

A Concerto of Two Grandfathers



BY ALAN CHANG

"Grandpas don't smile at silver or gold. Grandpas only smile when grandchildren come to visit!" This Chinese proverb always makes people laugh when they hear it, especially grandmothers, who often say poker-faced grandfathers immediately jump up from the recliner when grandchildren visit or call.

The birth of my granddaughter Zoe brought us great joy, but she is in Los Angeles, too far away from Taipei, where I live. To avoid missing Zoe's growth, I finally created an Instagram account. In addition to tracking and watching, I also give love and leave messages under each post. My in-law Raul is not on Instagram but is a big Zoe fan like me.

My daughter Alison gave birth to Zoe a year after marrying Jordan. The baby girl has at least seven nationalities of blood : Raul is from El Salvador, his paternal grandfather is Italian, and his surname Zavaleta shows that his ancestors may come from Spain; Raul's wife, Debbie, is of German, English and Armenian descent.

Raul is a first-generation Hispanic immigrant, and his parents came to the United States to work and

save enough money to bring their children in. During the four years of separation from his parents, 15 year old Raul began the huge responsibility of caring for his three younger siblings. He received monthly living expenses from his parents in the United States and had to keep track of every penny to ensure that his siblings had food to eat and books to read."

I know much about Raul's life, perhaps even more than his children, because I read the News Letters he wrote. On top of that, we had weekly video calls, which were initially for me to learn Spanish. Due to the many similarities in our life paths, the Spanish class is gradually less critical. Most of the time, we chatted like friends, with topics ranging from the US election to the Taiwan Strait crisis, from each other's entrepreneurial experiences to estate arrangements. During this hour-long call, I usually ask questions about the content of the News Letter.



Raul's News Letter is divided into three main sections: "Life Lesson," "Danger Zone," and "Musings." Since "Danger Zone" talks about his observations and thoughts on the current situation, and I am a bit indifferent to politics, I rarely take the initiative to discuss them. Nevertheless, I am very interested in "Life Lesson" and "Musings," in these two parts, I want to hear more details and the more profound thoughts and values in the text.

As I mentioned earlier, we started out learning Spanish, and this motivation stemmed from my curiosity about the Latin people.

In 2000, I flew from Toronto to Cuba, a bit like Thailand for Taiwanese and a great value-for-money destination. At that time, Havana was cheap, and the old streets were like movie studios, but our retro was their real life. The main reason why these old antique cars are running all over the streets is that Havana was once a vacation destination for the wealthy in the United States, and later, the country was impoverished due to US sanctions. On a local day trip, I saw a Canadian couple carrying a large bag containing small gifts such as candy or stationery. As the jeep drove down a country road, they distributed it to many begging children and mothers standing on the side of the road with babies.

Still, old Havana exudes a mysterious charm, and it was in that time and space that

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* was born. We visited Havana's famous bars so that we could experience Hemingway's inspiration, in his cigar smoking and Mojito drinking.

I love the city of Havana and, more precisely, the people. Chinese people believe, "He who gives no thought to far-flung problems soon finds."

However, this unshakable truth for the Chinese finds no market here. In Cuba at the time, tipsy tourists could see someone dancing Salsa in public at any time, and enthusiastic Cubans would invite them to join in the fun if the onlookers were not in a hurry to leave.

I left Cuba with only a bottle of rum and a ceramic figurine. Rum is the base of Mojito, and with fresh mint, lemon, sugar, and ice, I could replicate Hemingway's "Flash of Inspiration." The ceramic figurine is a chubby woman with dark skin, wrapped in a headscarf, with a cigar on her lips, sitting bare-chested on the street. She represents the free-spirited nature of Latin people, demonstrating a sense of freedom not restricted by rules. I often switch from a pensive Chinese to Latin mode whenever I see her.

When I indicated I wanted to practice my Spanish conversation, Raul said he could help me.

Some people say that "you can live in California by only speaking Chinese," which is true and false. However, it is difficult to deny that daily life will not be too problematic if you only stay in the Chinese area. Still, you talk about integrating into society or competition. In that case, people who do not speak English can usually only stay at the bottom of society unless they are "financially free," this phenomenon also applies to explaining the situation of only speaking Spanish. Raul, who first arrived in the United States at nineteen, knew very limited English, but to support his parents and siblings, he had to learn English quickly. In his Life Lesson, he mentioned that he had worked as an apprentice

carpenter, sold encyclopedias door-to-door, was an assistant in a pawnshop, and worked in a distribution center and a multinational company after graduating from university.

