

ISAN FIELDNOTES 4b April 6, 2007 by Walter Williams

A fellow professor who read my last email said I have a talent for finding paradise wherever I am. Yes, I do try to find, or make, my life as much of a paradise as possible. Accordingly, I try to direct my travels where I have the most potential to do that. I avoid war zones, or anywhere human life is miserable. I try to find places to live where the values of the local culture are in accord with my values. After almost freezing to death in Alaska, doing research in the Yupik native culture, I decided to focus my future research on the tropics. Other people who like cold weather can do research in cold countries, and I will stay in the tropics. I like Thailand so much because it is a tropical country that is also Buddhist.

I became Buddhist over twenty years ago, and I have done a considerable amount of reading and study on this philosophy of life. The English-speaking monk that I met in my village took me to speak to his classes at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University in Koen Khen. He was so impressed with my perspectives on Buddhism that he took me to speak to his other classes at the Roi-et campus of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. The student monks at one campus presented me with a beautiful necklace with a small Buddha. At the other campus they gave me a beautiful large stuffed pillow that is great for lounging in my living room. Both gifts are quite expensive looking.

The monk is very impressed with the design of my house and garden, and he has asked me to be his advisor in making the village temple grounds more beautiful. I brought my long garden hose and sprinklers down to the wat for the monks to water the plants more easily, and they were quite appreciative. Besides the personal joy I get from doing the interior decorating of my house, perhaps the most important effect of my emphasis on beauty is this opportunity to work with the monk. He has taken me to several Buddhist retreats where I am the only foreigner present, and I know that I am observing Buddhist procedures more than what most people see. I am seated with the top monks, in the special chairs for the honored guests. As we leave the ceremonies, all the people bow and hold their hands together in a prayerful gesture of respect to the monks. It is hard not to feel privileged as I am included in this group. People must wonder who this foreigner is, who is included in the group of leading monks. The monks themselves are invariably friendly to me, often trying to practice their slight knowledge of English with me. I feel very lucky to have become such close friends with this monk. It is typical for anthropologists to take years to develop ways of participating in the culture being studied, and I am fortunate to have strong support from the monks.

Today I was impressed with how well my monk friend is respected by the senior monks. They chose him to make announcements at ceremonies, and they obviously think of him as a rising star in the hierarchy. On our trips to these retreats we have an opportunity for long talks about Buddhism and Isan culture, which makes it quite interesting and educational for my research.

He is an intellectual, listening patiently even when he disagrees with some of my ideas. But overall he really likes my different approaches to Buddhism, and that is why he keeps

recommending me as a speaker. He has a critique of the Buddhist establishment, feeling that too many monks stay only within their monastery and do not do enough to go out and improve society. But he is a stickler for rules, and he seems surprised when I question some of these rules. I point out that Buddhist monks in other countries do not follow these same rules. And when he gets high and mighty about how Thai Buddhist monks are more strict in following Buddhist rules than monks in other countries, I point out that Thai monks are not as strict in some things. For example, Thai monks eat meat, whereas monks in some other nations are strict vegetarians. I think I am giving him a liberating view of the monkhood. He still gets shocked when I say that monks ought to be able to dance, or have sex, or enjoy life in other ways, but I think he silently appreciates having someone around who throws out new ideas and questions the establishment.

Recently there are important changes at the village temple. A senior monk in his eighties just died, and the abbot at the village wat has been appointed to fill the role of the departed monk. This represents a high promotion for that abbot, and I am sorry to see him gone because he has been very nice to me. He led the blessing ceremony at my house, and he did a healing massage for my shoulder when I sprained it. Now the villagers want my friend the English professor to become the new abbot at the village temple. He is undecided about taking on this new responsibility, because he is already overloaded with his teaching responsibilities and translation work. When he asked me to be his advisor I pledged to advise and help him especially in improving the temple grounds if he agrees to become the new abbot.

TEACHING ENGLISH IN THAILAND

As a professor of English, this monk realizes the importance of improving English comprehension in Thailand for the nation's future good. He realizes, more than most people, how crucial English is for the economic growth of Thailand.

