

## **Chinese Intro:**

*Hello. My name is Luan, and this is my husband Michael.*

*Thank you for taking the time to be here today. You are all very involved parents who love and care for your children very much. Thanks also to CBCOC for inviting us to this event.*

*Mike and I are here to offer some of our perspectives and experiences as children of first generation immigrants, Ivy League students and now second generation Chinese Americans navigating adulthood and parenting ourselves. We hope that some of what we share will be useful to your families and your own children's development.*

*Here, I will switch to English, because my Chinese is only conversational. I read, process and study the Bible in English. Also, my husband is an American Born Chinese and communicates primarily in English. Translation of key points will be provided by Tiffany on the Powerpoint.*

## **Part 1:**

Luan: I was born in Shanghai as an only child under the one child policy. From the ages of 11 months to 3 years old, I lived for long stretches of time with my grandparents on my dad's side, while my parents were working at their government assigned jobs and finishing their education after the Cultural Revolution. From a very young age, I liked to draw, so my parents obtained rolls of butcher paper and taped it to the walls, so I would always have a canvas.

I was born left handed, but my grandparents were very traditional, so they restrained my left hand and forced to me to do everything with my right hand. Shortly after that, I developed a severe speech impediment, which can sometimes happen with a change of handedness. As with all childhoods, mine was a mix of happy, exciting, sad, and frightening memories. I felt secure with my grandparents and my uncles, but at a young age, did not have a firm understanding of what my mother's role was. I loved fresh Shanghainese spring rolls, boiled soybeans and riding my tricycle in the alley in front of my house. My mom would call me over to her at the door and hand me a half a cucumber or a carrot to gnaw on while I

played. Inside the home, things were sometimes tumultuous as both my parents were young and strong-willed. Parental fights were a fixture of my childhood.

At age 6, we immigrated to the United States, to a suburb north of Chicago, having been sponsored by my mother's mother. In truth, we were the last branch of my mother's family to remain in China. My great grandfather had attended college in the US, gone home to Shanghai and then escaped again with most of his family in 1950. Only my grandmother, his eldest daughter, remained.

At that time, it seems to me that we were only allowed to carry \$300 into the country with us. We rented some rooms from a lady in her 90s who still lived in the house. Therefore, I had to be on my best behavior at all time, could not have friends over and behave as young children naturally do. My parents found whatever unskilled jobs they could find until they could get into their own fields. This was a difficult time for all of us.

I didn't feel a very strong attachment to my parents and had been forced to leave my grandparents. American food tasted raw and unrefined to me. I was not used to riding in cars everywhere, and I could not understand what was going on around me.

On my first day of school, both my parents needed to show up to work, so I was sent on the school bus alone. I knew very few words of English and had a note pinned to my jacket which gave details of who to call if I got lost. At school, I had no idea what was going on. The school I attended was in a very socio-economically diverse area, so some of the children brought their own problems from home. As a result, I was teased and bullied relentlessly - for my different clothing, for my lack of English skills, for my speech impediment.

At home, my parents were stressed, trying to figure out how to stabilize and improve our lives, each working two jobs. There were more fights. One night, I remember sitting at the dinner table and realizing that I did not want to be alive anymore. There was simply no place for me to set down my problems: no one cared at school and no one could listen at home. Being a sensitive child, I easily picked up on my parents' stress and anxiety, and it shaped my thinking. I didn't realize that panic attacks had already started, as a result of the fact that I felt any mistake I made could cost my family everything - that I had to be perfect.

Still there were fond memories from that time. I started to play the violin. My dad taught me how to ride a two-wheeler bike. My parents took me to the local park and built snowmen with me when it snowed.

*Mike: I was born in New York about 18 months after my older brother was born. Both my parents were scientific researchers – my dad a professor at Rockefeller University and my mother working at the New York Blood Center. Both my parents had young careers at that point and were working full time. As a young child, I remember spending a lot of time with my brother. When my brother went off to school, I spent my days with a “grandma”, a nanny who watched over me. Mostly, she handled household chores, and I watched a lot of TV. My mother did endeavor to enrich our lives; for example, I attended a good day care, and I began to play violin around that time as well.*

*Due to my father’s health issues, our family decided to move to Fresno, California shortly after my sister was born. I was 5 at that time, and I don’t remember the transition being too difficult. However, my parents have told me now that it was a stressful time for them. Someone had swindled them out of the money they had received from selling their house in New York. My father was trying to get a lab established at his new job, and my mother was trying to take care of 3 children. Thankfully, I was mostly shielded from this, and I still spent a lot of time playing with my brother. Although it was difficult to make very good friends at school, I made several friends at church. In fact, I believe that the connections and community that our family made at church eased our overall transition to this new place.*

