

LETTER TO A YOUNG PUBLIC INTEREST ATTORNEY

*Kim H. Luu-Ng**

The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.

—Mahatma Gandhi

I am a refugee by definition. When I was two, my family fled Vietnam by boat, but since I was very young, I do not remember my family's refugee experience. Still, I have lived in its shadows my whole life. My family's refugee legacy has in many ways dictated the choices that I have made in my career. For my parents, it was their dream to see me become a successful corporate lawyer. In their eyes, working in the corporate world meant a good income and giving face to the family. Thus, I felt tremendous pressure from my father, who believed in the power of the law to protect and uphold freedom and liberty. To him, my success as an attorney defined his own success and made the escape out of Vietnam worth it.

* Kim H. Luu-Ng is an attorney with the Torture Survivors Project at Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles. She provides legal services to victims of torture in immigration proceedings and works on asylum and refugee issues. She previously served as a detention attorney with the Legal Orientation Program at San Pedro Detention Center, and subsequently, as pro bono coordinator at Mira Loma Detention Center.

Kim started her legal career as a litigation associate at the law firm Reed Smith LLP. She received her JD and MA in Public and International Affairs from the University of Pittsburgh, and graduated *cum laude* with a BA in International Relations from the University of Southern California.

© 2010 Kim H. Luu-Ng. The copyright in each article is owned by the respective author. Except as otherwise provided, the author of each article grants permission for copies of that article to be made for classroom use, provided that each copy is distributed at or below cost, the author and the Journal are identified on each copy, proper notice of copyright is affixed to each copy, and the author and the Los Angeles Public Interest Law Journal, a Project of Community Partners, are notified of the use.

Then, about three years ago, my father swiftly succumbed to pancreatic cancer at the age of 51. Sitting by his side before he passed, I saw in his eyes a tired and weary man who had dedicated every waking moment to his children and community. During his lucid moments, he shared with me that perhaps he had put too much pressure on his children, and encouraged me to pursue a career of my own choosing. It was after my father's passing that I was able to *find* myself at the service of victims of torture, whose stories differ not much from my own family.

Several months after my loss, I permanently left behind the corporate world and joined the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA) as an attorney in the Torture Survivors Project (TSP), which is one of the few programs nationwide that provides comprehensive immigration and social services to survivors of torture. That was my path to public interest law. In this letter, I hope to share with you individual aspects of my career that I have found to be exciting, challenging, and inspiring. By doing so, I hope to impart some lessons I've learned along the way that hopefully will be helpful to you as you *find* your path as a young public interest lawyer.

To begin, one of the most exciting aspects of my career is representing victims of torture in deportation proceedings before federal immigration court. Under U.S. asylum law, an immigrant can obtain asylum if he or she has a well-founded fear that they will be persecuted on the grounds of political opinion, religion, race, sex, or membership in a particular social group. In court, I defend my clients against removal from the U.S. and try to persuade a federal immigration judge why my clients should be granted asylum. In terms of my professional work, few experiences compare with the adrenaline rush sparked by facing off against Department of Homeland Security attorneys in these mostly adversarial proceedings. Prior to the court hearings, as with any trial, significant preparation is required to master the law and the facts. On any given day, I will work with law clerks to prepare direct and cross examination questions, research and draft hearing briefs or motions, and prepare witnesses [including experts] for merits hearings. I also have the privilege of co-counseling with pro bono attorneys from firms like Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher and Lee Tran & Liang on a number of asylum cases. The partnerships have been rewarding

professional experiences, and have also afforded my clients optimal resources to fight their complex legal battles.

As I continue to grow professionally from my work, it is critical to keep training and developing my skills so that I can strengthen my ability to fight for my clients. Substantive law training is important, but I also focus on refining my writing, speaking, and argumentation skills as much as possible. These are the tools of our trade, and if we don't sharpen them often enough, they eventually wither and dull.

After the excitement of trial wanes and the adrenaline subsides, I face one of the most challenging aspects of my career: how to self-sustain when working with such emotionally tolling issues. Whether it's interviewing a client about their torture, or comforting another who fears execution in their home country, advocating for torture survivors brings about unique challenges. The work of representing and advocating for torture survivors and other victims of severe trauma adds an emotional dimension that can lead to distressing and potentially disruptive effects stemming from vicarious and secondary trauma.

As human beings, we have difficulty shielding ourselves from other people's pain. When this exposure occurs on a daily basis, even the strongest and most veteran of attorneys can break. The reality is we are not impervious to the complicated emotions arising from advocating for the poor and powerless, who have suffered great injustice and pain. In fact, studies show that working with severely traumatized clients day in and day out can lead to compassion fatigue, depression, burnout, and other psychological conditions.

Based on my personal experience, the sustainability of this kind of work depends heavily on healthy and well-supported attorneys and staff. After all, how can we as attorneys truly serve the best interests of our clients if we are debilitated by the trauma of serving them? With appropriate structures of support and training, however, the potentially harmful effects arising from this work can be prevented. For example, we were fortunate at LAFLA to successfully obtain a grant from the Center for Victims of Torture to develop a secondary trauma support project that provided secondary trauma counseling and training to TSP advocates. As a result of the success of the pilot project, we have decided to make it a permanent fixture of TSP. Personally, I've learned that I can only best serve my

clients and sustain my ability to do so by taking care of my mind, spirit, and body.

Finally, the inspirational parts of my career are what I embrace most. I'd like to share a conversation that I had with a client earlier this year that illustrates my point. Let's call this client John. On an early Saturday morning, I drove to John's apartment so that he could sign some documents for a motion to reopen to be filed that day. If granted, the motion would enable him to reunite with his children, from whom he had been separated for over six years. John fled his country because the military stormed into his home in the midnight hour, raped his wife (killing her), and beat him with rifles until they thought he was dead. Once an influential pro-democracy figure in his native country, John was forced to flee to the US an impoverished man, leaving behind his surviving children and the only life he knew. That brisk winter morning, John told me that the only thing in his life that made it worth living was the chance to reunite with his children. I immediately felt the pressure bearing down hard on my shoulders. Perceptive to my unease, John then looked at me and sincerely shared that even if the US government did not grant the motion, he was grateful for the hope and possibility of reuniting with his children. Two months later, the government granted the motion and John is waiting today to be reunited with his children in the near future.

My conversation with John reminded me that while attorneys bear great responsibilities, we are also endowed with the gift of bringing hope to our clients. I know that as lawyers we ultimately strive to give our clients positive results, but the gift of hope is a powerful thing too. Knowing that I can bring hope and possibility to my clients is really inspiring, and makes my work even more gratifying and meaningful.

Since I began working LAFLA, I have learned many truths about the challenges and difficulties faced by immigrants in today's legal environment, particularly survivors of torture and other refugees. I cannot pretend to understand the fears that engross the lives of my clients, nor can I begin to relate to their experiences of torture, but I do greatly marvel at their resilience. They face great odds to escape to this country alive and then they challenge the system head on to seek freedom, safety, and security for themselves and their families. Their strength resonates deeply with me because

that is what compelled my parents to risk our family's lives to flee Vietnam. If my dad knew what I was doing today, I think he would be proud.

Sincerely,

Kim H. Luu-Ng