

As I prepare to leave Thailand, I want to complete the story I began in my last report, telling about the riverboat trip that I experienced with Lon's family. The riverboat stopped just below an incredibly beautiful waterfall, and we all climbed up to the top. I was hesitant about my weak knee, but did not want to miss out on the enjoyment of the moment. Near the top was a small pool, in a setting that looked so pristine it seemed man-made. What I hate about having gone to Disneyland and high-class resorts is that they create these constructed scenes that attempt to replicate nature, and they are so perfect that real nature seems pale by comparison. But this place was so perfect that it seemed hard to believe all of this beauty was created only by natural processes. I sat in the pool, letting the water cascade on my back and neck. It was like getting the most powerful massage imaginable, and I felt awe at the power of falling water.

Lon's brother, who is a very adventuresome guy, took a chance and jumped off of the top of the waterfall ledge into the river below. I waited with baited breath to see if he would resurface safely. After he did, others also jumped off. I stayed comfortably in the pool under the waterfall, but after even Lon (who cannot swim) jumped off the top with an innertube, I decided to do so as well. Having seen everyone repeatedly jump or dive off the ledge, I thought it would be safer for me to do so than to try climbing down the steep riverbank. I decided to carefully negotiate my way to the side of the falls, and then slowly walk to the ledge. However, despite my slowness, I fell in the slippery water and hit my leg hard. I felt a sharp pain in my knee. I feared the worse, but stayed still in the cold water. Lon saw me fall and came quickly back up to the top of the falls. I could see the worry in his face. He asked me if I was OK, and I said I did not know. I sat there for about another ten minutes before trying to move my leg again.

When I was young I used to climb all sorts of places. I loved mountain climbing, and especially climbing around waterfalls. One time, though, at a very high waterfall in the jungles of Malaysia, I lost my balance in the slippery slope and went careening down from the top of the falls. As I fell I managed to grab hold of a little tree root that was sticking out of the water. I held on for dear life, staying very still as I caught my breath. Everything got eerily quiet, and there were no other people around to help. I slowly turned my body around, and reached toward dry land where another root stuck out. It took me several tries before I could reach it. At last I was able to pull myself out of the water. I felt relieved when I got onto solid ground. But it was only later, when I hiked back down to the base of the falls that I looked up and realized how high I was. I saw right where I held onto the little root, and if I had not managed to hold myself there I realized I would have fallen a tremendous distance onto huge boulders at the base of the falls. There is no way I would have survived. This was one among many memories I have of times when I was close to death, but I managed to walk away unhurt. I have been very lucky that I didn't kill myself in some of these hikes.

Now it was readily apparent to me that I cannot continue to do the kind of daredevil things I did in my youth. I am no longer a young man, and my body is much more fragile than it used to be. After all these thoughts entered my mind, I tried to move my leg. It

was clearly sore, but I was able to get up. I moved even more slowly than before, right to the ledge. With a sharp push with my good leg, I jumped off the ledge and down into the river. With relief I did not hit the bottom. I swam to the surface and the others helped me into the riverboat.

It was only after I was safely aboard that I found out that Lon's brother, in his daredevil dives, had hit his head on the bottom and his forehead was bleeding. Of course, he just laughed it off, but there was a clear gash in his forehead that he will probably have for the rest of his life. Then I saw another sharp cut on the foot of Lon's sister's husband. I am glad I was more careful, but I have to take this as a warning that I need to be cautious in the future. Nature can be both incredibly beautiful and unrelentingly unsympathetic to pain and injury.

I hobbled on board and headed for the toilet at the back of the boat. After entering the little bathroom I realized the "toilet" consisted of a hole in the floor. I thought with disgust about the other riverboats with similar toilets, and that I had just been swimming in that water. But I had to go really bad, so there was no choice. As I squatted down, I could hear the plop plop sound of my feces hitting the water. Then I looked down through the hole and saw a swarm of fish competing to eat every tasty morsel. I had earlier eaten fish caught from this same river, for lunch. Poetic justice, I thought to myself. At least I was relieved that floating feces would not be seen in the river, but I did have second thoughts about eating fish after seeing that. I chose chicken for dinner.