*Even though Fresno might seem to be a poor place to raise a family, with little resources for children compared to a place like Orange County, my best teachers were there. I attended an all GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) school and I still remember fondly my 2<sup>nd</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. In particular, my 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, who was actually a farmer by trade, not only was very good at imparting knowledge but he also tried to help us solidify our character.*

## **Park 1 Life Lessons:**

- Our parents did the best they could with the information they had. There is no such thing as a perfect family and ideal circumstances, so sometimes, good enough has to be good enough.
- Try not to send your children away from you, and seek an attachment, a connection with your children. There are important developmental stages that happen in early childhood, which must be mastered so that subsequent developmental stages can build on them. In order to develop into a healthy adult, a child needs a primary attachment figure. A child needs to feel safe, and one of our primary tasks as parents is to create a safe place for our children to process their experiences. This means giving time, attention and respectful listening. A stressed and pressured brain under attack is not a brain that can learn and acquire new information and skills. It is physiologically impossible.
- Studies have shown that the number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is directly correlated to school performance and wellbeing later in life. Here's the problem: We are not perfect parents, and the world we live in is not perfect. Not only can we not control everything our children are exposed to, we often lack the self-control to behave in a loving way to our own children.

The answer is found in giving your child a firm foundation in Jesus Christ – letting them know that even when things seem out of control, God is in control. I (Luan) think this would have made a big difference in early childhood. And in order for us to be the parents we want to be, to not feel out of control, we need to know that Someone has forgiven our past, helps us in our present and has good planned for our future. That Someone is Jesus Christ. That Christ died for our sins (1 Cor 15:3-4), paid for them on the cross, that He wishes to give every believer power to live through the Holy Spirit (John 14:16) and promises His presence to us always, that He has prepared a secure and eternal home for us (John 14:3). There is no firmer ground than this on which a person can stand in life.

## **Part 1 Questions for Reflection**

When you think about your child, what are your primary concerns for them?

When you stand in your child's shoes, what are their primary concerns right now? Where might they be struggling?

What can you do to make them feel supported, safe?

What do you think of the gospel framework Jesus offers? What are some of your questions?

## **Part 2:**

Luan: By the age of 10, my parents had found work in their industries and we had purchased a home in a more affluent part of the Chicago suburbs. At my new school, I suddenly became a "regular" American kid. I made many friends, attended birthday parties, sleepovers, etc. In fifth grade, a teacher noticed that I might be academically gifted, so I received an IQ test, and it turns out I was. I was placed in a gifted and talented program, similar to the GATE program in California.

With regard to school, my parents recognized that I was internally driven, with a tendency toward perfectionism. To the best of their ability, they backed off from asking to review grades and report cards. They also did not hover over projects and papers, leaving me largely to my own devices. In high school, when I would feel overly pressured, my mom would write a sick note for me and take me to the latest exhibit at the art museum.

I played the violin, and after my parents purchased a karaoke machine and recognized that I could sing, I took voice lessons. I had no tutors. Except for violin lessons and performances, my parents never drove me anywhere special after school. I just participated in the classes and clubs offered by my schools.

Learning to write well has been a great gift in my life. The high school I attended had a very strong English department, and the fundamentals I learned there have served me in all areas of life, from processing my own thoughts to the corporate world.

Looking back on those years, my parents and I had cultural and language differences, but we found common bonds. Classic literature was one of them. They introduced me to Hugo, de Balzac and Dostoevsky. I would also take long bike rides with my dad in a forest preserve near our house. On the weekends, we would bike 14 miles to the botanical gardens and 14 miles home. Thanks to being an only child, our family dynamics became very tight, and I was encouraged to express myself and my thoughts.

My only big rebellion in my teenage years was that I became a Christian. Prior to this, our family practiced no religion, my dad being culturally Buddhist and my mom believer herself Ba'hai. A friend invited me to a youth group event when I was 14, and I knew very quickly that this faith was the answer to the deep loneliness, isolation and insecurity I felt. Learning about the claims of Christianity and the Bible were like a homecoming for me. My parents worried that I was spending too much time at church and neglecting the great opportunities I had academically. However, God's grace helped me to excel in school while not putting all of my hopes there. In many ways, God saved me from myself and my own tendency to become overwhelmed and stressed. Christianity taught me that life was bigger than grades, class rank and material success (Luke 12:24). It taught me that God would accomplish in my life what concerned me (Psalm 138:8). It taught me to not focus exclusively on myself but be concerned for the wellbeing of others (Phil. 2:4). God taught me not to waste time comparing myself to other people, not to take shortcuts and lie to get my way, not to be arrogant or proud (1 Cor. 13). It taught me that when I worked, I should do it with all my heart as for God (Col 3:23). Yale was actually my first choice university, and my parents supported that desire, so when I was accepted, off I went.

