

**Name of Interviewer:** Nancy Nhung Ngo

**Method of Recording Interview:** Digital audio

**Language of Interview:** English

**Location of the Interview:** St. Mary's Seminary [9845 Memorial Dr., Houston, TX 77024]

**Date:** October 03, 2008

**Themes:** Immigration; War; Vietnam; Adjusting to new culture

**Name of Person Interviewed** (or pseudonym): Father Dat Hoang

**Contact Information of Person Interviewed:** [832-758-6205] Houston, TX 77024

Name	Transcript
<i>00:01</i>	
Nancy:	This is Nancy Ngo. I'm interviewing Father Dat Hoang at St. Mary's Seminary on October 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 2008. I'll begin with asking you, what was it like where you grew up in Vietnam?
Father Dat:	We came from a poor town of the country called Ho Nai, Vinh Hoa and I grew up in a big family. At that time, there was 7 of us brothers and sisters. As we were growing up, we did not have a lot of toys. So the kids get together and the kids at home and in the village, in the town, everybody knew each other. And we grew up playing a lot of games together. It was fun memories of the kids. We have electricity maybe 3 times a week, 4 times of week. So on the days that there's no power, I remember good memories of playing various games under the moonlight. Religion was a big part of who we were. We were expected to go to mass every single day, family pray together every day. And there was just a lot of interaction with young people, with the kids in the village. Everybody knew each other.
Nancy:	Did you have any occupations while you were in Vietnam?
Father Dat:	No, I was just a student.
Nancy:	Were you involved in any organizations at school?
Father Dat:	No, because of the political situation, there was not much that we could be involved with. Now in church, there were caticatichal class where we go to study our faith. We get involved in the choir. We sung at the church. We got involved with a group at the church that would go out and visit those who were poor. We try to put money together and go help them out. Other than that, there was not much that we could be involved with.
Nancy:	Were there any traditions that your family had?
Father Dat:	A big tradition was the Vietnamese new year, the lunar new year. That was something that every year, we worked very hard to save money just we can celebrate. In Vietnam we celebrated it for 3 days. The 1 <sup>st</sup> day was to visit immediate family, visit grandparents. (I remember those memories) to wish a good year, good health to grandparents and immediate family. The 2 <sup>nd</sup> day was for relatives. We would go and visit uncle and aunts. And the 3 <sup>rd</sup> day was for friends. We go to friends' house. So we would go and bring food and I remember bringing, there's that particular banh trung and banh day, that rice cake, which represents the moon and the earth that we would always bring. And in return, I loved receiving lucky money from the older. That was a lot of fun. We always

had dragon dance. We always had firecrackers. We always have food that we don't normally get to eat. That was a lot of fun. That was something that I remember a lot. I remember Tat Trung Thu, a celebration of, kinda like a pre-new year when supposedly there was a time when the moon was full.

05:04

I remember the story behind it was that you look at the moon, you were taught that on the moon, there was Chu Cuoi. The story goes that he was someone who tended the water buffalos and that tree uprooted and grow up and he hung onto it and he went to the moon. [laughs] So during the full moon we always look to see if thang Cuoi, that little boy, is up there. We made our lantern, various colors and shapes of the stars, the boat, rabbits, tigers...all kind of shapes and forms. We would, under the full moon, without power, without electricity we would go around with those lanterns, with the little candles, and go around the village and we would eat the moon cake. And that was a lot of fun. I loved that. Those are the two main one that I remember celebrating a lot. Also, for us farmer, I think it was in April, there was a day we call it, because we were farmers, so it's called a day when we try to supposedly kill all the bucks. So that's the day when they go out and spray the field to try to kill the bucks. And we would eat a special type of rice, wine rice. Supposedly it help to kill all the buck in the stomach as well. That was fun. I enjoy eating that.

Nancy:

How were your experiences in school, with friends and teachers?

