What does it mean to be poor? Only someone who has experienced both the pain of poverty and the perks of privilege can truly answer that. Someone like Aitran Tang Doan.

Aitran has lived the kind of life most American students could never imagine, navigating two very different world—the first world and the third world.

For generations, war changed her family’s fortunes and forced them to run for their lives. Her grandfather fled China in the 1930s during the Japanese invasion and built a comfortable fortune in Vietnam, managing a brick factory. But he was powerless again as the Vietnam War escalated, destroying his business and the promising futures of his eleven children. Everything he had worked so hard to achieve was confiscated by the government.

Her aunts and uncles also left behind affluent lives in Saigon, emigrating to the United States where they had to take odd jobs to survive.

Aitran herself started life in a Vietnamese farming village before her family joined the immigrant wave looking for safety and opportunity in America. They settled in Brooklyn, New York where they had little money—her mother’s job paid just $8,000 a year-- but there was the promise of opportunity.

“I was certainly poor in Vietnam and Brooklyn. However, although my circumstances...were not ideal, I was able to seek other opportunities to change the cards that were dealt to me.”

Aitran knew that education was the key to opening great opportunities for her future. So she worked hard and earned a seat at some of the top schools in America. She won a full scholarship to an elite New England Prep School and then went on to Stanford University in California. She had moved into a world of intellectual and economic riches but, inside, she was struggling with her self-image.

“I was scared to share who I was because nothing fit together. I was scared my first-world friends would pity my third world past. I was scared that everyone would think that I was a fake, because I am no longer the Vietnamese...
girl working in the rice paddies. I am also no longer the inner-city immigrant child fighting off poverty. It has taken me a long time to process all these feelings and all these emotions. I don’t think I felt very reconciled with the guilt of privilege that I had.”

During high school Aitran found the encouragement and the courage to open up to others about her personal journey, turning her self-doubts into positive action.

“Telling my story did not cause others to pity me. Telling my story empowered me, and it empowered others to continue their own struggles, or to continue the work they were doing to provide resources for others to take control of their lives.”

Today, she is committed to working on behalf of other vulnerable people, especially immigrants and refugees. She has already worked in Ecuador and with indigenous groups in the Amazon. Most recently, she produced a documentary about a Syrian family she befriended at a refugee camp in Greece. They dreamed of reaching Germany but each day brought new obstacles.

“I was starting to understand a little bit the type of ambiguity that lingers over my friends lives that I have not been able to truly experience as a volunteer.”

Witnessing their strength in adversity has given her own “can do” spirit a boost.

“I am prepared to meet...new challenges that will keep coming at me. Interacting with these sojourners, these refugees and economic migrants...really helped to bring that mentality out for me.”

“I am determined to contribute to a future where everyone can tap into their potential, where the billions of people who are poor, not merely for material reasons but also because they have no means to seek out opportunities, can do so.”

Aitran Tang Doan, an immigrant from Vietnam, has lived the kind of life most American students could never imagine, navigating two very different worlds - the first world and the third world. Based on her experience, Aitran is now committed to working on behalf of vulnerable people, especially immigrants and refugees. She is studying International Relations at Stanford University in California.