

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 1



Key Paragraph – 17

“The VC hated propagandists more than they hated American GIs. They hated propagandists more than they hated the Nationalist Air Force. And Thong was the director.”

Writing as Thong, Andrew’s father, write a narrative paragraph about his life. Describe his life in Vietnam and his time in Minh Luong Prison. Include one quote in this narrative revealing Thong’s courage.

1. What would your autobiography be about?
2. Describe a challenge in your life that you’ve overcome?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 2



Key Paragraph – 21

“Thong and Anh lived in a one-room shack, nailed together in a back alley of the fishing town. They were young, in love, and strong, but their hands were like old people’s, seasonally water-crinkled from mopping the concrete floor and tending the leaky roof. A baby girl, their first child, slept peacefully in her crib- a cardboard box on their bed. They were cheerful about their meager lot, joking that the heavens were so generous to their rainwater cisterns, they hadn’t had to visit the village well in a month.”

Write a narrative paragraph describing how Pham’s life has changed between 1960 and 1990. Compare the key paragraph above with Pham’s life during the 1990’s. Provide three examples of change.

1. If could take a bike trip to anywhere in the world, where would you go?
2. Describe a cultural tradition your family has continued.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 3



Key Paragraph – 40

“ ‘You know,’ Bryan says, ‘when it’s all over, you’ll realize that the answer is already within you.’ ”

Write a narrative about what you think Andrew is seeking to discover on his trip from California to Vietnam. Support your position with three examples from the text. Provide an experience of your own that illuminates his need to return.

1. What place from your past would you like to revisit?
2. Describe a time when you helped a stranger in need.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 4



Key Paragraph – 43

“I sit on a bench, dumbstruck and lonely. Maybe this is how my sister felt on the streets of San Francisco, poor, hungry, cold. Grasping the tails of an incomprehensible language. Wishing for a place to sleep. Looking at pedestrians, wondering why no one stopped to offer a helping hand.”

The story has revealed that Chi, Andrew’s older sister, has committed suicide in the recent past. She had been a runaway at the age of sixteen and had been living on the streets of San Francisco. Andrew misses her and is troubled by the loss.

Write two narrative paragraphs describing Chi’s story. Attempt to fill in the details of- Why Chi ran away? What happened that was so horrific that she would want to commit suicide?

1. Describe a time you felt discriminated against.
2. What would you do if you needed help in a foreign country but you did not speak their language?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 5



Key Paragraph – 54-55

“Early every morning, Chi took Huy, Tien, and me down to the bay to teach us to swim. Grandma sent us off with steamed rice cakes filled with peppered pork and sweet beans. We walked down to the beach, our breakfasts warm in our pockets. These were to be saved for after our swim, but we ate them on the road, knowing there was a meal waiting on the beach. In the water, Chi held each of us up by our stomachs and we learned to dog paddle. We swam, waded, and built sand castles. Entire clans of fisher folk, from grandfathers to toddlers, gathered on the shore to bring in the morning catch. When they hauled in their nets, we pitched in, digging out feet into the sand, heaving the lines to their rhythm in a tug-of-war with the sea. The net made a great big U in the water taking a bite of the ocean as we brought it in. Silvery fish came out of the water like coins pouring, bouncing, and hopping out of a slot machine. The fisher folk went mad with laughter, dashing about, scooping up the jackpot into hand-woven baskets, screeching to each other to grab this one or that one before it flopped back into the water. We worked with them, laughing, competing to see who bagged the most. In return, they gave us a couple of fish and lent us a pan and oil. Chi built a driftwood fire on the beach and fried the fish. We pinched the meat from the bones and ate it off banana leaves with salt and lime, sitting on the sand, watching the sun come up out of the water. It felt as though Chi had never gone to live with Grandma. I never thought we could be so happy again, Chi and me playing as though it had never happened. Like I’d never betrayed her and Leper-boy, three years before.”

