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STORY OF SELF

My daughter, Teresa and my daughter-in-law Melissa had repeatedly asked me to attend "Camp Courage" with them. I hesitated. It would be truly awkward for me. Imagine an aging Chinese woman mixing with a bunch of gay Americans for two whole days! How uncomfortable! But... I didn't want to disappoint them so reluctantly I agreed.

On one early Saturday morning, with an uncertain heart, I arrived at the meeting hall in East LA. From afar, I saw a group of people gathered at the entrance. They were all races, black, white, yellow, and brown, guys, gals, young, and old; all chatting intimately. I hesitated to go forward, and unfortunately I was spotted by friends of my daughters. They welcomed me with hugs and kisses which comforted me a little and went in the room with them.

"Story of Self" was the theme of Camp Courage this day. Each person was supposed to tell his or her own story. These individual stories would connect together and create a natural community. The trainers urged all the attendees to participate and become new activists to engage in the movement to legalize gay marriage and persuade people to accept the idea of gay marriage.

There were about 250 people attending this training camp. Groups of ten each with a facilitator were formed and seated in circles. Teresa and Melissa each led their own groups sitting opposite each other. Within my group, there were four gay men, three lesbians, one transgender person, and one straight ally. Adding me, the mom of a lesbian, seemed like a good mix of bunch.

One boy started his story – he said, he knew he was different when he was little. He didn't hide being gay as soon as he understood what it meant. He was lucky that he didn't have to struggle with denial. His naïve honesty led to him being discriminated against and constantly bullied. Most of the kids had gone through lengthy struggles. They went from confusion, self denial, to anxiety, to acceptance, and finally "coming out". Their emotional struggles were hard for us to imagine and full of helplessness. I looked back on my own journey, from suspecting my daughter's sexuality with an uneasy mind, to finding out for certain with panic and anxiety, to accepting the reality with a heavy heart. I was sad, angry, guilty, disappointed, and then hidden for the longest time. At last, I broke through my thick and heavy shell and came out as the mother of a lesbian. Looking back, I couldn't help but choke up and cry.

Our stories revealed our deep down emotions and secrets to everyone in the group. We felt we knew each other now. Ten strangers became intimate friends. Looking around the room, all 250 people under one roof became friends. It created such a warm and powerful energy. I began to highly respect the organizers of the Camp Courage.

Following the group activity, an announcer invited people to go on stage to tell their individual stories. Some volunteered themselves, others were recommended by fellow attendees. Somehow my name was called out. I was shocked. Even though my English

wasn't exactly "broken" it wasn't fluent enough for me to give a public speech on stage. When I was hesitating, Teresa made a grimace at me. Melissa gave me a look of encouragement. Okay, so be it! I, an old lady, took a deep breath, went up the stage and started my speech. Unexpectedly what I got from the audience were laughter, tears, and long applause! I got popular, becoming the "talk of the town"! This was truly a surprise!

Here is my story:

My husband and I are first generation immigrants. We were born in China, grew up in Taiwan, and came over here, and have grown roots in the US. Our son and daughter were born in California. We are such proud parents to see them grow up healthy and happy, and get the best education.

Since early on, our daughter Teresa had been intelligent, sensible, and delightful. I liked to put a little dress on her, put her hair in two little pig tails. She was so cute and pretty and always very active. She loved to play basketball, soccer, and practiced kung fu all the time, much like a boy. Dresses and skirts were no longer on her as soon as she knew how to dress herself. She was very independent, having her own minds and ideas. Even though she had a full daily activity schedule, her school grades were top notch. We didn't have to worry about her a bit. The only thing I didn't quite understand about her was that she never was very "open". She didn't talk much, had ideas of her own, quite stubborn actually. Her clothing was boyish. Most of her friends were boys. After school, they would come to the house and hang out, doing homework and playing ball together.

One day after school in her high school years, she came home & said angrily to me, "This dude Tom from my class told his parents he was gay, and he got kicked out of the house!" Her face showed obvious anger and a feeling of injustice. My heart skipped a beat, and I just slipped this, "Well, what about you? Are you a lesbian?" She was surprised, and gave me a glare and retorted, "What do you think? Now really!" She stomped out. Since then, my husband and I didn't dare to think of this. Choosing to avoid the reality, we let two years of time pass.

