

Cross Street: Khmer Rouge + Napalm

Perhaps my birth year, 1966, foretold of my interest in connecting things. My route 66 had a major stopping point in 2016, the year I turned 50. Years before my 50th birthday I had already decided on what I wanted for this special birthday: a trip to Vietnam and Cambodia. When I was growing up, the Vietnam War was going on. I didn't understand it. 50 years later, I still didn't, but I felt an intense need to see Vietnam with my own eyes. Likewise, when I was crossing from elementary to junior high school, the Khmer Rouge were in power in Cambodia and over a period of 3 years 8 months and 21 days they killed 2 million of their own citizens.

Turning 50 allowed me the time, the finances, and the thought processes to learn something about the past and see how it could affect my present and future. My top question before embarking on this trip to southeast Asia was: How do countries devastated by war and genocide come back? But that was only one of my questions. I had many more. How do countries devastated by war and genocide forgive? Can they? How do they move past hatred? How do they regrow? Regenerate? Have rebirth? Move forward? And I also had some of the most fundamental of all questions: Are all humans the same? Is what matters in our life the same? I was searching for something, something very important. Some say that when you are searching for something you are trying to fill a void. On the contrary, what I was searching for was something that would expand my capacity for understanding and connecting with the world.

So on November 16, 2016, my wife and I embarked on the first of 3 flights required to get to Vietnam. Six days into the trip I was beginning to feel depressed. Why had I travelled all this way? Six days and I hadn't found anything that I was really looking for. In fact, it was on the sixth day that I found exactly what I wasn't looking for. An answer that I didn't want. That all human beings are the same. They are (often) assholes. Let me explain or at least clarify. We were flying from Hanoi to Saigon. On the flight, I had both my wife's carry on and my carry on to put into the

overhead bin. Behind me was a short, presumably Vietnamese man. Precisely at the moment I took the first carry on to put in the overhead bin came the first of many “heh-hems.” Initially I just thought this guy was clearing his throat. But 2 or 3 seconds into handling the first bag and prior to actually getting it into the overhead bin, another “heh-hem” came, then another, and another, and another. By the time I got our second carry on in the overhead bin he must have “heh-hemmed” 10 or more times.

Being the (originally from) New Yorker that I am, when the second “heh-hem” came I went into New Yorker mode. My mind played this inside: I sure would like to kick this guy’s ass. Wait, I’m in a communist country, I could get arrested and never get home. He’s got two of his friends behind him, they might kick my ass and I’d get arrested and still never get home. So I just kept my mouth shut, sat in my seat and hoped he’d trip a couple of rows ahead and hit his head. That didn’t happen. When we got off the plane, we had to wait at the Saigon airport for our bags. It was as crowded in baggage claim as any airport I’ve ever been in. People pushing and shoving and being rude. Sure, I had the obvious answer to one of my questions. Are all people the same? YES! When you put them into situations like crowds, flying, airplanes, airports and baggage claim, they act like inconsiderate idiots.

Over the next day or so I thought about this a little more and something much more important hit me. I wasn’t just flying any airplane from Hanoi to Saigon. I was on a 787 Boeing Dreamliner. The very first that I had ever flown. So I was flying a Dreamliner asking how do countries devastated by war and genocide come back and I was flying on the answer.

On the 7th day of the trip something much more important happened. That day I visited the War Remnants Museum and again saw the famous photo by Nick Ut of the young girl burned by napalm in 1972. That night I went on the internet and again looked up the Vietnam War, the girl in the photo, and found the name of the person in it—(Phan Thi) Kim Phuc. I read about her and learned of an essay she wrote called the long road to forgiveness. In it she said: “Napalm is very powerful but faith, forgiveness and love are much more powerful. We would not have war at all if everyone could learn how to live with true love, hope and forgiveness.” These words were so powerful I was awestruck. I immediately wrote her

quote on the Intercontinental Asiana Saigon pad in my hotel room. Furthermore, to this day, I carry that piece of paper in my wallet. I also thought of all the things I had to search and how I actually came upon her name and what she said. Had I looked up the Vietnam War on Wikipedia first? Did I google the girl in the photo? Had I clicked on a link on one of those webpages? Would I have even looked anything up if I hadn't been in Vietnam? Seen the Cu Chi tunnels? Visited the War Remnants Museum? Been searching for answers?

