

A Matter of Faith Short Guide

A Matter of Faith by Peter Bacho

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Overview

"Bad news travels at two a.m.," says Buddy, narrator of "A Matter of Faith."

When the phone rings at two in the morning, he learns of Uncle Kikoy's impending death and realizes that this death is the first of many deaths that will feel like the loss of a parent. Uncle Kikoy and other "bachelor uncles" helped to raise Buddy—they "kept me safe," he recalls. Eighteen years old, with only a little money that he was saving for college and an old car that can make only one more trip to Seattle before it collapses, Buddy sets off on a spiritual journey in which he discovers underneath his seeming atheism a faith born of emotional needs and a strong bond to a man who never gave up faith even in the hardest of times.

About the Author

Peter Bacho was born in 1950. His father was a Filipino immigrant with a fourthgrade education; his mother did not complete high school. As a small child, he lived with his parents in migrant farm worker camps, traveling from harvest to harvest.

His youth was spent in central Seattle, in an area of hard lives, tough times, and difficult people. His interest in Asian martial arts and American boxing has its origins in his adolescent days of protecting himself. He has studied martial arts for over thirty years, and he spars in boxing often. His interest in boxing has resulted in a picture-book study of boxing champions, *Boxing in Black and White*.

Bacho is not only physically imposing but intellectually impressive. He received his bachelor's degree in 1971 from Seattle University, then received a law degree in *Dark Blue Suit and Other Stories*, 1997 *Boxing in Black and White*, 1999 from the University of Washington.

Bacho has had a distinguished legal career, including a stint as attorney for the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. In 1988, while still working as a lawyer, he became a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Washington. He spends much of his time on the road, not only commuting to his classes on three different campuses but traveling to Sacramento, California, where his wife is pursuing historical studies of her Native American ancestry.

Bacho has been a columnist for the *Christian Science Monitor* but is now focused on his fiction and historical studies. He tends to write in floods of words, when he takes time away from his legal and academic duties. Much of his fiction is autobiographical, in homage to those who made his present life possible. For instance, like Buddy in "A Matter of Faith," Bacho had an Uncle Kikoy, whose grave he visits.

Setting

Most of "A Matter of Faith" takes place in Buddy's mind as he tries to sort out his feelings for Uncle Kikoy and all the other members of his parents' generation who gave him a solid foundation for his life. "A Matter of Faith" begins in Buddy's bedroom in San Francisco, a place far enough away from the city where he grew up, Seattle, that he has been able to gain some emotional distance from his childhood. He believes himself to be levelheaded, to have put the traditions of his elders behind him, yet as he drives farther away from San Francisco and ever closer to Seattle, he begins to understand Uncle Kikoy and his spiritual beliefs, eventually realizing that he is very much like his uncle. The story ends with Buddy again in a bedroom, this time in Seattle. He no longer views his mother's home from the perspective of a child, but as a man who is painfully working out his debt to his elders and who finds himself embracing Uncle Kikoy's admonition that the spiritual connection between them is "a matter of faith."

Social Sensitivity

One theme of most of Bacho's fiction is the contribution of elderly—especially immigrant—Filipino Americans to the modern, younger generations. This theme derives from Bacho's respect for the sacrifices made by immigrants and their children that have made possible the prosperity of later generations, and from his deep interest in history, especially the history of the western United States. The theme plays out in "A Matter of Faith" as Buddy tries to come to terms with his feelings for Uncle Kikoy and the other bachelors who sacrificed their chances for marriage and children of their own so that there would be enough money for youngsters such as Buddy.

However, "A Matter of Faith" goes beyond the economic sacrifices and focuses not on the material welfare of the young but on their spiritual life. Through contemplation of Uncle Kikoy, Buddy discovers his deep spiritual bond to his ancestry. The story tells of the spiritual foundation laid down by Uncle Kikoy and Buddy's mother, so that Buddy has a firm understanding of moral conduct, as well as of his place in the world and what he can make of it. He discovers that his levelheadedness, of which he is so proud, has its origins in the steady moral leadership of Uncle Kikoy, and that Kikoy's steady guidance was rooted in a belief in God and a belief that religious faith is essential to maintaining a sane perspective on one's life.



Literary Qualities

In "Peter Bacho's World," (see "For Further Reference") Alex Tizon says that Bacho is a loquacious, rambling speaker but his writing tends to be clear. In "A Matter of Faith," Bacho's clear, usually plain language can be subtle and at the same time convey a great deal of information. Buddy is fairly plainspoken, and the imagery of his narrative tends to be focused on his immediate experiences. Yet, the attentive reader can learn a lot about Buddy from his plain language. For instance, his discussion of his time in "juvy" reveals his reason for being in San Francisco: the city represents his "moving on" like his father—he is trying to fashion a new life for himself. And like his father, he may not have made the best choices. Herein lies much of the tension in his narrative: his journey back to Seattle is a journey back to his old troubles, not only his troubles with the law but his troubles with his family.