After graduation, Teresa was accepted by UC Berkeley. We were very happy and very proud of her. But the liberal atmosphere of UCB and the Northern California community somehow worried us. Moreover, every time we saw her when she came home, her clothing became more and more boyish. Several times I wanted to ask her, but each time the words got stuck to my tongue... How could I ask?

During a summer break in her freshman year, she came home. As usual, a bunch of her high school buddies came to hang out at our house. Everyone was chatting, laughing, and joking. My husband and I were there enjoying the warm atmosphere of her homecoming. Suddenly I heard Teresa's voice: "I am a lesbian." She said it quietly. Instantly the whole house fell silent. I stared at her, taken by surprise. She stared back and said, "Yes, mom and dad, I am a lesbian."

This incidence was followed by my and my husband's many sleepless nights and many tearful days. Everyday, I went online eagerly searching for reasons of being homosexual. What made her a lesbian? Why did this happen to OUR family? Did I eat something wrong

when I was pregnant with her? Was this genetically related? Was it due to the liberal climate of UCB? Oh, my dear daughter, what was all this about?

Endless confusion, endless searching for answers...; however Teresa is still Teresa. She is still the same independent, intelligent, well behaved, beloved daughter of ours. To think of what she must have gone through before coming out, then all the challenges she will have to deal with in the future... she has a long and hard path in front of her. We indeed felt for her. But could this be changed? Could people understand her? How would we talk to our relatives and friends about this? What should we do? Oh well, let nature take its course! There was always tomorrow. Teresa was seldom home anyway.

Life went on as if everything was fine. She graduated from UCB as planned. Right away, she studied for a master degree. Two more years had passed. She finally returned to Southern California, a familiar hometown she had left so long ago, and started her career life right away. Her life was busy and tense. One day, she met Melissa, a bright, light-hearted and passionate "non-Chinese". Teresa's quiet life suddenly got lively. We could feel that she became very happy. Since we realized that being a lesbian is a reality that couldn't be changed, as long as she was happy, we could only go along and let it be. Even so, we still didn't know how to break it to our friends and families. Whenever we had to introduce Melissa, we just said she was our daughter's best friend.

One day, my son told me, "Teresa and Melissa want to get married". "Oh, yah?" That was fine with me, I told my son. Marriage was a symbol of being responsible and respectful for the relationship she had with Melissa. It was a commitment. I was totally okay with that. Knowing that we agreed to their marriage, they were so happy. We were very delighted too until we found out they actually were planning a wedding ceremony. A wedding? Oh, my gosh! A real wedding with blessings from friends and families? Now, what do I do? My daughter is getting married, and she is going to marry a bride, how do I say this to friends and families?

We didn't want to let Teresa and Melissa know our embarrassment and hesitation. But then we didn't know how to break this to friends and families. "Mom, I need addresses to send the invitations out". Oh, no...

Finally, one night after long wrestling with myself, I picked up the phone to call my sister-in-law, "Teresa is getting married, Melissa is going to be her bride, and you are invited to their wedding!"

Now, my husband and I were finally out of the closet. That was my "Story of Self".

Thus I told my story, couldn't help tearing up several times during the course of my speech. Unexpectedly, the whole audience stood up, applauding loudly. I got a standing ovation! I descended the stage in a daze. Many people approached me and thanked me by shaking my hands. Several young Asians came to hug me, with tears in their eyes. According to them, Asian parents are traditional and conservative. Most of them believe that being gay is an immoral choice. Having a gay in the family is a big shame. They prefer their gay children to stay forever in the closet, bearing and hiding the "burden of shame" with themselves, to be in the eyes of their parents "normal offspring." The youths all said Teresa and Melissa were

so lucky to have parents like my husband and me. They don't understand why ever since young they were taught to be honest, truthful, and faithful, but when they tried to do just that, they are not being accepted. They are forced to leave their homes early, confronting the cold world outside to make a living. While within their hearts, they yearn for the love of their families.

The mission of this two-day "Camp courage" is to train leader activists. When gay marriage is put on the voting ballot again, they will urge people to vote for marriage equality. So gay people can get married legally and have the equal rights and benefits. To "normal people", marriage is such a basic right that we take for granted. Some people don't even cherish it. They get married and divorced. Family values and family structure become such a mess out there. Whereas for gay people after working so hard to get the right to build their families, their love strengthened, their families tied.

Gay marriage one day will gain its ground in U.S. for sure. The ping-pong battle is merely waste of resources. People! Keep up the good work. I hope all of you will get support, love, and care from your families and friends.