

HAROLD TAW

HAROLD TAW was born in Burma (now Myanmar) and immigrated to the United States as a child with his family. He attended the University of California at Berkeley and Yale University Law School. He has practiced law in San Francisco and Seattle and is active in Seattle philanthropies and on the bicycle advisory board. Recently, he put his law practice on hold to concentrate full-time on writing a novel, *Adventures of the Karaoke King*.

Finding Prosperity by Feeding Monkeys

In this essay Taw relates his efforts to observe an unusual tradition that he first practiced in his native Burma. Every year, Buddhists commemorate the birth and death of their founder, Gautama Buddha, with a symbolic watering of the Bodhi tree, under which the philosopher is said to have achieved enlightenment. When Taw was born, a monk urged that he perform a similar act of care for the natural world, but the ritual proved difficult when he immigrated to the United States. Taw read this essay for the National Public Radio series *This I Believe*, which invites people to explain the philosophies that guide their daily lives. The essay was also published in a *This I Believe* collection.

I could say that I believe in America because it rewarded my family's hard work to overcome poverty. I could say that I believe in holding on to rituals and traditions because they helped us flourish in a new country. But these concepts are more concretely expressed this way: I believe in feeding monkeys on my birthday—something I've done without fail for thirty-five years. 1

When I was born, a blind, Buddhist monk, living alone in the Burmese jungle, predicted that my birth would bring great prosperity to the family. To ensure this prosperity, I was to feed monkeys on my birthday. 2

While this sounds superstitious, the practice makes karmic sense. On a day normally given over to narcissism, I must consider my family and give nourishment to another living creature. The monk never meant for the ritual to be a burden. In the Burmese jungle, monkeys are as common as pigeons. He probably had to shoo them away from his sticky rice and mangoes. It was only in America that feeding monkeys meant violating the rules. 3

As a kid, I thought that was cool. I learned English through watching bad television shows, and I felt like Caine from *Kung Fu*, except I was the chosen warrior sent to defend my family. Dad and I would go to the zoo early in the morning, just the two of us. When the coast was clear, I would throw my contraband peanuts to the monkeys. 4

I never had to explain myself until my eighteenth birthday. It was the first year I didn't go with my father. I went with my friends and arrived ten minutes after the zoo gates closed. 5

"Please," I beseeched the zookeeper. "I feed monkeys for my family, not for me. Can't you make an exception?" 6

"Go find a pet store," she said. 7

If only it were so easy. That time, I got lucky. I found out that a high school classmate had trained the monkeys for the movie *Out of Africa*, so he allowed me to feed his monkey. I've had other close calls. Once, a man with a pet monkey suspected that my story was a ploy, and that I was an animal-rights activist out to liberate his monkey. Another time, a zoo told me that outsiders could not feed their monkeys without violating the zookeepers' collective bargaining agreement. In a pet store once, I managed to feed a marmoset being kept in a birdcage. Another time, I was asked to wear a biohazard suit to feed a laboratory monkey. 8

It's rarely easy and, yet, somehow I've found a way to feed a monkey every year since I was born. 9

Our family has prospered in America. I believe that I have ensured this prosperity by observing our family ritual and feeding monkeys on my birthday. Do I believe that literally? Maybe. But I have faith in our family, and I believe in honoring that faith in any way I can. 10

SANDRA CISNEROS

Born in 1954 in Chicago, SANDRA CISNEROS attended Loyola University, where she received a BA in 1976. Two years later, she earned an MFA from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. While at Iowa, she embraced her Chicano heritage in her writing, turning to her childhood for inspiration. Most of her published work deals explicitly with issues of ethnic heritage, poverty, and personal identity. She is the author of two novels, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), for which she won the American Book Award, and *Caramelo* (2003); a collection of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991); and four books of poetry, including *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987) and *Loose Woman* (1994). Cisneros has received numerous awards, including two from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Lannan Foundation Literary Award, the Texas Medal of the Arts, and a MacArthur Fellowship.

Only Daughter

Growing up, Cisneros faced expectations placed on girls by both American society and her Mexican American culture. Her father had little interest in reading, and his only ambition for his daughter was marriage, yet he proved to be the main reason that she became a writer. In this essay from a 1990 *Glamour* magazine, Cisneros explains why.

"Only Daughter" mixes several methods of development to show the difficult yet fruitful bond between daughter and father:

- Narration (Chap. 4): paragraphs 9–12, 15–22
- Description (Chap. 5): paragraphs 7, 13, 16–21
- Cause and effect (Chap. 11): paragraphs 3, 5, 7, 8
- Definition (Chap. 12): paragraphs 1–2

Once, several years ago, when I was just starting out my writing career, I was asked to write my own contributor's note for an anthology I was part of. I wrote: "I am the only daughter in a family of six sons. *That explains everything.*"

Well, I've thought about that ever since, and yes, it explains a lot to me, but for the reader's sake I should have written: "I am the only daughter in a Mexican family of six sons." Or even: "I am the only daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother." Or: "I am the only daughter of a working-class family of nine." All of these had everything to do with who I am today.

