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My Experience as a Sponsored Child--Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

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What is the significant meaning of reoccurring dreams? Since college, I have frequently dreamt that I refuse to go into a dark room. In the dream, I always walked into an extremely dirty bathroom, and often stepped on some sticky soil. During my college years, I studied psychology to discover the meaning of these dreams. The connection stemmed from the seven-story H-shaped housing project, where I lived from birth to twenty years of age. In this housing project, more than 300 tenants on each floor shared two communal toilets located in the middle of the "H." Most dream analyses linked bathroom dreams to emotional needs about releasing an unconscious desire of basic wants. Why would I still dream about these *basic wants* even after I no longer have to worry about food and shelter? How could a child's memory last this long? Were my dreams related to my childhood stress? Only I, not my psychoanalyst, would know where the source of this childhood stress came from. My experience should *not* be referred to as "childhood trauma," but instead it was all about poverty and the journey out due to family, family values, sponsors, church and community support, and education.

Poor but not helpless

My life began when I was born into a poor refugee family in Hong Kong. I was the fourth child among seven. In 1948, my father fled to Hong Kong to escape the Chinese Communists' rule. Thinking that he could return home within a short period of time, he left his wife and newborn daughter behind. A year later, my mother rode alone on the back of a bicycle for three days to join my father in Hong Kong, with the help of a neighbor. At that time, my father lost all his money because some businessmen in a big town tricked him. This is the beginning of a poor family's struggle.

Adjusting to a new culture, language, and the cunning ways of earning a living, my parents attempted many different jobs in Hong Kong. I still have fond memories of my father skillfully patterning various colors of rattan to make chairs, and of my mother, as a nursemaid, endlessly feeding two babies--my younger sister and our neighbor's baby. Life was filled with financial struggles, but I was unaware of its complexity because I thought poverty was a "normal" part of living. Since all of my friends lived under this same housing project, I did not know that another world existed outside of there. With family earnings of five to ten dollars per day (equivalent to US\$1-\$2 at that time), my family somehow managed to survive. My parents believed that poverty could be put to an end if the family was strong and if we supported one another. However, this strong family also received help from two different sources, which were both churches.

Our early struggles continued when a big fire destroyed the Chinese refugees' squatter area at Shek Kip Mei on Christmas Eve in 1953. As victims, my family was resettled to the Wong Tai Sin Resettlement Estate, a housing project next to a Catholic Church. During my early childhood, we ate rice at most meals without any other food. On more fortunate days, my mother added a sweet potato to the pot when steaming rice to add flavor and make it tasty. Other

times, we had to wait until one of our neighbors finished their meals and provided us with their leftover rice so we would have something to eat. Despite our destitute situation, my parents never asked the government for welfare. They were so adamant about this that “welfare” was not a word that was even mentioned at home.

The Catholic Church was one of the sources that provided us assistance, such as basic food items and milk powder. When I was born, the priest also gave some money to my parents so they could renew their marriage vows and take a honeymoon to Macau, a nearby city of Hong Kong. When I was five, I went with my older sister to get our first pack of noodles from the church. The noodles were freshly made in a Catholic operated factory and we lined up to receive them after the operator punched a hole in our “Caritas Card.” Our family ate only a small portion of the noodles that night and hung the rest to dry for later use. Afterwards, we received noodles once a week. To this day these childhood experiences have influenced my life and even my preferences-- noodles are still my favorite and I do not enjoy rice.

Support also came to us from the Lutheran Church. I began attending a Lutheran elementary school, which was located on the rooftop of our housing compound, at the age of four. The school principal enrolled my siblings and me in the Lutheran sponsorship program so that we could study there without costs. My parents did not mind sharing their “parenting” with strangers because they knew these sponsored parents would only see us on papers, and in exchange, we would receive a free education. Back then, education was not compulsory and many children were child laborers. We were fortunate because our parents valued education and did not encourage us to find jobs. With the sponsorship support, five of us received free elementary education.

Our living conditions improved before the additional two siblings were born. My mother would buy sardines, vegetables, and tofu for dinner. My father worked two or three jobs through the most difficult time in our lives. In my eyes as a child, we were poor but not helpless.

Sponsoring a child: Learning from the child’s perspective

As a sponsored child, I had to write a letter to my sponsors once a month. At the time and even to this day, I do not know who my sponsor parents were, where they lived, or whether they understood my letters. I simply copied everything in Chinese from my teacher’s paper to a piece of sheer stationery. My letters were about my school, my grades, and my family from as early as the age of four. In the first two years near Valentine’s Day, I received a card from my sponsored parents. At the time, I did not know what the Valentine’s Day holiday was about or anything about Saint Valentine. It is still in question whether I had the same sponsors the entire time when I wrote my letters. What I do know is more important and that is that they were kind and generous people.