I have encouraged him to accept the abbotship of this village temple, so that we can attract English-speaking monks from other locations and make it an English-speaking environment. We want to train monks and novices to speak English, by producing a little English-speaking world in this village, so that they will learn effectively by immersion exposure and in context of living life on a daily basis. He is very excited about this possibility, but wary that it will be difficult to attract English-speaking monks to come to this out-of-the-way village. But I point out how nice the life is here, and how wonderful the villagers are, as a means of attracting more monks. He wants to start a school for novices, to teach them English, and wants me to help design that school. It would be very interesting to do this, to incorporate the newest research findings about effective ways to teach another language. I already have many ideas that I want to suggest when I go back to USC, in terms of designing their language-learning programs more effectively.

I am coming to realize that a major reason why levels of English speaking are so low in Thailand is because the Thai language and the English language are so drastically different. Thai has tonal differences that I cannot hear because I was not raised in a language that said that tone was important. Likewise, Thai people do not hear the same way that Westerners hear. Our ears are trained differently from childhood. What I never

realized until now is that hearing is cultural. Thai people hear differently from Indo-European speakers. When I say the English word “good” Thai people will often repeat what they hear as “goose.” When I say “yes” they will reply “yet,” and they cannot hear the difference between yes and yet. They are particularly prone to leaving off the sound of the endings of words. Thus, if I say “rice” they will say “ri” If I say “house” they will repeat “hou.” What they hear is so different and when I try to pronounce a Thai word that may have two or more distinct meanings depending on the tone, I cannot tell the difference. This makes for difficulty in people learning both English and Thai.

THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION

Besides his role as a professor of English and Buddhist Studies, this monk also is asked to translate important documents into English. This week he is working on translating a report about pig production in Thailand, that will be published in English. He asked me to help him translate it. As we worked on it, I asked why anyone would want to read a report with so much detail about pig production. When I read the introduction of the report I realize that the purpose of this document is to increase pork production in Thailand. I am surprised to learn that Thailand is the world’s fourth largest exporter of pork, and the Thai Department of Commerce wants to increase the production of pork even more.

Now I feel very conflicted. The monk knows that I am morally opposed to the killing of mammals for human food. For nearly forty years I have avoided eating beef and pork, and I encourage others to do likewise. I feel that the consumption of our mammal relatives is close to cannibalism, and a relic of our past that is best to move beyond. After thinking about what I am doing, I told the monk that I cannot morally justify my participation in this translation project. The ultimate goal of the report is to increase the number of pigs being killed in Thailand. I told the monk that I want to help him, but it would be a violation of my moral values to continue working on such a report.

Thus, I have come to realize that there is a politics of food consumption. I encourage the monk to stop working on this translation project, and instead to encourage the Thai government to export insects as food. In that respect, Isan culture is a model for the world, and the future of humanity.

But right now the monk has his orders to translate this particular report, and this makes the source of my moral conflict.

MOLUM MUSIC

Last week the monk took me to a Buddhist festival that had Molum music. I love the energy and infectious rhythms of this joyful yet plaintive style of Isan folk music. I am increasingly realizing that part of the appeal of Thai religion is that it is the institution in society that sponsors so many holidays and festivals. There is a cheerfulness and a “sanook” [have fun] attitude toward life because the religion says this is important. Let me give two examples. One is a Buddhist festival that was held at an isolated Buddhist retreat, where Molum singers performed from two main stages all day long. But what was even more interesting is how little informal groups of singers and musicians would

gather at different places just to sing and play. I was the only foreigner at this whole event, and everywhere I went people welcomed me to take photos and join in. One particularly energetic group poured water from a plastic cup down my back. I am certainly glad that I knew beforehand that this is an honor to be chosen to receive a dousing of water! Otherwise I would have no clue why they were doing this to me. Attached here are a few photos of this impromptu performance. There were also impressive performances from the stage, but the really enjoyable music was created by the little groups at the sidelines.