Father Dat:

I remember school was different. I remember we would go get up in the morning. Well, we went to school for Monday to Saturday. We didn't have school on Wednesday, so we go to school on Monday and Tuesday, Wednesday off, and we go to Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. They didn't have cafeteria in the school, so we go to school in the morning, and we go home, eat lunch, and go back to school in the afternoon. Going to school was [pause] I'm trying to remember. I know that in the culture, the teacher has very high respect. In the Vietnamese, there is a saying that "One day as a teacher, is a teacher for the rest of your life." "Mot ngay lam thai suot doi la thai." One day a teachers, that teachers for rest of your life. The teacher has a lot of power. I remember in school, the boys we didn't behave and they would line us up and we would get spanky in school, the teacher would give spanky. As far as school is concerned, there was a lot of memorization. Everything that we learned, we had to memorize. We would go and get before the teacher and just read back what we were supposed to memorize in class. Interestingly, we had to learn classical virtues, we had to learn math, a lot of memorization with the formula. No calculator. [laughs] That was something that didn't exist in our place, so we had to memorize a lot, a lot of memorization. Tremendous fear and respect of the teacher. I remember that right before class, we have to all line up. There's someone who's called the leader of the class. He would line us all up. We would go in line by line and fill up the chair. When the teacher walk in, we have to immediately stand up and say "Good morning teacher." or "Good afternoon teacher." then we sit down. In class, absolutely no talking. We would get spanky for talking.

10:00

And when the teacher ask a question, you do not [pause] say anything. You do not ask a question in class. You have to neatly raise your hand like that [demonstrates hand motion] and when the teacher say [demonstrates hand motion], then you can

talk. But there was not a lot of interaction. It was mostly lecturing. Rarely you'd have an opportunity to be able to speak, and when you do, you have to raise your hand and do that. [demonstrates hand motion] I remember those memories of school.

10:40

Nancy: I just wanted to ask you some questions about your memories and experiences of the war. How did it affect you?

Father Dat: The civil war in Vietnam?

Nancy: Yes.

Father Dat: Funny, but I was born after the war. My father work in the airforce, so when the communists took over, at that time, I was in my mother's womb. After the communists took over Vietnam, shortly after that, they took my father to jail, to prison, to what they call re-education camp. I don't know this, but my mother told me she was about my self. She was working, trying to make money, and one day...6 months later after the war, she just one day said, "Oh! It's time for delivery." She got on a little motor-scooter, ran to the hospital, and ran to the emergency room by herself, and 2 hours later gave birth to me. [smiles] So when I came out to the world, I did not see my father. My father was in re-education camp. My first childhood memory was I think when I was about [pause] almost 3 years old. I remember playing in the front of the house one day, and I saw someone walking in that was dressing like a soldier. So I remember going to my grandpa, I said, "Grandpa, there's a soldier coming into the house." I remember also, that man walk in and grandpa hugged him, and my mom came out, hugged him. And I remember my dad turn out around and my mom said, "This is your son." And I remember my dad picked my up and just throw me, and just kind of lift me up like that. [demonstrates how his dad picked him up] That was my first memory of dad. And we grew up, because of the war, we had to have permission for everything. I remember, as Catholic, I didn't really get a chance to go to church for class. And the bishop was not allowed to really go to the church every year or whenever he wish to confirm. I remember after my first communion for confirmation class, they would lump people together, so I was confirmed with my older brother because the bishop was not allowed to go around all the time. I know that every time we want to celebrate something, to have a procession or something, we have to have the permission of the government. I remember I always wanted to become a priest when I was little. So when I was 10 years old, my dad took me to go see the bishop and told the bishop, "My son really want to become a priest. Can he go to the seminary or what should he do?" And I remember the bishop telling my dad that the only way your son can really be a priest is to leave Vietnam because of the political situation and because my dad has worked in the previous government. So because of that, my family tried to save every single penny we could, so I can flee Vietnam, leave Vietnam. So it was tight, by the fact that the government kind of regulate what you can do. I remember that I have cousin who wanted to go to the seminary. Even though they were accepted by the seminary and by the bishop, they were rejected by the government, so they couldn't go to the seminary. I remember that when my

15:03

grandpa passed away, when I was 6 years old...8 years old, we knew a lot of priests, and during the mass, my father went to the local government to ask because all these priests that knew our family want to come and join the mass, invest and join...we call concelebrate in the mass. They couldn't do it. The government only allow, give my father permission to invite 4 priests. We know like 20 priests, so my poor dad has to pick out the one he think was closest to my grandpa, while the other priests couldn't show up.

