

... AND A FUNERAL

The last time I wrote was regarding a wedding in an Isan village. This time I write about a funeral. When I first came to this village several years ago, I was told I should visit a particularly spiritual Buddhist monk. He lived in an isolated temple, far out in the woods away from other habitations. People came from many kilometers around northeast Thailand, in appreciation for his goodness and for his spiritual power. He received many money contributions from admirers, but unlike some monks who use such money for their own personal advantage, or give money to their relatives, this monk used every contribution for proper purposes. He built a number of temples, supported the education of novices, and made amulets to give to people in need. He lived simply, not spending money on himself, but used his considerable financial resources for purposes that Thai people admire. He was known for giving good advice to people, counseling them to do good things to help others, and to follow the moral teachings of the Buddha. I spoke with a man who had been trained as a monk by him, and he said that this monk was unfailingly humble and kind to everyone. He was the ideal Buddhist monk.

My friend Lek had been to him several times when he was sick or troubled. The monk did a spell that helped Lek sleep well, when Lek had been plagued by bad dreams. Lek attributes both his and his sister's success in getting a U.S. Visa to the prayers of this monk. Lek, like everyone else in the village with whom I spoke, highly venerated this monk.

When I went to visit him, he seemed to be an unassuming man. At first nothing seemed particularly impressive about him. But the more I talked with him, the more his gentle humanity shown through. He asked me questions about myself, and he seemed genuinely interested in learning as much about me as he could through translation. He had never met an American before, but his questions were about my personal life rather than to learn information about the United States. He asked me if I was married, and I said that since I am gay and same-sex marriages are not recognized by my State that I am not married. He was totally accepting of my gayness, as I have found other Buddhist monks in Thailand to be. At the end of our conversation, when it was time for him to give me a blessing, he made a Buddhist prayer and tied a sacred string around my wrist. In his prayer, he made a wish that I would have many boyfriends in my life, and much happiness. Not one boyfriend, mind you, but many!

Though I know from experience that Thai Buddhists are accepting of gay people, it still floors me when I hear a religious leader say something like this. Having been raised in a Christian tradition where some of the most serious sins are sexual in nature, and especially anything regarding homosexuality, it is amazing to me to be exposed to a religion that does not have a tradition of sex as sin. For people raised in such a culture, they cannot understand why something as pleasurable and wonderful as sex should be considered as anti-religious.

Having had this positive experience with him, shortly before I left for America last year I was saddened to learn that this kindly monk had died. He was age sixty-six, and I was told that he approached death with the same equanimity with which he lived his entire life. He did not have any fear of death at all, but welcomed the end of his life with the kind of satisfaction that comes from a life well-lived. A Buddhist believes in karma, and so those who have made good causes in their lifetime can approach the end of their life confident that this good karma will result in a better life in the next reincarnation.

When a person dies in Thailand, within a few days the body is cremated. In the case of this monk, however, there were so many people throughout northeastern Thailand who wanted to come to pay their respects that the monks decided to delay the cremation for a hundred days. His body lay in a closed white wooden casket. Today was the day for the cremation. Practically everyone in the village went to the isolated hermitage where the monk had lived. People told me that I should not miss this major event.

This monk had built a small but exquisitely beautiful temple at his Wat in the woods. When we arrived I saw over a thousand people crowded around a tall fabric canopy in the middle of the woods. I was the only non-Thai person in attendance, and several people nodded approvingly when they saw my Buddhist necklace and wristband. Buddhist monks were reciting sing-song prayers in the ancient Pali language, while people approached the casket on their knees to offer prayers. I have grown to love the soothing melodies of these ancient chants that I have heard so many times. Various monks gave speeches about his good deeds, and his fame throughout the region. They said that he always treated everyone with kindness, and that he had a particular goodness in all his being. Many spoke about how he had personally helped them in their life.

The lead monks then approached the casket and made additional prayers. As they poured some kind of clear liquid onto the top of the casket, which I assume was flammable, a large dog walked up to the central group of monks. I wondered what the officials would do as this dog, with its tail wagging vigorously, went to each monk. No one took any action to dissuade the dog from interrupting the ceremony at all. I took this as a symbol of Buddhist respect for all sentient beings. I was told later that this particular dog was the deceased monk's favorite dog. It was almost as if the dog was transmitting friendly greetings from the dead monk's spirit to each of the monks on the podium. I wondered if the monk's spirit would remember tying the string around my wrist years ago, and wishing me to have many boyfriends.

As the monks left the platform, volunteers distributed incense sticks to everyone in the audience. We were asked to offer our prayers for the beloved monk's karmic reincarnation or achievement of Nirvana. I noticed that many people had brought sticks of wood with them. Now each person came forward and placed their piece of wood, however large or small, along with their incense stick, onto the casket. The casket was literally buried in the wood by the time everyone had brought their contribution. By this means of symbolic interactionism, every person in the crowd became a participant in the event.