I was/am the only daughter and *only* a daughter. Being an only daughter in a family of six sons forced me by circumstance to spend a lot of time by myself because my brothers felt it beneath them to play with a *girl* in public. But that

aloneness, that loneliness, was good for a would-be writer—it allowed me time to think and think, to imagine, to read and prepare myself.

Being only a daughter for my father meant my destiny would lead me to become someone's wife. That's what he believed. But when I was in fifth grade and shared my plans for college with him, I was sure he understood. I remember my father saying, "*Que bueno, mi'ja*, that's good." That meant a lot to me, especially since my brothers thought the idea hilarious. What I didn't realize was that my father thought college was good for girls—for finding a husband. After four years in college and two more in graduate school, and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education.

In retrospect, I'm lucky my father believed daughters were meant for husbands. It meant it didn't matter if I majored in something silly like English. After all, I'd find a nice professional eventually, right? This allowed me the liberty to putter about embroidering my little poems and stories without my father interrupting with so much as a "What's that you're writing?"

But the truth is, I wanted him to interrupt. I wanted my father to understand what it was I was scribbling, to introduce me as "My only daughter, the writer." Not as "This is my only daughter. She teaches." *El maestra*—teacher. Not even *profesora*.

In a sense, everything I have ever written has been for him, to win his approval even though I know my father can't read English words, even though my father's only reading includes the brown-ink *Esto* sports magazines from Mexico City and the bloody *¡Alarma!* magazines that feature yet another sighting of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* on a tortilla or a wife's revenge on her philandering husband by bashing his skull in with a *molcajete* (a kitchen mortar made of volcanic rock). Or the *fotonovelas*, the little picture paperbacks with tragedy and trauma erupting from the characters' mouths in bubbles.

My father represents, then, the public majority. A public who is uninterested in reading, and yet one whom I am writing about and for, and privately trying to woo.

When we were growing up in Chicago, we moved a lot because of my father. He suffered periodic bouts of nostalgia. Then we'd have to let go our flat, store the furniture with mother's relatives, load the station wagon with baggage and bologna sandwiches, and head south. To Mexico City.

We came back, of course. To yet another Chicago flat, another Chicago neighborhood, another Catholic school. Each time, my father would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break, and complain or boast: "I have seven sons."

He meant *siete hijos*, seven children, but he translated it as "sons." "I have seven sons." To anyone who would listen. The Sears Roebuck employee who sold us the washing machine. The short-order cook where my father ate his

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ham-and-eggs breakfasts. "I have seven sons." As if he deserved a medal from the state.

My papa. He didn't mean anything by that mistranslation, I'm sure. But somehow I could feel myself being erased. I'd tug my father's sleeve and whisper: "Not seven sons. Six! and *one daughter*."

When my oldest brother graduated from medical school, he fulfilled my father's dream that we study hard and use this—our heads, instead of this—our hands. Even now my father's hands are thick and yellow, stubbed by a history of hammer and nails and twine and coils and springs. "Use this," my father said, tapping his head, "and not this," showing us those hands. He always looked tired when he said it.

Wasn't college an investment? And hadn't I spent all those years in college? And if I didn't marry, what was it all for? Why would anyone go to college and then choose to be poor? Especially someone who had always been poor.

Last year, after ten years of writing professionally, the financial rewards started to trickle in. My second National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. A guest professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. My book, which sold to a major New York publishing house.

At Christmas, I flew home to Chicago. The house was throbbing, same as always; hot *tamales* and sweet *tamales* hissing in my mother's pressure cooker, and everybody—mother, six brothers, wives, babies, aunts, cousins—talking too loud and at the same time, like in a Fellini¹ film, because that's just how we are.

I went upstairs to my father's room. One of my stories had just been translated into Spanish and published in an anthology of Chicano writing, and I wanted to show it to him. Ever since he recovered from a stroke two years ago, my father likes to spend his leisure hours horizontally. And that's how I found him, watching a Pedro Infante movie on Galavision and eating rice pudding.

There was a glass filmed with milk on the bedside table. There were several vials of pills and balled Kleenex. And on the floor, one black sock and a plastic urinal that I didn't want to look at but looked at anyway. Pedro Infante was about to burst into song, and my father was laughing.

I'm not sure if it was because my story was translated into Spanish, or because it was published in Mexico, or perhaps because the story dealt with Tepeyac, the *colonia* my father was raised in, but at any rate, my father punched the mute button on his remote control and read my story.

I sat on the bed next to my father and waited. He read it very slowly. As if he were reading each line over and over. He laughed at all the right places and

¹Federico Fellini (1920–93), an Italian, directed *La Strada*, *La Dolce Vita*, *Satyricon*, and other movies.—EDS.

read lines he liked out loud. He pointed and asked questions: "Is this So-and-so?" "Yes," I said. He kept reading.

When he was finally finished, after what seemed like hours, my father looked up and asked: "Where can we get more copies of this for the relatives?"