Nancy:

Did your dad ever talk to you about his experience at the re-education camp?

Father Dat:

[pause] Not so much. I guess it was painful memories for him. My mother say that when the communists took over, initially everybody lived in complete fear. So it was very rough for her because there she was trying to run the business, but everybody was so scared. He would go to his little garden in the backyard. He would never be in the house. He always go the back because he was afraid the government would come any time and take him away. So he would go out to his garden and work there all day until the sun comes down and go home. When he was taken away to re-education camp, it was very tough. They make him go to work, from the morning until night, in the field or doing whatever, construction or whatever. I remember one story he told me. One day, they came in and said, "Any of you here, Catholic?!" and my dad would say...nobody would raise hand, but dad raise his hand and everybody thought, "Uh oh, he's dead." So they brought him away and on the way to the office he was praying and praying and praying and praying. And when he got to there, they slammed [hits the table with the palm of his hand] and said, "Why are you Catholic?! Don't you know that this religion was brought to us by the French?! It's not even the religion of our country. It was made up by the French." So my dad said he remember telling them, "No sir, our religion was not founded by the French. It has been from the very beginning, from when God created the world, and then Christ came and shared good news to us. The French only come to share what has already been there since the beginning of the world. I remember he was sharing with me that, "Wow I was scared, but I was pray because I trusted that the Holy Spirit will give me the words to talk to those who interrogate me. So when he came back, everybody was surprised that he came back alive because they expected him to go there dead.

Nancy:

When did you and your family leave Vietnam?

Father Dat:

The first time we left was 1984 and we left in a little boat. When we go, as the boat get in the ocean...we were going for a week, and the engine died. So we were floating on the ocean for about a week. Food ran out, water...no more water. So everybody was beginning to become weakened. And we started praying. Everybody, in their own religion, started praying. And at the end of that week, we saw a big ship, big boat, so we let all the women and the children to the front and we were waving. Take our white shirt out and just waving. And they stopped, they came by, and it happen to be a Russian boat, cargo, Russian. At that time, the Russian were communist with the Vietnamese government. So they allowed all the women and all the children into their boat and they gave us some food and water. They wouldn't allow the men to get into the boat because they were afraid the men might take over and attack them. They send a mechanic down, fix the

20:00

engine, and send them away. So at that time, we had to say goodbye to our father. Then this Russian boat took us back to Vietnam. The moment we set our feet into Vietnam, the communist come and put us in jail, so at that time my young sister was only 3 months old, and we were in jail for a good 2 months, we were there. When we were finally released from jail, we came home [pause] at the news and our grandpa who, at the time, was still at the house told us that my dad continued further, you know the rest of the men that went on? The engine died again, so the wind blew them back to Vietnam and he's now in another jail. Now *that* was bad. *That* I did hear the story from my father. He told us how, when he got in, they really beat him up really, really bad. They beat up the people in there really, really bad. They kind of formed a circle and kind of kicked them back and forth, like a ball. And then they would lock the men, in this one small room, they would lock all the men hand to hand with each other. They can't barely move. If they want to sleep, they have to take turn. One person would lie down and sleep, and then the next person. It was like that for a long, long, long time in jail. So my mother came back. She had to work like 3 or 4 jobs, staying up really late at night to try to make money to support us because we lost all the money. We had to invest a lot of money to leave Vietnam. We had to pay a lot of money. So she kind of start from scratch while trying to go and visit dad, bring food and support dad at the same time. So my dad was in that jail for another 3 years before he came home. But we knew that we had to leave because in order for me to be able to go to the seminary or to be able to go to college, we have to leave. So we decided, once dad came back, we decided we had to leave, but we not gonna leave all together like the first time because we have to kind of split up, that way, if something happen, we still have someone staying back to keep the house and keep the business running. So my two older brothers left and made it, wrote letter back. And my younger brother and I, I 12 at this time, together with my aunt and some cousins, I left at the age of 12. So I came to Thailand, I stayed in a refugee camp for two years and a half and arrived to Houston in 1990, when I was 15 years old.

Nancy: Where there any things that you decided to bring with you that were important, from Vietnam?

