

Now that my house is virtually finished, life in this small village in northeastern Thailand has settled into a comfortable routine for me. I am enjoying planting more plants in the yard and in the house, but I am especially enjoying the presence of Lon. I have known this teenage kathoey (feminine male, similar to the American Indian Two Spirit or berdache) for about a year, but beyond some pleasant times together he did not spend much time coming to see me until I moved into my new house. I found out later that he was intimidated with all the people around the other house where I was living before constructing this house. However, since Lek arranged for him to start cooking and cleaning my new house, he has been coming here on a daily basis. To my pleasant surprise, our relationship has blossomed quickly and he seems totally devoted to my happiness. He lives with his parents on the other side of the village, but he is here bright and early every morning, usually impatient to wake me up between 6:30am and 7:00am. Since I prepare my own cereal to eat for breakfast, he clearly does not have to be here that early. He really enjoys cooking, and I have to get him to delay cooking before about 11:30am. Despite my pleas, he cooks so much food I could not possibly eat it all. Today alone, he has fed me chicken livers, fresh oysters, chicken thighs, sweet potatoes, cabbage, cucumbers, tomatoes, rice (which he cooks for himself but there is always some left for me), and a vegetable that looks like a flattened pumpkin that is SO delicious, with a whole fresh coconut and a fruit similar to a grapefruit for dessert. Since I have lost weight since coming to Thailand, I do not want to gain it back, but his cooking is so superb that I really enjoy eating. And because there is so much food here (he says in Thai that he got such bargains at the market that he could not possibly turn it down etc, etc.) I have started giving fresh food to neighbors before it spoils.

Lon does not enjoy the cleaning as much, and sometimes I have to tell him several times to clean something. But when he does tackle it, he does it with a relish. When I asked him to mop the floor, after several requests he took a bucket and started throwing water from the fishpool all across the living room floor. I tried to get him to stop, and use less water, but to no avail. That is how he approaches everything. I am always telling him to slow down, and do things with more care.

When he washes my clothes by hand, insisting that using a washing machine is not as clean as hand washing, water is everywhere in the bathroom. He likes my large tiled bathroom “chop mak mak” [I like very much]. Like other people in the village, Lon seems incredibly clean on his body, taking at least three showers a day. But also like others, he does not pay much attention to cleaning the house. So I have been trying to explain to him that I like a clean house as much as he likes a clean body. But he is careless in the extreme, and drops things. He has broken a few things, and the rough way he handles objects is something I am trying to teach him to be careful especially with something delicate and of beauty. Like other people in the village, he jerks open things, and when he looks at a picture book he turns the pages with such vigor that I am afraid he will tear them. I keep saying “cha cha” [slow down] and telling him to be careful. He just laughs, but I think it is getting through to him what I like and don’t like.

I installed screen doors on my office and the kitchen, to at least keep out the hoards of insects that are everywhere. But Lon, like others in the village, can never remember to keep the door closed. He now understands “please close the door” because I have said it a thousand times, and he does that. But the next time he goes in and out the screen door is left open again. Today I went into the bathroom and was surprised to see one of my koi fish swimming in the water tank. Every Thai bathroom has at least one open tank for storing water, to provide water if the undependable public water supply stops working (which periodically happens). I asked Lon why he had put the fish there. He explained, in Thai, that the fish will eat the larvae of the mosquitoes in the standing water tank. I explained that that is why I want him to keep the screen doors closed, so that mosquitoes and other insects do not come into the kitchen or bathroom in the first place. Then, I explained, keeping a fish in the water tank is not necessary. Once he understood that, the little fish was put back into the fish pool.

Actually, except for mosquitoes and flies (and ants, which bite my legs unmercifully if I inadvertently step on their anthill outside), I really do not mind the other insects. They seem harmless enough, though many Americans would be disturbed by their large size. Now, whenever I feel something land on my back or arm or leg, I just wipe it off without thinking. Beetles the size of silver dollars crash land on me or the furniture or the floor, bungling their way through life in the way I see many people doing, and it is just part of daily existence. I have learned from my Isan neighbors to treat the insects as food, so any time one appears, it is a potential snack. Yummy.

