Of Bamboos and Fuchsias

by Lê trung Chính

To my wife Jeri, and to Ben and Jen,
and all in our Lê Thẩm family, with love

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Introduction

Every book needs an introduction, which is the moment for the author to step up to the podium to answer two simple questions. *"Why do think you should write a book"?* and *"What is it about?"* Then, there is another question: *"What will happen to the book after it is written?"* Ironically, even the few "successful" writers who get their fifteen minutes of media fame will experience the most humbling literary journey: seeing one's book go within a few months from the shelves of a chain bookstore to a $0.99 "used-but-like-new" book deal on Amazon.com, and finally as a $0.50 bargain at a thrift store or someone's garage sale. *What, my life story for 50 cents?*

It is true that there are too many books out there already, most of them never read or just gathering dust, and that I actually don't have much of a story to tell, or to sell. I am not a "survivor" of any great human tragedy, and I don't have an interesting "immigrant success story" to brag about. But writing is first and foremost a personal matter. We write for our own sake. Writing a book is probably like working on a painting. It starts with our basic human need to express ourselves and interpret our world. So to answer the above questions, I would like to reproduce the first few lines of my *"Bodega Bay journal",* which I started on August 28, 1988.

"Why should a man start a diary at 40? Perhaps it is the urge to put down in writing fleeting or recurring thoughts, like a blacksmith working the iron when it is hot. We write believing that our thoughts and feelings are worth saving for posterity, or for the need to feel better understood, someday... Or maybe starting my diary at 40 is just a mid-life crisis, a time for reflection." I did not write because I felt morose about the years past and gone, like a Marcel Proust *"à la recherche du temps perdu", who* subjected his manuscripts to endless revisions to recapture or recreate time through unconscious memory. Nor did I write to search for the meaning of life, like a Rod McKuen lamenting in his song *"Looking Back at 30"* the deception and the passing of youth. If I had a middle life crisis at 40, I am not sure that it was about looking back, or looking ahead, as much as it was *"living for today."* My diary entries were reflections about events that crossed my mind on a particular day, like paintings of clouds drifting across my sky. They were essentially "interior monologues", as it has been said of writings that explore the inner self. Now, I am at that stage in life when the days, and months, and years are passing ever faster, when the past is flashing back ever closer, the future sounding more uncertain, and fleeting thoughts of old age and death are

becoming as inevitable as leaves must fall from trees in late autumn. It is time to pause for a moment, revisit the journey and confront my own nature and mortality.

Most books are about the past, not only because the present can be best understood by analyzing the past, but because the present is to some degree made up of the past. However, this book is not an autobiography: let's face it, I am not eager to write my own obituary - not now, nor later. But I am using my diary as the main foundation of this book. For I just realize that keeping a journal is actually writing one's memoir at the instant when things happen, when feelings run as a turbulent stream of consciousness, like the tumbling flow of a mountain stream before it hits the dam below, where suddenly the water stands still, only to be later released in calculated measures. In rereading my journal entries spanning the past 20 years, I was at times astounded at how much I had forgotten of the actual events as they unfolded then, and how my initial "raw" feelings had faded away over the years through the selective process of my memory. In contrast to the tendency of a memoir to rearrange and reshape events, then fix their place in history, diary pages are direct recordings of the heartbeat and pulse of our past. They are not to be "whitewashed" or redressed for posterity. And so, here are the voices and the pictures of my past, unfiltered.

The book also contains stories about a few patients who have walked into my life for only a few episodes, but nevertheless have left a profound mark on me. As a history lover and a practitioner of medical sciences, I have always believed in the reasoning power of facts and statistics. Personal stories were but "anecdotes", fit for novels and after-dinner conversations but with no "academic value". Now that I realize how history is always being rewritten, and how statistics and facts can be manipulated, I have discovered the real dimension of individual stories, of lives infinitely insignificant in the pages of history, yet profoundly representative of our human condition. These stories, recorded as they happened, are as real as the flesh and bones of the patients who grabbed me by my white coat and inspired me to write - stories without added coloring or touches of make-up to turn them into likable works of fiction.

It doesn't mean selecting what segments of my diary, e-mail letters, stories or essays to publish, and editing my spontaneous scribbles of years bygone is without some "reorganization" or re-packaging. Many themes were recurrent in my original writings, or were of trivial value, and therefore are condensed, reframed, or simply omitted. I subjected my e-mail letters from Việt Nam to a vigorous "cut and paste" operation, and merged them along major themes. However, there might be some repetitions, some feelings told and retold, because I want most essays to be able to

stand on their own, fully endowed. Most of the editing process is, first, to improve the grammar and clarity of the original diary entrees. For this, I am most thankful for my wife, Jeri, and our friends Dorothy Foytik and Sandie Helmick, for their patience in correcting the many syntax errors in this awkward ESL work of mine, and for asking me to clarify some muddled expressions. Second, in my own editing, I have sometimes found it necessary to expand on the themes and feelings that were true when they were first put down, but I have resisted the temptation to justify or "sugarcoat" them. Thus, this book is not a collection of "confessions", Jean Jacques Rousseau style, for there is no retreat from, nor apology for any of my feelings that could be negatively interpreted by others. Nor is it a Faustian strife to understand the infinite, or a quest for the fulfillment of a soul infinitely aspiring and never satisfied, although I would agree with Goethe that a man's life, anyone 's life, is an unfinished poem. If some facts may no longer be accurate because things have changed and answers are different now, the reader should remember to reset their clocks to the time of my original writing. This collection of my observations of the world around me is not edited to fit the current picture or later course of events. It only tells it the way it was, then and there.

Now, what will happen to my book once I finish writing it? I hope that these "reflections" or interior monologues, initially written for myself, will someday resonate with my son Ben, with his "partner-in-life" and our "daughter-in-love" Jen, with my nieces and nephews, sisters and other relatives, and with a few close friends scattered across the continent and around the globe. This book is to make up for the time we could not spend together, for the evenings we did not have together, evenings I wish we could have to open our hearts and minds to each other by the glow of a fireplace, or share stories while watching the waves rolling in. Some stories may be inconsequential, and some feelings not so relevant. But you may also learn about some people, events and values that have shaped my life, our lives, and perhaps discovering along the way some parts of you that are in me.

And so, I dedicate this book to all of you, family and friends, my loved ones, for here I am to share with you my bamboo roots, grown in Việt Nam, and our fuchsia plants, blooming in America. Each garden created with its own climate, soil and water, wind and sun; the two lands I call mine, where many had nurtured me, and to whom I am most thankful.

Lê trung Chính.
Corvallis, Oregon
May 2012
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Book One: Việt Nam

“Spring rain waters all the plants equally,
and yet the flowering branches are long or short.

The water that flows down the mountain does not think
it flows down the mountain.

The cloud that leaves the valley does not know
it leaves the valley.”

Trần Thái Tông,
First King of the Trần Dynasty,
1225-1400
Việt Nam

Father

November 23, 1991

Just after my visit to Montréal in August, father went into severe respiratory failure after choking on some food – a carrot bit or a raisin, according to the bronchoscopist. Who would guess that he is still "hanging on" four months later, at 93 years of age, surviving frightening weeks of mechanical ventilation, several aspiration pneumonias, a cholescystectomy, multiple IV's and antibiotic courses, Foley catheters and nasogastric tubes, fluid overload and congestive heart failure, and who knows, since we never asked, "hospitalitis" and depression so common with such events.

My father's health has rapidly deteriorated since the end of 1989. Through weekly phone conversations with my parents and my sister Oanh in Canada, I learned that he was getting weaker day by day, and often choked on his food and even on small sips of fluids. On the phone, his voice was so feeble and so detached, barely a whisper carried by the breeze several thousand miles away. In January 1990, I visited him at Hospital Hôtel Dieu in Montréal, where he was treated for pneumonia. He was quite lucid then, and gradually got better after a couple of weeks in the hospital, *"being the fighter he has always been"* - a comment some of us in the family would bring up from time to time. During the next two years, my parents' life remained rather calm, filled with the empty routine of things that no longer mattered very much, and the silent resignation for the way things would be at their age. Like two boats moored side by side, their old wood squeaked softly to the rocking motion of the waves and the tides – tides of joy or regret that came and went with family matters near and far. Jeri and I have been to Montréal three to four times a year to visit them, and we maintained weekly contact by phone. But my mother said it best what was in our minds*: "You know, my son* – she said, hanging on to my arms at the end of every visit - *we are like two feeble candles in the wind. You never know when they will blow out."*

Now again, with father back in the hospital, my first reaction, perhaps shaped by my own "Medical Ethics 101" course that has evolved throughout my career, was immediately to *"let the man go".* He has had a very meaningful life, let us not prolong it in agony. Indeed, how often, in the face of intolerable pain or when life seems so stripped of any meaning or hope, have we not committed the silent impropriety of prematurely wishing for our own or someone else' s death, while knowing quite well that death would only come at its chosen time? Well, father "hung on" - the quiet, unassuming

and resilient man we knew, saying nothing about his desire to live or his wish to die. Thus, nobody felt the right to ask the doctors to withhold treatment. In difficult times, as there were many in my parents' lives, mother's motto has always been: *"Còn nước còn tát" ("as long as there is water, we can irrigate")*. So we carried on by that unspoken directive. My sister Oanh added: "He does not seem to be in pain, nor depressed". Meaning? There is still life to enjoy?

Everyday now in the hospital, my mother and sisters are caring for him with extreme devotion, always attentive to all his needs. And so, life goes on. No matter how great the pain or burden, life is worth living, without a complaint, since suffering in silence has always been a highly acclaimed virtue in our Vietnamese culture. It is not up to me to make a "life-or-death call" on my father's behalf, as long as he is mentally aware, and my mother is at his side. Our family did meet once with the hospital medical ethicist, who recommended a *"no code"* status. It was also agreed that parenteral nutrition, antibiotics, and a gastrostomy tube were quite reasonable. I was not sure how much my father participated in these decisions, conscious as he was, but perhaps not fully cognitive of the implications of each medical step that would keep his existence "in status-quo". Yet, looking at my father in his hospital bed, painfully struggling for each breath, I can only recall one of his favorite quotations, by Victor Hugo:

"Le vieil homme regarde le soleil qui se couche,
Le soleil regarde le vieil homme qui se meurt"
("The old man looks at the sun, now setting,
The sun looks at the old man, now dying")

How my father would have liked to die, peacefully, like a poet, his soul bathing in the colorful lights of the last gorgeous sunset!

November 27, 1991

Jewish General Hospital, Montréal, on a Monday morning. Busy beehive! - I said to myself, being able to watch the ward activities not from a physician's perspective, but as a family member of a patient. Orderlies with rolled-up sleeves lifting patients and navigating gurneys down the narrow and crowded hallways; housekeepers packing up large white sheets of linen and pushing brooms;

ladies in blue uniforms with white bonnets passing out food trays, calling out patients' names and breakfast menu numbers; nurses pushing medicine carts and IV poles; lab techs and phlebotomists with rattling ECG machines and blood tube trays, checking out the latest orders; and patients' families lining the walls, making room for the chaotic traffic, speaking at half voice, and trying to get a quick conversation with the doctors as they hurried from one patient' s room to the next. What a theater of well-drilled chaos!

One could pick out the medical students in their short white coats. They looked a bit disoriented, still dragging their bags packed with heavy medical textbooks, but acting proudly since they have finally made the jump from the classroom to the ward – into the real clinical world! Medical residents, on the other hand, wore long white coats, with "how-to" manuals bulging out of pockets – those essential back-up's for the volume of knowledge and clinical skills they must possess. Wearing a stethoscope wrapped around one's neck has become the universal symbol of a seasoned and weary clinician. So every intern and resident nonchalantly displayed this honored trophy. As they swarmed around the attending physicians, some still seemed to be in REM sleep, and woke up only to check their frantic beepers. The professors were men in elegant suits who spoke the medical Gospel of the day. Yes, all these busy bodies were there, with perfectly calm heads bobbling in a sea of crises, making life and death decisions on their patients, as I watched the clinical world unfold within the walls of the hospital on this Monday morning.

My father laid supine in his hospital bed, awake but motionless, for hours, undisturbed by the frenzied activities around him. When asked, he would say he was feeling no pain, had no wishes, and requested nothing. Then suddenly, he would act confused, agitated, and would go into frank hallucinations. He would speak out about things that happened many decades ago, as if time had rushed back on him. Often, it would be a courtroom event. In a sudden burst of passion, he called out the names of other attorneys and judges he had known, talked of honor and justice, of the destiny of our Motherland, *Mẹ Việt Nam*, and about his faith in his fellowmen. Tears rolled down his cheeks, his voice trembled with great emotion. Then, just like an LP record slowing on the turntable to end in a soft scratching sound, he would quiet down and stare away like nothing had happened.

Out in the hallway, by 11 a.m., the frantic morning duties finally quieted down. The trickle of soft conversation of nurses and family members was only interrupted by the female operator's voice occasionally calling "stat" for a doctor or a technician. When the night shadows crept in, hours later, the most dominant sign of life in this old brick building was the incessant humming of the

refrigerator across the hall, harmonizing in lazy monotone with the air humidifier hissing by my father's bedside. And so it was, day in and day out, at the Jewish General Hospital, where my father would stay for endless months in a state of resigned, silent agony only broken by fits of parasomnia.

"Gémir, pleurer, prier est également lâche.
Fais énergiquement ta longue et lourde tâche
Dans la voie où le Sort a voulu t'appeler,
Puis après, comme moi, souffre et meurs sans parler."

(Groaning, crying or praying is equally cowardly.
Perform your long and heavy duty with energy,
In the path that was called to you by Destiny,
And then, like me, suffer and die without a word)

I could hear my father, barely moving in his hospital bed, reciting in his faintly beating heart, that verse he knew too well from "*La Mort du Loup*" *("The Death of the Wolf"),* by Alfred de Vigny.

August 29, 1992

I spent another day at my father's bedside. He is now back at home where Mother and Chị Oanh are shouldering the burden of his daily care. They have the help of a Filipino nurse, but mother is always there. Father's condition has not changed much since he left the hospital. Everyone seems waiting for the end to come, oscillating from the thought of "final deliverance" to the hourly concerns for his physical needs. Much attention is spent on the functioning of his gastrostomy tube and the volume of his feeding, his constant drooling accompanied by frequent, terrifying coughing spells, and his confused mental state. Moving him from a lying position in bed to being propped up in an armchair, and back to bed, is quite exhausting for everyone involved. Watching his shrinking cortical brain functions flip on and off like a flickering, distressed light bulb is even more painful. If for the sick, a decaying existence is no longer worth living, how ironical it is that the care providers believe that death can be pushed back, or held back at arm length, only if all minor details are well attended to. Everything seems to say: No, not yet...

At breakfast, my mother would again tell us father's life story, even though we have heard it so many times before. He was born in 1898. We were not certain about birthdates then, since birth records were not kept. Our paternal line came from Hải Dương province, a rural area just east of Hà Nội. My father never told us much about his own father, but it was the memory of his mother that he recalled the most often. She died from a breast infection acquired while nursing him, when he was only four months old, he said. He often drew a parallel with the story of a mother pelican that starved herself to death while feeding her babies with the regurgitated food from the pouch hanging from her beak. It was a romantic story by a 19th-century French poet, either Victor Hugo or Alfred de Vigny, I can't recall. Evidently the early loss of his mother had left my father with a profound feeling of guilt - didn't he cause her death from nursing? - and with a longing for maternal love and care for the rest of his life. Years later in his 80's, when we lived in Davis, he would ask me to draw an imaginary portrait of his mother, of whom there was no picture, to place her next to his father's picture on the family altar. He had fantasized about her all his life, as the beautiful and perfect mother he never knew but could only worship, a ghost figure still glowing in the lanes of his imagination, but shadowed by his own guilt and atonement.

Of his childhood, father did not say much, except to mention that his roots were rather humble – *"thanh bạch",* a Vietnamese expression that weaves together poverty and purity as inseparable virtues. "My parents named me *Định*", he often said, and this to him had a very profound meaning: *"Vouloir, c'est pouvoir!"* ("Will is power!"). Henceforth, to act with a resolute mind was the driving force in his life. He often brought up the story of how Demosthenes conquered his speech deficit: the great Greek orator would put pebbles in his mouth to train his tongue and oral muscles. All his life, my father would also try to combat his stuttering through determination and perseverance. The two lions of his time, George Clemenceau and Winston Churchill, were his contemporary idols, not so much for their political views, but for the image they projected as men of strong will.