I recognized that sometimes you are looking for something. You look something up, then come across a link. You click on the link. Then there is another link and another and another. Perhaps 10 pages later, after you've forgotten how you even got to where you are, you realize that you are there. You have found something. Something that you probably couldn't ever find again unless you had repeated the EXACT same process you just had. And you are so thankful that you found it. It is an epiphany. And later, after my return from Vietnam, I learned that Kim's village, Trang Bang, was only 12 miles from Cu Chi. Moreover, when I peered into the tunnel in Cu Chi I didn't know that the tunnels in fact connected to Trang Vang, even inside Kim's own home. If a periscope were attached from the tunnel I looked in at Cu Chi to Trang Vang, I would have been looking at the very area that the plane dropped the bombs containing napalm that burned Kim.

For the next 48 hours I could think of little else. How could a young girl burned so terribly in the war teach ME so much? Later I learned that the name Phuc means happiness. And much later, I learned how so many people who observed Kim over her lifetime commented on her smile and laughter. They too knew of her tragic injury, her surgeries and pain and they too so accurately observed her smile and laughter.

Prior to my trip I decided I would record videos while on the trip. I hoped to do this every day. Though I recorded the first video about 10 days before departing, it wasn't until the 10th day of the trip that I recorded the first video while abroad. I titled my videos "What if All the People of Iowa and New Mexico were gone?" Three million people were killed in Vietnam during the war. That is the population of Iowa. Two million were killed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. That is the population of New Mexico. Now imagine that all of the people of Iowa and New Mexico were gone.

GONE. That's how many are gone from Vietnam and Cambodia. The first video, the one filmed outside my backyard in North Carolina on Lake Norman, captured all of my questions—the ones about recovery, regrowth, forgiveness, and are all humans the same.

It wasn't until I learned of Kim Phuc's eloquent statement on forgiveness that I felt I was able to record the next video. It was at that time that I also felt that even if I didn't learn anything more on the trip, I had learned more than I ever could have hoped to learn. It was quite truly transformative.

I knew before the trip started that the people of Vietnam and Cambodia (and the other places we were going to visit) would teach me so much more than I could ever teach them and leave me with so much more than I could ever leave them. Kim Phuc proved that point. In fact, I didn't do anything for her at all, but she taught me how she got to the point of forgiveness. She says that after she was injured she had hatred in her heart. She looked at other people who weren't injured and hated them for being normal. It wasn't until 1982, 10 years after she was burned, that she came to (Christian) faith. And it was through faith that she could forgive. Moreover, she did much more than that. She taught ME about forgiveness. Someone who had been so badly burned and injured; someone in pain; teaching ME about forgiveness. Kim said: "Forgiveness made me free from hatred. I still have many scars on my body and severe pain most days but my heart is cleansed." It was only after learning what I did from Kim that I was able to record my second video along the Mekong River in Vietnam; only after seeing Nick Ut's photo with Kim Phuc and only after finding Kim's message. Then I was ready to record.

While on the Avalon Siem Reap, the river boat portion of our trip through the Mekong Delta, we also got our first introduction to the kind and beautiful people of Cambodia. We first met them upon boarding the Avalon Siem Reap in Saigon. They had many more answers to my questions. One of the waiters on the river boat was named Chamroeun. Immediately he introduced himself and said: "My name is Chamroeun, but you can call me Champion." Each day, Chamroeun would energetically greet us at the entrance to the dining room on our river boat. The first day he said: "Hello Steve. Today I am EXCELLENT." Each day he would have a new adjective. On the second day, he said: "Hello Steve. Today I am

AMAZING.” Now Chamroeun, or Champion, had an accent and some words were harder for him to pronounce than others. On the third day he said: “Today I am ASTONISING.” He had a bit of a hard time with the “SH” sound of ASTONISHING. His attitude was so charming that I decided I would try to teach him new words. So one morning, wanting to practice his new knowledge, he boldly professed: “Today I am PHENOMENAL!” A day or so later he greeted me good morning and said: “Two TUMBS UP!” On the last night of our riverboat excursion I told him that I would teach him one last term. So I said, “I am PSYCHOTIC.” Immediately he said: “I am PSYCHOTIC,” to which I replied: “Champion, don’t say that one, it’s not a good one. If you do, passengers will look at you funny.” He dismissed it completely.

Chamroeun, or Champion always had a smile, He was gracious, friendly, and kind, and always aimed to please. In truth, so were all of the staff on the Avalon Siem Reap—Yari and Sophan and Rita and Sreyroth and many others. Recognizing the devastation that Cambodia had been through and knowing that so many people were killed between 1975 and 1979 (and even after) it almost seemed odd with the smiles that always greeted us. Champion was one of many great ambassadors for his country. Champion was EXCELLENT, AMAZING, ASTONISHING, PHENOMENAL, and TWO THUMBS UP, just like the people of Cambodia.

