

Running from Death: My Family of Cambodian Refugees and the Pilgrims

Imagine this. You live in a world where everyone you know and love faces the threat of death for their religion as well as other factors. The world as you know it is crumbling, and you can't stay in your home country anymore and face persecution. These are the problems my family (Cambodian refugees) and the Pilgrims both faced. The journey of my family and the Pilgrims is eerily similar, but also dissimilar in certain ways. They were dissimilar when trying to leave their respective countries, similar in facing death and religious persecution, and similar in their initial struggles while settling in America. Not only do these stories eerily intertwine, but I am half white and half Asian, and I can trace my bloodline back to 3 people on the Mayflower as well as Cambodian refugees. This provides for an even eerier comparison.

Firstly, my family and the Pilgrims were clearly different in attempting to leave their corresponding countries. My family was heavily prevented from leaving their country to travel to a Thai refugee camp. There were bombs all along the Thai-Khmer border to deter the Khmer Rouge's victims from escaping. There was also little transportation and a whole lot of people around this border. They were people trying to prevent future refugees from escaping. Many Cambodian people died to these landmines, of which some still exist today. However, in contrast to the Khmer people, the Pilgrims had a relatively easy time leaving England. The only thing that stopped a portion of them from leaving was the weather. Other than that, there were no structural forces preventing the Puritans from leaving, such as the monarch stopping them from leaving and forcing them to stay in England. This is the main difference between my family and the Puritans. The Cambodian refugees were almost trapped, while the Puritans were almost forced

out and set free.

In contrast to this dissimilarity, the Puritans and my family were both similar in the way that they both faced death if they stayed in their home countries. In Cambodia, almost everyone except the ruling few faced nothing but execution, famine, and overwork. 25% of the Cambodian population died to one of these three causes. My family was also Buddhist, which was a persecuted religion punishable by death. Therefore, it was almost certain that if my family remained (in a societal status that was sought out for persecution, i.e. the educated city-dwellers) that they would die. The situation was the same for the Pilgrims. At the time in England, the church and the state were not separate. That means that following a different religion than the official church constituted treason, which at the time was punishable by hanging. Thus, if the Pilgrims/Puritans had stayed, they would have faced religious persecution by death, just like my family would have. In this way, my family and the Pilgrims are extremely similar.

Finally, my family and the Pilgrims were similar in that they both struggled while adapting to settling in America. When my family first came to America from a Thai refugee camp, they were extremely poor, and lived in government housing and ate food from a soup kitchen. They struggled with making ends meet and making enough money for my grandfather to take English classes so he could get a college education. My mother, aunt, and uncle all wore clothing from the church donation box. Yet again, there was barely enough money for food. But as my family got acclimated to America, they were able to move up in life and make more money. Now everyone in my family owns a lucrative business and drives any car they want to drive. A happy ending that shows they were able to create a stable life and raise families. The Pilgrims had similar problems, with insufficient food and insufficient housing for the cold New

England weather. Half the Pilgrims died in the first year they were in the Mayflower colony, but eventually, as they got acclimated to the harsh weather and food conditions, they were able to build a stable society, one that was perfect for raising families. This is now a society that has evolved into much of America today, with other colonists branching out and creating new colonies such as Providence in Rhode Island or New Haven in Connecticut. A happy ending with a stable society. A happy ending with a stable family.

Overall, the story of my family's journey to America compared to the Pilgrims was very similar. They differed in some aspects, but overall certain parts of their journeys mimic each other, such as the struggles they faced in their home countries and the struggles they faced in their new countries as well. I would even say that this journey and these problems are not unique to either Cambodian refugees or the Pilgrims. They are a part of every immigrants journey to America, the struggles back home, the reason for wanting to move, and the hardship of acclimating to the climate of America. I'm sure there are millions out there that can tell a similar story to the writing in this essay. New people immigrate to the United States every day. Each one of them has a unique story to tell. It is our job to make them feel welcome, as we realize not every family is able to ascend so quickly as my family or the Pilgrims did. Some struggle more than others, and we extend our hand out to them during this trying period. I do not know why some families must remain in refugee camps or in poverty, while I have the luxury to live my life the way I do. We must remember the privilege we have in having enough to eat and a roof over our heads and we must help those that don't. Most importantly of all, we must remember everyone in America is a descendant of an immigrant or colonizer, except the Native Americans. This struggle is the immigrant experience, and it is a story that will be told for ages to come.

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