

# Hear Our Stories

The Moment The Butterfly Flaps Its Wings



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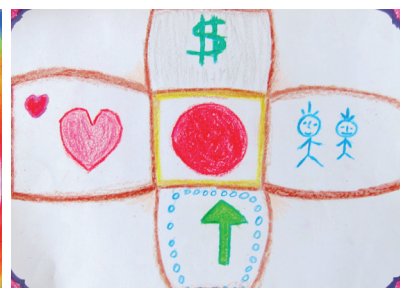
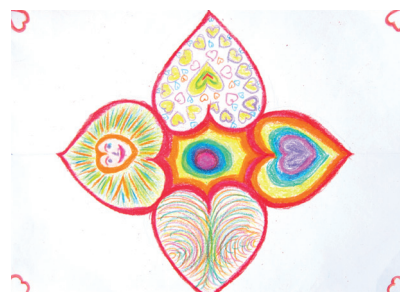
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These drawings are mandalas created by each participant to explicate in each quadrant, (1) her achievement in the past 15 months; (2) the desires/dreams/achievements she would like to focus her energies for the next 3 years; (3) the qualities that she would like to develop; (4) what she would take from the WSP experience for her life - eg. how/what to let go, learning gratitude and forgiveness. The centre core represents what she aspires to be or develop in the next 3 years.





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*lean* and Molly

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# Introduction

The thirteen narratives in this book are written by the women who participated in the Women's Stories Project (WSP) under the auspices of Women Centre for Change (WCC), Penang and Pusat Perkhidmatan Wanita (PPW), Seberang Prai. All participants except one are married or have been married and nearly all of them encounter relationship, family and/or marital challenges. Among these twelve women, two are divorced and are single mothers, while five of them are separated and the remaining five are in conjugal relationships. At some point, all of them have turned to WCC and PPW to seek help and support during the darkest period of their lives. They are all Chinese and Mandarin-speaking. They wrote their stories in Chinese<sup>1</sup>. None of the women had any previous experience in writing or drawing but subsequently discovered these capacities through the various workshop activities. A number of them now want to further develop their artistic-creative talents and to be facilitators to support other women.

Butterflies<sup>2</sup> have been used as a symbol of transformation, inner beauty, strength, independence and freedom in the WSP to help the women understand that life challenges can help discover and rediscover who they are and

what they desire. In fact for butterflies not to be maimed, the caterpillars need time to mature fully so that they do not emerge impaired from their cocoons. In many ways, what the women experienced through the healing process, marked by the birthing of these stories, parallel the long gestation of cocoons before they develop into flapping butterflies to experience the transformation, freedom and independence. The moment the butterfly flaps its wings is the moment of breakthrough, the turning point, the transformation, the change of mind-set, the moment of emotional resolution, reconstitution to feel their own confidence and groundedness, healing from their woundedness, transforming from victimhood to being empowered with their own agency and freedom. Indeed, through the evocative and reconstitution processes in the series of WSP workshops, the women have been able to flap their wings like newly-molted butterflies and have become self-assured, resilient and emboldened after taking time and courage to confront and address their suppressed pain and challenges. At another level of analogy where butterflies flapping their wings can generate ripple effects, the women have also expressed interest and have started to move beyond focusing on themselves, to reach out to other women and children. By writing down their lived experiences, the women have hoped that other people in similar situations who read their stories will be inspired to come forward to address their buried pains or be involved to support other women.

These narratives are stories from the women's lived experiences and articulation of their suppressed pains, silences, dreams and

1. These stories were translated into English for this publication. The translation was done in such a manner that the voices of the women are maintained. As a result, some of the women's quotes may sound Chinese because these are literal translation from the Chinese text.

2. The butterflies in this book are crafted by the women themselves to mark their own metamorphosis in the healing journey.

desires. The focus and length of each narrative is different, describing what each woman is comfortable to share with the wider public. What is published in this booklet is only a fraction from their writing. Some of these stories describe how the women met their husbands and entered into marriage, how their marriages have broken down or are breaking down, and how they struggled through separation, divorce or attempts to save their marriages. Some reflected on what they have learnt from their pushed aside but vivid childhood memories while others recalled how they have grappled with their life challenges. The women who are already divorced wrote about the deep wounds inflicted by their ex-husbands' extra-marital affairs. They talked about their distressing dilemmas, begging and waiting for their husbands to return, then feeling angry and wanting to revenge, and their fear of being abandoned to face the unknown. Finally, each of them took the bold step of getting a divorce and learned how to let go and move on with their lives. They shared in their stories, the new windows in their lives where they learn to be financially independent and nurture their children as proud single mothers. One of these women had initially refused to let her children see their father after their breakup but later changed her mind after joining WSP because she realized that children should not be made to suffer because of the actions of adults.

For those who are separated, they are still trying to come to terms with their current situation. All except one have their children with them. As single mothers, they are faced with common daily dilemmas such as how to be financially independent, how to be emotionally strong for their children, how to seek proper child care while they work to earn a living, how to manage their time and multi-task to meet diverse demands. The woman who does not have custody of her children wrote about her sufferings in being separated from her young daughters. The only time that she could see them is during recess in their schools and she has to even do this secretly without the knowledge of her 'husband'. She wrote about the difficulties she encountered in trying to get legal

custody of her children and the painful separation of a yearning mother.

For those still married, they are working very hard to save their marriages. They try to understand and wrestle with the various underlying demands in their marriages. A couple of them attributed their marital problems to their family background and their own childhood experiences. They are from either poor broken family background or have parents who were always quarrelling. They found that they often view themselves as victims, have high expectations of their own marriages and children, and have difficulty in relating with members of their husbands' families. From WSP workshops, small group discussions and with the support of other women in the WSP, they begin to understand their own situations better and have regained their self-esteem and self-confidence. They even feel energized by their new-found enthusiasm and desire to live their dreams now.

Behind the words in these stories, the women's emotions: pain and sorrow, anxieties, frustrations and anger, hopes and dreams are conveyed. As they shared and reflected on their life journeys, they discovered and rediscovered themselves. The women now describe themselves as beautiful, colorful flapping butterflies after breaking through the cocoons to find the silver lining in their lives. Happiness and freedom are in their hands as they change their outlook and begin to chart their life paths purposefully.



Let us know how this book, project and the stories resonate with you. Thank you  
**Do send us your comments & feedback: [womenstoriesproject@gmail.com](mailto:womenstoriesproject@gmail.com)**

# The Journey of Realization

by Hui Ming



If we keep on fighting with each other, not only will we hurt ourselves. We will be worn out too.





**i** have been separated from my husband for four years. Although I have freedom now, at one time my mind was empty and lonely. I have two children; my husband is having custody of them now. I had a mental breakdown because my husband had deprived me of the right to visit my children. I had no mood to work and I spent my days in tears. When that happened, my children were still small. They did not know what had happened between us, and I also did not know how to tell them. It was by chance that I came into contact with Pusat Perkhimatan Wanita and participated in the Women's Stories Project organized by them. Through writing, I hope my children would read my aspiration when they grow up, and at the same time I can express my repentance to them.

I used to have a happy family. At that time, besides working hard to provide for my material comfort, my husband was also very caring, thoughtful and took good care of me. I did not expect that one day we would become strangers to each other. His love for me would turn into hatred, and everything I had just disappeared.

A few years into our marriage, problems emerged in our communication. Day and night my husband was engrossed in chatting with his cyber friends on Facebook to the extent of ignoring my presence. I have repeatedly argued with him over this. I have asked him to share his messages and discussions on facebook with me but he refused. Once, I was so angry that I switched off his computer. He flew into a rage, manhandled me and injured my waist. However, for me this physical harm was actually a small matter, but the verbal and mental attacks he inflicted on me was the most terrible invisible killer. Whenever I saw him, my heart would be filled with fear unexpectedly, and I also could not concentrate on my work.


Meanwhile, he picked on everything I did. I was very angry and frustrated, but I could not express myself. Gradually, I could no longer play the good roles of a wife and mother who worked hard for the family. During this period, in order to challenge my limits he even told me his experiences with prostitutes. He said to me, "The appearance and body of the prostitutes are perfect. You're old, and they can provide me with services that you cannot give." Although I have chosen to face his infidelity calmly, but he completely ignored my feelings and committed the same mistakes again and again. Finally when I could no longer tolerate him anymore I quarreled with him. Disrespectfully, he challenged me to look for other men if I was capable. He did not want a divorce, but his attitude of paying no attention to me and his hurtful words, made me feel as though I was a worthless woman.

Previously, whenever I returned home, I could feel the warmth of home, but this home had become strange and frightening. I did not want to return to a home without love. In the eyes of outsiders, my husband is a talented businessman. He is polite to the elders, always gives the good impression of being filial and loves his family. I could not believe and accept the change in him. After our separation people put all the blame on me. I was in so much pain that I did not want to live.

During the first three years of our separation, to enable the children to have a complete family, I had hoped to reconcile with my husband. I returned to the house that once belonged to us three times. However, from his attitude, I gathered that he was telling me, "If you love the children, then come back willingly, but do not ask about and interfere with whatever I do." In simple terms, he wanted to keep our relationship in name only. He just wanted a woman who can take care of his children. His attitude made me give up the hope of reconciliation.

The children were already older then. When they saw me weeping alone in the room, not only did they wipe away my tears, they also drew a picture of a woman weeping and presented it to me. On the picture was written, "Mommy, do not cry anymore". They also sang the song 'In This World, Only Mother Is Good' to make me





happy. I let the children know why I wanted to leave, and told them, "I'm sorry, please forgive Mommy's selfishness. I cannot accompany you to pass your beautiful childhood but mama's heart will never leave; I will keep watch at the back quietly as you grow up. Mommy loves you; you will always be my precious darlings. In your lives there is only one mother who is biologically related to you, and that is me. This is a fact that cannot be changed." After I had finished talking, the three of us hugged tightly and cried together.

Although I was not financially independent, I gritted my teeth and left the house which was no longer the same as before, thus ending an inhuman and painful marriage. What was very disappointing to me was that to prevent me from contacting the children, my husband re-set his hand-phone and blocked all my calls. No matter how hard the children pleaded with him, he did not allow them to see me. I only managed to see my children briefly at the daycare centre during recess hours. My children once asked me, "When our friends' parents divorced, they can still go out with them, why can't we?" I could only tell them, "When Mommy comes to school to see you, we must cherish the short time that we are together. No matter what happens, you must share with Mommy. Mommy will always be with you and support you."

As the children's father used every possible means to stop me from visiting them, I had to try my best to fight for visitation rights. Because of this visitation right issue, the children's father and I had countless conflicts. After going around for help unsuccessfully, I resorted to deal with it through legal procedure. Unfortunately, it would also incur expenses. Although the government provides free legal services, one must comply with the conditions to get the legal aid. It was really intimidating. To hire a private lawyer, women in the low-income group really do not know where to raise money to pay for the exorbitant fee of a lawyer. This also resulted in many low-income women to give up hope to fight for custody of their children. Under the pressure of not being able to bear the financial burden, I had to give up the fight for custody of my children too. For such unfair treatment, my heart was filled with a lot of frustration, resentment and no desire for reconciliation.

After the separation, everything needed to start from scratch but I was more worried about losing contact with the children. During this period, I came into contact with PPW and I put my mind on activities of the centre. During my participation at the WSP, I met a group of friends and we are like sisters. Their warmth and support gave me some invisible strength which enabled me to become stronger. Through sharing and discussion, I realized that some of my beliefs were wrong, because I always thought that only when I had found someone who loved me then I would be blessed. So when I lost my husband I felt I had nothing left. I finally understood that before I love somebody I need to love myself and make myself happy first. Only when I love myself and take good care of my life, then I will have greater capacity to love my family and children, and to bring them happiness.

Previously I was extremely resentful of my husband. After attending a course on communication between spouses organized by PPW, I learnt that in order to create a happy family, a couple must work together. In fact, I could only use the phrase "one palm alone cannot clap" to describe how our marriage had come to an end. In the course of 17 years from dating to marriage, indeed many things had happened between us that made us no longer trust each other.

After each conflict we did not communicate properly. Hence both of us were hurt and that left shadows in our hearts which haunted us. Although this discovery had made me feel regretful and I blamed myself, I realized that no matter how guilty or bitter I felt, my marriage can no longer return to the past. Now, the only thing I can do is to accept the reality and confront myself bravely. Forgive and bless each other and hope that I do not leave too much regret in my life.

I would like to take this opportunity to tell **all female friends,**

*Vengeance has a way of rebounding upon oneself. If we keep on fighting with each other, not only will we hurt ourselves. We will be worn out too.*

Now, I often meet with friends to have singing sessions, to travel and do voluntary work.



Seeing unfortunate people who were struck with illness, I realize how good my life has been. It also made me understand how valuable health and life is. There are not many decades in our lives, so I have to cherish and live my life fruitfully. Because of this, I have become more cheerful and flexible. The stress and burden in my heart became lighter. In retrospect, through WSP, I learnt how to put down my worries and anxieties wisely. Then I took a big turn in my life, as though I pushed aside the rubbles that blocked the river of my life. I learnt to feel the power of life that the universe has given me, to cherish everything in life, and constantly learning and growing. In the parent-child relationship, I learned to use the language of love so that my children would feel the presence of motherly love. Our relationship became closer and I also learnt to feel and receive the love my children gave me, thus adding beautiful colors to my life. In fact, there is beautiful scenery at every turn and corner, and every trial will bring along maturity.

I am aware that not every 'sorry' will be reciprocated with an 'it does not matter', but if I do not admit my mistake, I will be hounded by my conscience for the rest of my life.

I would like to tell **my ex-husband**,

*Although you had caused all sorts of injuries to me and your behavior was irresponsible to me, but in the past my willfulness and stubbornness have also hurt you deeply. They severed our relationship so much so that it was irreparable. So I want to say 'sorry' to you. I hope that you would understand my intentions. I also want to let you know that I am really very grateful to you for having given me many wonderful and happy memories. I am also thankful to you for bringing up our children and give them a good education. For my immature attitude and ways which have brought you pain, I am deeply sorry. Although our relationship has irreparably broken, I sincerely hope we can remain friends. Even though we are separated, I sincerely hope that with your cooperation, our children can enjoy the love of both parents.*

I also wish to tell **my children**,

*Children, I am sorry. Please forgive Mommy for having made a cruel decision to leave you when you were still very young and most in need of a mother's care. The problem between Papa and Mommy cannot be explained in a few words, so I hope you can forgive Papa and Mommy with an understanding heart. Mommy often feels guilty for letting you suffer this trauma at such a young age. Although currently Mommy still cannot get Papa's permission to share the responsibility of caring for you, Mommy will use her strength of life to give blessings for your health and happiness, and to guard and accompany you to grow up with the invisible love. Although each time when I go to your school to meet you, the time is very short, Mommy will not give up because you are always the flesh and blood that I gave birth to after I had been pregnant for nine months. In your life you only have one mother. I hope you can cherish it all.*



# Letting Go

by Peony

...the only thing  
which can be  
changed is myself.  
After I had changed  
myself, I found that,  
in fact, we can get  
through anything.





**i** was a beautiful woman who became a mother at a young age. Early last year I became a single mother and was free again. However I am not lonely because there are four heavenly kings (my four sons) by my side to accompany me. My eldest son is 23 years old, while the youngest is 10 years old. After I had become single again, we moved out of our former residence, so now I have to undertake three jobs to support the family, but my children and I are feeling freer and more relaxed.

Looking back at my past, the sweets and bitters are more than I can tell. During my childhood, I had to help with household chores at a very young age. My mother was a single mother. As she had to shoulder the financial burden of the whole family alone, she was always working outside day and night. At that time, my mother did not have time to be with us. Everything at home was done by me and my siblings.

When we were young, my siblings and I were often bullied by outsiders, so I had to prevent those outsiders from having their ways by all means. Even if I were dead scared in my heart, I put on a fearless look to scare them away. However, my trouble-making brother often offended people, so much so that those he offended would come to our house to seek revenge. Because they came in numbers and all of them were tall and strong, we were so frightened that we locked the door firmly, trembling with fear and trepidation and hid under the bed for hours before we dared to come out again. In my childhood, such dramas were staged in our house

for quite a number of times.


At that time, we stayed in a place which my mother rented with her meager income. I had always hoped that we could have a permanent home and did not need to move again and again. My mother had to work day and night and often worried for money. Sometimes she even had to put us in a relative or friend's house. So often we were looked down upon by others. Hearing the sarcastic remarks of others, I had a lot of questions in my mind, "Do we have to bear with all of these when we have a single mother?" I felt inferior, resentful and very unhappy then.

After I have grown up, more responsibilities and pressure came. It is none other than my marriage which caused me the most heartache and regrets. I did not wish to follow my mother's footsteps, so I hand-picked my first boyfriend who later became my husband. However he let me taste the sweets and bitterness of life. This was because one day his mother took him to pray and consult an oracle. The deities predicted that 'it is his destiny to have two wives'. This remark gave him an excuse to look for extramarital affairs, and began to erect a thick wall in our conjugal relationship. The first time I discovered my husband was having an affair was when my father-in-law said to me "Peony, if you still want your husband, you'd better keep a close watch over him. Somebody saw him going places together with another woman in his car." I had great confidence in my husband, hence when I heard this; it was like a bolt from the blue, leaving my heart aching like being burnt by fire. I was young then, and was really afraid of losing my husband, for I could not imagine how to spend my days without him.

From then onwards, he always dressed in his best to go out, and treated me coldly. I was very scared that I would have to share my husband with another woman, and even more worried that I would become a single mother like my mother. I did not want my children to suffer discrimination from others just like what I had experienced in my younger days. I was also afraid that my friends and relatives would look down on me. I lost all desire for food and drink; I could only hug my children and cried! Almost every day I prayed to God and the deities







for blessings, hoping that my marriage would take a turn for the better. Although he returned to the house every time after an affair, but can a leopard change its spots? He committed the same wrongdoing again and again. Step by step he drove me into a painful hell. Later, he even rationalized that I was responsible for his extramarital affairs as he believed that it was my fault that all these happened.

During this period, the elders often advised me to exercise 'patience'. They hoped that I would not take the matter to heart for the sake of the children. Some even thought that things would work out for me as every cloud has a silver lining. On the other hand, the younger generation advised me, "Is there no other man in this world? As long as you can stand on your own feet you won't be starved!"

At that time, my second child was already seven or eight months old. He was always noisy and refused to drink his milk. It seemed that he knew something had happened to the family and he was protesting. At the same time, my sister-in-law moved in with us. Her kids and my elder son often squabbled and this created disputes among the adults. Then my parents also passed away one after another. The spate of incidents let me sink into extreme helplessness. I was near the brink of collapse, and even thought of committing suicide. Fortunately, with my tender affection and love for my children, the support of my brothers and sisters, the care of my friends, and the spiritual sustenance which the deities and Buddha had given me, I was able to get through the most difficult part of my life and get up again!

I have asked myself over and over again, "Time is so precious. Why do I waste my time in vain on a two-timer who shows no sign of changing his behaviour?" Then I finally found the answer. In fact, my patience and tolerance had nothing to do with the role of a wife to keep the marriage. It was just because he is the father of my children and my children needed the care of both parents that I conceded to maintain the 'marital relationship'.

Before letting go, I have been struggling for a long time either to change or to accept his shortcomings, which included his dissolute, laziness, no urge for improvement, and no

sense of responsibility as well as inconsiderate attitude. I used to watch attentively to see if he had specially dressed up himself before going out, and was always wondering whether he was going out with a man or a woman. As a result, I was always suspicious, restless, and not accepting of my fate.