The second example is still another performance of a Molum traveling group that performed in my village. These little groups go from village to village, and give energetic performances that are paid for in rice that they collect from households in the next morning after the performance. What is so interesting to me about these groups is that they often include a kathoey (cross-dressing transgender person) and some really outlandish costumes for the male performers. When I approached the stage to take some pictures, audience members literally pushed me to kiss one of the male performers. Someone grabbed my camera and took my picture as I did so. I do not know if the male performer was gay, but it would be hard to imagine a straight man wearing such an outrageous costume. Whatever the case, he received my kiss with a smile and a “thank you” said in English. But everybody wanted to have their picture taken with this performer. So I do not know exactly what was going on, except for the clear lack of homophobia, and the complete acceptance of me as a gay person in this village.

The central theme of having fun (“sanook”) is so strong in Isan culture that this attitude generates an acceptance that other people deserve the right to have fun in their life also. With that recognition, we all danced the night away, at this isolated village in the middle of nowhere in northeast Thailand.

April 16, 2007

THE SUN, HEALTH FACTORS, AND THE TROPICS

I am continuing to enjoy my time in Thailand, but this last week I had a health scare that led me to contemplate my life. Up until now my health has been excellent. One of the reasons I am enjoying this year sabbatical so much is that my health is good. That is such a contrast to the previous year, when I was plagued by two major health problems. After being on crutches for several months due to a dislocated knee that would not heal, and going through knee surgery, I am very grateful to be able to walk with no problems. The surgery was a success and I have not been bothered by knee pain since then.

In addition, the health factor that is most noticeable in the eight months that I have been in Thailand is that I have lost about 25 pounds. The same thing happened to me when I lived in Indonesia, when I also lost 25 pounds. How this weight loss happened, in both cases, was not intentional. I never went on a diet or tried to lose weight. I never deprived myself from eating anything I want. But what is most evident is that the foods I eat here are obviously more healthy than the foods I eat in America. Instead of going to a

restaurant where they pack sugar into every plate, I eat mostly at home, with the cook using no sugar or chemicals in the food. Instead of a sickly-sweet dessert that I would finish my meal with in America, I will eat a banana, a freshly cut pineapple, or crack open a coconut. I do not in any way feel food deprived. I wish it would be possible to follow this kind of natural food diet when I go back to America. But, when I have to eat out so often because I do not have a chef at home, the weight comes back. I hope I can make a determination to keep this weight off when I return to Los Angeles this time.

I have an additional motive to keep this weight off. In the year before I left America, I suffered the onset of chronic sleep apnea, which is aggravated by excess weight. I started feeling tired and exhausted all the time. I could not teach a small seminar discussion group because I kept falling asleep when the students were talking. In my large lecture classes, where I kept awake by wandering around the stage while I talked, I managed to get through my lecture with difficulty, only to collapse in exhaustion afterward. After several months of this lethargy, it got so bad that I was forced to take a medical leave of absence from my teaching for a semester. It was the first time I had ever taken a medical disability and gone on workers' compensation.

The sleep apnea was not only bad because I felt exhausted, but because I was so tired all the time I eventually became really depressed. Being so tired made me lose all my interests. My productivity as a writer came to a complete halt. In addition, all sexual feelings disappeared. I did not even have the energy to read. Not wanting to do anything but lay in bed, I started to think that my life had no meaning. I wondered what was the point of going on in life if I felt like this all the time. I felt devoid of any energy to do anything. Feelings of hopelessness grew.

I had never before suffered from such incapacity, and my mood was totally lethargic. The thing that saved me from total oblivion was TIVO. One of my students convinced me to purchase it, and he set it up for me on my big screen television. Normally I hardly ever watched TV, because most of the shows seemed so inane to me and a waste of time. I would prefer to read, work on my writing, do gardening in my backyard, or go out somewhere. Anything seemed better to me than being stuck in front of the boob tube. I did not like being a prisoner to the TV station's schedule, and the few good shows that interested me always seemed to come at a time when I was not able to watch. Now that I had TIVO, I could look up the upcoming week's schedule of shows on all channels, and pick which ones I wanted to record. And I could watch them when I wanted to watch, instead of being required to conform to the station schedule. I found, especially on the public television stations and others like the History Channel and the Science Channel, many shows of interest to me. Since I often fell asleep while watching even an interesting show, all I had to do was play it again later when I awakened.