Father started school late, and studied very hard in primary school, with few books and whatever meager educational means kids in rural districts possessed at that time. He often recalled that, when he presented himself at the admission office of a boarding school in Hà Nội (*Trường Bưởi,* a famous secondary school in his day*)*, having been awarded a scholarship, he brought nothing with him except the clothes he had on and a pair of pajamas rolled up inside his bamboo suitcase. "Where is the rest of your belongings?" the clerk asked. Father quickly answered: "Oh, my family will bring it later!" He lied then, knowing fully well that he had brought with him everything he owned. I never knew of any other lies he would tell for the rest of his life. He eventually graduated from the

School of Law and Administration (*Trường Pháp-Chính - École de Droit et d'Administration*) in 1922, and joined the Department of Agriculture in the district of Hà Đông, where he worked in the position of *"Thương tá canh nông"* until 1933.

Through hard work, my father moved up the various ladders of the colonial French Protectorate administration in North Việt Nam, and later in Cambodia. I believe he was an assistant to some mandarin minister when my mother met him, or perhaps her family influence might have helped him obtain a good civil servant position after they got married, eventually getting to the rank of *"Bố Chánh de Première Classe*, *en service à l'Administration Régionale du Nord-Vietnam".* In 1940, he co-founded the first agricultural and artisan cooperative in Việt Nam, called *"Tiểu Canh Nông Công Nghệ",* in the village of *Triều Khúc,* district of *Hà Đông*, just on the outskirt of Hà Nội, with my mother working as the organization's treasurer. The association even created a "Farm School" in 1944, giving scholarships to poor families to get training in agriculture and handicrafts. Decades later, my parents would still be kindly remembered by many families who benefited from this pioneering social experiment that lifted the life of many poor farmers and workers in the area.

The relative lack of fighting during WWII in Indochina ended in the spring of 1945. When the Vichy government collapsed, Japan declared hostility to France, now led by de Gaulle. Soon the Japanese themselves surrendered to the Allied forces, and within a few months, Hà Nội and Indochina exploded in the chaos of the national revolution led by Hồ Chí Minh against the return of the French colonial forces. The food shortage that started with the Japanese invasion a few years earlier became very severe across Việt Nam in 1945-46. It was not actually caused by failed harvests, but by the French not allowing food distribution to the rebelling Northern provinces. It was one of the worst famines in our history, as close to 1 million died of starvation. Our family fled Hà Nội for the countryside where the fighting was less intense and food would be more available, leaving most of our possessions behind. Like many other families swept by successive waves of violence during Việt Nam's struggle for independence and the subsequent civil war over the next thirty years, Mother would often say that, in their lifetime, Father and she had so many times lost everything and had to *"làm lại cuộc đời với hai bàn tay trắng"* (*"restart their lives again with two bare hands").* So they did, during the 1946-1954 years, in the Hà Nội / Hà - Đông region, amidst periodic fighting that ignited unpredictably around them like wild fires jumping into what was thought to be secure and protected zones.

The small farmer and artisan co-op that my parents directed survived the war, but its success came at a severe price. It did not matter that the co-op embodied the socialist utopia in its most fundamental way, for any association with the French and mandarin Vietnamese administrations, which gave the legal support for the co-op existence, would be a good target for communist terrorism. On July 8, 1949, on the way home from work, my parents were ambushed by communist guerillas, known then as "*Việt Minh*". Father was wounded in the abdomen, right flank and leg, and a bullet split my mother's right thumb tip when she fended off a shot from the fleeing attackers. In the Yersin Hospital in Hà Nội where Father laid delirious with fever from a wound infection, Mother spent many days "painting him all over with mercurochrome", she recalled. Father was released in September 1949, to recuperate at home for another three months.

Father rejoined the national civil service that eventually sent him to work in Cambodia and South Việt Nam. In Đà Lạt, where he was an administrative judge (1950-1954), he continued his involvement with the Ấp Hà Đông (a farmers' commune) that he cofounded in 1938, while remaining president of the Triêù Khúc co-op in North Việt Nam. In Hà Nội, mother cofounded a local cooperative micro-finance organization. Friends and neighbors got together to set up a lending system, with interest rates and repayment conditions developed by the group *("Chơi họ"* was the popular name for these meetings). As I think about it now, these women were fifty years ahead of the concept of "micro-credit lending" that nowadays serves as a tool against poverty in the developing world. Despite the war, my sisters and I enjoyed a rather peaceful and privileged childhood in Hà Nội in the early 1950s, with mother managing the family finances well enough for my parents to be able to buy a beautiful French villa on #3 Khúc Hạo street, in the heart of the city near the famous Old Citadel (*Cột Cờ)*. It was purchased on November 8, 1952, for 300,000 Vietnamese piasters (*Đồng)*, according to the papers my parents saved all these years, perhaps with the hope of reclaiming the property someday.

I do not recall much of the life in that big house, except for those moments captured on a few black and white photos that have survived our many moves. In two of them, my sisters and I were playing in the garden shaded by our two-story colonial villa. My sisters were on their bikes, and I myself was riding a splendid toy "Vespa" scooter, next to my mother who wore a simple white *"áo dài"*. The only vivid memory I had of those days was of a hot afternoon, when I was strolling by myself on the sidewalks in front of our house, happily enjoying an ice cream bar. A North African Legionnaire soldier passed by, took a big bite of it, and walked away in a big laugh. I ran home very scared and crying into the arms of my older sisters. I was terrified by his big white teeth, his thick brown and

pink lips, and his ebony dark face dripping with sweat. Hergé's drawings of Africans in the early adventures of Tintin would reinforce this cartooned image of Blacks, unfortunately, for most of my youth.

Well, if that was the only bad thing that happened to me during the colonial war, I could say that I was certainly a lucky and spoiled kid. And lucky and spoiled I was indeed, everyone in our family could confirm that. On a more tragic note, the conflict took my oldest half-brother Nghi away from the family. He was in his early 20's in 1947, when he told his sisters: " I am going to join the *Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng*" [1]. If I survive, I will come back to you. If you don't hear from me, you know I have died." The VNQDD eventually dissolved, as civil war broke out between the communist North and the nationalist South in the mid- and late 50's. Which side of the conflict he eventually fought for, and what happened to him, we never knew. He never came back. We don't even have a picture to remember him by. Heaven and earth shook again at the partition of Việt Nam along the 17th parallel in 1954, and we abruptly abandoned our beautiful villa in Hà Nội where we had lived for just a couple of years. My mother made all the decisions and arrangements for our family to rejoin our father who was then working in Đà Lạt, South Việt Nam. With whatever could fit in our suitcases and handbags, we were part of one of the largest mass migrations of war refugees in recent history, as over a million people left North Việt Nam within a few months.

In Đà Lạt, 1954-55, we first lived in a rather rustic cabin, then moved to a much nicer brick house provided by the government, on Hoàng Diệu street. Besides being a judge, father continued his work with a group of co-op farmers-artisans from the district of Hà Đông, North Việt Nam, who followed him to the South at the partition of the country. Đà Lạt, even then, was the idyllic city for honeymooners and romantic souls. It was built as a resort area for the French colonialists to escape the tropical heat of the South. It took a full day to get there from Sàigòn by car, with most of the 300-km journey on roads winding around and up to the highlands, through rubber plantations and pine forests shrouded in fog. My sisters and I would invariably get carsick and throw up during the trip. But when we got there, we felt as if we had entered the garden of Eden, blooming in eternal spring, where the air was fresh and pure, where flowers laughed and pine trees played with the clouds racing in the sky, and where cottages surrounded by vegetable and fruit gardens seemed as much a part of the natural landscape as the hills, the waterfalls, and the native ethnic "Montagnards" *(Đồng bào thượng)* who roamed the hills with their bare chests and strong legs.

[1] the clandestine Việt Nam Nationalist Party fighting the French

There were even tiger footprints on the trails where my sisters and I walked to our elementary school. One day, Chị Hằng and I fell into the cold mountain stream, from the monkey suspension bridge that swung wildly under our feet, near the Căm Ly waterfall. Another memory of that time was of our older sister, Chị Thảo, who would take us on a hike up the hill behind our house, as we sang along:

"Derrière chez nous il y a une montagne,
Moi et mes amis, nous y venons souvent..."
("Behind our house there is a mountain,
My friends and I would climb it often...")

This was the only memory I have of my sister Thảo, who now looks back at me in a black and white photograph, with her head resting gently over her folded arms, smiling so shyly as a flower would to the early morning sun. She must have been a lovely young woman then! Tragically, something went wrong three months after her wedding with Anh Tân, and she jumped into the crashing waters of Gougah Falls on the outskirts of Đà Lạt. She was buried on the banks of Hồ Than Thở ("The Lake of Sighs"), amidst wild grass and pine trees that wailed in the breeze, as to remind everyone how the lake got its name. A huge heart-shaped headstone, on which her destitute husband had a short poem carved, marked the spot where she was laid to rest:

"Nước nước non xanh dù biến đổi,
Ngàn năm Thảo vẫn trong tim Tân"
(The blue stream can flow and change its course,
Thảo will live in Tân's heart for a thousand years")

For many years, long after the tombstone had been vandalized and stolen, young lovers would come and pray by her grave, drawn by legends and folktales that distort my sister's life story to satisfy the popular yearning to romanticize love and loss. Even now, fifty years after her tragic death, an occasional romantic soul will go to the Hồ Than Thở lake, and ask the old women and young children playing in the park near by where one would find the grave of Lê Thị Thảo, the sister I barely knew.

Anh Tuyên was the youngest of the children from my father's first marriage. Of him, I remember only the quarrels he had with my father because of his academic failures at the end of high school.

He left for France in the early 60's – the rumor was that he joined a Catholic mission – and we never heard from him again. I wish I had asked my parents more about the life of Anh Nghi, Chị Thảo, and Anh Tuyên, who were lost to the family in the prime f their youth. My father never bonded with his older sons very well - perhaps this is the case for many men who put their work ahead of family matters. Or is it a natural law that sons are put on earth to torment their parents? Father and Mother seldom mentioned their names, but are any parents ever freed from the pains of losing their children, so young, and without a final word of atonement?

Sometime around 1956, my father was transferred to Sàigòn, and we resided at 2/9 Cao Thắng Street, in a nice government-housing neighborhood of the South Vietnamese capital. We had a cozy small villa, quite elegant for that time, surrounded by a small garden with lush bushes and even a cement driveway large enough for my sister Hằng and I could play hopscotch. It had a fruit tree that I would climb on hot afternoons, serving as my hideout and my launch for adventures to fantasy worlds while the rest of the family would be taking their siesta. It was also on Cao Thắng St. that the young schoolboy in me first woke up to the mirage of "love". There she was, a girl who lived several blocks from us. How I idolized her as the feminine figure I would fight and die for, if I were a knight! I never had the courage to get close to her, never knew her name, never said a word to her, yet wrote poetry and dreamed of her for many an afternoon when bougainvillea flowers blazed orange and red in the summers of my adolescence.

During the 60's, we lived from paycheck to paycheck on father's salary, which for a civil servant with no business connections, was barely enough for a large family. I could tell the end of every month by the meat and vegetable portions getting skimpier on the dinner table as mother tried to stretch the family budget until the next pay day. Those were the days of soybean cakes in various recipes (as diced cubes floating in a watery tomato and garlic soup - *canh cà chua;* or fried and dipped in fish sauce – *đậu gián)*; of boiled cabbage that we would dip in a fish sauce thickened with a mashed soft-boiled egg; and of watercress or chayote squash stir-fried in a little bit of lard and garlic - *râu mướng sào,* or *quả chou-chou sào*; those are the dishes I remember so well from those childhood years. They helped the bland flavor of white rice, which was always plentiful. How special these dishes would taste to me now, better than any fancy Asian gourmet meal!

Despite our limited financial situation, my sisters and I all went to elite private French schools (Lycées Marie Curie and Jean Jacques Rousseau, respectively), and we never felt miserable or poor. Thrift, humility, and hard work were the values that defined our family, and I believe we carry

these values for our own families well into the present. Mother constantly reminded us: "*Đói cho sạch, rách cho thơm"* ("Stay clean and smell good even when you're hungry or tattered"), and often recited this popular quotation:

> *"Nhìn trên mình có bằng ai,*
> *Nhìn dưới lại thấy chẳng ai bằng mình"*
> ("I look forward, there are a lot of people ahead of me.
> I look back, there are a lot more who wish they can have what I have.")

And so, we were contented and grew up with a good dose of self-confidence.

Education was our pride, even when we were too young to know that it would be our ticket to a better life. Mother herself had no more than a few years of elementary schooling, having to take over the domestic duties of her family at the age of ten when her own mother died in the cholera epidemic of 1914. Being the oldest daughter in the family, she ran the family store selling various medicinal herbs and other nickel-and-dime items. But later as a mother, she dedicated herself to raising her five daughters as modern professional career women.

As for father, he worked as a judge in the Labor Ministry, and after his retirement in the early 1960s, as a public defense lawyer. He was quite respected, I believe, for his hard work, determination, and honesty, and for being one of the most senior members of the law profession of the time. He was the chief editor for a legal journal for some time, and authored a book on administrative laws that was published in 1973. He was still practicing law in his 70's, his office occupying the entrance room of our townhouse in Trần Quý Cáp, where we moved after father retired from his government post. I don't think he handled many legal cases then, but every day, he would get dressed in his white shirt and black tie, and sit at his desk to read for hours. I did have the chance once to see him in court. Assigned as a public defender for a *Việt Cộng* guerilla prisoner, his lips quivered and tears filled his cloudy eyes as his voice stuttered with passion: he denounced the terrible ravages of a war that reduced individuals to peons caught in the endless conflicts waged by world powers. He was then, my father, scrupulous and passionate, the Victor Hugo he always aspired to be.

My father's position in the justice system may have saved my life in 1963. During the students' and Buddhist monks' protests against the Ngô Đình Diệm's regime, I was arrested for accidentally riding my bike into a street that the police had barricaded near the presidential palace. Along with other

demonstrators, I was transported to an army training camp outside of Saìgòn, with the threat that all of us would be sent to “the war front”. I was 15 then! My father frantically obtained my release through his legal connections, and I was able to finish high school without interruption. For the next few years, my sisters and I were lucky enough to live in relative calm in Sàigòn while war raged outside of most cities.

However, our family was not spared suffering from the war. Our brother, Anh Đức, lost two sons to the army. Hành was a handsome lad, only two years older than me, whom I remember most for his good singing voice. He died in Quảng Trị in 1967. Thuật was one year younger than me, an intense fellow, restless and disillusioned. He joined the Vietnamese Rangers against the family’s advice, and was killed in Đà Nẵng in 1972. Anh Đức’s youngest son Tùng joined the army cadet corps while still in high school, graduated from the prestigious Military Academy in Đà Lạt, and became an officer in the elite 8th Paratrooper Division - only to spend years of hard labor in “reeducation camps” after the Communist victory. Mother never recovered from the loss of her first two grandsons, Hành and Thuật, believing their deaths avoidable had her son Đức’s first marriage stayed intact.

Myself, I was lucky to be in school for the duration of the war, and thus avoided the draft that destroyed or took the lives of so many young men of my generation. After my high school graduation in 1966, all of my friends whose families could afford the cost went abroad to study and escape the war. We did not have enough money for an education overseas, so I enrolled in premed studies in Sàigòn. Within a few months, however, I took off to America, having received a handsome scholarship from the USAID. At that time, all my family and I knew of America were stories of David Crockett, Buffalo Bill, the Last of the Mohicans, Scarlett O’Hara and Tom Sawyer (all read in French versions), and a little bit about presidents Washington, Lincoln and Roosevelt, and the more recent ones – Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson. Mainly, we imagined life in America as seen in photos of New York, Chicago, and California (again found in French magazines like Paris Match) and a dozen of Hollywood legends whose movies were shown dubbed in French, with Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, Gary Cooper, and Robert Taylor heading the list. Leaving Sàigòn in February, 1967, I didn’t even know then what American university I was to be enrolled in. My scholarship was to last four years. Little did we know then how this educational opportunity would change my life and my parents’ life forever.

Sàigòn fell in 1975. With the reunification of the country came a “purge” by the victorious Communists to get rid of the Western capitalist values acquired by the nationalist Southerners. In our family, my sister Oanh and brother Đức and their immediate families were the only ones able to escape Việt Nam. My sister Yến, who worked for the national bank, and most of my brother-in laws and nephews, were sent to “re-education camps”. Father was too old and had been long retired from government work. When the Communist cadres came to our house to clear father’s bookshelves, mother recalled “he threw such a fit” and went into such an uncontrollable rage that they rapidly left our house, leaving the “old, crazy man” alone. Knowing my father, I would not be surprised to see him literally fight to death to keep his books, even if many of them had fallen apart, victims of termites and years of exposure to tropical moisture. Yet, some of these books are now still in the hands on my sister Nga’s children, who were raised by my parents when she and her husband Anh Hoàng went for their medical subspecialty training in Australia in 1973, and during the dehumanizing decade that followed the Communist take over of the South in 1975. The love for these grandchildren, later separated half a world away from her, and whom she never saw again after my parents’ move to California, never left my mother’s heart. It was another sorrow she would bear for the rest of her life.