After I have been worrying about personal gains and losses and in pain for some time, I finally found the answer why I have been unable to let go. The reasons were: I felt cheated by him and I wanted to retaliate so I would not let go. I have been attacked and in order not to lose face I would not let go. I felt that I have been giving but got nothing back in return so I would not let go. I understand that my pain cannot change anything; I also see that it is not easy to change others. In fact the only thing which can be changed is myself. After I had changed myself, I found that, in fact, we can get through anything. So I accepted 'letting go'. People often say, "Be willing to part with". I finally understood the true meaning of that phrase. Only when you are willing to part with something, then you can get another thing! More importantly, I finally understood that to accept your destiny does not mean to admit defeat. So, I chose to divorce; because for me, when I let go, not only could I feel real freedom, but also I could relieve myself from the mental torture. Even after I have chosen divorce, the process was still fraught with difficulties. However, once I had made the decision, I should pursue it with perseverance and courage.

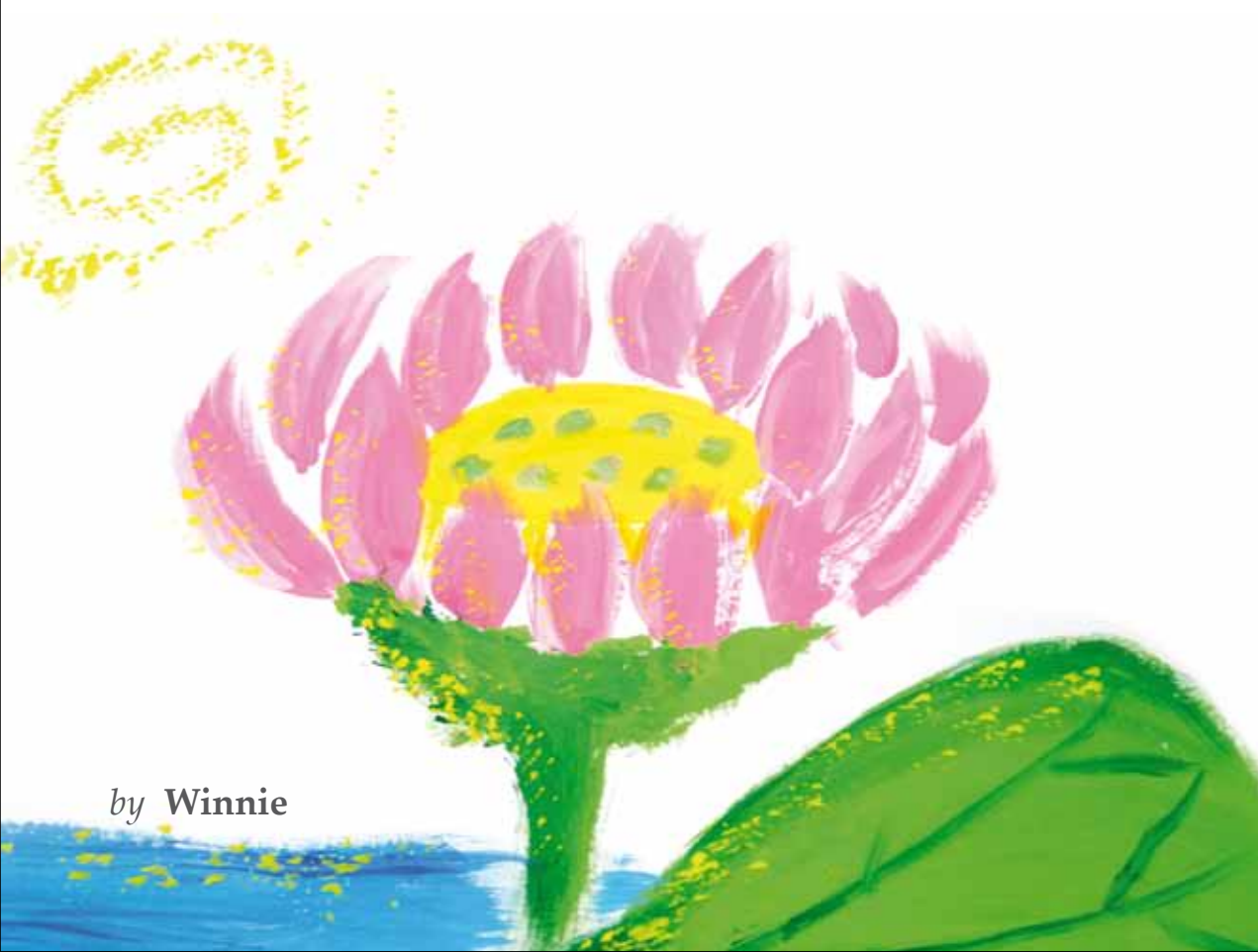
Looking back in the past, I have asked myself what I got in the end. I always thought that when a woman is married she should give unconditionally to the family. However, living only for others without your own role will make your life worthless. In addition, I have asked myself what I had lost, and what I was pursuing. I felt that I had learnt a valuable lesson, a lesson on life which made me understand myself better, aware of my own strengths and weaknesses, as well as think about what I really need.

I believe most people would be afraid of things which come all of a sudden. Hence, it is difficult to accept them with an open mind. However, if we could think about it positively this may be a trial given to us by God; and when

we finish this lesson, we will continue to move forward with confidence!

Owing to my husband's betrayal, I was unable to trust others for a while, and spent over six months re-establishing relationships with the friends around me. I am very glad that I have been able to survive these challenges in life. This is because I have been surrounded by a group of sincere friends who are willing to lend me their ears, my kids who love me, and the proverb 'every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost'. While it may sound exaggerating to outsiders, but for a frustrated person this proverb was really helpful. This is because only when you

consider yourself as the most important person, you will love yourself well and summon the courage to break through all the difficulties! In addition, I am thankful for the WSP activities. Not only did they enable me to confide at ease, but also helped me to rebuild my confidence and to see hope in my life.



by Winnie



# Wholesome Family

by Cheng

There is still a  
long road ahead  
and I have to walk  
forward bravely.







**i**n the forty-eight years of my life, I have never thought about my past, nor recalled the suffering and fear of my childhood years. I specially want to thank WCC and PPW for organizing the Women's Stories Project, because when I wrote down the painful experiences which I did not dare face for all these years, I managed to untie the knot that has been buried deep in my heart for so many years. Through this I also managed to release the child in my heart!

To write about all the pain inside my heart was a great challenge to me. Before I started to write, I remembered that the teacher told me, "Write about yourself." I began to ask myself, who am I actually? At that moment, I burst into tears. I cried for three days and three nights before I could write anything. After crying for three days and three nights, I took courage to face the truth and convinced myself that the past was not shameful. There is still a long road ahead and I have to walk forward bravely.

My childhood experience was a big wound to me. Over the years I have never mentioned to my husband and children about those past experiences. So when I let the children read what I have written they were surprised that their mother had gone through so much pain and challenges in her childhood. They also realized that their mother was so independent and courageous! After that, I myself was surprised that my children could understand my struggles. Since then, the relationship between mother and children improved greatly and our relationship has become much closer than before.

On the other hand, my husband also noticed that I have become quite different. The previous

me had no confidence in everything. My husband had wanted me to be independent, but I always had conflicts with him because I did not want to learn to be independent. My husband blamed me for always opposing him. I did not appreciate his painstaking efforts to help me to learn to be independent and often I got angry because of the pressure he put on me.


So, because of my change, the relationship among our family members became more and more harmonious.

## In retrospect

When I was young, my aunt's (my father's elder brother's wife) treatment towards me and my siblings was very bad. Once, my sister accidentally hurt my cousin sister when they were playing, my aunt got very angry. She actually picked up a kitchen knife to teach my sister a lesson. Another time, my father's sister brought some chocolate for everyone to eat, but when I went to get a piece, my aunt caught my hand and told me to put the chocolate back. Filled with grievances I cried and went into the room to tell my mother about it. I remembered my mother held my sister and me and cried after listening to this.

One day, my mother told my younger sister to go to a nearby pharmacy to buy medicine for her. As my younger sister was still at a tender age, she did according to my mother's request without knowing anything. We did not realize that my mother took the sleeping pills to commit suicide. When we discovered that, my mother was already unconscious. My father rushed her to the hospital right away. When my mother was in the hospital, my father asked my aunt to help take care of us. Everyday my aunt would cook fresh food for her own children to eat, but let us eat the overnight food. As our mother was still hospitalized we did not want to upset her, so my siblings and I dared not tell my mother how badly our aunt treated us. At that time, I hated my aunt for treating us like that. I also resented my father for not knowing how to protect us, and often ignored our feelings. In the end, my mother left us. I was still young, but was forced to grow up overnight. Other than taking care of the daily life of our family members, I also had





to face the full blast of a complaining father and put up with our cold and sarcastic aunt. Looking back at this part of my life, I really did not know how I managed to walk through it.

My father was a hawker. Since my mother died, my father asked me to stop schooling and help him in his business. Fortunately, my aunt intervened on my behalf. He reluctantly agreed to continue my schooling, but he put in a condition that I have to finish all the housework before I go to school. In order to be able to go to school, every morning I had to wake up at 4 am to help my father prepare the materials for opening his stall, and then I had to clean up the house before I rushed to school. Before school dismissal, I had to finish my homework first. As soon as I got home I had to cook for the family, and also to help my father get ready the materials for the following day's business. Only then could I go to bed. Sometimes when my father's business was not good, I would be scolded.

One morning, I could not get up to help early in the morning because of a high fever. However, my father insisted that I must get up to help. My elder brother found out that I was sick and could not get out of bed; so he argued with my father. My brother begged my father to let him replace me, but my father just would not accept it. I felt that I had been treated unfairly then; I could not help but burst into tears. I knew my father would not let me rest, so I struggled to climb out of bed to help. Due to lack of sleep and coupled with my sickness, my body became very weak. After I had got out of bed only for a little while, I fainted. Because of these harsh and unfair treatments, even at a young age, I often asked, "Why should I suffer such injustice? My mother's death was not my fault!" I did not understand the problems of the adult world, but I knew I could not quit school. I had to keep moving forward. I often hear people say that "Mama is the moon; she would protect her children. However, the word 'Mama' was an injury to me then. It also deprived me of a happy childhood. During those years I was afraid of going home. Only when I was at school chatting with friends, or when I was playing a ball game then I would be relaxed and happy.

The days without my mother's care and love continued until my aunt's attitude towards me

improved. Only then I saw the ray of sunshine again. It happened because one day, my aunt's house was on fire. It was too late for her to escape from the flames and she was seriously burned. Even though the neighbors advised me not to be so good to my aunt, I chose to put aside my previous grievances. I cleaned her wound and applied medicine for her. I even cooked for my uncle. My aunt was very grateful that I buried old grudges and took good care of her; so her attitude towards me improved greatly. From then onwards our relationship completely changed. My aunt became my second mother. When I encountered difficulties, she would give me a lot of support. Whenever my father made trouble out of nothing or uttered harsh words; my aunt would tell my father off angrily. Subsequently, that Lunar New Year, my aunt taught me how to make cakes and New Year eve dishes. I finally had the opportunity to experience the happiest New Year in my life.

When I wanted to get married, my aunt was as happy as if her own daughter was getting married. Besides organizing everything for the wedding ceremony, she also shed tears of happiness because I had found a good husband. The wedding made me realize that actually there are many people around me who love me.

However, my happy marriage began to change soon after our honeymoon period. With the births of my five children, one after another, the conflict between my husband and me became more frequent and intense. Our relationship was often filled with the smell of gunpowder. At that time I was exhausted from rushing around for the family and did not realize that our relationship had seriously affected the children. Until one day, I found that my children were displaying some strange behavior such as hiding toys and money under the flower pots, burning themselves while playing. Only then did I feel something was wrong. What was even more painful to me was my eldest son was living in fear because he often witnessed the intense conflict between his father and me. Not only his studies were affected but later he was diagnosed as schizophrenic. Since then, we always have to watch over him. In fact my child's misfortune was really the biggest test God has given us.

When my eldest son was undergoing treatment, his mood was quite unstable. As I was worried that something bad could happen to him, I guarded him day and night. One night, I found that he was not in the room. I went to the kitchen to look for him. At that moment, I saw that he was holding a knife and slitting his wrists in an attempt to commit suicide. I was stuned and quickly shouted at him to stop. He immediately burst into tears. He cried and told me that sometimes he did not even know what he was doing. My child's tears were like a knife stabbing my heart. I told myself that I must help him overcome his mental state.

Initially, my husband and I really did not know how to take care of a child with mental health problems. Sometimes he would made trouble out of nothing because he could not sleep, and other times he would do things to hurt himself or others. Since my husband and I did not know much about schizophrenia and as we did not understand the changes in our son's behavior, my relationship with my husband became worse and worse. Every day I worried about my son's future.

Maybe God have pity on me and my son, and let my husband set up his own factory. I asked my husband to provide an opportunity for our son to work in his factory, so that he would not stay home and sleep every day, doing nothing. My husband rejected my request i the beginning because he thought our son had lost the ability to work. For the sake of our son's future, I repeatedly communicated with my husband to make him understand that if parents do not help then the child might never be able to overcome his psychological problems. My husband finally agreed to my request, but the problem was still not solved. Because my son was under the influence of medication, he was very drowsy and refused to get up every morning. When he was at work, he was not able to concentrate. Outsiders do not know how to help him. Every day when he returned from work, he would put on a long face, complained that his father did not treat him as a member of his staff because he was not allowed to take part in meetings.

For the sake of my son's future, I certainly would not give up any opportunity. This may

be a difficult process, but I knew that I cannot undo the harm done so no matter how hard the next path would be, I would accompany my son to walk on. Because of my conviction and my constant encouragement, my son finally overcame many obstacles and setbacks, and against all odds he was promoted from a cleaner to a general support staff.

## Postscript

My life journey has been lined with hardship, often very difficult to walk. Looking back at all the things that have happened, all kinds of emotions surged within me. Many made me deeply touched. Seeing the possibility that my schizophrenic eldest son can be transformed into a sensible and reasonable child and always caring for his family, I believe that my perseverance has finally paid off. Now, I finally can see how the different trials that God has given me are producing fruitful results.







# Together with Me

by Kun Ni

There will always  
be hope if we are  
alive. Do not give  
up life lightly.



Year after year, as I grow older, I feel that time flies faster than arrows. From my carefree childhood to my young and inexperienced youth, I later stepped into marriage quite blindly. Under these very difficult circumstances, I have no choice but to bring up my two children single handedly and at the same time taking care of my elderly mother. My busy and aimless life has left me tired and breathless and sometimes feeling lost in my direction. Whenever I had reached a stage of not being able to walk on, I would think of my late father and late sister, because they were the family members who gave me the most support and strength.

By chance, I took part in the activities of the Women's Stories Project (WSP). Through its various activities the teachers led us to analyze our past. Under their guidance and encouragement, I plucked up my courage to reflect on those horrible past incidents which I did not want to recall, not realizing that the sudden death of my father and sister had such a deep impact on my life.

Whenever I read news of disasters I can relate to the pain of losing our loved ones suddenly. After these disasters, family members who are alive usually lose hope. To get out of this trauma, is really easier said than done. I remember one night years ago, when everyone was asleep, the telephone rang suddenly. I was informed that my father had a fall when he woke up to get a drink. He had hit his head and fainted. I was very worried and I rushed to the hospital. My father was admitted to the ICU. I did not expect the startling news that I received after my anxious wait. The doctor declared that the emergency aid was of no avail. So my father did not have the chance to see the next day's sunrise.

I remember that I could not accept the reality then. I wailed in pain, "Papa, do not go

away! Do not go away!" However, he just lay there with no response. I did not expect this to happen so suddenly for we had met and had a nice chat before nightfall. But only a few hours later, we were separated by life and death.

In my memory, my father was a strict but kind man. Although he was only educated up to primary school level, he did not neglect teaching us on how to deal with people. He often reminded us to respect the elders and honor their worth. He also reminded us to be filial to our elders when they are alive and not to fulfill our filial duties only when they are dead. He also told us that if a family member passed away, we ought to put in some effort to care for the dependents that are left behind. Remembering his words, although I was in deep sorrow after his sudden death, I quickly put aside my grief to make arrangements for his funeral and took good care of my widowed mother. On recalling back, I only realize how well-intentioned my father's teachings were. For those who are gone, they are gone forever. For those who are left behind, they suffer more. It is very fortunate that we live up to my father's teachings for that helped my mother gradually to come out of her bereavement.

Even though it was difficult to make ends meet, my selfless father did not hesitate to pay for the education of his three children. When I was in primary school, my father often helped me to revise my lessons, especially mathematics. Using only a ruler, he taught me how to calculate the unit measurement of feet and inches. His clear teaching helped me to build a good foundation on this subject. During the annual Mid-Autumn Festival, I often missed the tin lanterns which my father specially made for me, as well as the oversized four-wheel rabbit lantern. I used to complain to him, "Why my friend's lanterns are hand-held whereas mine is being pulled?" He also made our furniture himself. Everything he had made was so simple and yet durable.

When my father was alive, I had not seriously thought of cooking for him. The first time he tasted my cooking was at his funeral. What an irony! My father's departure made me feel that we must cherish our good fortune. Like the loss of sand between fingers, if not properly grasped at the moment, it will be lost in the blink of an eye.





Years later, my sister and I had some free time between work commitments, so we went for a tour to China together. Unfortunately, this journey ended up very painfully for me. This journey made me fully aware of the impermanence of life thus making me more grateful and cherishes the present, because my sister left me forever without any warning during this journey.

The tour that we had been looking forward to had just begun. While on board the plane from Penang to Kuala Lumpur, my sister had a sudden attack of gastric pain after drinking a glass of orange juice. Even after taking some medicine, she did not feel well during our tour in China. Although feeling a bit worried at that moment we did not think it was a big problem. I thought that she would be fine after a few days of rest. I did not expect her condition would get worse. During the last stop on the last day of our tour when she got off from the bus, she vomited and fainted. Seeing her lying on the ground with a pale face, I desperately gave her some first aid which my father had taught me and at the same time calling her name non-stop. Many people came to lend their helping hands, but her conditions worsened. I immediately asked the local tour guide to send my sister to a hospital. Unfortunately, the taxi driver did not know the location of the hospital and we went around in circles in that vicinity for five to six minutes. Later I suggested asking for directions at the police station. After a long while we finally arrived at the hospital emergency room. In the car, I kept calling her name. She lay in my arms lifeless with a pale face. Getting over the pain of losing my father was not easy; why did God give me such big test time and time again? While I was shedding my tears I kept asking, "How could this happen? After visiting this place of interest we are about to go home!"

What happened next was like a scene from a movie. The doctor came out of the emergency room and shook his head. I could not accept it and did not want to give up. I asked the doctor to resuscitate her again. I was very confused and was hoping against hope that she would survive. The doctor once again confirmed that there was nothing they could do anymore. There and then, I could not

cry out. I wanted to cry but the tears just would not come out. My sister just lay there motionless. The doctor wrote down 'sudden death' on his report. What a strange word? How could it have anything to do with me? I held my sister's hand and could feel that there was still a trace of warmth in her body; so I said to her, "Get up, do not sleep, we are going home. We joined this tour together, now you let me go back alone, how can I explain this to our mother?" I felt very guilty and regretted that I had not taken good care of my sister. I was very worried about how my mother was going to face the loss of another loved one again.

Looking at our shoes which were of the same design, it occurred to me that we do think alike about nearly everything. Crying was of no avail. I slowly came to accept the fact that my sister had gone away from me forever. I took care of everything like a zombie. Holding the bag containing my sister's ashes, we set foot on her final journey. Come to think of it, it was quite incredible because on my return journey, the seat next to me was vacant which made me feel that my sister was still with me.