As Andrew, write a detailed narrative paragraph describing the happy memories from his youth. Recall a time or an event during which Andrew was very happy. Describe the scene with as much detail as possible. Include sights, sounds and smells. Explain the event and describe how he felt during this time.

1. Describe a time when you told someone a secret? Were they able to keep the secret?
2. How would you feel if you had to escape your country?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 6



Key Paragraph – 73

“In the morning, Viet, Hung, Khuong, and I go out for breakfast. We walk down the street past scores of diminutive eateries. The neighborhood food scene is the Vietnamese version of the Paris Café-bistro life, discounted by a factor of twenty. The streets are dirtier, and much more crowded and loud. Old women sell food out of baskets. Knuckling their eyes, schoolchildren in white-and-blue uniforms jostle each other, crowding around the women to buy sweet rice, banana rice cakes, fried bread, baked goods, and rice porridge. We take one of the rusted tables lining an alley. A young boy immediately delivers three steaming bowls of beef noodle soup, each starring a six-inch section of ox tail. A rag of a mutt roots around under the tables for bones.”

As Andrew, write 2-3 narrative paragraphs in your travel journal detailing the day’s activities at breakfast, the bike shop, on the motorcycle, and in the café. Complete your journal entry with some thoughts about what you learned about Vietnam and Vietnamese culture today.

1. Have you ever been on an airplane? How did your flight compare with Andrew’s?
2. Does Vietnam interest you as an intriguing place to travel? Why or why not?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 7



Key Paragraph – 88

“The stars gleamed around an emptied moon. A cool breeze rolled off the ocean over the surf, across a road that paralleled the beach, and into the coconut field, combing up the foothills where we hid among the surrounding crickets. We hunkered down in the brush, twenty yards of coconut palms separating us and the road. Tien huddled with Huy on my right, whimpering so softly I could not make out his words. Bundled in a blanket at my feet, Hien, the four-year-old, wheezed through his snot, eased from crying into slumber by Mom’s sleeping pills. She crouched nearby, keeping one eye on us, the other on the road, where Auntie Dung and Chi waited to flag down Dad. We had been hiding since dusk, nearly six hours in one spot. I was crumbling with fear that my friend Hoa had told someone who might have gone to the police. Mom thought I had eaten something bad. She kept urging me to go up the hill and empty my bowels. I wanted to confess. I was sure Dad had been caught. It was 11 p.m. He was two hours late.”

Write 2-3 narrative paragraphs describing how Andrew and his family fled from Vietnam. What were the risks at stake? Described what happened first, second, and third. Include one quote from the story to add relevant descriptive details.

1. Describe a time when you were sick from tasting new food.
2. How do you think Andrew felt when escaping Vietnam?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 8



Key Paragraph – 102

“I try to explain something to her about life in America. And that I don’t know her. I try not to let my disappointment show. I come searching for truths, hoping for redeeming grace, a touch of gentility. But, no. The abrasiveness of Saigon has stripped away my protective layers. I am raw and bare and I ask myself, Who are these strangers? These Vietnamese, these wanting-wanting-wanting people. The bitter bile of finding a world I don’t remember colors my disconsolate reconciliation between my Saigon of Old and their muddy-grubby Saigon of Now. Saigon gnaws at me...its noise...its uncompromising want...its constant...Mememememememememememememe...”

Pretend you are Andrew. Write a letter to your brother Tien who has always been your closest confidant. In 2-3 narrative paragraphs describe what you have seen over the past weeks in Saigon. Tell him of the people you have met. Tell him what you had hoped to gain from this experience. Express your feelings and your disappointment with what you have found instead.

1. Describe a time when you felt heartbroken.
2. What advice would you give Andrew?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 9



Key Paragraph – 109

“Then there was nothing. The wildfire swept past me. Ashen, I pulled over. Without a word, Viet, his nephew and I went home. At the house, I parked my bike just inside the gate. The tears came without warning and I had to turn away from my uncles and aunts and nephews and nieces. I cried into the wall, the sobs racking my shoulders. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide in this little house, in this crowded neighborhood. I wept uncontrollably, as I did when I heard my sister Chi had committed suicide-my father cutting her free from a yellow nylon rope. I had known then, as I knew now, that I was weeping for her and I was weeping for myself because I was not there in the months before her death. Although we had lived in the same city, I had avoided her, too engrossed in my own life, my own problems.”