March 26, 2008

It has been over fifteen years since father’s death, and more than ten since mother passed away. The feeling of loss has softened over time, replaced by lingering memories of their lives and their marks on our own existence. My sisters and I are getting old ourselves, and soon our children and grand children, nieces and nephews will know us only through fading memories and digitized snap shots. So how do I remember my parents in the twilight of my own life?

As children, we showed Father our due respect for being a hardworking provider, and for the moral authority conferred on him by Confucian traditions. But it was Mother whom we admired even more. Father practically devoted his whole life to his work, while all domestic affairs, from the family budget and household repairs to the emotional and educational needs of the children, fell on the shoulders of our mother. She was everything our father was not, and she did everything our father would never do. He was completely dependent on her in many ways. If he was “the thinker” who buried himself in his books, she was the tinker who got things done. If he was the dreamer, she was

the one with common sense. If he was the titular “head of the family”, she was the real “power house”. And if he could quote Victor Hugo and Napoleon Bonaparte by heart, she could sing the best Vietnamese proverbs and folk rhymes from the deepest corners of her soul. The wide difference in their personality and burden of responsibilities could have led to many conflicts, but as a child I never witnessed any discord between my parents. Perhaps they knew how to strengthen their marriage by bringing to it their individual characters and personal skills, rather than letting their differences tear it apart. At times, I wonder whether our own generation could learn from their role model of marital companionship. Romantic and passionate starts in marriage can quickly turn into disenchantment and disillusion if couples don’t learn to weave their differences into a common fabric. My parents seemed to have woven their fibers together quite well, and in many unusual ways. Yes, they stuck together all their lives, but I wonder now, were they equally happy and content in their union?

They married each other quite late in their lives, in 1938, both having lost their first spouses to early death. Father was then a forty year-old widower with seven children, aged 2 to 14. Mother’s first husband was a medical student, apparently young and dashing, and a violin virtuoso. He was studying in France when he died of tuberculosis in 1929, mother said. She then devoted the next several years to raising her two small children, my half-sister Hiền, a sturdy, self-confident tomboy-girl (*“Garcon manqué”,* she was called), and my half-brother Đức, who was rather frail with asthma and recurrent pneumonias, but a little rascal, nevertheless (mom used to yell at “*thằng ranh con*”, anh Đức later recalled, with a smile). She ran a dime store, barely making ends meet. Yet, when she met my father, my mother felt sorry for him and his half-orphaned children: “He was so busy at work and had no domestic help; his children were so neglected, so much in need of a mother!” And so, they married rather quickly, one month shy of the traditional minimum of one year of mourning that my father should have respected after his first wife’s death. It must have been a little bit of a scandal then, as tongues were quick to denounce those who deviated from the social norms. And it must have been quite a new household they started, with nine children under one roof and little money! Over the next ten years, five more children were added – fourteen all together, not counting a few who died early in infancy. It was probably not easy to be step-parents to some children and full parents to others at the same time, and to appear equally fair to everyone. At least Anh Đức remembered how my father treated him like his own son and sent him to the most prestigious school in Hà Nội in those days, the French Lycée Albert Saraud. But Father’s own sons, Anh Nghi and Tuyên, did not fare so well.

Although I am sure my mother did not marry my father entirely out of pity for his family circumstances, Father certainly had the best end of the deal. My mother cared for him and sacrificed herself beyond the call of marital duty. Just the way she fixed his breakfast day after day, year after year, tells the whole story: every morning, he would have a soft-boiled egg, a glass of fresh squeezed orange juice, buttered French bread that my mother had carefully cut bite–sized, so that he could easily dip in his coffee and condensed milk. After this, she would prepare Ginseng tea for him to sip the rest of the morning. And for herself, mother would have a small bowl of sticky rice or soup, or a small piece of toast with his leftover milk.

Despite all the care he received, Father was not the ideal spouse: He was certainly not the most handsome or romantic lover, and he could be quite temperamental and rigid at times. Mother, even as a young widow, had plenty of men courting her. Yet, all my life, I seldom heard my mother complain about my father, even when his bursts of temper and ill mood triggered by others would unfairly fall on her. Only rarely did she have her moments of exasperation, when she would cry out that he was acting like a child!

Only recently, more than 10 years after my mother's death, was I told of a rumor that my father was unfaithful to her when he was working in South Việt Nam and she was raising the family in Hà Nội. This was a bit of a shock to me. Mother never mentioned my father's affair to any of us children, of course. Did she tolerate the fact that it was a common event in those days and forgive him? After all, polygamy for men was traditional among their own parents' generation and accepted in Việt Nam well into the middle of the 20th century. All my life as I watched my parents, they appeared inseparable like two birds in a nest. Was it love that bound them for over 50 years of marriage? Or perhaps, for having together shared so many events, endured so many trials, walked so many paths leaning on each other, there could be no other feeling but a marital duty that would bond them for life no matter what might come, and even if one faltered?

There are some scenes in my parents' lives that I will never forget. Even as I try to piece our family story into a concise, objective biographical timeline, I best recall my parents' lives in snap shots or short anecdotes, seen through the filter of my own lenses, and processed by a selective memory. Being the youngest of fourteen living children, and the last son after a long line of girls, I was privileged to have my father's attention, pride and affection more than my older siblings. I was even *"bán khoán"* ("dedicated") to the Sisters Trưng - meaning, offered at their temple in Hà Nội for them to adopt me! I remember Father best during the years when I was in elementary school in Sàigòn.

Every evening, I would greet him when he returned home from his long office hours, eager to show him what books I had read that day. It might be one of these neatly bound French “Little Golden Books” with colorful pictures and happy-ending stories that would transport any child to a fantasy world, or one of the *“Fables de La Fontaine”* that already taught me during these young and impressionable years that life is not always fair, but that good behavior and hard work always pays off. Father would give me encouraging words and even rewards, most often another trip to the French bookstore located on Catina Street, near the Continental Hotel. The rest of the evening, Mother would read him the newspaper while he took his bath and ate his late dinner. Afterwards, sitting out on the veranda enjoying the breeze blowing in from the river, they would quietly talk about other events of the day. It was a simple, very routine life, but it impressed me how my parents needed and enjoyed each other.

I remember other times when, the three of us, father, mother and I, would ride a *“cyclo”* home from his work, usually on a Saturday when he got paid. We did not have a bank account, so all his take-home salary was in cash, bundled and wrapped in a newspaper. My mother would quickly deposit the money in a safe coffer hidden in a hole behind a calendar hung on the wall of our dining room. From there she would take out the family spending money little by little through the whole month, budgeting everything from daily grocery allowances to paying for our private math tutoring with the popular Mr. Tùng. Occasionally, on these paydays, the three of us would go out for a meal at the Continental Hotel by the Sàigòn River, treating ourselves to a French meal. Those were the few times in my childhood when I would have potatoes, and my father some cheese on bread or crackers – a real “French treat” so different from our daily rice and fish sauce dishes at home.

My father was of average build for most Vietnamese men of his generation. Until he retired from work in his late seventies, he always walked briskly as if strolling in a promenade would be a great waste of time. Every day, he invariably dressed in a white shirt with a black tie and grey trousers. At work, he wore a white or grey suit, and outdoors, donned a hard hat that colonial safari hunters wore in those days, except that his was white. He had a large head with receding thin grey hair, and his face was sprinkled with many brown sunspots. His small, squinty but lively eyes were squeezed between his high cheekbones and his wide forehead. He stuttered frequently when excited or when his emotions took over -- his thick, slightly purple lips trembling while he breathed heavily through his large nostrils. He developed emphysema later in life, his non-smoker’s lungs nevertheless blackened over the years by coal burning in his childhood home, and later by the city air pollution. Yet, he defied all medical statistics: At the age of 85, while waiting for the “Orderly Departure

Program" for family reunification with us in California, he survived a severe bout of dysentery at the refugee camp in Thailand, thanks to the good grace of our friend Jim Cross who managed to get him to a Red Cross hospital. Father also had very high cholesterol levels, and his systolic blood pressure ran between 200-240, with his diastolic pressure reading around 140-160. Yet he lived to be to 95 years old without treatment for either condition and without ever having a severe stroke or a heart attack!

Nowadays, it would be hard to define a "man of letters" (*"nhà nho giáo"),* but my father, like most educated Vietnamese men of his generation, was one. Physical chores and hand-labor skills were below the dignity of men elevated to the rank of mandarin in our Confucian society. I have never seen my father with a hammer or a broom in his hands, or do any cooking even for fun. Our mother was actually the "handyman" around the house. Father's hands were therefore soft and delicate as if they were made of silk, and plainly declared to the world that he was a man of the mandarin class. On days while my mother and sisters were out to enjoy a market stroll or a promenade on the sidewalks of our neighborhood, Father would spend hours absorbed in quiet reading, his prominent forehead bending over books and newspapers, squinting through his large brown-framed glasses. Then those hands, those silky hands, would be cutting articles and pictures out of magazines, copying quotations and paragraphs from the great classics into a neat notebook, or sending his two index fingers tap-dancing on the keys of his old typewriter.

Incredibly, into his late 80's, father was still learning English on his own. A dozen notebooks he left after his death were packed with his disciplined, neatly hand-written English vocabulary, idioms or quotations, next to Vietnamese or French translations. He wanted to learn English so that he could converse with Jeri, his cherished daughter-in-law, he once told me. The only words he ever said though were *"thank you",* and *"very nice"* – pronouncing *"nice"* like the name of French Riviera city of Nice. But he always said them with a wide and heartfelt smile that said it all: he was sincere, appreciative, and happy.

All his life, Father had no other passion outside his work and his books. He never went to the movies or to the market, and seldom listened to the radio. He never played any games or sports, although he seldom failed to do his daily morning stretching and breathing exercises, and he walked a lot. He never smoked, but rarely would take a sip of wine or a half-glass of beer loaded with added sugar. I never heard my father tell a joke, never heard him sing. Yet, he was very emotional, and tears would come to his eyes upon reading or hearing about stories of desperate

love, or of courage that triumphs over evil. He never gambled, and most of his life limited his lust for the beautiful sex to a collection of pictures of famous and pretty women he cut out from magazines and glued in his notebooks. The most exotic book he ever read was probably the excerpts of “The Nights of Arabia”. In Davis, we subscribed to the Reader Digest for him: he perseverely looked up every word and translated his favorite stories and quotations into French. He spoke few words, even to his children; he did not have anyone he would call a close friend, and often considered social visits a waste of his time. As Gandhi himself noted that “in this world, good books make up for the absence of good companions”, so lived my father, in his vivid imagination, caring only to be part of the circle of great men of history and literature, the circle of teachers, poets, and movers of the world: Napoleon, Churchill, Demosthenes, Victor Hugo, Voltaire, to name a few of his heroes. Perhaps through their writings, he felt he could live more intensely his emotions and his passion for history and social justice.

He was not the father one would find in children’s books, the fun-loving parent who would take you fishing or biking. There were even a few things about him I resented when I was younger: He was a man of his times, and traditions were on his side. Traditions may act as glue that holds a culture together, but more often, they are rituals and tools that one particular generation or a social group uses to keep control over others. In our family, Father took for granted all the privileges that a patriarchal society gave him, and I particularly did not like the way he treated my mother. He belonged to a generation born and raised in Confucian traditions that I considered obsolete for my time, a generation who delivered Việt Nam to French colonialists, and who later worked for an inept administration during the civil war. Like many young men intolerant of the past and impatient about the present, I judged my father severely as a self-made East-Meet-West hybrid, a student of the French Enlightenment capable of reciting Voltaire and Montesquieu, but still rooted in the soil of a decaying Asia.

But there was another side of my father, of course, and I hardly appreciated it in my youth: he was a man of conscience and high morals. Swept in the turmoil of the century that reshaped our nation, he did not swim against the tide. He did not leave a legacy of glorious battles fought and won, like some of his own heroes, Victor Hugo’s Jean Val Jean, or Rudyard Kipling whose poem *“If”* he taught me to recite by heart. Nor was he a handsome macho in a fateful Hemingway style. But quietly, he had compassion for others, and in an era of corruption and greed, he held up a unique conscience for social justice and dignity for others less fortunate, all in the cluttered office of his legal work.

Only recently did I realize how much I might be like him, both of us gravitating around two similar worlds. One world built on the wonder of learning, the power of reasoning and a strong work ethic: be guided by sound knowledge, and do your best; then, offer even more of yourself than what is expected of you. Geniuses, Father and I were not, but we compensated for our average intelligence with hard work, building our professional accomplishments line-by-line, page-by-page.

The other world I share with my father is a fantasy world of our own, filled with good books, dramatic stories and quixotic tales, and driven by an infinite longing for the romantic and the beautiful. In my youth, I was in awe of Sir Ivanhoe, lived through Tintin's adventures, and dreamed of being a stoic Samurai or a medieval knight upholding the values of chivalry, courage and honor. That world still lives in my Lego toys, in Star Wars, a world of unfinished, but never abandoned childhood fantasies. Antoine de St Exupéry and Albert Camus introduced me to a quieter and more humble humanism during my late adolescence. In my twenties, America conquered my soul through the music of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Gordon Lightfoot, Peter, Paul and Mary, and many others. And now, less compulsive about having to keep up with dozens of medical journals, I am immersing myself in classic novels and history books, enjoying the biographies of great leaders, and entering the worlds of Don Quixote and the Man of La Mancha, of Leo Tolstoy's Prince André, and the inner circles of DH Lawrence, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Maxim Gorky, John Steinbeck, and so many other great writers, whose ordinary mortal characters would expand the boundaries of my own humanity.

Neither my father nor I accomplished much in our lifetime that will be remembered beyond our small circle of friends and family members. In many ways, we both were quite lucky and privileged. At least my father, coming from poor peasant roots, worked hard to make his life a "success story". I merely had the good fortune and a stable mental health not to waste what was handed down to me. Fate has taken both of us far from the shores of our birth land, and drifted us as high as any cloud in the sky. But Father and I would never measure up to the people we wished we were - he, a Victor Hugo or a Winston Churchill *("The Last Lion"),* and I, another Paul Farmer *("a man who would cure the world"* – so goes the subtitle of his biography). I would have liked to be a Physicians Without Borders, but could not walk away from a good family life to carry out medical missions in the most dangerous and insane corners of the world. So, both Father and I are but flickering dim lights in the consciousness of billions of stars large and small. The swift river of time and space will quickly wash away the shallow footprints we leave on this earth. The ripples our pebbles create in small ponds as

they fall into the water will quickly disappear. They are insignificant, compared to the waves formed by many others in the ocean of human miseries and triumphs. Yet, as dreamers, Father and I both expanded our inner world by reliving the many lives and actions told by poets and historians, artists and musicians, a world where our imagination would take us drifting between the humbling teachings of Buddha and the sometimes melancholic, sometimes jubilant melodies and poems of our human condition. Yes indeed, we have had a good life, Father and I.

Top: Father (age 42) and Mother (age 36), in Hà Nội, Việt Nam, in1944.
The medals they wore were awarded for their work for the agricultural and artisan cooperative in the village of Triêù Khúc.







Top: Our maternal grand parents: Thẩm Phác (1879-1954) and Trịnh Thị Ninh (1877-1914); Father, age 22; Mother in her mid 20's
Middle: Mother, age 38, the year she married Father; with my parents, in Hà Nội, ca. 1950
Bottom: With Father, at the entrance of the Sisters Trưng Pagoda, in 1953;
Mother, with my sisters Yến, Oanh, Hằng, Nga and me, in Hà Nội, ca.1953

Top and middle pictures: at our house in Hà Nội, 3 Khúc Hạo street, ca. 1952-53

Bottom row: With Mother, in Hà Nội, ca 1952-53; With Father, in Saìgòn, in late 1950's

Father, as a judge in Đà Lạt, ealry 1950's;
In Đà Lạt: Our cabin, before we moved to a larger government issued house, mid 1950's;
With my sisters Nga, Hằng, Oanh and Yến, and Mother, in Sàigòn, Tết 1967- the last New Year I spent with all my family; My sister, Chi Thảo

Top: Mother, in the family kitchen, in Saìgòn, 1971;
Mother, with sisters Oanh and Yến, in Davis, CA, 1983

Middle: Our small nuclear family, in Davis, CA, 1986;
Mother and brother Đức, in Montréal, 1992

Bottom: Parents in their house on Kildare Street, with sister Oanh, in Montréal, 1989

Mother

December 24, 1996

Humans have no choice in the circumstances of their birth. Seldom are we able to choose the terms of our death, either. If our lives started as lush green plants in the spring, only to turn into dry weeds, tumbling across the desert by summer's end, one could say that there is indeed a season to everything. But I have learned that much in our lives can neither be forecast, nor controlled by ourselves. We watch the sun and the moon roll across the sky in their seasonal patterns, but the seasons of our own lives are not predictable. Some people never live past the budding of springtime, while some sink into the cold darkness of winter even before the August sun has burned itself out.