In the course of writing this story, I realized that when we have cherished something, even though it did not have a good ending, we can still consider it as a satisfactory ending. Hence, I have learned not to hold onto everything permanently, when we have to let go just do it. Now, when I feel that I had received something, even if it is only a small amount, I accept it with a grateful heart. Because of this insight, my relationship with people gradually changed and became more harmonious. Looking at it from another perspective, I might have lost my beloved father and sister, but I am also touched by the abundance of love I feel in the midst of my pain. Over the years, I really wish to tell my late father and late sister, *"Thank you, you let me look at life from different perspectives, which enable me to live happier than before!"*







by Jenny

The border design of all the stories' pages is taken from this painting.

# Learning and Cultivating a Life after Separation

by **Evainezzel**

When my daughter saw me crying she immediately held my hand, and said to me, 'Mommy, Daddy does not love you, I love you.' I felt a tender affection for my daughter's thoughtfulness.







Looking back, at that time I really thought I had found a good man to whom I can trust with my whole life. I gave up my career for him, encouraged and helped him unconditionally. He started with nothing. I worked hard with him until his business grew bigger and better. I was very happy and contented then because I thought that everything was worth my effort. I only discovered later that my happy days were only transient.

Before I met my husband, I was a very independent and confident person. I always act decisively. I was an image consultant and makeup artist of an international brand. My clients were celebrities and film stars. I also provided overall image makeover service to advertisers, so I often went abroad to participate in many big events.

I had already known my husband for more than a decade before we started dating. We even lost contact with each other for some time. One year, my father fell sick. I came back to Penang from Kuala Lumpur to take care of him as I was the eldest daughter. At that time we met again, and then we started dating. He took me along to attend various functions. When I heard his best friend telling me, "So you're his dream goddess!" I felt very happy secretly, and I thought to myself that since he had a crush on me for so many years, I am sure I had not chosen the wrong person!

In order to have more time with my husband and family, I began to decline some of the overseas assignments. Over time, the opportunity for oversea assignments also became less and less. I was thinking, since I am a woman

I would not achieve anything great and I also thought that a woman should stick with the man she marries, no matter what kind of man he is! So, I concentrated on working hard for his business. We jointly bought a semi-detached house to be our new home and started preparing for our wedding. Everything was so wonderful.


After marriage, while waiting for the birth of our first daughter, he told me not to work for him anymore, but to enjoy life at home and welcome the arrival of our daughter. As he was worried that I needed somebody to take care of me after I had given birth, he invited my parents to move in with us. At that time we did not have a maid. I only had my parents to help us take care of the baby, so naturally I became a full-time housewife. I have been accustomed since childhood, to give priority to my family. I went out to work soon after I had finished high school to lighten the financial burden of my parents, and to enable my siblings to continue their education. So when I had my own child after marriage, the focus of my life naturally turn to my own family and child.

Thinking back, there was a long period of time when I did not plan for myself. I just thought that as long as I carry out my duties well then people would appreciate me. When my daughter was two years old, initially my husband suggested setting up a company for me to manage. But after a while he changed his mind and instead, suggested that we 'add' a boy to our family. So we started to work on that, and I was lucky that soon I became pregnant with my second child. I was full of hopes for the future. I did not realize that the nightmare was about to begin.

During that period, he began to stop taking me out to socialize, and directed me to rest at home so that I could have a smooth pregnancy. At that time I did not sense anything wrong. After the birth of our second child, even though I was so busy with the children, I became confused and disoriented. My husband just played with the children for a little while and then he would leave us and go out. He did not help me nor share the responsibility of taking care of our children. Moreover, I began to notice that some of his behaviors were becoming increasingly bizarre. In addition to stopping me from contacting







his friends, he also held on to his telephone all the time. Meanwhile he came home only late at night, sometimes even before dawn with his body smelling of alcohol. Previously, he did not care much about his appearance and dressing, but then he began to pay much attention to his appearance and attire. When I talked to him, he seemed impatient and dismissed me. He often used fatigue as an excuse to stop being intimate with me. At that time, my friends had noticed various signs indicating that he was having an affair, but I still deceived myself and wanted to trust him. I even deliberately arranged for a trip with him so as to improve our feelings for each other.

Of course, during that time he would not admit that he was having an affair. After a while, he told me that he wanted to start a beauty salon business. As I suspected, his business partner was the third party in our marriage. When pressed further, he confessed to me that they had already started their relationship before I was pregnant with our second child. Actually he had planned to make me pregnant with our second child, just to prevent me from knowing and interfering with their relationship. From that moment onwards, he started to become arrogant, completely ignoring my feelings, and did not care about my parents.

The change was such a blow to me. I did not want to let my parents and children see that I was sad. So I chose to go abroad to get away from my unhappiness and hoped that the two of us would have some space and time to think calmly. Very soon two weeks passed. When I returned home, he told me he felt guilty and was remorseful. He cried and begged me to forgive him and give him a chance to mend his ways. At that time, he promised to take good care of me and my children, and also promised to fulfill the conditions I had listed out. I forgave him and was so naïve that I believed he was tired of his extramarital affair thus he has returned to our home that we have built together.

However, he did not cherish the opportunity I gave him. He lied to me again and again.

I thought he would sever his extramarital relationship after I gave him some time to settle it. But after waiting for a period of time he told me he could not give up that woman because she

had already aborted her baby by him. When he told me he must be responsible for her sacrifice, I was dumbfounded. I then questioned him what about all the things that I had done for this family? What about my two children? Why did he only choose to be responsible to her? Who is responsible to me and my children? Moreover, our children were still very young then.

The promise he made when we got married became such an irony at that moment. It was really heart breaking.

At that time, he did not even bother that our children were by our sides and brutally uttered, "If you do not accept her, then we will get a divorce!" After that he just left. Looking at the back of the man who has forsaken me, forsaken our children, abandoned the family, I broke into tears in great sorrow. Facing his merciless decision, besides crying, I had no other reactions at that moment. When my daughter saw me crying she immediately held my hand, and said to me, "Mommy, Daddy does not love you, I love you." I felt a tender affection for my daughter's thoughtfulness. At the same time I was also aware that I could not do anything stupid which would let my parents down. I could not be like the children's father, abandoning the children and disregarding them. Hence, I told myself I must confront this very difficult situation with courage.

From then onwards, he began to treat me as though I did not exist. When he felt like it he came home, or he would stay out all night without any explanation to me. He even thought that I, for the sake of the children, in the end would accept him to enjoy the good fortune of having multiple wives. At this time, he stopped giving me money, though for the last four years he had been giving me money for household expenses. He used his money to oppress me. He even beat me, and I also reported to the police several times. But being soft-hearted I forgave him again and again, hoping that he would wake up and come back. I put up with him in silence for the sake of the children. However, his increasingly presumptuous attitude made me feel useless and helpless. I constantly criticized myself for not having done well enough, until my husband went out to look for other women.

I kept asking myself, and also repeatedly begged him to tell me where I had done wrong until he was so cruel to me. One day, failing to disregard my persistent questioning, he just said to me, "Sorry, actually you have not done anything wrong. You are a good wife and also a good mother. It is me who is bad." The moment I heard that, my mind instantly went blank.

I was puzzled and deeply in pain, I never thought that even when I had fulfilled my responsibility, I would come to such a fate.

I kept consoling myself, maybe waiting needs patience. I have been hurt, I had cried, begged, and fought. I have to lay down my dignity and swallow my pride to save the marriage. After struggling in pain for some time, I realized that even if you want to change something it may not be changed. Half a year later, I suddenly 'woke up' after my best friend questioned me, "Where is the cheerful and confident Evanezel?" I was frightened by the haggard face looking back at me in the mirror. Since I had done whatever that could be done, including begging him, I felt that it was time to let go. No matter how bitter and painful it would be I must learn to accept the situation. After all, from the very beginning to the end, it was me who has chosen him. I no longer blame or complain about what had happened in the past. I have learnt to face it.

I began to hire a lawyer for my divorce procedures. Although I was confused by many different advices I received during the process, fortunately I was able to gather very useful information from newspapers and websites. These information coupled with the advice of my professional legal counsel finally helped me draw up a set of divorce conditions.

I then moved out from our matrimonial home that we bought together and ended my life as a married woman, and started everything from scratch. From here my life as a single mother and working journey began. The support from my parents and siblings, the emotional strength from my children, as well as the encouragement from a group of friends, made me feel very warm. Hence I only took half a year's time to get back on my feet again. Of course, in reality, I have also encountered people who took the opportunity to fish in troubled waters or stepped on me when I

was down in difficulties, those who looked at me through tinted glasses, or those who harbored malicious intentions and tried to cash in on me or take advantage of me. Fortunately, I was able to defend myself and did not do anything which would let myself or others down. Now, I no longer worry about others pointing their fingers behind me, because I believe that if I do my part well, then these rumors will stop.

I am very glad that I have not been knocked down by all these setbacks, but only became stronger instead. I have set up my own business from scratch successfully. In this world, I believe that if we do not give up easily, there is hope in everything. When I tried to look at the course of events in the past and the things I wanted to do in the future, I am very definite about my direction in life. I have started working again for the past two years. During this period, in addition to gaining different life experiences and constantly learning to improve myself, I also had the opportunity to participate in many charitable events, lectures, performances, etc. The different experiences in life are the stage for us to learn. I believe that if I can play my role well I will have no regrets in my life. Seeing my children growing up healthily and happily, I am satisfied.



# Opening Another Door with My Ex

by Xiao Mi



Only when we can put down our subjective feelings of 'likes and dislikes', look at things objectively from all viewpoints (especially from our children's standpoint), then only the inner pain can be eased.





## The starting point of my life

**W**hen my mother was pregnant with me, my family was really very poor. Moreover there were already six children at home, so she became depressed again. The elders also told my mother, "Give away the destitute star in your stomach, so as not to increase the burden of the family!" But the thought of giving away her own flesh and blood to others was as painful as cutting off a piece of flesh from her body. My mother was reluctant to do that.

After this 'destitute star' child was born, family conditions became even more difficult. In the absence of other options, my mother steeled her heart and planned to give me up for adoption. Unexpectedly, while waiting for the adopter to come to take me that day, a violent storm broke out. Many places were flooded. The adopter did not show up. My mother thought, "Is God blaming me for giving the baby to the wrong person?" So my mother immediately decided not to send her baby for adoption. With no money for her confinement, my mother single-handedly did the cooking, laundry, child care, and all the other housework by herself.

When I was young, my father had to make enough money to feed a family of twelve. My mother was often blamed by my father, "I kept working every day, where have all the money I had given you gone to? It's all because of you; you do not know how to be thrifty and did not save any money. You spent all the money until not even a little bit was left! It is your entire fault!" My mother understood that my father worked very hard to maintain the family. So even when she felt aggrieved, and it was unbearable for her

she just chose to suffer in silence. Moreover she thought that by not resisting, and obeying the husband are virtues and attitudes a wife should have in a marriage. However, I could feel the pain in my mother's heart then.


When I was young, I could not bear watching my father treating my mother so badly. I wanted to help my mother to defend herself, but I was stopped by her, because she did not allow any child to be rude to the father. Although feeling quite helpless and my heart ached for my mother, I started to learn from my mother that to be a good wife I should possess quality of 'endurance'. My mother also instilled other values in me, such as 'do not look down on people', 'a woman must endure, and accept her destiny', 'try to tolerate, then everything will be okay', 'do not wash dirty linen in public, because people will laugh at you for being unable to take care of your family'. I strongly believed and obeyed the teachings of my mother and carried these values into my marriage.

## Stepping into marriage

One of the reasons I wanted to get married was that I did not want to stay in my parents' house. This was because I really could not bear the frustration and struggle of not being able to stand up for my mother. When my father bullied and oppressed my mother I could only watch in vain. I was thinking, since I could not change the unfairness in my parents' marriage, then I might as well step into my own marriage, and create a home which belongs to me. Therefore, to escape from my family of origin I got married. However I was ignorant of marriage. Only after I got married I knew through experience that every family has its own problems.

God really played a big joke on me. Shortly after we were married my husband and I followed my parents' footsteps. Almost every day we argued heatedly over 'money'. To stop me from saying anything, my husband would say things that would hurt my feelings or rant and rave in foul language. In order to provide my children a functional family, I chose to use my mother's method, which was to bear all the grievances and suffer in silence. Since then, I planted an isolated root in my marriage relationship. Regardless of





good tidings or bad news, I considered nothing had happened. Not only did I detach myself from my emotions, but I also cut off the road linking our inner worlds.

## Cracks in our marriage

As I had been accustomed to solitude, even when I was pregnant, I did not want to share the joy of becoming a soon-to-be-mother with my husband. When my child was born, I, the young new mother, concentrated on taking care of the child wholeheartedly. At that time, even though I found out that my husband was secretly chatting on the phone with other women, I chose to turn a deaf ear. When he did not return home for the whole night, I also did not question him. Until my husband's family started pointing fingers at his back. Then I began to worry, "What should I do now? Should I ask him? Or should I remain silent?" Before I always thought constant quarreling would undermine our feelings for each other. In fact, keeping silent also cause problems in a marriage. I was seized with fear. What should I do to resolve the crisis in my marriage?

I began to see that there was a limit to 'tolerance'. Endurance without a limit would only make you lose yourself in a relationship. Endurance is also not helpful at all in a marriage. Moreover, the result of 'endurance' will make people violate their marriage vows of honesty towards each other. If there is no honesty in a marriage relationship, how can a couple make it to the end together?

After much thinking, I believe that since we are adults, to fight each other in a harsh manner is not the way to deal with the crisis in our marriage. So I decided to work abroad. On the one hand it enabled my husband to have some space to think about his behavior, and on the other hand, it could solve our financial difficulties. I also thought that if our marriage was so flimsy and could not stand the test of time, then I would let him go.

## A choice without an alternative

So, I left my two young children unwillingly and flew abroad to work. Although I did not know if my marriage would survive the change, I told myself that at least I would be well-paid

abroad. If I could survive the hardship, and be trained as an assistant plant manager, in the future then, after three years when I return home to develop my career, I would be self-reliant and can raise my two children.

However, after working abroad for some months, even if I could survive working without a rest day I could not bear the torment of missing my children, my husband and family. When I received a call from my mother telling me that she no longer has the energy to take care of my two children for me, I pondered in my mind constantly, and repeatedly asked myself, "Do I need more money, or do I want to be with my children as they grow up?" Caring for my children was naturally my responsibility as a mother. If I threw that responsibility to my aged mother, it would only add problems to my mother's health, and it would mean my own lack of filial piety. I would definitely be regretful and remorseful for the rest of my life. So after struggling for six months in a foreign country, I returned home. The happiest person, of course, was my mother. She looked much older and I learned that she had missed me and was very worried about me working alone in a foreign country. Although it was only half a year, I found that my kids had grown taller. When they first saw me they showed some unfamiliarity, so I could not imagine what it would be like if I had come back after a few years.

## Letting go

After I returned home, my husband finally admitted to me his extramarital affair. He told me, "I will not give her up, and I will not abandon you and the children. I will stay with you but you cannot stop me from providing for her. I need time to deal with this other relationship." After being separated for six months, I did not expect to hear these words from him. I was very hurt and upset indeed. But when I calmed down a bit, a thought suddenly flashed through my mind, "We must rely on ourselves to fight for our happiness." I took my children home with me and I told my husband that we wanted to come back and stay with him. Then I went into our bedroom to unpack my clothes. When I opened the wardrobe door, I saw intimate photos of my husband with the other woman as well as clothes

and underwear which did not belong to me. At that moment, I was stunned. I always thought that my husband was just having fun with other women occasionally. I did not realize that he was so serious in his extramarital affair. I did not expect that in the six months while I was away he would bring the other woman home, and let her become the mistress of my house. I was mad. I freaked out and threw out her stuff but my husband stopped me. I could not succumb myself to such humiliation, so I fought with him. Unexpectedly he gave me a tight slap. I cannot remember for how long did we pushed and pulled at each other, but I definitely cannot forget that slap. That slap had struck my heart until it bled.

After calming down myself, I found my two children were so scared that they were holding onto each other. The expressions in their pale faces instantly put out the fire in my heart. I told myself, for the sake of our children, I will not fight violently like that with him. I have to handle the situation calmly. So, I said to my husband, "Please let go my hand. Let's talk." When he let go of my hand, I asked him, "Now how are you going to deal with this?" He gave me the same answer as before and said, "You give me some time. I cannot let go of her now." I said, "I have already given you a few months' to think, and now you are still asking for more time? I'm sorry, I cannot. I need your answer now. Think carefully before you answer me. When the kids and I step out of the house this time, we will not come back. Finally, he shouted impatiently, "I don't want, I don't want, I do not want anything!"

When a man, who once loved you deeply, hurt you in order to defend his mistress, then his actions and words told me clearly his choice. He had decided to let go of our family. So, I took my two children and out of desperation went back to my parents' home with a broken heart.

## Understanding my rights and responsibilities

When my husband and I were negotiating for our divorce, one of my conditions was that when he takes the children out, he cannot not bring along his mistress. When I found out that he violated the condition, I was very angry. Since

then I did not allow him to take the children out anymore. He once told me, "If one day I have money, I would definitely fight for custody of the children." His words have made me worry constantly. So when he broke the condition, I found an excuse to prevent him from being close to my children. I often thought to myself "I have lost my husband, I absolutely cannot not afford to lose my children as well. I must do everything I can to keep my children by my side." For without my children, I believe my world will collapse.

In 2010, as I came into contact with a friend in a community organization, I began to change my views. This friend told me, "People need to understand their basic human rights, because everyone has the freedom of speech and action, and no one can use threat to control the freedom of others." His remarks reminded me that in preventing my ex-husband from seeing our children, I had only considered my own feelings. Not only had I denied the opportunity for the father and children to grow close to one another, I also had never considered my children's feelings. Children need love from both parents. Neither of which is replaceable by the other. At that time, although I did feel a little ashamed of myself, I was also afraid of losing face, so I hung to my decision of not letting my children see their father.

## Learning to communicate and to maintain an intimate relationship


Since 2012, after I had participated in a workshop on marriage, I have a better understanding of 'love', and became aware that the family of origin will affect a person's personality and intimate relationships. Only then did I realize that in order to maintain a marriage a couple must first understand each other. Because of our different family backgrounds, we each would have different beliefs and values. Values such as respect, acceptance and tolerance, can make a relationship closer. But only good and effective communication skills can make a relationship last.

## Introspecting

I met a woman, Hui Ming in the Women's Stories Project. Her experience made me







reconsider some of the decisions that I had made before. Hui Ming has been separated from her husband. She has two children, but her husband would not let her see her children because he claimed that he took care of the children more, so he was adamant that she was not qualified to see her children. Her husband did everything possible to make it difficult for her to meet her children. Even when she pleaded, he was indifferent to her request. She often lamented and complained tearfully to us about her longing for her children and her helplessness.

I was moved by Hui Ming's pain and suffering in missing her children and I saw my shadow in her husband. While I empathized with Hui Ming, and reproached her husband's actions, I actually saw myself in him. When I tried to stop my children from seeing their father, was I not being selfish? I was only concerned about my own worries and did not consider my children's need for fatherly love. Hui Ming's pain, not only made me feel deeply the pain of separating my ex-husband from his children, but also made me realize that it was time to let the children meet with their father.

## A colorful picture

That day was my children's grandfather's birthday. My ex-husband came to collect them back to celebrate their grandpa's birthday. When my children knew that their father was coming to see them, they were so excited that they danced and jumped with joy, and even hummed songs. When I saw the happiness of my children, I knew that I had made the right decision.