The structure of "A Matter of Faith" also tells us something about Buddy and about the author's ideas. The story opens in a bedroom, with Buddy apparently sleeping peacefully until the phone rings ("I knew I should've let it be"). The voice of his mother reaches out to him and tugs him back to Seattle, his hometown and the place where he was a problem. The journey itself is set up by his conversation with Junior, who repairs his car. Junior offers strange warnings that are more myth than fact, such as that Buddy should "stay away from hungry-lookin', toothless hillbillies. They'll eat you, Benny, it's cultural." This odd warning hints of the strangeness that Buddy will experience on his way to Seattle; he seems to be transformed during the trip from the independent, levelheaded Benny of San Francisco to the Buddy of his family in Seattle. Significant is Buddy's return to a bedroom setting at the story's end. It may seem that he has traveled full circle, but his Seattle bedroom contrasts strongly with his bedroom in San Francisco. In Seattle his bedroom seems alive with his past and the people who mattered to him when he was younger. Further, in San Francisco his peace is invaded by a technological device, the telephone, whereas in the Seattle bedroom he needs no telephone to communicate directly with his Uncle Kikoy.



Themes and Characters

Buddy (aka Benny) asserts that "even as a child I wasn't religious," that for him "a narrow, unbending logic was enough; all else was superstition." In San Francisco, Buddy is trying to distance himself from his past, and at the age of eighteen he seems to think that he has life figured out. During the course of "A Matter of Faith," he learns that there is much about life that he has not figured out, and that a "narrow, unbending logic" is not enough to explain his feelings and his strong connection to his elders.

He has moved to San Francisco to distance himself from his violent, criminal past, which he blames on "our star-struck foolish father," who broke up his marriage to Buddy's mother to marry a much younger woman. Although Buddy believes that he has come to terms with the divorce of his parents, he regards his father with embarrassment for the foolishness of marrying a woman many years younger than himself. Such is the attitude of "logical" Buddy until he receives a telephone call at two in the morning.

When Buddy's mother tells him that his Uncle Kikoy, one of the men who helped to raise him, is dying, he decides that he must rush to Uncle Kikoy's bedside in Seattle.

Thus begins a journey not only to Seattle but into Buddy's soul; the young man discovers a spirituality in himself that he had repressed. Although he was not a churchgoer, Uncle Kikoy had always professed a belief in God. Wanting to reach him before he dies, Buddy slips into Uncle Kikoy's way of thinking. Often Uncle Kikoy would say, "It's a matter of faith," and Buddy repeats this to himself. That Uncle Kikoy will stay alive long enough to see him is a matter of faith.

When Uncle Kikoy was shot in the arm while fighting in World War II, he told Buddy, the Japanese soldier tried to make him see his ancestors, "but, you see I'm not dead, 'cause I got faith." This faith of his uncle's is very much on Buddy's mind as he tries to will his car to last until he reaches Seattle. As a levelheaded young man, he has rejected Uncle Kikoy's straightforward belief in God, but he finds no comfort in "narrow, unbending logic"; instead, he finds comfort in his uncle's faith. As Buddy yearns for his uncle to live at least long enough for them to see each other at the hospital, he begins to find in himself a desire for faith—he wants to believe. Indeed, having faith sustains him through the hardships of his journey in a dying car in the middle of winter through cold, snowy country.

By the time Buddy reaches the hospital, he is in a state of near-desperation, afraid that any delay will make him too late. As it turns out, he is indeed about an hour too late. Uncle Kikoy has died, and his body has already been removed from his hospital room. Even so, faith intrudes into Buddy's sad thoughts. His mother tells him that Kikoy said to her, "Tell Benny, don' worry... I'll see 'im. I got faith, but he gotta have it, too." At the beginning of "A Matter of Faith," this would have been an extraordinary demand for Buddy, but during his journey he has thought a great deal about how important Uncle Kikoy has been to him and about how much, perhaps, he has meant to his uncle. Buddy wants to have faith.



Later, in a bedroom of his mother's home, he has fallen asleep. As at the start of the story, he is awakened, but this time not by a telephone. Buddy has come far in his spiritual journey, and motivated by a deep spiritual need, he is prepared to take a leap beyond logic, to have faith. Logical Buddy notes that "first one candle extinguished. I blinked. Odd. No flicker, no sign that the flame would soon go out. Then the second.