More than once in my childhood, I was told that each star blinking in the immense night sky above us represents a life on earth. My sisters and I would watch the night sky, and we believed that when a falling star suddenly streaked across the horizon, a person had just died on earth at that moment. Stars are born and die every day, yet what do we know about them? Almost nothing. But this, I know now: my fate, like the fate of billions of stars above me, is well beyond my understanding. We are not born, nor do we die, according to any formula of grace, any rule of fairness. Often it seems that the cards in our hands are dealt to us by random acts of kindness or of cruelty. For many, death comes when least expected, at the turn of the road with the blinding sun in their eyes, or on a day when a disaster strikes a whole town, sweeping people, trees and houses away in a drowning flood, a swirling tornado, or a volcanic blast. Unpredictable, and so unfair.

December 22, 1996, was one of those days I remember for its fateful blow. It was the beginning of an end to a unique life, my mother's. A late Friday evening phone call cut short the lazy conversation we were having at our friends' house, the Chavez'. "Mother just had a stroke", my brother-in-law Anh Tùng said. "We are taking her to the hospital."

Hôtel Dieu Hospital was where I arrived nine hours after I hugged Jeri goodbye, shook hands with Javier Chavez, and gave Ben a pat on his broad shoulders before taking the plane from San Francisco. Hôtel Dieu was a stack of dark brown and grey brick buildings in the middle of other stacks of dark brown and grey buildings in Montréal. The city was blanketed by a light December

snow that promised the gift of a beautiful white Christmas, but delivered only an icy, dirty slush of brown and grey mud. All the strings of holiday lights and colorful bows, hanging brightly here and there across the city could not overcome the dreary feeling of a long, cold and inhospitable winter. Hôtel Dieu, Room 3110, bed No.1 by the door, was where I found my mother lying under a light blue bed sheet that she was fighting off with a repetitious nervous jerking of her right arm and leg.

"Oh, my God, does she look like my brother Đức!" Strangely enough, that was my first reaction when I saw my mother on that evening in December.

Mother was a beautiful woman. Frankly, I have never met anyone who did not spontaneously voice such an impression after seeing her in person or in a photograph. But the compliment did not stop there. She commanded a great deal of admiration for her poised look, her dignified manners, and for her domestic skills - sewing, cooking, managing the household, entertaining guests, and raising children. As the matriarch of the large Thẩm family, she was more than the respected authority figure bestowed on her by ancestral hierarchy. She was a role model, holding on to long-cherished traditions, and yet she often was one step ahead of her times. She belonged to the last generation of Vietnamese who learned *Chữ Nôm*, the Chinese-based scripts used for our popular, poetic native tongue, before the modified Latin alphabet became the official written Vietnamese language ("*Quốc Ngữ").* She was among the last of urban women who had their teeth dyed black and who chewed betel leaves, and she among the first and very few Vietnamese women who smoked cigarettes and sipped on wine, defying the social traditions of the times – never smoking or drinking enough to get addicted, but just to show that there was nothing a man could do that a woman could not. She attended only a few grades in elementary school, enough to be able to do calculations on an abacus to manage the family business at the age of ten, after her mother's death, and enough to write poetry in a quiet, humble way. But her daughters would learn Latin and Greek in French schools, and read Victor Hugo, Balzac, Tolstoy, Simone de Beauvoir, André Maurois and Antoine de St Exupéry. In brief, my mother embodied the image and the virtues of the ideal woman in our traditional Vietnamese culture, but she never feared to open the door to the future, for herself and her children. In our lifetime, no one among us will ever match her beauty, her resourcefulness or her vision, and that is the simple truth.

We see our parents under different lights as we go through different stages of our own lives. As children, we needed them, tried them, judged them, admired them, and also found fault in their actions. Our parents were not infallible in all their choices and judgments, as time would later prove.

They had to swallow the bittersweet pills of life more than once, just as we, their children, are now doing. There were times we knew they felt proud of us, but often this was tempered by our own feeling that we did not quite live up to their expectations: they always wanted us to be one stroke better, to go one step further. But on this day of the “last judgment”, seeing our mother near her death, we have no answer to a simple question we often ask ourselves: “What could we have done, more and sooner, to repay our parents for what they did for all of us?”

I fed my mother mashed potatoes with margarine and gravy, half a teaspoon at a time, slowly and carefully, as somehow, without rehearsal, we both understood the danger of esophageal dysmotility that follows a stroke. I caressed her thin white hair that flowed past her bony shoulders, as if my strokes could communicate the affection and care I wanted to give back to this body that conceived and nurtured me, now a body half-dead. Her left hand and wrist, slightly puffy from the edema of flaccid paralysis, were strangely beautiful compared to the unaffected right side where torturous veins and knotty joints emerged under her skin, wrinkled by the labor of years bygone. What an irony, that a lifeless, paralyzed hand should look so young, so healthy, all because of a morbid blow to the brain!

My mother ate quietly, with her eyes closed, with the obedience of a well-trained infant who opened her mouth at the touch of the spoon on her lips. After she waved that she did not want any more food, I fed her a few more spoonfuls, as if I knew better, as if a few more spoonfuls of nourishment would restore the integrity and health of her half-gone mind. My mother sat in her hospital recliner chair, staring into nowhere, with a slow drool from the left corner of her mouth. At times, she would drag the fingers of her right hand like a comb over her thin white hair with restless energy, or she would try to pull off her socks with a stubborn perseverance, with her eyes closed, mumbling incomprehensible words in a burst of frustration or despair that only she could understand. Or, could she? Could she really comprehend the new, half-empty world where she was now trapped, or could she feel the half-filled body her soul was anchored in? My mother, not long ago a woman who prided herself in so much composure and dignity in all her actions, now sitting in that huge, ugly orange armchair, wrapped in a white blanket covering an oversized blue hospital gown that accentuated the bony bulges of her arthritic knees; my mother, with eyes that shut out the world, and a thin drool of bitter life flowing from the side of her mouth. At 93 years of age, she had outlived many others already, and like all of us who imagine a perfect, gentle death, she had always wanted to go to bed healthy one night and never wake up the next day. Nor would she mind the excruciating pain of a massive heart attack that would take out her last breath in minutes. But now,

on this December night, lost somewhere in a grey and brown building in the heart of a cold and dreary city, she was trapped. She had reached the final milestone of her journey, only to be pinned down in that ugly orange chair and experience the decaying process of a slow death. It seemed that the only thing she could do was to accept the absence of choice. And so, she chose to close her eyes to the world. And wait. How could it be that the life of such a beautiful woman be ending in such a senseless act of cruelty?

Over the next few days, as we gathered and took turns staying by her bedside as she laid lifelessly, or helped her sit up in the recliner chair, my sisters and I spoke little among ourselves about our mother's stroke. Perhaps the only thing in our mind was how terrible it was that Mother had to be dying this way. Or how in her life she sacrificed so much of herself for all of our needs and frivolities: from cooking our favorite food, to guiding us through our career choices, Mother had always been there for us. Now, the small talk my sisters and I exchanged was what families of people dying of slow death say to each other, the little things that somehow seemed to matter because they filled the silence and the emptiness of the moment. "Oh, yes, she moved her left leg a little more today." "She actually ate quite well for lunch, most of her mashed potatoes and half of her fruit puree." "Do you think she might be too warm in those socks?" Others in our family, seeing themselves more as "support members", have started the process of planning for a funeral that would match the dignity of her life. They sought relief in brief metaphysical discussions about the meaning of life and death, health and disease, in phrases like: "How liberated she must feel now", or "There is perhaps no soul left, and therefore no pain, in that feeble body." Myself, I was mostly numb, all the way cursing the whimsical fate that dealt my mother such a cruel ticket out of this world. I wondered how a 20 mg dose of Valium, delivered as an IV push, would work to stop her regular but labored breathing; or better yet, a 100 mg dose, to be sure that "it works". A blessing my mother would thank me for, but a choice that would not be there for her, or for me. So, for now, she just stared away, indifferent to the life around her, seemingly lost in another world.

I fed my mother, caressed her sparse white hair and the silky fine skin of her paralyzed hand, wiped the drool from her mouth, and tried to see through those eyelids closed shut as if they were curtains that had prematurely fallen before the final act. It was not that she could not fight for her life. A few years ago, already in her late 80's, she survived an *E. coli* peritonitis and septicemia, and recovered in no time at all. But now perhaps, there was not much to fight for. When it became clear that Mother's condition would not change much for days or weeks to come, I left Montréal. In the plane that flew me back to San Francisco, tears of loss finally overtook me.

February 13, 1997

Mother died over a month ago, on January 8. A few days earlier, another stroke sank her into a deep coma from which she would not recover. I was by her bedside the night she died, heard her last quiet breath that was as faint as a sigh, and felt the last warmth emitting from her frail, lifeless body. Agonizing as it was for all of us, maybe the last month of her life and her death were not as painful to her, as she was already half gone. All measures of pain and sorrow are relative, for, I said to myself, all over the world, people die every day of more unjust and atrocious deaths. But such a consolation does not really ease the pain of losing one's own mother.

She was buried next to Father, on a day when the frozen Canadian earth seemed harder and colder than steel, even as a bright sun in the wide blue sky above was trying to flood that winter day with all its rays of joy and hope. Both of them now lie in a land on which some of their children and grand children walk, run, and prosper, but after all, a land so foreign to their own lives. Not the land of waving palm trees and tender green rice fields caressed by a warm tropical breeze, where their own ancestors rest.

I have not cried much over my mother's death. Perhaps, I am still living with the numbness over the fact that I won't see her again, ever again, except in my dreams, flashbacks and old family photos. No, I will never see my mother again. When she was still alive, when we said good-bye at the end of every visit I made to be with her in Montréal, she would squeeze my hand, her cloudy, almond-shaped eyes probing into mine, and she would say: "Who knows when or if we shall see each other again", as if she were preparing both of us for the unexpected time of her eventual death. Yet in the last several weeks, I feel that I am seeing her everyday.

I see my mother walking slowly in her old house on Kildare Street, Montréal, in short steps, keeping her balance by leaning on one piece of furniture and then on another. Her back was so curved, as if the weight of the teapot she was carrying was bending her the way a sparrow resting on a twig would bend it. After my parents left Davis to be near my sisters in their old age, Chi Oanh and Anh Tùng bought a house next to theirs where my parents could live independently and yet stay only steps away from their care. It has been said that a son is a son until he gets a wife, but a daughter is a daughter for life. How true that is! My sisters were much better caregivers for my parents than I could ever have been.

The house was just the right size for them, solidly built of bricks with an off-white paint, a steep, elegant roofline, lace-curtained windows, and a small lawn in front with bordering bushes and flowerbeds that bloomed in spring and summer, and where the snow piled up knee-high in winter. It was a very cute house on the outside, and cozy on the inside. My parents occupied the main downstairs floor, while I and other guests would have the upstairs bedrooms when we visited our Montréal relatives. In the summer, mother would be in short sleeves, and her arms would look like twigs loosely wrapped in a soft and wrinkled roll of skin. In the winter, she would be wearing three or four layers of wool sweaters that she had carefully mended, always proud to be frugal in her clothing as in all of her other needs. After my father's death, she was even more frugal, as if there was no reason for her to ever be beautiful or happy, or smiling again. She nurtured her sorrow and reflected on her lifelong struggles in a typical Buddhist way. No more desire, no more suffering. Frailer than ever, like a dry leaf barely dangling from a tree in late fall, she now only wore black and brown clothing. The only bright colors in her house came from the red tablecloth, the fake gold trimmings of the candle holders and of the metal bowl where incense sticks were planted, and from the seasonal fruit that adorned the altars of Buddha and of our father and ancestors.

April 10, 2008

It has been more than 11 years now since my mother's death, and as I retype my journal and review old photographs, I am struck by the heavy, sorrowful and convoluted sentences of my earlier notes. I have chosen to leave them in that way, because they were written in moments of grief, not as an afterthought "celebration of life" that is now a more popular, comfortable and uplifting way to remember the dead.

While rearranging the old photographs, I recall the days when my parents lived with us on Cornell Drive, Davis, from May 1983 to June 1989. They intended to come and visit us only for a year or so, but stayed on, perhaps because the long travel back to Việt Nam would have been too hard, and because most of their children have already settled in the US or Canada. They stayed in our newly remodeled bedroom with an adjacent bathroom at one end, and a deck opening to the backyard garden at the other. It seemed to be a perfect setting for them, for their own privacy, and ours. Or were they too secluded from the world? If they missed the warm commotion of a large family, the conversations of friends and relatives dropping in, as they had known in Việt Nam, they never openly complained. They were certainly in their happiest mood when two of our sisters, Yến and

Oanh, came to visit them. The kitchen would burst in joy and fill up with the aroma of fresh herbs and delightful Vietnamese dishes, as they cooked and laughed like any family would on festive reunions. After the sisters left, my parents' life would quiet down again to the sound of whispering murmurs.

For the six years my parents lived with us, the hours of days and nights were a well-established routine. Father would do his morning exercise on the deck, while Mother prepared breakfast, the offerings for the ancestral altar, and Father's daily Ginseng tea. She adapted quickly to the conveniences of the modern American kitchen, finding the microwave at times indispensable. In the late afternoon or early evening, coming home from work, I would either find them taking a gentle stroll on the sidewalk, or sitting on the back deck, shaded by the trees, enjoying the fresh air and whispering breeze from the Sacramento delta or the San Francisco Bay.

My parents were inseparable in those days, except for the times when Father stayed home while Mother would go to garage sales with Jeri. Oh, did she have a great time then! She quickly found her old bargaining skills quite useful, and would not hesitate to ask Jeri to translate for her. She would come home with small finds like a tea set or dishware that she could call her own, or some old cloth that she would wash and mend. Back in their room, my parents' hours were intertwined every minute, like two vines on the same fence, two birds in the same nest, two lonely fish in the same pond. He, reading or copying text segments of books, magazines and newspapers into his notebooks; and she, sitting next to him, mending clothes, murmuring poems that vibrate the melancholy of the past, reciting Buddhist prayers, writing letters home, and getting up occasionally just to prepare tea or a simple meal. He, eating slowly, and she, always making sure that his bowl was filled up with the best portions of whatever vegetable or small meat dishes she had prepared, while reserving the less tasty bites for herself, as she had done throughout their lives. They communicated with each other mostly in silence, as if there were no words that had not been already said during the decades they had spent together. Occasionally, a short sentence would quietly emerge from a simple observation or a reflection on a current event, but more often, they ruminated about their past, and shared thoughts about family and friends. They were two shadows moving so gently in the filtered light of their bedroom, sheltered from the California sun, and so far away from the moonlight shining over the Việt Nam of their past. Two shadows that yearned to be elsewhere, but could not project themselves beyond the walls of their bedroom.

Father always seemed rather contented, as he loved the green lawn, the big trees, and the shaded sidewalks where he would take leisurely strolls. Lilly, our black and white cat, would follow him on these walks, three or four steps behind. Yes, an old man with a cane, uprooted from half the world away, and a cat, walking together, both quieter than the morning breeze. It must have been quite a memorable scene for the neighbors on Cornell Street, who so often expressed to me how gentle and courteous they felt my parents were! Thus, with his books on one side, Mother on the other, and a peaceful place where he could contemplate life, Father seemed quite settled.

Mother was not happy, and she wanted to make the point clear to everyone. She wore a long face, her eyes drifted in vacant looks, and if she smiled at all in any of the family photographs we took in Davis, it was a just a thin and bitter line across her tight lips. I was at work most of their waking hours, and when at home, I often felt torn, splitting my time between my parents in their secluded bedroom and my own small nuclear family, Jeri and Ben. Being a more social person, my mother missed her Vietnamese friends and extended family more than my father. She was also a proud person, having sailed her own boat and managed the family resources all her life. She would have been happier had she received “government support” rather than feeling “dependent” on her children, she often stated. She never quite understood why we did not apply for her “social security checks” or “old age pension”, since most immigrants and friends she knew got theirs. She did not need the money for herself, but she could use it to help others back in Việt Nam, she sighed. As she found she had little control over her own life as the years went by, she would often quote a popular Vietnamese verse of resignation and resilience:

“Thôi thế đã thế thì phải thế”

(So it is, so be it...)