The children made birthday cards for their grandfather. When they showed me the birthday cards, I was instantly dumbfounded. My children's drawings were not only meticulous, but they were painted in beautiful colors. Prior to this, due to lack of confidence, my elder son would only draw in black and white. From those beautiful and colorful paintings, I could feel the inner joy and sincere love of my children for their grandpa. The birthday cards they made have helped me to further understand my children's ways of expressing themselves.

When I was having my shower, my younger son secretly looked up his father's phone number

in my hand phone. He was so engrossed that he did not notice that I had come out from the bathroom. He had no choice but told me, "I wish to jot down Papa's contact number, because I hope I can contact him later. I wanted to ask you for Papa's phone number, but I was worried that you would not give it to me. Mommy, I'm sorry!" I was speechless. My son's action and words aroused deep feelings in me. It also made me realize that it was just my own wishful thinking that in all these years everything I had done was for the sake of my children, but I have never asked myself what do my children really need.

When I got divorced, in addition to the embarrassment of losing face, I also forbade my ex-husband to see my children because of his unruly behaviors, such as, being hot temper, impulsive, indulgence in nightlife and having extramarital affairs. This is to prevent him from influencing my children. Since that birthday of my former father-in-law, my children and their father have been keeping in touch with each other. They are very happy now with their father's love. Everyday my children will wait for their father to call and report to them that he has reached home safely, and then only would they sleep in peace. I now can talk with my children more openly. My son pleaded with me, "I'm afraid Papa would disappear, I want to go home. You and Papa reconcile and we go home together, okay?" His pleas stirred my feelings and I was moved to tears. I told them, "Both Mommy and Papa love you. You are good boys; you will always be our children. No one can replace you. Now the relationship between Mommy and Papa is like family, in your everyday life. There is a father and also a mother. We do not live together but it does not mean that we are not family. Just like other relatives, they are also family but we do not live together." Unexpectedly, when the children heard my sincere response, they jumped up happily and cheered, "Yeah! Hooray! Hooray! We are family!!!"

So, actually the children's point of view is different from adults. Children think that only when they are living together with their parents then the family is complete, and they will have a home. But if adults can explain to them that even if the parents are separated, they still can have full

parental love. Then the children will feel more at ease and relieved. Since then, my children have their father's attention and care, and I have an additional relative. Why not?

Some people have asked me, "Why are you so friendly to your ex-husband?" Actually, there is no question of 'why' in this matter, because the feeling of family is 'unconditional'. I do not worry about him taking advantage of me and vice-versa. I told myself to let go of my own likes and dislikes. Only when we can put down our

subjective feelings of 'likes and dislikes', look at things objectively from all viewpoints (especially from our children's standpoint), then only the inner pain can be eased.



by Peony





# My Awakening

by Da Xing

If we work hard to maintain the feelings between people, like the process of cultivating seedlings into big trees, watering and fertilizing regularly, the relationship can be as sturdy as the trees.







**I** am a junior high school dropout, and a mother with no paid work experience or employable skills. Currently, I am separated from my husband, and living alone with my two children.

The eighteen months' writing program has helped me understand clearly that as a single mother, I must be responsible for taking good care of my children. Previously I did not understand how important the custody of my children was to me, but now I am very certain that I want to fight for the custody of my children. No matter what the future holds, I will forge ahead together with the children. I also realized that everyone should know how to be grateful and know how to manage their finances. I hope that my writing can help other women who have the same experiences as me to understand that when something happens, both parties are responsible, and should not blame each other. At the same time, we should not involve the children in any marital disputes.

There are more boys than girls in my family of origin. Every family member is very hot-tempered; the way we interact with each other is quite rough. When we talk we often belittle each other to save face. Nevertheless, we do not hold grudges. We are just frank by nature with a ready tongue, and do not take what has been said seriously. In time to come, such interaction affected me and I make decisions without thinking. Coupled with my impulsive personality, I often speak without considering the


feelings of others; thus offending people without even knowing.

My parents value boys over girls. As the only daughter of the family, all the housework naturally fell on me. My parents' thinking is very traditional. They always tell me, a married daughter is like spilt water. After I separated from my husband, my parents' home naturally became my main reliance. However, when I expressed the wish to go on a trip together with them, my mother would say to me, "You should go along with your husband's family!" I am very annoyed by her remarks. Isn't the married daughter still their daughter? I am very angry. In fact, my heart is wounded. Sometimes, I would put on an indifferent look, but deep down inside I am very eager to be respected, accepted and recognized by my family. Although I knew that actually my parents are very concerned about me, but some of their reactions or words strike me black and blue all over.

At home, when I did something wrong I would be scolded severely. However when I did the right thing I was not praised. When I decide to do certain things, my family would say that I would not know how to do it. They seem to look down on my ability. When I was scolded by my family, I would feel very useless, sad and helpless. So whenever I want to do something I always lack confidence and feel quite inferior. Even until now, I have not overcome this hang up. Besides being often belittled by my family, I remember when I was young; my mother seldom prepared breakfast for my brothers and me. Each morning after she had woken us, she would put some money on the table and told us to buy our own breakfast; and then she would go back to her room and continue sleeping.

Because of these experiences in the past, I really do not like my mother's way of bringing up her children. Yet I find my own method of parenting quite similar to my mother's. One example is that I do not like my kids to be too close to me. This reminded me that when I was small, my mother often pushed me away and did not let me get close to her. I often worried about my method of teaching children is wrong. I am afraid it would affect the physical and mental development of my children in the future.





Because of this, I keep on consulting friends, and also attend some parenting seminars.

I seldom bring my children to come into contact with nature, such as the beach, hiking etc. I only take them to shopping malls and let them play video games. At home, whenever I am free I would watch television programs. The irony is that I often tell the children to do their homework and not watch television. I did not lead by example. After attending a number of parenting seminars, I understand that teaching by example is very important. So now when the kids are doing their homework, I will switch off the television. By now, my children have also grown up slowly and began to express their views. They would say to me, "Mommy, why is it that you can watch television and we cannot?" Besides, I do not want my kids to grow up without accomplishing anything like me. So now I learn to think first before I speak.

As for household expenditures, currently I'm still learning how to budget. I have never been good at managing money, because I grew up witnessing whenever my family members have money in their pockets they would spend all of it eating and drinking. They do not know how to save money. When I did not have money to spend, my father would usually stuff some money into my pocket. When my marriage was on the rocks, I realize that I would not be able to find any job because of my low education level and my lack of special skills. So while the children's father is still giving me housekeeping allowance, I should save some money in my bank account on a regular basis. Participating in the Women's Stories Project gave me the opportunity to interact and learn from the other sisters. Now I finally know how to distinguish between being thrifty and stingy. To be thrifty is not to be wasteful and save, and the things we use need not to be branded items. To be stingy means not spending the money when it is necessary to spend, that is, not willing to buy something that should be bought but instead use other people's things. So I learn how to be thrifty and not spend money unthinkingly anymore.

Sometimes I do feel grateful to the children's father. If not for his decision to leave us, I would still be squandering away my money. I would not think of saving money to raise my children

and for old age. At present, the children's father has been threatening not to provide me the housekeeping allowance. He threatened that if I do not sign the divorce papers, he will not send the allowance. His threat has made me realize that I have been too dependent on him financially. I was wondering to myself that maybe only after signing the divorce papers then I would learn to be financially independent. Can I make money with my own efforts to raise my two daughters? If one day my husband does not give me housekeeping allowance anymore, how can I cope? I still have not taken any action yet because I do not know where my strength is. My capacities are limited, but I do find that I can talk to strangers easily.

From dating until marriage, my husband's family did not accept or respect me; so I vented all my anger onto my husband. I argued with him and even blamed him. I also talked about his family's faults in front of him. At that time, I often compared myself with my other sisters-in-laws in the family, and I was not contented. In order to get recognition and acceptance from his family, I would brag about my parents' wealth to them. At that time, I thought that was the only way that my mother-in-law would accept me. However, after attending the writing program, I realized it was because I did not have self confidence, that I was often eager for recognition from others.

Previously, I always thought that when two persons get married, they should be together all the time, and should not have their own private space. Since my husband's affair, my world has changed. At first I accused him of being at fault. However, after I had gone for counselling and attended some courses, I know now that we need to be mutually understanding and accepting, then our relationship would last, and everyone should learn to be contented and grateful to be happy.

Although we have not yet signed the divorce papers, my husband and I have separated. In any broken relationships, the children are always innocent. Since I have given birth to the children, no matter how difficult it is I must bring them up. I often think if we work hard to maintain the feelings between people, like the process of cultivating seedlings into big trees, watering and



fertilizing regularly, the relationship can be as sturdy as the trees.

I often see myself as a mother tree holding its children. I hope that my relationship with the children can be deep-rooted and will not be uprooted by the strong wind and rain. Now, even though I have to bring up my two daughters by myself, I do not feel sad because I see us as a fortunate and happy family. This is because I am grateful that I still have the companionship and laughter of my children. This simple joy makes me feel very happy and contented.





# The Story of My Life

by Little Grass

*Now I think that suicide cannot solve any problem; on the contrary, it will bring the family more damage.*





## Lonely childhood

I was born into a poor family. My parents always had to rush to work before dawn sets in. When they return they had to do several part-time jobs to cope with our household expenses. Growing up in such an environment, I became very sensible and appreciated my parents' hardship. Since I was young I have been doing everything by myself. I was responsible for all household chores, laundry, cooking, cleaning were all done by me single-handedly. In addition to taking care of my three younger siblings, I also had to look after my grandfather who suffered from dementia. Every day before I went to school I had to prepare meals for the whole family, besides washing everyone's clothes. On weekends, I would replace my mother and followed my father to the place where he worked to help him. Whenever I had time and during school holidays I would do odd jobs. Folding newspapers, pitting betel nuts, cutting wires and shelling peanuts were some of the odd jobs I did to earn pocket money when I was young. Usually a few hours' labor would only earned me a few cents, so I was able to understand that my parents' money was hard-earned, and therefore often remember to be filial. I have often thought if I were able to earn more money in the future, I would surely let my parents enjoy a comfortable life.

'To an impoverished couple, nothing goes well'; I very much agree with this statement. My parents always quarreled over living expenses, and conflicts between in-laws. My mother once left us after a quarrel with my father as a result of instigation by my aunts. So, when I was young I really hated those interfering aunts, and was very afraid of their visits, because they always

instigated my parents to quarrel.


When I was young, I was quite plump and unpopular. I had very few friends and no male friends. I was criticized and ridiculed because of my body size. Others always referred to me as 'big fat girl'. So I was very lonely, sad and suffered from inferiority complex. What hurt me most was that even my own younger brother ostracized me. He was always worried that I would ruin his handsome image in the eyes of others in the school. So he was reluctant to acknowledge that I was his sister in front of others, and refused to interact with me in school. My younger brother was the only son so he was very spoilt. My younger sisters were prettier and lovelier than I and thus were often praised by others. In the crowd I was always being snubbed and ridiculed. People even remarked that I was fat because I often grabbed my sister's food to eat. At home, my only consolation was that I got along very well with my father. My father had a low-key personality. He did everything by himself and did not like to show off. He was also thrifty, filial, and respected the feelings of others. Perhaps we were more similar in personalities; so my father and I got along well. My father loved me very much and he often praised me. Our common hobby was making cakes and pastries. When we were free we would make some cakes and tasted them together. Every time when I tried to make a new type of cake and failed, he would still encourage me by eating up the unpalatable pastry.

As for my mother, I was very unhappy that she often beat me and was particularly partial to my younger brother and sisters. So I often fought with her. Many times, I became my mother's target for venting her emotions. At that time, I was very angry, and did not understand why I could not get my mother's love even though I was the most filial and understanding child. I had very low self-esteem and had very few friends around, so I was ever so eager to get my mother's love.

*Mami, do you see my existence? Do you see my loneliness, fear and helplessness? Do you see my love for you? Why do you show favoritism? Have I done something wrong? Has my obesity brought you*







*shame? I do not know how to get your love. Actually how I yearned to get your 'love', but why you did not pay any attention to me, put me in your heart? You all thought that I was strong, independent, but in fact, I have been very fragile and lonesome. Mami, though you are by my side, why do I feel there is a vast distance between us? Is it because I cannot get your affection, or I do not understand you?*

Unfortunately, my mother did not hear my cries. This affected me and I became insecure with people, often felt lonely, helpless, scared and sad. The only way for me to release was to hurt myself. So again and again I knocked my head against the wall. However nobody noticed it even though my head was bruised. I remember once, I did not know why I cried nonstop. My crying angered my mother and she gave me a beating, but I still kept on crying. Suddenly, my mother was out of control. She picked up a pair of scissors and stabbed me. I tried to resist; as a result my arm was wounded. I really hated my mother then. I did not understand why I was always the one who got beaten up. There was always a question in my mind, "Am I really my mother's biological child?" Physical wound may heal, but the invisible injury in my heart cannot be erased even after all these years.

## Independent youth

When I was 18 years old, I decided to leave my hometown and follow my fellow villagers to work outstation. Facing a new life, a new environment, the loneliness of being far from home made me feel very helpless. During daytime I always worried whether I could do my job well. At night I was sad and shed tears because I missed my family. Seven or eight boarders squeezed into a small room. On top of that I had to endure bullying and sarcastic comments from my roommates. As I did not want to worry my parents I tried my best to report to them only what was good while holding back what was unpleasant. I often reminded myself that I must learn whatever I can, so I worked hard, and often worked over time until late at night.

I remember once after my lessons at night, as my friend could not take me home, I called my room-mates for help, but they refused to help me. So the helpless me had to bite the bullet and walked 5 km alone to reach home. After that incident, I decided not to rely on someone's charity. I did not want to be under anyone's control so I rented a room by myself.

I am very grateful to a group of good colleagues and elders who were very willing to help me. With their help, I found a room, and started to live alone. I got to know an elder who left a deep impression on me. He took care of me as though I was his goddaughter. His family made me feel that I was being cared for and loved. With the support of my colleagues and godfather, I began to lead an independent life. After working for two years, I started to work part-time in order to complete my favorite course. Every day I worked until late at night to earn more wages to pay for my tuition and living expenses. Whenever I had classes, I rode my motorcycle to attend class after work. During the rainy season I was always caught in the rain and was wet like a drowned rat.

During that time, I met my husband. After we had dated for more than a year, my father was paralyzed after an accident. At that time we were unable to accept this reality. Especially me, I had this griping pain in my heart, I could not understand why God would want a good person like my father, the one who loved me most, to bear all this pain? I wish I could bear all of my father's pain in place of him. When my father knew that he was paralyzed he was also very sad, but he did not give up. Instead he faced the reality positively.

His wounds further deteriorated because of his diabetes. After receiving treatment for some time, my father's condition not only has not improved, the treatment also made him lose weight and appetite. Slowly, he became irritable. And gradually he lost his fighting spirit. He did not like to talk anymore. He began to refuse medication, and many times at night he shed tears secretly. I remember once he said to me, "Papa really cannot pull through this time.. " When I heard my father say these words, my heart was really broken.



Later when my father was admitted to the hospital, I stayed in the hospital to accompany him. I considered the hospital ward as my home and the chair was my bed. I was afraid that if I went home I would not see Papa again. Papa had to take a lot of drugs every day, and every day the dosage was increased, even to the extent that taking morphine could not ease his pain. I saw my father having breathing difficulties. I saw him losing patience, I saw him demanding to leave the hospital, and got readmitted again. One would not feel the 'pain' if he had not experienced this kind of torture. I kept praying for God to alleviate the suffering of my father, and I sincerely wished that I could bear for him.

A few days before my father's death, he could not speak. He was in a daze and could not recognize anyone. My heart hurt. I could not understand why when I had the ability to give him a comfortable life, he had to leave me. Over the years, I still cannot overcome the longing for my father.

When my father was seriously ill, I promised my mother to start preparing for my wedding so that he would feel comforted seeing his daughter married. However, it was too late for my father. He left before the wedding took place. To have to prepare my wedding at this time, without my father, my feeling was really indescribable. That really was the biggest regret of my life. In order not to disappoint my mother, I entered married life without knowing much about my husband and his family.

## Sudden marriage

After entering married life, my husband has also just started his business and faced financial difficulties. Many creditors came to collect debts. My superstitious mother-in-law believed that my husband's business was not doing well because our birthdates clashed. Hence, she began to blame me. She also believed in ghosts and gods, she demanded us to change our birthdates and names and only wear clothes of certain colors. Her various superstitions stressed me out and I nearly had a nervous breakdown. More and more discontent and conflict developed in our marital relationship.

Financial problems coupled with in-law

disputes led to frictions between my husband and me. We began to accuse each other and hate each other. I felt really bad. I gave up my work so that I could take care of my children properly, but now I had to face such enormous financial pressures and unsolvable relationship issues. I often could not help but shed tears and had suicidal thoughts. I began to suspect that I was suffering from depression.

My husband is a very filial son. He is very obedient to his parents. I remember once, my mother-in-law went to consult the deities again because my husband's business was not running smoothly. Following instructions from the deities, my mother-in-law asked my husband not to attend any funeral or visit anyone who was sick during that period. As it happened, during that period I was not well and needed to have a minor operation. Since my mother-in-law strictly forbade my husband to step into the hospital surroundings, I had to drive myself to the hospital to be admitted. I was really mad. I was very angry and sad why my husband had to comply with my mother-in-law's unreasonable demands.

My husband's family never treated me like part of the family. I remember once my husband and I had a quarrel. My mother-in-law then marched to my house angrily, accused me of not being a good woman and scolded me with many harsh words. Angered by her unreasonable accusation, I left my children and drove away from my house. As my car moved forward quickly, the scenario of my mother-in-law scolding me kept on appearing in my mind. The idea of 'death' began to appear. At that moment, I missed my father very much. I wished he could take me away together with him. I was thinking, "Papa, please take me away, take me away, I cannot take it anymore." I did not know how far I had driven. Then a car blocked my way. Following that, a lot of people crowded around me. I could not hear what they were saying to me until I saw my family who had rushed to the scene. I cannot remember what happened after that; I only remember they took me home.

After this incident, my mood became even worse. It was simply uncontrollable. There were always a lot of unpleasant scenes in my



mind. I always flew into a rage because of trivial incidents. Often I could not sleep and had nightmares. I started to dislike going out. I did not wish to see other people. On the other hand, I often blamed myself. I was living in a world of my own fear, pain and anger. When fear and pain appeared, I could not help but hurt myself. In addition, I also vent my emotion on my children, and always flew into a rage and hit my children over minor things.

Because they were often beaten, my poor children would tremble when I spoke loudly. They often had nightmares too and woke up with a startle. When I saw the various negative reactions of my children, I felt guilty and my heart ached. I was shocked to realize that I was repeating my mother's behavior. I was using those disgusted ways to bring up my children. It made me hate myself even more for I felt I was not a good mother.

Because they were often beaten, my children became very timid and did not have definite viewpoints of their own. They often wet their beds and were noisy. Once my two children had an argument and one of them knocked his head against the wall because he was angry. I was horrified to see such a scenario because my child had copied my improper way of venting his emotions. At that moment, I began to realize that I could not go on like that; I could not let my children vent their emotions just like I did. I did not want my children to live in resentment like me. I did not wish to lead a life of 'self-destruction', be sorrowful and painful forever. I started to look for help.

