
MY MOTHER: AN UNWRITTEN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

by Sinith Sitthiraksa



My mother gets up in the early morning and works in her garden. It is also our in-house pharmacy.

*This is my 75-year-old mother.
She has never applied for a job in her life.
She has never had a resume.
If she had one, she would probably write only a short one-
sentence resume: a housewife for 58 years.*

My Mother and Me and My Mother and Trees

One day last winter, my classmates and I had a deep and broad discussion on the topic of environmental education curriculum.¹ As the only student from Thailand in the class, I was surprised to see that many of the colourful curriculum guidebooks provided for Cana-

dian students were designed to *teach the children here how to touch, to hug and to kiss the trees.*

Why is this subject and activity being taught?

What's wrong with the relationship between nature and human beings here?



A planting tip: banana trees like recently burnt soil and freshly cut green grass. (Drawing by Ann S. Walker, International Women's Tribune Centre.)

This is something very strange and unusual compared to my own experiences. I have grown up with nature always around me. At my house in Bangkok, just stepping into the backyard I can pick up any kind of fruit I like: papaya, mango, jackfruit, guava, banana, sugar apple and rose apple, etc. It is my mother's place. It is because of her that I still experience nature as alive inside of me.

"Banana-trees need burning soil and green grass as fertilizer." That is what she had learned from her grandfather. Her plump and healthy banana-trees are growing day by day, night by night. What a tree of life! My Mother never buys aluminum foil or plastic wrap. She uses banana leaves and string made from the dry banana trunk. There have also been the many different kinds of nature toys that she had made for me from the banana tree when I was young.

Her other magic plants are bamboo and coconut. We use bamboo shoots and coconut milk for cooking. My Mother also makes a ruler, rake, broom and fruit picking utilities from those plants. Burning coconut husk is a natural insect repellent that keeps mosquitoes away.

Next, let's see what she has in her kitchen garden: lemon grass, basil, ginger, galingale, chili and pumpkin, etc. These herbs are not only used as ingredients in cooking but also as multi-purpose in-house medicines, i.e., lime and salt for coughs and sore throat, tamarind leaves and red onions in boiling water as a cold treatment.

Bit by bit, piece by piece, my mother collects old bamboo branches, rotten wood and coconut shells to use as her fuel wood. She dries her fish and chili in the sun and during the rainy season she stores rain water in jars for drinking.

It is ironic that after travelling 10,000 miles to study many new environmental subjects with many new technical terms (i.e., *reduce-reuse-recycle*, *sustainable development*, *resource management*, *energy conservation*, *indigenous knowledge* and *ecofeminism*), that all along this new knowledge was already taught to me, on a practical level, year by year, by my Mother.

She is my first environmental education teacher who taught me the concepts and practices of environmental education through her unwritten environmental education curriculum.



Her prescription for a cold: a handful of tamarind leaves, some red onions, and boiling water.

Direction: inhale and exhale the steam, take a bath and put the concoction on your head. (Drawing by Ann S. Walker, International Women's Tribune Centre.)

There is no need to pay for "hydro" as she often uses her in-house energy resources. The light wood, which produces heavy smoke, is used to start the fire. Later, the hard wood is put in as the main firewood. That is her indigenous knowledge on fuel woods. NOTE: Her copper rice cooker on the stove is 58 years old!!!!

In doing dishes, there is no need for dishwashing liquid and scrub pad. The coconut husk and ash (in a small coconut-shell container; can you see it?) serve as her natural dishwashing utilities.



Women's housework is invisible and unpaid. What is worse is she has to do 2 or 3 things at the same time. While waiting for her rice to boil, she sometimes sharpens her knives.

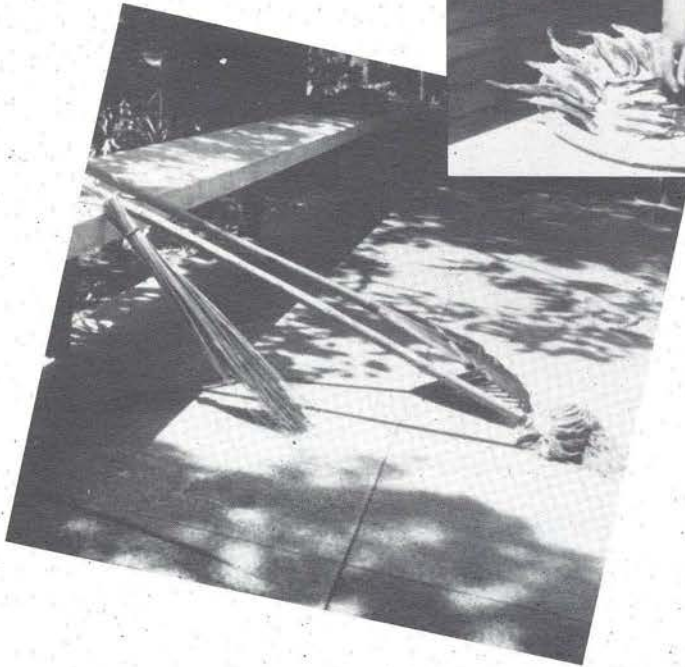
My Mother and Her Family's Folklore

"What is the most significant moment in the life of your mother?" Have you ever sat down knee-to-knee and asked your mother some of these questions?