Same way. Eerie, much worse than odd. I bolted back up, my mind racing to find an answer, a logical one." There is no logical answer that he can find. The house is energy-efficient: there are no cracks for air to escape, no sources of drafts. Afraid, he resists the temptation to turn on an electric light and prays instead. Whether Uncle Kikoy actually comes to him is not clear, but Buddy has reached a way station in his spiritual growth, a place where his connection to Uncle Kikoy has become more than "a matter of faith."



Topics for Discussion

1. Buddy calls some of the "old-timers" an "irreligious lot." Why would Kikoy be religious even though some of his companions were not?
2. What are the similarities between Buddy and Uncle Kikoy? How do these similarities shape Buddy's personality?
3. Does Uncle Kikoy actually come to Buddy at the end of the story?
4. Why would Bacho choose to have Buddy arrive too late to see Uncle Kikoy?
5. Why would Uncle Kikoy be as devoted to Buddy as he is?
6. Why is Buddy embarrassed by his father's new marriage? If he is embarrassed, why would he choose to live in San Francisco, near his father, rather than Seattle, near his mother?
7. What does San Francisco represent for Buddy? How does his view of San Francisco differ from his view of Seattle?
8. Buddy admits that he behaved very badly as a teenager for a few years.
Why does he tell us this? How can the responsible, loving Buddy who tells the story be the same Buddy who only "a year ago" had "a rap sheet that was starting to grow"?
9. Bacho himself had a real-life Uncle Kikoy. Why would he put his uncle into a short story?
10. Why does Junior refuse to take the money Buddy offers him?
11. What point is Bacho trying to make with the slow death of Buddy's car?
Does he imply that Buddy is stuck in Seattle?
12. Why does Buddy choose to pray at the story's end even though he has insisted that he is not particularly spiritual?
13. What influence does Seattle have over Buddy's image of himself? Why does Seattle have that influence?
14. Why does Buddy decide not to turn on the electric light in the bedroom in Seattle?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The "bachelor uncles" in "A Matter of Faith" are based on real-life Filipino men who came to the United States to make better lives for themselves and their relations and who had to forgo marriage. Who were these men? Where did they come from? What did they hope to do? What did they accomplish?

Why would Bacho feel particularly indebted to them?

2. Filipino Americans are one of the largest Asian ethnic groups in the United States. Where do they live? What have they accomplished?

3. The federal government and some state governments passed laws restricting the immigration of Asians and limiting their right to jobs and even their right to marry whom they chose. What were these laws? Who wrote them? Why did they become law? Who supported them?

How were they enforced? How did they affect Filipino Americans in particular? Were any specifically aimed at Filipinos?

4. What did Filipino meals consist of?

How did Filipino Americans adapt their cuisine to the foods available in the United States? As a project, prepare some typical Filipino American dishes.

5. What is the history of America's relationship with the Philippines? How has that history affected the flow of Filipino immigrants to the United States?

6. Buddy grew up in Seattle, where there is a large Filipino American population. Why are there so many Filipino Americans in Washington? What contributions have they made to the state?

7. The author Peter Bacho is a boxer. What has been the role of Filipino Americans in boxing? Which boxing champions have been Filipino Americans?

For Further Reference

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Eder, Richard. "A Gritty Story of Assimilation." Los Angeles Times, January 14, 1993, p. E5. Writes Eder: "Bone, although it can be facile and sentimental—Leila's boyfriend is too much of a perfect prince, for example—tells a gritty and moving story."

Publishers Weekly 241, 47 (November 21, 1994): 78. A brief review lauding *American Eyes: New Asian-American Short Stories for Young Adults*, edited by Lori M. Carlson (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), in which "A Matter of Faith" appears.

Rochman, Hazel. Booklist 91, 9 (January 1, 1995): 814. In a brief review, Rochman praises *American Eyes: New Asian-American Short Stories for Young Adults*, edited by Lori M. Carlson (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), in which "A Matter of Faith" appears.

Tizon, Alex. "Peter Bacho's World." www.

seattletimes.com. March 1, 1998. A profile of Peter Bacho based on an interview conducted in Bacho's truck and a motel room. According to Tizon, Bacho is a tough, even intimidating, man, with a reverence for his ancestors.

Related Titles

In his fiction Peter Bacho has blended his academic interests and his desire to tell about the lives of Filipino Americans. That fiction is well researched and filled with long historical passages, as in the novel *Cebu*. Although history is also an element in Bacho's short stories, it is more often felt as an influence on characters, as in "A Matter of Faith," than explained in detail. The stories in *Dark Blue Suit and Other Stories* echo the themes in "A Matter of Faith," especially the theme of indebtedness to earlier generations of Filipino Americans. One of Bacho's objectives is to bring to life the Filipino Americans of the past, and his stories often feature young people such as Buddy.



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