My leaving for college was a huge change for my parents, who suddenly became empty nesters. My mom missed me very much and started attending church because she knew that I spent a lot of time there and was well known there. Through frequent letters with me and conversations with the people she met at church, she found God's message of love was for her as well, and accepted Christ during my sophomore year of college. My dad observed all of this, our transformation, read *Mere Christianity* and many works by C.S. Lewis along with my mom, and was baptized shortly after I graduated college.

Mike:

*Around 5<sup>th</sup> grade, we moved to Irvine, CA. This was a more difficult transition, I think because we were older. We had to leave behind familiar surroundings and friends. I don't know all the reasons why we moved but I'm sure that the quality of schools, the opportunities for better work, the nicer climate, and access to more Chinese food all played a part.*

*My mother, in particular, was intensely interested in improving her children, so she got us into good schools, found good violin and piano teachers, and tried to help us be more outspoken. She saw my brother and I as soft-spoken individuals and tried to remedy this by enrolling us in debate, drama and other public speaking classes. Sometimes, there were no classes like these for children my age, so I ended up in public speaking classes with kids much older than me. As you might imagine, I was already afraid of speaking publicly, so speaking in front of people who already looked down at me was traumatizing.*

*Also, in the vein of improving my situation, I was moved in the midst of middle school to a supposedly better program across town. Both are highly acclaimed schools in Irvine – Rancho San Joaquin and Venado – but one was reportedly better than the other. At this age, it was difficult to move, leaving behind many good friends. I had a teacher with certain idiosyncrasies that were difficult to learn and navigate. At one point that year, I became bitterly depressed and wrote several dark essays that worried my teacher leading to a parent-teacher conference.*

*As you can see, if the sole focus had been on improving me academically, things might have been disastrous. But, it wasn't. One of the crucial things my mother did during that time was establish a daily devotional routine for me where I spent time reading the Bible daily and praying. By the grace of God, I believed what I read and placed my faith on God himself. It was an early faith, but it saw me through the rest of high school. I went to University High School which was already quite rigorous and competitive back then. While many friends spent countless late nights studying and working on projects, I continued to spend time with God daily and made a commitment to a local church where I attended and served faithfully. I believed Matthew 6:33 in that if I sought His kingdom first, the rest would follow. To be sure, I worked hard academically, but I tried to place God*

*first. In the end, I spent much less time studying and working than my peers, but God gave me a great opportunity to go to Yale where I met my wife.*

## **Part 2 Life Lessons:**

- In order for children not to be swayed by outside influences, they have to be firmly grounded, attracted and committed to the culture and values of their own household. (from Q&A) We take frequent family dates with our children, during which we'll select a new place to explore, or stay in and play board games or do creative projects. Sometimes, we'll split up and have one-on-one dates with each child. When the child feels like they have been heard and understood, they are naturally more eager to listen and return the respect.

We also frequently use language describing our family as a team. We have observed that in many Asian households, mothers take care of almost everything, ending up like a 24 hour child sitter and maid. Instead, we tell our children that the family, the household, does not work without them and their contributions. We lay age-appropriate responsibilities on them, which actually makes them feel better, because they feel valued and respected. They begin to learn mastery and see themselves as capable.

Family is a God-provided form of *identity* which can mitigate, buffer and help overcome many of life's stressors, such as difficulty making friendships, disappointments at school or work, and many other challenges.

- Children are not created the same, and the starting line is not the same for each person. There is a fundamental difference in paradigm between expecting your child to fit into a pre-established societal mold, and seeing and accepting them for how they were created and working with them to develop their God-given strengths. The first can result in a lot of frustration, disappointment and strain on the parent-child relationship. In the more positive, accepting model, you and your child are on the same side, and they are aware that your efforts are for them.



- We can't stress enough the importance of being able to say sorry to your children. Often, there is a fear that if we admit imperfection, we will lose face or respect in the eyes of our children, and that should be avoided at all costs. In fact, it is a primary responsibility of parents to offer their children a balanced, realistic worldview. When something is crazy, it is important to name it as crazy for your children. If you yell at your children and never call it wrong for them, never apologize, suddenly the wrongness of yelling comes into question for them. Their worldview becomes unstable and confused. In addition, apologizing teaches children the importance of second chances and helps them practice forgiveness. They learn to ask for forgiveness and accept second chances as well. The Christian discipline of daily confession and repentance is actually a very healthy thing, though it actually takes God's grace to practice.

