**Courtney Yadoo**
**Lowell Student Speaker Series**
**March 8, 2011**
***"Teaching as Autobiography"***

This spring, I am a student teacher at a middle school in South Boston. I spend my mornings and afternoons in Room 214 with eleven and twelve year-olds, teaching history.

In my education courses, my professors have urged me to think of teaching as something informed by one's own personal history. Teachers bring their autobiographies to their classrooms: their identities, experiences, and beliefs. Some anthropologists believe that teachers should reflect on their own "forgotten, repressed, and ignored" heritages: complicated family histories, for example, can serve as resources for teaching and learning. There is one particular experience that has framed how I think about teaching history.

When I was 16, my grandfather gave me a Japanese flag. It was more than 60 years old and covered with fading bloodstains. Its silk surface was punctured by two bullet holes. Its white background was filled with Japanese characters and symbols that looked hand-drawn. The flag was wrinkled and creased due to the many decades it had remained folded up inside a pouch.

My grandfather obtained this flag during World War II. He was 19 at the time and a member of the United States Army. He took the flag from a Japanese soldier who had been shot in the head.

My grandfather said that Japanese soldiers carried these flags folded up inside their helmets. The flags were decorated with messages and prayers from family and friends. The flags were supposed to bring luck in war.

According to my grandfather, American soldiers took these flags as tokens of their victory over the enemy. My grandfather describes the flag as a trophy of war. But when he returned to civilian life at the age of 21, he decided to put his military trophy behind him. He considered the war a closed chapter. He did not talk to anyone about his army experiences for 50 years.

Now I have the flag. I don't know what to do with it. It sits on my closet shelf, wedged between a scrapbook from elementary school and a pile of old jeans. It remains safe – neatly folded inside the same pouch that has protected it for 70 years.

The flag is my grandfather's wartime trophy. It is also carries the hopes and prayers of a dead Japanese solider whom I never met.

I struggle with what it means to be the steward of this object. I feel like I owe something to the Japanese soldier. I see his humanity and imagine him as a young man fighting for

his country. I have thought about translating the messages on the flag and trying to find the soldier's family. I wonder if being a good steward of this object means giving it to someone else.

However, I also feel obliged to uphold my grandfather's legacy. I deeply admire my grandfather and am proud of his service in World War II. He entrusted me with the flag as a symbol of that service. He made me the steward of stories and experiences that he had buried away. He expects me to pass on the flag to my own children and grandchildren.

So the flag reminds me that the history I teach my students is often a lot more complicated than I'd like to admit. I know how to keep the heritage of my grandfather's public service alive, but what to do with the neglected part of that heritage – the part that is forgotten, repressed, or ignored?

I'd rather be able to glorify my grandfather's service without thinking about its darker side. And it would probably be easier for my students to hear a black and white account of what happened long ago. But ultimately, my understanding of my grandfather is enriched by the weight of both sides of this legacy. There is probably a reason he kept the chapter of his military service closed for 50 years, and left it to me to parse through its complexities—to make something of it for my own understanding of the world. And now that gift of history—with all its pride and pain—is something I can try to give to my own students.

Thank you.