Reflecting over the lives of her own children, Mother would often say: *“Bô´mẹ sinh con, trời sinh tính” (Parents give birth to their children, but children get their personality from the Creator”)*. Have we not, ourselves as parents, questioned how little influence we seem to have in our children’s lives? My parents certainly took pride in our professional successes, but my mother in particular was deeply saddened by the disharmony in the marriages of some of their children. Mostly though, it was her two only sons who brought her the most chagrin. My brother Đức and I both married women who were not my mother’s idea of a traditional daughter-in-law. By following our hearts, we broke the conventional marriage code of our time, tormented our family, and deeply wounded our

mother, the mother we both owed much to, the mother we each loved in our own way, and toward whom we had both respectful and ambivalent feelings.

As a teen and young adult, I rejected much of what I felt was vanity and hypocrisy in the Vietnamese mentality. At times, knowing how proud a woman she was, I felt that my mother's talks of self-effacement had a distant echo of self-righteousness. In her role as a wife and mother, her devotion was so complete that it would induce a sense of guilt for those of us at the receiving end, feeling more a burden than a grace. My mother used that secret weapon commonly yielded by Asian women quite well - to act submissive, to always evince humility, never forgetting her duty, and in the final count having the ultimate control over the emotions of everyone in the family.

Perhaps the feeling that I was "not there" for my mother after my father died would weigh the heaviest in my conscience for years to come. They must have been the loneliest time of her life. But when we lived together in Davis, my relation with my mother was similar to Paul Morel, the DH Lawrence's character in "Sons and Lovers", to his mother. Well into my adulthood, mother would tell me what to eat, how to enjoy life, and how to climb social ladders. She frowned at my helping Jeri in our domestic chores. She often commented that my woodworking hobby was below my status as a doctor, and suggested that I should take up tennis or golf instead. She would have chosen, for me, a bride from a respectable Vietnamese family, and for herself, a daughter-in-law to whom she could pass on her social standing and domestic skills. My mother's feelings and wishes would breathe on me like the wind would bend a tree, or flood my days like the sea would, wave upon wave, smoothly shape the rocks of a tide pool. But I left Việt Nam at the age of 18, and lived an ocean away from my family for the next 17 years during which I was on my own to make my choices in life. Jeri and I met within days after I landed in the US, and our lives intertwined in a most unpredictable path, as if fate would have not allowed it any other way. Vietnamese family values, no matter how strong they were, could not overtake the feelings Jeri and I have developed for each other. Jeri was, one might say, the "*Love minus Zero*" Bob Dylan sang about, *"she is true - like ice, like fire".* Not the traditional wife or daughter-in-law who would put on a social mask to please even Confucius himself.

In Davis, our family life was probably not the vision my mother had hoped and lived for. And for me, in those years, with a mother on one side, and a wife on the other, even the choice of dinner food was problematic. It was obvious that sharing a kitchen was no easy task for two women with very different personalities and coming from two worlds as opposite as Everly, a sleepy farm town in Iowa, and a metropolis like Hà Nội, in the Land of the Dragon. Both were dear to my heart, and I

could not help feeling guilty when choosing whose food I would eat first. For Jeri, these years living with a mother-in-law who now and then dropped a disapproving remark would be remembered as “the Zantac years”. Jeri learned enough Vietnamese words to communicate with my parents at the basic level, but it was the expressive tone and facial muscles that told more of the silent conflict of cultures from both sides. An example that Jeri still remembers only too well was the time when my mother would give a pitiful and dejected look at the dinner that Jeri had prepared and casually said: “Poor Chinh, he would eat anything.” On other occasions, Mother would see the CBS news anchor host Connie Chung on TV, and said: “Oh, how beautiful Oriental women are!” - and put out a long sigh.

Sadly for my parents, for me and for Ben, during the years when Little League baseball meant everything to a kid who aspired to be an All-American boy, Ben himself never cared much for Oriental food, never learned to speak Vietnamese, and so never got close to his grandparents either. I should take all the blame for not exposing Ben to our Vietnamese culture, but during the 1970s and ‘80s, I had nothing good to say about the land I came from, the Việt Nam I had left behind: a former colony; a humiliated nation; thirty years of devastating wars; the corruption and treacheries of its leaders; the vanity and broken words of its intelligentsia; so much talk about bravery and traditional values, and so many wasted lives; and for what? A lost and miserable future? A pityful ranking among the poorest nations on earth? Up to this day, even though my feelings about Việt Nam have changed a great deal, Ben has yet to find any bonding with his Asian heritage.

There is one more, one last story about my parents that tells us how life can be full of surprises and confusion. It is their conversion to Catholicism. After all, our family had been practicing the worship of ancestors for generations, and the traditional, harmonious blend of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism had guided our way of life as long as the history of our people itself. We have always believed that there is a Supreme Being *(“ Thượng Đế ”)* who made Heaven and Earth *(“Trời Đất”),* and that the course of our individual lives is already pre-determined by how the stars line up in the sky at the hour and day of our birth. We have little control over our fate, but must learn to accept it. Astrology charts are to be consulted for major life decisions, including marriage, funerals, and even travels. If we pray to Buddha, it is not for grace, mercy, or salvation, but only for guidance - to be wiser, or to be more able to bear the suffering that our mere existence brings. Buddha is not a God and does not promise miracles. There is no named “God” figure in our Vietnamese tradition. So for our parents to radically change their religion and accept the God of the Western civilization at the

end of their lives was rather extraordinary. It was distressful to those of us who valued our parents as the last generation of a Viêt Nam burdened by traditions but rich in faith. My sister Oanh recalled that she cried for days when learning our mother had “turned her back” on Buddhism. But this was how, as the final decision in her life, mother became a Christian, and how she kept father in her gravitational pull, on earth, as it would be in heaven.

Before my parents were married, and when my brother Đức was only two or three years old, he was quite often sick with asthma and pneumonia. Having done everything she could for him, my mother promised that she and her two children will become Catholic if Jesus or Mother Mary would give her son his good health back. Anh Đức got better, and so both he and my sister Hiền converted to Christianity. However, our mother remained a devoted Buddhist for many more years, until she herself got very ill in Davis. Struck with *E Coli* sepsis, she was in and out of semi-coma and delirium, but made an incredible recovery. Lying in her hospital bed, she recalled seeing a bright light at the end of a tunnel, not unlike many individuals who recover from near death. [2] Mother saw a woman emerging in that bright light. It could have been a nurse seen in the lit doorframe of the dark hospital room. But Mother was certain that it was Mother Mary coming to save her. This was the ultimate event that converted my mother to Christianity. Yes, Mother Mary had finally come for her.

I often wondered whether there could be another reason for my mother’s conversion. Could it be that Christianity offers her something that her Buddhist faith could not deliver in her lifetime? Were the words of the Diamond Sutra no longer reassuring? Should one just go out like a “flickering light”, in quiet despair, with no hope of ever being rewarded for all the work one has done and sacrifices one has given?

Reflecting on her own life, with a subtle mixture of humility and pride, my mother often recited this popular verse that would say it all:

“Nhìn trăng không thẹn với trời,
Nhìn gương không thẹn với người trong gương”
(Looking at the moon, I am not ashamed to be facing the sky;
Looking into a mirror, I am not ashamed of the person I see)

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[2] *We now know that a transient retinal hypo-perfusion associated with dropping blood pressure would explain such a visual illusion.*

For has she not lived all the five Confucean virtues (*ngữ thường*): *nhân* (humanity), *nghĩa* (justice and equity), *lý* (rites), t*rí* (knowning right from wrong) and *tín* (faith), and has she not passed on to her children the most valuable things in life: *"Tích đức cho con hơn tích của*" (virteous deeds, more important than material goods). At times, she would muse:

"*Kiếp sau xin chớ làm người,*
Làm cây thông đứng giữa trời mà reo!"
(In my next life, I 'd rather not be a human being,
but a pine tree howlering to the sky!)

For after some 90 years of a life spent in self-sacrifice and devotion to others, was she ever rewarded with the happiness and fulfillment she deserved? Not really. Her life story ran like a series of deceptions from all the men she had loved and cared for: first, two husbands who did not deserve her, then two sons who deserted her. As she aged, her sad and tired eyes stared into the emptiness of her life, and her thin lips sketched out a story of bitterness and deception, as she tried but failed to understand the whims of her fate, the cruelty of her karma. She recalled an astrologist who once told her that in her previous life, she convinced a monk to eat monkey meat. Was that prank bad enough to condemn her to a life of unfulfilled expectations this time around? Perhaps it is too much for any mortal to try and reach the Buddhist Nirvana by paying the price for all the misdeeds of one's past lives. So, why not break away from this absurd cycle of reincarnations, and find salvation through the grace of a more forgiving Creator? Why not stop the spinning of our soul from star to star across a universe so full of black holes that not even light can escape, and return to the Garden of Eden where everything is bright, and where our damned heart can finally be forgiven, and finally be at peace? Isn't St Peter's gate wide open for anyone who finds the path to redemption and salvation by just believing in the Christian God? Oh, how sweet, how sweet, Thy Amazing Grace!

And so, with the help of my sister Yến and her husband Anh Bảo, my mother converted to Catholicism, within a year or so after moving to Canada in 1989. All his life, Father vaguely believed in a "Supreme Being" relevant only when the extraordinary fate of humans could not be explained by logic, and when calling it "the work of providence" does not appease the soul either. For him, belonging to an organized religion never meant very much. But now, he had a simple reason, a most logical reason to be religious: "When you die, you will go to Heaven, won't you?" - he asked my mother. "What would become of me, then?" And so, while their hearts and prayers were

Buddhist for most of their lives, and I believe, until their last breath, my parents' tombstones are engraved with their Christian names, "Maria Térèsa" and "Phê-Rô" (Vietnamese for Pierre or Peter), under which their souls were baptized from here to eternity.

That is the story of my parents, seen through my own filter of blessings and atonement. At my age now, just as it was for my parents when they were living with us in Davis, the remembered or rearranged past, fondly archived, is so much part of the present. As William Faulkner would say, the past is never really over, it is not even past. As the years dim the fire in our souls, don't we all come to a time when, to endure the present and push back the future, we rekindle the past? And how strange to feel at times that our parents may still be watching us and watching over us from the other side of death?

So what about death? Mother often stated, with a sigh: "*Chết là hết" ("Death is the end")*, literally meaning: there is nothing beyond death. "*Chết là hết".* Did she say this in despair, or in a final admission of reality? If that seems to contradict all her belief in the Buddhist reincarnation or her longing for the Christian paradise, it was just as real, for who can live forever with illusions or charades? "*Chết là hết".* She may be right, since none of us mortals would ever know what awaits us beyond our own death. Death is the end. The end is the end. Our consciousness, call it *"our soul"* if you want, no longer exists beyond our last breath. Don't even think about heaven, or about the next life, I often remind myself, coldly and bluntly. Funerals and anniversaries, candles and prayers, altars and offerings, they are for the living, not for the dead.

If there is a paradigm to help us live a better life, I believe that we should not live by the religious rules that might open the door of heaven to us, or by doing good deeds that may hopefully recycle us into a happier existence the next time around. If there is an afterlife, it only exists in our imagination while we are still hanging on to life, or in the mind of those who survive us. Perhaps the best that can happen to us after our death is to be remembered kindly by those we leave behind. Perhaps we should live our life now the way we want others to remember us after we're gone. Simple enough. No God needed. No next time around, either.

It took many years, many decades, for my parents' lights to shine on me, just as in the sky, the life and death of stars takes light-years to reach us on this earth. My parents were born around the turn of the 20th century. Their life journey spanned not just across the globe, but the length of this turbulent and extraordinary century. With their passing, it seems that the history chapters of modern

Việt Nam have also turned over, one by one: the breaking away from its Confucian roots, the fight against colonial domination, the starvation and bleeding of our people through several world and civil wars, and finally our emergence as a new nation. More importantly, many years after my parents' deaths, in the winter of my own existence, only now do I realize how much of them still lives in me, and have made me who I am.

The Agricultural Commune of Triêú Khúc

April 25, 2012

On January 27, 1953, in a letter addressed to General Nguyễn văn Xuân, my father wrote about the plea *"des familles pauvres, coeurs vaillants et des bras solides" (*of the "poor families, brave hearts and strong arms"*)* that were working in a commune just outside of Hà Nội. I am piecing together here the story of the *"Tiểu Canh Nông Công Nghệ"* ("The Small Farmer and Artisan's Co-Op") in the village of Triêù Khúc*,* from the documents that my father had saved over the years and that I am finally taking the time to go over, never expecting to be so moved.

In each of these documents and photographs dating as far back as the 1940s, a life, a hope, or a moment in history seemed to come alive again, as I carefully unpacked them from recycled thin envelops where my father had put them, and cautiously freed them from rusty paperclips and pins. These are incredible documents, like original land deeds of farm and rice field plots, with hand-drawn maps, attached to letters by peasants who previously owned the land and sold it to the co-op – I assume the letters were written by a hired clerk and "signed" by the illiterate peasants with their fingerprints still visible on the yellowish paper [3] . There are receipts of the co-op financial transactions; communications between the association's officers and counselors and the Ministry of Agriculture, typed on paper with French colonial letterheads that boldly say *"État Français - Gouvernement Général de l'Indochine,* or *"Gouvernement Central Provisoire du Viêtnam"*, and bear faded red-inked official seals and stamps; newspaper clippings that reported the accomplishments of the co-op; and even several notes from the *"Inspecteur Général de l'Agriculture et de l'Élevage"*, asking my mother to organize a display of local produce and crafts, or thanking her for being in the jury of the horticulture competition at the *"Exposition/Faire du Tonkin"* of 1941 and 1944. And of course, there are photographs: large families in front of thatched-roof houses, vegetable gardens in immaculate rows, artisans weaving straw hats, group pictures of government officials in their Western suits, village elders in their traditional black *"áo dài",* and peasants in their clean "pajamas" standing respectfully on the side or in the background. There are photos scribbled with names I remember hearing my parents mention from time to time over the years - names that belong to an obscure page of history but are coming back today to resonate in my ears. Among them, Jean

[3] *fingerprints used as signatures was a tradition borrowed from the Chinese since 220 BC*

Catala, Thẩm Hoàng Tín (my maternal uncle and a former mayor of Hà Nội), Trịnh Xuân Ngạn (his son Trịnh Xuân Thuận and I ended being classmates in Saìgòn in the 1960s) and Dr. Phạm Buểi Tâm, the dean and mentor of the first generation of Vietnamese physicians. He signed my father's release from Hospital Yersin in 1949. These are documents and photographs of a time that now only survives in archives that perhaps interest no one, of people who are now long dead and gone, mostly forgotten since they left no mark on this earth. Now, as I hold the fragile copies of the numerous letters my father must have written at the end of a busy day, I can hear his typewriter clicking away, letter by letter, line by line, one more task, one more hope at a time.

The co-op association was formed on July 7, 1940, by 20 founding members (seventeen men and three women), under the honorary presidency of *"Son Excellence"* Hoàng Trọng Phu. *"Son Excellence"…* I have not heard this term for decades. Neither would I read nowadays, at the end of a letter, salutations like this: *"Avec mes remerciements, je vous prie d'agréer, Monsieur le Résident, l' hommage de mes sentiments respectueux et dévoués".* Polite, formal diplomatic jargon may be, but with such a graceful tone one seldom hears in our present human encounters. Yet, I tell myself I have to restrain from romanticizing the past, since Colonial France was anything but gracious to its subordinates.

The Association's charter called for aiding families of small artisans and farmers "to have sufficient means to perform their work and to sell their products". The goals could not have been stated more simply or factually. Active members would contribute their parcels of land, tools, buildings, labor, or money to the co-op. Credits (ranging from 20 to 50 Vietnamese piasters or "*đồng"*) would be offered to those in need, without interest being charged to them. A farm-school would be created, and scholarships would be given to those who wanted and qualified "for further studies in France and abroad" in the field of agriculture or industrial crafts. (The Farm School at Hà Đông was eventually linked to "*L'École Supérieure d' Agriculture*" in Hà Nội). Article 19 of the charter forbid the Association to get involved in political or religious pursuits. Article 21 required council members to donate their services without financial compensation, except for business travel expenses. My father served as its president for many years, and my mother as its *"économe"* – I assume it is the title for a financial manager. My mother of course never had any training in economics, but she certainly knew how to budget and restrain my father from getting into risky deals – as my sisters and I observed years later in our own family!

Among the documents saved was a 1952 partial census of two neighborhoods where some co-op members lived (near the Two Sisters Trưng pagoda and on Lò Đúc street), listing the names, ages, and provinces of origin, along with their identification papers and occupations of 147 male heads of families. Most were cotton and silk weavers, vegetable growers, metal workers, or had specific skills, such as making bamboo furniture, leather, ivory and lacquer goods, clothing buttons and embroidery. There were 48 members listed without work or trade experience, but it must have been a relief for them and their families to be accepted in the co-op, and be taught new skills.