Pretend you are Andrew. Write a narrative letter to Tien explaining what happened with the little orphan girl you met today. Tell him how you wept. Explain to him what you think it is that you were really mourning for. Chi? Fate? The effects the war had on the people of Vietnam? The effects the war had on your own family? Then tell him how you are currently feeling about your journey to Vietnam.

1. How do you react when you are upset? How do you make yourself feel better?
2. What advice would you give Andrew to help with his emotions?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 10



Key Paragraph – 135

“Kim has never looked so beautiful. It’s too late, but I wish I could tell her of the warmth and respect I harbor for her—for her tenacity, for her unblinking honesty, her selfless devotion to her family. She is very Vietnamese and very un-Vietnamese all at once. Fate is an obligation I don’t understand—the reasons that random beast passed over her deserving soul in favor of mine.”

Pretend you are Tien and that you have just received a letter from Andrew that told of his experiences with Kim. He has asked you two questions: Should he bring Kim back with him? And why does fate seem to have favored him over her? Write him back giving sound advice. Write 2-3 narrative paragraphs that three include examples from Andrew’s life as well as Kim’s to make your points.

1. What would you say to Andrew if he asked you why fate had favored him over Kim and others in Vietnam?
2. How has fate favored you?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 11



Key Paragraph – 143

“5 a.m. The night couldn’t have passed quickly enough. I want to be away from here. Away from Kim. I want to go north. I want to go to Hanoi and forget, but I need to pay homage to one more place in south Vietnam. I need to find Minh Luong Prison. Perhaps even more than touring the rest of the country. Somehow, I have long thought of it as the end of my journey—as if by finding Minh Luong and returning to the exact spot where I watched my father working the minefield, I will have come full circle. I spent the night mulling over my choices and nursing beers on the balcony. An hour before daybreak, I strap on my backpack and strike out for a brisk four-mile hike to the market, where a fleet of mini-vans shuttles people into Saigon hourly, sunrise to sunset. Hanoi must wait.”

Pretend you are Andrew. Write a 2-3 narrative paragraphs in a letter to Tien describing your journey to Minh Luong Prison. Describe in detail what you hope to see and what you hope to accomplish by visiting the prison. (Think about how seeing this place again might bring you “full-circle.”)

1. Describe a time when you’ve been bullied.
2. What advice would you give someone to stop their bully?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 12



Key Paragraph – 156

“Now it is a major tourist attraction and a venue for government propaganda. Tourists, two-thirds foreigners, one-third Vietnamese come by the busloads. The staff are soldiers and civilians, some dressed in black pajamas and hand woven scarves, uniforms of the Viet Cong Guerrillas. We were grouped with other Vietnamese visitors, seated in a large gazebo to watch a war video about American atrocities spiced with a hefty dose of commentary on the evil of Western capitalism. A young soldier led us into a maze of trails twisting back and forth through the jungle. Great bomb-gouged pits, now weeded with vegetation, gaped like giant satellite dishes, testimonies of the unsuccessful U.S. attempts to destroy the tunnels. He showed us invisible trapdoors, tiger pits for men, and grenade-rigged manholes.”

Pretend you are an American journalist visiting Vietnam in the 1990's. Write a narrative piece (2-3 paragraphs) on the Cu Chi Tunnels. Explain the history of the tunnels and what tourists will get to see and do when they are there. Be descriptive. Include sights, sounds, smells, etc.