Father Dat: Well, there was not much we could bring. My mother gave me her wedding ring because it's gold. We didn't have much. We had to use her wedding ring because we didn't have enough money. She sewed her wedding ring into my jeans. We bought some medicine. We bought some ginseng [laughs] because that's supposed to help you with the energy and that's it. That's all we had. We didn't bring anything. Some set of clothing, some medicine, medication. Of course, we were stopped by pirates before we enter Vietnam. They search and they took that wedding ring and throw away all the medicines. So when we finally arrive to Thailand, I only had one pair of clothes, the set of clothing that we had...no money period. So we went around and begged for food. We were beggars for about 2 months before the United Nations found us and brought us some food, supply us with food.

Nancy: What was your experience like at the refugee camp?

Father Dat: Well when we came, I came at the end of 1987, early 1988. It was at the time that they decided to stop accepting refugee. So when I came, first we didn't have food.

25:00

So for 2 months, everyday, we get up and we went around asking for food. Some day, we were lucky, people gave us food...some day, we were unfortunate, we came home sleeping very, very hungry. It was during this period that I learned to eat spicy food. Thai food is very spicy. I remember like in evening, we would wait 'til dinnertime, then go down to the village. And people, when they finished eating, and they still had left-over's, they would call us in and allow us to finish eating. And I remember it was so spicy. I didn't know how to eat spicy, so I would be sitting there eating and tears would be coming down, runny nose, [smiles] but I was so grateful that I was able to eat, you know? [laughs] So for two months, we lived like that. It was very rough. We kind of lived in a little cottage. There was one lady that was with us. She was pregnant and she had a 2 year old son. Her husband had left 2 months before that and it was at a time when they accepted refugees, so he was taken to the main camp. We got stuck back at the island, so we came right at the time when they stopped accepting refugees, so we got stuck back there. It was so rough, she didn't get enough nutrition, didn't get enough food...and the weather. We just lived in a cottage like that. It was so rough, she died. It was very painful. I remember seeing her 2 year old son running around without knowing that his mother has past away. It was very painful for me. We wrapped her body around in a piece of plastic that we had in that cottage, brought her up the hill, and find some wood, and cremated her. After 2 months, they still didn't know what to do with us, so they brought all the refugees in Thailand into one island. They would bring us outdated can food, but it was great. We were able to live by it. And we lived in that island for another 5 months. And they *still* didn't know what to do with us! So they brought us to the border between the Cambodia and Thailand, and they gave us knives and bamboos so we can build our own little cottages and live there. And it was really scary because it was in the border when it was fire breaking out between Cambodia and Thailand and we were *right* in between them. So we started digging [pause to thinks what the word is] bombshells. Every time there's fire break out and there was explosion, we would run and hide in those holes. There were people that died. Unfortunately, bomb drop right where they were and died. They would post pictures of people dying...going out of the camp to buy things and they would be killed by those [pause] the guerillas. And they would post the pictures and say, "Do not leave the camp." It was a very scary time. And finally, after another 5 months living in that border between Cambodia and Thailand, they finally brought us to the main camp, inland. That was when it was better. We were given food, we had places to stay. I lived there for another year when the U.S. Embassy representative came in, interview us, and accepted us to go to the United States.

Nancy: Did you have a sponsor for your family?

Father Dat: I did, my uncle and my two older brothers had lived in Houston so they sponsored me over to Houston.

Nancy: What would you say is the hardest thing about starting a new life in America?

Father Dat: Well, culturally, it was very different. I would say the hardest thing is the inability to communicate. When I came here, I didn't speak English. So when I go to school, it was *so* scary because people ask me questions and I had no idea what they were asking me, *no idea*. So the way I tried to respond was I would look at