- What are her childhood and teenage memories?
- How was the relationship with her husband after getting married?
- When and what were the biggest changes in her life? If she could, what kinds of changes would she want to make in her life?
- What activities please her most? How much time can she afford to spend on them?
- How does she want to spend the rest of her life?

If we ask ourselves what we know about our own mother, we may be surprised to find that the answer seems to be both everything and nothing at the same time. Influenced by "Women's Stories/Women's Lives: An Oral History/Photography Workshop," conducted by the oral historian and women's activist, Cindy Cohen, I slowly started to reflect on my mother's folklore with very mixed feelings: "It's too personal and too strange for the Canadian Community. Who will benefit? What can they learn from a third-world Mom's life story?" However, David Smiley, a Toronto social photographer, thought differently. He valued it as a critical "cross-cultural, cross-national and cross-generational oral history and photography project: "Use whatever tools and channels you can: overseas

Drying fish when the sun shines on her bamboo basket.



The bamboo tree is used in making a fruit-picker tool. These are her natural products: a mop-handle and a rake made of bamboo.

How many plastic bags did you use during these past ten years? It was around 3650 bags, if you used 1 per day. My mother has sustainable bags... Look at her basket collection... The biggest one on the right has been used for almost 10 years.

calls, fax or even computer networking to communicate to Thailand to get the project done!"

For him, it seems like the story of 'regular' or 'disempowered' people are important as a form of personal expression, a perspective from which to view historical change, and a point of departure for understanding and transforming relationships.

There was much kind support from my classmates, as they helped me brainstorm leading questions to guide the interviews with my Mother. I phoned home many times to complete the interview process. My relatives helped by taking current photographs and reproducing the historical ones from family albums.

It became a family reunion. My eldest sister, who is 18 years younger than my Mother, recounted some of her own past experiences of my Mother, some of which go as far back as the Second World War. My other sisters helped by displaying my Mom's basket collection and recording her lullaby songs. What happened as the process was going on reminded me of what I have learned in oral history workshop; that is, as Cindy Cohen said, not only do "people come to value their own experiences and perspectives when their oral expression is listened to, recorded and presented with dignity," but the process and outcome is also valued by those who are intimately close to them.

The Last Moment

It is Tuesday, May 7, 1991. While I am waiting for the last set of pictures from Thailand, I look back and ask myself, what have I learned from the course "Photography for Social Change" and from developing this final project as part of the course's requirements. Paradoxically, the answer is so simple and so complicated at the same time. Firstly, in learning about my Mother's life, I have been given the chance to find my roots. Secondly, I learned more about how "to write" something down from the "unwritten world." Thirdly, it gave me the understanding of what my instructor has said: "a shared understanding of the past and present is critical in order for communities to work together to shape their future."

How can I end this project without saying something to my Mother personally. She is going to be 75 on May 11, one day before the opening of the exhibition.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY MOTHER!

I have worked on this display intentionally as a birthday card for my Mom; the biggest card that I have ever made.

"I wish you could see it and I'm looking forward to celebrating your 100-year-old birthday, Mom!"



It is said, "if you educate a man, you educate a person; if you educate a woman, you educate the whole family." Her long-lived teaching tool, a slate, was used and reused and reused again and again from her first to sixth child.

Notes:

1. This photo-story was part of my final project for "Environmental Education" at York University and "Photography for Social Change: A Hands-On Course for Community Workers" offered by the Moment Project in winter 1991.

As the goal of the photography course was to focus on exploring the uses of photography in community action, this project was designed and developed collaboratively with other community workers' photographic projects to exhibit their current work and address issues such as homelessness, native health, domestic workers, immigrant and refugee women etc. in order to support work for social change. All exhibits were presented at the Mayworks: 6th Annual Festival of Working People and the Arts, May 12-26, 1991 in Toronto.

Later, "My Mother" Project travelled to many Women, Environment and Development conferences in North America, Japan, Thailand and the Global Forum '92 in Rio de Janeiro:

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I wish she would let me write her resume. If I could I would list her experiences as follows: gardener, agriculturalist, cook, entertainer, tool & toy inventor and maker, traditional doctor, resources manager, energy conservationist, food scientist, home economist, teacher, sustainable developer, ecologist andenvironmentalist.