1. Describe a time when you were creative in order to make money.
2. How would you improve the tourist destinations in your city?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 13



Key Paragraph – 164

“The first Baptist Church of Shreveport, Louisiana, was our bridge to America. They loaned us the airfares. They rented us one of the church properties, found Dad work, and generally took care of the family, making sure our transition to America was comfortable. We went to church three times a week: all morning Sunday, Wednesday night for Bible study and bowling, and Saturday night for church youth-group activities. Except for two trips to the movies, we never went anywhere in our nine Shreveport months except to church. It was the most magnificent place we had ever seen. It had huge white Roman columns, lofty marble halls, great diamond chandeliers, walls of stained glass, miles upon miles of cardinal carpets, and velvet drapes that went almost to heaven.”

Pretend you are a reporter for a Shreveport newspaper. Write a narrative article (2-3 paragraphs) about the arrival of the Phams. Be sure to include how they arrived in Shreveport, who brought them there, what they have been up to. Encourage the residents to look out for them.

1. What advice would you give to someone moving to this country?
2. Imagine you were in Andrew’s shoes at the diner filled with angry locals. What would you have done?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 14



Key Paragraph – 181

“We are chatting amiably about the virtues of the house when our eyes meet—a strange moment—and we know we are holding a common thought: the transparency of our situation. Fate could have switched out destinies and no one would have been the wiser. I clear my throat and take demi-steps toward the door. I thank him for showing me his home. The tides of traffic and horns disorient me as I step into the road short of breath. Feeling guilty, I am very thankful we had the money to escape Vietnam.”

Imagine Andrew’s family had not escaped. Pretend you are Andrew and write 2-3 paragraphs to narrative a story of your life in Vietnam after the failed escape. What has become of the members of your family? Where in Vietnam do you live? What do you do? What do you wish for?

1. Describe a favorite childhood memory?
2. Who helped raise you when you were young?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 15



Key Paragraph – 194-195

“The first thing Chi did when we moved to California was throw away all her dresses and skirts. From her first day at high school, she wore men’s clothing. Her teachers, misled by her confident male body language, instinctively classified her as a boy. One thing rear-ended another and suddenly it avalanched beyond her control. Whether she wanted it or not, Chi had a new identity. At school, she was a *he*. And she used the boys’ locker room and competed in boys’ sports. She didn’t speak much English then, but what friends she had were all boys. She was one of them.

Things had gone quietly for a year and a half on Lock Drive until she had a row with Dad. He knew about the chest-bandaging and he tired to teach her how to be a normal girl. Chi, mirroring her father’s stubbornness, had sasssed him. So Dad schooled his child, measuring out his love, in the way his father had taught him. He caned her.”

Pretend you are a reporter for a local San Jose Paper. Write 2-3 narrative paragraphs to make a story about Trong Pham’s arrest for beating his daughter. Include as many details about Trong and Chi as you can. You may wish to include a quote from Trong or Chi or both. Be sure to include: Where the family came from, how the school had managed to mistake Chi for a boy all this time.

1. How do you think the school should have treated Chi?
2. What do you suggest Andrew do in his situation at the train station?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 16



Key Paragraph – 203

“The grandfather is on his way to see his grandchildren. He makes twenty dollars a month as a laborer, so hopping a freight train is the only way he can travel five hundred kilometers once every year to visit them. The beggar boy is waiting for a cargo train to take him into Phan Thiet, where he panhandles every morning in the fish market. He travels widely because beggars ride trains and busses for free. It is considered bad luck to turn them away.”

In and around the train station, Andrew is struck yet again by the poverty of Vietnam, especially when compared to the relative riches of the United States. It is evidenced in the people he meets, in the dilapidated state of buildings, in the food that he eats, etc. Pretend you are Andrew, the writer. Write a 3-4 narrative paragraphs as a piece for an American newspaper describing the poverty of Vietnam. Focus on either the people you have met, or the run-down state of your surroundings. Use details and description to paint a verbal picture for your readers. Evaluate your journal entry using the checklist you created today. Then revise.