30: 00

their face, if they looked mean, I would say, “no” [laughs] and if they looked like a nice person, I would say, “yes” having no idea what they were asking. I would go to class and I sit there and I have no idea what the teacher is saying. I couldn’t catch up with it. I remember I was assigned to read for English class, actually...I was taking ESL, ESL-C I remember. And I was asked to read, I think it was...Romeo and Juliet. And I go home and I remember we were assigned to read like 20 pages. I remember going home, reading the first page, I have to look up every single word. I would take a pencil, I would have a Vietnamese dictionary. So I see this [points at the table] and I look up in Vietnamese what it mean and I wrote on top of it. And I would look at the word, “sincerity” and it took me three hours to read one page. And I was thinking to myself, “Oh my God...and I have to read 20 pages.” It was very, very difficult. So because of the inability to speak English, I was afraid to make friends. I felt very isolated. In Vietnam, everybody knew each other, you know? You know your neighbor. You hang around with the kids of the same age. Over here, everybody live in their own house. You don’t even know who your neighbor is...very isolated, so it was very depressing for me. Not only was I not able to make friends in school because I couldn’t speak English...school was hard because I couldn’t speak English. In Vietnam, I was always top notch student, you know? I take a lot of pride in that. Come here, and I felt like I can’t even understand what the teacher is saying. It was very hard. Sometimes, unfortunately...I felt like a lot of time because people know that I didn’t understand them, they would ignore me and that makes it even worse. I felt [pause] like I am much less than others...a sense of inferiority because everybody else speak English, everybody else was able to socialize and have fun. I was just sitting in the back myself, scared all the time. I felt like I was behind a lot. So that was very difficult. [pause] When we first came, my 2 older brothers were here, they were also in high school, so we bought a very beat up car. We didn’t have money. We bought a car for 3 or 400 dollars. And a lot of time, we running and it died on us. And we didn’t know what to do, who to call...so it was a very tough time, very scary, but what makes it hard was the inability to speak English, not knowing the system, not knowing how to relate to people...I felt very isolated, very lonely, very depressed, very scared every time I go to school.

Nancy:

How were you able to overcome those language barriers?

Father Dat:

I knew that I need to study because in my family, the value of education is...the supreme value, most important value in our family was faith. That was important. Every day we had to pray...no matter what happened, we have to go to church and pray. And the second most important value in our family was education. So my mom and dad over and over again, stressed that, “You *have* to study, you *have* to do well in education. If you don’t speak the language...if people who speak the language take 1 hour to study and you need 2 or 3 or 4 hours, you spend 2 or 3 or 4 hours. You have to work *very* hard. If you’re not as smart as people, you just work doubly harder. That was the philosophy that they instilled in me. So I studied very, very hard. I came home...what took my peer maybe 1 hour, it take me maybe 5 hours. So I made a point to not have Vietnamese friends so I would not speak Vietnamese with them, so that I would force myself to hang around English-speaking people only. I would go home and I would sit in front of the TV

35:00 with a dictionary and try to listen to the word that I can and look up the word. I try to read, I try to look up the word, I try to learn it. I worked very, very, very hard and after 1 year or 2, I began to feel comfortable that I was able to at least communicate and make friends. By the time senior year come, I did very well. In fact, I graduated top 10% of my school and by the time I go to college, it was ...so it was just working very, very hard to catch up with the rest.

Nancy: Were there any similarities from your life in Vietnam and your life in America, in dealing with communities, or is it a completely different experience?

Father Dat: It was very different. The similarity that I found was at church, where I can hear the mass in Vietnamese, hang out and talk to the people that have the same cultural values, but even among the Vietnamese it was different...it's no longer like in Vietnam, you know? Because everybody is so busy, everybody go to work all day and by the time they get home, they already tired, you know? So there was the similarity in the sense that we eat the food, we were able to go to the Vietnamese supermarket and eat the food that we eat in Vietnam. We were able to go to celebrate and hear the mass in the mother tongue. And the way we chant the mass, the way we pray is different from the way the American...you know? So that that the similarity, but as far as the sense of the community... is no longer there. People are so busy, you know? I have *relatives* that already live here, but we don't have time like we used to in Vietnam, where we gather and do a lot of things together. So it was a lot different, a lot of adjustment to it.

Nancy: You said that as a child, you always wanted to join a seminary and become a priest. What was your reasoning for that as a kid and even now?