A neighbor kindly broke a small tree branch in half and motioned for me to take it to the casket. As I placed my incense stick and the piece of wood onto the casket, my thoughts wandered back to the time when I was so affected at a funeral of an elderly Cherokee woman in 1974. She had died shortly after I began my first ethnographic fieldwork, on the Eastern Cherokee Reservation. That was while I was still in graduate school. And now I find myself at another funeral half a world away, and thirty five years later, being equally moved by the outpouring of empathy by everyone in attendance. As I return to my seat, memories of my time in Thailand overtake me. I notice the spot where, on my first visit to this Wat, I excitedly saw an old broken pot (my excitement due to my experiences as an archaeological excavator) and started to pick it up when Lek, nervous about my safety as ever, stopped me in fear that there might be a snake coiled underneath it. I notice my first student here, a boy that I taught to use a computer and some key English words, who is now a monk in his orange robes. An elderly lady who seemed close to her own death a year ago, is now recovered and participating in good form. The mayor of the village greets me with the English words "Good evening." A young man who had just visited my house this morning takes me by the hand to introduce me to his friend from a nearby village. People with whom I have lived are now bonded as a community by this commemoration of an admired monk's blessed life.

So many thoughts and memories crowd my every glance. People I have known, and others I have never seen before, are all together in a warm and safe surrounding. I feel as at home and as safe as any place I have ever been. Tennessee Williams, the famous gay playwright, penned the line that "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." Nothing could be more true of my life. I remember back a few years, when I was waking up after my knee surgery in the orthopedic building of Kaiser Permanente. I was there as a temporary resident in a big impersonal institution in the city of Lost Angels, filled with nurses and doctors from the Philippines and many other countries, chattering away in Tagalog and other unknown languages. Though they had never seen me before, and had no reason to feel anything at all toward me, nevertheless they treated me with such tender care and kindness that I felt completely protected. That is the way I felt in this crowd.

As I sat in dreamy contemplation, what happened next was totally unexpected. The peace and calmness of the funeral ceremony was suddenly punctured by the explosion of several loud bursts. At first I thought it was gunfire, but then I looked up and noticed the fireworks exploding in multicolored hues above the crowd in the dark night sky. Just as I turned to see where the fireworks were coming from, an extremely loud whirring sound issued from a bright red flare that came from the top of a nearby chedi monument. As my eyes lit up in surprise, the red flare traveled in a direct line to the top of the fabric canopy. In an instant, like a tracer gun marking a target, the flare lit up the canopy and traveled directly down to the wood-covered casket. Before I knew what was happening, the pile of wood was aflame with an intense fire that reached up to the top of the canopy. Next, four walls of sparkling fireworks surrounding the canopy burst into a blindingly bright square.

Wow! I have never seen a funeral like this! What a way to get a sendoff to the next lifetime. If that does not catch the attention of the spirits, I don't know what would. At that instant, I decided that I want my funeral to be at night, and to have the climax with a fireworks show! Ha.

I thought my father had the best idea when he said that instead of a sad dreary funeral, he wanted people to have a great meal, and have an enjoyable experience in his memory. So, that is what we did after he died. At his funeral I spoke about the highlights of his life, and his accomplishments, and then invited people in the audience to say something about their memory of him (I got that idea from attending the very moving funeral of the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff. She was so kind to me). After those testimonies all my Dad's friends and relatives repaired to a nearby dining hall and had a delicious dinner and a rousing time, just as he instructed.

Seeing this cremation made me think about what I want to happen to my body after I die. I used to think that when I die I would like my body to be encased in liquid plastic, and buried in a time vault to be opened in five hundred years or so. Then, since the typical casket and embalming in use today only preserves the body for a century or so, I could be a unique exhibit in an archaeological museum. I have always loved museums, and the thought of spending eternity one of its interesting halls sounded quite appealing. There was something very comforting about the idea that my body (along with copies of my books that I have published) would be a central attraction as a docent explained to schoolchildren and tourists about the foibles of life in the 20th century. Now, though, it is the 21st century, and I have survived service in the U.S. Army, several near-fatal accidents, and the AIDS pandemic. I am alive a lot longer than I ever thought I would be alive. And a little less vain. So, perhaps being encased in liquid plastic is not such a burning dream of mine any more. Not that I have anything against it, if my survivors want to go to the trouble of finding enough of those little plastic kits of clear resin for scorpions and other critters to be encased. But, at the rate that we are destroying the earth's environment, chances are not too good that Homo sapiens will even be able to have museums in five hundred years. So, no great loss there.

Nowadays, I am thinking differently. I'm not sure being burned to a crisp, and further polluting the air with the smoke, is my favorite means of disposing of my body, though I have to admit this monk's cremation is the most spectacular funeral I have ever seen. I think I'll take the fireworks without the cremation. What I am thinking would be most nice would be to be buried naturally, without embalming, in a beautiful fabric bag that will soon degrade. Then above the spot of my burial, plant a nice tree—preferably a long-living fruit tree—with a plaque (or maybe even a little statue or Buddhist monument) about my life. Invite passersby to eat the fruit (no pun intended) and have a nice thought of me. As my body decays, it will provide natural fertilizer for the tree. Thus, my life will help another form of life to grow and produce something of value for others.

