

ISAN FIELDNOTES by Walter L. Williams March 16, 2007

I bought a new mobile phone for 5,000 baht (\$125 USD) that is supposed to be able to connect me to the internet from my house. So far, after trying on a number of days, I have only been able to connect three times. sorry for the lack of communication, but I have been so occupied with the house construction and all the ceremonies, and getting the house set up the way I like it, that I have not been going into Maha Sarakham to get to the internet.

Lek was worried about me being here with no one to speak English, so he took the bus to come here. He has been his critical self, but also very helpful at the same time. Rock, the translator from Maha Sarakham University who I hired begged me for an advance on his salary of 2,500 baht, in order to pay his rent. I told him every single time I have loaned money to a Thai person, I never get paid back. So I said I really did not want to do that. He begged some more, promising on his honor as a responsible university graduate that he would follow through and either pay me back or work it off. I pay him the outlandishly high salary of 500 baht per day (\$12.50 USD) so I told him if he would promise not to be like all the others I had hired, and show up for work dependably, then I would advance it to him. He promised on a stack of Buddhist prayer books. Well, he showed up for three days after that, and then did not show up. So he owes me 1000 baht still. Lek arrived that day, so I did not call Rock. Several days later, never having heard anything from Rock, I called him. He said he had to go to Bangkok, and would return within the next two days. I said he should call me immediately if there is any change from our plan, and he promised faithfully to do that. That was four days ago and I have not heard from him since then. As it turns out, I did not need him during these days since Lek was here. But it still galls me that he has not called or shown up as promised. If even a responsible university graduate student acts this way, I can only conclude that Thai people are just not dependable. They are the nicest people in the world, but promises and commitments mean literally nothing to them.

Several days after writing this, Rock showed up to work. I asked him about why he did not come before. He explained that he knew that Lek was in the village, and he knew that Lek does not want him there because Lek thinks paying Rock is a waste of my money. Of course, Lek does not do a good job as translator, and knows nothing about computers. Rock figured that I did not need him when Lek was here. This is an example of the different ways of thinking between Isan people and Americans. I explained that I did in fact need him, that I was not able to get my phone connection to work for accessing the internet, and there were other things that I needed Rock to do. Plus, I explained to him that if he did not show up for work or call to explain, that an American employer would just conclude as I did that he was not dependable. Once I explained this to Rock, he understood. Even he, an educated person, acts based on an Isan mindset.

That mindset is most evident in the reactions of my neighbors when there is a problem. After a heavy rain the other day, I complained about the way the workers poured the concrete for the new driveway, because water stands there and does not drain away. I am very concerned about slipping and falling again, as I fell several times before on slippery Isan house floors. One of those falls resulted in a dislocated knee, which required an expensive surgery and months of walking on crutches. My neighbors' reaction was to take a broom and sweep away the water. That was kind of them to do, but it does not address the basic problem, which is the way the driveway was constructed. I notice this kind of reaction over and over in a thousand different ways. When there is a problem, Isan people take action based on the immediate issue. They do not think in terms of

making a basic change in the structure that led to the issue. I wonder if this has anything to do with a Buddhist mindset of accepting things as they are, and focusing on changing your own attitude. If there is water standing on the driveway, then that really is my own problem of my attitude. They do not think in terms of changing the driveway.

Lek has been very helpful in getting good prices for workers for the house, and for materials. His sister's husband has worked here for several days for free, making my fishpond, and done great work. The house really is turning out to be beautiful. It just has a lot of problems. I dread to think what will happen during the rainy season.