Father Dat: We call it a call from God. It's a mystery that I can never understand. It's like you go out and have attraction for somebody and you don't know. And you ask why do you like her? Well, I just *like* her. [smiles with enthusiasm] I just like the way she look, the way she talk, you know? So that's how it is for me. I remember growing up, I go to church a lot and my grandfather talked to me a lot about our ancestor who died for the faith and I want to do the same time. [said with enthusiasm] I get to read the bible, I get to read about especially the lives of the saints. How they have this relationship with God, how they have this love for the poor. My parents kind of instilled that in us. Make us go out and share, give a little bit of rice, a little bit of food, some clothing to the poor...kind of instilled that in me...a prayer life, my taste of God. We pray at home. We had a lot of priest that came to the house...talk about their life, what they do. It always fascinate me, what they do. And I remember going to church and seeing the priests wearing those vests and always saying to myself, "I wanna wear one of those." I used to go home, as a little kid, and would take out my dad's vest shit and put it on and go all the way to my ankle, and play mass. So that's always instilled in me and I always wanted to do that. When I grow up and finally enter the seminary, the reasoning changed because now I want to commit to give a life to live for other people, in service of other people. I want to live a life entirely for God...but it started out with that attraction, liking the lifestyle, wanting to do something like that. I love praying, love preaching...in fact I used to gather my friends together, read a little bit of the bible and preach to them. So that's how it all started. It's a call. God just put that desire in me.

Nancy: What are your ideas of U.S. politics and policies during the war and even after the war?

Father Dat: My idea of?...

Nancy: Did you agree with how the U.S. handled things during?...

40:00

Father Dat: With the Vietnam war?

Nancy: Yes.

Father Dat: You know what? I don't know enough about the political situation at that time to assess that. Now when I grew up, the way the communists do thing was they brainwash all the little kids, especially in school, that American people are very bad. They come and destroy our country. So growing up, I didn't really know a lot. All I knew was my dad was in jail, all I knew was that we had a war and that the Americans lost and they told us they were bad people. So I didn't really know much about war, about the political situation. We were not allowed to talk about politics at home, period. They can come in at any time and you can go to jail for talking about politics. So I didn't know a lot about it. Now when I come over here, then I know a lot more about it. It create a sense of anger in me and frustration because I know that my people in Vietnam suffered a lot from the lack of human rights, from the suppression. They didn't have the right for free speech, no freedom, there's no religious freedom, there's no freedom of speech, there's no respect for human being. They can come in and take you any time. It makes me angry. I noticed that the government bribe a lot of people, so the government officials get richer and richer while the people are poorer and poorer. It makes me very angry. I feel sad that...I don't know the political situation, but I know that as soon as the U.S. force withdrew from Vietnam, the communists took over right away. I wish that they had stayed to help us restabilize rather than withdraw like that in the middle of the war and left us hung like that and lost. I know, from my father and from a lot of the adults, I know that at one time Vietnam was considered the pearl of Asia. We were the pearl. Everything went to there. We were very rich. We were the envy of country like Thailand, but because of the war now we are so, so, so, so poor. In fact my father and I went back to Vietnam, but we stopped in Thailand on the way to Vietnam. When my father saw Bangkok, he cried and he said, he told me, "Son, before the war in 1975, before the communists took over, our country was the pearl of Asia. Thailand would look up to us, but now because of the war, because of the corruption of the communist government, Thailand is way, way, way ahead of us. And our people continue to suffer and poverty is at its worst because of the corrupted government. So I feel very sad, very angry for my people because of the government.

Nancy: Well that concludes all of my questions. Was there anything else that you wanted to add as a message to the Vietnamese American community?

Father Dat: I think my message to the Vietnamese American community?

Nancy: Yes.

Father Dat: My message is that to do take advantage of the opportunity we do have here because there are many, many young people back in our country who would wish to have a tenth of the opportunity we have here to learn and they would really,

really learn, but they don't have that opportunity. So take that opportunity to study, to thrive so that we can contribute to this nation that has been so great to us, in many generations. And to also be a voice to speak for our people back there, so we can help our people in Vietnam who are still very poor. We can help them financially. We can be a voice for our people. I still do fundraising and every year, I will send money to help the poor people in Vietnam and it's very sad. Two years ago, I came back with a group of about 100 doctors and we just go from village to village to village to give out medicine. We can share a lot with those who are less fortunate than us. So take the opportunity so that we can be something beautiful for the society, for this country and for our people, who very much need us.

