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*The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* Question Responses

1. The title *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* is a translation of the Hmong words "qaug dab peg," which refers to epilepsy. In the Western world, epilepsy is defined as a neurological condition brought on by unusual brain electrical activity. However, the Hmong view it differently. The term is an interpretation that seizures are caused by a person's soul being trapped by an evil spirit, which makes them fall. The ailment is generally considered to be a sign that a person is either spiritually gifted or chosen by spirits to become a shaman or healer. In Lia Lee's case, her parents believed that her epilepsy made her stand out as an unusual person, one who had a great spiritual connection.

The name is a metaphor for the cultural battle surrounding Lia’s condition. Her doctors treated her epilepsy as a disease to be managed by drugs, while her parents viewed it as holy and meaningful. The misunderstanding and distrust between the two sides ultimately caused major consequences in Lia’s life. The title explores both the literal and metaphorical "falling down" that occurs throughout the book, like the falling of cultural bridges, the breakdown in communication between the two cultural groups, and, of course, Lia’s literal “falling down” caused by her epilepsy.

2. The Lees' life in Laos was deeply rooted in their Hmong culture. They lived in a relatively homogenous society where they shared language, custom, religion, and identity. Their daily lives were guided by beliefs surrounding their ancestors and a close association with nature. Independence and self-sufficiency were important to the Hmong, and this influenced how their family functioned and how they handled disease, the later usually involving shamans and remedies rather than medicine and hospitals.

Their life in the US, however, was often marked by cultural dislocation and misunderstanding. They also faced major challenges adjusting to a new society, such as having to learn a new language, managing an unfamiliar healthcare system, and assimilating into an individualistic society. Their traditional health beliefs and methods of child rearing were also very different from the American physicians’, especially when it came to the care provided to Lia.

Despite these differences, there were some similarities between their lives in Laos and the U.S. The Lees were able to remain close as a family unit and still hold their cultural at a more local and family level, partially due to their relocation to Merced, California, involving many other Hmong refugees. In America, they continued observing their rituals, speaking their own language, and paying homage to their ancestors. Their strength and loyalty to family ideals continued, showing the ways in which they managed to still retain their cultural identity.

3. The Hmong culture is a very orally based culture, and their folktales stories are a method of communicating life values and experiences. One of the most important things that we learn from these stories is how the Hmong perceive themselves — as a people who have been persecuted, displaced, and misunderstood throughout the years but have managed to endure through sheer strength and willpower. Much of their folk literature deals with themes of resistance, migration, and spiritual power. For example, there are accounts of the Hmong having to escape their native land and losing their written language. Stories like these help us understand their dependence on oral narratives to maintain their cultural identity.

These folk stories also demonstrate the importance of the spiritual world in Hmong life. Spirits, shamans, and souls are all major aspects in explaining life experience, illness, and family life broadly. The story of the soul wandering away and needing to be called back is one that directly affected how the Lees responded to Lia's seizures. Because of this story, they did not consider her sickness to be primarily a bodily affliction but instead a spiritual one. Additionally, Hmong stories teach respect for elders, family ties, and emphasize how critical it is to retain one’s tradition. These stories are designed to both entertain and educate the younger generations about the Hmong’s cultural norms and values.

4. At first glance, the Lees' denial of Lia's medication seems irresponsible or even neglectful, especially considering the severity of her epilepsy. I personally found it extremely frustrating when they rejected the medical advice of their doctor, especially given how important getting proper medical care is in our American culture. But when I reexamined things from their perspective, their decision makes sense, at least to some degree. The Lees were not intentionally trying to harm Lia; they clearly cared about her deeply and wanted what they thought was best for her. However, they were burdened by the complexity of the medications that were offered, many of which had potent side effects. On top of this, they didn't fully understand the purpose of the drugs because of the language barriers. From their perspective, epilepsy was more a spiritual issue than a physiological issue. They thought Lia had to be healed through Hmong spiritual practices and rituals and so were simply trying to do what they thought would work.