## **Part 2 Questions for Reflection:**

What are some core values of your family? What are some of the values, interests, and activities that are unique to our family?

Where do you and your children have common ground? How can you do foster that common ground?

What are some defining characteristics of your child(ren)? How can you develop these characteristics?

How can you see the Christian faith as an asset to a developing child?

### **Part 3:**

*Mike: When I was younger, getting into a good college seemed like the end of long journey. Honestly, when I got to Yale, I felt like I had made it. In reality, it was just the beginning of a long adventure. We got married shortly after graduating from Yale. Like many young people, we were full of hopes and dreams. But life turned out to be more interesting than we had ever dared.*

Luan: My adult life so far has been quite the adventure story. At age 23, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune Grave's Disease, which is when your immune system attacks your thyroid and makes it hyperactive. By the time it was discovered, my thyroid levels were toxic, and the doctors were quite concerned for my life. Medication failed so I had to have the thyroid removed quickly. The thyroid is a very tricky little gland, because the hormone it produces effects every cell of the body from head to toe. Too much, and it's like you've had way too much caffeine, too little and you become extremely depressed and sluggish. My experience with this disease in the prime of my young adulthood, when all of my friends were having the time of their lives, was very jarring. It became abundantly clear that I did not have control of my body nor my future.

At the same time, my career was taking off. I started at an architecture firm and quickly became a project manager. A client of mine, a real estate developer, recruited me and within three years, I was offered partnership. At 24, we purchased our first house. At the same time, I struggled with my physical and mental health. At this time, I also realized that I could not be all things to all people. While I enjoyed the success and praise, I absolutely hated the work.

*Mike: During this time, I started the MD/PhD program at UCI. I had this dream of building on my college success and becoming a hybrid physician-scientist. In my mind, as a physician, I would help patients with my skills and knowledge. When modern medicine could no longer help those patients, I would then go into the lab and develop new therapies and cures for disease. What I found, instead, was a long road. Two years of medical school was followed by what seemed like endless and frustrating research during graduate school. By the time I was 28, my friends that I started medical school with, had their MDs, were almost done with residency training, and about to start their careers. Meanwhile, I had no degrees and nothing to show for all my trouble. Eventually, I was able to graduate from*

*my PhD program but with much fewer publications and accolades than I had hoped.*

Luan: When I was 27, my thyroid had been controlled to a point where we began thinking about starting a family. Mike was reaching the end of his PhD, so there was some time for baby. Unfortunately, my thyroid collapsed during that pregnancy, so I spent some of it in the hospital and most of it not myself at all. At the same time, Lehmann Brothers collapsed and the Great Recession began, so all of our construction loans disappeared and my office closed. So much for depending on success.

I spent the next two years learning to be a mother and reinventing myself. I learned to save money. I had a lot of time to serve at church. I found that being a mother really resonated with me, and I loved bonding with this little human. Because the pregnancy had been so rough, we began the adoption process.

In 2011, we were surprised with another pregnancy. The pregnancy was better this time, but after the birth, I hemorrhaged. It was one of those one in a million hemorrhages. They couldn't stop the bleeding, so I had to have an emergency hysterectomy. Toward the end of that procedure, after having been transfused 15 units of red blood cells alone, my heart stopped for about 15 minutes. The strange thing is that I was conscious during that time, because they had to remove sedation in an attempt to jump start my heart. My first thought was that I had had a postpartum stroke, since my husband is in neurology, and was locked into my body. After a few minutes, I realized that this was dying and having a very type A personality, asked God how the whole thing worked. Would an angel come get me? If He is omnipresent, could He come get me Himself? Would I go back to sleep and wake up somewhere? Or wait, people talk about a light...where am I supposed to find this light? Almost immediately after I asked God, I felt a gentle pleasant breeze on my left-hand side guiding me toward my right, where I saw a vision of Mike and the two girls, but the girls were old, like 12 and 14. I felt the doctor intubate me and say, "That's strange, she's fighting me." I tried to relax my gag reflex, because I knew I had to do this. They placed me in an induced coma on ice to preserve whatever was left after the code blue. During the coma, I felt my mom's hands and could hear her. She said, "The baby's fine, you're going to be fine. This stuff does not happen to me." I could also feel Mike's hands and could

hear him. By this time, he had already witnessed several code blues and knew that most of the time, they do not turn out well. He was saying, "Just come back to me, and I will take care of you every single day of your life."