Several days into our excursion up the Mekong from Vietnam we crossed into Cambodia. On the next morning we met our Cambodian guide for the trip. His name was (Meas) Chanta. There were about 30 passengers on the Avalon Siem Reap. In larger cities, such as Phnom Penh, we would tour by bus. Our first day in Phnom Penh, Chanta boarded the bus and introduced himself. He said: “Family. Is it ok if I call you Family?” We all said ok and from that point on, we WERE Family and always referred to by Chanta as “Family.”

Chanta was born in 1968. Like many of his generation, he was uprooted and relocated when the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia on April 17, 1975. He was separated from his parents and siblings, forced to work under harsh conditions and starved. He was our guide at Choeung Ek, an infamous killing field a few miles outside of Phnom Penh. It was here while walking past a poisonous tree that he told us the three things his

mother told him to survive: 1. Lie about what your father did. His father was a teacher and the Khmer Rouge killed anyone who was educated. 2. Don't eat from trees that the birds and animals don't eat from. 3. Work hard. This last piece of advice connects to a phrase that the Khmer Rouge used: To keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss. The Khmer Rouge needed little reason to kill you. If you didn't work hard, that was enough reason.

I felt the connection with Chanta from the moment he introduced himself, especially when he called us FAMILY. He shared much about his life. He told us about a kind lady who taught him how to cook the one little bowl of rice he got once a day. He learned to eat worms, caterpillars and mice. At night he would walk to the river and pray to his ancestors and to Buddha to: "Please protect me." Had he been caught praying, he would have been executed on the spot. He spoke of living as an orphan in a large refugee camp on the border of Thailand and Cambodia. Though I cannot confirm it, I am almost certain this was Khao-I-Dang refugee camp. He lived as an orphan at this camp and he believes it was the spirit of Buddha that protected him from harm many times during intense gun battles and innumerable landmines.

Chanta, even under extreme conditions, had the ability to smile. He told of being with people his own age (as a teenager) who would never smile. The very same people like him who had been enslaved, starved, often tortured and watched their family members die or be killed. To them he would say: "You need to smile. You are alive." Nearly 20 years later, Chanta was reunited with his mother who he also says rarely smiled. I recall one day on our tour bus he told us about this. He went home one day and she wasn't smiling and he told her: "Mom you have to smile. Ha-Ha. Ha-Ha-Ha. HA-HA-HA!!" I could feel an intense connection with Chanta at that exact moment. The understanding that sadness and difficulty require humor and laughter.....perhaps to keep one from going insane. I recognized this in myself, that I often use laughter to deal with difficulty and sometimes if I laugh a lot I can make you laugh too. I felt a profound connection to and understanding of Chanta.

And I wanted to go deeper into the concept of forgiveness and moving on from hatred. In Vietnam, people often say they LOVE Americans. They

let bygones be bygones. They leave the past in the past. Perhaps this is related to Buddha too? Buddhism teaches that if you have hatred in your heart you cannot move forward with your life. But how do you move forward from genocide? How could you possibly forgive the Khmer Rouge?

I learned that Chanta attended the military academy in 1994 and led an elite special forces squad that tracked down Khmer Rouge guerrillas who were still in hiding in the hills and jungles near the Thai border and raiding Cambodian villages throughout the 1990s. This to me made sense, exacting revenge for what he endured— separation from his family, slave like conditions, starvation, and the loss of his father. After he was reunited with his mother in the late 1990s, he credits her with influencing his decision to change careers. Chanta said he had to learn to be less angry. He channeled Buddha's spirit to be more patient and he has found forgiveness. But he cannot forget the Khmer Rouge years and he says everyone must remember.

A few days after I met Chanta I told him that I wanted to ask him a question. A bad question. A question that I did not like and did not feel comfortable with. He said that I could ask him anything and that he spoke from the heart. I told him that I knew he spoke from the heart the second I met him so I asked him my question. "Chanta if you were in a room with the people who killed your father what would you do to them?" He said he would NOT kill them. He would go to jail and it would destroy his life. It would not bring his father back. But I of course understood his having to learn to be less angry and through Buddha, be more patient. Lessons I could certainly use.

Another extremely important event occurred on the day Chanta took us to Choeung Ek, one of the largest killing fields in Cambodia. Immediately after visiting it, our next stop was S-21, the infamous jail in Phnom Penh used by the Khmer Rouge to interrogate and torture people wrongly imprisoned. Many died there or were taken to Choeung Ek at night to be murdered. I learned that 16,000 people were killed at S-21 and on January 7, 1979, the day that the Khmer Rouge were finally kicked out of power by the Vietnamese, only 7 prisoners walked out alive. One of those 7, Bou Meng, was at S-21 the very day I was. I was so fortunate to meet him, sit next to him, and hold his hand. And less than 24 hours later, after reading

his book, I learned something very powerful. He wrote that he wanted to kill the people who killed his wife and tortured and imprisoned him. Who wouldn't?

