



# The San Francisco Psychologist

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## Survival of the Heart Preserving the Tibetan Culture

*Marcella Adamski, Ph.D.*

Several years ago I founded The Tibet Oral History Project to carry out a direct request made to me by the Dalai Lama. The Project's mission was to videotape the extraordinary oral histories of Tibetan elders living in exile. What I considered as a personal "homework assignment" from the Dalai Lama came about in the following way. I served as a psychological consultant for a human rights investigation conducted by the Tibet Justice Center in 1999 regarding the conditions of children in Tibet under the Chinese occupation. Our findings were to be presented to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. I was asked to help conduct interviews because of my work with torture survivors through the San Francisco based organization, Survivors International.

We met with the Dalai Lama and told him of our findings regarding the horrific experiences of the 64 recently escaped children we had just interviewed. I found it difficult to have to recount the suffering of these children to a leader who was already well aware of the plight of his fellow Tibetans. In the course of our discussion, I asked what else we could do to help the people of Tibet. The Dalai Lama requested that we interview the oldest Tibetans before they were gone and their stories with them. He wanted these stories preserved for the Tibetan people and for the next generation of Chinese who had no idea of what really happened to their Tibetan neighbors because of their government's control of information. He also suggested that these eyewitness accounts be put on the Internet so that the world community would under-

stand the true history and plight of the Tibetan people.

I was captivated by the idea of interviewing the elders of Tibet and struggled for years trying to find a way to make it happen. Like myself, interested people were busy and monthly planning meetings made for very slow progress. So, in 2006



I decided to commit a significant amount of volunteer time to develop the project while still maintaining my full time practice. Friends helped raise funds by putting on benefits in their homes. The Firedoll Foundation funded an oral historian to do research on relevant areas. A colleague offered a small mailing list of Tibet support-

ers to receive our first appeal letter. We were on our way at last!

When a Tibetan woman, Tashi Chodron, offered to translate and Kerry Rose offered to videotape the sessions, we conducted our first trial interviews with older Tibetans living in the Bay Area. They included Cho Lhamo, a 65 year-old daughter of a Tibetan resistance fighter who the Chinese killed, Lama Kunga, a reincarnated lama who was forced to flee his monastery, and Tsewang Khangsar, a teacher who witnessed his village turn into a living nightmare under the Chinese infiltration and occupation. After realizing how significant and compelling these interviews were, I knew we needed to find the funds for the Tibet Oral History Project to interview large numbers of elders. The clock was ticking. Their lives were ending and their stories would be lost forever.

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# Child Custody Consultation Group

Megan Lehmer, Ph.D.

Some believe that doing child custody evaluations for Family Court can be the most difficult work that psychologists do. The task calls for a knowledge of forensic psychology, child development, family systems, psychological testing, and the ability to maintain a calm demeanor in the face of highly conflicting challenges from multiple parties with opposing interests. Since March 2003 the San Francisco Psychological Association (SFPA) has offered a Best Practices Peer Consultation Group for members who conduct child custody evaluations. The goal of this group is to keep members current on the latest development in the field, collaborate on solving complex problems, help members provide evaluations of the highest quality, and provide support for group members who do this complicated and stressful work.

Meetings over the last couple of years have

included topics such as implementing the new AFCC guidelines, dealing with emergencies, cultural diversity, and handling the complexities of blended families. Drawing on the expertise of group members, we have explored special topic areas such as chemical dependency, child sexual abuse, and new developments in psychological testing relevant to child custody evaluation. The group has explored a variety of ethical issues evaluators commonly face. Recently, we had a presentation on subpoenas, depositions, and testifying in court. Occasionally, we have guest speakers such as attorney Vicki Tropolis who spoke to the group on the subject of minor's council, helping us understand under what circumstances the judge might appoint an attorney to represent the children's interests in a complex custody matter. Group members can provide each other with peer consultation. This

has been particularly helpful on infrequent occasions when a group member's personal safety has been challenged or when one of us has been worried about liability issues.

Any child custody evaluator who has completed ten or more child custody evaluations and is a member of SFPA may join the group, which meets once a month for two hours on Friday mornings. Both APA credit and continuing education credit are given by the Administrative Office of the Courts for most meetings. Our goal is to make sure that by attending the group each member earns 8 of the 12-hour annual continuing education required to serve as a child custody evaluator, so it is only necessary for group members to take a 4-hour domestic violence workshop on their own. For information on joining the group contact Megan Lehmer, Ph.D at 415/665-8960 or <mlehmer@drlehmer.com>.

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## Survival of the Heart

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After raising enough funds to cover expenses for the project, I organized a 12-member team to conduct the interviews in Bylakuppe, the oldest Tibetan refugee settlement in India. Tibetan officials said that the largest number of elderly Tibetans could be found in Bylakuppe, where approximately 24,000 Tibetan people lived in exile thanks to the support of the Indian government. The area, now a lovely rural farmland with cultivated green rolling hills, had to be carved out of a forest replete with tigers, elephants, and malaria-bearing mosquitoes. The southern Indian climate took its toll on the Tibetans raised in the cool and snow-bound plateaus of the Himalayas.

To maximize the number of interviews we could conduct in the shortest amount of time, I located individuals with interviewing skills (psychologists and reporters), those with videotaping and translating experience, and those who were familiar with Tibetan issues.

The Tibet Oral History team included nine people from the United States and four Tibetans from Bylakuppe. We employed a Tibetan woman in Bylakuppe, Tenzin Yangchen, to serve as our Field Coordinator. She did an amazing job of pre-interviewing over 80 elders and getting their consent to participate. She explained that His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, wanted their stories of life in Tibet to be preserved for generations to come and to be shared with the world community. They were proud to be a part of the project and often surprised by how much they had to relate. The team conducted 82 interviews over a three-week period from June 18 to July 8, 2007. It was divided into four groups, each comprised of an interviewer, a videographer, and a translator.