While I continued to sleep much of the time, over the next few months I spent most of my waking hours watching these shows on TV. By avoiding the inane shows and focusing on shows that were educational, I learned much about subjects that I did not know before. I saw excellent biographies, like two PBS shows about the psychology of Thomas Jefferson and Mark Twain, both of whom suffered from depression. I

discovered topics about science and astronomy that I knew nothing about. I felt like I received another education during those months of inactivity. So, even though I was incapacitated, I feel that I made good use of my time. Without TIVO I would not have had the patience to keep searching the channels for an educational show. I have never been so grateful to a machine.

Still, I was feeling so depressed that I did not see the point of anything. On one of my trips to see a doctor at Kaiser Permanente HMO, I mentioned that I was feeling like life had no point. I did not see any reason to live. He referred me immediately to the psychiatric office of Kaiser. I started going to what turned out to be an excellent mental health program for depression, organized by psychiatrists and psychologists at Kaiser. The main question was whether I was so tired because I was depressed, or was I depressed because I was so tired. It turned out to be the later. The doctors kept telling me that I was feeling depressed because my body was acting differently, and that I would not have these feelings of hopelessness when I physically felt better. I am glad that they told me this so often, because that was the link that kept me sane. I had these feelings because my brain was operating differently. I was literally suffering from a mental illness. My sleep apnea was an illness that was affecting the brain.

After doing multiple tests, and finding that I was healthy in all physical respects, a doctor ordered an overnight sleep test. The results found that I was suffering from an acute case of sleep apnea. The reason I was tired every day was due to my not getting enough deep sleep at night, because a constriction in my throat was preventing me from getting enough air in my lungs. The doctors prescribed a CPAP machine that assists breathing by pumping oxygen into my nose and mouth when I slept. With this continuous infusion of air, I was able—at last—to get a restful good night's sleep. Once I started getting enough deep sleep, then my feelings of depression went away. It was like magic. I was literally thinking differently. Everything that seemed so hopeless, giving me no point even to live, now looked very different. I wondered why I had been feeling so hopeless before. Now, when I was well rested, life seemed good again. My brain was recovering from its illness because it could rest each night.

Once I got my energy back, I started spending my time reading and writing, working in the garden, going out, spending time with friends, and feeling sexual desire again. All my regular interests returned. Gone were the days watching TIVO. In fact, I hardly turned on the TV at all after I regained my good health. My energy came back with a vengeance, and I completed the writing of my tenth book TWO SPIRITS.

The doctors were pleased that I was reacting so well to the CPAP machine, but they stressed that I would have to use this machine every night, without exception, for the rest of my life. I was grateful that the machine led to such a dramatic difference in my restfulness and my mood, but I did not like the idea that I had to sleep with this large air hose and nosepiece strapped to my face every night. It violated my entire image of myself as a healthy and sexy person. It is hard to feel sexy lying in bed with my beloved while having to wear an airhose stuck in my face. Nevertheless, I continued using the CPAP machine for almost a year. I brought it with me to Thailand, and used it when I

first arrived in Chiang Mai. However, in October I needed to travel around Thailand, and with no car I had to pack lightly to travel by bus. I thought seriously about what I should do. I decided not to bring the CPAP machine with me. That decision could have been a disaster for me, but it has worked out nicely. Incredibly, when I have not used the CPAP machine, I still am able to sleep soundly. Thus, I am well rested the next day, and my energy levels have returned to their normal frenetic state.

I think the reason I was able to stop using the CPAP machine is because I have lost so much weight while in Thailand. I read recently that even a ten-pound reduction in weight can have an effect on lessening sleep apnea. So, I am determined to keep my weight to a healthy level. I now weigh 160 pounds, down from 185 before I came to Thailand. With this improved health, I was caught unprepared when another health crisis reared its ugly head.

