

Jenna

Professor Clauss

WR 13300

February 3, 2016

The Giving Home

My freshman year in high school, my family went bankrupt. One day after school, my father told my family that he was diagnosed with cancer and could no longer work. To make up for my father's income, my mother accepted a full time job at her workplace, a Korean nursing home called "Angel of Mind Nursing Home." Furthermore, my mother's boss, Mrs. Ma, offered three rooms in the nursing home free of charge for my family. After a month of difficult contemplation, our entire family decided to move to this nursing home. Upon arrival, I noticed that the nursing home had a strangely sad exterior. The house had once been painted white, but now the dark grey hues overwhelmed the purity. The front lawn was more golden than green. Walking to the door in my flip-flops, the dried grass prickled my toes. Once we reached the door, my mother simultaneously sighed and forced a smile—one that was toothless and did not reach the wrinkles next to her eyes. "We got this. I know we can get through this." She repeated twice. Stepping into the building, my family was greeted by an indescribable, yet unpleasant stench. "Watch your steps," my mother alerted, as we saw that the front door was barred with a pet gate. The pet gate functioned to keep the residents with dementia and wandering problems locked inside the house. Closing the gate behind me, I immediately felt trapped. In the living room were five patients, lifelessly staring into the flashy screen of an analog television. Their skins were gray and aging and their hairs were limp and unwashed. During my first month at the nursing home, I was very depressed. I constantly blamed my parents and questioned God for putting me

in this situation. I did not understand what I did to deserve this life. However, as I look back and reflect four years later, I can confidently say that this nursing home changed my life for the better.

Living in the nursing home has taught me to be a more selfless person. Back at our two room apartment, I never helped around the house. Occasionally, I helped my mother on small chores like vacuuming, but bigger chores such as cooking dinner was completely off my radar. In retrospect, the only way I can justify my past attitude is that it seemed like my mother loved cooking dinner. Before every dinner, she always jammed out to her Christian cassette tape while cooking. Although she was off-tune and off-beat, she sang her heart out while swaying side to side. However, in the nursing home, I never got to witness another one of my mother's mini concerts. Since she was the only one responsible for five different patients, cooking dinner was no longer enjoyable activity for my mother. Her huge Sony cassette player was nowhere to be seen. Moreover, she wore sneakers in the house, prepared to run to get everything done at the nursing home. Her typical day consisted of preparing meals, cleaning the house, bathing the patients, changing adult diapers, and driving the patients to their hospital visits. Therefore, she went to bed at 3:00 AM every night, with five baby monitors on to ensure that every patient was safe. Thus, to help out my overworked mother, I decided that every Saturday, I would cook breakfast for all of the patients, and let my mother sleep in. Every Saturday morning, I looked up a recipe for a Korean dish and tried my best to follow the directions online. I came to master the Fermented Bean stew and Korean wonton soups. After I conjured up a dish, I pulled out five plates and portioned the food according to how much each patients ate. After setting the table with silverware, drinks and the plates of food, I woke the patients and helped them to their seats in the dining table. Some patients could not eat without assistance, so I took spoonful of the food

and fed them. It was after I washed all the dishes, and cleaned up that I woke my mother up for her day. She got at least six hours of sleep on Saturdays. It did not matter if I had a football game the night before, or I had a rough week at school; I never broke my promise of Saturday breakfasts. Seeing my mother wake up more rested and seeing the patients enjoy my meals, made my 6:00am mornings more than special. Living in the nursing home prompted me to be a more selfless person, as I learned to prioritize put my mother's and the patients' needs before mine.

Along with my independence, living in the nursing home has improved my problem solving abilities. For instance, our nursing home had dementia patients with wandering problems. At a quick glance, they looked normal and rather sane, but in reality, they led lives of delusion. After weeks of observation, I realized that the patients' remaining memories were so minute that they lived every day in identical patterns. Patient Hong was a 96-year-old newlywed bride. Every day at sunset, she was anxious to return home to her groom. "I forgot to cook rice for tonight," she would say, "I washed the rice this morning." Stuck in the past, the blushing bride was convinced that her house in South Korea was just a short distance away. Thus, her attempts to escape the nursing home were perpetual. Her daily race to the front door drove my family anxious. Patient Hong wanted her freedom, while my family wanted her safety. This same exhausting pattern repeated every day. After many attempts to solve the conflict, my family decided that the best solution was to escort her out of the nursing home at least once a day. Every day after dinner, I volunteered to take the patient out on a walk. Before stepping outside, I had to use my problem solving skills to develop a safety plan for the trip. First, it was imperative that the duration of the trip be no longer than fifteen minutes. Patient Hong was not strong enough for a trip on foot that would last longer. Secondly, I had to learn to see my neighborhood from