I was supposed to be on ice for three days before they tried to wake me up, but many people from our church came to pray for me that night. Miraculously, I woke on my own the very next morning at 7AM. They gave me a piece of paper and my glasses, and I wrote, "Thanks to my doctors and nurses," because somehow, I knew that everyone worked very hard throughout the night. I also wrote, "I like IVs," because I associated full blood product with feeling good, and emptying ones with feeling worse. Finally, I wrote "Sorry, mom." They began checking my body's systems, and miraculously, nothing was harmed. Many women in my situation, if they do survive, end up with long term dialysis, paralysis or personality change. After 7 days, they discharged me home: a miracle. However, my mind wasn't able to follow all the dramatic changes, and I, who have always been prone to anxiety, developed post-traumatic stress syndrome like a soldier returning from war. Going to therapy and counseling helped a lot.

*Mike: This all happened the day before I started residency. I had just graduated medical school (finally!), and I had high hopes for a new chapter in my life. But, that day, I almost lost everything. It is a miracle that Luan is with us today, that our children have their mother, and that God provided Luan the strength to carry on. Truly, because of Luan's support and love, we were able to survive residency. In fact, despite difficult life situations, residency went well. Because I loved Luan through her suffering, I was able to provide understanding and love my patients better through their suffering. In my last year, I was made chief resident and named resident of the year. Following that, I was offered a professorship at UC Irvine and job at the VA in Long Beach. All of these accomplishments were beyond what I deserved and more than I had hoped for after a disappointing research career. Looking back, I can see that it was not all my striving that got me to where I am, but God's hand had always been moving in unseen ways.*

Luan: What I have learned from having gone through to the extremes of the physical and psychological is that I was not the person I thought I was. Straight out of school, I thought I had so much to offer, that I was a blessing and gift to the world. After all of this, I realize that I am actually a vessel that demonstrates

God's grace and power to sustain and save. I also learned that God is always always there. He was there while my heart was stopped; He was there when I was depressed and no one around me could understand what was happening. It's His presence in life that makes all the difference. I learned that it was useless to pursue material success. No amount of degrees, money, and fame would have helped me in any way to get through the life experiences I had. In addition, they are an endless pursuit that never fulfills – always someone smarter, prettier, richer, more successful. As parents, we want our children to be secure and happy, and often we think a job, a salary, a title will win them that. The truth is that life is much more complex than that. When there aren't external hardships to deal with, there are internal ones. Our only hope is in the One with whom there is no shadow of turning (James 1:17).

Certain skills from my childhood helped and some hurt. My perfectionism and tendency to worry made it hard to accept my circumstances sometimes and see potential good out of them. However, my parents encouraged me to communicate my feelings and needs, which made it possible for me to get the help I needed and made recovery possible.

*Mike: Today, Luan and I are very involved with our church and have a wide circle of friends. What we've found is that life is a long road, so it helps to take the long view of things. At a very basic level, we now work with people who ended up exactly where we are by many different paths: international school, going to school after working, by various different degrees etc. The college experience is just the beginning of a very very long road, and by far not the most important decision in life. Decisions that far outweigh the college admissions process would be choice of a life partner, career direction, family planning and your faith.*

We've also observed that degrees, job titles and awards do not seem to have protected any of our second-generation friends from heartache, broken marriages, neglected children and general misery. At best, these things serve as a lot of opiate, a stand in for real happiness. At worst, success becomes the ultimate temptation, to which a person will sacrifice everything and everyone in their lives. Instead, what determines overall well-being seems to be an ability to accept themselves, a willingness to take responsibility, an understanding of their own feelings (emotional intelligence), and the ability to communicate their needs

appropriately. A person cannot begin to have true emotional intelligence without peace with God, because a person must first know that they are fundamentally accepted, loved and has worth. It is God who tells us that through Jesus (Lk. 12:6-7; Eph. 1:3-5; Rom. 15:7). In addition, Jesus informs us as to what love looks like and how to have healthy relationships with others. We simply cannot make life work using our own strength. We've encouraged you to teach your children emotional intelligence and the art of relationships, but ultimately, offer them an eternal security and the power to reach their full potential through faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Part 3 Life Lessons:**

- Nothing except Jesus is going to prepare your children for what life has in store.

### **Part 3 Questions for Reflection:**

What has helped you cope with the demands of adult life?

What do you hope to pass onto your children about how to be an adult in today's world?

Does your family have ultimate rest in Jesus?

**Psalm 73:25-26.**

**Q&A**