



I came to know Lin Su-yue (林素月), a Tzu Chi volunteer writer, through her own words. Lin produces articles and essays for Tzu Chi that are emotionally powerful, lively and engaging. My eyes have often welled up with tears over passages that were particularly sad and poignant.

I imagined that Lin would be a demure lady who talked with a soft voice and whose elegant manner made her stand out in a crowd. With such preconceived notions, I was quite surprised when I phoned her for an interview and heard a resonant voice on the other end of the line. She fired off her words much faster than the soft-spoken writer I thought I knew. I was even more surprised when we actually met--she turned out to be quite an impish character in person. She reeled off one joke after another and seemed to be full of inexhaustible energy.

Lin is at an age at which many of her peers cannot afford much time for volunteer work. They frequently hold full-time jobs or have families that demand their care. But Lin is an exception. Although she has a husband and three daughters, she does not need to work outside the home. This allows her to devote all of her extra energy to the Tzu Chi missions and her writing. In fact, she attends almost every Tzu Chi activity held in Taidong, eastern Taiwan, where she and her family live.

Tzu Chi-related responsibilities keep her so busy that she has little personal time left. Does she mind? Not in the least. On the contrary, she fully enjoys her busy, fulfilling life. "I consider it my obligation to record the history and the 'footprints' of Tzu Chi. By reading the stories I write, future generations will know how we dedicated ourselves to carrying out the Tzu Chi missions. With my pen, I can preserve the Great Love spirit of Tzu Chi for eternity. What could make me happier than that?"

Laughter and tears

Lin kept a journal of her activities from the very beginning of her involvement in Tzu Chi. She found she had to write down her thoughts and feelings after participating in Tzu Chi activities--there were so many things and people that touched her heart that she simply had to find a way to vent her emotions. Having honed her writing skills in this way, she felt completely in her element when she became a volunteer writer.

Laughter and tears intertwine in the stories she writes. She frequently experiences these when conducting an interview or covering an event. At some times she feels hope, at other times intense helplessness and despair. Her writings, such as the following, appear in "The Tzu Chi Great Treasury Sutra," an online forum for volunteer Tzu Chi writers.

At the end of every year, Tzu Chi volunteers hold relief distributions and dinner parties for care recipients. They also travel to remote areas to bring aid to people who cannot come to the distribution sites.

A-zhong, a seventh grader, lives with his grandparents in Luye, a mountain village. "I have trouble falling asleep at night because I miss my papa so much," he told us when we brought

their relief supplies. "Even if I fall asleep, I still dream of him coming back to see me." When he was done talking, he hung his head low and fell silent.

The dirty, old clothes he wore told us of the poor life he leads. Although his grandparents care for him, he longs for the love of his parents. Their absence has left a scar in his young mind.

Ah-hua, another young care recipient, grew up in a family of alcoholics. "I was raised by my grandparents. My parents never came back to see me after they divorced. My mother lives in Yanping Village. When I miss her, I walk to see her. I think my father lives in Hualien. It's very far away. Even though I want to see him, I don't know how to get there." As he talked, Ah-hua fiddled with a dry, withered leaf in his hands. The action helped to hide his emotions. His chapped lips were pressed tightly together, as if holding back inexpressible sorrow.

Tzu Chi volunteers visit the dark corners of society to seek out the needy. They listen to suffering people pour out their hearts. They try and soothe their troubled minds. Seeing the misfortune of others, the volunteers learn to appreciate and cherish what they have even more. They also realize that only love can make a difference in the lives of the suffering.

Although Lin often feels sad when witnessing such heartbreaking scenes, she always reminds herself not to be trapped by her emotions. Instead, she tries to learn something from every experience. "Before, I was quite wasteful and never saved leftovers. But now I think of the care recipients, their empty refrigerators, and the mildewed rice in their cookers.... When my children grumble about the food put before them, I share with them the stories of the care recipients to remind them how blessed they are to have any food to eat."



Careful observer, moving stories

Lin seems to be constantly on the run with her pen and camera. Sometimes, she virtually wears herself out. But even though she is physically tired, she feels spiritually enriched. She is more than happy to share every story that touches her heart with her readers.

Lin is very methodical in her approach to a potential story. She spends a lot of time doing background research on her subject before writing a single word. She joins volunteers on their home visits, observes their interactions with care recipients, and takes notes. Only when she has become familiar with the potential interviewee does she start asking questions.

Lin says that she never writes about a person without first getting to know him or her personally. She observes her subject's behavior and finds out what kind of a person he or she truly is. Sometimes she spends weeks interacting with her subject. She develops a warm friendship with every person she writes about. "Unless you have truly understood a person, it is impossible for you to come up with a truthful and touching story."

"I always let my interviewees know that I sincerely want to share their stories and that I'm not using them as a tool. Only when they can sense the sincerity in me do they really open up and generously share their life stories with me."

Lin puts her whole heart and soul into writing a story. Her stories move many readers to tears, including the very people represented in her stories.

Lin observes that one must have "three hearts" when conducting an interview: a grateful heart, a sympathetic heart, and a respectful heart. "Be grateful to your interviewees for giving you the opportunity to interview them; show your sympathy when they share their joy, sorrow, or anger with you; and be respectful to them for allowing you to learn from their experiences."