Compared to Raul's career journey, my path is full of angels and good fortune. When I was young, I studied in the United States and went back to work in Taiwan without attending the graduation ceremony. At that time, the idea was straightforward: I wanted to live an easy life; instead of staying under someone else's roof, why not be a returnee with an advantage? Although this decision is rough, my idea is not unfounded, based on the examples of many international students. Staying in the US requires more endeavor, especially the strife and discomfort caused by race. Raul wrote in his newsletter about being mistaken as an Amigo (Mexican) and treated with contempt in the workplace. I once asked how he felt about this kind of treatment, but he didn't seem to be affected too much, and the past of being belittled due to his immigrant status seemed to be a "small thing" to him.

Staying positive is an essential trait for being a great adventurer. I remembered that he shared a story of his adventures: before he came to the United States, he was a top soccer



player in El Salvador, once went to Guatemala and participated in a national tournament as a gunner, but he unexpectedly became a hero and was ignorantly arranged to be interviewed by a local reporter, and then the team realized that something was too big and hurriedly let him return home overnight.

Because of his soccer skills, Raul earned a scholarship to UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) and served as the varsity soccer team captain. When I asked how he and Debbie met, Raul said they were students of different grades and departments. One day after practice, he was eating in the empty cafeteria. Debbie showed up when it was almost closing time and went over to sit at his table with a plate, which was the first conversation between the two. I stupidly asked Raul, "Why did she sit with you while the cafeteria had many empty tables?" Raul said with a somewhat

restrained look of showing off, "Would you like to ask Debbie for me?"

I did ask, and here is the answer from Debbie: I showed up for a late lunch and sat down at the end of his long table. I said hello and asked him, "What are you reading?" This was a silly question as he was reading the UCLA Daily Bruin paper that all students should know about.

Debbie's father owned a PhD at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was relatively abundant, and had a high social status. When her mother, a schoolteacher in a primarily Hispanic Community elementary school, heard Debbie was dating a Hispanic immigrant, she was unhappy about it, which was the starting point of the family revolution. After Debbie and Raul had dated for 3 years and became engaged, her parents were finally ok with the union and even agreed to pay for the wedding.



Raul was very competitive in his multinational corporations. His career ladder was blessed, and soon, he was offered an overseas assignment in Switzerland.

After finishing the two-year term, he returned to the States and founded his first company in Indiana. Being an entrepreneur, for him or anyone was not easy. Both Raul and Debbie renewed their faith in God and began going to the Catholic Church at that time. Strong beliefs empowered them and led them to success. Celebrity Oprah said, "Excellence is the best deterrent to racism or sexism." Raul fully embodies and confirms this sentence.

Raul's success in his career is unquestionable. Still, as I heard about his family revolution of interracial marriage, I sighed and said, "If your story happened to me and my wife, I would have given up a long time ago."

Managing an interracial marriage requires wisdom; because of the difference in culture and values, it is difficult for many people to persevere without clear goals and strategies. For example, in the case of a Chinese daughter giving birth, confinement means someone, usually her mother, will care for and feed her with Chinese medicine and nutritious food for a month. Caring for her daughter and the infant is not too stressful if both live in the same city. It becomes very complicated if a mother plans to fly to the



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States and help her daughter; she must first worry about whether Chinese medicine can pass customs. People with similar experiences say that when the customs officer asks the purpose of coming to the United States, mothers should not say "confinement for my daughter," but answer "visit my family" is less likely to be troubled. You may think, "Isn't it natural to help your daughter in confinement?" but this is the value difference. Chinese mothers assume serving their daughters in confinement is their duty, but they are suspected of coming to work to make money at US Customs.

It takes a couple to achieve a successful marriage. At my daughter's homecoming party in Taipei, I asked Debbie to say a few words, and she said in the simplest language, "I have many 'OK moments' in my marriage."

Because this sentence will be beneficial, especially when the husband and wife or family members disagree and are emotional, she learns to take a deep breath to calm down and then use an "OK" to stop the situation from heating up; "OK" may not solve the problem, but at least the problem does not get worse. When I helped translate, I felt a lot. Does "OK" mean "admit defeat"? I have learned from life experience that "OK" is a kind of damage control. Things and emotions will change, and when the problem is deadlocked, being patient can see things more clearly or in the long term.

Debbie is a "big-hearted" person. She can't separate Raul from his roots, whether it is in-laws, aunts, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, or others who more or less need assistance; I assume Raul would be the advocate, and Debbie should have struggled a lot then, but she chose to support her husband, and with an "OK," life moved on.

