The stories that shape us

Hmong memory and Mennonite faith in intercultural community

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In the Hmong tradition, when a woman marries, she usually goes to live with her husband's family. Shortly after my wedding, I packed all my belongings and joined my husband's household. Today, we continue to all live together—now as three generations under one roof. Yet for many Hmong families, this way of life was painfully interrupted in the 1960s, as the Laotian Civil War and the Secret War fractured communities and uprooted households that had been established in Laos for generations. Song Moua, my father-in-law, endured unspeakable tragedy and loss, much like many other families affected by war. Sadly, he has not been under the same roof as his three siblings since they all fled Laos nearly fifty-six years ago. Last summer, however, this long separation was about to end, as all four siblings were invited to our home for a grand reunion.

The centrepiece of this reunion was a gathering at our home, where we had invited close friends and additional extended family to share a meal together. Before we partook in the meal, along with children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews, my father-in-law and his siblings each took a turn to share their memories surrounding the fateful events that had separated them. The atmosphere was heavy with grief but also filled with a quiet strength as each sibling found the courage to speak. Around our dining room, my father-in-law, his two brothers, and his younger sister began to share their recollections, their voices weaving together the fragments of a story torn apart by war and displacement.

It was a touching and monumental reunion, with each sibling providing their perspective of what had happened to them when *teb chaws puas* (when the Laotian Civil War unfolded). My father-in-law, typically a man who rarely displayed his emotions, shared his journey of loss and hope with tears rolling down his cheeks, revealing all of the deep pain and hurt he had experienced.

He was the second-oldest of four children, with one older brother and two younger siblings—another brother and a sister. He was only a child when his mother had died in childbirth giving birth to his sister, the youngest of them all. He shared a memory from that time of needing to take on the responsibility of caring for his baby sister. Too young to be left alone, he

would bring her with him to school, slipping her inside his shirt to keep her hidden. He remembered the small, tender routines of caring for her, pre-chewing food so she could eat and doing whatever he could to make sure she survived. But he was only a child himself, and eventually they had to let her go when another Hmong family offered to raise her as their own child. With that came another painful farewell, not knowing if or when they would meet again.

Rumours of war had already reached those remote Hmong villages located in the rural mountains of Laos. Shortly after, the Hmong village in which they lived was attacked by Pathet Lao soldiers. Many villagers fled but my father-in-law's father hesitated, held back by his concern for their farm animals. This decision cost him his life, leaving my father-in-law without both parents.

Hearing their stories made me realize how little I knew of their struggles, and how much pain and trauma they carried with them as they were forced to quickly leave their homes and all that was familiar to forge a path forward. I had heard and read many tragic stories from this time period in Hmong history. Yet there is something profoundly different when those stories are no longer distant or abstract—when they belong not just to "the Hmong people" but to your own family, to the lives of those you love and call your own. Hearing these stories first-hand leaves an indelible impact on our lives. These are stories that should not be forgotten. They are important for knowing who we are, for honouring the generations before us, and for shaping generations yet to come.

I am a second-generation Hmong Mennonite Canadian in my forties. Yet I know so little about the journeys of my parents and grandparents, and even less about my great-grandparents. Because very little has been written down, many of their oral stories risk being lost with the passing of the older generation. I am deeply grateful that we had the opportunity to hear my father-in-law's story, and I will always treasure the time spent together listening to their struggles and witnessing their vulnerability.

Unfortunately, however, their struggles didn't end there. Once my father-in-law and mother-in-law arrived in Canada, they had to learn a new language, navigate a new culture, adapt to a new climate, and discover what it meant to belong in a new land. Those of us who grew up in Canada witnessed first-hand our parents' resilience and grit. They worked hard at their jobs without ever taking a sick day, even when they were ill. They picked up overtime whenever possible, sometimes even taking on a second part-time job when ends still didn't meet. For that we are forever grateful.

At the same time, we recognize that their determination to build a new life did not give them space to heal from past traumas.

All this has led me to wonder how the church might serve as a place for truth-telling and lament, providing healing for all generations. But before this can happen, it is important to recognize that sharing these memories is not always easy. This realization came to me during a conversation with Sue Park-Hur and Pablo Kim Sun. Upon accepting the invitation to contribute to this issue, I participated in a Zoom call with Sue and Pablo to discuss the theme and potential ideas for our articles. I had met both of them previously at other Mennonite events. So it was wonderful to reconnect and to share our work and experiences in the communities we served. In our conversation, Sue shared about a time when she had been asked by an organization to consult on a project addressing a difficult past. She explained how sometimes retelling our stories can actually re-traumatize those sharing them. She noted how this particular project provided support through onsite counsellors and additional resources to help participants navigate the process safely.

Sue's insight reminded me that any space created for truth-telling and lament must be intentional, sensitive, and prepared to support those who are sharing their stories. While the prospect of gathering these stories can feel exciting, it is always essential to prioritize the well-being of the individuals who lived through these traumatic experiences. Healing is rarely straightforward; oftentimes the pain, trauma, and grief associated with past events remain embedded with the memories.