Yesterday some people told me that the way I have an open side of the house, during a tropical storm that my whole living room will be soaked. I put up a plastic tarp as a sun shade, and it works fine for that, but they said it will not be sufficient for a bad storm. I wish people would tell me these things earlier, but they do not want to be the purveyor of bad news so they say nothing when I am planning the house. Now I am told that I need to buy an aluminum roof to cover the fishpond, which I thought would protect the house from a storm. I thought I might need to buy this anyway, because I had been suffering from mosquito bites so much that I decided to go ahead and spend the money to put screens over the whole yard. That was about as cheap as doing screens all around the house. But when we went to price the screens, the helpful employee at Homemart told me about a mosquito trap for 2,500 baht. Since that was considerably cheaper than the screens, I decided to buy it. Also, he recommended a spray for bugs in the ground, and Lek sprayed the whole yard. For the last three days this seems to be working pretty well, so I am not getting bitten as before. I wish I had known about all this earlier, or I would not have spent so much time and energy and money trying to make the house bugproof.

But I did decide to put screens on my two office windows and a screen door for my office and another for the kitchen. When they finished the work I saw that there were no locks on any of the screens. The installer said he never heard of locks for screens. Can you imagine? I pointed out how anyone could come to the front window, push open the screen, reach inside the window, and steal something (like my computer) sitting on my desk by the window. The man suggested I move my desk away from the window!!! I insisted that every screen door in America is installed with locks, and I want locks. They always reply, "Well, this is not America, this is Thailand." After insisting again, the man left. The next day he returned with plastic locks for the two windows, but he said he could not find any locks even a simple hook, for the screen door. So, now I have two screen doors with no locks. Not that they would be used anyway. Neither Lek nor anyone else in Thailand is used to opening and closing doors, since their doors are always open whenever anyone is at home, so my entreaties to "please close the door" go for naught. Finally, after showing Lek the flies in the kitchen because he continually leaves the screen door open, he is starting to close it--sometimes. But he and other Thai people just don't think about things like that.

Back when he lived with me in California, I was always irritated at Lek not screwing on lids correctly. He continually screws a lid on crooked, so ants often get into food. I always thought this was just his own person idiosyncrasy, but now I see other Thai people continually doing the same thing, they wipe away the ants, and I point out if they screw the lid on carefully ants cannot get into their food, but they just give me these blank looks. They really do think very differently from everything I have been used to. Sometimes I feel like Alice in Wonderland here.

Just as I am getting frustrated with this kind of lack of attention to detail, someone will do something especially kind or helpful to me. They really are the sweetest people in the world. How can I get upset at these little things when they are so nice?

I have a small walk-in closet, and I told the electrician I want a small light ("lek fi") in there. Later, I come in to find that he has installed the biggest florescent tube that I have bought (for the front

of the house) in this small closet. When I complained, he said he thought I would want to see well the things that were inside the closet! I have told him to always check with me before making some kind of decision like this, and he promises to do that (and sometimes actually does ask, which is better than most of the workers I have found here). But then something like this happens.

Today I realized that, when walking into the bathroom late at night when it is dark, the switch to the closet is closet to the entry, and the switch to the bathroom light is further away. Thus, I have to stumble about in the dark when it would have been just as easy to install the switch to the bathroom closest to the door.

What goes through the mind of these workers just boggles my imagination. Every Thai house I have been into has all these little things that make living there more difficult. But people just shrug and accept it all as part of the reality of life. Or, they will construct some kind of makeshift thing that will get the job accomplished. I have seen people run two electric extension cords, and put the connecting point right in the middle of a doorway, where it is dangerous to trip on. They could easily change to put the long cord where the short one is, so that the connector is not in the middle of the doorway, but that is just not the way they think. No problem. Just step over it.

I don't know why my electrician was even working on that closet, when the electricity in the bathroom is still not finished. What goes on in the minds of these workers (and he is among the best I have found) really defies any kind of logic. He finished the lights in Lek's salon (which will not be used until Lek moves here permanently) before doing the lights in my office, which I am using every day. Finally that did get done, but every worker I have hired seems to do exactly the lowest priority thing when I insist that the other things are higher priority. They are not deliberately trying to sabotage my efforts, and they genuinely want to be helpful. But if I want three bricks cemented to finish a row of bricks, they will inevitably start another row of bricks first, leaving the unfinished part until later. Thus, many things are unfinished.