Fortunately, I read about the services and activities of PPW in the newspapers. I took the first step to seek counselling. After obtaining positive encouragement and affirmation from the counselor, I began to get back the courage to face life. During that time, I participated in a lot of courses and workshops organized by the PPW; I got to know a number of people. I found out that everyone has her own story, after sharing and getting mutual support and encouragement from one another, we gradually forged a rare sisterhood. Meanwhile, my sisters and I also participated in the Women's Stories Project. The facilitator of this project used a lot of methods to

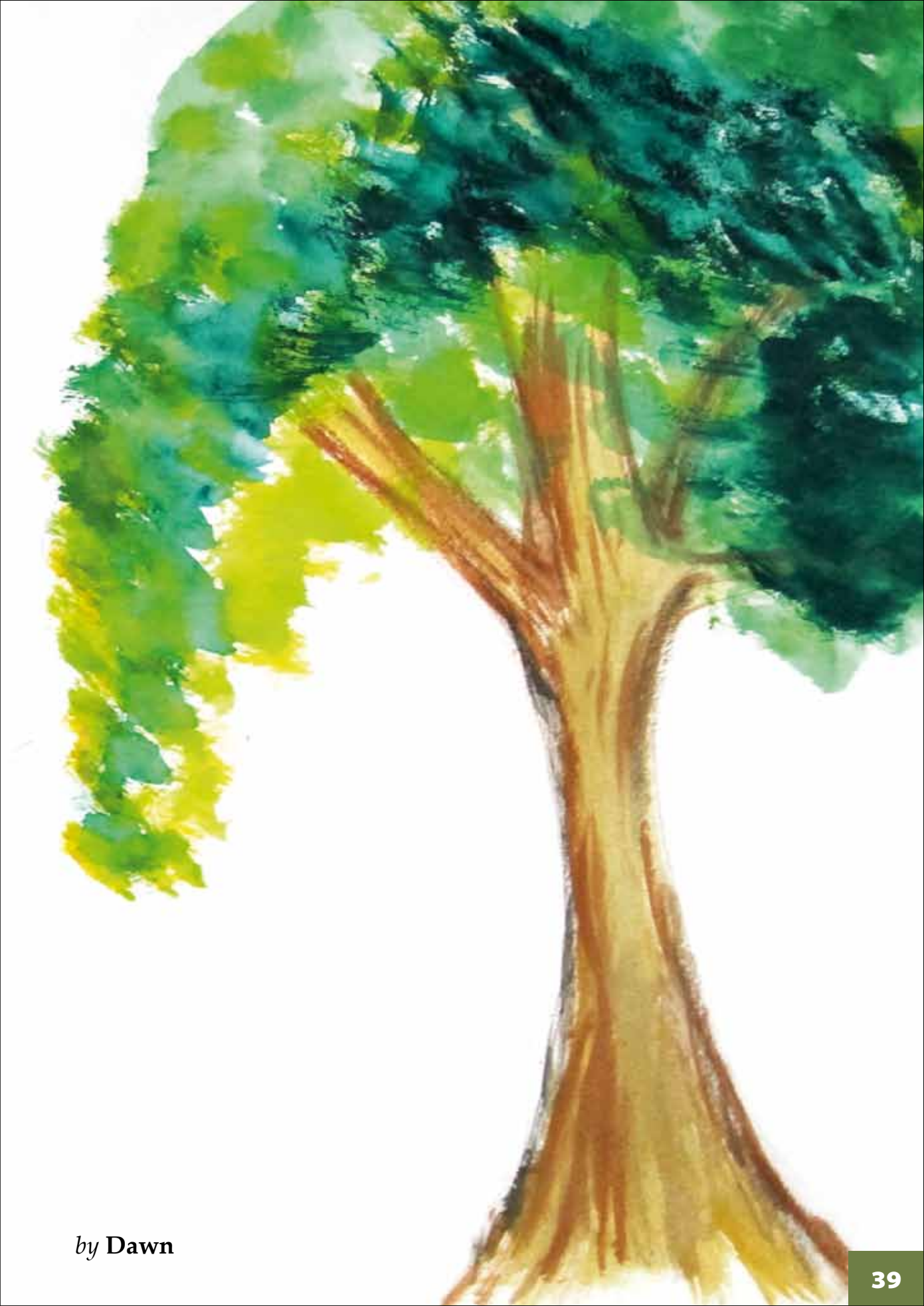
make us look back and explore the process of our lives. We were encouraged to reflect on our lives and to face them bravely. Then we each wrote out our life story.

After attending the workshops, I found myself thinking more positively, and the knots in my heart untied one by one. I am no longer single-minded with some things. Previously, when I was sad, I would think of using 'death' to solve my problems. I believed that death would end one's troubles once and for all. Now, however, I learned to think, to analyze, to reflect, and to clean up the emotional garbage accumulated in my heart throughout the years. I decided not to be the 'victim' anymore. I promised myself I must change, and slowly I found myself full of energy. Now I think that suicide cannot solve any problem; on the contrary, it will bring the family more damage.

I realized that in life there are always ups and downs, so we should not be single-minded about anything. Besides, time will pass in the blink of an eye, and then things that upset us will pass. There will be a rainbow after the storm. I am learning to adopt the attitude of letting nature take its own course and to treat people and things gratefully. I also often remind myself not to get into a dead end. Because of this change, relationships between my husband and I, as well as with others gradually improved. As for my children, I learned to use patience, acceptance, understanding, empathy and equality to get along with them. I also have done away with corporal punishment and threats. To my surprise, I could see that the act of 'listening' has improved my relationship with my children. As a result, my children have also become more obedient.

I am very grateful to the group of mentors and sisters who learn and grow together with me at WCC and PPW. Bless you, and bless myself.





*by* Dawn



# Appreciating Life's Challenges

by Goldfish

*When a person chooses to remember her pain, it means that she has chosen to spend her life in pain.*





**i** have suffered from depression. One day three years ago, in a state of total disorientation, and like a walking ghost, I was accompanied by my sister to seek counselling at PPW. Throughout the counselling session I was crying, and kept on going to the toilet. Even though I did not know how to express my hurt feelings, the counsellor attended to me attentively. This enabled me to pour out my heart. After I had received several sessions of counselling and participated in some activities like the Women's Stories Project, 'Journey to Intimacy', etc. organized by PPW, I finally emerged from a state of self-pity, and gradually found my direction in life. In the past, when problems arise, I was accustomed to adopting a victim's attitude and pointed the problem towards other people. Since I had discovered more about myself, I began to learn to reflect, to confront and to take responsibility for myself.


During this learning process, I continue to look back on my life. I realized that both my husband and I had encountered severe trauma in our childhood. Although my husband and I come from different family background, we have been affected by our families of origin. I come from a family which was full of intense conflict, violence and fear, thus creating my introverted, timid and not confident personality. I do not know how to use words to express my thoughts, not to mention knowing how to manage my inner complex emotions and feelings. On the other hand, my husband comes from a family which uses beating and applying pressure to discipline children; so he has learned to use violence to solve problems.

Our original families not only affect our personalities, but also influence the ways we relate with our spouse. Owing to the lack of love in my original family, when I got married I became a beggar of love and was very possessive. Since marrying my husband, I thought that my husband should completely belong only to me. So from the very beginning, my mother-in-law, my sisters-in-law and I were jealous of one another and competed for his attention. My husband's sense of family is very strong. He responds to every plea from his family, but let me face and deal with everything of our own family alone. If I do not do it well he would blame or scold me. He was indifferent to my discontent and grievances over the years, but blamed me for making trouble out of nothing. Later, my husband felt that there was no peace and warmth in the house. He prefers to participate in church activities rather than stay at home with me and our children.

Whenever my husband is stressed out and frustrated at work he would vent his anger on me. Everything I did was not right to him. Since I come from a family which does not have a sense of security and does not know how to use words to communicate, so when I encountered his displeasure, I would feel extremely sensitive and disgusted; and I would retaliate as a way of protesting. My reactions often made my male chauvinistic and bossy husband fly into a terrible rage. He retaliated with a more severe attitude to suppress me. Whenever we had conflicts, the children were very scared. In order not to affect the children, I tried my best to suppress my anger and resentment. After some time, I accumulated so much emotional garbage in my heart, they finally became deep-seated grudges. Later, I had to declare cold war with him to vent my grievances. However this was a very stupid method, because after a few times he became indifferent. This again deepened my piled-up grievances against him. At that time, my hatred for him was written all over my face, so he became more disgusted and annoyed with me. Thus our relationship became a vicious cycle. The most adversely affected were our innocent children who lived in constant fear due to our bad relationship.

I did not understand why I worked so hard





in a relationship yet at the end I was covered with scars. After I had attended a course on "Journey to Intimacy", I learnt how to empathize, to forgive and be tolerant and applied them on my family members, and then I witnessed its wonderful effect. First, I improved my attitude towards my mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. At the same time, I slowly learned to let go and forgave my husband. A miraculous thing happened. Our relationship improved and we no longer antagonized each other with such harshness. As my heart began to soften, I got to know some very good friends, found some books which were helpful to me, heard a lot of pleasant news and discovered a lot of nice things. All that had happened were quite incredible.

When I was growing up, my parents and relatives often compared me with others. I therefore developed an inferiority complex and often worried about being looked down upon by others. After I have grown up, even when I had my own family, I was still very concerned about how people viewed me, and I especially yearn to be recognized by others. My expectations of myself and my children were high. If my children could not reach my standards, I would give them a good beating. At that time I did not realize that my seemingly well-behaved, obedient children with excellent grades have been harbouring rebellious thoughts. Until one day, I was surprised to find that my little daughter's temperament took a drastic change. She became very rebellious. Every now and then an aggressive expression would appear on her face. I discovered that my excessive repression has caused her emotions to burst out. As her form teacher could not accept the 'do not want anybody to be near me' look, the teacher told her classmates, "When I see her face I want to puke", and that wounded my little daughter's heart deeply. This incident made my heart ache and made me realise my own inner reactions.

Instantly, I cried. With this insight, I became remorseful of my own behaviour. I decided to do away with my 'competitive attitude' and 'eagerness to be one up over others', and tried to be as normal as possible. My daughter's incident made me realize that my childhood trauma caused by my own family of origin, had

deeply influenced my negative personality and resulted in my negative approach in disciplining my children. I know that it was inappropriate to go on like that. After that, the way I taught my children changed from blaming and threatening to listening, empathising, reminding and explaining. Fortunately, the change in me helped me to win back my children's hearts. The children gradually walked out of the dark clouds and became happy and confident again.

I remembered during the first part of the writing workshop, the teacher asked us what some of the common feelings we often have towards ourselves are. My answer was "I feel that I am very useless." When I meet with setbacks, this feeling is even more intense. I did not know why I felt like that then. However, when the shell of memory was peeled off slowly, I finally remembered that when I was seven years old; one night my mother lost her temper and shouted at me, "You useless thing, I wanted to abort you but was not successful. When I was giving birth to you, you caused me so much bleeding that I was in labour for three days and nights before you were born. Your Chinese Zodiac sign clashes with mine. The hour you were born, you overpower your parents." I still remember every time after my mother had quarrelled with my father, she would vent her anger on us, her children. I also remember that once my mother gave me a small piece of paper to take to the Chinese medicinal shop to buy medicine. It turned out that she had planned to use the sleeping pills I bought for her to commit suicide and she nearly lost her life. After this incident, all the people around and the neighbours scolded me and said that I was stupid, useless, and almost killed my mother. Those remarks have made me feel bitter, remorseful, anxious and guilty for a long, long time.

In fact, I have tried very hard to forget that painful memory of my childhood, but when the teacher asked us to reflect on our past, all my childhood experiences suddenly became alive. The anger which I had tried very hard to repress poured out like an avalanche. At that moment, I finally could not suppress myself. I blurted out and shouted, "I hate her! I hate her! I really hate her!" Fortunately, the teacher and other participants of the workshop hugged me tightly.



None of them criticised me negatively of my response. Their loving energy not only helped me to put down my resentment of my mother, but also helped me feel again the love of my mother that I have been yearning for a long time. It also made me recall the goodness and love of my mother.

When I let go of all my negative emotions towards my mother, I began to see how my mother had influenced me positively. My mother liked to drop in on others and criticize people; so I do not drop in on others and do not like to gossip about people. My mother is a competitive person and she likes to show off; so I choose to be low-key and humble to people. My mother had behaved improperly as she wanted to take revenge on my father and this had led the neighbours to ridicule us. Because of the shame we felt, I always reminded myself not to use improper action in a fit of anger to retaliate at my husband, so that our innocent children will not be embarrassed by others. Every time after she had quarrelled with my father, my mother would run away, and I had to be put up under somebody's roof at a young age. So I was often ridiculed. Hence, after I was married I would never run away even when my husband and I had conflicts. My mother does not like cleaning and doing housework, but I would always provide my family with a clean and tidy home. My mother often disregards her children's needs and feelings, while I consider my children's needs as my top priority.

When a person chooses to remember her pain, it means that she has chosen to spend her life in pain. As I did not know how to put

down the past nor do I know how to change my mindset, I was heading blindly to a dead end. I could not get rid of the resentment and pain in my heart. This has caused me to suffer from depression. Depression has made me to lose control of myself and the ability to harness my willpower. When the doctor first diagnosed that I was suffering from depression, I could not accept it. I suffered from mood swings which were even more difficult to control. After living in the dark for a long period of time, I decided to face it rather than to avoid it. It was only then that I saw the sun behind the darkness.

I have been hesitant and reluctant to put down in writing and to share my lived experiences with others. Today, after reflecting all that have happened in the past, and looking back on my own learning and development, as well as the reactions of my family members, children, teachers and friends, I can feel deeply the gift and the abundant love life has given me.



# Marriage?!

by Dawn

*...even if you are right,  
there is no need to  
argue, only to forgive.*





**i**f marriage is a big tree, then my children are the roots, and I am the trunk. My children are like those roots firmly embedded in the ground. I am like a tree trunk firmly tied down by the roots. My husband is the branches of the big tree. What about the leaves? They are those never ending female friends by my husband's side. There will be times that the green leaves will wilt, but when they wilt and fall on to the ground, new leaves will immediately grow out.

I think my marriage is the gloomy sky. My two daughters are rainbows after the rain. They make up for the flaw in my marriage. They are my energy, my spring of joy. Whenever I see them eating the food I cooked heartily, I have a sense of joy and satisfaction. It was a pleasure to me even if I have to go to their school to wait for them an hour before school was over.

In my twenty years of marriage, in order to care for my children I gave up my job. At that time, my husband was working all the time. Apart from the kids and me, there was no one else in the house. I was maintaining a household without the man of the house throughout the years. No matter how strong I was, when all were quiet in the stillness of night I still felt unusually helpless. In fact, vulnerability is basically every woman's, if not every person's weakness, but I think my inner turmoil and contradiction is even worse. Even though I was very clear that I could not trust this man anymore, I still gave him chance after chance.

At that time I already felt very unhappy with my husband, but I always told myself to think of the bright side! In fact, he is very filial, excellent at his work and also has a sense of responsibility. At that time, I really thought, in

comparison with others, albeit I fell short of the best but I was better than the worst because I did not have to go out to work for money. Moreover, even if my husband was womanizing outside, he strongly denied to me that he was having affairs, which showed he still has his family in his heart.

I am a Christian, I often use the saying of the Lord Jesus, "You have to forgive others before you forgive yourself" to remind myself to forgive him. However, I found that even though I have repeatedly forgiven him for his womanizing, he still remained unchanged and continued fooling around with other women. So I could not help but sighed 'a leopard cannot change its spots'. Fortunately, now I am no longer affected or hurt by his behavior. After all, when I learned to let go of the resentment in my heart, my worries were reduced naturally.


## This is how I entered into marriage...

Twenty seven years ago, through a friend's recommendation, I began to work in a Japanese company. The job was a new journey in my life, because I believe my husband's and my destiny were actually fated. I remember one day, I worked until seven o'clock and I was the only one left in the office. I had already worked in this new company for seven days, but this was the first time I saw him. I can still remember clearly he had his back towards me, blowing his nose into a handkerchief outside the office. Oddly enough, a thought flashed through my mind then, 'He is my future husband'. But I did not take it seriously, and did not think through the seemingly naïve idea. I just concentrated on finishing my work.

He came to the company about once or twice a week. Other than official business, I did not speak with him much. I also knew he had a Japanese girlfriend, who was in Japan then. Very often his girlfriend would come to Penang to see him. In those days, he wrote to the Japanese girlfriend every day. As his English was not as good as mine, I always helped him to ghostwrite love letters to his girlfriend. One day, he showed me a diamond ring, and said that he would fly to Japan the next day to propose to his girlfriend. The entire office was filled with a jubilant atmosphere; everyone was happy for him and







was looking forward to see him bring the bride back.

However, things were not as smooth as we thought. After two days, he came back earlier than the scheduled date. His face was full of disappointment and sadness which could not be concealed. Everyone knew in their hearts that he had been rejected. Since then, he never asked me to help him write love letters anymore.

On Christmas day of that year, after a sumptuous dinner, all the employees of our company went to a nightclub to have fun. I still remember that night when we came out from the nightclub. Nobody was around to take me home and he said to me, "Never mind, there is me, I will send you back." That night, our relationship changed from being colleagues to a couple.

Love is sweet, but also blind. My understanding of man-woman relationships was completely ignorant then. I did not see his character, income, appearance, education and family background in true light at all. Since he and I had reached marriageable age, we very soon were talking about getting married.

As we still did not have any children, the first two years after we got married were happy and sweet and we went everywhere together. Our first child was born in the third year of our marriage. After that I took care of my child full time. I felt frustrated. I did not feel he enjoyed being a first time father nor his eagerness for the arrival of our first child.

After giving birth to my first child, due to the lack of experience in taking care of children, I seemed to be overwhelmed, often suffered from insomnia and irritability. My poor eldest daughter became my punching bag. During the 1997 global economic crisis, my husband's savings were all lost due to the crash of the share market. Because of our housing loan, our car loan as well as the need to feed many in-laws, my husband had to work very hard round the clock. Because of all the stress, anxiety and worry have unknowingly invaded my body. I often could not sleep at night, my limbs were weak and painful, I talked to myself, and from time to time I could smell perfume. Even worse, I started hearing voices. Once when I went to the mall, one of my legs seemed to be pulled by somebody

who wanted me to jump. I was really terrified and thought I had been possessed by evil spirits. Until one day, I read an article about depression in the newspaper. I was shocked to realize that I have been suffering from depression. I did not seek medical help, but tried to help myself by following the methods mentioned in the article. First of all, every day I walked in the park, took a deep breath and did 'tai chi'. At the same time I ate the food mentioned in the newspaper. When I was in low spirits, I tried not to be alone, and went to places where there were crowds. When I was angry, I would quickly stay away from the children so as not to vent my emotions on them. After several years, we weathered the economic crisis, and my depression began to take a favorable turn. Thereafter, my husband had to work outstation; hence we were apart more than we were together.

Four years ago, another test for our marriage appeared. My husband got involved with his colleague, but he maintained that she was only his colleague. He often gave excuses for not bringing any money home. At that time, our house was like a battlefield. Although he strongly denied his affair, he was seldom home, and rarely took us out for meals. He even had two additional credit cards in his wallet, and he often exceeded his credit limits. At that time, my spirit plunged into an unstable condition again. I was short-tempered and was fearful all the time.

Two years later, he moved to work in another company. Since then, I did not hear the woman's telephone call anymore. I thought everything would be calm and peaceful finally, but his behavior began to become a little weird. Sometimes he was very polite to me, and sometimes he deliberately picked on me; and that made my mood become very unstable again. Once he was sick I bought some medicine for him. He was very uneasy, repeatedly expressed his thanks, and also kept on saying sorry. I felt very strange then, because I just bought some panadol for him, and it was right and natural for a wife to buy medicine for her husband. Very soon I had the answer to my uneasiness.

I knew very well of my husband's lustful nature, but I absolutely did not expect he would hook up with one of my friends. My sister warned

me, "Men become lustful when they are in their fifties and sixties." During that period, one of my long-time good friends suddenly came to see me frequently, and told me that, "I deserve a better man." Not understanding what she meant, I asked her, "You have just remarried recently, why do you say that?" Following that, she came to see me more and more often. When my husband was not in Penang, she would invite me to go karaoke or listening to music in the pub. After that, she started to inquire about my husband's and my sex life. When she got to know more, she revealed to me that she knew about my husband's affairs.