In my enclosed garden, there are some resident frogs and a large striped lizard that came into the bathroom today. I chased him out of there, but I like him because he is so beautiful. If he will stay in the garden, and avoid the house, that would be nice. But geckos are all over the house, the ceiling, the floor, the windows, etc. etc. I like them all because they are continually eating flying bugs. The geckoes look like tiny dinosaurs, and they make this high-pitched clucking sound that may have been similar to the voices of their dinosaur ancestors. The drama of watching a gecko upside down on the ceiling stalking a bug is as interesting as watching any nature show on TV. Some of the people here wonder why I do not want a television, but I much prefer life without the constant chatter of Thai talk shows, game shows, or melodramas that imitate American TV at its worst. My house is very peaceful now, with the construction workers gone, and I feel quite at home. It is the perfect place for me to do my writing.

Though I am now enjoying spending most of my time at home, Lon has been taking me with him to the food market in the nearby town about seven kilometers from this village. I decided to go with him to the market because he always buys too much food if he goes by himself. The other day, after we went to the market, to load up with fresh vegetables and fruits and fish, I asked him if he knew any kathoey (ladyboys) in the town.

KATHOEY

Lon took me to this very outlandish little house, little more than a shack, where a 62 year old kathoey lives. The kathoey greeted us with a kind welcome. The entry area has several pictures of the kathoey, first as a handsome teenage boy, and then at various

stages of her life as a kathoey. She was quite attractive in her youth, and even today looks younger than her age. One photograph on the wall is of her leading a parade in the town, decked out in a princess dress complete with jeweled crown, with a marching band behind her. I am sure that was one of the highlights of her life, which is proudly displayed in the living area.

I think it is great for Lon, as a teenage kathoey, to have all these older role models to build a sense of identity. This kathoey turned out to be quite a character.

The front of the house is covered with these hanging pieces of mobile art made out of plastic drinking straws that the kathoey cut up into different shapes. The variety of colors, combined with a bright array of plastic flowers, make these creations quite bright. The hanging patterns are similar to the traditional hanging mobiles that are often hung at Buddhist temples, so this art is an example of an evolving folk art style. Inside the house, I saw one that was particularly beautiful, and asked the price. Lon told the kathoey sharply to give me a good deal, and the price was set at 150 baht (about four dollars US). Lon started bragging about how beautiful my house is, so the kathoey asked me to drive him/her there. After that, two other kathoeyes arrived, and so they all piled into my car and we took off for the village.

I was under the impression that all these kathoey would be staying the night at my house, but after admiring my house and consuming several bottles of beer, they all left on one motorcycle that somehow appeared at the end of the evening. Seeing three or four people riding on one motorcycle still surprises me, but when I see five I am amazed. The next morning Lon told me the kathoey expected me to come back to her house in the town. Not knowing what to expect, and with Lon telling me “loell loell” [hurry up], we arrived at the kathoey’s residence. She was still putting on her makeup, but she stopped to show me still another piece of mobile art that she had made. It was even more beautiful than the other ones I had seen. She offered to give it to me for free, but I insisted on paying for it. After I paid for it, she gave me a beautiful potted plant as a gift that she wanted me to have for my new house. After that, she and Lon disappeared around the back side of the house, and after about ten minutes came back with three large decorative plants. She gave these to me also, explaining that she knew I would take good care of them to make my house even more beautiful.

Not satisfied with that, after I expressed my gratitude, she presented me with a small piece of pottery that she said was found at an ancient Khmer townsite nearby. That would make it about one thousand years old. In his excitement, Lon grabbed it to see it, and of course in his clumsy ways dropped it. Incredibly, the little pot landed on a pillow and did not break. Lon was quick to say, in English, “sorry.” But then he continues to act in the same careless ways, and does not seem to understand why I am not satisfied with his statement of apology. This careless roughness is the thing about him that I am trying most strongly to get him to change. I think if he can overcome this fault, he will go far in life. He is so graceful and talented and sweet, but he needs to moderate himself.

After receiving all these gifts from the kathoey, we returned home. The generosity of Isan people really is amazing, and I have been given some incredible antique items. I want to take these old things that people offer me, because I see that they are not being preserved well, and I want to try to save them. The English-speaking monk has plans to build a little museum at the village temple. I would like to donate these historic items to this museum before I leave in August.