Lek decided to pave the driveway, which I thought was low priority and should wait until later. But he got two workers for so cheap that I agreed to go ahead. Then after they started the work, it turned out that they did not know how to do smoothing concrete work. Bunlut, Lek's brother in law, was going to come and do that part for free, but he got busy in his work and he could not come. So the only person who knew how to do that was the electrician!! So for two days the only electrician in this district was working on the driveway while the two workers I hired stood around and watched him. Some bargain! Plus, the electricity is still not finished, because the electrician has been so busy on the driveway. They worked and worked, and the carport is beautiful. But later I checked and, despite my repeated statements that I wanted to make sure the concrete slopes so that water does not stand on it because I do not want to fall on a slick wet carport, after they left and the concrete dried, I poured some water on it and it just sat there. There is no slope at all. Plus, after making this beautiful paved carport, they left jagged edges at the front side, which could damage a car tire as it pulls in and out of the carport. I made them redo that. But why don't they think of these things before hand?

A former student of mine, who is now living in India, says the workers there are exactly the same way, and his advice to me is to learn meditation so that I do not let these things bother me. I guess with this kind of incompetence, one really does need to learn to meditate. Maybe that is why meditation is such a big deal in Asia.

Tonight I came out into the carport to see Lek painting over the concrete splashes that the workers had left on the wall. That was very nice of him, only he did not put down paper on the floor, as he repeatedly has heard me insist that all the workers use, and so there are paint spots all along the carport edge. The other day I noticed in the village temple, which has a beautiful tile floor, that there were paint spots all along the walls of the temple. They just do not notice such

things, even though I think it ruins a beautiful tile floor. They just laugh when I point this out. Crazy American!

Lek decided to let me keep his car to use here, and so for that favor I bought four new tires which were badly needed. That cost me 10,600 baht (\$300 USD) but I think is well worth it for having a car that I can drive. Plus I want good tires for safety if I am going to be driving it around. Lek has been buying used tires, and has had about eight flat tires since I have been riding with him last fall. When I say the need to buy new tires, he always says he has no money, so he can only afford used tires. I point out that he has spent more money on used tires than if he had bought new tires in the beginning. And so it goes.

Well, every day the house gets closer to completion. Every day people in the village come to see the progress, and they always tell me it is the most beautiful house in the village. I want to scream that it has so many problems how can they be so sanguine. But then I look at their houses, and realize that this house is, by far, the most beautiful.

I have been getting some great deals on beautiful tropical plants, and plus the electrician has given me several plants for free from his yard. He has all these beautiful plants behind his house where no one goes and all this ugly open space at the front of his house where he and his family spend their time. I tell him he should put some of these beautiful plants at the front to make his surroundings beautiful, but of course that does not happen. Oh well, at least the people here like my house a lot. I wish someone would offer to buy it, so that I could sell it and build another house now that I know all the mistakes to avoid. Of course, why do more work? As I lay on my hammock, overlooking the fishpond and the beautiful plants that I have planted (the mango tree is already starting to grow little mangos in only a week since I planted it!), I really do love it. So, I have to forget the problems and focus on the enjoyment I get from the good things about the house.

Of course, the big question is what to do when the hot weather arrives. It is already hotter than Hades here, and I am only comfortable if I am DIRECTLY under the ceiling fan or one of the portable fans. I had hoped to avoid having an air conditioner because they use so much electricity. But my office is like an oven. I don't know why, since I made a very high ceiling and put lots of insulation in the ceiling. But it is still hot. I am going to have to do something to improve the air flow. Lek does not want to open up the top because he fears dust, but I may have to tear some holes in the walls or ceiling to get more ventilation as I originally wanted. The neighbors say it is hot because I built a high wall around the yard. I wanted that for privacy and to block the ugly houses next to this house. But they say the high wall cuts out the breezes. Maybe they are right. Ugh.