On the first day of school, I lined up with other students on the playground outside our classroom to be “inspected” by the church representatives. The inspectors first looked at our fingernails to make sure they were clean. Then we brought out our handkerchiefs to show that they had been washed. We repeated “Good morning, Sir!” after our school principal, and then I stood there for an hour to wait for my name to be called. The inspectors looked foreign to me because they had green eyes. They disappeared hurriedly after the inspection. Before the end of the day, our teachers gave each of us a bag to take home. Inside the bag we received two new school uniforms, a t-shirt, a pair of shorts, a pair of cloth shoes, a pair of black leather shoes, and some pencils. The bag was way too heavy for me to carry, but my mother somehow knew and

picked me up after school. For the rest of the semester, I went home by myself since my parents had to work, but being home alone was not something unusual.

Around Christmas time, the school principal gave me a letter to take home. My mother said we would go downtown on Saturday to pick up a package from my sponsors. That was my first bus trip and I was excited to receive a doll since it was my first toy. It was the most beautiful doll dressed in an elegant outfit, but I wished that they had sent me a dress. Before the age of six, I never had a dress because I wore hand-me-down clothes from my brother, as the clothes from my oldest sister went to my other sister. I only have two childhood photos: one is a family portrait posted for the housing project certificate, in which I looked like a little boy; the second one is a family picture taken in a studio after my mother received her first paycheck from her nursemaid job and again I looked like an unhappy boy. However, I do have fond memories because my mother treated this neighbor baby like her own since he was included in this second photo. The second family photograph reflects that a strong family values all its members.

Ending the cycle of poverty

When we moved into the 120-square-foot room in the housing project, my parents were told it was only a temporary place for the homeless due to the big fire. However, we ended up living there for twenty years before moving to a better housing project. I spent all of my childhood in an environment that was clouded with drugs, murder, sex, gambling, and domestic violence. Every time we passed by a gambling stall in front of our apartment unit, my father always reminded us, “Do not become a gambler, or a drug dealer, or a drug addict, or a prostitute. These people will only take your soul, take you to poverty, and to horrible lives.” When we had time, my siblings and I would study because we did not want to be involved with the kids who watched the gambling activities. However, our apartment was too small to stay in during the hot and steamy weather. We sat on our bed to finish our homework and then we played at the Wong Tai Sin Community Centre next to the playground as we waited for our parents to return home from work. This was the first community center to open in Hong Kong, which took place in 1960. The social workers were friendly and provided us with guidance and support. On school holidays, they took us to the New Territories to enjoy outdoor activities. Visiting the New Territories was like traveling to another country; it seemed far but the trip was enjoyable. When I was seven years old, I said to myself, “I want to be like them when I grow up.”

When I was eight years old, I went to the fresh food market on my own for the very first time. In my prior market visits, my mother taught me how to examine meat for freshness. In the housing project, we shared toilets, bathhouses and laundry areas with others, and we did not have a kitchen. In the corridor outside of our apartment, we placed a portable kerosene stove on two wooden boxes to function as our kitchen. My mother taught me how to put fuel into the stove, cut down the wicks so that the burned parts would not obstruct the frame, and how to light the stove and adjust the wicks for various kinds of cooking. My first cooking experience required observational skills, self-confidence, and knowledge about fire prevention. In addition, I had to use adequate measuring skills in order to purchase the right amount of food and ensure that there would not be any leftovers. My family simply could not afford to waste food because we did not have a refrigerator where we could store leftovers.

I grew up as an onlooker and I practiced what was observed. Through my observations, I sensed that studying was my family’s lifelong goal so I continued with my education. My mother was illiterate but she still encouraged me by listening to my poem recitals. My father

supported our studies and taught us how to write letters to grandma. Unfortunately, I never met my grandma because she passed away before the communist party opened the door of China for visitors. So, I lost my opportunity to meet my grandma and my father grieved silently. Later, my father enrolled me in a Catholic school because he was promoted to a supervisor position and insisted that we no longer needed sponsorship to pay for our education. I passed my entrance exam to this new school, which ended my four-year experience as a sponsored child. However, the benefits of being a sponsored child continued.