While I can’t say I have ever experienced a cultural barrier like the Lees did, I can at least understand broadly what they would have been going through. I imagine that coming to a relatively new place and being told that everything they understood about their daughter’s illness was wrong was extremely difficult for them. It’s incredibly tragic that these cultural miscommunications only contributed to Lia's worsening condition.

5. Neil Ernst and Peggy Philp were passionate pediatricians who truly cared about Lia. They were very skilled in their respective occupations and were dedicated to helping her. They did everything they could within the limits of Western medicine to manage Lia's condition. They were also truly upset when she didn’t receive the proper medication. Their concern for her was real, and they put in a lot of time and effort to take care of her.

However, one of their biggest failures was their struggle to understand the Lees' cultural practices. They treated Lia’s case strictly through the lens of Western medicine and expected her parents to follow along without any questions. They didn’t really consider trying to meet halfway with the Lees’ traditional cultural practices to build trust. Instead, they began to see the Lees as noncompliant and neglectful, which finally led to them taking Lia away from her family and putting her in promote care.

This misunderstanding, although unintentional, contributed to a major breakdown in communication. They didn’t realize that just having medical expertise isn’t always enough when it comes to treating patients from different cultures and backgrounds. Even though their intentions were good, their dedication to their procedures at the expense of cultural understanding ended up hurting the very patient they were trying to help.

6. Lia Lee’s fate came as a result of a mix of cultural misunderstandings, system failures, and communication issues. Both her parents and her doctors loved and cared for her dearly, but they had completely different perspectives when it came to treating her. The Lees interpreted Lia’s seizures as something spiritually important, while her doctors saw them simply as a medical emergency. This cultural gap led to a complete breakdown in cooperation and trust.

One of the main reasons Lia ended up in a vegetative state was the inconsistent medication she received. The Lees were really confused by the different prescriptions and didn’t want to give her medicines they didn’t understand or that seemed to be making her worse. Similarly, the doctors didn’t take the time to adjust the treatment plan to make it simpler for the family to understand. On top of that, there were bigger system problems, like a shortage of trained medical interpreters, that kept both sides from being able to communicate well. If there had been more collaboration and cultural awareness, Lia’s health issues could have been avoided. If the doctors had taken time to learn about the Hmong perspective and if the Lees had received more help in navigating the medical system, they might have figured out a treatment plan that would suit everyone’s needs, especially Lia’s.

7. Power as a theme *in The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* shows up in many ways — such as in institutions, culture, and between individuals. In the American healthcare system, doctors like Neil Ernst and Peggy Philp had considerably more power than the patients. They were the ones who made many of the decisions about medical treatment, prescribing therapy, and even had the power to take a child away from their parents if they thought the parents weren’t doing enough to take care of the child. This level of control was very intimidating to the Lees, especially since they didn’t really understand how the system worked.

The Lees, as Hmong refugees with limited English skills and education, felt relatively powerless. They were often labeled as noncompliant, and their cultural beliefs were rarely respected. These feelings of powerlessness became even worse when Child Protective Services (CPS) took Lia from them. This moment really underscored just how little control they had over what was happening to their own child. This resulting power gap had several major consequences, such as creating suspicion, making conversations difficult, and putting a stop to any chance of working together towards solutions. The book really drives home the point that when power is used thoughtlessly, even with the best intentions, it can be just as harmful as ignorance or indifference.

8. Reading The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down was very thought-provoking for me. One thing that particularly stood out to me was how tragic and avoidable Lia Lee’s situation was. Both her doctors and her family genuinely cared for her, yet they just couldn’t come together, all because of cultural misunderstandings. It helped me to realize just how essential cultural competence is in healthcare — something I hadn’t really thought much about before.

I was also particularly moved by the strength and determination of the Lee family. Even with everything they faced, the worst being the loss of Lia, they managed to remain loving, committed, and respectful. I also appreciated how Anne Fadiman told the story with a rather non-biased attitude towards both sides. She didn’t demonize the doctors or elevate the Hmong. Instead, she allowed the readers see the humanity in everyone involved. Overall, I found this book to not just be a single story about one unfortunate child, but also a powerful reminder about how important it is to be aware and considerate of other people’s culture and background.