ANIMAL RIGHTS

Yesterday I witnessed the sale of a young water buffalo by a neighbor. As the buffalo was being loaded onto the back of a pickup truck, the mother buffalo started acting very agitated. She roared her disapproval. When the truck took off with her son chained in the back, she broke away from the rope holding her by the nose, and ran frantically after the truck. Whether from prior experience or intuition, she knew exactly what was happening, and that she would never see her son again. The owners ran behind her, and eventually caught her and subdued her. As they led her by the rope, I actually saw tears in her eyes. She was obviously in great stress and mourning. Anyone that says animals do not have feelings has no experience being around animals. Water buffaloes are large-brained intelligent animals, and they have emotions just as humans do. We are so human-centric that we think we are the only beings with feelings. My neighbors thought that it was funny that I was so concerned about the mother, but they also recognized that the

mother was indeed very sad to lose her offspring. Yet, even with that recognition, their whole life experience leads them to think that humans have the right to own and sell other species.

This is a mainstay of human thinking for the last eight to ten thousand years ago, when animals were first domesticated. We lightly use that term “domestication,” when to my mind it is nothing different from slavery. In fact, I think that the enslavement of animals led directly to the enslavement of other humans. I do not think people could have accepted the idea that a person has the right to own and exploit the labor of another person, if they had not already adjusted to the idea that they could own and exploit the labor of animals.

As I watched the reaction of the mother buffalo, I could not help but be reminded of descriptions I have read of African American mothers being sold at slave auction houses in the Old South, and of their terror and grief as they saw their children being sold to other slave-owners. The mother’s reaction, knowing that she would never see her child again, was not unlike the stress and mourning that I observed in the mother buffalo.

How can we stand aside and not express outrage and concern at the continued enslavement of animals? Most people shrug and say that is just the way things are, and there is no hope for change. But studying history convinces me that there is indeed a realistic hope for change. Two centuries ago, human slavery was a major part of the world economic system. The rise of Great Britain as a leading world power could not have occurred without the vast profits generated by the British trade in African slaves, and the profits of British plantations in the widespread British colonies. Yet, a century ago, an awareness emerged within British thinking that eventually recognized that slavery was morally wrong. In 1835, the British government abolished slavery in all its colonies, in spite of the economic losses.

Now, I would suggest, it is time for people to take a similar attitude toward the enslavement of animals, at least for the higher intelligent mammals like cows, pigs, and water buffaloes. Admittedly, things are much better now than they were a century ago, when horses, oxen, and buffaloes were exploited for their labor to transport things for human benefit. Animals were worked mercilessly until they died, pulling wagons, plows, water pumps, and other labor devices. With the emergence of oil-based machines, much of human “horsepower” need was transferred from horses to machines. Though dependence on petroleum brought its own problems, especially air pollution, the transfer to machine power represented a vast improvement in the lives of domesticated animals.

Today, the life of a cow or buffalo is not onerous. In this village, as in Isan villages all over Thailand, every morning the cows are led out to pasture, and they spend their day eating and lounging in the fields. Every evening the owners come and pick them up to return them to their barn at the owner’s house in the village. This everyday movement, that I call “The Cow Parade,” sets the routine for village life. Yet, even though they are no longer laboring for human benefit, the animals are still virtual slaves. They have no rights that a human is bound to respect.

One of the most horrible aspects of slavery was the sale of children and separation of families. The profit of selling young slaves was integral to the way the entire slave economy worked. Likewise, today, Isan families depend heavily on the sale of cows and buffaloes for their profit. Making ends meet by farming rice is no longer economically viable. The only way a farmer can make a profit is by having cows or buffaloes to breed, raise and sell the young. It is hard to convince an Isan person that what they are doing is morally wrong, when their whole economic well-being is dependent on raising and selling animals. The other day, after discussions with his sisters and cousins, Lek asked me if I would buy a cow for him to raise. All my talk about animal rights has obviously meant nothing to him, and he thinks that my idea that the enslavement of animals is morally wrong is silly. Once again, as many times in the past, I am in the situation where I feel something inside that other people think is crazy. Any white person in the antebellum South who expressed moral outrage over slavery would also have been thought to be crazy. Yet today, most people in the world accept the idea that human slavery is wrong. Changes in attitudes can occur over time. I am hopeful that one day most people will accept the idea that enslavement of animals is also wrong.