Before the implementation of the six-year compulsory primary education requirement in 1971¹, many families in Hong Kong could not afford formal education for their children. Because of the sponsorship, I was able to receive formal elementary education without any interruptions. With this solid educational foundation, I obtained excellent scores on my secondary school entrance exam. As a result, my tuition was waived for my six years of secondary school education. Before graduation, I passed my college entrance exam with excellent credits and used the scores to apply for a scholarship upon entrance. I received a scholarship donated by the Hong Kong Bank. Additionally, I obtained a work-study position at the Lutheran social service agency where I had received my very first doll as a child. In addition, I also received a refugee family scholarship. With this financial support I was able to attend college without burdening my parents with additional expenses. My father said, “Do whatever to study more. Don’t worry about getting a full-time job too soon. We can manage.” During the age of economic depression, most Chinese parents did not send their daughters to college because they preferred for them to work for as many years as possible before they got married. It was a traditional belief that a married daughter became a member of another family and would no longer continue to provide financial support for her parents. My parents differed from the norm and encouraged me to study, “Just study hard. Don’t get married when you are studying. No need to worry about sending money home.” I concentrated on my studies and did not get married until I completed my doctoral dissertation. My family was financially poor, but spiritually rich.

Searching for my sponsors

During my freshman year I studied sociology and became aware of the significance of social services for improving the lives of children. After I was hired by the Lutheran agency, I realized that I was called to help the poor. I worked there throughout my college years and graduated from college with distinction.

My first job after college graduation was as a refugee service coordinator helping Vietnamese refugees who fled to Hong Kong after the fall of Saigon. I was sent to one of the United Nations operated camps to help the refugee residents look for jobs, apply for financial support, and learn job skills and different languages for resettlement preparation. At the time, there were four open camps in Hong Kong and I was assigned to the one managed by the Lutheran agency, where I had worked for the past four years. With no delay, I worked collaboratively with some of my former colleagues assigned to this camp and found my experience absolutely rewarding. At the peak, I worked with more than 6,000 residents in this army barrack of 30 large bungalows; each bungalow housed 20 to 50 triple-level full-size bunk beds. My upbringing helped me understand their needs and communicate empathetically with them about their requests.

¹ Hong Kong implemented its 6-year compulsory primary education policy in 1971 and its 9-year compulsory education policy in 1978.

Puzzled by my continuous affiliation with this Lutheran agency, I decided to search for my sponsors. I asked one of my colleagues about the sponsorship program because he had been working for the agency for over 30 years. His reply was an utter disappointment because he said, "Before the agency changed its name, Hong Kong was no longer a sponsorship country because of its fast-growing economy. When the agency renovated its building, old documents were destroyed." Unfortunately, I was unable to search any further for the identity of my sponsors to inform them of my academic success. The only piece of information I obtained from this colleague was that the sponsors were Swedish. Knowing that I wouldn't be able to locate my sponsors, I turned my energy to sponsor a child with my limited income.

The outcomes of sponsorship

If my sponsors knew that I had graduated from college and received my master's and doctoral degrees, then they would be proud of their support and my success. Since I was unable to directly tell my sponsors about my accomplishments, I decided to conduct a study on sponsorship outcomes, with hope that the published data would reach my sponsors. I placed many phone calls and mailed numerous requests to sponsor-a-child agencies to see if I could conduct a research study on the outcomes of sponsorship. None of the agencies responded to my request so I was unable to obtain any data.

In an attempt to continue my research, I looked for current data about sponsored children. When I entered the keywords 'sponsored child' and other related words into an Internet search engine, over 3 million web entries appeared. Most of them linked to specific organizations that would help locate a child to sponsor. However, the Internet and other research databases did not lead me to a single piece of work that would describe the impact of these sponsor-a-child programs. Again, I was disappointed in my findings.

Since I was unable to discover any possible channels to conduct a scientific study about the long-term impact of these sponsorship programs, I decided to write this article about my own personal experiences and identify some of the positive outcomes that applied to my family and me. Through my "Dear Sponsor" letters, my report cards, and reports from the agency, my sponsors must be aware of my achievement at the time of their sponsorship, but they would not know how the financial support for a single child's elementary education could become a base to provide higher education for many more children. At the time, they relieved my family's financial burden so that I could attend school, but my sponsors also helped develop my personality and career choice. Not only did their donations pay for my tuition, books, school supplies, school uniforms, and all my educational needs in four years, but also their warm intent has supported a professor's work for a lifetime. These heartfelt gifts from the past have helped many families today to understand the importance of social services and community support because I have become a strong advocate for children and families. At that time, my sponsors helped my family successfully endure a critical time of economic crisis; through my professional practice, I have been helping many more of these families. My sponsors were the unsung heroes who helped one family break the cycle of poverty. One child who made the journey out of poverty has become one of the collaborators to help many others.

Since I began writing about these positive outcomes, my dreams of the dark room have not returned.