Yet, he says that if he did, he would leave more innocent victims behind, namely the wives and children of the perpetrators. Being an innocent victim, he says he could not create more innocent victims. I would never be able to think like this. All I could feel was hatred for the Khmer Rouge and the desire for revenge and I did not experience their horrors. Bou, who did experience those horrors, remarkably has compassion for others, the relatives of the Khmer Rouge. But he also says he does not forgive and that those guilty of these heinous crimes must be brought to justice. Decades later some of the top Khmer Rouge have finally been brought to justice and are serving life sentences. In fact, just days before I met Bou, a United Nations tribunal upheld their life sentences. A long time later, at least some of the Khmer Rouge are paying for their crimes against humanity. Perhaps Bou's smile was a little more radiant on the day I held his hand, knowing that justice had been upheld a few days before we met?

I have learned the stories of many people from Cambodia whose family members were tortured and killed. The sharing of those stories requires an extreme amount of courage, for telling them is reliving them. One such story is told by Chanrithy Him in her book: *When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge*. I recognized that she was likely at the same refugee camp (Khao-I-Dang) that Chanta, our guide, was at. Knowing this, I felt a connection to her even though we never met.

Chanrithy shares so much about the intense sacrifice that family members made for each other. A mother seeing her very young child with life threatening dysentery has to separate the child from her and the rest of the family to try to prevent the spread of disease. A very young and very sick child comforts his distraught mother by saying soon he will be better knowing that he won't. She is unable to comfort him, yet he is able to comfort her. A mother sending a child away to a labor camp where she is told her child will be fed more food. The child, senses abandonment, the mother provision. Though all are starved, they still save portions of their own rations to give to other worse off family members.

Chanrithy's is one story among many who suffered the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. The level of sacrifice often unimaginable. A father, leaving his own family, knowing he would be killed, so that his children could survive, is an incomprehensible sacrifice. This is an occurrence that unfortunately occurred many times in Cambodia. Likewise, a mother forcing her very young children to leave and be without her is a similar unimaginable sacrifice. Turning her young children away, abandoning them, all in order to save them.

The stories of 12 or 13 year old boys sneaking out at night while enslaved by the Khmer Rouge to steal food for their family, knowing that if they were caught they would be beaten or killed. A young child forced into labor 14 hours a day every day whose insufficient rations result in starvation, yet at night this same child fishes to supply additional food for the rest of his family. The results of his intense labor and sacrifice of sleep often only enough to get 7 or 8 fish the size of the tip of your thumb to share with 5 others. This intense inner strength and self sacrifice for one's own family is perhaps seen today in the hard work of the Cambodian people to provide for their family members.

Throughout Cambodia, past and present, I saw the same enduring qualities—determination, hard work, sacrifice for family, family connectedness and family centeredness, kindness, gentleness, care for fellow human beings and smiles despite all the things that would cause grave sadness.

I recognized that moving forward from hatred (rightful and deserved hatred for the atrocities of the past) requires much fortitude. While looking at Chanrithy Him's website, I encountered an image. It is this image for which I name this essay. At the bottom of her gallery page, many scrolled pages down, all the way at the very bottom on the left, is the next to last picture of her gallery. In it, I immediately recognize who she is standing next to—Kim Phuc, the girl in the photo. One girl burned as a child in Vietnam by napalm and one girl enslaved and starved by the Khmer Rouge who lost many of her immediate family members. It is this intersection of special people that took on great meaning to me. Was it an accident that two people so hurt and so harmed were together? This picture reflects the

two of them teaching the rest of the world about forgiveness and moving past hatred.

At face value how odd that the Khmer Rouge and Napalm a cross street! But no, two amazing people who are survivors against many odds, standing together. Chanrithy and Kim are not just survivors, they show the power and strength of two amazing people helping so many others. Chanrithy and Kim have seen the worst of humanity and they have seen the best of humanity. To me, Chanrithy Him and Kim Phuc are potent reminders of the BEST OF HUMANITY.

Likewise, the strength of Chanta and Bou Meng, and many, many others is something that I am so fortunate to have been privy to—more of the best of humanity. Similarly, my interaction with Chamroeun, or Champion, is akin to the impact that all of the people of Cambodia have had on me. They are EXCELLENT, AMAZING, ASTONISHING, PHENOMENAL, and TWO THUMBS UP!!!!!!