I observe that Isan people do not respect their animals, in the way that hunter-gatherers offer prayers of thanks to the spirit of the animals that they hunt. When I visited a neighbor and watched him cut the throat of a chicken for us to eat dinner, I offered a prayer of thanks to the spirit of the chicken. They all thought this was terribly funny, and considered it just one of many crazy ideas of this farang (foreigner). I explained that traditionalist American Indians offer prayers like this for the food that they eat, and I think that is a good idea to promote a sense of not wasting food. They accepted my explanations with an interest, but no change in their own attitudes or behavior.

Isan people take advantage of every aspect of their environment. Instead of eating cows and pigs, I try to encourage them to eat more small things. After a big rain the other day, a swarm of insects came. All over my house, these flying insects appeared. I have already given up on keeping insects out of the house, and once I purchased an electric mosquito trap that relieved the torment I had from mosquito bites. So the mosquitoes are gone, but the other bugs are everywhere. I am amazed at the variety and size of the insects. Today a dragonfly bigger than a hand span landed on my bed. June bugs almost the size of an egg land on my shoulder, and at this point I just brush them off. I no longer react in surprise as some strange looking bug plops down on my arm. Isan people welcome the swarm. Of course, the ingenuous Isan solution to this calamity of bugs is to eat them. People go around with buckets of water, grabbing insects everywhere and throwing them into the bucket to keep them until they get home. Then they fry the insects and eat them whole. I continue to feel that insects should be the future basic staple food of humans, so I am happy to encourage this aspect of Isan diets. Eating insects certainly does not have the environmental problems that eating beef and pork provide.

ISAN PARTYING

This week there have been still more parties. A street fair was organized by the primary school, and students from the school did dance performances from a makeshift stage. A

highlight of the evening was when the principal of the school went on stage to sing Isan folksongs. I am amazed at how much public entertainment goes on in this small village. In an American village of less than 500 hundred people, I doubt there would be so many public performances. I am coming to realize that a major emphasis of Isan culture is performance and partying. Isan people will use any excuse to celebrate anything and everything. This is great, except for the fact that for the young men (mid teens to late twenties) this partying involves a lot of drinking beer or whiskey. I am continually receiving invitations to participate in these drinking sessions, which I mostly turn down. When I do drink, it is only a little.

I worry about the health and financial impact of this heavy drinking. One twenty-five year old man whose nickname is Name, who I have known for over five years, has always been very kind and sweet to me. It is sad, however, for me to see how much he depends on alcohol. He is always asking me to buy him a beer, which if I do usually turns into five or six large bottles that he can consume during the course of an evening. When he visited my house the other night, he received a phone call from one of his relatives. They were talking about money matters, and Name is not happy because he and his parents have no money. It is hard for me to feel sympathy for him, considering how much he spends on beer. His salary, working on constructing the little spirit houses that are commonly made and sold at this village, totals between 100 to 200 baht per day (he is paid by the piece). That is between \$2.75 and \$5.50 USD for a day's work. Considering that he pays forty baht for one bottle of beer, it is easy to see that his expenses for beer alone are much more than his income. I have tried to talk to him about not spending so much on beer, and about the impact on his health. He nods in agreement, but then the next time I see him he is drinking again.

This pattern of heavy drinking is the negative impact of so much Isan cultural emphasis on partying, but there are many positive impacts of the party mentality as well. There are many Buddhist holidays, and I think it is great that a religion sponsors so many institutionalized means for people to have fun. I want to quote the Buddha, who advocated what he called "The Middle Way," avoiding extremes. That is, a certain amount of anything should be appreciated and enjoyed, but avoiding excessive overdoing of any one thing. Anything, no matter how good, if done too much, results in a life that is out of balance.

