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Fall 2019

FYS 101 Women Writing the World

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Fall 2019

## Knowing Your Enemy

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### Recommended Citation

Tetrick, Mackenzie, "Knowing Your Enemy" (2019). *Fall 2019*. 41.  
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Mackenzie Tetrick

### Knowing Your Enemy

People of the Hmong culture immigrated to many different places in the United States during the late 1970s in search of refuge. When these people came to America after facing war in their home country, they were unsure as to who they could trust. A Hmong man told a reporter, “In a war, you know who your enemies are. Here, you don’t know if the man walking up to you will hurt you,” (Fadiman 192). It is evident that the Hmong people did not know who to trust when doctors looked down upon them and saw them as inferiors. Consequently, they were often confused by the medical terminology, and more specifically, a couple had their child taken away from them because cultural differences made them appear as unfit parents. After the Hmong had immigrated, Americans expected them to assimilate, but because proper communication and understanding was not sought out, trust could not be established between the two groups.

One of the first signs shown in the book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* of the Hmong people not recognizing who to trust happens when the Lee family visit the hospital. Foua and Nao Kao Lee had to take their daughter, Lia, to the Merced County Medical Center on two occasions because her seizures had escalated to the point her parents were worried (Fadiman 23). Because there was no way to communicate between the two parties, the doctors had no way to inform the parents what they were doing to their daughter. The Lee’s did not know if these doctors would be an enemy or an ally and would continue to wonder for the rest of their encounters with them. When they moved to this new country of America, they wanted to be able to take care of their daughter using their traditional methods of healing. The doctors did not consider asking the parents what they would want done to their daughter; they just did what they

felt was best for Lia. Bypassing Lia's parents and focusing solely on the problem and not the person solidified the mistrust and apprehension between the parents and the doctors.

The lack of communication from everyone put the Lees in a position where they started to perceive the doctors as enemies. Not only were the doctors starting to be seen as enemies, but even interpreters who were supposed to be a middleman became enemies. Nao Kao said that a Hmong interpreter, Sue Xiong, "scolded him, and he became convinced that she was not accurately translating his statements to a doctor" (Fadiman 91). Whether Sue was correctly translating or not to the doctors, the fear that Nao Kao had that she was not reflects again how the Lee family could not tell who their enemies were in this country. Nao Kao was so unhappy with Sue as an interpreter he even said he would "get a gun and shoot her" if she showed back up at his house (Fadiman 91). In this moment, it truly became a war between the Lee family and the American workers trying to help Lia. Nao Kao already had a fear the family was not being listened to appropriately, and the problems worsened from here. No one knew who they could trust in this situation, and everyone was converting into each other's enemies instead of uniting in order to help Lia overcome her seizure disorder.

With different beliefs and no communication between the Lees and the doctors at MCMC, there was confusion about Lia's medicine. Nao Kao and Foua never knew what they were signing off on at the hospital when they were handed papers to sign and never followed the instructions on the medical forms (Fadiman 26). Because no one tells them how to conform in a way they understand, they resort to what they are comfortable with which is their own culture. When doctors do not take the time to explain medical procedures, this confusion further puts up a barrier between the two groups of people and strains the miniscule trust the family has for the

doctors. This barrier also affects the trust the doctors have for the family, and it even went as far as having Lia removed from her family in order to ensure she was receiving her medications (Fadiman 79). Dr. Neil Ernst was doing what he believed was best for the child, but never communicated the deep concerns he had over Lia not receiving her medications with the parents. This further lead Foua and Nao Kao to believe that he was an enemy to them in America. The root of the problem between the two groups stems for the communication barrier and makes them enemies, because nothing was done to break down this barrier besides incompetent interpreters provided occasionally by MCMC. If steps were taken in order to find some sort of common language, the two groups could unite and fight the problem they were facing in Lia's illness instead of fighting each other. A common language may have allowed Lia to receive the correct medications to best control her seizures and the grand mal seizure could have been avoided. Instead, the two groups get nowhere with the problem while they look at each other as the enemy instead of an ally.

When an ethical common ground was found and trust was built up with the Lee family, who emigrated from everything they knew, some of their relationships began to improve. Jeanine Hilt, the CPS caseworker, was determined to help the Lee family regain custody of their daughter and did everything she could to help them show the court they were fit to take care of Lia (Fadiman 90). Jeanine had faced the same barriers that the doctors and staff at MCMC had. The difference was Jeanine's willingness to overcome the problem put before her and find resources to help her get Foua and Nao Kao to understand what she was telling them. Jeanine would spend hours educating the family on Lia's medications in order to show the court that the family had learned how to give her the medications based on the doctors' orders (Fadiman 90).

Without her help, the Lees may have never gotten their daughter back from the government.

Jeanine showed how taking the time to work around not only the communication barrier but the cultural barrier as well can bestow trust to the family and let them know that they are not facing an enemy.

Anne Fadiman also showed how taking the time to get to know the family and working against the barriers can build trust between the two different cultures (Fadiman 97-99). The Lees never had to grant Fadiman access to Lia's medical records, but because Fadiman took the time to get to know the family and their culture and try to see the situation from their perspective, they knew they could trust her with those files. Fadiman made herself an ally, not an enemy, to these people and showed them how to be welcomed into the country instead of immediately being forced to assimilate into a culture they know little to nothing about. Fadiman gave the Lee family a voice in a country where no one would listen to them in order to bring awareness to their differences and embrace them instead of finding ways to change the Hmong people into Americans.

It is human nature to be uncomfortable in situations one doesn't know much about. When someone isn't certain with something, they get an uneasy feeling and can be put on edge. This was a common feeling among the Hmong people not knowing what their role was in America. If proper communication was out into place in the Lees situation, Lia may have never gotten to the point where she reached her grand mal seizure and lost higher level brain function. The doctors and Lia's parents could have worked together in order to come up with a treatment plan incorporating western medicine and the traditional healing methods of the Hmong. Lia's case has changed the way people now look at different cultures when it comes to healing methods, but

there is still work that can be done. There is no right way to approach a cultural problem when it comes to health, but training can be provided among many different religions and cultures in order to best prepare the people who will face this problem.

Works Cited

Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. Print.