

I have not been writing much fieldnotes lately, because I have been spending much of my time writing another book. My skin cancer surgery is healing nicely, and I have felt no pain from it. Life is going pleasantly and uneventfully, except that it is so hot I suddenly broke out in a bad skin rash that covers my chest, neck and groin areas. I had a skin rash like this before, in Singapore many years ago, and it also appeared suddenly. I went to the local clinic yesterday, and the doctor applied a cream over the affected areas, and gave me a large tube of the cream (cost for this clinic visit and the cream was 110 baht (\$3 USD)).

After having several friends suggest I should install an air conditioner, I decided to go ahead and pay the money for it. I found a good one for 18,000 baht (\$500 USD) which includes free installation. But then my friend Lek, who is currently in Bangkok still trying to sell his hair salon, objected to me spending that much money. Lek has an air conditioner in his salon that he seldom uses because the cost of electricity is so high in Bangkok, but he wanted to keep it there to add to the value of the sale. However, he said if I will pay for someone to bring it to this village and install it, he will give it for the house. That will save me about 15,000 baht, so I am happy that Lek offered that.

A friend in America wrote to me bragging about how he was able to buy a house for only \$100,000 dollars. It was incredible to get a house that cheap, he said. It was a house in upstate New York, covered in snow and ice. I hesitate to write back to him, telling him that I built this house for less than \$9,000 (and think I could have done it for much less if I had not made several mistakes based on bad advice from Thai construction workers). My latest addition to my estate is to build a traditional Thai grass hut in the garden. It is not needed, but just something I like to look at and relax inside. I paid 600 baht for the materials, and paid 500 baht for two workers to build it in two days, plus 600 baht for a bamboo platform bed to put inside it. That total of 1,700 baht is \$47 USD. It all is relative, of course, and as I learned long ago the main three factors in a house's price are: 1. location, 2. location, and 3. location.

#### SNAKES AND LIZARDS AND FROGS, OH MY!

I am continuing to enjoy my fishpool, and every day I sit and watch the fish swim as I eat my meals. The fishpool has definitely been worth the investment. However, it has been so hot and dry lately that snakes are coming into the village in search of water. I have never seen a snake in this village before now, but in the last three weeks I have seen four snakes. One evening two weeks ago I was horrified to see a very long silver colored snake in my garden, heading straight for the fishpool. I yelled in alarm, and the snake looked at me with terror in his eyes, and quickly turned around and slithered away. I wondered how that snake had gotten into my garden, since I so carefully walled it in and sealed it to prevent precisely this kind of thing. My friend Lek pointed out that snakes can climb up trees, and this one might have dropped into my yard from the next door neighbor's trees that overhang my property. But when I checked the water drain leading out of my garden, I found a small hole about the size of a half dollar in the screen. Hoping that that was the way the snake got in I closed the hole, at the same time praying

that the snake had already left by that same hole. That was the direction that the snake slithered away in alarm when it saw me. I have not seen the snake since then, but I cannot be sure if it is gone or not. I looked up “poisonous snakes of Thailand,” on the internet, and the main type of dangerous snake is the cobra. Unfortunately, all the pictures showed cobras rearing up with their fan-shaped neck spread wide. This snake that I saw was just slithering along the ground. If it had reared up and spread its neck I would know it was a cobra, and then I really would have been frightened. But it did not rise up, so it could have been a harmless non-poisonous species. I looked for a silver colored snake on the internet site, but cobras come in several different colors (including silver) and there are many harmless snakes that are silver colored, so that was of no help in identifying it.

One of the things I have tried to do is to make a tropical jungle look in the garden, similar to what I had done in my backyard in Los Angeles. The plants are starting to grow, and it is beginning to look nice. But I may have to reevaluate that jungle look if my garden keeps attracting snakes. I have to realize that with the jungle look can come critters that live in jungles as well. I do not mind some of them. There is a large beautiful lizard that has such striking long stripes that I enjoy watching it. I thought it was one lizard, but now I realize it is really a family of lizards of the same type. There are also various frogs in the garden, and I like them as well. The other night I ate frogs for dinner. Isan people eat practically anything alive, including lots of insects, lizards, snakes, snails, and frogs. The way they cook frogs is to simply throw a bunch of live frogs into a big pot of boiling water. Then they eat the entire frog, bones guts and all, in one big bite. I am an advocate of people eating insects and other small animals, but watching the frogs being boiled alive, and then chewing up the little squishy animal inside my mouth, was almost enough to make me a vegetarian. I realize of course that my hesitation is purely cultural. If I was not raised to think that eating a whole frog was gross, I would not think it was gross. I cannot understand why I still cannot eat the head and eye of a chicken or a fish, or the feet of a chicken, since I admire the way Isan people consume every part of the animal with very little going to waste. Despite my intellectual approval of such ecological eating patterns, I still cannot bring myself to eat these things.

