

ISAN FIELDNOTES 2008-2A by Walter Williams February 5, 2008

Thank you to those of you who have written to me recently, telling me your reactions to my fieldnotes from Thailand. I particularly appreciate those who have read and complimented me for my recent book *TWO SPIRITS: A STORY OF LIFE WITH THE NAVAJO* (Lethe Press), and talk about how moving this same-sex love story was to them. That book, and the true story of the astounding events that happened to the Navajo people in the 1860s, was based on research that I did on the Navajo Nation many years ago. With talented gay novelist Toby Johnson, I constructed a same-sex love story that has a happy ending, but is also ethnographically and historically accurate for the Navajo people who traditionally had a very accepting attitude toward “Two Spirit” androgynous people. See reviews of my books at <http://amazon.com> and at <http://gaybookreviews.info>

I also appreciate those who have read my essays at <http://livefully.info> on how to have a fulfilling life, and my own personal history of activism in human rights, and have gotten something of value from these writings. It is readers like you, who can see the value of others’ life experiences, and can incorporate those lessons into enriching your own life, who are the real audience to whom I write. My feeling is that I have now reached the age where it is time for me to share some of the things that I have learned about life, as my most effective way to benefit others. My highest goal and desire is to pass down the knowledge and wisdom that I have learned, with the hopes that my perspectives will assist others in building their own philosophy of life. My readers are my students, just as much as those who take my classes at USC.

The last time I wrote I was waxing poetic about how wonderful life is in this Isan village in northeastern Thailand. Part of the reason I enjoy living here so much is because of my house. I attach some pictures of my current house situation. I am dividing this email into two separate sendings so that the pictures will not overload memory. This is what I am sending in this email:

1. view from the front door, as one enters the open air living room.
2. view of the entry from the living room, with the door and window to my office.
3. inside my office, which is also where I sleep due to it being the only room of the house with air conditioning.

4. In my office among my prize possessions are a reclining Buddha, a Buddhist monk's alms bowl (a gift last year from the abbot of the Buddhist monastery where I was living), and prayer beads.

The next email will show pictures of my house living room.

When the week started I was asked by a teacher to teach the kids at school a song in English. Since the research I did last year in effective language acquisition demonstrates that songs are indeed a good way to teach kids a new language, I was happy to do this. Isan people love music and from the very first time I came here they were always asking me to sing. When I first came here I was not prepared for this emphasis on singing, and the only song I could remember the words to was "Row, Row, Row Your Boat."

Language acquisition theory says that songs are effective ways to teach a language because even if a person does not know the meaning of the words they can remember the melody. This was proved to me recently when a boy now in his teens sang a song that I taught him five years ago. On a recent visit to my house he suddenly starting singing "low, low, low da but, ghently down da steem. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, lie is but a deem." The words were not perfect, but considering he had not heard anyone sing this song for five years I think that is pretty good evidence of the way the human brain can remember a melody.

To prepare for teaching this time I tried to think of some good songs to teach the kids, but none of the examples I could think of made much sense. When I thought of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" I tried to think of the way to explain the meaning of "e-i-e-i-o". Plus, the sounds I make for the various animals are not even recognizable to Isan people. For example, cows are called "waw" and pigs are called "moo." So if I say "moo" to refer to a cow, Isan people are befuddled. They do not hear "moo" when thinking of the sound a cow makes. The way they imitate the sounds of those animals do not sound like those animals at all, to my ear, but this just goes to show the cultural nature of language. Every human being brings our cultural background and learnings to the sounds we hear in life. That has been demonstrated over and over as I try to teach Thai people to speak English. I say "yes" and they reply "yet." Again I say "yessss" with heavy emphasis on the "s" at the end, and they will consistently say "yet." This happens all over Thailand, and what I first thought was a strange quirk I now see is a consistent linguistic pattern. Their ears are not trained to hear the "sss" sound.

Anyway, after abandoning Old MacDonald's barnyard animals, I next thought of "Yankee Doodle." But again, it was so complex just trying to explain the meaning of a line like "He stuck a feather in his cap and called it macaroni." Then I decided to sing the Gershwin version "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy" but it also proved impossible to explain lines like "A real live nephew of my Uncle Sam, born on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July." Just too much explanation would have to go into the background of those terms. So, not having any other songs fresh in my memory, I came up with the idea of writing my own lyrics to Gershwin's singable melody. Drawing on the positive feelings I have been having about Thailand, I came up with these lyrics. I have to explain to them my invention of the word "Thailandophile" as one who loves Thailand, but given their ignorance of the English language, that is no more difficult than explaining the other words. Here are the three verses I wrote:

I'm so happy here in Thailand,  
A place that makes me want to smile.