It is funny how experiences that one has will suddenly prompt a memory from years ago. I remembered my father telling me that when he was a boy growing up on a farm in North Carolina he would go to the outhouse and see the chickens waiting hungrily below to gobble up anything that came down from above. That was, he told me, why he never liked to eat chicken. I also remembered when I was doing research at a village in rural China, several years ago, that the outhouses of the villagers were placed right over the family pigpen. So, when a person defecated it would fall directly into the pig's feeding trough. Yummy.

Thoughts like this should be enough to make everyone a vegetarian. But then I think about spreading cow manure into the soil to make plants grow, and I realize that everything we consume is, ultimately, truly full of shit.

While living in the village I have gotten so used to sticking my hands into cow manure as I work in my garden, that it no longer seems worth note. I remember walking around at night when I forgot to bring a flashlight, along the road where the cows had just a couple hours earlier been brought back from pasture, and feeling the squishy ooze as I stepped into an unseen large pile of manure while wearing only sandals. There is no other sensation that is quite like this life experience.

With all these memories flooding my mind as I watched Lon busy cooking dinner, I was happy to accept Lon's brother's offer of a glass of rice wine before the meal. On an empty stomach, that rice wine is quite a kicker, and I was soon floating into a stupor

where it did not matter to me what I ate. Earlier in the day Lon's brother and two sisters' husbands had climbed up the riverbank and into the jungle, cutting some tender young bamboo shoots that they threw down to me. I swam to get them and carefully balanced them on an innertube to float them back to the boat. Meanwhile, Lon's sisters had gone out into the jungle and came back with a basketful of leaves that Lon cooked. It looked like spinach but tasted quite a bit better. Before that meal I had never particularly liked the taste of bamboo, but the way Lon cooked it was terrific. Lon is really an excellent cook. Everything tasted particularly delicious, even if the fish we ate had also just previously feasted on our human leftovers. Talk about the circle of life!

That evening we watched the sunset and right after that everybody rolled out their straw mats to sleep on the deck. There was a little room at the back of the boat where pillows and blankets were stored. I was thrilled when Lon led me into the room that he and his relatives had prepared for us. They had carefully laid out blankets on the floor for Lon and me to sleep comfortably and in privacy. I thought this was a particularly nice gesture, considering that the other couples had to sleep in the open with no privacy. This was still another indication of their total acceptance of my relationship with Lon. I lay down in relief and Lon started tenderly giving my leg a massage. I felt like I was in heaven. Lon excused himself to go wash up before coming to bed, and I had visions of a romantic evening aboard this rustic riverboat surrounded by the sounds of the jungle.

I lay there a long while, relaxing and appreciating the joys of the day. At last Lon came in and lay down beside me. I leaned over to give him a kiss, but wanted to scratch at a bug bite first. Then I realized I was itching at other places. Before I knew it, I was scratching all over. I turned on a flashlight and saw large welts all over my body. Since I had seen no mosquitoes at all, these were obviously bedbugs biting me. The blankets were infested. I had not brought any ointments with me, so the only choice I had was to jump into the water to relieve the itching. After staying in the water for about ten minutes I was too cold to continue so I came out. I dried off with the shirt I had worn earlier, and refused to go back into the infested room. All my expectations of a romantic evening went out the window, and I was forced to stay outside. It was starting to get a bit cold, but I dared not use one of the blankets again. I climbed up into the top rafters of the boat and laid down by myself on a platform, where at least I was protected from the cool night breezes. Lon wanted to join me, but when he brought a blanket with him I begged him not to bring it. He was too cold to go without a blanket so he retreated to the deck below. I shivered during the nighttime, and did not get much sleep.