Still, there is much to be said for the Isan emphasis on partying. Last night there was a Molum performance at the village Buddhist temple. Molum is a style of Isan music that is similar to Dunduk music in Indonesia. It is wonderfully melodic, and easy to dance to. A local Molum performance group came from a nearby village, and in their performance they integrated comments about this village and about the district into their singing. The style of music varies, from a plaintive talking commentary, to handclapping foot-stomping dance music. I was surprised that the young men, who form the core of the dancers, were not in attendance as they have been at every previous party I have attended. I was also surprised that more people did not dance at the performance last night, as I had seen them do on previous occasions. Only a few men and women got up to dance, and they joined the performers at the front, dancing in a line as the performers sang. Two

men from the village approached me, and begged me to join the dance. I was reluctant since there were so few other people dancing, but they dragged me along anyway. I started dancing, and the crowd of observers started clapping in approval. They love to watch me dance American dance styles. I danced until I was exhausted, and as I sat down the music ended.

At the end of the performance it is interesting that Lek's sisters, who I have not seen for a few days, both appeared and said to me—in English—"go home." Since they know so little English, I know that Lek taught them to say this because Lek is worried about me being in the village by myself while he is in Bangkok. They are all worried about me at night, that someone might try to take advantage of me and steal something from me. It is nice that they are so concerned about my wellbeing, but a little disturbing that my actions are so under their observation and control. I feel totally safe in this village, and have never had even one person approach the house with any intent other than in friendship.

Both sisters asked why my new boyfriend is not sleeping with me at my house. They think he should be with me fulltime, instead of going back to his parents' house to sleep. They are completely accepting of our homosexual relationship. Before leaving for Bangkok, Lek arranged for a young kathoey named Lon to come to clean the house and cook for me. I have known Lon for about a year, and his parents completely accept his transgender nature. They talk matter-of-factly about his feminine ways since he was a young child, and think nothing negative about it. He wears short hair which is mandatory for boys at school, and he dresses in blue jeans, but wears feminine-looking shirts and women's high-heeled shoes. When he answers the phone, or says hello to someone, he always says "Sawadee ka" which is the women's form of greeting as opposed to "Sawadee kop" that a man would say. This greeting immediately announces to someone talking to him that he is a kathoey. Everywhere people accept him as he is, and assume that he will be homosexual. This village is the way the world would be without homophobia and transphobia. The fact that I, as an openly gay person, am so comfortably accepted here is another indicator of the lack of homophobia of Isan people.

Over the past year Lon and I had sex a few times and had some pleasant associations. But Lon only came around a couple of times a month, so I did not think much would develop. However, since Lon has been coming to my house on a daily basis, he has really blossomed. When he first came here, he was very impressed by my house (saying "suay mak mak" [very beautiful] and "chop mak mak" [I like very much]). But he was shy with me. He would not even take off his shirt when we made love, and he seemed embarrassed to be seen without his shirt on. Over the last few weeks he has really opened up, as I have explained my sexual liberationist philosophy, and emphasized how the body is good and we should not be ashamed of it. Now Lon parades around the house nude, showing off his beautiful body with great pride. He gets great enjoyment from sex, and wants to do it so many times every day that I am exhausted. Boy, this is really a big surprise to me about him. Even though I am exhausted, I feel great joy in having him around. He is a terrific dancer, and when I play classical Thai music, or Isan molum music, he puts on quite a show. He is a natural entertainer. He has this personality that has developed independently of any contact with international transgender dance and

performance, leading me to think this aspect of transgender performance must be something inborn in transgender people. I have spent many a hot afternoon lounging in my hammock and lost in awe at his graceful dance performances. This must have been like the role of the transgender performer as shaman, or as dancer in the court of a local king or prince.

Lon is graceful in all the ways that a woman might be, but he also does not mind doing things that require strength. He will come out of the bathroom where he insists on hand laundering my clothes, in order to volunteer (without me asking) as I dig a deep hole for a tree planting. Of course, this is similar to the role of Isan women, who also are involved in heavy physical labor.