A great life here is what I so enjoy,  
My reasons I now will compile.

First, I've got a charming house here,  
I live with comfort and with style.

Being here brings so much pleasure,  
Every single day now,  
I am a Thailand-o-phile.

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I'm so happy here in Thailand,  
In a village or in town.

Thai people always strive to enjoy life.  
They don't let small things get them down.

They take the time to smell the flowers,  
And savor life in ways profound.

When I'm with them, I feel happy,

Being with these people.  
Thailand leaves me so spellbound.

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I'm so happy here in Thailand,  
Thai people really catch my eye.

Their beauty abounds both in spirit and form.  
And they're sweeter than sugary pie.

I've got many friends here in Thailand,  
We have great times, I won't deny.

When I'm here now, I am happy,  
Being with my friends. Yes,  
That's something money can't buy.

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You can also come to Thailand,  
This country is the land of smiles.

A great life here is what all can enjoy,  
I hope you see this reconciles.

With all these nice things to commend it,  
And freedom for diverse lifestyles.

Thailand offers so much goodness,  
For all hopeful people.  
Join me to be Thailand-o-philes.

I also wrote some lyrics to the tune of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm", and instead of the meaningless "e-i-e-i-o" I wrote the line "I like to watch things grow." I am trying to encourage the villagers to be more ecological, by growing more trees, and eating more fish and chicken instead of beef and pork. These are the words I taught the kids at school:

I WANT TO HAVE CHICKENS SOME DAY.  
I LIKE TO WATCH THINGS GROW.

AND IF I DID I'D RAISE THE CHICKS,  
AND EAT THEIR EGGS ALSO.  
WITH A CLUCK CLUCK HERE  
AND A CLUCK CLUCK THERE  
HERE A CLUCK THERE A CLUCK  
EVERYWHERE A CLUCK CLUCK  
I WANT TO HAVE CHICKENS SOME DAY,  
I LIKE TO WATCH THINGS GROW.

I WANT TO HAVE A POND SOME DAY,  
I LIKE TO WATCH THINGS GROW.  
AND IN THAT POND I'D RAISE SOME FISH.  
I LIKE TO WATCH THINGS GROW.  
WITH A SPLASH SPLASH HERE  
AND A SPLASH SPLASH THERE  
HERE A SPLASH THERE A SPLASH  
EVERYWHERE A SPLASH SPLASH  
I WANT TO HAVE A POND SOME DAY.  
I LIKE TO WATCH THINGS GROW.

I WANT TO GROW SOME TREES SOME DAY.  
I LIKE TO WATCH THINGS GROW.  
AND AS THEY GROW THE AIR SMELLS FRESH  
I'D SNIFF AND SNIFF THEM SO.  
WITH A SNIFF SNIFF HERE  
AND A SNIFF SNIFF THERE.  
HERE A SNIFF, THERE A SNIFF,  
EVERYWHERE A SNIFF SNIFF  
I WANT TO GROW SOME TREES SOME DAY.  
I LIKE TO WATCH THINGS GROW.

After teaching this rendition of happy songs with more meaning than e-i-e-i-o, I returned to my home for a late lunch and a relaxing evening at my house. I will send the next email soon.

I send my wishes that your life is going as well or better than mine is, and that you may have good health and happiness in every day.

Best regards,

Walter Williams

Before I left Thailand last August I place two hundred tiny Tilapia fish in my fish pool. They are crowding the goldfish that I put into the fish pool last year. So I decided to purchase an aquarium for the living room, and I put the goldfish in that. I did this as much for the entertainment of the villagers as much as for my own pleasure. The villagers have never seen fish through clear glass, and they are fascinated by this eye-to-eye view of fish. The aquarium is a real hit. I enclose here a picture of the aquarium, as well as pictures of my open-air living room, with the early morning sun streaming in to light the Buddha statues and the picture of Thailand's King Rama IX (whom I greatly admire for his concern for the poor and for the environment).

The tilapia fish are just now almost reaching edible size, and a neighbor gave me two traditional Isan handmade wooden fish traps so I can catch fish for dinner. Every day for the last two weeks I methodically checked the fish trap each morning, but there was never any fish inside. At last I gave up, and did not check it for the last two mornings. Sure enough, as I brought the fish trap out of the water today there was a fish inside. Lek told me that the fish had laid there dead for too long inside the trap, and it was no longer safe to eat. I had to reluctantly dispose of the fish, but not wanting it to go entirely to waste I buried it at the base of my mango tree to use as fertilizer. I decided to use the handmade fishtraps as art, and hung them as a mobile (see attached picture). The villagers get a chuckle out of the way I use their common everyday items as home décor.