Of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year, that was the most wonderful.

ing I know about the subject, every thought I've ever had on it. This
velve or fourteen pages. Then I read it back through, for quite a few
find—given that subject—what its rhythm is. Cause everything in
rse has a rhythm. So if it's free form, it still has a rhythm. And once
:rhythm of the piece, then I try to find out what are the salient points
st make. And then it begins to take shape.

to set myself up in each chapter by saying: "This is what I want to
-from B to, say, G-sharp. Or from D to L." And then I find the hook.
he knitting, where, after you knit a certain amount, there's one
at begins to pull. You know, you can see it right along the cloth.
writing, I think: "Now where is that one hook, that one little thread?"
: a sentence. If I can catch that, then I'm home free. It's the one
me where I'm going. It may not even turn out to be in the final chap-
throw it out later or change it. But if I follow it through, it leads me

For Discussion

would you define the word *rhythm* as Maya Angelou uses it?
response would you give a student who said, "Doesn't Angelou's approach
ting waste more time and thought than it's worth?"

DIFFERENCE

AMY TAN

AMY TAN is a gifted storyteller whose first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), met with critical acclaim and huge success. The relationships it details between immigrant Chinese mothers and their Chinese American daughters came from Tan's firsthand experience. She was born in 1952 in Oakland, California, the daughter of immigrants who had fled China's civil war in the late 1940s. She majored in English and linguistics at San Jose State University, where she received a BA in 1973 and an MA in 1974. After two more years of graduate work, Tan became a consultant in language development for disabled children and then started her own company writing reports and speeches for business corporations. Tan began writing fiction to explore her ethnic ambivalence and to find a voice for herself. Since *The Joy Luck Club*, she has published four more novels—most recently *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005)—as well as children's books and *The Opposite of Fate* (2003), a collection of autobiographical essays. She also sings in the Rock Bottom Remainders, a rock band of writers.

Fish Cheeks

In Tan's novel *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), one of the characters says, "Good manners are not enough. . . . They are not the same as a good heart." Much of Tan's writing explores the tensions between keeping up appearances and having true intentions. In the brief narrative that follows, the author deftly portrays the contradictory feelings and the advantages of a girl with feet in different cultures. The essay first appeared in *Seventeen*, a magazine for teenage girls and young women, in 1987.

For a complementary view of growing up "different," read the preceding essay, Maya Angelou's "Champion of the World."

I fell in love with the minister's son the winter I turned fourteen. He was
not Chinese, but as white as Mary in the manger. For Christmas I prayed for
this blond-haired boy, Robert, and a slim new American nose.

When I found out that my parents had invited the minister's family over
for Christmas Eve dinner, I cried. What would Robert think of our shabby
Chinese Christmas? What would he think of our noisy Chinese relatives who
lacked proper American manners? What terrible disappointment would he
feel upon seeing not a roasted turkey and sweet potatoes but Chinese food?

On Christmas Eve I saw that my mother had outdone herself in creating a strange menu. She was pulling black veins out of the backs of fleshy prawns. The kitchen was littered with appalling mounds of raw food: A slimy rock cod with bulging eyes that pleaded not to be thrown into a pan of hot oil. Tofu, which looked like stacked wedges of rubbery white sponges. A bowl soaking dried fungus back to life. A plate of squid, their backs crisscrossed with knife markings so they resembled bicycle tires.

And then they arrived—the minister’s family and all my relatives in a clamor of doorbells and crumpled Christmas packages. Robert grunted hello, and I pretended he was not worthy of existence.

Dinner threw me deeper into despair. My relatives licked the ends of their chopsticks and reached across the table, dipping them into the dozen or so plates of food. Robert and his family waited patiently for platters to be passed to them. My relatives murmured with pleasure when my mother brought out the whole steamed fish. Robert grimaced. Then my father poked his chopsticks just below the fish eye and plucked out the soft meat. “Amy, your favorite,” he said, offering me the tender fish cheek. I wanted to disappear.

At the end of the meal my father leaned back and belched loudly, thanking my mother for her fine cooking. “It’s a polite Chinese custom to show you are satisfied,” explained my father to our astonished guests. Robert was looking down at his plate with a reddened face. The minister managed to muster up a quiet burp. I was stunned into silence for the rest of the night.

After everyone had gone, my mother said to me, “You want to be the same as American girls on the outside.” She handed me an early gift. It was a miniskirt in beige tweed. “But inside you must always be Chinese. You must be proud you are different. Your only shame is to have shame.”

And even though I didn’t agree with her then, I knew that she understood how much I had suffered during the evening’s dinner. It wasn’t until many years later—long after I had gotten over my crush on Robert—that I was able to fully appreciate her lesson and the true purpose behind our particular menu. For Christmas Eve that year, she had chosen all my favorite foods.

For a reading quiz, sources on Amy Tan, and annotated links to further readings on Chinese Americans, visit bedfordstmartins.com/thebedfordreader.

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