Field Journal: March 6, 2015

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Its about 9:30 at night and I just got home from Tay Nay’s family apartment (Carolina Apartments E17) where I was interviewing her mom Mi Htoo (pronounced “Me Too”), and dad, Aung Oo Ning (pronounced as it is spelled).

When I arrived at the apartment Aung Oo opened the door. I entered, leaving my shoes in the hall among all the rest, large and small, flip flop and tennis (a testimony to the large family living in that three bedroom apartment). Tay Nay (age 19), was sitting on the small couch playing on her phone. I sat down next to her, facing the large open room, her mom, Mi Htoo sitting on the floor, wearing a beautiful woven “longyi” (wrap skirt), and a blouse.

*How was your day?* I asked Tay Nay.

*So-so*, she said.

*Oh yeah*? *What’s up?*

*Oh, just a long day,* she said. (I would find out later that she and her sister had fasted all day. Maybe this explains the long day, and the fatigued looked on she and her sister’s usually smiling faces).

Tay Nays older sister, Hser Ku, came into the living room from down the hall. Now I notice they have set out 2 folding chairs by the couch (maybe this is to make me feel more comfortable), but nobody is using them. Hser Ku takes a see on the bamboo rug next to her mom. Her dad joins them.

There is little furniture in the room, a small counter or desk of sorts and a large shelf. Its night, and the light in the room is low. The apartment has an open floor plan, so from the living room you can see into the kitchen. In the space between the living room and kitchen (where some might choose to have a dining room), there is a fold out table with cooking supplies on it and boxes of food beneath. Maybe they use this as extra kitchen counter space. A long hall leads to two bedrooms and a bathroom. There is one more room behind the living room, where Tay Nay’s younger siblings quietly come and go from (stepping around our little circle on the floor to get to the other bedrooms). Considering all the children in the house, I’m always surprised how quite it is. On the longest living room wall is an illustrated poster of the Karen alphabet. Next to the hall there are two framed certificates of some kind (I’ll have to look closer next time I’m there).

I was over at the apartment last week, helping Tay Nay with a research project about immigration she is doing in high school. Now she is helping me in this project, and it feels like and equal trade, but I still felt I should bring a thank you gift of sorts. I asked Tay Nay what I could bring for her parents, but she didn’t respond to my email. I’m not sure she felt comfortable asking for anything.

I asked Tay Nay to translate the consent form for her parents. She and her dad filled it out together on the floor, kneeling over the paper and writing on a book. I set up the zoom on the floor where they had chosen to sit and then worked with Hser Ku to fill out the life history form.

Finally we all sat down together. I had sent Tay Nay a preliminary set of questions (some that she had actually written herself for her high school project that I found to be thoughtful and pertinent: like, for example, what are some of the cultural differences here and how are your overcoming them?)

Hser Ku explained that she would translate for her mom, and Tay Nay would translate for her dad. This turned out to be extremely helpful in understanding who was saying what at times when both Aung Oo and Mi Htoo began speaking at once.

The five us sat together, I turned on the recorder, and we got started with introductions, but we had a bit of a false start. I still don’t quite understand what happened, some confusion with whether to translate in first person or third person. Tay Nay decided it was better to translate in first person and asked that we start over (we had barely begun asking the first question, so I said fine, that would be our practice-round).

Interestingly, in their introductions they all said they were from Thailand, although only Tay Nay was born there. The rest were born in Burma. We spent more time than I had anticipated talking about Aung Oo’s experience in Burma, and the danger of life there. I had anticipated not dwelling on this because I did not want the interview to focus on tauma, simply because I did not want the conversation itself to be traumatic. Aung Oo chose to bring up this subject on his own, so I followed his lead. At some point Hser Ku gestured to me to ask a different question/change the subject. I followed her advice and shifted the conversation to one about life in the US.

Toward the end of the interview we started talking about cultural knowledge, as it relates to farming mostly. Mi Htoo shared a Karen folk tale with me, which is meant to encourage children to behave. That really made my day. It seemed to me they were more excited to talk about this subject. The conversation became more comfortable/enlivened. They have invited me back to talk more about these subjects and hear more stories (maybe next week), and this time they will invite Tay Nay’s grandfather. Perfect. So excited.

Oh! Yes. I forgot to take a picture and didn’t realize until after her dad had left to go to a friend’s house. But we decided I would come back and take a picture of the 4 of them with the few items they brought with them from Thailand when they moved.

Before I left they insisted I take two packaged snacks. They would not partake in eating with me. That’s when I found out Tay Nay and Hser Ku had been fasting. They and all the youth church members were taking the day to fast, and pray for the sake of all the problems in the Karen community right now. I accepted the snacks but waited to eat them in the car. Yum. Sweet rice cakes, and something called “Pandan flavor layer cake”. Pandan is a tropical plant used in SE Asian cooking