To my shock, I learnt that my womanizing husband was having an affair with this good friend of mine. At that moment I almost collapsed. I was panic-stricken, I could not concentrate, and when I drove off I nearly met with an accident. I could not sleep for many nights. Even when I fell into a light slumber, my whole body would tremble and I would be jolted awake. I often wondered why he wanted to do that. Following that, I could not eat. That kind of blow and hurt was too much. The pain was like being stabbed in the chest and having the whole heart dug out.

Now I tell myself, I will never let it happen again. I know very well that physically it is very damaging. I want to use a very strong faith to protect my body. My husband's repeated extramarital affairs led me to head towards Jesus, against my family's wish. Jesus helped me to get through the most difficult part of my life. I know that I have been wrong too. I was wrong in exerting my utmost efforts to fight on the basis of reason. I was wrong in not being able to control my temper, so that my husband could provoke my emotions. I was wrong in assuming that 'the prodigal son would return'; so forgiveness should

bring me hope, but instead I was hurt even more. I prayed to God, "Let me change him! Let me not argue for right or wrong again, let me be silent!"

I have thought about divorce, but my children have grown up and have their own minds. Moreover when I looked around at my friends, I know that divorce was not the best strategy. I also know that my kids would not be able to take the blow of their parents being divorced. In addition, as a Christian, the church would strongly oppose my decision to divorce. After some painful torments, my heart restored its calmness, and this calmness enabled me to handle things sensibly. This incident really made me grow up. I learnt from the Bible, even if you are right, there is no need to argue, only to forgive. Currently, I am over fifty years old, how many days have I left in my life? From my silence my children seemed to be more considerate to me, and the relationship between my husband and I seemed to have changed from being a couple to being a family.



# A Beautiful Short Moment

by Yuan Gui

*I have learnt not to let  
the emotional injuries  
and the failure of my  
marriage make me into  
a victim, and continue to  
indulge in self-pity...*







**i** grew up in a middle class family. I have an elder sister, an elder brother, and a younger brother. My father was a building contractor and my mother was a housewife. My family's financial situation was pretty good. Since I was young my family loved me very much. They helped me to arrange for everything nicely, and I did not have to worry about anything. They also gave me the opportunity to study in a college. After I had finished college, I found a good job without any problem.

Because life has been smooth, and my family helped me to arrange for everything, I therefore developed a dependent personality. When faced with setbacks and problems, I usually rely on others to make decisions, and often do not know how to resolve problems by myself. I was very simplistic then. Because I had this wishful thinking that every marriage would last, each couple would love each other, trust each other, support each other, and the relationship would continue until one of them die. So, I was filled with a longing for marriage.

As the saying goes 'good times do not last long'. When I was 21 years old, my carefree life began to change. That year, my father passed away after a serious illness. Our family lost a breadwinner, and life began to become difficult. Fortunately, during that time only my younger brother was still in school. The rest of us were already working. With the hard work of my siblings, my family's financial situation gradually improved. Life was not that bad.


When I was 26 years old, I met my husband. He was a gentle and caring man. He loved me very much; took good care of me, and we got married after we dated for two years. When we

just got married, we were very loving, and life was really enjoyable. Following the birth of our first child, life became very busy, but we were still happy. Unfortunately, happiness was indeed so short. When I was 36 years old, I discovered that my husband, who used to come home almost every day to accompany me and our children, suddenly changed a lot. At that time, my husband was driven home by a female colleague after midnight every day. After questioning him, I was surprised that my husband was having an affair with this colleague of his. I quarreled with him every day, and in a heated argument, I accidentally hit him. At that time, I regretted and apologized to him, but it did not stop the affair. They continued to see each other.

So we continued quarrelling for another year. Whenever we had conflicts, the children became scared and hid aside to cry. Because of this, my eldest son who was only seven years old then, suffered from depression. I had no other choice but to take him to seek professional counselling. Fortunately, after numerous counselling sessions, my son's condition improved. As I knew that the reason behind our son's depression was our continual quarrels, I would swallow my anger and kept silent to reduce the burden on our child's mind, even if my heart was not willing and I felt that I had been wronged. From then onwards, I controlled myself and did not quarrel with him. I also did not question his extramarital affairs. At the same time, my husband also promised me that he would be faithful to me. So I chose to forgive him, and did not raise this matter again.

Unfortunate things happened one after another. When I was 38 years old, I suffered from thyroid cancer. My husband gave me a lot of care and support then. For the sake of my children, I had to be strong to undergo surgeries and treatments. Fighting against cancer for eight years was certainly not easy, but finally I got through it. I thought those who survive a catastrophe are bound to have good fortune later on. I did not expect my husband to raise the issue of me hitting him years ago. He even said he did not have any feelings for me anymore, and he wanted a divorce. I certainly could not believe that this was the reason he wanted to file for divorce, but when I asked whether he was having





an affair he denied. One moment he would say that he had reached menopause and wished to stay alone. Yet at the very next moment he would say that more than ten years ago when he was in the delivery room accompanying me to give birth to our eldest son, he saw me bleeding profusely and hence he had developed a fear for me. These reasons were simply too far-fetched and made me very confused.

At that time my mother-in-law was critically ill. I nursed her like how I took care of myself when I was sick. My husband told me not to tell his mother about his wish for divorce. In order not to make my mother-in-law sad and worried, I promised him. But my heart could not bear this blow, and I spent my days in tears. The blow was so unbearable that in just two weeks, I lost 10 kg. However my husband just turned a blind eye to my sadness, worry, fear and despair. Immediately after my mother-in-law passed away, he began to send text messages to me every few days asking for a divorce. He also wrote hurting messages which stated that he had no more feelings for me, and we could not continue to be together, etc. Every time when I received his text message I could not eat nor sleep, and relied on sleeping pills to sleep at night. As I did not want a divorce, my husband hired a lawyer to send me a letter stating that he would file for divorce unilaterally. I was very helpless and confused then and also cried day and night. Fortunately, my husband's family was very supportive of me. They also helped to persuade him to give up the idea of divorce. Finally he withdrew the lawyer's letter, but still insisted to divorce me. Since then my husband was indifferent to everything at home. But for the sake of the children, I did not quarrel with him.

My eldest son loves his father very much. He also tried to persuade his father, but his father just turned a deaf ear to what he said. Because of this, my son begged me not to divorce his father. He said he did not want to have a broken family. Since I still loved my husband, I promised my son I would try my best to restore our family. That year my son had to sit for the PMR examination, but he was deeply affected by the poor parental relationships, leading to his not being able to concentrate on his studies

and became very bad temper. Every day when he came home from school he would fall asleep. I knew he was trying to escape, and I was afraid his depression symptoms would appear again. This time my husband did not want me to send our son to undergo counselling again. I had no choice but to seek help myself and contacted PPW for counselling. I participated in activities organized by PPW like 'Journey to Intimacy' and the Women's Stories Project. From these activities I learnt how to get along with people, I could write out the pain in my heart, so I felt more relieved. In the writing project, from the 'river of my life' workshop, I wrote out the secrets in my heart. I got to know more sisters. We talked to one another, supported one another and this enabled me to have more courage to go on. Through these experiences, my heart slowly calmed down. I learned how to avoid friction with my husband. Following my change, my son also changed. Two months before his examination, he was finally able to concentrate on his revision. He managed to get very good results for the examination.

Unfortunately, without informing me, my husband quietly moved out of our house that we had shared for more than ten years. After our separation, he still maintained contact with our children, and also provided us with housekeeping money, but was indifferent to everything concerning the family. At the beginning, the children and I were not used to it and we missed him very much. Every night we hoped and yearned for his return. I could not sleep every night. I was afraid that some bad guys would break into our house. Only when daylight set in that I could close my eyes to take a nap. I was tormented until I did not look like a human being. It was only after some time that the children and I slowly adapted to a life without him. He still texted me occasionally, asking for a divorce. He urged me not to hold on and look for a suitable other half. All this would not hurt my heart and soul anymore. I am beginning to accept it and let go gradually. The most important thing for me now is to give my children a good education and a secure home environment, so that they can also live happily under such circumstances.

Although my current situation is not what I hope for, I have learnt not to let the emotional



injuries and the failure of my marriage make me into a victim and continue to indulge in self-pity until reaching a dead end as in the past. I have started to learn and accept that things do happen for a reason. I now learn to face setbacks rather than avoid them. Only in this way, I am able to find ways to solve my problems. I also begin to learn to be independent, to let go, as well as to plan for the future. I do not have him to rely on now, so I can only deal with everything on my own, which makes me learn to be self-reliant. When participating in the activities of Tzu Chi, I understood the principle of karma (cause and effect). I began to learn how to put down my worries. Although I know that the process will be very difficult, I believe that if I can go forward with confidence and courage, then only the lives of my children and I can be changed.

After participating in Tzu Chi, it gave me the opportunity to contact with people from different backgrounds, which also made me realize that I was still fortunate because what I had lost was only a small part of life. From my failed marriage I found that actually what I have gained is far more than what I have lost.



by **Rainbow**



# Rainbow Movement

by Rainbow

I hope that my sharing would help other people to have a greater understanding and awareness of mental health.



## An impaired larva



**S**omething bad has happened! Belle wanted to jump out of the window, but fortunately it is discovered!" K said. A phone call in the middle of the night; it was like a thousand katis have pressed down onto my chest. My tears kept falling. If it was not discovered, what would have been the outcome? When I thought of this, I could not continue thinking.

Our car rushed to the other side of the bridge, to the residence of Belle's boyfriend, K, on the 35th floor. When we stepped inside the door, the house was in darkness. K said Belle would not let him turn on the lights. Belle was just coming out from the toilet. When she saw us, her hands were holding onto her chest. Not a sound was uttered. K and we persuaded Belle to go home with us. We were unable to bear the consequences. 35th floor! It was too dangerous!

When Belle heard that she was going home, she immediately hid in the room; slipped into the blanket and refused to listen to us. Finally we managed to coax her to swallow a sleeping pill. So she got into the car in a daze. Then we drove the car around on the street for a few times. Only when she fell asleep, we drove her home.

I can recall that year Belle entered a talent idol competition. She was one of the top three finalists, and became a spokesperson for the products of a company. She began to rush from one place to another to fulfill her roadshow assignments, and attended various activities day and night. With the pressure of increased workload, conflicts among colleagues and her boyfriend's family pressing her to get married, she, being an introvert, finally collapsed!


Six months ago, we noticed that Belle's mood had become unstable. When she was in high spirit, her energy was limitless. She could go on and on without any sleep or rest. She would sing or dance, and paint the whole house with abstract art. She also asked us to buy a house in the city, or went on buying sprees on her own. However later when she was queried about them, she had no recollection of what she had done. When she was in low spirit, she would hide in her room and would not come out. She would not even answer her phone. When we could not find her, we had to trouble her roommate to find out about her situation. The first time Belle went 'missing' left the deepest dent in us. When we received a call from her boyfriend K informing us there had been no news from Belle, we have never been so scared before. Any contact numbers that we could track had been dialed, but we still could not find Belle. So we kept on calling until the battery of our hand phone was flat, and the family was completely exhausted. That left only me, the mother. I felt chilly all over my body. My mind was blank and my tears kept pouring down. "Buddha, where is Belle?"

In my helpless moment, I suddenly thought of the contact number of the credit card center. Yes, the credit card! I thought Belle would use the family credit card; so I immediately called the credit card center to enquire. Providence does not let down people who do their best! The center traced her transaction location, and found Belle was last seen in a hotel in a certain area. With the increase in the number of times of her 'disappearance', I had to leave my work from time to time to go to the city to be with her and coax her to take her medication.

## Pupa

The subsequent battling days were like sailing in a stormy sea, dangerous and frightening. All day long Belle locked herself in her room. Even the window was sealed with a piece of black cloth! She rarely came out during the day. Only at night would she step out of her room to drink or to look for food to eat. All family members took turns to be on guard. Fortunately, our residence then was only a single storey house. All sharp scissors, knives, needles and other sharp objects





were carefully hidden. In addition, we had to add mood-soothing Chinese liquid medicine or tranquilizer in Belle's drinks. At the same time we had to be careful not to let her discover it. Thus the times for taking her medication were not fixed, and the dosage was not correct, so it was difficult to control the symptoms of Belle's condition. This situation made the family ache deeply in their hearts.

Belle's moods were unstable. We did not know when she would have an attack. When she was happy, she insisted on going back to work, but as her mood swings, she would turn into a hideous monster. She can be very temperamental, knocked herself against the wall, pounded and beat, pinched her hands and body indiscriminately, and sometimes even opened the window and wept hysterically while screaming for help. When Belle has her attack, her strength was boundless, and it was difficult for an average person to overcome her. When Belle was sad, she would crouch in a corner, crying and muttering, "Go away; go away, I do not want to hit you. Sister, Mama, all of you go away! Woo.. Mama, hug me." My ears listened, my heart ached, and every word from her mouth was like a sharp arrow piercing through my heart.

Occasionally, Belle wanted to go out and she would be accompanied by me or my husband. We were like carrying a time bomb and we must prepare a bottle of sleeping pills, as we would not know when she would explode. In order to take care of Belle, we put the computer desk beside her room, so that family members can make the excuse of going online so as to keep an eye on her.

One morning, Belle suddenly opened her room door and jumped out. She knelt in from of me, and then started to kowtow as if she was pounding garlic, making sounds which made my heart ache, "*Mama, my head is very painful.. it really hurts.. I am sick, what should I do? I don't want to be sick! Help me. Take me to a doctor.. I want to take some medicine.*" Despite feeling deeply like my heart being slashed, I still could not abandon my child, I just prayed that I had a pair of thicker and warmer wings to protect her from the storm and wind.

## Breaking free from the cocoon

When we reached the hospital entrance,

Belle suddenly became difficult. She refused to get down from the car and yelled to her younger sister, "Go home, go home, Mama wants to harm me!" Hugging the elder sister, the younger sister's tears gushed out like a spring. Thanks to the younger sister for her support in those days, but I believed that the little girl's young mind was certainly wounded then.

After pulling and pushing for some time, we finally managed to bring the tired Belle to the specialist. The doctor diagnosed that her depression had reached a dangerous stage and recommended that Belle should undergo a series of emergency treatment.

Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) is a method for treating a certain type of mental disorder, especially severe depression. It is both effective and safe. In the course of ECT treatments, the patient would sleep after being administered anesthesia, and then a small amount of current will be passed through her brain in a minute. The current causes the patient to have a mild convulsion and the whole brain would have received positive 'charge'. The main effects include controlling the emotions of the patient; improve her appetite and sleep, etc.

After receiving ECT treatment, Belle's mood swings came under control, but her intelligence quotient regressed. Her actions became clumsy, even when she spoke it was not smooth and fluent. When she saw the coloring book and colored pencils which her brother bought her, she was so happy that she was like a little girl. However, she got along happily with other patients. Besides helping to take care of patients more serious than her, she also helped others to clean up their dishes after dinner.

Every day when the family went to visit Belle, she had a lot of stories to share with us. In the beginning, she would act like a spoiled child, "Mama, this place is boring, I want to go home." Later, she even told me, "Mama, that uncle said he was very rich. He wants me to be his daughter. After his discharge, he wants to give me a Kelisa (a locally manufactured car) as a present!!! Really! I am not bluffing you." One day, Belle slipped a piece of paper into my hand mysteriously. She said, "Mama, On-chai's mother did not come to see him for many days! On-chai misses his mother. They (the medical



staff) did not help On-chai to look for his mother. This is the contact number of On-chai's mother. You have to help On-chai to find his mother!" I kept the piece of paper in my bag carefully, and nodded to Belle. "Mama, you are really kind. On-chai must be very happy!... Mama..."

Belle was lucky in the sense that she met a professional and experienced specialist. The doctor also told Belle, "Look, how much your family cherishes you. You can build up your career in your hometown. The city is too complicated, not suitable for you. Be good and stay with your parents." Two weeks later, Belle bid goodbye to the doctor; she was discharged!

## The butterfly flapping gracefully under the rainbow

Whenever I encounter anything, I have always been very calm. I am not the type who reveals my sadness to anyone easily or bawl in front of other people. Hence, not even my family members around me nor good friends knew that Belle was suffering from depression. I was clear that everything in the world would not change because of my sorrow. I could only continue chanting the sutras, praying to Buddha and reciting the mantras. Keep my calm, and continue to guard the injured larva in my family.

I remember one day during the time when Belle was sick and hospitalized, I was alone at home when suddenly a pain struck me. I felt unprecedentedly helpless. The griping pain in my chest and stomach was so acute that I could not breathe. I felt there were thousands of worms and ants devouring me. My back pain was so severe that I could not stand up. Fortunately, I did not forget to chant sutras and recite Buddha's name. Then I held my head in my hands and cried loudly to relief my pain and grief. Indeed others can never imagine the grief of a mother when her child is sick.

Several years later, when I write about these experiences as part of the Women's Stories Project, my mind went blank. My hands trembled as I recalled and wrote about the episode. The pain is ingrained between these lines and words. Beneath the calm appearance that I always portray, I have

not processed the grief and pain which I had buried deeply and did not know how to express. Recording this experience has been a healing process. I hope that people facing similar conditions and their families will benefit from my story. This is certainly not an easy task. I hope that my sharing would help other people to have a greater understanding and awareness of mental health.

At present, Belle still relies on Chinese and Western medicines to restore balance to her emotions. Fortunately, she is very healthy physically, and works hard to earn money, and even plans to travel round the world. Although the storm is over and the sky is bright now; it may rain again. Let the most beautiful rainbow emerge after a thunderstorm, with colorful butterflies spreading their wings one after another, flapping gracefully under the rainbow.

## Postscript

According to Dr. Pang Chin Boon\*, "Depression is a serious mental illness. It affects the way we think, feel and behave. To be low in spirits is an emotion that everyone will inevitably experience in life, but the negative feeling of depression is more intense and it will last. It interferes with our daily work and functioning of family life. More importantly, we need to understand that depression is a sickness like diabetes, high blood pressure or cancer. If we have a correct understanding, it will be beneficial to access early treatment and rehabilitation. Factors leading to the onset of depression are many, including genetic factors, hormonal imbalance, long-term excessive pressure in life, and so on. The patient's body will undergo some 'biological changes' such as a lack of serotonin and affect the brain's transfer function."



\*Pang Chin Boon (2013). *I am a human*. Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Mental Health Association.

# The Most Precious Gift from the Rain in My Past

by Rainy Day

*Change is not  
scary, as long as we  
walk through the  
twists and turns in  
the winding road  
bravely.*





**B**efore the age of six, I used to have a complete family. However, when I was six years old my life underwent the first drastic change. That year, my parents divorced and the 'family' in my life was gone. At that time, we were still very young. My sister and I did not know how our parent's arrangement for us would be. So we were very panicky and scared. In retrospect, such a happening in a family will certainly create a permanent scar in the children's mind.

Following that, we lived with our father. Every time when my father went to work, he put me under the care of a nanny. As for my sister who was eleven years old then, she would stay at home alone after school. After several months, my life underwent another drastic change. As my father's income was barely enough to maintain a family of three, he could not afford the cost of hiring a nanny. So, my father decided to send me to his hometown and put me under the care of his elder brother and sister-in-law. In just a lapse of a few months, I had to be separated from my closest kin again. I was very young then. Even though I was very reluctant and sad to part from them, I knew I had no other choice.