I hesitate to commit myself to vegetarianism because I find that if I try to eat only plant foods, I still feel hunger. I need some kind of protein. Six years ago I stayed at a Buddhist monastery in rural South Korea, and the monks there ate only vegetarian meals. The food was so good, and included soybean foods that tasted and even looked like pieces of chicken, red meat, or fish, that I felt completely satisfied. If I could find those kinds of foods, I think I could go veggie. I still think there is a great market for a company to grind up insects into a nutritious powder that then can be used as a base for cooking a high protein meal. I predict insects will become a major food source in future decades.

#### BUDDHIST MONKS AND TRANSGENDER MOLUM MUSIC

There was another big Molum music concert two days ago. This time the reason for the performance was because three young men of the village decided to become ordained as Buddhist monks. They each have jobs and are married, so they only will stay as a monk

for one week, but the way the village erupted in celebration one would think they were committing themselves to serve as monks for the rest of their lives. What I am beginning to realize is that becoming a monk, even for a short period, is in many ways more like a rite of passage than a religious commitment per se. I asked each of them why they wanted to become a monk, and they all said it was because this was a custom in their family. Not one of them said anything about Buddhist ideas or their desire to learn more about Buddhism. I pressed the matter and asked what they hoped to get out of the experience, and they each answered that they did it to accumulate merit and good fortune for their families. They had no expectation that they would learn more than to chant a few short prayers in the ancient Pali language that is used in Theravada Buddhism.

My friend the English-speaking monk complains about Thai people only following Buddhism because of family custom, and not really paying much attention to the actual teachings of the Buddha. They are quick to bow reverently before a statue of the Buddha, and they treat monks with great respect, but they really do not pay much attention to studying the ideology of Buddhism. He says that foreign Buddhists, including me, are actually much more knowledgeable about the ideas of Buddhism than most Thai Buddhists. I pointed out that that is probably true of almost all converts, since no one would bother to convert to a religion that they knew nothing about. He talked about me to another Buddhist university in a neighboring province, and that university has issued an invitation for me to come and lecture there also. This is somewhat surprising to me, since in my past lectures I openly question some of the rules of Thai Buddhism and I suggest that Thai religion has as much shamanism in it as it does Buddhism. Unlike a Christian university, which might consider some of my radical ideas heretical, Thai Buddhist professors keep an open mind toward new and different ideas. This is a major difference between Buddhism, which is committed to discovering truth and knowledge, and most other religions that are quite closed-minded in their dogma.

However short the commitment to monkhood might be, Isan people being Isan decided to throw a big celebration. I see again that a strong Isan value is the commitment to celebrating every possible event. Anything can be an excuse to party. About nine p.m. I arrived at the village wat to see the three young men, in orange robes and with their heads freshly shaved, sitting calmly in the temple. They sat placidly in the way of monks, not showing emotion. Yet what they looked out upon was hardly calm or placid. A large crowd or perhaps five hundred people, many of them coming from neighboring villages, sat on mats on the ground in front of a large stage that had been set up in the middle of the open space between the temple and the monks' residential building. On the stage a five-man band played loud Molum dance music. In addition there were three male lead singers and two female singers, plus six female dancers in skimpy miniskirts. I was again amazed at the size and sophistication of the musical performances regularly being produced in this small village.

What was even more interesting was the prominence of transgender male-to-female kathoey in the audience. A group of kathoey were sitting on mats near the stage, but to the east side of the stage. The only people in the audience who were dancing were two kathoey who were dancing wildly to the music. Eventually a few young men started

dancing in their own group nearby, and then some other men came over and started dancing with the kathoey. They have no hesitation to be seen dancing with kathoey, and knowing that I am gay several young men pointed me toward the kathoey and said “suay” [beautiful] and encouraged me to go dance with the kathoey. Other young men grabbed me and brought me out front to dance with them. The lack of homophobia and transphobia still surprises me. A local policeman kept telling me how beautiful one of the kathoey is, and insisted I take his picture with the kathoey. Other police nearby humor the kathoey, who flirt with them shamelessly.

As the music grew in intensity, larger numbers of young men started dancing at the front of the stage, while more kathoey danced on the side. I was surprised not to see more people of different ages dancing, as I have seen on other occasions, but this time it was only young males (that is, teenaged boys and young men in their twenties and thirties, plus male kathoey). Later in the evening, all of a sudden a large group of teenaged girls started dancing, and they danced as wildly and enthusiastically as the boys. Both they and the kathoey moved into the central group of young men, and everybody was dancing wildly as one group. It was all great fun, as Isan Molum music usually generates so much energy. I want to talk to those girls later and find out why they waited so long before they started dancing, since they were obviously enjoying the music before then. I suspect that there is a certain sense of what is proper for girls, who are not as free as boys and young men to act wildly. Young males are given so much latitude in Isan culture to act as crazy as they want to, and no one interferes.