That, in a way, encapsulates my desire of my life. I have devoted myself to helping others, to giving pleasure and sustenance, as a teacher and as a writer. My lectures to my

students, and my books to my readers, are the heritage that I leave after me. Others may wish to have offspring to carry on their family name. I am satisfied for my ideas to have given insight to those who have heard me speak, and for my words to inspire readers to take committed action or simply to appreciate the pleasures of each and every day.

As the fireworks display finished, and the casket burned brightly, all these thoughts were going through my head. I sat there in silence, watching the burning embers in the dark night. As the crowd started to return to their motorcycles and trucks Lek wanted to leave. Like many Isan people, Lek is very afraid of ghosts. He was not comfortable, so I agreed to go. But I did not feel afraid in the least. I just wanted to sit there and absorb the beauty of the fire. Lek thought I was crazy, much like my sister thought I was nuts to want to sit for hours staring at the edge of Niagara Falls. After all, it is the same thing over and over again. But, to me, there is something intensely soothing about watching the current of the water as it gracefully yet powerfully cascades over a rocky ledge, or watching a fire grow from the initial spark into full flame, and then gradually dying down to a few glowing embers.

It is this same intense soothing feeling that I find more and more attractive as I spend my days conscious of every moment of pleasure. This is the Buddhist concept of mindfulness, of appreciating what one is doing by being consciously mindful of every action one takes, and every detail of the view one sees. This is why I give such attention to being surrounded by beauty, whether of the beautiful plants in my garden or the art on my walls. This is why I am so grateful for the simple pleasures of each day.

It occurred to me that I was particularly appreciative of this funeral ceremony because it was such a fitting end to a good day. I had awoken refreshed in the morning after a restful sleep. After watering my garden, and feeding the fish, I had eaten my usual bowl of cereal. Then after a brisk shower I got a good amount of writing done, in my attempts to catch up with several publication deadlines that are staring me in the face. About eleven o'clock a neighbor came by and out of the blue offered to give me a free massage. It was so relaxing that I fell asleep for about twenty minutes. Then when I woke up I cut open a fresh coconut and drank the sweet juice inside, and scraped the slippery white coconut meat and let it slither down my throat. Eating lunch, a simple bowl of rice with chicken, and sides of fresh cucumbers and tomatoes, seemed particularly delicious. I picked a fresh papaya off the tree in my yard for dessert, savoring that while watching the fish swim back and forth in my little fishpond. I got some more writing done in the afternoon, and got a good sense of accomplishment for the day. The afternoon, however, was interrupted by two neighborhood kids who wanted to take a swim in the fishpool. Because I do not want to terrorize the fish, I dissuaded them from that idea and instead actually persuaded them to study a new English-language computer program that I recently purchased. To my surprise they pronounced the words perfectly. That was another pleasure of the day. Before I knew it, the light was fading and it was time for dinner. I made a sandwich and a cabbage salad, as I looked out the window at the farmers herding their water buffaloes back to their nighttime shelter, and had another delicious meal. Then it was time to meet with friends as we got ready to go to the

funeral. Remembering the monk, and watching the spectacular funeral ceremony, was a truly great ending for a great day.

An appreciation for each day of life, as it happens, is exactly what the Buddha taught about focusing on the present. From that perspective, this day was quite fine. I feel satisfied in a way that I did not when I was younger. Now I am more likely to stop and smell the roses, to savor every pleasure that life holds out. I am grateful that I have lived long enough to get to this place in life, and part of my reason for writing these letters is to encourage you the reader to do likewise.

And yet, while I am enjoying life completely, perhaps precisely because I am feeling so fulfilled in life, like the famous monk I have absolutely no fear of death. I now understand what my father said, when he knew he was dying. Instead of being fearful of death, or resentful that he could not live longer, he said that he was grateful he had lived as long as he did, and so he did not begrudge death. He told me something the day before he died that I had never heard him say before. He said that he did not believe in an afterlife. He said that he thought a life is like a burning candle, and when it burns down to the end and the light goes out, that is the end. The candle, and the light, does not exist any more. It simply goes out of existence.

Is there a heaven? Is there a hell? Is there one reincarnation after another? Does our spirit leave the body and become part of the universe? None of us know what happens after we die, and anyone who confidently spouts details about postmortem existence is simply pontificating. Rather than worry about heaven or hell after we die, I think we need to focus on how much we create our own heaven or hell during our lifetime. Of course people can get caught up in events that are beyond their control, or suffer tragedies that are not of their making, but in general to a great extent we can make our days heavenly or hellish. It is up to us, by the attitude with which we approach life, and by the choices we make. A critic once said that my writings are full of “optimism” as if that were some fault. I am glad that my writings are perceived as optimistic. Why not be optimistic? What is the alternative?

My wish, then, is for you to have a fine day today. Be optimistic, and feel gratitude for every blessing that life has afforded you. Forget the bad, and remember the good. That is how I have learned to approach each day. I hope you can do the same.