looked and fully understood what death was at that point. I thought about the family. *What does it mean? Who are all these people crowding around this body?* I remember making a promise to myself that I'd never cry; I didn't want to be a burden to anyone. My world was my grandparents at the time. I knew that they were old. They were doing us a favor by watching me because my dad had taken my brother and uncle to escape Vietnam to try to find a better place to live.

I can't say they set out to go to America. It was just, 'we have to get out of Vietnam.' So, they were gone. My mom and three sisters were living at another location because we'd split up to prevent the authorities from knowing what we were up to. That's the explanation that I got. Either way, I felt alone. Two years after, my mom and a bunch of other relatives, escaped on a tiny boat. I remember it well, I remember everything. After a few days we ran out of supplies like fuel, food and water. We were adrift on

the open sea. I remember being so thirsty. But I never asked for water. It was the same feeling: *I don't want to take away from community, from other people.*

Maybe it's part of my personality, but I'm going to say that it's a lot within the mentality of the refugee community. In the Vietnamese Asian culture, we're raised to be disciplined and conditioned to never think about the individual or ourselves. We always have to think about the next person, our family members, our neighbors...at our own cost. This is something I'm still dealing with. There's a lot of hate for things that I was taught that I don't think fit here in America.

'As a human being, we feel these harms.'

We came to America in 1982--my mom and I and the rest of my sisters. We were very fortunate. We thought we were going to die; we didn't. We made it to Japan and my uncle sponsored us to come to come to America. We flew over here from Japan to Florida where my dad and my brother were. I remember the sense of peace; it felt like a tomb.

I was happy to be with my dad. I didn't remember him being in Vietnam, and my brother, who was two years older than I. They were happy to be together. And also, my uncle; I thought he was the coolest guy every. I observed they had this bond that I wasn't part of. It showed by way of wherever they went, they'd take my brother, I'd always stay with my mom. I don't know if they did it consciously, but as a human being, we feel these harms, right?

Coming to America, they keep telling us that everything is fine now and you're supposed to act like it. But it wasn't fine for me. We proceeded as best we could. We moved around; I'd say probably nine times before the age of 13. All these things affected me. We moved to San Francisco from Florida. I started kindergarten there, in the city. We lived three families in one floor of an apartment. And we were always hiding. Like, *hide from the landlord, because we're not supposed to all be living there.*

As a kid, I would be so angry like, *why are we hiding? Why are we always hiding?* It really fed into my insecurities, it taught me that we're invisible; we don't matter. We only take problems from other people and that's how it is. There were a lot of Asians in San Francisco. We lived around a lot of relatives and my parents were busy working almost 24 hours a day. The only time they were home was to sleep. I would wake up, go to school, take the bus...all on my own. I dressed myself, came home...nobody's home. It's like we're being little adults. I don't say this to criticize the parenting style. That's how it was. I needed emotional support, but I didn't get it. All I heard was how good I have it, how good we have it. That may be true, but

it doesn't work for a child experiencing these things. I don't care how many times you tell somebody *you have it so much better so appreciate being beaten only 10 times a day instead of 20.*

'It's racism from the minority.'

That was the start of all these traumas. I never got any validation or affirmation. It builds up this resentment--this isolation--and moving around contributed to that feeling. I never had any connection to community. The only interactions I had with them were violent. We were told never to play with anybody for our safety—don't. That we're different. So, we stuck to ourselves, to the relatives.

There was this black kid. I don't remember what grade I was in...probably first or second. To me, he was an adult; he was big. He was probably in high school. He was always playing in front of our house. I remember this day walking by him and he started picking on us, doing all the things that people did back then at that time to mark Asians, *ching chong*, and all those stuffs. *How are we going to handle this situation?* My sister told the guy, "You better stop or I'm going to tell my dad." He was like, "your dad?" "Yeah, let's go tell him now." I think he pushed us like, *let's go*. We went to my house and the guy wanted to fight my dad. I remember thinking, *my dad's going to handle this; he's going to beat him up or whatever. It's going to be solved.* But it didn't go down the way I wanted it to.