1. Have you ever helped someone out just because they needed help?
2. Describe a time when you showed courage.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 17



Key Paragraph – 214

“She equated being around to putting Dad in jail. He was sitting in jail about to be tried for child abuse. Her testimony would put him away, and that would be the end of us all.

‘Where are you going to sleep?’ I asked her, reeling in the void that suddenly separated her world and mine.

‘I don’t know. Maybe I’ll find some place in San Francisco.’ She had been there perhaps three times. I doubted she knew the way. Besides, her English was worse than ours. Two and a half years wasn’t enough time to learn a new language.

‘They’ll find me here,’ she said. ‘There are more Asians in Chinatown.’

Pretend you are a runaway hotline worker and that you have just received a call from Chi who is cold, hungry and scared. Imagine that she has explained her story and her dilemma thoroughly. Write 2-3 narrative paragraphs to provide Chi with the best detailed, step-by-step advice that you can. What should she do? What should she NOT do? Where should she go? How can her situation best be resolved? What might happen if she deviates from your plan?

1. This is certainly no leisure trip Andrew is on. His travels have been hard work. Do you think all his effort is worth the experiences he is having?
2. Describe a learning trip you’ve been on.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 18



Key Paragraph – 227

“I think whatever Vietnamese—Northerners, Southerners, or Viet-Kieu—feel about this man and his ideologies, they respect him as all the underdog countries of the world do. For here was a man of inconsequential beginnings who crept through the land of the white man as a menial laborer and returned to wrestle his homeland from empires. Founder of the Vietnamese Communist Party and President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1946 until his death in 1969, Ho Chi Minh was born Nguyen Sinh Cuong to a fiercely nationalistic scholar-official of humble means. He studied in Hue at the Quoc Hoc Secondary School, then migrated south to work as a teacher in Phan Thiet, my hometown, the very villages where my father, eking out a living as a teacher, met my mother. At the age of twenty-one, Ho signed on to a French ship as a cook’s apprentice, the first step to what would become a thirty-year journey that would take him to North America, Africa, and Europe. He settled in London, the Paris, earning a living as a gardener, snow sweeper, waiter, photo finisher, and mastered several languages, including English, French, German, and Mandarin. It was his tenure in the racially prejudiced Western world that led Ho to examine his roots and nurture his sense of patriotism.”

Review the short biography of Ho Chi Minh’s life on pages 227-229. Pretend the year is 1969 and that you have been assigned the task of writing his obituary. The tone of an obituary should be one of sorrow and praise. Be careful not to say anything that would slight his character. Tell the story of his life in 3-4 narrative paragraphs and explain his significance to Vietnam and its people.

1. Describe your friends at school.
2. What advice would you give Andrew and his friends?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 19



Key Paragraph – 243

“I feel nauseous. I can almost smell roasting ginger and dog fat—the smoky arid edge of barbecued ribs dripping on hot coals. I remember my first taste of dog meat. My uncle had forced it down my throat when I was a kid in Saigon. The beerhouse smelled terrible, rancid if it weren’t for the cigarette smoke and the grill. Red-faced men talk-shouted, tearing into dog ribs with their teeth and tossing bones on the muddy floor. The owner, a mean-faced old woman, took my money and handed me a small plate of roasted dog meat, the pieces cut thin like nickels. One day, Uncle Hung was drunk and he ordered me to eat it. With him preparing to smack obedience into me, I put a slice into my mouth. It tasted gamey, almost like rabbit. The ginger killed most of the strange meat flavor. ‘Ha! Ha! Ha! You ate it! You know what this means? In your next life, you’ll be reincarnated as a dog!’ I tried to vomit without success and I bawled with fears only an adult could instill. Whenever she visited me, Chi would take pity and go in my place to fetch Uncle Hung’s dog meat.”

It is generally accepted that life has purpose. Some people believe that the purpose of this life is to ensure a happy after-life or next life. Many others believe in a secular purpose. In 2-3 narrative paragraphs, describe yourself and state what you believe to be your purpose in life. Then provide examples of how you are fulfilling that purpose.