Some of you may have noticed in my recent pictures a sore on my left eyebrow. It has been there since late January. When I would wash my face, I kept accidentally knocking off the scab, and it would start bleeding again. I kept thinking it would heal, but it did not. Finally, after it started oozing a clear liquid, I thought I better go to a doctor to get it taken care of. When I went to the hospital in Maha Sarakham, the doctor took one look at it and said it was skin cancer. I was totally surprised. I never expected it was cancerous. I don't think I have ever actually seen a skin cancer, to my knowledge, but I thought it would be much worse than this little oozing sore. Boy was I shocked.

I enclose a picture of my skin cancer here, just in case anyone does not know exactly what they look like. In my case, it was so small that I did not pay much attention. I wish someone had shown me a picture like this before, so I would know exactly what to look for. Why aren't pictures of various disease manifestations publicized in schools, libraries, on television, and in medical waiting rooms, so that people can be educated and be on the lookout for warning signs?

The doctor asked if I always wore a hat or sunscreen when I went out in the sun, and I said no. I have been in the sun a lot since I have been in Thailand, and I never thought much about it. I have always liked sunny weather, and find that I am not in a good mood when I cannot see the sun for awhile. I remember when I was a professor at the University of Cincinnati, I found that I always cheered up when I went elsewhere. I thought it was because I hated Cincinnati (which I did, since it was such a godawfully conservative and stuckup place), but later I figured out it was at least partly because there were so few sunny days there. Cincinnati weather was usually overcast or rain, sleet and snow. The dreariness actually did have an effect on my mood, and when I would travel to other more sunny locations my mood bounced back immediately. I think the number of sunny days was a major reason why I immediately fell in love with Sunny Southern California the first time I went there, and why I like Palm Springs and the tropics so much. I loved living for a year and a half in Indonesia, when I was Fulbright Professor at Gadjah Mada University, and whenever I started to complain about the heat I would remind myself of how much I hated suffering through months of frigid wintertime in Cincinnati. When I lived in Ohio, I had told myself if I could get a good job in a warm

place, that I would never complain about the heat again. I have pretty much followed that policy since then. On some days here, when Thai people complain about the heat, I find that I am doing just fine. I remain grateful not to be in the middle of a snowstorm. People back East are always asking me if I am afraid of earthquakes in California. I respond that I am less afraid of the POSSIBILITY of an earthquake in California, than the CERTAINTY of a cold winter in Ohio.

So, I do not complain about the heat in Thailand. Oh, but the bugs are the big exception to my enjoyment. They just crawl all over me, anywhere and everywhere. I no longer get surprised when a large June bug awkwardly flies right into me, or a countless number of species crawl up my leg. My attention is drawn to insects because just now I swatted away a green oval shaped species I have never seen before, that was preparing to goose-step its way across my computer keyboard. Except for the ants and the mosquitoes, which bite me unmercifully, however, the other insects do not seem hostile. They just go about their daily routines irrespective of the presence of humans. How anthropocentric of us humans to think we are the dominant species on earth! It is not humans, but insects, who are the main occupants of this planet. The number of species of insects (half of them must be resident in Thailand!) is incredibly large, dwarfing to near insignificance the number of species of mammals. There are so many new species of insects being discovered by entomologists every year that it boggles the imagination. The largest continuous urban area on earth is nothing constructed by humans, but a massive ant colony that stretches from southern France into the middle of Italy. If an alien spaceship from another galaxy arrived on earth, they would most logically strive to communicate with the insects rather than with humans. They might even be the same size as insects, and travel in little spaceships no larger than a soup bowl. Why are even science fiction writers so limited in their imaginations that they always make alien intruders the same size as humans and with only four appendages? Why not a species with twenty eyes, several mouths that both ingest food and expel waste, and a hundred feathered arms that twirl and keep it hovering in the air?