Initially located in Hà Đông, near Hà Nội, the co-op developed in 1943 two branches in Sàigòn/ Chợlớn and Gia Định areas (the region was referred in one of the official letters as *"Sud Indochinois"* – how strange that term sounds to me now!). The Hà Đông co-op originally drew families from surrounding districts only, but by 1946, had swollen to more than 1,000 inhabitants, as families displaced by fighting between the French and the Việt Minh poured in from many provinces in North Việt Nam. By 1950, the newspapers reported that 970 migrant families have passed through and gotten shelter there at one time or another, and that 172 families with a total population of around 1,500 were still making a living in the 4 co-op sites of the Hà Đông/Hà Nội area. The government donated to the co-op thirty-five hectares of land and three large hangars occupied by the Japanese Army during WWII. In one of the documents, my father even acknowledged American aid to the co-op association, which I was totally unaware of until now.

Incidentally, I was delighted to find among my father's official travel papers (which included an airplane ticket on Air France dated August 25, 1950, and all the necessary stamps of approval by the French security forces for every place he went) a document dated October 12, 1951, from the *"Haut-Commissariat de France en Indochine"* authorizing me to travel with my father from Hà Nội to Đà Lạt via Saìgòn. Here it said, in plain words: *"Voyageant accompagné de son fils, Lê trung Chính, âge de 2 ans".*

My father was never a farmer, of course. I even doubt he ever handled a hoe or plucked a chicken. His skills were in administration: he worked for the Ministry of Agriculture (1922-1933), and cofounded the *"Ấp Hà Đông"* in Đà Lạt in 1938, an agricultural commune for farmers displaced from North and Central Việt Nam. In Triêù Khúc, as the Association's president for many years, he did most of the bureaucratic work to get the proper permits, obtain grants, or settle conflicts between members. Considering the number of people involved in the co-op, he must have had plenty of work to do everyday. It must have been also very frustrating at times. Yet, all that transpired from his

writings was a concrete understanding of the realities around him – poverty, ignorance, war - and a massive dose of idealism – dedication, solidarity, mutual aide and conciliation. He later published a short manuscript about how to run a communal co-op. I did not find a single word about finances, marketing, or stock shares. Father only wrote about the need to adapt to challenging circumstances, to respect the local culture, and to nurture human skills. His core message was simple: Cultivate the people. *"Tant vaut l'homme, tant vaut la terre, tant vaut l'intitution".* (How good the earth is, how good an institution can be, it all comes down to how good the individual is.) He never talked about politics, either. I recently read David G. Marr's outstanding book, *"Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945"*, and realized that my parents were right in the midst of the tremendous intellectual and social upheaval that swept our country during their formative years and young adulthood. How they choose the path they took, away from the multitude of ideological entanglements by staying "down to earth" and focusing only on the people they were serving - I wish now I had the opportunity to ask them, and to learn more about these turbulent times! But may be, they would have only said: *"Tant vaut l'homme, tant vaut l'institution".*

I discovered another aspect about my father - that, while he was French-educated, the poetry of his family's peasant roots had never left him. Along with the many official documents about the Association, he has also saved for me some poems that express so well of the fusion of feelings *(tình)* and reason *(ly')*, and the wisdom and the lightheartedness of the Vietnamese peasantry. Father was not a poet himself, but he put the dreams and poetry of others into action, Here are a few pearls from the people of the earth, listing the things that are important for a good crop:

"Nhất nước, nhì phân,
Ba cần, tứ giống' "
("First water, second manure,
third labor, fourth seeds")

Singing the reward of a resilient and hard labor:

"Ơn giời mưa gió thuận hòa,
Nơi thì bừ cạn, nơi thì cấy xâu.
Xin ai chớ ngại làm lâu,
Bây giờ cơm bặc, về sau luá vàng.

Xin ai đừng bỏ ruộng hoang,
Bao nhiêu cơm bặc luá vàng bấy nhiêu."

("The grace of heaven has made the rain and wind favorable.
My dry land, I now can plough it deep and wide.
Don't you dread the hard work,
Today's silvery seeds of rice will grow into a harvest of gold.
Just don't leave your field idle,
Turn your silvery seeds into a crop of gold.")

Being at peace with nature, that's what a farmer's life is all about. Hear the voice of a peasant maiden praying as she walks down her rice paddy:

"Người ta đi cấy lấy công,
Em nay đi cấy còn trông nhiêù bề.
Trông trời, trông nước, trông mây,
Trông mưa, trông gió, trông ngày, trông đêm.
Trông cho chân cứng đá mềm,
Trời trong bể lặng mới yên tấm lòng".

(Some worry how much they will get paid for cultivating the land.
Me, I worry about many other things:
I gaze at the sky, I peer down the water, I watch the clouds,
I feel the rain and the wind, I live the cycle of day and night.
My feet must be firm where the soil is soft.
My soul is not at ease until there is peace in the sky and over the sea.)

And now the happiness of a harmonious couple:

"Ai ai cùng vơ cùng chồng,
Chồng cầy vợ cấy trong lòng vui thây!
Sang năm luá tốt tiền nhiều,
Em đem đống thuế đóng sưu cho chồng.
Đói no có thiếp có chàng,
Còn hơn chung đỉnh giâù sang một mình."

(Hey, we're a happy couple!
I plow, and you cultivate the land, what better joy?
Next year the crop will be great,
We'll pay off our taxes and credits!
In hunger or in bounty,
We have each other! It's so much better than being a rich but lonely guy!)

Some countries are feared for the power of their armies or their banks, and some are respected for their sciences and technology. Some attract tourists for their handsome statues of dysfunctional Gods, some for their pyramid temples to bloodthirsty deities, and others for their cathedrals huge enough to block the sunshine from worshipers. Việt Nam offers none of these glories. Its pagodas hug the earth, and its farmers still break their backs to cultivate the soil. But to know the poetry of its people is to love Việt Nam.

A few years ago, I wrote in my journal that my father's and my own legacy in this world would not amount to much. After all, Father was only a low-level bureaucrat, I assumed. I was certainly wrong about my parents, for they have touched so many lives, and perhaps helped hundreds of families during one of the hardest periods of our nation's history - colonial exploitation, famine and war. They even almost lost their lives for it. Did they change the course of history? No. Unfortunately not. Good hearts and gentle hands seldom make history. But perhaps, that's what we should all remember about life.

My father never told me why, among hundreds of other documents, he saved and sent these to me in 1982. Perhaps he had the most unrealistic dream that someday, the land redistribution and reform launched by Hồ Chí Minh after 1954 would be reversed, and these legal papers would allow the original owners to reclaim their properties. Of course this will never happen. Or could it be that, deep in my parents' hearts, Triề Khúc village was what meant the most to them?

"Camelot ! Camelot !" It may sound quite phony - for my parents did not live in a mythical castle, nor did they hold elegant receptions in glittery ballrooms of some White House. But for more than ten years of their lives, they had their *Camelot*. Remember King Arthur? Weary, heartbroken and old, he murmured at the beginning of Hammerstein and Rodgers' song, "Lest people forget *that once there was a bright and shinning spot…"*

In the village of Triêù Khúc, district of Hà Đông, in the heart of the Red River delta of North Việt Nam, once upon a time there was a bright and shinning spot. There once lived some families, with resilient hearts and valiant hands, who made the best of the little they had. It was my parents' *Camelot*. History would have never known it, but for the tarn and yellowish papers that I now hold in my hands.

Central section of the Triêù Khúc co-op facilities, 1948

Top: Old French colonial map showing the Hà Nội - Hà Đông region and various artisanal activities, with green star* indicating the location of Triêù Khúc village.

Lower left: Map drawing the site of the co-op – “Cité Artisanale et Agricole”

Lower right: Map showing the location of the former Japanese hangars turned into dwellings and workshops, and family plots with names of heads of families

Life in the village of Triêù Khúc, 1950:

Top and middle pictures, left to right: Families at the entrance to the co-op; the Communal Hall; a farmer and his family; vegetable fields.

Bottom two pictures, from newspapers: making bamboo hats; weavers at work.

Top pictures: The Hà Đông co-op commune was not spared from the ravages of the war between the Việt Minh and the French forces. The pictures above show "*L'Atelier des Arts"* (the Art Building) before and after the fighting in1946.

In the picture to the left, my father – on the front row, right - was showing a delegation visiting the ruins of the *"Ancienne Résidence",* March 3, 1949

Top pictures: My father at work at the Triêù Khúc co-op commune; and addressing a gathering of official dignitaries, local elders and peasants.

Above: A plan for a new, 16-acre co-op center was developed in 1950, laying out sites for flower and vegetable plots, workshops and a museum; the construction was funded by credits from King Bảo Đại and American aid. My father hand-wrote and typed the attached notes.

The co-op commune in Đà Lạt was named “Âp´ Hà Đông, in the village of Trung Bắc, as it was formed by refugees from the northern province of Hà Đông and the central province of Nghệ Tĩnh. It had a clinic run by the Catholic Sisters of St Vincent de Paul.

The bottom picture captured the inauguration of the new house built for a horticulture merchant at the co-op, September 9, 1952.

Newspaper clippings saved by my father, praising the achievements of the Hà Đông Farmer and Artisan Families' Cooperative:

Top: a Vietnamese language newspaper, ca 1949 or 1950; and *L'Entente*, December 27, 1950
Middle: *L'Écho du Việt Nam*, April 7, 1951; and January 1949
Bottom: *L'Avenir du Tonkin*, April 27, 1941

First Homecoming

March 6, 1997

We have been chasing the lights of the sunset for hours now, and have not seen the night sky or stars since we left San Francisco. Outside, through the small windowpane, the thin layer of pink keeps stretching for miles and hours between the white clouds and the light blue sky. As our jumbo jet takes us eastward over the Bering Sea, our tired bodies are trying to fight off the fatigue of inertia and sleeplessness, and our red eyes feel the weight of the lids that cover them but bring neither rest nor comfort.

But I am not complaining, for we are now on our first journey back to Việt Nam. In the past few weeks, and more so each day as the departure date approached, my emotions about the trip grew more intense, like if they were following a drum that beats in crescendo. Months ago when we made the decision to go to Việt Nam with the Elderhostel program, we did it perhaps with a sense of curiosity and adventure, driven by my desire to share with Jeri that part of me still cocooned in my childhood years. Now, I feel like I am embarking on my own pilgrimage of a lifetime, and that I am also "going home" for the sake of my parents whose health in the last years of their lives would not permit them to travel so far. I can imagine how dear this homecoming would have been to them, especially seeing North Việt Nam where their souls would have returned after their death, if such a thing indeed does happen in the cycle of life. We, Asians, believe that our human soul should return to the land where our ancestors came from, if peace in afterlife is ever to be found. As for me, when I recently dug out some old pictures of Hà Nội from our family album, memories of my early roots flashed by more as a quest for answers than as a remembrance of the past. Am I really that cute and spoiled little boy that hung on to my parents' arms somewhere in the co-op farms of "Tiểu Canh Nông Công Nghệ" that my father founded? Is the pagoda in the background of that picture still standing 50 years later?

As a student, and later as a young professional, I was quite critical of many aspects of the Vietnamese society I knew then. I hated the hypocrisy of its middle and upper classes, the vanity of many of the men we must treat as respectable elders in our Confucian traditions, and the corruption and incompetence of many bureaucrats who ran the government agencies. I thought I would never be able to function in a Vietnamese society again – and now I may fit even less. I was "less

Vietnamese" than many of my friends, having been educated in French schools. Even now, I know little of our rich literature that my brothers Đức and Tùng can recite by heart, and I remember only a few of my native country's historical milestones. Sadly then, for many years, I felt that I did not provide a positive osmosis, and did not have many good things to tell Ben about Viêt Nam. I am very much to blame for his emotional distance from his Vietnamese background.

And yet, is it possible to witness in me a metamorphosis, a stronger acceptance of my roots as I am entering the fifth decade of my life and as I am heading back to my ancestral land? The first things to come back from my childhood are the sense of food and music. I have come to long more for the delicate flavors of Vietnamese cooking, as offered to me by my mother and sisters over the past few years. I now enjoy the lyrics of some old Vietnamese songs more than I ever imagined I would. The chords vibrate some feelings of simple poetry and truth in my unsettled heart. The Vietnamese language sounds sweet and unique in my mind. I romanticize the experience of life in the rice paddies surrounded by green hills and soaked by torrential rains during the monsoon season, although I was brought up in the cities. I feel excited by the hope that I can meet up with some of my first cousins I only know by names - men born with the same blood and around the same time in the history of our tumultuous nation, but raised in totally different ideologies and life styles. Can we have a "heart-to-heart" conversation? If our past was divided, will our future and our dreams intertwine? How will I understand the life of "my" people whom I left 30 years ago, and the place where I ate my first bowl of rice and soup? Will I end my medical career by working in Việt Nam on some projects, and will this trip be the first stepping stone? These are some of the questions that dance in my mind as the plane comes closer and closer to the land of my birth.

Viêt Nam will unfold to us in the next three weeks, Jeri and I are feeling this with excitement and trepidation: its green and fertile deltas; its chaotic flow of bicycles and rickshaws; its old people who have survived three consecutive wars, and the mobs of kids whose future no one can yet guess. Numerous magazine pictures and articles on Việt Nam may have prepared our hearts and minds for this trip, but nothing like the smells, the sounds, and the colors that surround us, the movements of the crowds and the body language of individuals we meet will give us the real and unique experiences we are looking for and probably will never forget.

Hà Nội, March 11, 1997

He turned the pages of my passport book, inspected the two stapled visa papers, one of which had my picture and the other one did not. He was a small and very thin man, just a bit more than half my body size, with a bony, brown, triangular face, and eyes that sank deep in their sockets above his high cheekbones. A wrinkled face that had never produced a smile, one would guess, for it seemed to be carved by the sorrows of past wars and the pains of present hunger. Eyes that accused me of injustice, just because they had witnessed horrors I was spared. He insisted that my traveling papers were not complete, and that I needed another photo for the second visa document. Of all the people on the tour group, I was the only one to be held back by the custom office. It may have been just a procedural barrier, but a fifteen-minute process felt like a few agonizing hours waiting for a criminal sentence to be handed down without ever having a fair trial.

Earlier, at the very moment our plane landed in Hà Nội, my heart was gripped by an irrational fear when my eyes caught sight of the flag with the bright yellow star centered in a sea of red that greeted travelers at the gate of the Nội Bài airport. The same feeling that would grip any soldier seeing an enemy flag, although a soldier or an enemy, I had never been. Was I to be detained as a traitor or a coward for leaving my native land, at the age of 18, for a life of material excesses and moral indecency in America? No point arguing with a low-level bureaucrat in a green army-style uniform and three stars on each epaulette, my instinct told me. So, a Polaroid snap portrait and two dollars later, I passed the immigration gate that welcomed me back into my birth country.

Immediately as we stepped off our tour bus that brought us from the airport to downtown Hà Nội, we were swamped by a group of street children like hungry mosquitoes, following every step we made. They begged us to buy postcards and stamp books, and interestingly, a locally printed paperback edition of Graham Greene's "The Quiet American". Their probing eyes and their whining voices were relentlessly directed at us, until our last straw of pity and compassion broke down, by one, or two, or five dollars at a time. As soon as we bought something, anything from one of them, many more came and surrounded us immediately, all offering the same products, all with the same story of need and helplessness. "If you buy from him, why not buy from me?" they all said. People called them *"Bụi Đời"* ("Dust of Life"). Newspapers wrote about them as unfortunate by-products of the "market economy", abandoned by irresponsible parents and families. Most tourists would like to chase them away like annoying pesky parasites. Those of us who spent some small change on them realized that we would not improve their lives by much. For not knowing when too much

empathy helps or hurts, we could not bear the guilt of just walking away from their mournful appeals.

Vietnamese cities were full of people everywhere. By the dozens, by the hundreds, trickling slowly or rushing in huge human waves, they came down the streets, on foot and in crowded buses, pushing carts or pedaling two or three-wheeled cycles. The more affluent ones rode roaring motorcycles, and a few sat inside cars with tinted windows. The traffic flow was chaotic and dangerous, with everyone blowing horns, going around each other as though guided by invisible sonar radars, and acting as if they owned the road, no matter how small, how frail or how powerful the vehicles they were riding.