This was the third animal I have had to kill this week. The others I killed were not for food, but were threats. I have to learn to be careful due to the critters. While I was gone Lek did not clean up the leaves in the garden, and as I was gathering some leaves with my hand the other day I felt something slither. At first I thought it was one of the lizards that populate the garden, but then I saw to my horror that it was a snake that I had almost picked up. I ran to get my metal digging stick, and I chopped it in half. I do not know if it was a poisonous snake, but as it writhed in its dying throes it repeatedly tried to bite the metal blade. That could have been my hand.

Later, late at night, I came into the kitchen to get a drink of water. Before I turned on the light, something scampered across my feet. The light came on in time for me to see that it was a mouse scurrying behind the refrigerator. The next day I noticed that the mouse had somehow managed to get into the drawers of the kitchen cabinet, as evidenced by its little droppings that it had

left all over the plates and bowls in the drawers. Angered by this potential source of disease, I went to the one little store that exists in this village and purchased a mouse glue trap to put in the kitchen. Sure enough, on the next morning there was the mouse, stuck in the glue. His eyes did not show fear, and he looked at me calmly I explained to him that he had violated my eating equipment space, and I was sorry but he had to be eliminated. I took the glue trap into the yard, and with the sharp edge of the same metal digging stick I quickly pressed it across his neck to kill him quickly so that he would not suffer. I gave a little Buddhist prayer that he would be reincarnated into a better life next time. I don't like to kill animals, but I felt that I had no choice with both the snake and the mouse invading my living area.

The way the mouse ran across both my feet reminded me of my childhood when I lived at my grandparents' house in North Carolina, and how mice used to seem to always run right across my feet whenever I got up in the dark at night. It seems to be a universal rule of mouse behavior, sort of like a chicken at one side of the road always seeming to feel the need to run to the other side of the road right before a car approaches on the road.

What gets me here, though, is the behavior of dogs. For some reason, all over Thailand, dogs seem to prefer to sleep in the road. As a car approaches, a dog will slowly rouse itself from its slumber and amper to the side of the pavement just as the car whizzes past. Thai drivers do not slow down for dogs, and I have seen numerous times when the dog manages to get up and out of the way by mere inches before the automobile tire rolls past. The dog shows no alarm and indeed seems to be in no great hurry, as it raises itself first by its back legs, and then by its front legs, and waddles away. With this kind of behavior, one would expect to see dead dog carcasses littering the highways all over Thailand. But I cannot recall ever seeing even one dead dog by the side of the road.

I think dogs in Thailand take a lesson from the way people drive here. Thai drivers scare me half to death the way they pass a slower vehicle, even if approaching a blind curve or even if another car is coming from the opposite direction. The rule seems to be that the approaching driver just moves to the side of the road and allows the passing motorist to continue passing even though that car is in the opposite lane. Highways usually have wide side paved areas to accommodate the numerous motorcycles that people commonly drive. Thai drivers calmly give up their lane if a person is

passing in the opposite direction, and this is no matter for concern. There have been times when I have been driving, though, when I thought I would have no choice but to drive off the road altogether to avoid an accident.

Roads in Thailand are carefully marked with double yellow lines just as in America, but Thai drivers pay no attention at all to these safety markers. As a passenger I have sucked in my breath so many times, expecting to see a head-on collision as three cars approach each other on a two-lane road. Again, with this kind of behavior, one would expect to see auto accidents on a daily basis. But, just as with the dogs asleep in the middle of the road, the two cars speed past each other with perhaps two inches between them and they never seem to touch. I have seen a few cars that have been crashed, but I have to admit that I see less accidents in Thailand than in America. I think it is because American drivers are so used to keeping possession of their space that if another car is in their lane they simply do not know how to react, and a collision results. Thai drivers, on the other hand, are so used to calmly moving to the side of the road as a car is barreling toward them in their lane, that it creates no panic. So, maybe—ironically—Thai driving patterns are more safe than American. But it still scares the bejesus out of me when I see a double-decker bus speeding toward me in my lane.

The most common roadside accidents that I have seen are the result of trucks being overloaded. Particularly in sugarcane-growing areas, the cut cane is piled so high in these trucks, that sometimes they turn over from being too top-heavy. This is an example of the relative lack of regulation that occurs in Thailand. Recently, though, Thai police have started giving drivers traffic tickets if they are seen driving without a seatbelt. Though Thai people complain about the police doing this, I am glad to see this kind of traffic safety enforcement.