Once we began interviewing, the eyewitness accounts were so compelling that we worked 10 days straight in one stretch. The participants ranged in age from 60 to 95 and came from Amdo, Kham, and U-Tsang regions of Tibet. They related incredible stories of early life in Tibet, the shock of inva-

sion, the trauma of prison, and their escape to India. The videotaped interviews lasted one to six hours. They were conducted in Tibetan and immediately translated into English. We interviewed the elders in their own homes or some other familiar setting.

The elders live in simple dwellings tucked close together. They lived alone or with families who had been reunited after fleeing Tibet. They often had the joy of grandchildren in their homes. Their brightly painted modest abodes always had small Buddhist altars, little gardens or plants on the garden walls. Some of the more frail elders live in a nursing home where they gathered every day for prayers and chanting in the community room. Those interviewees who were lamas, monks, or nuns lived in their religious communities.

"I have been waiting my whole life to tell what happened in Tibet." This heartfelt statement of one elder is representative of reactions we had to recording their oral histories. The elders came from diverse backgrounds;

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they were nomads, farmers, housewives, servants, traders, monks, nuns, government officials, and community leaders. After the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959 and their subsequent occupation many Tibetans became political prisoners, victims of *thamzing* (public beatings), forced laborers, resistance fighters, and torture survivors. Here is a sample of what the Tibetan elders recalled in their interviews.

- Accounts of how their tranquil young lives as yak herders and farmers in the vast Tibetan plateau were devastated by the Chinese infiltration and subsequent invasion.
- Nightmarish recollections of frantic flights from mountain villages, capture, imprisonment, and forced labor; as well as years of starvation, abuse, and torture.
- Eyewitness descriptions of the heroic attempts by freedom fighters to stop the annihilation of fellow Tibetans, the killing of revered Buddhist teachers, the destruction of monasteries, and the loss of treasured Buddhist manuscripts.
- Inspiring stories of courageous families who made the harrowing journey from Tibet to follow their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, into exile for the next 50 years.

Their tales of courage, endurance, and compassion are as inspiring to us as we believe they will be to the world.

The next task of the Tibet Oral History Project is to make these invaluable testimonies accessible around the globe. To accomplish this goal we plan to organize the interviews for world wide Internet access in both edited and complete versions. We will provide DVD copies of the interviews to Tibetan and other library archives. We will send DVD copies back to Bylakuppe for the elders and the Tibetan community to enjoy and treasure.

Making these eyewitness accounts public is especially crucial at this time in history. China's repressive, hard-line policies in Tibet pose a severe threat to the survival of Tibet's unique language, culture, and religion. These elders

convey an important message about the true history of Tibet and its survival of the heart.

As psychologists, we know what it means to try to help people recover from the traumas they have endured. In conducting these interviews with elderly Tibetans who suffered the loss of family members, livelihood, cultural identity, material well being, and geographical roots, I found their equanimity and genuine peacefulness very striking. You may catch a glimpse of this in their photos. While many did not deny their repugnance for what the Chinese had done to Tibet and their longings for Tibet to be free, they did not seem to let it interfere with their ability to savor the goodness of their daily joys. Although many wept in recounting the terrible sufferings they experienced, they did not seem stuck in the anguish of the past. Even in the face of oppression and hatred, their Buddhist beliefs

of compassion and loving kindness for all beings, including themselves, seemed to make survival of the spirit possible.

**Marcella Adamski, Ph.D.**, is a psychologist in private practice in San Francisco and Berkeley. She is the former Board Chair of the Tibet Justice Center and the former Executive Director of Survivors International. Currently she serves as an advisor to the United Nations Association of the East Bay and is Executive Director of the Tibet Oral History Project. She can be contacted at 415/921-0110. More photos can be found at <[tibetoralhistory.org](http://tibetoralhistory.org)>. Phone: 415/292-3202 email: [info@tibetoralhistory.org](mailto:info@tibetoralhistory.org).



## New Member Introduction

### David Weibel

I recently moved back to SF after finishing my Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Ohio University. I grew up in Palo Alto and went to UCSB and SF State for an economics degree and MBA. I then marketed Batman & Superman multimedia comic books before realizing I wanted a career that provided more meaning and better fit my personality.

To prepare for grad school I listened on a teen hotline and took classes and did research at Stanford and Berkeley. Always being drawn toward therapy, I was able to make change the subject of my research. At Stanford I coded the emotions of women living with metastatic breast cancer who were participating in existential emotion-focused group therapy. Once in grad school, my thesis measured the effects of therapist interpersonal skills & training on the alliance, emotional experiencing, and outcomes, revealing that interpersonal skill mattered, while training did not. For my dissertation I created and delivered loving-kindness intervention that boosted self-compassion

and compassionate love for others and lowered anxiety. Overall, my science helps point out that it is the soft stuff, the tough to quantify, the sometimes labeled unscientific, the touchy, and maybe even the feely, that contribute the most to outcomes.

I used my own scripts and voice to create an audio CD with seven meditation and relaxation tracks that I give to clients. I like traveling off the beaten track and have made separate solo trips to Southeast Asia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. I took three years of Spanish during my Ph.D. on top of eight years before college, and I dream of someday conducting therapy in Spanish. I'm currently writing what I hope becomes my first book and exploring opportunities to get licensing hours in a variety of settings including college counseling, CMH, group practices, and hospitals. I like meeting local people to get reconnected to therapy 'left coast' style. Please feel free to say hello: <[davidweibel@gmail.com](mailto:davidweibel@gmail.com)>. 415/271-1922.