I think Lon must have thought I was strange to have so many ailments, because he was not bitten by the bugs at all. This has happened to me several times in Thailand, where I suffer many insect bites while Thai people are not bitten. Some Thai people have told me that their skin is so tough that bugs cannot bother them, but I am fresh meat that the insects savor as an unusual delicacy. I don't know if that is true or not, but I have another explanation as to why the bugs like to bite me so much and not them. My guess is that all the spicy food they eat must emit an odor that the bugs do not like. This may be why the ancient Thai people developed such a fondness for spicy diets, as a way to protect themselves from insect bites. Since I cannot eat spicy foods, perhaps my body does not

have the protections that Thais have. I have tried to develop a taste for Thai spices, but when I was growing up my family did not include such seasonings. Thai spices sting my mouth so much that I literally cannot swallow. I break out in a sweat, and start having a runny nose.

After a sleepless night, at the crack of dawn everyone woke up and started preparing for leaving. I wanted to go swimming again, but sharply at 6am a longboat came to tow us back to the home dock. After being towed so far during the previous day, I did not realize we were only two riverbends away from the dock. As we walked up the steep steps to the truck at the top of the riverbank, I realized that my leg was quite stiff from the previous day's fall. Again I realized my age is catching up with me, and I cannot do all the things I did when I was young. The aging body just cannot repair itself as quickly as the bodies of young people.

The drive back to Kanchanaburi was pleasant as we again beheld the marvelous scenery. But I was relieved to get back to the hotel. When we entered the lobby I saw a billiards table, and asked Lon if he knew how to play. He had never even seen this, so I taught him how to shoot pool. This was actually good for him, because I wanted him to learn to handle the pool stick with slow carefulness instead of the hurried rough and careless way that he does everything. I am always saying to him, "cha cha" [go slow]. He saw that if he aims carefully he can hit the ball, but if he does it too quickly he will miss. I hope this lesson sinks in, because I want him to be more careful. A month ago he cut off the tip of his middle finger while cutting up a chicken, and I think he is starting to see that he has to be more careful when he does things. After about an hour of trying to hit the ball, he really got the hang of it, and he thoroughly enjoyed playing billiards. I did not tell him about the betting and gambling that often goes along with that game, and we did not keep score. I wanted him only to enjoy the fun of the game itself. I do not quite fathom why human beings get such enjoyment out of hitting a ball around, whether on a billiards table or a baseball diamond or a golf course, but the pleasure of doing so seems almost universal.

After coming back to the room, Lon gave my leg a really great massage. I told him I wanted to pay the tuition for him to go to English school, so that by the time I come back to Thailand in December he will have improved his English abilities. He would not even consider that, and said that he can learn enough English just from talking with me every day. His English has improved considerably in the past year during our time together, but I realize this is not enough. I have tried and tried to get him more interested in computers, but he does not show much proclivity. He is just happy to cook and keep house, and give massages.

Though he refused my offer to pay for his schooling, he did want me to pay for a telephone for him. He has been using his sister's mobile phone, and I told him he did not really need a mobile phone since he could either use his sister's or his parents' phone when he goes back to the village. I fear that, in the rough way that he handles everything, he will soon either break or lose a phone. But, in the same way that American young people are captivated by the latest stylish technology, Lon has his heart set on getting a

mobile phone. It is not only the convenience of making phone calls, but also the status that comes with having a mobile phone that entices him. I resisted, but he begged and begged. I said that I would pay him for the massage he gave me, and that since that was his money he earned he has the right to do with it what he wishes. I then said that if he will give me more massages during our next two days together, then I will pay him by the hour and he can have enough money to buy a phone.

He agreed, but then over the next day he kept pressing me to raise the price I would pay him for massage. People normally get paid fifty to one hundred baht per hour for giving a massage, but I offered to pay him two hundred baht per hour. I want to be generous to him, but I also do not want for him to get so spoiled by easy money from a foreigner that he forgets the value of earning money by hard work. I pointed out that the average salary for an eight-hour day of backbreaking work in the rice fields is one hundred baht, so earning twice that in one hour is a good income. He understood what I said, but he still kept pressing me. I actually wanted to give him more than that, but I would have felt better spending money to improve his education than just for him to have a fancy phone that he does not really need and that will probably not last long. But I do have a weakness for a relaxing massage, so I felt that it was a good trade for him to give me something that I like as he gets something that he likes. After more haggling, he did in fact give me three hours of great massage during that day and evening. But I had to keep track of the minutes on a piece of paper to get him to fulfill his part of the bargain. I don't know if I was too strict with him or not, but I have seen young people quickly get spoiled by access to money and I want to be careful that he does not fall into this trap.

