

Evolving Expressions of Love for the First Generation American  
Faith in Indigenous Immigrant Households

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Tote bags filled to the brim with groceries were carefully being balanced on our laps, our feet. My mother and I sat side by side on a bus, my hands twisting and becoming tangled with fabric straps as she told me how envious she was of our neighbors. An older couple, both migrants, had recently bought a house in New Jersey. Their middle-aged, unmarried children were also moving in with their parents as caretakers and financial support to offset the expensive costs.

“And the children are also *American citizens!*” This was somehow the most important part of the story, that despite their *American* upbringing, these noble children had somehow maintained a grasp on important tradition. “I just don’t understand,” her voice toeing the fine line between curiosity and disdain, “why you wouldn’t want to do the same.”

My pinky fingers were trapped in the knots. As the quintessential disgruntled teen I mumbled, “I don’t get why I *wouldn’t* want to move.” Since childhood, I wished to sleep in a queen-sized bed all for myself, planning to move out whenever financially feasible, dreaming of the freedom brought at the cost of my mother’s broken heart.

The bus trudged uphill and at the ring of the bell, all the passengers began to shuffle towards the door. I tangled bags around my wrists once more. My mother rolled her eyes as we rose from our seats.

Although my family is Indigenous from the highlands of Guatemala, Christian ideologies loosely dictate our cultural practices, directing morality and therefore, parenting practices. This relationship has its troubling roots, in the violent history Maya communities faced because of the European colonizers and forced conversion to Catholicism. I do not intend to dismiss or offend practices and readings that have influenced and shaped culture for centuries (and my own life) but instead reflect on important virtues of love and honor and how they manifest.

Why must we live with our parents until marriage? In a Catholic household, raised with parents who ask for obedience as a symbol of respect, I find the answer rooted in a Christian idea of honor. After all, one of the first commandments of the bible reads,

“‘Honor your father and mother.’ This is the first commandment with a promise: If you honor your father and mother, ‘Things will go well for you, and you will have a long life on the earth’” (Ephesians 6:1-3).

The idea of *honoring* your parents has been interpreted to mean respect and gratitude. Honor, however, is a word solemnly used in my own upbringing. Yet the bible again uses honor to describe marriage,

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous” (Hebrews 13:4)

When it comes to faith, honor, and *love*, we are all interconnected. Our connection with our parents means we live under the same roof, and marriage is the turning point for disconnection as new households are created and we are allowed to leave. However, these practices can uphold purity culture. And moving out prematurely feeds into that cycle: at best it is met with confusion. At worst seen as scandalous.

My frequently remind me to uphold such practices. I had always rebelled, staring deadpanned at their wedding photo hung on our living room wall, complete with the tuxedos, the white gowns, and three children standing by their sides. Irony! I proclaimed.

Yet that is the point. Guilt is carried throughout the generations. Matrimony is a logistical tradition of the Catholic Church as one of the seven sacraments. The creation of indissoluble unions is part of the preparation for the afterlife, and the idea of honor in Catholicism can therefore also be interpreted culturally as maintaining reputation. The actions we take in this

mortal life will therefore reflect our capability to enter Heaven, an eternal life meant for virtuous people, my parents, and family's "mistakes" are inherited. They reflect on me. And my "mistakes" will reflect on them, as they are the ones responsible for my upbringing. We are connected as a family, yet this intersection of religion and culture creates strict ideas of how we can maintain honor.

I will not practice complete obedience. I find little benefit in staying with my parents until marriage. My own ideas of independence are in constant conflict with Catholic values. I also dearly love my parents. It is hard to find an answer within this intersection, yet as many other cultures have similar practices of honor and the ideal family, in comparison, we still find new ideas. In the Analects of Confucius, filial piety (Xiao) is also described with passages of obedience, hierarchy, and respect. My parents do not have "filial piety" in their vocabulary, yet, despite the parallels, I hesitate to introduce the concept to them because they would adopt the idea with overwhelming fervor. Like when they swarm the one-dollar strawberry vendors on Main Street. However universal practices of love that can comply with a multitude of beliefs have made certain passages resonate with me,

"Meng Wubo asked about filiality. The Master said, 'Let your mother and father need be concerned only for your health'" (2.6).

Macy's is my mother's haven. Herald Square Macy's twists and swirls as eight floors of clothes, jewelry, and bags were eagerly taken in as we rose by the escalators to the children's section, down to the shoe sections, and circled back to admire the displays full of gold and diamonds. With our shiny Macy's card, it might as well be all ours.

Yet Herald Square is somehow *different* because we skip past the boutiques, and the purses encased in glass, the brand names labeling the alcoves. We did not enter any of those

spaces. One room held a raised platform, with angled mirrors shining spotlights on the hypothetical customer trying on the fur coats lining the walls. I knew somehow these items were not to be touched. But it's winter, and my mother is always so cold. She's bundled up in layers of tank tops, turtlenecks, knitted hats that holds all her hair, and furry boots that lace up mid-shin. Always, always in puffer jackets that can be folded up into little drawstring bags.

She is worth a real fur coat though. A fur coat, I thought, would surely keep her warm. "I will buy you one, one day," I promised, pointing to the guarded racks with all the confidence of a grade schooler. I will buy you all the fur coats you want. My mother laughed, endeared, kissed my cheek, and ushered me away from the room of mirrors and lights.

I look back to my Kaqchikel heritage as another source of inspiration, and what perspectives Maya communities offer for parenthood. In the translation notes of the Popol Vuh, an epic of Maya K'iche folklore, language suggests a different relationship,

"Generational changes represent the transferral of life from the grandparents to their grandchildren... implying that the spirit of a dead ancestor... has returned to occupy a new body. In most highland Maya languages, the word for grandfather, mam, is also the word for grandchild, suggesting an equivalent relationship" (115).

Catholicism and Indigenous ideologies suggest interconnectedness. Yet where culture has evolved to maintain purity culture and a cycle of guilt through gossip, our interconnectedness should encourage self and mutual respect instead. Filial Piety, in passage 2.6 offers the idea that through independence can children relieve their parents of stress if they prove capable of taking care of themselves. K'iche, Kaqchikel and other Maya languages suggest that we must all care for one another as spiritual equals.

Its love shown as we carry the heavy groceries for each other. The child in Macy's becomes the caretaker, the parent for a moment, giving back a love taught by a mother who insists on bundling the children up in their own puffer coats and hats.

Unlike the model neighbors, my own life becomes a melting pot of what faith and love can look like. To not be devout does not mean we must lose our morals. Separation of households does not need to occur through marriage, and moving out doesn't mean there is a premature separation. My faith in higher powers is constantly evolving, but love is universal, shifting yet constant as I find the appropriate ways to express it.

First generation American, loving your parents can feel like repaying the bottomless debt we never asked for. Neither entirely American, nor of our homelands, but that doesn't have to always be negative.

The cycle of guilt is a cultural construct we can dismantle. We must live our own lives too, an independence that cannot come without pain as it often comes about when tradition evolves. A doting parent will never stop truly worrying (as my worried mother so often reminds me), yet as Analects say, let them only be worried for superficial reasons. As our indigenous languages write, remember we are all still connected. And as the American in me says: go get that queen-sized bed!

Sources

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