I had some recent emails from a Buddhist monk who is strongly encouraging me to become ordained as a monk myself. This is my reply to his emails: Thanks so much for your thoughtful emails. I am taking your points very seriously. Though I have listened to the villagers' complaints about the local abbot, I have not taken any public stance myself. Following your advice, which is good advice for me to remember, I will not do so. It is the place of the higher Buddhist authorities, and of the villagers themselves, to decide such matters, and it would not be good for me to get involved. I think, though, that all this controversy must be influencing the local abbot, because just this week construction has begun on the temple. And yesterday, I saw



the abbot driving his automobile himself. Perhaps he is trying to save money rather than hiring a driver. That is admirable if he is responding to the local people's wishes, and spending the money correctly. I just hope that his reputation has not been irrevocably damaged in their eyes, and in the eyes of his superiors. This is such a nice village that I hate to see controversy raise its ugly head.

Regarding my own future, you say a lot of important points about Buddhism and being a monk. I am not decided yet on this matter. I might yet decide to become a monk. There are points in its favor and other points against, for me. I agree with you totally that the Buddha made exceptions for many things, and he remained flexible. I just wish some monks were not so slavishly devoted to these rules, that they cannot see any exceptions at all. Many of them I have observed are very rigid.

I do not see the fact that some rule was laid down 2,500 years ago as reason enough to keep following that same rule, if current conditions have changed. Obviously, many Buddhists agree with me on this, on the position of women, because the situation for nuns has changed dramatically in a number of Buddhist countries in recent years. What is possible in one country is possible in another. I think this change is overdue for Thailand, and is causing Buddhists in other countries to criticize Thailand for not making nuns more equal. I do not agree with your statement that change is not likely in one lifetime. My whole life has been a model of bringing about social change. From the time when I was a teenager, when I joined the civil rights movement, there were people telling me that it would be impossible to change racial segregation. Yet, the walls of legal segregation came tumbling down in only a couple of decades. When I was a pioneer in the gay rights struggle, so many people told me I was pushing for impossible goals. Yet, I have lived to see great and wonderful changes in my lifetime. To have thought that I would be paid as a professor to teach about gay-transgender subjects some day is an idea that would never have even occurred to me when I was a teenager. Yet, here I am. I am not dissuaded by cautions that change is impossible or unrealistic.

Regarding the condition of women, a mere hundred years ago women were virtually everywhere enslaved under the control of men, and regarded as inferior. Those ideas have been severely challenged during this century, and a massive change has taken place. It will only continue in greater degree in the future, and any institution that does not adapt to the new equality will

soon be consigned to the dustbin of history. I want Buddhism to flourish and flower in the 21st century. It cannot do that if it is wedded to the old patriarchal way of doing things.

This is a different matter from my own personal future. What, then, should I do with my life? Should I become a monk, or remain as a layperson. You make a good argument that I have already made great contributions to society, and it is now time for me to focus on myself to achieve nirvana. As you know, though, it is not necessary to be a monk to reach nirvana. I rather like the bodhisattva ideal, of a person who is devoted to helping others. I think the idea that it is necessary for a person to develop the higher worlds (of learning, of creativity, and of helping others) is a better approach to life than just becoming a hermit and isolating oneself from the world. I classify myself as more of an engaged Buddhist ("socially engaged Buddhism") rather than just the contemplative meditative route of Buddhism. For others it might be different, but that is the way I feel for me.

Rather than have to hide and pretend, or act with hypocrisy about some 2,500 year old rule regarding willful ejaculation or any other bodily matter, I have found that I can live my life very openly here in this village to my heart's desire and not one person objects. People here are so accepting, that I consider it a blessing to be able to live here.

On another matter, let me tell you about a new development that has occurred that has given me a new responsibility. A neighbor man, age 30, came to me. His wife left him two years ago to raise two children: a boy now age 9 and a girl now age 3. I have known him for several years, and even had a brief erotic experience with him a couple of years ago, but I had only seen his daughter and did not know that he had a son. He wants to be a good father, but is very poor and cannot afford to raise both kids. The boy has been living with his grandmother, in another part of Thailand, and was not even able to afford the small expenses needed to attend public school. At times the boy did not have enough food to eat. The father was very disturbed about this, and he came to me and asked me if he could bring the boy here to this village for him to live with me and Lek. He wants his son to learn English and computers, and knows that I could give him a good home.

We drove three hours to visit the grandmother's house, and she was glad to be relieved of the burden of raising the boy. Unlike most other kids I have

met in this country, though, this boy was not friendly, and seemed nervous about leaving that village. When he first got here, he would not even talk to me. I thought it all was a big mistake. On the third day when his three year old sister was visiting, they got into some sort of spat, and he hit her rather hard. She started bawling. I insisted he should say sorry to her, but he refused. He seemed very hard-headed. I realize a lot of this may be the result of his mother's abandonment of the family, and that he had emotionally closed down, but I thought I had taken on more responsibility than I could handle.