We spent the day and evening relaxing at the hotel. I tried to give him more lessons on computer use and working on his English, and I tried to stress that these are the skills I have that will be most valuable for him for his future. He hears me, and I think he understands that what I say is true. Lon is not stupid, but he really does not have much patience for study. If he does not pursue education, I fear that he will have the same life that his parents have, working on the farm for increasingly less money as agricultural labor continues to go down in value. Or he will do the kind of work in concrete construction that his brother and sisters do in Kanchanaburi. Every day they get paid by the piece for each concrete pillar that they pour. People from the village where I live are noted for their skill in working with cement, and that is likely his future also.

Of course, when I explain that I want a better life for him, Lon will reply that he will have a good life if I take care of him. He says that he loves me very much, and he will be completely satisfied in life to cook and clean and take care of the house for him and me to live happily ever after. It is in this matter that I am most conscious of our age differences. I am nearing age sixty, and though I hope I can live for another couple of decades or so, I am increasingly aware of the fragileness of life. If my health got so bad that I could not continue living in Thailand, and had to return to America for health reasons, then I would have to leave Lon behind. If my mother's health becomes bad, then I will feel the need to take care of her if need be. She was always such a good mother to me, that I would not feel right if I was not there for her in her time of need. Knowing these concerns, both Lon and his family have more than once suggested that I

should take him to America with me. I have tried to explain to them how difficult it is to get a visa to the United States. What I have not told them is the heterosexist double standard that exists in American law. If Lon were female, and Lon and I fell in love, I would have no trouble getting a marriage license and taking Lon back with me as my legal wife. But because same-sex marriages are not allowed in federal law, there is no opportunity for two people of the same sex to obtain a marriage visa. This is a great injustice that has a huge impact on the lives of gay and lesbian bi-national couples. If Lon got a sex change, we could then marry, but that is ridiculous since neither Lon nor I want such a medical procedure. The other option is to try to sneak Lon into America illegally, but that route is fraught with difficulties and nightmares. Heterosexuals have no idea how much privilege they have in American law, just by being of two different sexes.

With all these thoughts swirling in my mind, Lon and I spent our final night together. As we awoke to the early phone call from his sister, we got dressed and packed. We both realize we will not be able to see each other for five months, and though Lon begged me to cancel my flight and stay in Thailand with him I know that is impossible. His brother and one sister, and her husband and daughter accompanied us to the bus station for me to return to Bangkok. They all insisted on waiting until I was on the bus, and said that they will look forward to seeing me again after Christmas. I did not understand where the second sister was, but as the bus was pulling out of the station, that sister and her husband and baby son arrived on a motorcycle. They had gone out of their way and driven across town on a motorcycle just to be able to wave goodbye to me as the bus departed. These people, strangers to me before this week, had taken me into their lives and their homes and treated me with such kindness. It was that final touch, of coming to the bus station to see me off, that really marked for me the acceptance they feel toward my and Lon's relationship.

As I come back to America, knowing that so many gay and lesbian young people are not accepted by their families, much less a relationship they might have with their beloved, the contrast with Thai family values is most striking. People in many countries around the world are sitting in prisons today because of being involved in such loving relationships. In some nations, people like me are being executed. I feel so fortunate that my family has been so accepting of me, and that I have been able to find a place like Thailand where I can feel such love and acceptance. This is what true family values is all about, and I think that ultimately is a reflection of Buddhist teachings of love and compassion for all people and all living things.

It is with gratitude for these teachings that I prepare to end my wonderful and fascinating year in Thailand and return to the land of my birth. I will look forward to seeing my mother, as well as all my dear friends, but I leave Thailand quite reluctantly as I think about so many precious memories of the past year. I hope those of you who have been following my reports of my adventures have managed to get some insights of value in these words, and I send my very best wishes to each of you.

Walter