I am trying to develop in Lon a sense of appreciation for these historic items. Two days ago I received an invitation from the monk to attend a Buddhist retreat near the city of Roi-et. I had been there several times, and I think it is one of the most beautiful cities in Thailand. I really wanted Lon to go with me, but he was very afraid. In his whole life he has only been in surrounding villages and in the district town. He has never seen a city. I insisted that he should take advantage of the opportunity I was offering, to see something new and different than he had ever seen. He still resisted, so I pressed him that he better show up the next morning or I would be very upset. Early the next morning he appeared, dressed very nicely. He again said he was afraid to go, but I assured him that I would take good care of him in the city. He got into the car nervously. As we drove the 60km to get there, he got very quiet as we entered the city. I don't think he had ever seen so many people, and he was fascinated. I told him he had not seen anything yet, and we were still at the outskirts.

When we got to the city, I took him to the city museum. It was actually much nicer than I expected, with professional quality museum exhibits. I did not know how Lon would react, but he loved it. When he saw the display of ancient pottery, and how carefully each pot was mounted in the display, I think he has a new appreciation for the display of Isan pots that I have collected in my house. Isan are also famous for their silk production, and several exhibits of silk cloth styles also gave him a different perspective on the hand looms that people still use to weave beautiful silk cloth today. There were some nice dioramas in the museum, of daily life in past times, and he was totally absorbed by them. What struck me is how much continuation of Isan daily tools and household items are still being used in the village today. Living here is like a daily lesson in history, or an archaeological site come alive, when I see people still using these things in their lives today. They may have a cell phone, and drive in a truck or bus, but their material culture is much as their ancestors used.

The monk met us at the museum, and then took us to his temple. At this temple there is an extremely tall Buddha, standing several stories high, that is very impressive even to a world traveler like me. Lon was overwhelmed by it. He wanted me to take many pictures of him standing before it. I took him inside the temple, and after bowing three times to the Buddha statues he made a contribution of the money that I had paid him for cleaning my house. I was so impressed by this that I asked him to pick out some memento at the temple souvenir shop for himself. He picked out an inexpensive but beautiful ring, and I was happy to buy it for him. The next day when I did not see it on his finger I asked him where it was, and he carefully opened his wallet where he had it in a little cloth bag. He was afraid of damaging it, but I told him I bought it for him to wear, and he should wear it proudly. He has been wearing it ever since.

Next, I drove the monk to a Buddhist retreat. He introduced me to several novices that he said he wants to stay at my house so they can learn English. The way the monk keeps pushing these young boys on me is surprising, showing the total lack of homophobia in Buddhism. I spoke with several of them, and though they live in very tiny houses with few material goods I was impressed with their happiness and their desire to learn English.

After leaving the Buddhist retreat, I drove the monk and Lon back into the city. The monk told me he wanted to take us to see “The Fish Museum.” I said I had never heard of a museum devoted to fish, but wanted to go since I like fish and think they should be a mainstay of the human diet. When we arrived and went inside the Fish Museum, I laughed when I saw many tanks of water with fish on display. I told the monk this was an aquarium, but he had never heard that word before. We went inside, and Lon’s eyes got wider and wider. He rushed from one tank to another, excitedly looking at all the different species of fish on display. I decided not to insist he take it slow, and systematically go through and read the texts at each tank. This aquarium was not bad, even compared to current American standards, and it has an impressive large tank with a glass walkway so attendees can walk underneath the fish swimming above. Lon took picture after picture with my digital camera, even when I showed him that most of his photos only showed the reflection of the glass.

After leaving the aquarium I took Lon to the Roiet City Park. It is a beautifully manicured garden, with a large lake. Lon kept saying “suay mak mak” [beautiful very much] and “dee mak mak” [good very much] as we strolled through the park. I bought some fish food pellets, and Lon enjoyed throwing them to the swarm of fish feeding below the bridge that spanned the lake. Of course, in his impatience he wanted to throw it all at once, but I reminded him “cha cha” [go slowly] to do things with more care and deliberation. This is one of the main things I think I can teach him, not to be so careless and impatient.