Although we did not have counsellors present at our reunion, the presence of trusted family and friends surrounding my father-in-law and his siblings created an environment where they could share their pain without fear of judgment. This atmosphere of care fostered openness in storytelling. There was no expectation or pressure to speak; each sibling chose to share at their own pace, offering their perspective as it fit into the unfolding history. A close friend of my father-in-law was also present, offering words of encouragement when emotions grew too heavy for speech. Together, these elements sustained a supportive and healing space for their sharing.

Reflecting on the past of our Hmong community will inevitably bring sorrow and grief, given the many family members, friends, and neighbours who were lost during that time. Yet the church can be a place where difficult stories can be shared, vulnerability can be assured, and healing can begin. When these stories are brought into the open, they no longer remain private burdens; instead, they offer the community opportunities to bear witness, provide support, and walk alongside one another in the healing process. Creating this space will require ongoing attention and reflection. However, as I learned from Sue and Pablo, it is not enough to simply gather to tell our stories; there must be intentional action to cultivate trust by listening deeply and naming the wounds that have remained unspoken.

In my congregation, I have witnessed glimpses of what this might look like. At First Hmong Mennonite Church, we provide space during our worship services for members to share their testimonies. I have heard congregational members speak openly about moments of struggle as well as times of triumph. In doing so, they allow the congregation to enter into their healing alongside them. These moments of sharing illustrate how storytelling can foster empathy, build understanding across generations, and create the beginnings of a shared space where grief, resilience, and hope can be acknowledged and honoured. Like our family reunion, moments like these draw us closer together as a community and remind us that even painful histories can become sources of healing and strength.

There are a number of different ways that our church could intentionally create spaces for sharing these stories. In worship, this could be a series of services centred on storytelling, including liturgies of lament and healing. In smaller settings, story circles or intergenerational groups can provide safe environments for deeper sharing, perhaps with trained facilitators to guide the process. Creative projects such as recording oral histories, launching a congregational podcast, or curating archives and exhibits of community stories would help preserve memories for future generations. Community events that combine storytelling with cultural traditions, or joint gatherings with Indigenous and other immigrant communities, can further build solidarity and mutual understanding. Underlying all of these practices is the ongoing work of training leaders in trauma-informed care, cultivating trust through deep listening, and making storytelling a regular rhythm of discipleship.

My hope is that holding the stories of our ancestors alongside our faith will challenge us to live faithfully in ways that honour both memory and justice. We are grateful for the refuge Canada provided for our family, for the opportunities that allowed them to rebuild their lives and for the Mennonite churches and Canadians who made this possible.

At the same time, we are also mindful that this land had a history long before our arrival, and we are aware of the ongoing presence and struggles of its Indigenous Peoples. Canada is built on lands that are the traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples, some unceded and others governed by treaties. Their histories of displacement, trauma, and resilience intersect with, yet remain distinct from, the stories of immigrant communities like ours. To hear our own ancestors' voices fully is also to recognize and respect the ongoing struggles of those whose land we inhabit today, especially as we begin to learn what it means to belong to a new land. Gratitude for our own refuge must be accompanied by humility, listening, and acting in solidarity with Indigenous communities.

As I reflect on the reunion with my father-in-law and his siblings, I am reminded that storytelling is not merely a way to preserve the past; it is a

call to responsibility in the present. The stories of war, loss, migration, and hope shape who we are. They inform how we live in community and guide how we extend care and justice to others. If the church can be a space where these stories are shared and honoured—where lament is allowed, where intergenerational and intercultural understanding is nurtured, and where healing is pursued—then it can model a deeper, more expansive vision of belonging. In listening to our elders, in witnessing their pain and resilience, and in learning to hold multiple truths at once, we participate in a sacred work: the work of remembering, reconciling, and striving to live faithfully in a complex world.

In recent years the Mennonite church has begun to live into being an intercultural church and broadcasting stories that do not centre around the traditional Russian and Swiss Mennonite historical traditions. To decolonize discipleship as an intercultural church, we need to recognize and value stories that have been historically silenced or overlooked (whether that was by choice or not) by listening to marginalized voices. The Hmong have been part of the Mennonite story for forty years now, and by recounting stories like my father-in-law's, we honor each other's stories across cultures as one body in Christ.

The reunion of my father-in-law and his siblings reminds me of the profound impact that sharing our stories can have—not only on those who speak but on everyone who listens. Witnessing their vulnerability and courage brought our family closer together. It created space for grief and healing, and it made the abstract history of our people tangible and deeply personal. Our experiences as immigrants, shaped by displacement and resilience, intersect with our faith by calling us to act with gratitude, humility, and justice in the world around us. In the same way, the Mennonite church has the potential to cultivate spaces where difficult stories are heard and honoured, where communities can bear witness, offer support, and grow together in understanding.

By holding the stories of our ancestors alongside our faith, we are reminded that belonging in a new land carries responsibilities: listening carefully, acknowledging past traumas, and walking in solidarity with Indigenous communities whose histories and struggles we now inhabit. Just as our reunion revealed the strength and resilience of one family, intentional storytelling within the church can strengthen the bonds of intercultural community, helping us all to belong more fully, heal more deeply, and bear witness faithfully to the histories that shape us.

About the author

Mollee Moua is a second-generation Hmong Mennonite Canadian living in Kitchener, Ontario, with her husband and their four sons.