Besides his abilities as a dancer and worker at the house, Lon is a great cook. My only problem is that he cooks so much food that I cannot possibly eat it all. The other day he cooked several large prawns, a batch of chicken livers, plus a fish, and rice and vegetables. I am trying to get him to cook less, and to cook only once a day so I can have the leftovers for dinner. Lon takes a possessive attitude about the house and making it nice. Though young, he is rather bossy, complaining to people if they don't take off their shoes before they enter the house. To my next door neighbor, a man age fifty, who has the habit of walking into my house uninvited and laying down on the bamboo bed to take a nap, Lon ordered him curtly to leave. He has the total self-confidence of a person who has been raised to think positively of himself. He does not think anything is strange about his being feminine, because Isan culture so totally accepts transgender behavior.

Lon is also rather bossy toward me, insisting that I do this or that thing in the way he prefers. But if he overdoes it, and I complain, he is quick to say "sorry" in English. In the few weeks that he has been here, his understanding of English has progressed amazingly. He does not say much in English, and prefers to speak in Thai or Lao. But when I speak in English, he now basically understands. Likewise, when he speaks in Thai, I basically understand. When we go visit his parents, he serves as translator between me and them.

Lon's mother suffered a very bad experience when she went to a Thai government clinic. She said that the clinic gave her some medicine that made her lose all feeling in her legs. Though only 53 years old, she is paralyzed from the waist down. Still, she is a very cheery and kind person. When I go to visit she always lights up with a wide smile even when I know she is not feeling good. Lon's father makes grass reed mats for roofs, and he charges 15 baht (about forty cents USD) for one mat. I bought twelve mats from him, and he gave me a discount. I like the traditional style of grass thatched roof, and think I will buy more to have a porch covering over my fishpond at my house.

Lon's family is very nice, as is the case of most Isan people, but they are not "clean" in the way that a Westerner would expect. They basically live outdoors in the grass-thatch covered porch that surrounds their one-room concrete block house. The house itself is used only for storage of the family's few clothes and other material goods. As a consequence, Lon is not used to doing things like putting trash in the trashcan but will

simply throw it into the yard. Since I am carefully making my yard to be beautiful, I am trying to train him not to do this kind of thing. I also put a screen door on the kitchen, to at least keep the flies out of the food preparation area, and like other Isan people he continually forgets to close the door. The only time doors are closed in Isan houses are when people leave the house and no one is at home. So, in very basic things like “close the door” which he is now learning in English, Lon is making some drastic changes in his approach to things.

What I notice in Lon’s behavior, which is typical of Isan people in general, is a lack of attention to detail and systematic thinking. He is careless in his handling of things. He drops an expensive world globe that I brought from America. I bought a beautiful poster of a waterfall, and when it came unglued from the wall, Lon thought nothing about crumpling it in a pile in the corner, even though this left numerous creases in the picture. I was upset, and considered the poster ruined, but Lon did not understand at all why I was upset or even concerned.

How an Isan woman can make an intricately patterned silk cloth, which necessitates extreme attention to detail, and cannot remember to screw on a lid of a jar correctly, boggles my imagination. I used to think that when Lek would continuously screw on jar lids haphazardly, that it was a personal idiosyncrasy of his. Now I see the same kind of behavior commonly in this village. Why is screwing on a lid of a jar so difficult for Isan people? I think it has something to do with a lack of focus on material things. Living close to nature, and using natural materials for most of their daily needs, a manufactured item is still a novelty for many Isan people. As a consequence, they do not pay much attention to keeping material things nice. I have seen sacred images of the Buddha, which I know the family values, covered in spider webs and dusty. My neighbor comes over, and without asking me moves the wood bench to a different location than I have chosen, and in the process chips a piece of wood off the polished wood bench. Another neighbor moves a floor fan from the place where I have carefully placed it for maximum coverage of the room, almost pulling the electric cord out of its socket, and he thinks nothing of this. Others will bring along a piece of fruit they are eating, and think nothing of throwing the skin or seeds on the floor or the yard.

