

proof: A Play by David Auburn

Thoughts after Reading by Ai-ping Liu. June 26, 2011.

The world of the play is consisted of 4 characters: Robert, a used-to-be-genius father and mathematician in Chicago University, who spends years scribbling on his notebooks as he suffers mental breakdown, a caring daughter, Catherine, who lives under the shadow of parental madness, yet embodies her talent in math as well as her greatest father-daughter affection in or out of her semi-lucid moments, an older daughter, Claire, who flies from New York to Chicago with the intention to support and to disbelieve Catherine after their father's funeral, and Hal, a former student of Robert, obsessed equally with the romantic entanglement with Catherine and the proof claimed to be her work. The four people let us see how they breathe and communicate through the thing they love, and how they take this very thing they love for granted to be stifled and misunderstanding.

After reading the play *proof*, I didn't think much about math at all. I thought about my dad, I thought about how my math teacher in senior high school treated me, and I thought about how I treated my daughter when she was doing her math homework.

My dad

I commuted by train to the school I taught part-time as a lecturer as I started my English teaching career. The train departed at 6:00 AM, and occasional rides on Dad's motorbike to the train station eased the entire journey afterwards. Dad said, "Call if you need a ride home." There were times when I arrived at the train station late at night, and I would call home, longing for the ride because a bit of walking was simply too much for my exhausting body and soul. "Wait for a moment. Dad was already on the way," Mom answered. His care for me actually didn't need to be summoned by a phone call, and his parental devotion was beyond any measurement. I thought of Catherine, making phone calls home and worrying to death about how her father was doing and why he didn't answer those calls. I thought about myself, and then I was assailed by guilt for feeling shy or hesitated to show my concern and love to Dad.

There were moments Dad shared his sole English learning with me. The start was alphabet learning from a radio program when he was 17, long after he had stopped his formal school education. This very knowledge of little amount of English secured his job 25 years later because he could recognize all the letters shown on the

registration forms of imported cargoes at a transportation and terminal company he worked for. Dad smiled at me humbly. English made him an office assistant, a promotion earned in addition to 20 years of endeavor and hard work.

Me

Hal's skepticism on Catherine's work of the proof brought me back to one of my remote reminiscences of being a confusing teenager, trying so hard to fit in yet most of the time ending up with frustration and misery. I was not good at math, and I rarely passed exams. I managed school OK, though. Once I got 71 on a math exam. There was this Math teacher, Mr. Liu. It was his doubt followed by direct interrogation that terrified me. In class he asked, "Did you cheat?" Then he turned to the whole class and put the death penalty upon me by the end of his trial with indirect mockery, "Well, she didn't cheat, I guess. Look at her workbook, all rumpled and marked. She must have studied very hard this time."

I never mastered or liked math. I had never had the courage to try a bit harder once again since then.

My daughter

Figures must have twisted or become blurring on the pages for her; I proclaimed I could detect how the flow of her thoughts advanced or subsided inside her brain. She hesitated, scowlingly, and scribbled on one of the pages. It was my parental instinct or expertise that functioned so well to accuse my daughter of being unwilling to think logically. She was 10, and she didn't like math very much. Trying to convince her that the math exercise on her desk was not difficult, arbitrarily, wasn't I too self-assured to grab a magazine to pat her on the head, even gently, to alarm her of the importance of thinking? Wasn't I just like Hal and Claire, who wouldn't embrace one single shred of trust towards Catherine and her work of proof in the first place? Their interference seemed benign, but in fact it was horrible as Catherine saw it. My intention to help seemed nice, but in fact, it was mean as my daughter saw it.

While helping her out with math homework, I easily lost my patience, and immediately, heart-gnawing regret besieged me. My apology followed shortly, but perhaps resentment towards learning from her side deepened as well?

The play

Let's assume that we have found the passion of our life, say, Math, English, and so on. Even so, how can one be so sure that he/she lives with and through it without

shackling other's free will or repressing other's talent of different kind? How can one still be shy or hesitated about saying "I love you" to his/her beloved family? To excel does not guarantee empathy needed for better mankind; courage to love and faith in loving people nurture the soil of humanity.