There is one man in particular who always makes a scene at performances. He is subdued enough in daily life, and I see him taking out the buffaloes in the morning and bringing them back into the village in the evening, just as other men do. But he gets so drunk at every celebration that he makes a real ass of himself. This performance was no exception. He was the only person to take off his shirt at the dance, and he repeatedly threw himself at people, doing body slams that almost knocked some guys off their feet. Yet rather than shoving him back, they just gently pushed him aside. At one point the obnoxious man went to one of the kathoey and awkwardly tried to grab her. The kathoey just humored him, in the same way that other people did, gently pushing him away. Then he grabbed the kathoey's plastic water bottle, and threw it carelessly up into the air. It landed fully on one young man's head, completely drenching him in water. I could tell that he was very upset, because he is particularly proud of his long hair and good looks. To be drenched like a wet rat was not at all what he wanted. In another culture, in which one individual acted so obnoxiously, this behavior would have undoubtedly led to a fight, or at the least a skuffle. In this instance, however, the drenched young man just shook his head in disgust and walked out of the area. He headed toward the bathrooms to clean his hair. After several minutes he came back to the front and started dancing again. Though the monk complains about the local people not paying attention to Buddhist ideals, I think these instances demonstrate that Isan people really do incorporate Buddhist ideals of gentleness and nonviolence into their lives. If a hotheaded young man in America had this same thing happen to him, I imagine a fight or at the least a heated argument would have ensued.

At the end of the dance, two very attractive kathoey wanted me to go with them for the evening. I said that my house was nearby and I wanted to go home, and they promptly asked if they could come visit me at my house. One of the other kathoey there had visited my house a month ago, and told them what a nice house it was, and evidently that I was also nice, so they were anxious to visit. As we walked through the crowd, some of Lek's female relatives gave them noticeably nasty looks. Lek's sister confronted me directly, and asked me where we were going. I answered calmly that we were going to my house for a beer. She did not say anything after that, but I could tell she did not like it. After we got to my house I closed and locked the door. About ten minutes later I could hear Lek's niece calling "Walter, Walter". I did not like this blatant interference in my social life, and so I decided to ignore the calls. Then the phone rang, and I knew for sure that it was Lek calling from Bangkok. They must have called Lek.

I knew that they were concerned about my safety, and afraid that these kathoey from another village might try to steal something from me. But I had taken the precaution of locking all my valuables inside my office, so I did not feel worried. The kathoey, however, did not seem threatening in the least, and we had a great time talking and listening to music. It turned out that they did not want a beer at all. I was surprised, considering how much Isan people like to drink. I had never once had an Isan male, of any gender, turn down an offer of a beer.

The next morning the phone was ringing as I gained consciousness. It was Lek on the phone. "Oh my sister called me and they are so worried about you. Are you alright?" Yes, I replied calmly, I am fine. I told Lek, and later his niece, that I greatly appreciate their concern about my safety, and it is nice to know that people are there to protect me, but I do not want that kind of hostility or interference every time I want to bring someone to my house. "Mai ben lai" I kept saying to Lek's niece. It's not worth getting upset over this. I told them I had everything of value locked up, but that I did not feel in danger in the least.

I feel very safe here, much safer than I feel living in Los Angeles, but the villagers keep warning me about danger. Today my next door neighbor came over and told me that I should always close and lock my door when I go to sleep. I was doing some writing on my laptop notebook computer while lying on my bed, and I fell asleep right in the middle of writing a sentence. When he came over to chat he looked inside and saw me asleep and closed the front door of the house as he left. He said that some young person who does not know any better might try to steal something from my house. I have seen his house front gate open, and I asked him if there had ever been anything stolen from his house, and he said no.

I asked the monk about why so many people in this village seem so worried about crime, when there is so little. He said he thinks it is because they watch all these alarmist crime stories on television, and the crimes that do take place in Thailand's big cities are transposed in their minds to make them feel insecure in their little village. Studies in America suggest that people who watch a lot of TV have an impression that there is more crime than really exists. Perhaps this is true for Thai TV watchers also. In any case, I do

not want to be foolhardy, and expose myself to potential crime. But neither do I want to cower inside my house, afraid to go out or to bring a visitor inside. It is a question of balance, of balancing concerns for safety with a free and easy lifestyle that makes living here so pleasant.

Well, between the insects, the snakes, and the neighbor's cat who I just found lying on my bed (I am very allergic to cats, so I chased it away), I have already made quite a list of restricted critters to keep out of my house. If I can get the air conditioner installed soon, let's see if I can get over this heat rash. I am worried more about that than I am about personal danger from visiting kathoey.

Last January there was a big story on all the television stations about a Russian lady who was killed by a group of Thai criminals. People here in this village talked about that for a couple of months. While any crime is a cause for regret, what I kept trying to say to them is how rare that kind of event is in Thailand. I hate to think how many foreign tourists are killed each week in America. It is so common as to not even make the news. When the recent slaughter of 30 innocent people by a Virginia Tech student hit the news, I asked Thai people if anything remotely like that had ever occurred in Thailand. No one could ever remember another such occurrence. There is something about America that leads people to be violent, and it is reflected in the stress levels as well.