I see this pattern, of a lack of attention to detail, to be endemic among Isan people. Lon playfully grabs me and throws me on the bed, almost knocking over and breaking the expensive electric mosquito trap that I bought. He brings me fresh flowers, which he has wet to keep fresh, and plops them down on the keyboard of my computer. When I complain, he is very hurt. I explain that water on a computer can ruin it, but that is not important to him. Who am I to complain when someone is kind enough to bring me fresh flowers? These are two different value systems: my American materialism values the computer versus his system values kindness.

Lon thinks some of the things I do are very strange. He accepts the fact that I want the kitchen door closed every time, but thinks it absurd to go to such trouble just to keep flies off of the food. Thai people will eat a piece of fish or meat that has been covered in flies, and think nothing of it. When I say that I could never eat a piece of meat that had flies all

over it, and that Americans do not like flies on their food, they look at me with some disbelief. Other cultural differences are also a surprise for both of us. The first time Lon saw me eat a tomato uncooked, he almost fainted. I asked him to try eating one, and he said he would vomit if he did so. He insisted on carefully taking off the skin of each tomato that he offered to me, but when I explained that a lot of vitamins are in the skin, and I like to eat the skin, he gave me this look of disbelief. I explained that tomatoes are originally a food from American Indians, and that all over the world people eat tomatoes raw and eat the skins. It is only in Thailand, and perhaps a few other cultures, where tomatoes are only eaten cooked. This example, for both Lon and me, shows the power of culture over people's behavior and beliefs. Lon cannot understand how I can eat a raw tomato and not throw up. I am challenging many of his expectations of ordinary behavior.

Despite this challenge, Lon spends increasingly more time here. Yesterday he took me to a place where plants are sold, and I bought some beautiful ferns and other tropical plants for pennies. He bought an orchid for his mother with the money that I had paid him for cleaning my house, and when we visited his family's house they gave me two large banana trees that I have now planted in my yard. Yesterday, I told him there was no more work for him to do at the house, so he could go visit his family, but within an hour he was back here. He explained "Lon miss Walter" so touchingly that I could not help but be thankful to have him here.

My house has become quite an attraction for the villagers, and many show up (walking in without knocking, which they do with each other as they visit) to see it. They invariably say "sway mak mak" (very beautiful) and several neighbors have given me free plants from their yards. Another gave me an intricately woven grass mat that is beautifully designed. When I said it was too beautiful to walk on, but I hung it on the wall, she seemed both mystified at the strange ways of this foreigner but also appreciative that I so value her handicraft skills. Yesterday I was shoveling cow manure off of the street in front of my house, both to use it as fertilizer for my plants but also to make the street more pleasant. I long ago got used to not minding if I step in cow manure (after all, it is only recycled grass), but I still prefer it not all over the street from the daily Cow Parade. When my neighbors saw me doing this, they assumed I wanted to collect the manure for fertilizer for my plants, so two neighbors brought over buckets of manure as a gift. They are so kind, always bringing me little gifts.

Given how little they have, this generosity is notable. Yet, though they have very little money, I do not count most of these people as impoverished. Their lives are rich and full. They all own their own houses, no matter how modest these might be, and no one is beholden to a landlord. Several industrious families have established rice mills, and they mill the rice of neighbors for a portion of the rice. Others have founded little production companies, manufacturing the tiny spirit houses that are sold throughout Thailand. And many own at least a few cows or water buffaloes. These cows are their real wealth. Given the fact that Isan history is based on cattle-raising combined with rice farming, I doubt I will have much luck in convincing them to switch to other means of livelihood besides cattle-raising. So, I am focusing on enjoying my time here, learning as much as I

can about Isan ways of life, and doing my writing. Life is pleasant, and I feel lucky to have Lon, Lek and the other people here who care so much about my wellbeing.