patient Hong's perspective. To patient Hong, my neighborhood was synonymous to her neighborhood in South Korea—in 1952. I especially had to problem-solve, when on multiple instances, patient Hong was convinced that certain houses on our block were hers. She fearlessly walked to random people's houses, and stood in front of their doors, rummaging through her empty purse for her keys. Remembering that we were in the context of South Korea in the 50's, or during the era of the Korean War, I said, "patient Hong, we need to go back to the nursing home. It is getting too dark outside. I heard that at night it is more dangerous to walk around for young girls." Patient Hong, concerned about our safety, consented to my suggestion and agreed to walk back to the nursing home. Like in every situation that requires problem solving, I learned to define the problem, and understand the problem in context, to propose a solution. Living in the nursing home exposed me to certain problems that I would have been oblivious to otherwise, and thus helped me to navigate, and resolve them.

In addition helping me be a better problem solver, living in the nursing home has sculpted me into a better daughter. Before moving to the nursing home, when my parents, who are not fluent in English, frequently asked me to make a call to the bank for a glitch on the bill or to the dentist's office for an appointment, I always unwillingly complied to their wishes. However, my begrudging attitude towards helping out my parents changed my second year of living at the nursing home. One day, my mother's boss told my parents that the government sued her for overworking my mother. Her charge was justified, as it was evident that my parents made below the poverty line for working 18 hours a day. The boss proceeded to tell my parents that her lawyer would have to interview my parents to build her case. She advised my parents to tell her lawyer that my mother worked 10 hours a day, and if my parents did not, they would be fired. I was upset that she was forcing my parents to lie, but more worried about what would happen to

my parents if they were to lie on court. We did not have representation like the boss did, and as a young teenager, I was afraid that the boss' lies would backfire on my parents. Finally, upon the lawyer's visit, I again, begrudgingly served as their translator. However, unlike the kind customer-service representative from the bank, the lawyer manipulated her questions to force answers that would disprove the fact that my parents were overworked. The lawyer scoffed that a teenager was her interviewee, and tried to put words in my mouth. Frustrated that the lawyer was taking advantage of my parents because of their language barrier, I politely asked the lawyer to leave the room for a moment. I told my parents to show the lawyer their time cards. They were technically not saying that they worked 18 hours a day, but showing the lawyer the truth without having to say a single word in English—or in Korean. After inviting the lawyer back into the room, I handed her photocopies of their time cards. The lawyer, upon seeing how much they actually worked, apologized and ended the interview. I felt a small pain in my heart, as I saw my parents so vulnerable and weak, hindered by a language barrier. From this experience, I grew from being an immature daughter who refused to help her parents on basic requests, to a daughter who understood her parents slightly more. Moreover, I realized that often times, my parents felt powerless in this foreign country. I realized that they did not want to seem helpless to their 15 year old daughter, but they had no other choice. I was their crutch of reliance. This experience at the nursing home was the first time when my parents' dependence on me was glaringly obvious. From that moment, no call to the bank or the dentist office seemed trivial or laborious. Because living in the nursing home made it clear how much my parents needed me, I grew as a better daughter.

Before moving to the nursing home, I was upset about what I was going to lose from the move: my parents, my privacy, and my perception of what constitutes a "good life." However,

my experiences in the nursing home have undoubtedly helped me to grow as a better person. They have helped me to become who I am, and I am beyond grateful that my identity has its root in this particular adversity. Last Christmas break, I was very excited to go home to not only see my family, but also to see our patients, whom we decided to call our “grandparents.” For Christmas, I picked up five Notre Dame hats for the grandparents. My heart leaped when the grandparents asked, “are you cooking breakfast tomorrow?” and when Grandma Hong gave me the greatest hug and said, “let’s walk to my house together, I will cook you a meal.” As of today, I feel beyond undeserving of all the blessings living in the nursing home has brought me. I am very thankful for my parents and God for providing me with this giving home.