I really, really hated my life, my situation, my place in the family, our place, our place within society and the world. I kept silent about it. We moved down to Southern California, moved many more times, and I kept experiencing all the racism, right? Surprisingly it all came from people who shouldn't have been racist or from Black people. They picked on us and tormented us the most, and then the Mexicans. Surprisingly the whites didn't. I can't say *all*, but my experience is, like I say, racism from the minority. I understand now why, but at the time I didn't.

'The bad kids were adored.'

I went through school, I excelled. I was a little behind; I still had an ESL English tutor at school in the third grade. But I got an honorable. I was in the GATE program, pretty much had straight A's. All this was on my own, no disrespect to my parents. I take credit for it. They did what they did as far as feeding us, but that was it. It was really hard because my mom, Asian parents, they don't know how to compliment, how to encourage. I'm still dealing with that now. They told us never to brag, always stay silent, respect authority

unconditionally, respect our teachers unconditionally, never use violence, think about the community, education, all of these things, right? Be humble. But at the time, I'm watching all of the movies, the music, and it's none of that.

We exalt the bad boys, the rebels, violence, always question, and fight authority to establish your manhood, your strength. School was not cool. The bad kids were the ones who were adored. Me, I just wanted attention. I felt so isolated; I couldn't fit in at school, or around the neighborhood. We had to do extracurricular stuff and I was never supported in that. My mom would say, 'where have you been? Why haven't you been home doing your chores?'

On the surface I was successful at socializing with a lot of these groups. But internally I knew that I didn't fit in, even at home. I didn't have any place anywhere. I didn't have enough insight to know that I didn't have connection to myself. I didn't have connection to my family. I knew I had to respect them and mind their advice but I knew that it doesn't stay in this society.

At 14, when we moved for the final time to Bloomington, CA and I hit puberty, was when everything changed for me chemically. I remember my sister taking me to a relative's house to hang out; she hung out with the older brother. The younger brothers were our age, my brother and I. They said, "we don't like you guys." We said, "well, why?" "Well, because you guys caused us hell." But we made that connection and it was the start of the end for me. The feeling I had was like, *damn, where have you guys been in my life. This is what I needed, someone who understood.* We started hanging out. It moved on to, let's do it lunchtime on weekdays, let's not come back to class afterward. Progressively we went downhill.

I started failing in 9th grade. I went to the vice principal's office; I didn't care. When they said, "Hey, you're failing," I told them, "I don't want to go to school anymore." They really, really encouraged me to pick up my grades. I had my mind set up that I couldn't do it. It's not that I didn't want to do it, I knew I *couldn't*. That answers the question people ask me now like, *what could have saved you?*

I didn't know what was right anymore.'

By 16, I was in juvenile hall facing life sentences. Within that short period of time, my brother was shot. I thought that he was dying and I couldn't run to him. I saw his body laid out on the beach at Newport Beach and the police were coming. I knew enough about the police to know that they're not my friends; they're not there to help. I had to walk away from his body. These are life-changing experiences, I didn't even know what was right anymore at that time. But I used to say, yeah, I'm going 100% with the street. That's where I felt loved, accepted, understood, and nothing else mattered.

Mind you, in 8th grade, I had my whole college career planned out. I was going to double major in civil engineering and medicine for my parents. Yet there I was, sitting in juvenile hall because I went to do a robbery with my friends and people framed it as gang activity. To me these were my friends; I didn't see it as a gang. We hung out as family, brothers who understood each other when we thought our parents didn't. Every time we got into conflict with neighborhood kids and they were wrong, we'd still get punished for it like we were wrong somehow. So, it felt good to have guys that had your back, to support you unconditionally. It wasn't a choice for me. I'm a very emotional person, I knew what I felt was more important. I chased that love and acceptance right into jail.