1. Have you ever had an experience like that where one incident made you change the way you lived your life? Explain.
2. How do you think Andrew is changing?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 20



Key Paragraph – 251

“I didn’t have much in common with most of my uncles. I hated having to bow, grovel, and show them respect the whole nine yard like a ten-year-old schoolboy just because they were my elders. Uncle Hong was a natural entrepreneur, at the moment a real estate speculator. Uncle Hun was a lifelong technician, a classic worker ant. Slumlord Uncle Hoang was the only Pham nearing millionaire status. He used to have me paint his illegal apartments until I decided to charge him minimum hourly wages. His wife, a beauty queen who didn’t get a long with the rest of the family too well, didn’t show up for the ceremony, causing fierce whispering among the wives-in-law.”

Choose a Vietnamese tradition you have read about today. Perhaps it is the requirement to respect your elders. Perhaps it is the duty to take care of your family. Or perhaps it is the tradition of honoring the dead. In a narrative paragraph, describe the tradition. Provide examples from the text. In a second paragraph, compare the tradition to one from your own family, exposing the similarities or the differences.

1. How do you act around your family?
2. How is it different or similar to the way Andrew acts around his family?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 21



Key Paragraph – 267

“ ‘No, I do not hate American soldiers. Who are they? They were boys, as I was. They were themselves, but also part of a greater culture—the government. As was I. I can no more blame them than a fish I eat can be blamed for what I do.’

‘You see, their pond is America. Here, in these hills, in this jungle, they are food.’

‘Me, I am in my land. I am in my water. These hills where I’ve killed Vietnamese and Americans. I see these hills every day. I can make my peace with them. For Americans, it was an alien place then as it is an alien place to them now. These hills were the land of their nightmares then as they are now. The land took their spirit. I eat what grows of this land and someday I will return all that I have taken from it. Here is my home, my birthland and my grave.’

‘Tell your friend Tyle. There is nothing to forgive. There is no hate in this land. No hate in my heart. I am a poor man, my home is a hut with a dirt floor, but he is welcome here. Come and I shall drink tea with him, welcome him like a brother.’

Review the paragraphs above. In a narrative paragraph, explain what you think the old man is trying to say about the war between America and Vietnam and its participants. Use examples to make your argument clear.

1. How do you make friends?
2. Describe how you met one of your friends.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 22



Key Paragraph – 276

“ ‘Do you know what I like about you, An?’
I did. But I said, ‘No, What do you like about me?’

‘You’re good. You’re different. One in a million.’

It was her favorite cliché, one she wished to believe. It seemed so easy to along with her, but the words sat in my throat. Someday, I would have to tell her the truth. She made me strive to be something better, but at the heart of it, I was no better than the next guy. I tried to be decent because she needed it.”

Pretend you are Andrew, trying to be the better person Trieu believes you to be. Give her sound advice as to what she ought to do about her father. Write 2-3 detailed narrative paragraphs giving her step-by-step instructions. Include anything you are able to help her with.

1. What advice would you give Trieu?
2. What would you do if you were Khai?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 23



Key Paragraph – 290-291

“Please, you must come back and enjoy my specialty—Gaping Fish,” he bubbles with barely enough patience for me to translate to my companion, the German epicure. ‘It is a dish I learned from a great Chinese chef when I went to Canton to study. O can make it with any sauce you want, garlic-lemon-butter, French tomato and mushrooms, or Chinese sweet-and-sour. Anything.’”

Pretend you are Andrew. Write a narrative email to your mother. In it, tell her about the Chef you met today and about his favorite dish, “Gaping Fish.” Provide her with the step-by-step instructions for preparing this dish. Be clear in your instructions, being careful to anticipate places where she might misunderstand.