As a final image, there is one more. I call it THIS Girl in the Photo. She is young, perhaps 8 or 9 years old. Similar in age to Kim Phuc when she was burned and likewise similar in age to Chanrithy when her family was uprooted by the Khmer Rouge. This young girl is in a small village in Cambodia. When I see her I am immediately drawn to her. She is thin and probably of average height for her age. She has no shoes. She is compellingly beautiful. She is standing astride a bicycle way too big for her. The handlebars are over her head. Yet, without shoes, and without the height required to ride it, she shows strength and determination. And ride it she does. Poised, balanced, almost at a standstill, then moving forward. She is adept. She is beautiful. She is determined. She both literally and figuratively is moving forward. She is the image of a country. A country whose people have great beauty, great kindness, great determination, and great fortitude.

There is no accident that I am drawn to her and to taking multiple photos of her. I recognize in an instant, the power of what I am observing. I look back at the 5 photos that I took of her realizing that the entire story could never be seen in 1 photo. The composite of the one of her standing astride the bicycle looking from behind the handlebars, the one astride the bicycle

her head off to the side under the handlebars while she is staring at me, the one twisted yet balanced, the one balanced at a standstill, and the one symmetrically balanced and caught still though in motion—it is all of these photos together that represent her and her country.

The final image of Cambodia is the parting from Chanta. When I said goodbye to Chanta, I gave him a picture of our puppy, Oliver. This photo puts a smile on everyone's face. Oliver is an adorable Papillon puppy and in the photo his tongue is partially sticking out of his mouth. His photo is one of the things that I shared with many in southeast Asia. The simple act of providing something that makes someone smile is powerful. On the back I wrote: "Chanta, we will never forget you. You are part of **OUR Family.**" The photo is a reminder that some things are universal. Smiles and laughter—the very things that Chanta spoke of and demonstrated.

Chanta personifies the strength, determination, and kindness of Cambodians. He demonstrates fortitude, the capacity to endure and to come back and the values he places on his family and fellow human beings. We were so fortunate to have been a part of his family.

The very photo I gave Chanta took on meaning before I ever left on the trip. This photo draws people together. It demonstrates our similarities. It transcends culture and language and history and politics, and wealth. It represents the idea that despite there being 195 countries in the world, all different, they are all the same. Every person in all of those 195 countries hears the bark of a dog and knows what it is. Everyone sees Oliver's photo and smiles. Likewise, people of all countries are drawn to the rocking of a baby in a carriage or in a hammock. People of all countries wave to you from the shore as you float past them on a boat. They want to connect even when they know you are from somewhere far away.

An hour or two after I said goodbye to Chanta I recorded my last video abroad, in Siem Reap, Cambodia. This is the video where I ask again are all people the same? If you had 7 days to live, would it matter where you lived if I asked what is important to you? What is really important to you? And none of us know how long we have. Perhaps we only have a week, or a month or 10 years or 20. In the end, what do you need? Food? Shelter? Companionship? A purpose? Do you really need anything else? And

finally, none of us knows how long those who are important to us have, so why not slow things down and think about what matters? Of course it must be the same for everyone.

In places where technology takes over our life with emails and the internet and text messages and Facebook and social media is our standard of living really better? Do possessions make you happy or just consume you? Do the things that speed up your life take away and confuse you from what actually matters in your life? When I see the person in the small village in Cambodia who has little compared to what I am used to I often see that they actually have more than what I have and that they in fact have everything that they actually NEED. It is floating down the Mekong River, walking in a small village of southeast Asia, sitting next to school children in Cambodia who are learning English, and watching orphans perform ancient dances that I realize what matters.

This essay is in honor of all the kind souls of Cambodia I have met and learned from and all the others I hope to one day meet and learn from. And to the people of Vietnam for teaching me about forgiveness and letting bygones be bygones.

Yes, I searched for something—something very important. Something about recovery, moving forward, forgiveness, getting over hatred and finding the similarities of all people. I found great character. I found happiness in Kim Phuc, whose very name means happiness. I found forgiveness where it would seem impossible. I found strength in Chanrithy Him. And I found honesty and kindness and determination and fortitude in Cambodia. I found a capacity to sacrifice for one's own family and the capacity to help others. I found the capacity to share stories of atrocities to help others learn from them. I knew that those I met would teach me so much more than I could ever teach them. They would leave me with something so much more powerful than anything I could leave them. In the end, what we gave each other was our hearts. Our desire to share and connect. If I never experience this again, I have been granted far more than I deserve.

