

Children of Tibet

Extract

Then we got the chance to go to America. In '88 an American girl, a language student of mine, and I became friends. She said her mother was the director of an institute for alcoholics and other people with problems, and maybe I could train there. Sometimes Westerners say things and nothing happens, but she wrote to her mother and can you believe it? The mother came to visit, just to see us. She said she would sponsor me and my son to America for a year. So that's how we got to go to Florida in 1989. For the first three months in America I was confused and sad, because I didn't know anyone. Here we are used to seeing people around all the time, and we talk, standing in the streets, or sitting and having tea. There it is totally different. I felt very lonely and homesick. In the first month my sponsor showed us the malls and grocery stores, but after that she was busy with her own work. Ingsel was seven and at school, so I was all alone by myself at home.

Finally I told my sponsor I wanted to do something to help me get a better job when I went back to Dharamsala. So she took me to an Adult Vocational Centre where there were classes in all sorts of things, baking cakes, gardening, music, computers, typing, ESL [English as a Second Language]. I started courses in typing and Apple Mac computers and ESL which was what I liked best - every Saturday we went for a picnic or fishing, things like that. I liked learning in that way. I began to enjoy being in America. I also started going to AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] meetings with my sponsor, as well as Al-Anon family group meetings, and I visited the Salvation Army where they look after homeless people. We have this idea that Westerners are rich, and when I saw so many homeless people there, old and young, I was shocked. I was told they didn't have jobs, and had lost their families because of drinking and drugs. Some were happy to listen when I told them I had been through the same sort of thing because I also lived in an alcoholic family. Some wouldn't talk for a while, but were interested when I told them I was from Tibet and talked about the Dalai Lama.

I started reading books about these things and then, what with also going to all these meetings, I was very busy. At the same time, because I wanted to make some money, I worked part-time, cleaning houses or babysitting. I liked the babysitting most because I love kids, especially little ones. I used to take all the neighbourhood children together to the lake which was nearby, and teach them Tibetan songs. I used to tell them their parents were working for them in order to make them feel better because they would say, 'Oh, my mum never stays home, she always puts me with my babysitter which I don't like'. We didn't have parents, because of events we lost them, but we had feelings about the way children should think of their parents. These children have everything except love between parents and children. The parents spoil their children with expensive toys and by taking them to video parlours to play games and, for their children's birthdays, they rent restaurants for a lot of money, and all the other children give expensive presents. We Tibetans never celebrated birthdays like that. Nowadays we may celebrate when children are very young, otherwise no. All we would do is take a child to the temple for prayers and an offering of butterlamps or money.

When Ingsel's birthday came he wanted a party in a special restaurant like the other children. I told him we were not rich and this was not our country, but I did promise him a celebration. Then I got an idea from a TV ad. The friend I talked to about it was very surprised, but agreed to take us in her car

because I cannot drive. Ingsel's friends were asking what we were going to do and I told them it was a secret, and everyone was very excited. Two of my friends took us in their cars, two cars full of children on Ingsel's birthday. We went to the Jake Allen's Center for Deaf-Blind Children and there they saw all those other children, blind, deaf and polio victims, some who could not move their hands, but all looking very happy, smiling and singing. We talked to the Principal and I told Ingsel and his friends, 'Now, each of you, take one child, talk to them, help them to write or to sing'. We spent three hours there, and afterwards we had the party at the lakeside near my sponsor's house with the cake I had baked. Some of Ingsel's friends said, 'Maybe on my next birthday I will do the same thing'. I thought it good for them, because they never see this other side of life. They take everything for granted. Their parents are rich and they have so many material things. Ingsel himself was very touched said, 'I think we're lucky. We have two hands and feet and we can move, and we can see'.

My trip to America was the greatest adventure in my life. I wanted to complete my computer course but I couldn't because my visa expired, and there were many other things I wanted to learn. I would have liked to become a counsellor, but in Dharamsala people don't talk about problems to counsellors. We go to lamas, then we do the pujas. Now when I look back on my life, I think maybe everything happened for the best and it's my karma. I don't even regret coming back from America. I could probably have stayed, as there were people prepared to help me, but I had to think of my children. I didn't want them brought up in the American way.

One especially big thing has happened since I came back. I have found my family. Just in the last few months I have found relatives I never knew I had. Before, I thought I had only my auntie in Kalimpong. Now I know I have two uncles in Dharamsala, one who has two sons here, one a monk. My other uncle works at TCV, and I knew him but I had no idea he was my uncle. I also knew my cousin the monk, because I used to go to the temple every day, but now we are very close. His father, my uncle, worked in the government for many years and now he is the chief personal master tailor to His Holiness, and he has held this post since the time of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama - he does beautiful applied thangkas. He's very old, 83, but still good at stitching. I visit him often and we sit and talk. Sometimes I make special food to take to him. He knows all about our family. He has told me I am from Gyantse province, from a place called Pehnak, a big village, and my mother was from its biggest and richest family and my father was also connected to it, but he doesn't know whether my parents are still alive.

Sometimes I think maybe for me the good times have come. Now I can say proudly, 'I'm from an aristocratic family', even though I don't have my parents and I'm not rich. But after all those years of not knowing who I was, finally I have found a family of my own.

Cayley, V 1994, Children of Tibet: an oral history of the first Tibetans to grow up in exile, Pearlfisher Publications, Balmain.

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