When I grew older I heard this saying, "When God closes one door, another door will be opened for you." Although my family and I must live separately, my uncle and aunt treated me like their own daughter. They loved me very much and never ill-treated me. There were many members in my uncle and aunt's family, so I was no longer lonesome. But was I blissfully happy?

Although my life was not lacking in basic needs, but since the separation of my parents, I could not experience the feeling of 'home' anymore. My heart had a lot of mixed emotions. I was scared, helpless and unhappy. I dared not speak out my thoughts and desire. I hid the pain in my own little inner world.

Seeing other people living together with their biological parents, I would raise many questions in my mind. "Why can't I be together with my father and mother? I also want to live with my father and mother." I felt an indescribable sadness. Sometimes late at night, alone in bed, I cried secretly.

Of course, when a block of ice meets with fire, it would melt. After some time, I finally got used to living together with others in another family. On the first day of primary school, I saw many of my classmates crying. Some even held onto their mothers' hands and were reluctant to go into the school. I did not cry, but felt uneasy and afraid. Then, a pair of warm hands held my hands; she was the mother in my heart (that is, my aunt). I was so moved. Clasp my aunt's hand tightly, I seemed to hear her say to me, "Do not be afraid, I will go with you". Ever since my mother left us, I had not felt that way for a long time. My aunt touched me bit by bit with her love and care. When I was sick she fed me medication, when I was cold she covered me with blanket, she treated me and took care of my daily needs like her own daughter. Gradually, I began to regard my aunt as my real mother, because she gave me the feeling of 'home' again. It was she who let me know that with them I was not alone.

Where there was a pair of warm hands, naturally there would be another pair which beat me. Who was the one who disciplined me? She is my father's sister. Her strictness made me learn to be independent and strong. She also made me aware that in this world there is no free meal, so I had to do everything myself. She operated a barber shop. I was in standard three then, with a height less than that of an adult's chair. She made me stand on a chair and wash hair for her customers. Every month she gave me thirty ringgit as my wage. Do not underestimate the thirty ringgit! At that time it was enough for me so that I did not have to ask for money to buy





candy and snacks. I could also give part of what I earned to my aunt to use as household expenses. Although the sum was not much, at least I was not a free rider in my uncle and aunt's house!!

At that time, the people in the village had the notion that if a child has the ability to study, then let her/him study. If not, then let her/him leave school and go to work. I did not like to study and my results were not good at all. Although my father's sister was fierce and she made sure that I finished my homework after school, she never demanded that I must get good grades. She also made it a rule that except for holidays and regardless of illness, as long as I was able to stand up, I must report to school every day. I did not understand the reason behind it, but later I figured it out. She did not want me go out to work too soon. Even if my grades were not good, she thought that if I could finish my secondary education, then I would not be led astray if I had gone out to work too soon. The ancient sage said, "The child is father of the man." Thanks to her strict teachings, I learned to be independent, and did everything myself. Although I was still young, I was able to wake up, go to school, fill my bowl with rice, complete my homework, wash my uniforms, etc. all by myself, and never let others worry about me.

Sometimes, being mature made me feel lonely. The friends around me always think that I am very capable. But in fact no one knew that I also need love and protection, and when I am sad I need a shoulder to lean on. Now, I like company and fun. It is because the noise can temporarily cover up the negative emotions which disturb me. I also want to tell other people that I actually am not capable, but the environment I grew up in forced me to learn to solve problems.

I am thankful to everyone who appeared in my childhood, because my childhood experience made me grow up faster than my peers. In our lives, we have to walk through many long roads. Each experience is a valuable lesson which makes us stronger in life. I am not perfect, but every person and everything that I had encountered has enriched my life. The challenges I met along the way have made me a strong survivor in this

world. Life is like a stage. There must be lights, music, performers and many other elements, before we can put up an interesting show. Sometimes what we learn now may not be useful immediately. However the wonderful thing is that when we encounter a problem, we will apply what we have learned to solve the problem.

God always tests us, but our destinies are in our own hands. I especially want to cheer myself on and urge myself to make more effort. Change is not scary, as long as we walk through the twists and turns in the winding road bravely. Only then we will see the beautiful scenery.

My original purpose to participate in the Women's Stories Project (WSP) was to share experiences with people who have similar background as me. However during my writing process I found that I had developed many good qualities from my lost childhood. My ability to act on my own and my strong character created the present me who is financially independent with a promising career. After all these years, I have managed to overcome every challenge in my life. The pain in the past has become the most precious gift to my life. I am very grateful to the care and guidance given to me by each and every teacher<sup>1</sup> in the WSP. They have helped me discover my inner strength. With this strength I can walk towards a better future at my own pace.



1. WSP participants addressed the facilitator as 'teacher' to express their respect as practiced in Chinese Culture.



When a door of happiness closes another opens,  
but often we look so long at the closed door that  
we do not see the one which has been opened.

- Alexander Graham Bell



# Conclusion



This concluding chapter presents some of the changes the women noted in themselves. In their own words, they highlighted their initial situation and described how the WSP workshops have impacted them, and how they feel about themselves towards the end of the project.

When the women first joined the project many of them felt rather hopeless and helpless, some were even in an emotional state of despair and disarray. As Yuan Gui put it,

*I found myself going round in a circle and I cannot break out from that circle.*

The women were entangled in the negativity of their despondency, soaked in negative emotions and feelings of self-pity, unhappiness, depression, and even feeling lost. The following were some of the feelings expressed by the women themselves:

*I feel angry and frustrated. I feel being made used of. I feel tired... meeting the needs of others all the time. - Little Grass*

*I feel like a maid... I have made so much sacrifice for my family yet...  
- Dawn*

*I feel suffocated because I have no opportunity to speak out, no opportunity to confide, and no opportunity to develop myself and excel. I need to find time for myself. - Kun Ni*

The women lacked self-confidence and had low self-esteem. They seemed to be steeped in a lot of fear: fear of loneliness, fear of separation, fear of sudden change, and fear of the unknown. They also felt very insecure. They were afraid of failure, scared of being judged by others and of being looked down. Some felt that they were being victimized, discriminated, and taken advantage of. They blamed others for what had happened to them, looked for happiness from others or waited for good things to happen to them.

They joined the writing workshops because they felt the “need to face the real situation”, “need to accept reality” and “need to move forward” with their lives. They realized “they cannot go back to the past”, as their “situation cannot be changed and I need to change myself and my own expectations”.

The writing workshops provided the women a safe space to talk about their personal problems and issues. They were encouraged to share and write about their past experiences. Writing their own stories became part of the healing process. They wrote to understand and to heal themselves. This was how one woman put it,

*Writing is an opportunity to confess, to reflect and to share with others. Writing is healing, reflecting and learning more about myself. I need to be brave to write honestly. This book is very important to me. In my*



*younger days, I didn't pay much attention in my studies and thus missed out on many opportunities to learning new things. But I definitely don't want to miss out on this opportunity. Even my mother noted how serious I was in my writing project. - Hui Ming*

The writing and sharing of their experiences not only caused much tears but also brought much release and relief to the women. One woman cried for three days before she could start to write. Many of them shared that they felt relieved after writing down their feelings and thoughts though it was very difficult at the beginning as it stirred up the turmoil that they had tried so hard to bury all these years. Indeed, as the facilitator explained,

*Crying alone, the heart remains as painful, but crying in a group the healing begins. - lean*

Another woman confessed that she “felt less hatred and anguish” towards her mother but their daughter-mother relationship has since slowly improved.

*From the beginning of the first workshop, the mosquito coil hug made me feel loved and supported. All that was suppressed in me surfaced out and I started crying. The more I cried, the better I felt. - Hui Ming*

Her writing also helped her to reflect on her broken marriage and to gain new insights from her experience,

*My broken marriage is a valuable experience. I realize that marriage is not the final outcome of love and divorce is also not the end of love. Instead of crying over my broken marriage, I have learnt to appreciate the happy times together.*

The writing workshops did not only enable the women to learn from their past experiences. They also provided opportunities for the women to convene periodically and support one another emotionally. They consoled, counseled one another and shared their joy together. They bonded as a group and developed a sense of sisterhood with one another. Connecting and bonding with one another nurtured the emotional anchor for the healing to commence. Articulating their silences and writing their own suppressed lived experiences started the process of healing. The women wrote to understand, address and heal from their suppressed pain. Their stories also became ‘mirrors’ for others to interrogate their own situation.

Besides the writing workshops, the women also teamed up to take on some activities. They gained a sense of achievement and fulfillment when they performed a dance at the official opening of the WCC new office, produced two calendars consisting of their drawings and crafted butterflies, helped to sell the calendars and volunteered their services to WCC and PPW.

As Dawn put it so aptly,

*When everyone comes together, it will create an energy, and the energy will grow to make an extraordinary achievement.*

Indeed the impact of WSP was felt by each of the women. After eighteen months of participation, all the women felt transformed into self-assured and highly-motivated women filled with confidence.



*My life has opened a new chapter. 2012 is the happiest year that I ever had in my life, while 2013 is the year that I am willing to open another new chapter. My feelings now are indeed comfortable, at ease, happy, grateful and satisfied because I realized that the inner satisfaction can make me feel the real happiness. - Xiao Mi*

*I was 'lost' at one time and lacked self-confidence because of my unhappy marriage. I have suppressed myself to experience all the verbal abuses from my husband. Now, I have found my strength and have learnt to be more independent. I have learnt better ways of coping and releasing stress. I have also learnt how to control my emotions and to deal with any challenges that I face in a positive and optimistic manner. I am proud that I had overcome some of my difficulties. In addition to that, the greatest joy is that I am more confident in searching my personal goals and dreams now. - Hui Ming*

*Due to some problems in my marriage, I started to blame people. From the workshops, I realized that I am the one who should change. Blaming can't change the situation. The only way is to change myself and to create positive energies around me. - Goldfish*

The women learnt a lot about themselves. In particular, they learnt self-acceptance and how to love themselves:

*The workshops helped me to go into my inner self. I have learnt that loving my own self is not a selfish move. I need to love myself before I can love others. - Little Grass*

*Through the workshops, I learnt that I must love myself. I learn to appreciate myself by loving myself. By loving others also, it will help me to find the meaning of my life. I realize that when I love, my heart is full of warmth, joy and hope because I am able to value myself. The reason why some people suffer, despair and feel sad is because they have 'lost' themselves. - Hui Ming*

They learnt how to be flexible and to see things from different perspectives:

*The writing project has given me a chance to learn how to interact and respect others who have different opinions and perspective from me. I used to be a very strict and controlling person. I have become a more flexible person. I learnt to accept other people's point of view instead of holding on to my expectation of others. I now learn to listen to my children's viewpoints instead of imposing what I want of them. - Cheng*

*Over the past year I have come to understand my own strength better. I noticed that I am much more able to handle difficulties. I now know how to solve problems with flexibility and persevere on doing things I want to do. - Xiao Mi*





They learnt the meaning and practice of how to let go:

*The breakdown of my marriage made me suffer. However I learnt how to let go and be a strong, proud single mother. In the beginning I felt guilty and blamed myself but now I am more confident. We need to handle our own situation; however some outside support would help a lot. - Peony*

*My experience gained from the workshop is that when I can't get what I want, I should let it go, and I will feel more at peace after letting go. The writing project makes me understand myself better and see the roots of my problems. In writing my story, I feel relieved of the sufferings of my mind. - Yuan Gui*

*There were many things that I could not let go, such as my ex-husband's affair. I have already let it go for some time now. I think holding onto the past for so long will not help me. When I finally accepted the reality as a fact, it won't make me feel so terrible. I now learn to be more independent, autonomous, and be strong. The workshops actually helped stimulate my inner strength and self-confidence. - Evainezzel*

*I have learnt how to let go and be aware of my own weaknesses. The hardest part for every individual is to realize our own problems. The workshops have given me a chance to learn how to interact and respect others who have different opinions and perspectives. - Cheng*

Some women learnt how to manage their emotions better:

*I think I have become more optimistic and able to manage my emotions. - Dawn*

*When I was alone, I would feel so empty, boring, lonely, miserable and restless. I am*

*afraid to face myself and fearful of losing certain things. In the story writing project, the activities inspire me to learn how to appreciate myself, find joy in myself, and not rely on others to please me. When I have self-satisfaction, I will not feel unsatisfied with others. I will be able to feel joy even when I am alone and I can share the joy with others. - Hui Ming*

Other women learnt how to manage their finances, for example:

*I used to spend a lot in my daily living. I never count how much I spent each month but now I keep a record of my daily expenses. When we lose our income, it will be difficult to live, so I started to learn the importance of saving money. I learnt the real difference between being thrifty and stingy. - Da Xing*

It is interesting to note how the women have influenced one another throughout the project. Through their sharing of experiences, some women realize that their own problems were not that serious when compared to those faced by others. Here is what two of them said,

*In the process of learning and sharing, every sister shared their stories. After listening to them, I realized that I am not the one who has suffered the most. This made me realize that I need to cherish everything that I have. - Da Xing*

*I self-reflect on my own situation... I felt that it is still not too late to save my misfortune compared to others. - Dawn*

When Xiao Mi saw how sad and depressed Hui Ming felt because she could not get to see her two children, she relented and let her own two sons meet up with her ex-husband, and have since become friends with her ex-husband



at the time of the final draft of her narrative. Da Xing who experienced difficulty in managing her money, found that she could learn a lot from Rain who grew up in a single-parent family and had to fend for herself since young.

After attending the workshops, many of the women regained their self-esteem and confidence, and began to trust others again.

*It has taken me quite some time to learn to trust people again. However, after I have participated in the project, I regained my trust in other women. I started to believe again that there are still good and trustworthy people around. - Peony*

They became stronger and began to set new goals for themselves.

*In this writing project, I heard our sisters' stories and they made me realize that women actually are quite helpless sometimes. I am quite aware of my own ability to endure pain. No matter how painful it was in the past, I must write down my story and tell people for it makes me feel strong. - Dawn*

*I learnt to be independent in many ways such as starting my own business. Ever since my divorce, I bear all the family responsibilities. I feel proud of myself for being able to do many things on my own without any support from my ex-husband. After completion of the project, I hope I will find some time to learn oil painting and dancing which I have never done before. I hope that I can open a shop for my small business. - Peony*

*My family and I have benefitted from the workshops and there are huge changes in us. I have since done a lot of meaningful volunteer services for PPW such as helping in food bazaar, performing a dance and selling calendars. - Cheng*

WSP not only produced a collection of stories written by women who have experienced emotional trauma, marital issues and challenges in personal and family relationships. More importantly, the women's subjectivities - their thinking, feelings and being have shifted:

*Previously, when I was sad, I would think of using 'death' to solve my problems, I thought that death can end one's troubles once and for all. Now I learn to think, to analyze, to clean up the emotional garbage accumulated in my heart throughout the years. I decided not to be the 'victim' anymore. I promised myself I must change, and slowly I found myself full of energy. Now I think that suicide cannot solve any problem; on the contrary, it will bring the family more damage. - Little Grass*

Their mind-sets have shifted and this enabled them to reclaim their strength; as described by Rainy Day,

*The pain in the past became the most precious gift in my life. During the writing process I discovered that my difficult early childhood has given me strength of character.*

The project has facilitated the women to heal from their pain and woundedness, and to reclaim their agency to live life enthusiastically again.





# Afterword

## Women's Centre for Change and Pusat Perkhidmatan Wanita

Women's Centre for Change (WCC) is a non-government, non-profit organization set up in 1985 to serve women and children. WCC envisions a society free from gender violence and discrimination, where women can actualize their full potential. Its mission is to eliminate violence against women and children, facilitate their empowerment, and promote gender equality and social justice. WCC provides counselling and shelter to women in crisis irrespective of their race, religion and social background. WCC also conducts community outreach and advocates for policy and legal reform on the rights of women and children. It also networks with government agencies and other organizations to improve the lives of women and children.

Pusat Perkhidmatan Wanita (PPW) was established in 2009 to provide critical services for women in the mainland of Penang and the northern region. It is sponsored by the Penang Committee on Women, Family and Community Development managed by WCC. Similar to

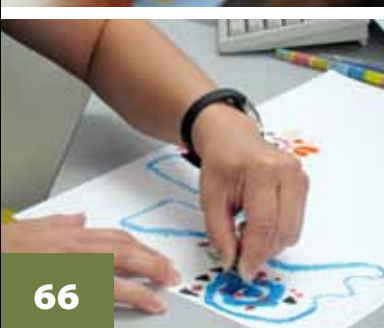
WCC, PPW provides counselling for women and children in crisis as well as run programs at the community level to benefit them.

## Women's Stories Project (WSP)

The idea of a women's stories project was induced from the first joint WCC-PPW participatory training workshop for women who had been counseled by PPW and WCC. In that workshop participants evaluated that the one day program was too short and indicated that they were interested to have more time to discern the 'rivers of their lives' more deeply. This expressed desire created the opportunity to explore with the women to use story-telling-sharing as a means to reflect on and write about their lived experiences and as a space for 'healing'.

WSP commenced in August 2012 and was brought to a close in December 2013 with the completion of the first draft of the women's narratives. It is a pioneering effort to engage women to reflect on their lived experiences of pain and hurts. Emotional injuries, especially those from abuse and subordination not only wound and maim the self-esteem and confidence of women but will pervade into deeply seated traumas even after crisis intervention, if unaddressed.





This initiative uses storytelling-sharing-reflecting-writing as a space for healing through a series of participatory workshops and related activities. The project created a safe, inclusive space where repressed, forbidden and unspeakable feelings and denied lived experiences were shared and processed accordingly. Various popular education methods and analogies were used to unearth the women's unspoken thoughts and feelings while evoking insights from their lived experiences, especially suppressed pains, silences, dreams and desires.

The story telling was undertaken in small groups to bond and encourage mutuality amongst the participants. Through talking and sharing of their suppressed pains and buried lived experiences the women experienced healing, recovery of their voice and self-definition. This was achieved through the caring support of other women who extended the gift of humanity by listening with their hearts, their caring respect and compassion. The process created a space for collective learning with information, interpretation and insights fused in shared conversation through which participants were able to acknowledge their hidden past and discovered that their present challenges were common issues confronting others as well.

### WSP's objectives were three-fold:

- (1) to encourage and support women to reflect on their lived experiences so that they can reclaim and redefine their subjectivities, identities and capacities;
- (2) to enable women to document, draw insights and heal from their emotional pain and suppressed silences, especially their unspeakable feelings and thoughts; and
- (3) to generate experiences of empowerment by fostering collective engagement as the women write their stories amidst group support and program activities.

The overall goal was to foster individual and collective agency by creating a safe healing space to reflexively introspect and to learn that life challenges can help discover and rediscover who we are. The project worked with the conviction that in enabling women discover their inner strength they can reconstitute themselves with resolute to chart their pathways, dreams and desires as they learn to let go and move forward from their hurts and sufferings.

The 18 month project had no dropout even though there could have been possibilities. Caring anticipatory mediation and individual outreach and support ensured the sustained active participation of all till the project's closure and subsequent follow-up activities. Different modalities comprising day-long participatory workshops, small group sessions and individual consultations and a Facebook-group were used as 'ends as means' in a participatory engaging methodology to sustain the women's interests and to attain the project's objectives.

WSP also produced two calendars which established a Women's Empowerment Fund for WCC. Over RM30,000.00 was collected from donations and sales of these calendars. The calendar project also enhanced the women's confidence by engaging them in publicity and sales efforts.



Having their drawings and craftwork featured in the calendars also boosted their morale and self-esteem. The women's drawings featuring their hopes and dreams were used for the 2013 calendar. The 2014 calendar carried pictures of butterflies which have been crafted by the women themselves to mark their own metamorphosis in the healing journey.

