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My Mother's Influence: Why We Must Recognize Personal Relationships

In a [three-part series](#) I posted a few weeks ago, I shared the story of Myong, a refugee mother whom I tried to help when I ran a social service agency in the '80s.

Later I learned that we had inadvertently harmed her relationship with her teenage son by diminishing her parental role as an authority figure. But I also know it was not our single act of helping that was responsible for all the damage; the paternalistic nature of helping reinforced a barrage of negative messages that low-income adults face every day. In a societal context that is class-, race-, and gender-biased, any act that looks paternal or charitable amplifies the negative view society has of those who haven't yet "made it."

In February of 2011, I was at a conference in Miami put on by [New Profit Inc.](#) We were fortunate to have [Daniel Beaty](#) perform a moving tribute to his mother, "[Dance Mama Dance](#)" from one of his plays. The spoken word performance goes somewhat like this:

"I feel my mama's presence. So many things I never got to say. Mama, I saw you raise five of us by yourself with a father nowhere in sight. I saw you inspire revolution with a chicken and two potatoes. I saw you limp home late at night with sores on your feet, I saw you gracefully remove groceries from the cart when the bill got too high, I saw you pray when brother stole the microwave to buy drugs [...] I saw you hold a home together like a foundation that would never crumble [...] but mama, I never saw you dance, I never saw you dance and I wonder what happened to your music [...] So dance mama dance, break the flood gates of countless uncried tears [...] Dance mama dance for all the dreams that you forgot so we could make it through the day, dance mama dance like your nightmare is ending."

After his performance, Daniel, an accomplished writer and performer, told the audience about the ups and downs of growing up. He shared that his inclination for writing was recognized by one of his teachers, who sent a paper he wrote to a contest that won him recognition leading to more recognition. He ultimately got a scholarship to Harvard and then forged the path to develop his career.

During the question and answer session that followed Daniel's performance and talk, the audience of funders, policymakers, and social service providers asked questions along the lines of: Besides the school teacher who recognized your writing, who or what else really helped you?"

The next day I led a workshop at the conference. I asked participants about Daniel's performance and whom they saw as the most important influence in Daniel's life. The first person answered, "the schoolteacher, of course." I asked who agreed and everyone in the room raised their hands. I was a little stunned by the unanimity, but not totally surprised.

I encounter the same reactions when I tell people about the sacrifices my mother made to raise me and get me through college. Despite the power of my mother's influence on my future, many of us look for the external interventions that can be made by outsiders or programs. So although Daniel not only wrote a play in tribute of his mother and did a beautiful moving performance of his dreams for her in front of all of us, no one credited her. And although I lead a national movement-building organization in honor of my mother, no one credits her. They are more likely to credit and donate to UC Berkeley, where I went to college. What is sad in both our cases is how little attention, credit, or support is given to our mothers or to the other personal, loving relations that are responsible for our foundations. Without those relationships, the teacher would have never met Daniel. Without my mother, my work wouldn't have been possible.

Our mothers, fathers, and guardians are dismissed and assumed to not be as capable as even a 25-year-old social worker or a teacher just out of college. This adds to the myth that low-income adults are disinterested or dysfunctional.

The consequence of looking for what outsiders can do rather than looking within is that we compromise the personal foundational relationships--and, thus, the fabric of community--that every child and person needs. This is what my services and those of others did; we weakened the parental authority of Myong as I described in [my previous posts](#). The dynamic is self-reinforcing since the weaker the personal relationships, the more need there appears to be for the outside programs and professionals.

So how do professionals and volunteers truly help? First, by not assuming we are the most crucial players in people's lives. We must acknowledge, reinforce, and protect the primacy of loving and caring relationships. More and more efforts, even programs and service models, are moving in this direction. There are transitional foster kids' programs and restorative justice programs that seek out caring adults and their leadership to re-establish, rather than replace, caring relationships. In a crisis, the social worker or counselor may have the leading role, but the vast majority of those we seek to help are more likely to make progress by working together with family and friends while professionals are a secondary support.

Philanthropy and other funders play a role as well. We need to reconfigure our systems so funds and awards first go to those who play that primary role, since often what we interpret as dysfunction is actually the stress that comes from being short a couple hundred dollars each month to pay for food. Money drives the social sector, so funders too must accept that the services and programs they fund should play more of a supportive rather than leading role.

Those people at the center of our upbringing need to be seen and supported as the primary providers of what we need to grow and thrive. Emotional support--love--is the first building block and that needs to be reinforced and supported, and then carried forward out into the world.