Oh, these insects everywhere make me digress, and my imagination goes into overdrive. In any case, getting back to the sun, because of my favorable attitude toward a warm sunny day, I have never given much thought about wearing a hat or sunscreen. Growing up in Atlanta, every summer I was out in the sun so much, in nothing but some skimpy shorts, that I did not think it was really summer unless I had a very dark tan. I was really cute when I was young, and I used to admire my dark tan in my bedroom's full-length mirror, with the sharp tanline where my little shorts were. In my budding sexual feelings, these sometimes masturbatory mirror gazings were a real pleasure for me as a pubescent boy. I think that association of tan skin with sexual pleasure is why, even today, I am attracted to tan skinned people.

I digress again. Getting back to the sun, Though the sun can be hot in Georgia, it is nothing like the tropics. In the tropics the strength of the sun's rays is so much more intense that light-skinned people like me have to act differently. I should have learned that lesson a long time ago. I remember the first time I went to a tropical area, when I was in my mid-twenties in the mid-1970s when as a new assistant professor I attended an

academic conference in Puerto Rico. The conference was exceptionally doctrinaire, and so predictably party-line that I soon got bored with the speakers and the discussions. I hate it when I go to an academic conference to learn something new, and instead hear the same old stuff regurgitated again and again and again. Can't these people have an original thought in their brains, I thought, instead of merely parroting the academic star-of-the-moment? So, giving up on the conference, I decided to see the sights of Puerto Rico instead.

The next day I visited a medieval Spanish fort in San Juan, one of the oldest European buildings in the Western Hemisphere, and after a day of interesting historical investigation and a relaxing Latin dinner I went out dancing at a huge gay bar in San Juan. I danced the night away with a variety of cute guys, and I remember being thrilled when I heard for the first time the disco version of "Don't cry for me, Argentina" and everybody in on the dance floor went loco. Then there was an amateur go-go boy contest and some people there insisted that I should enter it. I had my little bikini on underneath my jeans, so that was no problem stripping to the music, and I got quite a few tips and a couple of propositions, but I did not win the contest. The winner was a devastatingly beautiful nineteen year old Puerto Rican of mixed-race ancestry, who could just look at you and make your eyes melt. I'll bet, however, that I was the only professor in the contest!

The next day when I went to a late breakfast on the pier I learned about a snorkeling trip that was soon leaving on a large catamaran. I decided to forget about the boring conference, and instead took off for a new adventure. When we got to the reef for snorkeling, I lowered myself into the water and, through my swim mask I perceived for the first time another world. This underwater world was like being on another planet. I literally felt like I had entered another plane of existence. Previously, when I had looked down at fish in water, I thought of them as essentially like animals on land. Now, when I looked at all the bright tropical fish swimming all around me, I saw them as the birds of the sea. They were literally flying through the water, more similar to birds flying in the air than land-based animals walking on legs on the ground. I was so totally fascinated that I remained underwater for the entire day. I did not even come up for the lunch that was included in the trip. I paddled around the reef, I floated in complete stillness when I tired, I went back and forth, up and down in the water, not wanting to miss an inch of the reef. Everywhere I looked was so completely alien to anything I had seen before, that I wanted to spend every minute of the trip in the water. Long after the other people on the boat tired of the snorkeling, I remained afloat. I was the last one out of the water, and I only came back to the catamaran when the captain announced that they were leaving the reef.. I was so happy and thrilled to be experiencing this incredibly beautiful and stunning snorkeling. It is one of those events in life that imbeds itself so sharply in the brain as to never be forgotten.

My happiness, unfortunately, was not to last. When I got back to my hotel room, I collapsed on the bed and fell into a deep sleep. When I awoke a few hours later, I turned over and immediately let out a scream. My skin was on fire. I stood up with some difficulty and, in looking in the mirror, was totally shocked. Except for the small area

that had been covered by my tiny bikini, my skin was beet-red. During the entire time that I was snorkeling, my body felt comfortable and cooled by the ocean water. I assumed, falsely, that if my skin was wet it would not get sunburned. Boy was I wrong! This was the worse sunburn I had ever had in my life. I learned the hard way that the sun in the tropics is very different from the higher latitudes where I had grown up. The next day was my return flight to Cincinnati, and my skin was so touchy that the entire plane ride was sheer torture.