I thoroughly enjoyed showing him all this beauty, and new things that he had never experienced before. I think that is why I enjoy being a teacher, so I can see the lightbulbs going off in the minds of young people as they learn something new. Expanding their horizons is what I most enjoy. As a young kathoey, I want to pay particular attention to letting Lon know what is going on with queer people around the world. He is lucky to have been born into a culture that is so accepting of gay and transgendered people, and he has the other kathoey as role models. But he is so limited in his experience that he did not even know what the word “gay” means. Is it the same as kathoey, he asked? Not exactly, I replied, but a different cultural manifestation of the same kind of person like himself. He does not quite understand, but is learning more every day. I am very impressed at how quickly his understanding of English is improving. He still does not speak much English, but when I ask for something he usually understands and responds. He is learning more than even he realizes.

LEARNING A LANGUAGE: STUDY LESS AND LEARN MORE

Lon's experiences being with me in my house every day illustrate the best ways to learn a different language. The motto that I have adopted is "study English less, and learn English more." That is, instead of studying grammar in a classroom, as is the usual boring and frustrating method of English instruction in Thailand, I want to put students into a context (inside a house, walking down a street, digging in a garden, traveling to different places) and teach them English by seeing and experiencing the things talked about. That is, rather than just getting them to memorize the words for fork, spoon, plate, glass, fish, chicken, pork, etc., I would rather sit down with them in a restaurant and show them all these things. Research shows that the brain remembers something much more effectively when the eye can see the thing being talked about. So, in dealing with Lon, I am deliberately impatient, when I say things like "please bring me a spoon," or "I want chicken for dinner." He has to struggle to figure out what I mean, but when I point to a spoon in the dish rack, or the chicken in the refrigerator, he will remember it much better. He might bring me a knife, or something else in his desire to please me, and I say "no" loudly, but then I am quick to compliment when he does something right and say "kop khun kop mak mak" [thank you very much]. That is how he learns. He is starting to realize how much he is learning, and he is quite proud to translate for me when we visit his parents.

Earlier today Lon was nuzzling next to me as I typed away on my computer, and he said "Lon love Walter vely muck." He mispronounced the words, but I understood his meaning and was so touched. Then he asked me "Walter love I?" Though he made a grammar mistake, that did not matter. Grammar can come later. What is important is that he spoke English with enough confidence that he could come up with his own sentence. His meaning was clear, and I replied "mak mak mak mak." He just beamed. Giving someone the chance to say something, and know that it is understood, is the basis for further learning.

I like to have music playing, and Lon often breaks out in a dance. He is so graceful in his dancing to classical Thai music or Isan folk music that I could watch him for hours. When he first arrived here he was so shy about showing off his body, but now he will appear suddenly with nothing on but a small sarong, and quite often that is discarded as he dances happily around the house in the nude. Seeing his self-confidence grow, and his joy, is very satisfying. I wish all queer teenagers had this kind of opportunity.

Lon usually quickly finishes his light duties at the house, and then if I am busy with my writing, he will watch me. He is fascinated with how fast I can type using all of my fingers, and without even looking at the keyboard. Sometimes he just pounds away on the keyboard, typing nothing of meaning, just to imitate me. Other times he enjoys lounging in the hammock beside the fish pool, watching the fish swimming back and forth. He is always preparing little snacks, or fresh coconut or fried bananas or something, just to bring something to me. Then if I cannot be interrupted he will announce "Lon go home." I say bye bye, and he leaves with his trademark sweet smile. A half hour later he appears again. I express surprise, saying I thought he was gone for the day, and he says "Lon miss Walter."

What will happen in the future with Lon and me, who knows. I have been honest with him and everyone else I have met that I will be going back to America in August. I am taking the Buddhist approach, to savor each day and live it to the fullest, and don't be so focused on the future that I am not able to appreciate every moment of happiness that I am fortunate enough to experience right now. And right now, living in my new house in this little isolated village in northeastern Thailand, with Lon here by my side, I am very happy.

With so many people in the world living in misery or frustration, in not having the life that they want, or just in quiet desperation, I am grateful for these experiences and these times. To be loved, to have friends who care for you, to know that one is doing what one wants in life, is the real wealth. Far more than wealth in material goods, which can be lost in a moment, no matter what might happen to me in the future, I will take this wealth with me in my memory. I hope I never forget times like these.

Walter Williams