1. If you were gone for months, what would you be homesick for?
2. Describe a time when you were ripped off.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 24



Key Paragraph – 299

“After receiving some money as Christmas presents, Minh took a taxi to San Jose Airport and flew to Orange County to find his ex-wife. He lingered until his money ran out. It was his last attempt and it failed. Broke and brokenhearted, he returned on New Year’s Eve to Grandma’s, where his uncle and aunt put him up temporarily in the spare room. Three days later, Minh took his life with a yellow nylon rope tied to the bedroom rafters. At thirty-two, he died the most Vietnamese of deaths, a brokenhearted suicide. His father cut him down from the ceiling while his mother and grandmother wept. And his family, who could not love him while he lived, grieved his passing. His ashes were scattered on the sea he never finished crossing.”

Pretend you are Andrew. There are so many things you wished you could have said to Chi-Minh that you were not able to say when he was alive. Write him a narrative letter of all the things you wish you would have told him before he died.

1. Would you ever be interested in making a similar journey like Andrew’s?
2. What parts would you do and which parts would you do differently?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 25



Key Paragraph – 320

“He turned from me and I caught his awful sadness in profile. ‘I should have been a better father to you boys. I should have been more like an American father. They know how to cherish their children. I should have taken you camping...or something.’”

Pretend you are Andrew. Write 2-3 narrative paragraphs, briefly describe how you hope to change your future relationship with him. Tell him the things you intend to do differently. Suggest things that he might try doing differently. Close by telling him you hope he will accept your offer for a fresh start.

1. If you were Andrew, what would you say to your father who is expressing his regret for the way he raised you?
2. Describe how you can improve your relationship with your family

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 26



Key Paragraph – 329-330

“The silence tells me we are moving too far into no-man’s-land. One more cigarette. More beer. Tusking the smoke out of his nostrils, he seems to brace himself, gathering force like a wave, building before cresting white. As his beliefs come barreling out, I know the crushing impact of his words will stay with me, for in them I catch a glimpse of myself and the true Cuong, the Cuong that came before and is deeper than the suave Calvin facing me. *‘Vietnamese aren’t ashamed of our own poverty. We’re not ashamed of squatting in mud huts and sleeping on rags. There is no shame in being poor. We were born into it just as Westerners are born white. The Westerners are white as we are yellow. There is already a difference between us. Our poverty is minor in the chasm that already exists. A small detail. The real damning this is the fact that there are Viet-kieu, our own brothers, skin of our skin, blood of our blood, who look better than us, more civilized, more educated, more wealthy, more genteel. Viet-kieu look kingly next to the average Vietnamese. Look at you, look at me. You’re wearing old jeans and I’m wearing a suit, but it’s obvious who...who is superior. Can’t you see? We look like monkeys because you make us look like monkeys just by your existence.’*”

Pretend you are Andrew. Write a letter to your brother Tien explaining your feelings about being Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American, and Viet-kieu. Tell him about Calvin and your conversation last night. Ask him for advice regarding not being accepted as wholly American or wholly Vietnamese?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Catfish and Mandala, Day 27



Key Paragraph – 338

“No guilt. I realize suddenly, looking into her joy-gushing face. We stand on separate islands, nothing between us except our designs. And the perfection of our intention is enough. We: friends sharing a sea bath. Our Skein of history casts no shade on this moment. I wish at once Tyle were here in my shoes under this sky. Maybe he would understand that his past wrongs can be mended with the totality of his regrets, a pure desire that things might have been different, a wish of wellness for the survivors. Forgiveness is a hollow gift when there is no mountain to move as compensation for the wrongs. For our truths change with time. There is nothing else. No mitigating circumstances and no power to undo sins. No was. Only is. Between us, there is but a thin line of intention.”

Pretend you are Andrew Pham. You have just written your travelogue, titled *Catfish and Mandala*. Write a letter to the readers of your memoir to be placed on the inside front cover. In it write 2-3 narrative paragraphs that introduce yourself and then explain the context of the tale you have written. Discuss the most important thing you learned on your adventure, and suggest what you hope readers will get out of your memoir. Be sure to revise after your first draft and edit your final copy.

1. What was the most meaningful part of Andrew’s story?
2. Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or why not?