He likes living at my house, though, especially because it is not cold and drafty like his grandmother's shanty, and he sleeps warmly and securely here. I offered him the choice of where he wants to sleep and he chooses to sleep in my bedroom. He seems to understand that Lek and I are trying to help him. But I cannot persuade him to do anything he does not want to do. For example, I tried teaching him some very rudimentary English words, and unlike other kids I have taught at the local school, he did not seem interested at all. I tried to teach him simple things like "thank you" and "you're welcome" but nothing seemed to go into his brain. I enrolled him in school and he has been attending regularly. He seems to like the school, and has started to make friends with local kids. But when I bought school uniforms and other new clothes for him, he did not even say thank you in Thai much less in English. When I was trying to teach him numbers one evening, he refused to do anything. When I insisted, he started crying. I thought he did not learn or remember one thing.

Then, after a couple of weeks of this, after his father talked to him several times about my intentions were to try to help him have a better future, he very slowly loosened up and started paying attention. But it was murder trying to get him to say anything. Then one evening when I was showing another kid, who lives down the street, how to pronounce the numbers correctly, to my great shock this boy started saying every number exactly right! I could not believe he had learned the exact correct English pronunciation after all that resistance.

For a reward, on the next day I took him to a local village fair, and he enjoyed it very much. He could not fail to see the plaintive looks of the other kids who did not have the money to play the games that I paid for him to enjoy. I wish I could have paid for them all to ride all the rides, but I did not have that much money. He slowly started opening up, and even

started smiling a bit. Thinking he would enjoy it even more, the next week I took him to the city to a really big fair. I paid for his food and admission, for him to ride on several rides, and bought still more new clothes for him. Yet, when he saw a stand with toy pellet guns he stood there and insisted that I buy that for him. I am opposed to violence, and I do not like even toy guns, so I told him I had already spent enough. He started crying, loudly. I told him if he was going to act like that, we would have to leave. He cried even louder. He would not leave the toy stand or talk to me. I had to physically carry him out of the fairgrounds, while people stared at me. It was very embarrassing.

When we got back to the car, Lek was very upset at having to wait so long for us, and in his anger he tried to slap the boy. But I stopped him from hitting the boy, since I do not favor violence against children. My own father used to whip me with a belt, and I never want to see a child hit. But still, I was upset at the ungrateful boy, so when we got home I gave him a blanket and told him he must sleep in the living room by himself rather than in the bedroom as he had been sleeping previously. I took a lesson from American Indians, who never physically punished their children, but disciplined them by making them stay by themselves away from the adults. This must have really made him feel bad, because I know the one place he seemed to feel safe and secure is when he went to bed.

The next morning he came into my bedroom with the clothes I had bought for him. In perfect English, while holding the clothes out to me, he said "Walter, thank you." Tears welled up in my eyes and I gave him a hug. He said, in Thai "kor tot" [I'm sorry]. Later that day, Lek asked him if he wanted to go back to live with his grandmother. "Mai," he said emphatically, "Pom dongan pac tinee le Walter" [No, I want to stay here with Walter]. Later, I asked his father if he should leave, and he insisted that the boy realizes what he did was wrong and that he really does like living here.

So, since that day, things have really improved. Now, he is smiling and even laughing more. I find him humming along to music, which he never did before. He jumps and plays, rides the bike energetically, and is starting to act more like a regular boy. I am really pleased at how much he is opening up. It was almost like we had to go through an adjustment period, but now he seems to enjoy when I congratulate him at some new bit of learning English. He is patient as I show him how to do things on the

computer. He is sharing and considerate to his sister. I can hardly believe how much he is changing now. It is still too early to know what will happen in the long run, but things are looking quite positive now. You will recall our conversations last fall about some ideas to develop with a wat in that other country. I wonder why I should think about going to all the trouble and expense of doing that, without knowing the results, when I now have everything that I talked about wanting with him and others right here in this village. Shouldn't I work to develop what I have, and be grateful for what exists right now, instead of going off somewhere else and pursuing a different life?

As always, I will be greatly appreciative of your advice. But, after those problems I detailed above are now gone, I am really feeling happy and fulfilled right here right now. Isn't that what Buddhism teaches us, to focus on the present, and to reach fulfillment in life? I think this is the path for me, in helping this person, at least for right now. There will be time to make other decisions later, and if not, then there will be future lifetimes. As Isan people say here, "Mai ben lai" [it is not worth getting worried about].