Nancy: Thank you, Father Dat.

### **Excerpts**

Subject: Vietnamese Folklore

Name Transcript

---

5:00

Father Dat I remember Tết Trung Thu, a celebration of, kinda like a pre-new year when supposedly there was a time when the moon was full. I remember the story behind it was that you look at the moon...you were taught that on the moon, there was Chu Cuoi. The story goes that he was someone who tended the water buffalos and that tree uprooted and grow up and he hung onto it and he went to the moon. [laughs] So during the full moon we always look to see if Thang Cuoi, that little boy, is up there.

Subject: Education

Name Transcript

---

10:00

Father Dat Tremendous fear and respect of the teacher...when the teacher ask a question, you do not [pause] say anything. You do not ask a question in class. You have to neatly raise your hand like that [demonstrates hand motion] and when the teacher say [demonstrates hand motion], then you can talk. But there was not a lot of interaction. It was mostly lecturing. Rarely you'd have an opportunity to be able to speak, and when you do, you have to raise your hand and do that [demonstrates hand motion].

Subject: Father's Return

Name Transcript

---

13:05

Father Dat I remember playing in the front of the house one day, and I saw someone walking in that was dressing like a soldier. So I remember going to my grandpa, I said, "Grandpa, there's a soldier coming into the house." I remember also, that man walk in and grandpa hugged him, and my mom came out, hugged him. And I remember my dad turn out around and my mom said, "This is your son." And I remember my dad picked my up and just throw me, and just kind of lift me up like that [demonstrates how his dad picked him up]. That was my first memory of dad.

Subject: Religious Restriction

Name Transcript

---

16:10

Father Dat “Any of you here, Catholic?!” and my dad would say...nobody would raise hand, but dad raise his hand and everybody thought, “Uh oh, he’s dead.” So they brought him away and on the way to the office he was praying and praying and praying and praying. And when he got to there, they slammed [hits the table with the palm of his hand] and said, “Why are you Catholic?! Don’t you know that this religion was brought to us by the French?! It’s not even the religion of our country. It was made up by the French.” So my dad said he remember telling them, “No sir, our religion was not founded by the French. It has been from the very beginning, from when God created the world, and then Christ came and shared good news to us.

Subject: Father’s Imprisonment

Name Transcript

---

20:55

Father Dat He told us how, when he got in, they really beat him up really, really bad. They beat up the people in there really, really bad. They kind of formed a circle and kind of kicked them back and forth, like a ball. And then they would lock the men, in this one small room, they would lock all the men hand to hand with each other. They can’t barely move. If they want to sleep, they have to take turn. One person would lie down and sleep, and then the next person. It was like that for a long, long, long time in jail.

Subject: Refugee Camp

Name Transcript

---

24:45

Father Dat So for 2 months, everyday, we get up and we went around asking for food. Some day, we were lucky, people gave us food...some day, we were unfortunate, we came home sleeping very, very hungry. It was during this period that I learned to eat spicy food. Thai food is very spicy. I remember like in evening, we would wait ‘til dinnertime, then go down to the village. And people, when they finished eating, and they still had left-over’s, they would call us in and allow us to finish eating. And I remember it was so spicy. I didn’t know how to eat spicy, so I would be sitting there eating and tears would be coming down, runny nose, [smiles] but I was so grateful that I was able to eat, you know? [laughs] So for two months, we lived like that. It was very rough.

Subject: Adjusting to a New Life/Culture

Name Transcript

---

24:45

Father Dat So because of the inability to speak English, I was afraid to make friends. I felt very isolated. In Vietnam, everybody knew each other, you know? You know your neighbor. You hang around with the kids of the same age. Over here, everybody live in their own house. You don’t even know who your neighbor is...very isolated, so it was very depressing for me. Not only was I not able to make friends in school because I couldn’t speak English...school was hard because I couldn’t speak English. In Vietnam, I was always top notch student, you know? I take a lot of pride in that. Come here, and I felt like I can’t even understand what the teacher is saying. It was very hard. Sometimes, unfortunately...I felt like a lot of time because people know that I didn’t understand them, they would ignore me and that makes it even worse. I felt [pause] like I am much less than others...a sense of inferiority because everybody else speak English,

everybody else was able to socialize and have fun. I was just sitting in the back myself, scared all the time.

