

An Educational Journey

By: Tin Nguyen

When he was 25, clad in a double red jumpsuit to label him as high-risk security, and shackled with waist and legs restraints, he was waiting for a hearing on a murder case. As he was standing in the holding tank with his co-defendants, contemplating the gravity of the crime and the bleakness of his future, one co-defendant asked, "Hey Tin, what are you?" With a dumb look on Tin's face, because he did not comprehend, his co-defendant clarified, "You ain't Vietnamese cause you can't read or write Vietnamese, and you ain't American cause you can't read and write English." Tin recalled his reply as if he has just spoken it. With rage in his eyes and anger in his voice, he replied, "I'll tell you what I am when I get out of this chain, and beat you and choke you with it." Until this day, he still could not understand where the rage came from. Perhaps, because he was still in his youth or did his co-defendant hit the core of Tin's insecurity with that question.

Coming to America at a young age was confusing to him. He was trapped between the generation of Vietnamese refugees that knew they were Vietnamese, and the generation of Vietnamese Americans that were born here. At the age of five, he had to learn a new language, but he did not yet understand his first language. Trying to learn his ABC's at school, and speaking Vietnamese at home was taking its toll. He would rather play marbles. Falling behind in his English as he grew, and family was too busy (earning monthly rent) to teach young Tin proper Vietnamese, the community labeled him unintelligent. Through the years, he heard comments ranging from "dumber than a cow" to (in its most polite form) "some are good with their brain, and some are good with their hands. You're the latter." Using this as his justification, he decided school was not for him. This is the heart of Tin's insecurity. Dodging reading and writing became his most adept skill. He played the role of a dumb criminal and a hard gangster to cover what he felt was his lacking in brain. Fortunately, for him, in his early 30s, Tin fell in love with reading thanks to J. R. Tolkien's Trilogy "Lords of the Rings." (That is another story.) However, when California State University of Los Angeles (CSULA) and Dr. Roy entered Tin's life, his insecurity slowly faded.

Dr. Roy has not only taught Tin how to competently read and write, but through the process Tin came to a revelation that he had a brain all these years, as he stated in one of his reflections:

"Upon reflecting on my first few reading and writing assignments, I realize that I wasn't lacking a brain, but I

just didn't wisely use it. My writing wasn't good but it's not bad, and it can be improved. And isn't that what having a brain means? Isn't it to constantly learn and improve oneself? And that's just what has happened during these two classes with Dr. Roy."

When comparing his first reading and writing assignment with his most recent assignment, Tin discovered that both his reading and writing had dramatically changed and improved. For instance, he does not just read for the comprehension, but also as he reads, he questions and analyzes the materials, such as from what perspective, genre, narrative, etc. it comes from. His writing is structural with stages of brainstorming, outlining, free writing, rewriting and numerous revisions. His narrative writing style has transformed to an analytical writing style, and those are just the educational aspects.

What CSULA and Dr. Roy gave Tin was life changing. They have given him hope and not just hope for the future, but hope in living, in being good. They gave him the courage to think outside the box, and risk leaving his comfort zone. For example, he described a crucial event that in hindsight it was life altering, as he stated in his reflection:

"I spotted Dr. Roy on the yard, so I slowly looked around to make sure no one notice as I creep toward him. With one final look over my shoulder, in a low voice, I asked for his help on my thesis. Dr. Roy taught me and with a sign of relief, like a thief, I scurried away. Then bam! In class, in front of my peer, Dr. Roy asked, 'So Tin, do you have a question?' Very uncomfortably, I was like, 'Dude, nooo!' However, he insisted, 'I think you do. Didn't you asked me something about the thesis?' I stated, 'Confidential' under my breath, but I relented. As trivial as this may seem, it had a big implication in my live. Dr. Roy had brought me out of my comfort zone. You see, when you live in an environment (maximum-security prison) where the strong prey on the weak, you will learn quickly not to show any weakness. Asking for help is considered as weakness. There were times that I would count hours, minutes and seconds until my cell's door opens, because something violence was going to happen. I could have asked the officer, who was counting ever two hours for help, but live or die, you don't asked for help. That's the code that you live by in prison. Because of Dr. Roy, that wall came crumbling down. The mask of a harden convict slowly came off. I no longer had to put on that tiring façade of "I don't care, stone cold or I'm doing life, try me?" My perspective of asking for help was slowly changing. I began to view asking for help as a sign of maturity and strength, and not weakness.

This build confidence and strength within me, and I developed the insight and courage to leave my comfort zone of fortified walls that I have built in last 18 years. I now could engage myself in an academic discussion with my peer, which has helped me to improve both academically and personally."

CSULA and Dr. Roy also instilled in Tin that regardless of his past or present circumstances, it does not dictate who he is and who he can become. That there is good in him if he chooses to embrace it. It is a choice. They accomplished this by demonstrating their kindness, and providing him with knowledge, tools, and an opportunity to learn. Tin was able, through critical thinking, to begin to see the bigger picture in a broader sense, and not in the narrow view, he once possessed. He could see the probability, but also possibilities in his future, because he recognizes that he is good. As Socrates once said, "Man's crowning achievement is knowledge. Having attained knowledge, man would do the right thing, he would be good...That education should make a man a better citizen and a thereby a happier individual." From his own experience, Tin states, "after thousands of years, I found this philosophy to stand the test of time."

With the confidence that Dr. Roy has given him, and the opportunities that CSULA has provided, Tin has become alive, no longer walking among the living dead (serving life without parole), aimlessly roaming the prison yard and desperately searching for what he craved, hope, love and purpose. He has dreams and aspirations. His goals for the future are to double majors, obtain a Masters in Business Administration (MBA), and eventually a Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA). He will also become a professional artist, but ultimately he dreams of doing his part with what is given to him. He realizes that this is going to be a long and difficult climb, yet he states, "The Mountain's might may be high, but the will is mine. It is not the might of the Mountain, but it is the might of my will that I will surmount the mountain."

Whether Tin will succeed only time can tell, but with the generosity of CSULA and Dr. Roy, he knows that he is going places. No matter if he is sitting in a prison cell, he is no longer at a standstill, at the mercy of his circumstances. He will grow along with the world and move along with his life. One thing for sure, he now (after 18 years), he can finally answer his co-defendant's question: "What are you?" Answer: "**I am Me.**"