Here and there, and everywhere, I saw people, squatting on low plastic stools, buying and selling, eating and chatting, getting hair cuts, playing chess with gravel pebbles, fixing bicycles, cooking eel or beef soup, mixing fruit drinks, selling lottery tickets, or just watching others while fanning their faces to ward off the heat. Most were working hard to live from day to day, trying to turn a penny into a penny and a half, or - if they were lucky - a dime into a quarter. I saw women with their black pajama pants rolled up mid-calf and their heads shaded from the murderous tropical sun by wide conical hats, hunching their backs as they transplanted rice stalks in the watery fields, dug up the muddy clay for a new lotus pond by a luxury hotel, mixed cement and moved bricks and stones, with nothing but their hands and rudimentary tools. Many other women walked the streets balancing their baskets full of goodies: farm products, recycled paper and cardboard, or tasty fast food to be sold as sidewalk snacks to some, or full meals to others. I counted endless streams of men who honked the horns of their bicycles and motorcycles, who roamed the streets like heading for some important destinations but perhaps getting nowhere in their quest for fortunes. Here and there, I saw young and old men squatting by the street vendors, sipping tea, playing chess, smoking the last centimeter of their cigarettes, watching the shadow of their lives projected on the sidewalks of the city - too proud to admit that they no longer had marketable skills, while their wives, mothers, sisters or children were out somewhere else earning a few hundred *đồng* to bring food to the family table.

These were the many faces of Việt Nam that made the most impression on me on my first return to my native land, now the land of *"Đổi Mới"* ("Renovation"). Spilling out of tin-roofed shacks, escaping from under the cover of plastic awnings or the shade of banyan trees, life was what happened on the streets, hung on clotheslines, or trickled down open sewage gutters. I could not imagine the

complexity of this humanity energized by an unmeasurable instinct for survival. More than the old French-styled boulevards, lined with elegant colonial villas, more than the banyan and palm trees that gently swayed in the tropical heat, more than the colorful Confucian temples and Buddhist pagodas that made perfect snap shots and post cards, it was the people I saw and barely had the chance to talk to, it was the hard life behind their impermeable faces that spoke to me, and left the deepest mark on my conscience.

Top: with kids from Hải Dương province, where my father was born.

Bottom: Jeri and “the postcard boy” (Minh was his name), at Hoàn Kiếm Lake, Hà Nội. We corresponded with him by mail after our trip, but lost contact after a few years.

Letters from Việt Nam, 2001-2004

From: Lê trung Chính <chjle@hn.vnn.vn>
Date: Thursday, March 15, 2001 7:29 AM

"For the times, they are a-changin' "
Dear Ben, friends and family:

As we enter our second week in the capital of the Land of the Dragon, the soft, drizzly rain that Hà Nội residents say is typical for springtime here *(mưa phùn)* is finally easing up. Hard to believe, but already our life is almost getting down to a routine that makes the days fly by quickly. How can it be that we are now longing for Sundays, when just last month, as easy-going retirees in Davis, we joked that we could only tell the days of the week by watching whether the neighbors were going to work or not?

The first thing that hit us was realizing how much Hà Nội has changed since we were here last, in 1997. Like in Sàigòn, the streets of this once quiet and sleepy city are now flooded by the ebb and flow of motor scooters and modern cars -- and with them, the air and noise pollution is so bad that it could drown out the city' s historical charms. For me, helping Jeri cross the streets is like Moses parting the Red Sea. A bristling entrepreneurial middle class crisscrosses the old French avenues at all hours of the day, talking on cell phones while blowing their motorcycle horns and making the most of the old proverb that (traffic) rules are made to be broken. We were actually told by a taxi driver that it is more important to have a good horn than working brakes. So, you can tell why facing the city traffic has been our foremost challenge since we arrived here. By the way, wearing helmets is not cool, since “who wants to go around town with his/her head inside what looks like an electric rice cooker?” - so stated our cousin Lai when we asked him why Vietnamese motor- or bicyclists don’t wear helmets!

From the start, we were blessed that our flat comes with a Western-style bed, with a firm mattress covered by a pastel green and pink flowered blanket. I still remember the wooden planks and

bamboo mats that made up our beds when I was young, and I was a bit worried how our old bones and flabby muscles would rest on them now. Our apartment, offered to us free of rent, is located on Điện Biên Phủ Avenue, very near to the historic Old City. It is the old office of the CGFED (Center for Gender, Family and Environment in Development, the institute we have come to work for), which has been moved to a more spacious building in a district at the West end of the city. Fearful of diseases the tropics are famous for, we immediately bought a mosquito net, and through this exotic white veil over our bed, Jeri now looks like Queen Cleopatra waiting for her Anthony (if she can get him away from his Mac laptop, that is).

Next came the challenge of having regular, decent meals that would settle well in Jeri's delicate gastrointestinal tract, not to mention her fear of invisible germs infesting unrefrigerated meat, or worms squirming inside what would sell as organic veggies in the U.S. As a welcoming treat on the day of our arrival in Hà Nôi, a CGFED doctor took us to eat *bánh cuốn* [4] at a local restaurant. We had many trips to you-know-what the next day. Luckily, our ailment was brief, but within a week, we splurged and bought a few pots and pans, an 80-liter refrigerator that was delivered to us on the back of a motor scooter, a rice cooker (to actually cook rice rather than to wear as a motorcycle helmet), and a microwave oven - all at prices much higher than what we would pay in the U.S., since they are luxury items here. Now our meals are at the same level as those we cooked during our past camping trips: simple, combining many ingredients in one dish, and easy to clean up. Our culinary style still mixes the flavor of East-meets-West improvisations, just as it has in the last 27 years. This time, Jeri tries to dilute the strong fragrance of tropical fruit by eating them with French cheese, while I try to mask the strong taste of French cheese by eating it with a fragrant tropical fruit. Except for a couple of nice meals at my cousins' homes, we have mostly shied away from local restaurants - that is, until Jeri is fully immunized: you see, for the next month, she will continue to get increasing doses of heat-inactivated enteric bacterial and viral antigens via our home-cooked food. You do have to admit that my edible vaccine experimentation is more advanced than those by the U.S. CDC!

The rest of our basic living needs has also come to a simple routine, as we now call home this flat 3/4 the size of a double-car garage. The space includes our "kitchen" (a 3x5 ft enclave just big enough for a narrow table where our two-burner electric stove sits) and our bathroom (4x6 ft) that also serves as our dishwashing and laundry area. Water dribbles from a hand-held showerhead.

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[4] *bánh cuốn is a* thin rice-flour crêpe with onions with or without ground pork filling, eaten with a thin fish sauce dip and cilantro, a very popular dish among Vietnamese rich or poor.

We bought boots and ponchos to brave the rain and mud puddles when searching for food at the local open-air market. The neighbor lady downstairs, named Mrs. Thu, with a baritone voice and a quiet husband who spends most of his day smoking cigarettes and sipping tea, delivers us a loaf of French bread every morning in exchange for Jeri's English lessons. She runs the “Lipton Café” below us, and is a bit nosy, but nevertheless is quite nice and trustworthy, and now she seems to have a new mission in life: to force Jeri to speak and eat like a real Vietnamese. But Mrs. Thu soon gave up learning English, sending her kids instead.

We never dreamed that we would live in a gated community upon our retirement, but now we do. The two flights of crooked stairs that lead to our flat are guarded by a gate and a lock so rusty that our fingers stain orange and brown each time we come or leave home. Every morning we wake up to the sound of a military bugle: we live near the Old Citadel, *“Cột Cờ”,* reputable for its history in the fight against the French colonialists more than 100 years ago. I remember the name of this place from my childhood years, for my parents often mentioned it as the landmark of the district where we lived in the early 1950s. It is now an Army Museum, which we have no desire to visit. Every night we fall asleep to the sound of Karaoke and MTV music, and the whisper of lovers holding hands under the tables in the Lipton and Dilmah cafés that share the same courtyard with our flat. How more romantic can it get?

Jeri is now quite busy with her two ESL classes that meet four afternoons a week. One is very elementary, and the other is set for a more “advanced” level. She takes great care and pride that her lessons meet the needs of her students, and uses teaching practices they have never been exposed to: more pragmatic, less rote learning. Many have quite a bit of difficulty learning the correct English pronunciation, as they have to overcome a double dose of Vietnamese and Russian accents. Most of them are young college graduates now working for CGFED. However, we cannot fail to wonder whether a more elderly woman who lives in the neighborhood is not a party cadre attending Jeri’s classes as a political vigilante.

As for me, every morning, I hop on the back of a "taxi-scooter", called *Xe ôm*, literarily a "hugger-vehicle", since you have to hang on by wrapping your arms around the driver’s belly if you don't want to fall off the scooter. The commute to work is 7 km across town, and yes, I do wear a “rice cooker” instead of my beret for the trip! These daily rides provide me with a great opportunity to be immersed in the street life of Hà Nội: the heart and soul of the city are beating and breathing all around me at every inch of the road – its inhabitants rushing and stalling, cooking and eating,

selling and bargaining all along the sidewalks. All my five senses are overwhelmed by a great feeling of adventure, as the scooter that carries me roars and honks, swirls and zooms like Batman's motorcycle in the chaotic flow of human traffic.

So far, I have found my work as an advisor and teacher at the CGFED very interesting, a unique opportunity to learn about Vietnamese social issues and to interact with minds young and old. I attended my first World Bank teleconference meeting with VIP's in Washington and Tokyo this morning, in preparation for a grant application for our research center. Working on the emerging and threatening HIV epidemic in Việt Nam will help me understand this society even better: How is this Buddhist and Confucian culture, capped by communist ideology, responding to this deadly twentieth century virus – an agent assumed by many people here to have been introduced by the decadent Western life style?

For now, Jeri and I will have to miss the physical comfort of our Davis home, if our priority is to experience living conditions and social values that are quite different from those we have known. We promise ourselves that Sundays will be our "day out" for entertainment and city exploration, and we will tell you more about that part of our life in the next letter.

We love to hear from you whenever you have a moment to drop a line of news or gossip. Don't forget to tell us how the frogs are doing in the street tunnels of Davis this spring!

Now for a few personal notes:

Dear Olav: Every time we go to the market, we walk by the beautiful Danish Embassy which occupies an old French villa near our district. Jeri should not have any problem getting in with her "Jensen" maiden name, but with my flat nose and slanted eyes, I could not pass for an Erik, or a Gustav. It would be nice if you could become the next Danish Ambassador and invite us in!

Dear Kaiser Permanente-Santa Rosa-HIV team: Your gift of the multi-use pocket tool turns out great: it opened a can of Alaska salmon we bought at the local "supermarket", and also came in handy to screw the clothes-rack together. Thanks!

My dear sisters and Anh Đắc: Our flat is located two short blocks from our childhood home at Khúc Hạo. You probably don't know that the neighborhood is now occupied by the Chinese diplomats. A

huge fence (and a guard sticking up an AK-47) prevents us from peeking in our old house, but we can still see the large shade trees that tower over the front balcony. We see our cousins Can, Tùng, and Lai and their families frequently, as Jeri is teaching them (and/or their children) English as well. They have indulged us with elegant North Vietnamese dishes that Mother used to cook for the ancestors' anniversaries. I called and talked to Chị Quy and Chị Hiền briefly, but probably won't get to Saìgòn until May or June.

So long for now, with love,
Chính

From: Lê trung Chính <chjle@hn.vnn.vn>

Date: Hà Nôi, April 6, 2001; 7:07 am

“Comme une salamandre, l’amour est merveilleux...”

Dear Ben, family and friends:

"You can come and brush your teeth now, ma chérie. I am watching so that the salamander won't jump on you". Earlier, I chased him across the ceiling with a broom, and he went on hiding behind the ceiling water tank. Although not quite reassured, Jeri got to brush her teeth that night under my courageous guard.

You see, we have this 5-inch long, tan-colored creature that crawls on the ceiling and has a long, floppy tail and protruding black eyes - an ecologically friendly beast, since he eats mosquitoes, but a creepy and ugly uninvited houseguest, nevertheless. It was not reassuring to Jeri when I told her that one of my most vivid childhood memories was a salamander story: We were eating our family dinner, and two newts were chasing each other across the ceiling. Marital dispute, or a fight over a mate, who knows? One lost his (or her?) grip against gravity and fell on the dinner table. And so that night Jeri was convinced that this creature was going to skydive from the ceiling and streak across her neck when she brushed her teeth. But the beast has stayed away for now.

The next day, I covered the windows with mosquito netting, duck-taped all the cracks in the wall, and since then we have not seen the nocturnal visitor inside our flat. We hear him occasionally croaking outside with a high-pitched squeal, perhaps just warning us that he is waiting for the right moment to sneak back in.

As we enter our second month of stay in Hà Nội, this salamander has been our newest and perhaps only social acquaintance besides the neighbor family and Jeri's students. We have found ourselves unable to say “No” to many requests for English lessons and have had little time to pursue other social activities. Mrs. Thu, our neighbor lady downstairs who owns the Lipton Café, has taken her duty of neighborhood watch to a higher level of responsibility: She now inspects our grocery bag when we come home from the local market. On one occasion, she bawled me out for spending 5,000 VN *đồng* (the equivalent of US $0.30) too much for ten ripe tomatoes, one kilo of bananas, and two bunches of green vegetable (the total came up to 12,000 VN *đồng* - about US

$0.85). Friendly and sincere, she minces no words, though: she will not allow local merchants to take advantage of us, “ex-pats” *(“Việt Kiều”*). She has also taken upon herself the mission of getting Jeri to eat as much Vietnamese food and to speak as much Vietnamese as possible. She plainly stated: "I want to be sure that when you get back to the US, you will miss good Vietnamese cooking". It is indeed traditional for many cultures, especially in resource-poor countries, for the host to put fabulous meals on the table to make the guests feel valued. But today, I just had to tell our lady neighbor that actually, we enjoy and miss Western food very much. This sent her in a moment of stupor and shock. Missing American food over her exquisite local cuisine? I personally can eat Vietnamese food all the time, and enjoy the fresh fruit juice drinks that Mrs. Thu makes for us, but Jeri no longer has the stomach for consuming much of the stuff when she sees under what conditions they are prepared.

Despite our limited cooking facilities, we have managed to satisfy our hunger for familiar food. Jeri has made crepes three times since we came (and they are delicious with mangos, or ripe bananas, with or without cheese). We had a heavenly delicious tiramisu at a French café, and finding restaurants that make the best caramel custard in Hà Nội has become Jeri’s most pleasurable entertainment on weekends (our vote: the *Paris Café*, across from the Opera House). Last Sunday, Jeri had an-honest-to-God perfect hamburger, bleeding in real Ketchup at the Hà Nội Tower Restaurant that overlooks the infamous “Maison Centrale - Hà Nội Hilton”, home of many POWs several decades ago. I can easily thrive on my native food for the rest of my life, and Jeri also likes many Vietnamese dishes, but eating exotic food is like taking Disneyland rides: it's great once in a while, but not as a daily treat. It seems that our taste buds were primed in infancy and childhood, and once deprived of our familiar diet, our stomach and our soul long for the “comfort foods” of our youth. During our many strolls around our neighborhood, we recently found a store that stocks imported processed Western food. It seems like “Heaven on earth”! So we are now delighted that for breakfast, Jeri can have Kellogg cereals and wholesome fresh milk, while I dig my teeth in bread, French-baguette style, sliced lengthwise to sandwich a ripe banana. Oh, how sweet the tastes of childhood, and how vital it is to bring them back!

Besides food, the sights and sounds of the city have taken Jeri’s acquaintance with Việt Nam to a new level. Perhaps Hà Nội’s chaotic street scenes are not that different from many crowded cities of the developing world. But we feel that we can never get tired of people watching here. We are always surrounded by waves of human bodies and souls, flooding the streets, crisscrossing and intermingling in all directions, yet rarely getting into angry confrontations. Poor families live in

shacks and run-down tenements that are squeezed between the elite ‘s colorful and tall brick buildings, but so far the gap between the nouveau rich and the forever poor has not driven the crime rate up. We feel very safe walking at night in what would look like the worse slums in America.

The following is a selection of “postcards” of life scenes in Hà Nội we could send you: imagine electricity and telephone lines intertwined in disorganized bundles dangling at neck-high levels, ready to strangle a distracted tourist; street eateries everywhere, with customers squatting on low red plastic stools, eating snacks or full meals prepared from baskets or pushcarts. The vendors’ facilities for cooking, serving, and dishwashing are all combined in one portable unit. Families do their cooking and laundry “*au plein air*”, culinary and fiber artists in their own right. Friends and neighbors lounging in front of doorways, chatting and grooming each other’s hair. Young couples looking for privacy will ironically find it by getting lost in crowded “Lipton or Dilmah Tea” cafés, or under the shadow of a tree by the Hoàn Kiếm Lake that is encircled by waves of human traffic. Everywhere, life seems to pour from the homes into the streets. Only between one and four o’clock in the very early morning hours, after the city street sweepers have done their work, and until the first street merchants trickle back before sunrise, does the city seem to rest.