Subject: Refugees in Thailand

Name Transcript

---

26:50

Father Dat ...it was really scary because it was in the border when it was fire breaking out between Cambodia and Thailand and we were *right* in between them. So we started digging [pause to thinks what the word is] bombshells. Every time there's fire break out and there was explosion, we would run and hide in those holes. There were people that died. Unfortunately, bomb drop right where they were and died. They would post pictures of people dying...going out of the camp to buy things and they would be killed by those [pause] the guerillas. And they would post the pictures and say, "Do not leave the camp." It was a very scary time.

Subject: Call to the Religious Life

Name Transcript

---

38:02

Father Dat We call it a call from God. It's a mystery that I can never understand. It's like you go out and have attraction for somebody and you don't know. And you ask why do you like her? Well, I just *like* her. [smiles with enthusiasm] I just like the way she look, the way she talk, you know? So that's how it is for me. I remember growing up, I go to church a lot and my grandfather talked to me a lot about our ancestor who died for the faith and I want to do the same time. [said with enthusiasm]

Subject: Communist Oppression

Name Transcript

---

41:00

Father Dat It create a sense of anger in me and frustration because I know that my people in Vietnam suffered a lot from the lack of human rights, from the suppression. They didn't have the right for free speech, no freedom, there's no religious freedom, there's no freedom of speech, there's no respect for human being. They can come in and take you any time. It makes me angry. I noticed that the government bribe a lot of people, so the government officials get richer and richer while the people are poorer and poorer. It makes me very angry.

Subject: U.S. Withdrawal

Name Transcript

---

42:30

Father Dat I wish that they had stayed to help us restabilize rather than withdraw like that in the middle of the war and left us hung like that and lost. I know, from my father and from a lot of the adults, I know that at one time Vietnam was considered the pearl of Asia. We were the pearl. Everything went to there. We were very rich. We were the envy of country like Thailand, but because of the war now we are so, so, so, so poor... now because of the war, because of the corruption of the communist government, Thailand is way, way, way ahead of us. And our people continue to suffer and poverty is at its worst because of the corrupted government. So I feel very sad, very angry for my people because of the government.

---

Subject: Message to the Vietnamese Americans

Name

Transcript

---

44:10

Father Dat ...take advantage of the opportunity we do have here because there are many, many young people back in our country who would wish to have a tenth of the opportunity we have here to learn and they would really, really learn, but they don't have that opportunity. So take that opportunity to study, to thrive so that we can contribute to this nation that has been so great to us, in many generations. And to also be a voice to speak for our people back there, so we can help our people in Vietnam who are still very poor. We can help them financially. We can be a voice for our people.

### Summary

[My father was] brought away and on the way to the office he was praying and praying. When he got there, they slammed [hits the table with the palm of his hand] and said, "Why are you Catholic? Don't you know that this religion was brought to us by the French? It's not even the religion of our country!" My dad said, "No sir, our religion was not founded by the French. It has been from the very beginning, from when God created the world, and then Christ came and shared good news to us." I always wanted to become a priest when I was little. We call it a call from God...a mystery that I can never understand. It's like you go out and have attraction for somebody and you ask why do you like her? Well, I just *like* her. [smiles with enthusiasm] I just like the way she look, the way she talk. That's how it is for me. I want to commit to give a life to live for other people, in service of other people. I want to live a life entirely for God [and die for the faith.] My family tried to save every single penny we could, so I can flee Vietnam. My message [to the Vietnamese American community] is...take the opportunity so that we can be something beautiful for the society, for this country and for our people, who very much need us.

I chose to represent Father Dat with a summary of his life of faith. I believe that his family and he relied on their Catholic faith to endure the communist oppression, the escape to America, and the adjustment to a new culture. I decided not to correct Father Dat's grammar; I believe doing so would detract from the genuineness of his stories. To piece together a brief and coherent summary, I paraphrased earlier segments of stories and put them in brackets. To make easier transitions between sentences, I removed repetitive phrases and unnecessary conjunctions.