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My Rice Bowl

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I am Chinese...

My grandfather, whom I call my Gong Gong, was a migrant from China. Mom told me that during the Japanese occupation, he and his brothers were ordered by the Japanese to board a truck. They were not told where they going but somehow Gong Gong knew it was a one-way trip to death. After failing to persuade his brothers to jump off the truck at the opportune time, he did so himself. He survived but never heard from any of his brothers again. He valued family togetherness more than anything in the world and was determined to instil this value to all of his 11 children.

There is a Chinese proverb that says that one single chopstick is easily broken but one cannot break a bunch of chopsticks tightly held together. While growing up, I was taught that family was always first, that it was selfish to think for oneself or to consider one's feelings above the rest. In my family, the importance of a meal eaten together cannot be over emphasised. The family that eats together stays together. The Chinese dinner table is round and the communal food is placed in the centre of the table. Traditionally, the rice is the essential ingredient - one can eat rice without the luxury of extra dishes but one should not eat the dishes without the rice. Each person at the table has his or her own rice bowl. This bowl is not shared. It is supremely important for one's survival that one strives to have a full rice bowl.

I am Singaporean...

I am a 3rd generation Singaporean Chinese and life for me is different from Gong Gong's. He was grateful to have a life. I have not only a life but also a lifestyle. I am a middle-class 'English educated' pleasant looking healthy Chinese Singaporean. I live with my family in a 5-room private apartment. Less than 15% of the population live in 'private' estates and it seemed that nearly all my friends were in that category. I have two maids and a chauffeur.

I was an obedient child but I constantly hungered for approval and it seemed to me at the time that I would only be valued if I did well at school. My parents were very busy in their respective business ventures. I seldom saw them and on the rare occasion that I did, I was always told what to do and what to think. Sadly, I felt my worth depended on my academic performance, the very thing I was so very bad at. Despite many failures, I worked hard and when I finally received the acceptance letter from the National University of Singapore (NUS), I felt for the first time in my life that I was somebody. Overnight I became the respected elite and it gave me the permission to respect myself.

I went through the education system and in time I became one of the many numbered Singaporeans slaving for a 5-figure salary, 4 wheels, 3 rooms, 2 kids and 1 spouse as the supreme goal in life. I never questioned the structure. Acceptance and accommodation were the keys to my survival. This was the reality and I had to be realistic. As long as I could fill my rice bowl with these essential things I was going to be OK.

I am...

I had 10 years of work experience behind me and was ready to marry the man who adored me and whom I adored. All preparations were ready for our wedding and I was a joyful bride to be until just before the wedding I received a brief note from my fiancé informing me of his decision to break the engagement. No reasons were ever given. He had simply changed his mind and I heard no more from him. I cannot begin to express the deep rejection, wild confusion, total disbelief and devastation I felt. This kind of thing does not happen to someone like me. I did everything I was supposed to do, I followed all the rules, I was a good girl and I wanted to be a good wife and mother. Why had I not seen it coming? Was my reality just an illusion?

In this first painting since the event, I chose the items arbitrarily or so I thought. The way the items are laid out in the image is typical of how my table is set at every mealtime. I chose a blood red satin cloth as a background to the delicate porcelain china and its utensils. It was important that the red background reflected life, movement and flow. I was also intrigued by the shadows the light could create.

As I was alone painting this table setting one late night when I had a piercing experience. While I was painting the vibrant red background, I was filled with grateful thoughts of all the change, the activities and meaningful interactions in my life at that present moment and all the love and support I found in those around me. When I started painting the white bowl however, I began to feel an ache deep in my chest. The pain grew into such intensity that I was overwhelmed with emotion. It seemed to be confronting me with the inner realities I was faced with. The loss not only of an ideal world but also of the many structures and systems of beliefs my life was built upon. It was as if my life was being emptied out and I was left alone and bare in this world. Like in the image, the emptiness of my inner world was accentuated by the vibrancy of my outer world and the bowl seemed to act as a container of all the precious things I held on to so tightly to.

As I continued through the night, the act of painting seemed to transform into an act of meditation. The hard shadow within the bowl seemed to remind me of a distinct split in my inner world. The light and darkness was juxtaposed against each other. On the other side of the darkness was a sense of hope and a profound truth. My reflections took me into the remembrance of the long and painful journey I took to this empty state and the endless number of mornings I woke up to, the moments of torment and of grief. How I had made a decision not to turn cold but to humbly face and accept the rejected parts of myself. How I learnt to really listen to my heart and embrace my soul. How I had grown in compassion and come to love my uniqueness as a human being. How for the first time in my life I could reach out and connect with the pain of so many others. It seemed that through my suffering I discovered my commonality with humanity. I had found a treasure that was mine yet not mine to keep. I was empty so I could partake of more of that mystery that makes me unique but interconnected to human kind. Yes, I was empty, but I was more whole than I ever felt before.