A different mother

Lin used to be a full-time housewife. She led a simple, ordinary life, focusing all of her attention on her family. But that began to change when she became a Tzu Chi volunteer. Instead of her family, she began to spend a large chunk of her time on Tzu Chi activities. Her husband was unhappy about her involvement, thinking that her volunteer duties took up too much of her time. But his attitude slowly changed when he witnessed the positive changes in her life. She became a different person in many ways. Her temper improved and she grew more understanding and considerate toward him and their children.

Given her smiling and cheerful demeanor, it is hard to imagine that Lin used to be a very strict mother. She rarely smiled and often punished her children when they failed to meet her expectations. She used to place unreasonable demands on her children for their academic performance. In addition to their regular school, she insisted they attend cram schools in the evenings and on weekends so that they would not slip behind their peers. Her children were not allowed holidays or entertainment. When they had to take major exams, she made them stay up late reading. They were not allowed to go to bed before midnight on such days.



Lin put so much pressure on her children because she was afraid that if they did not work hard enough, they would not be able to survive in a competitive society. Not surprisingly, the harder she pushed her children, the more unhappy she became. In the end, she found herself trapped in a quagmire of depression.

In 1999, something happened that precipitated a change in Lin's life. That year, a major earthquake devastated Taiwan. The disaster killed more than 2,000 people and left more than 100,000 people homeless. Central Taiwan, where Lin and her family lived at that time, was hit the hardest.

When the tremor struck, half the island lost electricity and was plunged into pitch darkness. Lin lit some candles and ran with her family to a nearby park. That night was unusually cold, but they dared not go home. They put up tents and slept in the park.

Later, she saw the aftermath of the earthquake on the news. There were heavy casualties. She saw one lifeless body after another being excavated from the debris. Transfixed by the tragic images, she was left with a feeling of profound sadness. She wanted to do something to help, but she did not know how.

One night soon after the disaster, Lin was having trouble falling asleep. She, her husband and their children went out for a walk. On their stroll, they came across a uniformed Tzu Chi volunteer walking with a limp. He approached them to solicit donations. He told them the money would be used to help quake victims. Lin recalls that night: "Master Cheng Yen often talks about 'living bodhisattvas.' What is a 'living bodhisattva' ? That night, I saw one in that Tzu Chi volunteer."

She remembers thinking to herself at that time: "He's nearly 60 and physically challenged, and yet he's doing his best to help the suffering. I, on the other hand, am in my thirties and healthy and strong. What have I done to contribute to society?"

The experience prompted her to become a Tzu Chi commissioner. She underwent a series of training courses and enthusiastically went out among people to serve the needy.

At this time, she immersed herself in Still Thoughts, a collection of aphorisms from the teachings of Master Cheng Yen. Over time, she was gradually able to let go of her inappropriate concepts. She realized she was too hard on her children. "The Master taught us not to worry unduly about our children. Instead of forcing them into becoming what we want them to be, we should just let them go free. Many Tzu Chi sisters also shared with me their experiences in educating their children. Gradually I began to change my ways."

Lin's three daughters often comment on how they used to be frightened of their mother. She was so stern they were afraid of even looking at her face. But those days are long gone. Now when they come home from school, they fight with each other over who will get to talk to her first, eagerly wanting to share with her what happened at school that day.

Lin now spends less time supervising her children's homework, but her fears that her children would fall behind their classmates were unfounded. Her daughters did not become negligent in their studies. On the contrary, they study hard on their own and maintain good academic records at school. "My daughters work hard because Tzu Chi has given them a happy mother," Lin says, a warm smile spreading across her face. "They want to support me through their actions."

Lin's husband was born and raised in Taidong. Although he was the oldest son, he left his hometown to pursue a career in a more prosperous urban area. When his father passed away, he decided to move his own family back to his hometown to keep his mother company. As the oldest son, it was his duty.

At first Lin resisted the idea of moving back to Taidong, located in the relatively undeveloped area of eastern Taiwan. She was worried that her children would have difficulty going on to good universities or getting good jobs if they received an 'inferior' education in Taidong. But

Lin Su-Yue

Written by Wu Hsiao-ting

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when she saw how unhappy her opposition made her husband, she decided to go along with him. "The Master always tells us that there are two things that cannot wait in the world: fulfilling filial piety and doing good deeds. In the end I decided to comply with my husband's wish to take care of his mother and move back to Taidong with him."

She did not expect that she would immediately fall in love with Taidong. Within just a few months, she could not imagine living anywhere else. The air in Taidong is fresh and the people warm and friendly. What's more, Tzu Chi carries out a lot of charity work there. Since there are not that many volunteers in the area, Lin finds herself in high demand.

Lin likes to take on challenges and is full of enthusiasm for everything. For her, Taidong turned out to be an ideal place to live. She believes she's found her paradise, both spiritually and physically. She is sure to continue to devote herself to Tzu Chi and create touching stories to delight her readers far into the future.

By Tu Xin-yi

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Photographs provided by Lin Su-yue