

A Letter — To my nephews about the anniversary of the fall of Saigon

Thirty-eight years after communist forces took over South Vietnam, editorial columnist Thanh Tan tries to convince her young nephews of the benefits to growing up in an immigrant family.

By Thanh Tan
Times editorial columnist

This column is for my nephews living in Lacey.

Dear Edward and Eric,

We don't see you around as much as we used to. Now that you're almost 13 and 11, it seems you two prefer to stay home over coming to my parents' house on weekends to drink tea and watch Vietnamese music videos with us "old folks."

OK. Understandable. But by the time you finish reading this, I hope you feel some renewed pride in being part of our big, fat Vietnamese family.

We're here because 38 years ago on Tuesday, our native country fell to communism. April 30 is a day reserved for grief and reflection.

Your mom, who immigrated here from Vietnam in the 1990s, tells me you've started saying, "I wish I was an American." Though I think she makes the most delicious *pâté chaud* pastries and *bo bía* rolls, you ask her, "Mom, can you learn to cook American food?"

Your comments trigger something in me. When I was your age, I felt the same wariness of being culturally different from most of my Caucasian peers at school.

I was born in Washington, but as many people of Asian descent would say, I looked and felt like a foreigner.

Efforts to cover up my status as an immigrant's child included packing lunches consisting of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or Lunchables, Fruit Roll-ups and Capri Suns. I hoped eating the same foods I saw in Saturday morning cartoon commercials proved I was like everyone else.

Like your parents, mine also worked for the state. We didn't struggle, but I wondered at night why my mom and dad did not join the PTA or volunteer in



the classroom. We ate fishy-smelling Vietnamese food every night. Going to dances and having boyfriends was taboo.

That lack of awareness about American customs sometimes stoked my feelings of alienation.

It's not easy growing up with your feet in two cultures, is it? Being an English-speaking American student by day and dutiful child on nights and weekends — plus Friday night classes in Vietnamese language school — got exhausting. I developed an inner need to please others, to be all things to all people. (*Please try to avoid this.*)

I was too young to understand my parents lacked confidence in their English-speaking abilities to fit in with the other parents in school. They felt most comfortable among fellow Vietnamese immigrants in the community because they had been through the same experience.

Considering both your parents came to the United States in their late teens, they carry with them similar traditional cultural values that might seem antiquated or odd to an American boy, which you are.

But never forget we belong to a stoic group of people who survived a bloody war and the loss of their nation. How much have your parents told you about that? I was just a little younger than you when

I began asking questions.

When Saigon fell 38 years ago, it changed the lives of millions of Vietnamese people. Reunification efforts and disastrous economic policies in postwar Vietnam limited your father's opportunities and put my dad, a teacher and lieutenant in the South Vietnamese Army, in a re-education camp.

They escaped the country by boat, separately, in



search of a place where they might stand a chance of living fulfilled lives. My family stayed in a Malaysian refugee camp for six months, then arrived in the U.S. in 1979, two years before I was born. We sponsored your dad to immigrate from a refugee camp to Olympia a few years later. He was still just a boy when he embarked on that treacherous journey alone.

Immigrant parents like ours don't just talk about courage and sacrifice. They've lived it, and they try so hard to shield us from similar challenges. Thinking of them in this way always helps me to understand where they're coming from, and why your parents want so dearly for you to hold on to a piece of their heritage.

Don't ever let yourself think you're not American. You're Vietnamese American. In time, you'll figure out for yourself what that means. And you'll be proud.

Love,

Co Thanh (Aunt Thanh)

Thanh Tan's column appears regularly on editorial pages of The Times

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