Well, with that memory so imbedded in my brain, one would think that I would be more cautious while in Thailand. But, in my experience this past year, the sun has not been too intense for me, and though my arms and face are again dark tan, I have not gotten a sunburn. Consequently, it was a shock for me to find out that I had a skin cancer. That hospital in Maha Sarakham did not have a plastic surgeon, so to get such a specialist and also to get a second opinion, I traveled to the other city in this area, Roi Et. When I went there, the surgeon confirmed that it was cancerous, and he said it should be removed immediately. We scheduled the operation to remove the cancer on Sunday April 8.

The English-speaking monk kindly took the time to come with me to the hospital and wait while the surgery and recovery took place. When they put a local anesthetic on my face to deaden the pain, I fell into a deep sleep. When I awoke I was not in pain, and afterward had some uncomfortableness but not any sharp pain. I was lucky.

By the next day I was shocked when I looked in the mirror and found that the surgery had bruised the area all around my eye. It looked like I had a huge black eye. I was not in pain, but I looked awful! The doctor had taken a skin graft from the side of my head behind my ear, so as to get some hair. The purpose of the plastic surgery was to create a new eyebrow where the left one had been taken out when the cancer was removed. The doctor told me not to get either part of my head wet, for a week.

As luck would have it, the next several days in Thailand are the Songkarn Holiday. During this major holiday, to relieve the heat Thai people have a tradition of throwing water all over everyone. The practice goes back to ancient times, when the Thai New Year was considered to begin, and Thai people today still follow this tradition with a gusto. A week before, when I attended a Molum music festival, someone had rather politely poured a cup of water down my back. I am glad I knew about this custom or I would have been outraged. But what happened to me is nothing compared to the more vigorous custom, which is to throw water everywhere. So much water is thrown on people that the holiday actually has become a threat to safety because people throw so much water at motorcyclists that sometimes the motorcycle becomes unbalanced and crashes.

With strict orders from the doctor that I was not to get either place on my head wet at all, I was forced to miss the entire holiday celebration. It is so strange that, out of all the days of the year, I would have my surgery precisely at the time of the Songkarn Festival. I feel that I missed a major part of Thai culture. Instead of going out, I stayed home. With my

big black eye, I looked terrible anyway, so I was resigned to isolating myself during this time.

On Monday April 16 I went back to the hospital in Roi Et, to get the stitches removed. The doctor was very pleased with two things. First, the biopsy showed that one hundred percent of the cancer cells were removed, and the cancer is completely gone from my body. Second, he said that there was very good healing going on in both the side of my head where the skin graft was taken, and above my eye. He removed the stitches, but there were two stitches that were holding a piece of skin that has still not healed completely. So he left those stitches in, and told me to come back in one week to get them removed. He does not want to take any chances in removing the skin graft too early, so I will wait patiently for another week until those last stitches are removed.

Though I am relieved and happy that the surgery was such a success, it still is sobering to realize I might have died from skin cancer if it had not been caught quickly. If I had not gone to the doctor, or if the scab had healed and stopped bleeding, the cancer might have had the time to multiply in my body. Once again I am reminded of the fragileness of life. One minute we think we are healthy, and suddenly something can happen to throw one's whole life into a tailspin.

As I felt after conquering the exhaustion of sleep apnea, and after dislocating my knee, now that I have gotten rid of the cancer, I have a heightened awareness of the blessings of good health. A person can have many material benefits in life, but if they do not have good health then those materials mean very little. So, I am taking some time to feel gratitude for the good health that I am now experiencing. I hope my story will prompt readers to take a moment and feel grateful for their good health. All too often, we take it for granted, but it is one of the most important things about life. Enjoy every day while you have the good health to do so, because we never know how long those good times will last.

I send you all my sincere wishes for your good health and happiness.
Walter Williams