*'Nobody will give a f**k.'*

At 16, the detective told me, on the ride to juvenile hall--excuse my language--he said, "I should pull over right now, put a bullet in your f**king head, you fucking Communists. I'll get away with it because nobody will give a f**k." That's not an isolated event. That was my experience with law enforcement every time we came in contact with them on the street. I felt like I had no choice but to adapt and to survive, not just with the interactions with the authorities but with real gang members who tried to take our lives. We started acting like we were gang members.

When I was sitting in juvenile hall, they told me, "Look we'll give you a deal, 15 years if you testify against your friends." What I hear is, basically, sell my soul. I have to look out for the people I care about and you're asking me to do the opposite, to save myself. I felt like I had no worth; the only worth is what I can contribute to others. It wasn't hard for me to decline the offer. I got transferred to adult court, 18 years old, sentenced to two consecutive life sentences, plus 27 years. That's how justice was administered to me.

People always blame the gangs, but it's not that. We learn from a hostile environment. The judge taught me on that day that everything my friends, family, and brothers taught me was true. Which is, we're already weak coming to this, in this society. We're different, not respected, invisible. If you're dumb enough to let yourself be vulnerable and fall, they're not going to pick you up but they're going to stomp on you.

I'm not even talking about all of the prison stuff, the drama, the politics in there that I had to learn to navigate as an Asian minority. We don't even have a place. I had to fight five times as hard to get a seat to sit. I went in there and I didn't care anymore, I didn't feel anymore and I hated it so much. I always excelled at what I do, so I was successful in prison in a very bad way. *You can't win in prison: to lose is to really lose; to win is to lose as well.* I prepared to die in there and I was okay with it. If I don't have any empathy for myself, how could I for anybody else?

I lived in LA when I came out of prison. I earned my way; I earned my parole. They didn't open the gate. It was a challenge to say the least. They mandated six months in transitional home in LA. After that, they extended it to civil living for three months. Then I had to find my own place to rent.

After I got released, ICE picked me up and I went through the whole process of detention. Instead of seeing my family, they put ICE handcuffs on me and took me to a facility in Adelanto. I don't even want to describe the ride and how we were treated, but it's horrible. It felt like I was going back into prison all over again. I was ordered deported. I'm waiting to be deported now.

'Make the emotional connection with your kids.'

I don't care how many gifts you shower upon your kids...if you don't give them what they really need emotionally, it won't work. It's the same with us, the people they deem to be anti-social. Never mind the resources, make that connection that we feel and see. Be consistent while we need that sense of stability. We see the policies, the sentences. Don't expect us to change overnight once we got into it over years and years of conditioning. We need more personal connection, so that we feel that people care in order for us to stay. Otherwise, we feel that organizations are there to make money, only to keep their job.

I lived in LA. and I still work there now too. I had to move back with my parents last week, because of quarantine and the landlord raised my rent. Everything that I do now is motivated by giving back in the context of other people's expectations. For a lot of people, we can't give back something we were never given. I can't show love that was never shown to me. I want people to keep that in mind when they say things like *give back, think about the future*. These are things that really have no meaning to a lot of people. There's no silver bullet, it takes so much. What we need now is comprehensive, deep research to address all of the social problems. We're not the problem; we're the symptoms of it. But that's not to take away from the accountability, right?

I work for an organization supporting formally gang involved and previously incarcerated people, do local organizing, and I'm involved with many other organizations through volunteer work. People say, "I don't understand how you're able to work so hard." I tell them, "You've got to be in my shoes in order to know that these are things I can't *not* do." That's where I'm at today. I don't even have enough money for rent, right? But I feel like I owe the people who got me out. It's a lot of work and I'm so privileged to be able to contribute, to lend a voice, to give back. I've found that the people that I've reached out to and connected with pretty much share the same stories.

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