Chinese parents tend to worry too much, especially when they see their children quarrelling with



their spouses. They always provide advice, answers, resources, or solutions with or without being asked, but whether it is wise is debatable. TV dramas often show scenes of married daughters returning to their parent's house to seek help or comfort. When she tearfully accuses her husband's family of all kinds of wrongs, the people of her mother's family can't wait to seek revenge with a kitchen knife.

But is what the daughter says true? Amid all those trivial arguments, did she try to say "OK" to ease things down? Many regrets arise from asymmetric information; we can only see things more clearly by being calm.

With the weekly meetings, our two families became very close, and every time my wife and I visited Los Angeles, we lived in the big house Debbie's parents left her. This house is located at

the top of a small mountain, with five bedrooms on two floors, a large garden with a small waterfall and fountain, a living room balcony overlooking the entire city of Los Angeles, and even a Disney fireworks show at night. In recent years, the in-laws have renovated the house, building a new play area for their three granddaughters and a space for meditation. Raul always invited me for a walk when we stayed in the big house. Once, we ran into a Chinese neighbor; I went forward to chat with them about the big dog on a leash. Afterwards, Raul told me that the Chinese neighbor was not very friendly with him and did not respond to his hello. I didn't explain much, but maybe the neighbor didn't have confidence, they didn't notice, they were afraid of... something, and there were too many reasons. But this world is vast; this little thing is not worth overthinking.

Raul has played the role of a locomotive all his life, from family to career. He should have too many things that require his time and energy, and if he thinks a lot about other people's impoliteness, he will not have a peaceful mind and a quality life. He owns the skill of positive distraction; he likes parties. Raul's bar is unsloppy with everything from wine and white wine to whiskey to vodka. After dinner, he sometimes proposes a



karaoke party, and he even makes the event so professional that the karaoke parties in Indiana have become famous. Many of his retired friends were vying to sign up. When I asked who those friends were, Raul said there were neighbours, friends, and some board members.

Raul, 72, still serves on the boards of several institutions and is currently working as a business consultant for a few companies. I asked, "Throwing a party at home is a big project; would Debbie be willing to cooperate?" Raul says she didn't like it before but gradually likes it. However, I can't just listen to one side of the answer; it has to be confirmed by his spouse; after all, Debbie does not have Latin blood in her body, she has parents and in-laws who need help, and four children who need to be taken care of, and there are so many things to worry about. It's not easy to let go and dance Salsa like Latinas do.

Due to the language barrier, Debbie's communication with her in-laws is limited, and we can assume her four children were limited, too. I often hear stories of grandparents of interracial marriages who can't communicate with their grandchildren. Though I speak English well, the distance may be a problem in my close relationship with baby Zoe. The weekly chat with Raul brings solutions to the potential issues.

One-year-old Zoe changes every day. When she was with me, Zoe said birds and dogs in Chinese. When it was her turn to be with Raul, Raul would hold her and dance to Salsa. My name appeared in Raul's newsletter, and in return, the Latin values were quietly implanted into my world. I continue to use the app to learn Spanish daily, and when I am ready to practice, I call Raul.



Learning a foreign language is about communicating with people and learning an opinion or a way of solving problems. "If a problem can be solved, there is no use worrying about it. If it can't be solved, worrying will do no good." These words of wisdom come from the Dalai Lama, but the real practitioners are the Latins.

Last year, when our two families were in Los Angeles for the New Year, Debbie encouraged Raul to announce that Marian University Indianapolis would award Raul an honorary doctorate in May 2025. Wow! A nineteen-year-old El Salvadoran immigrant came to the United States to be recognized by the country for his achievements and many contributions to the community. His children may be accustomed to seeing

their father's accomplishments. Still, this is not a small thing; for me, the honor represents a great man's lifetime of hard work, self-control, and blessings from God that have brought him to fruition. Honorary doctorates are more challenging to obtain than ordinary doctorates, and a group of educators recognizes them. Ralph Waldo Emerson defined success and said: to laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people...

At 10 p.m. in Taiwan on Friday and 7 a.m. in Los Angeles, during a video call, I heard Zoe getting up, and I texted my daughter and asked her to carry Zoe to Raul's office to talk to us. It was the first time Zoe had spoken to two grandfathers simultaneously; she saw me through the screen, called "Yaya," and then turned to Raul, "Papa." Zoe stared at the screen for a few minutes with a confused expression, wondering whether to talk to us in English or Chinese. It has been said that "It takes a village to raise a kid," and the two grandpas are the most eager villagers. With our shared goal and perseverance, I foresee Zoe being trilingual in English, Chinese and Spanish. This child, who has more than seven nationalities of blood, will be immersed in love and wisdom and enjoy the concerto composed by the two grandfathers.