## Journey of WSP

There were altogether six one-day workshops, interspersed with small group sessions and individual consultations. Workshops were guided by the overall project's objectives, but designed from the specific objectives of each workshop. The focus of each workshop was determined by emergent issues and concerns discerned from the previous workshop. A variety of techniques and tools were used, commencing with centering exercises to relax and connect participants to each other and to create a safe, inclusive, respectful space that enabled everyone to participate comfortably. This was then followed by some community-building-bonding introductory activities before easing into the topics of the day's program. Diverse evocative popular education methods and analogies ranging from visualization, recall and reflection, drawing, music, drumming, movements, creative dramatics, clay-therapy as well as group-therapy, etc. were used to unearth and elicit articulation and to process the various feelings and experiences disclosed.



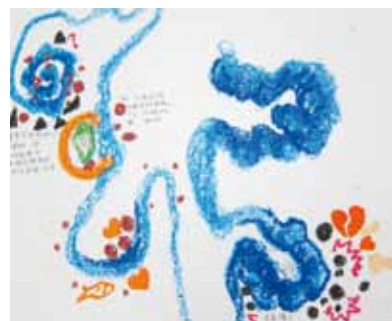
### Workshop 1: Constituting Ourselves as Women's Stories Project

The first workshop focused on clarifying and delineating collectively the objectives and agenda of the WSP. This included the formulation of agreements on how each workshop should operate and leveling of each other's fears, hopes and expectations. Initial activities focused on

trust building and enabled the women to know each other as well as their own selves. A key activity of the day was the facilitation of the women's articulation of what was important and meaningful to them through the sharing of significant items/symbols, and drawings to portray themselves individually before they start to write about themselves.

### Workshop 2: Discerning Myself and the River of My Life

The second workshop honed in on enabling the women to be aware of the prevalent feelings they have of themselves and their own life trajectory. It aimed at enabling the women to recall, reflect and write about their lived experiences through the analogy of their life journey as a river. The main objective was to help the women unravel more deeply about themselves by mapping out the milestones of their lives, highlighting the key influences, emergent issues and energizing moments. The workshop also crystalized the hopes and fears of the women in writing their stories and underscored



the importance of the trust, care and support they extended to one another throughout the project.

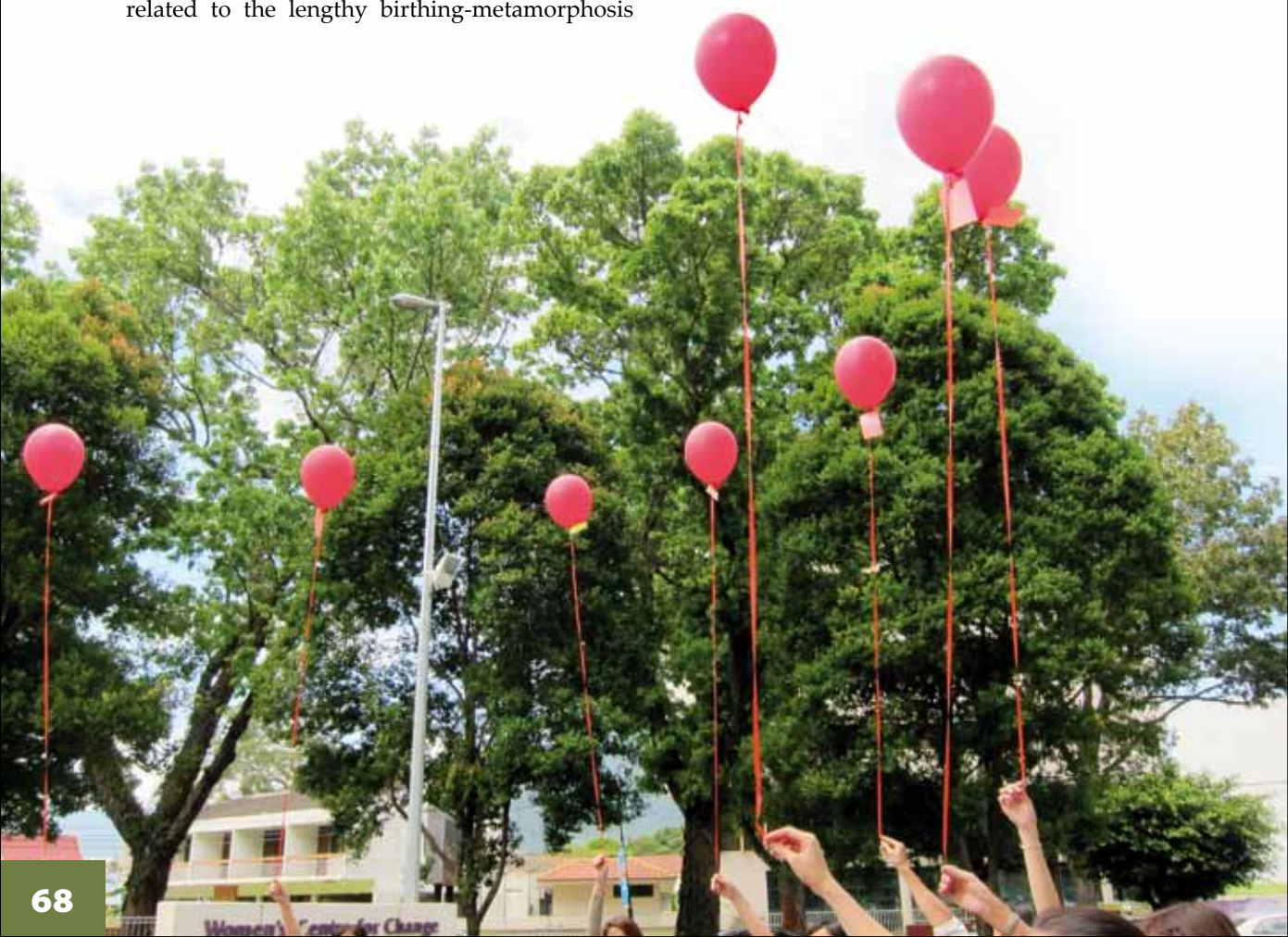
### **Workshop 3: Stones and Boulders along My River**

The third workshop aimed at enabling the women to take cognizance of and to name the critical 'stones and boulders' in their lives, some of which may have been buried and suppressed from their memories. Diverse creative methods and techniques were used to evoke recollections of anguish and pain which the women were made to believe were illegitimate and had therefore been suppressed over time. The objective was to help the women to be aware of the effects of their pains and discern learnings and insights from their lived experiences. The women were facilitated to experience a sense of personal empowerment through the power of being able to act on or reclaim an experience where they had felt helpless, being hurt, subordinated, bullied, molested, or treated unfairly, etc. This process was related to the lengthy birthing-metamorphosis

process of butterflies. The analogy was used to drive home the point that people also need time and introspection to work through their 'boulders' and challenges so that they do not get maimed for life from their pains but instead are reconstituted more wholesomely as they recover from their woundedness.

### **Workshop 4: Letting Go, Growing Stronger**

The fourth workshop facilitated the women to understand and work on letting go so as to enable them to move beyond their pain and to deliberate on ways to grow stronger. The women explored their own understandings (or misconceptions) of the meaning of letting go, and practiced letting go through individual visualization techniques, conscious intentions and a collective symbolic ritual of letting go balloons. The women were also supported to deal with their trapped and submerged emotions and then to take cognizance of their strengths, capabilities and achievements.







## Workshop 5: Reconstituting My-Ourselves as Resilient and Empowered Women

At the fifth workshop, the women were facilitated to re-discover and embrace their strength and self-worth as empowered individuals and as a group of resilient, capable women. The women took cognizance of their resilience and the changes that they had undergone and were supported to be conscious of what they want and their desire to move forward. The women tried to grapple with the dilemmas and challenges as they consciously journey towards empowerment. Again the butterfly symbol was used to help the women reflect on the changes that they had experienced for themselves since they embarked on the WSP journey. Through the medium of clay-work, they reconstituted their subjectivities (who they were and what constitute them) to ponder over where they were then and how they wanted to move forward individually, and collectively as a group.

## Workshop 6: Looking Back, Moving Forward

The final workshop focused on enabling

the women to reflect on their journey in the WSP individually and as a group. Participants explored how they would like to move forward to continue their journey of growth and to move beyond focusing on themselves in their step towards fuller empowerment. They reviewed their own individual experiences, evaluated WSP and discerned their observations of other members in the group. They also celebrated the completion of their writings and the 'completion' of WSP.

## Other Support Activities

In between the workshops, the women also met in small groups of four to five persons over the course of 18 months to discuss the progress of their writings and to give support to one another. Each of these sessions usually lasted two to four hours. The small group sessions provided more time and space for the women to express themselves more extensively and enabled more in-depth sharing and discussion of emergent issues from their writing. The initial approach was to guide the women to think about their lived experiences especially their feelings and thoughts arising from the workshops before penning them on paper.





These sessions also provided a critical learning-reflecting space as the women learnt to listen to each other from the speaker's standpoint (instead of from their own standpoint only). This helped to shift or expand their own understandings of 'the other'. Over time these sessions became learning-support spaces where they hear out how they each addressed their various issues, especially on parenting and how their children were responding. It was also from these sessions of hearing viewpoints of affected parties be it about children or estranged spouses that opened up the inclusion of other view points to help shift mindsets about their own situation.

They were also connected through a WSP facebook link where they communicated regularly, shared photos, daily experiences and views on various issues apart from being a mutual-help-support circle.

Individual consultations combined with feminist counseling/therapy, analysis and even caring challenges were conducted over three different periods for different purpose with the facilitator<sup>1</sup>. Of particular significance was during the initial period where certain individuals had felt very despondent and were still grappling over their heartbroken marital issues. Empathy, attentive listening, holding the pain together and being with each other helped the women open up, release their anger and pent-up emotions before they could talk about their unspeakable, unspoken pains. Some mediation was also

necessary in some cases where tensions and conflicts emerged between individuals. This helped to keep the whole group together with no one dropping out.

The second set of face-to-face consultations was focused on processing individually with the women their lived experiences to discern the part they felt comfortable to write for public consumption. In some situations, they were guided to focus on the part they had not opened up or addressed sufficiently. A couple of these final written pieces described these 'hidden stones' even though they had not been disclosed earlier.

The third and final sets of individual consultations were directed at:

- (1) reviewing their edited written pieces to ensure what they wrote was intact and read coherently;
- (2) processing how each felt with the completion of their written piece and evaluating reflexively their experience in the WSP; and
- (3) discussing their current situation and future plans with regards to where they each were in terms of why they joined WSP and what further support was needed.

In between Workshop 3 and Workshop 4, some of the women were encouraged to participate in a public rally to articulate their stand against violence against women. They also helped to sell the 2013 WSP calendars in

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1. WSP participants addressed the facilitator as 'teacher' to express their respect as practiced in Chinese Culture.

three public events and were also interviewed by a Chinese daily press on their 2013 calendar project.

Towards the later part of the project, many of the women started volunteering their services at WCC and PPW, marking their own metamorphosis from being cocooned to a flapping butterfly. One of them even organized a charity event where part of the funds raised went to WCC while another took on volunteer work at the WCC shelter. At the final workshop, they further identified programs and concrete follow-up action plans to reach out to other women and children.

## Challenges and Ways Forward

In the course of their WSP journey, some women were able to open up more easily than others and were keen to pour out their sorrows and problems while others needed a lot of encouragement and coaxing before they could talk about themselves and the issues bothering them. It was necessary to give attention and time, build trust and a sense of safety among the women before they felt comfortable to open up. It was observed that by listening to the women's silences attentively and evoking them to talk through caring probes helped the women open up to talk about their deep seated 'secrets' and wounds.

Although most of the women did not have problem with drawing, it was a different story when it come to their writing. Initially,

only a couple of the women could write down their thoughts and feelings. Many of them encountered difficulties in knowing or deciding what to write or how to write. Some of them were not too prepared to share their inner thoughts and feelings with the group while others still felt diffident about their own state of affairs. Quite a number of the women needed to talk about their lived experiences before they could write about them. It was encouraging to note that a few of the women took the trouble to brush up their vocabularies in Chinese characters so that they could use the right characters in their writings.

Upon completion of the final workshop, most of the women expressed their wish to continue either as a whole group or to work in smaller groups. They also indicated that they felt both confident and motivated to organize activities for the benefit of other women and children under PPW and had already commenced with such activities at the time of printing of this book. The work of WSP is a totally new approach for WCC and PPW. There is no doubt that it is labor intensive and time consuming indeed. Nevertheless, the experience and results have demonstrated the possibility, necessity and impact from working with empowerment as a perspective and approach as enshrined in WCC's mission. It is hoped that WCC and PPW will continue to develop this work to reach more women and that the stories in this booklet will encourage more women to come forward and be emboldened to become the change they aspire to be.





# The People Behind WSP

## Support and Editorial Teams

The Support Team comprised Annie, Chooi Leng, *lean* and Molly. Annie and Chooi Leng assisted in the co-ordination of WSP activities and oral translations as *lean* and Molly are not literate in Chinese. Annie and Chooi Leng were WCC/PPW staff members at the commencement of the WSP and continued their support even after they had later left the service of WCC/PPW. Molly documented the Project and steered the small group discussions. *lean* conceptualized, led and held the project together from its inception till its completion, including the production of this publication. The Introduction, Conclusion and Afterword chapters were written jointly by *lean* and Molly. They also conceptualized and prepared the publication's lay-out design. Specific contributions of key players are described in the following paragraphs.

The Editorial Team comprised members of the Support Team, and Swee Li who edited the women's narratives (written in Chinese) and translated the Introduction, Conclusion and Afterword into Chinese. Chooi Leng, and especially Annie, assisted in oral translations for the individual consultations, and supported the authors in finalizing their Chinese drafts. Annie played a key role in most of the needed oral Chinese-English translations. *lean* and Molly edited the English versions of the translated narratives.

Chan Lai Hin translated all the Chinese narratives into English. She also edited the translated Chinese version of the Introduction, Conclusion and Afterword and proofread all the Chinese scripts.

## Chan Lean Heng (*lean*)

I have been actively engaged with various grassroots, regional and international organizations in a variety of capacity building activities for women and other marginalized constituencies. The WSP is a continuation of my work to foster women's empowerment and agency. Two years ago, at a volunteers training workshop that I facilitated for WCC and PPW, participants expressed their interest to deepen the sharing of their life experiences. It was from there that the idea of writing their lived experiences was induced. I then nurtured the possibility of using story-telling-reflecting-writing as a healing process and to engender experiences of empowerment. Although I conceptualized, designed and facilitated all the workshops and subsequent individual consultations especially in assisting the participants to discern the focus of their written pieces, the Support and Editorial teams played a key role in the success of this initiative. This publication would not have been possible without their hard work and sustained support especially in the translations. Efforts were also made to ensure that team members learn from their involvement; hence much time was spent on explaining the focus, content, process and methods of each workshop to the team to get their feedback and input in this collective endeavor.

The WSP has demonstrated the possibility and importance of putting into practice an empowerment perspective and approach in working with women who have experienced abuse and subordination. The women's voices





on how the WSP experience has shifted their head, heart and relational spaces have been very humbling, moving and inspiring; sometimes even tearful. The reflections of participants as well as the Support and Editorial teams have indeed affirmed my passion to continue working with women. Thank you all for your gift!

I hope WCC and PPW will continue this work to facilitate the empowerment of women beyond crisis intervention and counseling.

## Lau Swee Li

I was PPW's first Coordinator, from 2009 to 2012, before I left to continue my postgraduate studies in Taiwan. In these four years, I had witnessed numerous struggles of women in their marriages and had counselled many women who were struggling to save their marriages.

In general, these women tend to understand their own thinking and accept their feelings better after counselling but I still could not figure out what hindered them from moving forward with their lives. Moreover, there were a number of them who seemed diffident in their decision-making even though they had become emotionally stronger. Besides counselling, I also encouraged them to share their stories in different programs and group activities. WSP started when this group of women expressed their keen interest to share and even write their own stories. Even though I was only present at the project's inception and was not part of the WSP process, I am delighted that I was given the opportunity to edit their written stories.

From their stories, I found that the women have not only explored their roles as a woman but have become aware of their inner self. They have also rediscovered their own strength and courage. Indeed, the project has successfully assisted this group of women to redefine their lived experiences with a new language, to start their journey anew. I really want to applaud them, "You are all so fantastic!"

Editing these stories also helped me contemplate that I need to be responsible for my life as I am the writer of my life's story.

## Molly Lee (Molly)

I retired in 2012 and returned to Penang from a foreign posting in Thailand. As a retiree, I want to contribute back to society and so I became a member of WCC. One of the projects that I got involved with was the WSP. My role as a member of the WSP Support team was to document the project. In this capacity, I took part in all the workshops as well as the small group sessions. I also worked closely with the Editorial Team in getting the women's stories ready for publication. Together with *lean*, we wrote the Introduction, Conclusion and Afterword of this publication.

The WSP is my first experience in grassroots work. I found this maiden experience very challenging and at the same time very meaningful. It is challenging because of my own limited personal and professional experience. I found it meaningful because it is so rewarding to witness how the women grew and developed as well as bonded and supported one another. I have learnt more regarding what life is all about through interacting with them. I have also learnt quite a bit about the participatory method of facilitation. In brief, I have benefited as much as I have contributed to WSP.





## Lim Chooi Leng

WSP was my first project assignment immediately after I took office as PPW Coordinator in August 2012. This was indeed a big challenge for a new comer as I had to learn fast to multi-task in providing a whole range of support needed from logistics to translation to counselling.

WSP is the most special set of group activities that I had ever participated in. Even though I faced many challenges, a lot of learning took place. I learnt to be patient. I learnt that nothing is impossible as long as we try our best. I learnt that continuous encouragement provides positive energy to others. I learnt that in life we can still learn to enjoy whilst enduring difficulty. The greatest outcome for me from this project is the opportunity to get to know a group of lovely sisters who have become more positive and enthusiastic, stronger emotionally and spiritually through their journey together. I get a lot of positive energy from them. This is a good project to support and motivate women in need.

\*Chooi Leng continued to assist in the translation efforts whenever possible and stayed in touch with some of the participants even after leaving PPW in May 2013.

## Annie Yeap

In 2012, in my capacity as WCC's Service Coordinator, I had the opportunity to collaborate with PPW's Coordinator on a joint volunteers' development program. During one of the training workshops, some of the women, who were WCC and PPW's ex-clients, showed interest in writing about their experiences. The WSP came about when we decided to take up this opportunity to work with these women.

The WSP proved to be a fantastic experience for me as this was the first time in the history of WCC that a group of women were interested to write about their experiences. The part I played in this project was to help coordinate the workshops as well as serve as the main translator for the lead facilitator. Even though this was not easy, it brought significant results of empowerment for these women through their participation in the project. My key learning from this experience is the realization that empowerment does not happen overnight. The women needed much support before they could decide to move on with their lives. What inspired me was that these women not only supported each other over time but now wish to volunteer their support to other women and children in the community. I admire the resilience and strength of this group of women and their determination to change their lives.

\*Annie continued to be the anchor liaison person and assisted with all the oral translation till the completion of the project even after she left the service of WCC in June 2013.

## Acknowledgements

Women's Stories Project acknowledges with affectionate appreciation the confidence and support of all who were involved: Participants, Support and Editorial Teams, WCC, PPW, Mariam Lim, Tan Leh Sah as well as donors, sponsors, friends and families who collaborated in various capacities especially in its calendar sales.



*~ be the butterfly effect ~*

*We each have the ability to 'lift each other up', to inspire each other to fly higher than we thought possible and chart our destinies intentionally to make a difference.*

*Women's Stories Project, WCC & PPW*



## Notes







Produced by

# Women's Stories Project

WCC & PPW



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