It has been said that life without paradoxes is not real life, and in Việt Nam this is quite true. What the Green Berets, B-52 and US Marines could not do 40 years ago, corporations like Nike and Adidas have achieved without spilling a drop of blood. Western capitalism, not long ago declared the ultimate evil by socialist revolutionaries, is welcomed now in an ironic twist of history. Franco-Vietnamese or Amerasian kids, products of past wars and once despised as *“bụi đời”* (*"*dust of life*"*) have come and gone in national anger and shame, only to be replaced now by more ethnically pure Vietnamese youngsters who dye their hair brown and reddish, and adorn the latest Gap or Calvin Klein fashions.

From large corporations to small street vendors, entrepreneurism is everywhere: For 300 VN *đồng* (less than 5 U.S. cents), you can have your weight taken on a wobbly portable scale - not a great tourist attraction, you can guess, but a hit with skinny locals whose measure of prosperity may be proportional to one’s waistline. You can buy your cigarettes one or two at a time, have your hair cut and ear wax removed on the sidewalk of busy streets, and purchase a cure for any of your ailments with the choice of Oriental herbs and snake wine, or with Western antibiotics without a prescription.

A motor scooter and a cell phone are survival necessities for the middle and upper classes, almost symbolic of the “rat race” that is evident everywhere in the urban areas. This is the new Việt Nam.

But the past is never entirely gone. Right next to the culture of consumerism, for many Hà Nội residents life moves at a more resilient, 19th century pace. Most of the very heavy loads, like charcoal for cooking, cement bags and bricks for home building and repair, food products to the local market - are still being moved on two- or three- wheeled cycles, or on carts pushed or pulled by men drenching in sweat, or on bamboo poles balanced across the shoulders of women. Just outside the city limits, farmers till the hard clay soil walking behind their water buffaloes - their most precious assets, and irrigate their fields by swinging baskets that scoop and pour water. On our excursions in the Red River delta surrounding Hà Nội, we have yet to see any motorized farm equipment. Official statistics put the population living below poverty level at 20%. These are the people who practically make their living on the city sidewalks, are subsistence farmers in remote mountain areas, or cultivate the fields near levees that hopefully will hold back the next flood of the monsoon rain. Their hard labor brings about the equivalent of $1.00 USD a day.

Another reality is challenging my naïve version of the country I left 30 years ago. Before coming back, my memory had romanticized the picture of the Vietnamese schoolgirls dressed in white *“áo dài”* like gracious white butterflies scattering in the spring breeze. Now in Hà Nội, they are hard to find. I have not gotten used to the sight of the modern young women riding motor scooters like get-away bandits, with gloves up to their forearms and bandanas across their lower faces. They are protecting themselves from the harsh tropical sun and city air pollution, of course, but Jamie, a Canadian fellow and AIDS consultant for the British Council in Việt Nam whom I recently met, had a different take on this. He told me this is a good sign: *"You see,* he said*, Việt Nam is a very condom-friendly country. Vietnamese women love barrier protection against anything that can be harmful, like sunlight and smoke."* The extrapolation being: this sensible, weaker sex would love condoms too. This makes sense, I thought for a moment. For a 1,000 VN *đồng* (less than 10 cents) you can readily buy three high quality condoms. However, I wish that HIV prevention could be that simple! More than ten years after the first case of AIDS was reported in Việt Nam, I have not seen many Hà Nội man wearing gloves and masks for protection against the natural elements. So to think that they would actually wear condoms... well, we may need another international grant to test Jamie’s hypothesis.

Closer to home, over the past month, Jeri's Vietnamese language skills and vocabulary have expanded quite a bit, but I can't claim any credit for that. We have our own ESL work during the day, so for me to teach Jeri Vietnamese names of furniture, food items, and weather conditions is hardly a romantic evening conversation for the two of us. But the three children of our baritone lady neighbor downstairs, aged 3 to 7, are quite eager to teach Jeri some common Vietnamese sentences, in exchange for Jeri's teaching them a few English words and art projects. These kids turn out to be incredibly tough teachers: Jeri may have to repeat a word ten, twenty times if necessary to have the right intonation. And how those kids would break in happy laughter and clapping when Jeri finally gets it! Last week, Jeri learned her first Vietnamese song: from a six-year old neighbor girl, cute like a doll, who taught her this chorus:

"Our glorious nation had won 30 years of foreign wars,
Viva Việt Nam, Viva Hồ Chí Minh!"

Was it a subtle political tit-for-tat for my brainwashing Jeri's students with Bob Dylan's song, *"For the times, they are a changin' "?*

Speaking of language, it has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. In Việt Nam, a word is worth a thousand pictures. Many Vietnamese words and expressions carry rich metaphors, and none of the linguistic imageries should be lost in translation. So, a construction company specializing in high-rise building advertised itself on a huge English-language billboard as an *"erection company"*. The gastrointestinal department of the local teaching hospital has an English subtitle of *"diarrhea-training unit"* on its door. Reading the national *"Việt Nam News"* gives us our daily dose of the Vietnamese news that call for no further explanation. Take some of these headlines: *"Dairy venture milks market"; "River of funds needed for water"; "Australia's slowing wine industry looks to uncork growth"; "US polls pooh-pooh Bush's tax plans"; "Elevator venture on the up"; "Việt Nam needs an intellectual hot house"* (meaning an Institute or Academy of Sciences); and what about this one: *"Artificial fertilization yields juicier crabs"* - I thought for a moment that getting pubic lice is a bonus offered at local in-vitro fertilization clinics, but they were actually talking about the high-tech commercial production of seafood aficionados. At the "Hà Nội Towers" restaurant, the sandwich section of the menu is labeled in English: *"Stuff that is between bread"*. The management was also very apologetic for a month or so: A footnote on the menu said: *"Dear customer: We are still looking for waiters and waitresses with exceptionally long arms. Meanwhile, you may wish to*

assist by passing the plates along." Finally, we have yet to figure this one out: *"In honor of our past clients, we refuse to serve pumpkin soup."*

At one of Hà Nội's few movie theaters, one can now see *"The Gladiator"* dubbed in Vietnamese, but we figure that watching ancient Romans speaking Vietnamese would not seem real. On second thought: Romans speaking Hollywood English is not real either, but somehow we have tolerated the Americanization of global history as naturally as we expect world trade to be moved by the green back dollar. And so it is for the new popular culture as well: there is a Vietnamese version of "Wheel of Fortune" on TV, watched by millions every night. What happened to the poster-perfect image of the Soviet-style, hardworking proletariat who spurns instant riches generated by the capitalistic evil?

You may think that we are in Hà Nôi just to poke fun at a 4,000-year old culture. Not at all. We are just putting in good humor the sounds and smells of a vibrant society rushing into the twenty-first century, as we are enjoying it right now, with all its charms and paradoxes. On the serious side of our adventure, we will talk more about our observations of the Vietnamese society at work at a later date. Both Jeri and I have found our work quite rewarding and well appreciated. Beside working with CGFED on various seminars and writing grant applications, I have been offered a consultant position with CDC at the US Embassy, and Jeri just found out about some social activities she may join, like the "Friends of Vietnamese Heritage" and the "International Women's Press Club".

We hope that our social circle will widen with these opportunities. We start to long for simple conversations in plain and fluent English with other "ex-pats" and new acquaintances without the trying demands of ESL teaching or the constant effort of bilingual translation. Otherwise, to break up the loneliness of our present shelter, we may have to invite back our salamander visitor. We may very well need him after all, with the approach of summer and the Dengue fever season. So sing on, Enrico Macias, sing on: *"Comme une salamandre, l'amour est merveilleux..."*

From: Lê trung Chính <chjle@hn.vnn.vn>

Date: 20 April 2001, 8:05 a.m.

Hot days in Hà Nội.

Dear Ben, family and friends,

Under the suffocating heat spell of the last two weeks, Hà Nội has decorated itself with red banners, and red flags with gold stars, hammers and sickles hanging from every home and across every street to welcome the delegates of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) to its IXth Congress. These party members, mostly men in dark Western suits, zipped through the capital's avenues in tinted-windowed mini-vans and sedans, as police escorts with shrieking sirens parted the usual chaotic sea of motor scooters, bicycles loaded with market products, and street vendors balancing baskets on their shoulders. This red and gold display of national glory has added lively colors to the capital city's usual landscape of laundry drying from windows and balconies, dangling telephone and electric cables, and rows of green shady trees that grace the old French villas, now home to government administrators and foreign diplomats.

During the two weeks of the VCP Congress, Hà Nội's populace seemed to carry on with its daily bustling and noisy activities as though nothing different was happening. And most tourists would not know that, months before this Congress meeting, this nation's administrative operations had come to a standstill. Even house remodeling permits were not issued, I was told, because nobody wanted to take action on anything now and risk finding oneself "on the wrong side" later. Large meetings, especially with foreigners, were not allowed, for fear of outside political contamination or plotting. And so, the educational seminars scheduled with the Việt Nam Project and sponsored by the California Chapter IV of the American Academy of Pediatrics were cancelled at the National Pediatric Institute. Never mind that we were just going to talk about respirators for preemies, CPR updates, and prevention of nosocomial infections. But for now, these presentations will have to wait, so that our Vietnamese partners to pay full attention to patriotism and national issues. Just before the May Day celebration, political buzzwords like *“harmony, national unity and pride*" (all code words for state censorship?) , "*moving the economy forward*", "*integrity and virtues*", "*controlling social evils like drug abuse and HIV/AIDS*" made the daily media headlines.

Finally, a new, younger leader was elected. The nation took a deep breath. While a more progressive economic policy - continuing the path of *Đổi Mới (Renovation)* which was started in 1986 - was welcomed by everyone, the rumor that the new leader is an illegitimate child of Bác (Uncle) Hồ and an ethnic minority mountain woman was no less noticable. School history books never mentioned the sexual life of Jesus, Lenin, or Mao, perhaps not to dilute their exemplary virtues, and so it was with the father of our modern nation until now. That Bác Hồ had "real human traits just like all of us" - as our *cyclo* driver commented - was quite acceptable to the common people. And so, as the Party 's Congress came to an end, even the sweltering heat spell lifted for a few days, with a light delta breeze gently blowing red flags and clean laundry hanging from the city's windows and balconies.

Việt Nam today is a country of perplexing contradictions and paradoxes. Except for the tight ruling by a so-called "People's Party" (whose real main concern is to maintain its members' power and privileges), nothing would tell you that this is supposedly a "socialist" republic. Certainly, large political billboards still idolize young men and women with Soviet style revolutionary toughness and determination expressed on their strong rectangular faces, broad jaws and bulging muscles. Yet, even Lenin has recently lost a bit of his glory. His imposing statue still looks across Điện Biên Phủ Avenue toward the Army museum, and to *"that MIG jet plane that shot down a B52"* - as our gracious host pointed out to us on our very first day in Hà Nội. But old Vladimir now seems happy enough just supervising a bunch of kids playing soccer in the park, while "protecting his pants from pickpockets", as the joke goes among the locals. And I suspect they tied down Uncle Hồ's embalmed body that was laid to rest in the massive gray mausoleum against his wish. Otherwise, the venerable Uncle would have risen from his tomb in horror for what has happened to the principles of the classless socialist society he fought for. He would have cried out his anger over the rapidly widening gap between the have's and have-not's, the inequities in the educational and health care systems, and at the corruption and greed of the Party he founded. Interestingly enough, the common man in the street seems to take everything with a benign philosophy. "You see, one of the taxi drivers explained, it was easy to be a clean and honest leader when the whole country was poor. There was nothing to get, nothing to take. But now, with the economic boom, it is not so easy to resist the temptation of wealth when one has the power to do so".

When asked what people feel about the promises of the new Congress, my motor scooter taxi-man wisely commented: "If they don't say much now, they can't be wrong later, can they?" But Dr. Huệ, a pediatrician at the prestigious National Institute of Pediatrics, still had fire in her small black eyes

when she said: *"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose".* What Dr. Huệ expected not to change is the corruption that is part of daily life here: money under the table used by the powerful to accumulate more wealth, and by the little guy to supplement miserable governmental salaries. Make a move, and you are crossing into somebody else's "jurisdiction", and so bureaucracy is a convenient game of power (*"I am the one with the right stamp"*) and unaccountability *("it's not my responsibility")*. Want to run your business without being hassled? Giving 10-20% of your profits can make “the authorities” look the other way. Want your doctor to write you a prescription? Just slip a few dollars in the folder of your medical records. But most Vietnamese are now just too busy making ends meet to care about the promise of a socialist utopia, and too tired for another revolution. So life goes on in Việt Nam, and actually quite a few things get done. "Better than in most developing countries", said Alf, a Swedish fellow we met over lunch one day at the Café Mocha. At least, he's the one who should know more than the rest of us: he has spent decades of his professional life as a consultant “to improve bureaucracies” around the world - a quixotic pursuit at its best!

One remarkable thing though: Jeri and I feel quite safe in Hà Nội, even as we walk in very poor neighborhoods. Perhaps because of the semi-police state that protects foreigners and tourists for their economic contribution, or because the city is so crowded that it would be hard for anyone to do mischief without being witnessed. Petty crime and personal violence in the streets seem quite rare in the capital city. Several hundred yards away from our place, hanging on the outside wall of the neighborhood administrative building, a mailbox spells the following: *"Drop here the names of people with criminal activities"*. A socialist version of our neighborhood watch? A bit scary - the thought has crossed my mind more than once. What if the guy across the street, or one of my coworkers does not like my look or what I say? What if he stuffs my suitcase with illegal drugs when I am away from my hotel room? An anonymous note could send me through the dark mace of a police state gulag that responds only to the "right connections" or the right amount of cash. Of course, my fear is probably not justified, for it only reflects my anxiety about living in a society where I feel like a closely watched stranger.

Speaking of police, it seems that the observance of the law and order and the need for freedom of expression somehow balance each other no matter where we live. In the US, we enjoy much political freedom, and so have little need to break laws that regulate our daily lives, like traffic laws, city ordinances and the like. Paradoxically in countries where there is less political freedom, breaking the small petty laws seems a way of expressing one’s defiance to the government. So, in

Hà Nội, judging from the city traffic or commercial schemes, we witness an incredible disregard of any law one can get away with, yet we are also aware that its citizens know the rules of the bigger game very well: that the only move one should not make is to threaten the monopoly of the party in power. Private jokes among friends and public complaints about "the system" are quite safe to express. But most people seem to know when not to cross the line: never attack the leaders and the Party in power by name.

If there is little political freedom in Viêt Nam, I also realize that many Vietnamese would not feel comfortable with a Western style democracy. The traditional values of this society are not individuality or competitiveness, but community and harmony, as they have been for centuries under Confucianism. Harmony, of course, is often an overrated word, for whoever sets the conditions and terms of the harmony has most to gain. But as long as people have close support from neighbors and families, and as long as the economy is good, state policies that seem paternalistic and even authoritarian are of little concern to the little guy. The common Vietnamese seem to trust their leaders to navigate the nation safely in this confusing, modern world, and would tolerate some corruption in exchange. Actually, well-traveled Westerners we have met have told us that corruption is nowhere as bad in Việt Nam as in other developing countries like Pakistan or Indonesia, and the political tyranny practiced by the Vietnamese Communist Party is less obvious than what is seen in China. Or may be it seem less so only because the world pays less attention to Việt Nam as it does to China, making the plea of political dissidents in our small country is less known.

Speaking of China, the mistrust and bad blood between the two nations have not changed much, even when the VCP models itself after the big brother up north. The scars of the 1978 border war are still visible in many Vietnamese, and the territorial dispute over the Paracels Islands and the oil fields in the South China Sea (which we Vietnamese call *“Biển Đông”*, the “Eastern Sea”) surfaces on and off, rattling some patriotic nerves. After all, the history of a thousand years of Chinese occupation is hard to forget. Here is one of the latest rumors among the locals: there is a big problem with rats everywhere in Việt Nam because the Chinese are buying and eating all our cats and snakes as gourmet food. Water buffalo feet are also in demand in China as medicinal potions, so here again they are stealing our most valuable farm animals. Yes, this is a big Chinese plot to ruin our rice crops and starve us to death. Kid you not, even my educated cousins believe in this conspiracy theory.

Another paradox in Việt Nam revolved around gender issues and equal opportunities for all classes. Early in their revolution, Hồ Chí Minh and the Communist party promised and implemented full constitutional equality between the sexes. But they were not able to shake up the thousand years of Confucian order. The modern urban Vietnamese woman remains torn between her educational and economic success and her traditional role of servitude to her male. It was explained to me that, if indeed the woman's role is to maintain harmony in the home, she also should be the first to take the blame for any domestic problems. In matters of improved opportunities for everyone, the revolution has done very well in providing public education until recently. Now, although the literacy rate is quite high (90-95%) for a low-income country, public education is free only up to the 5th grade. So most Vietnamese middle-class families spend between 25-40% of their income on school fees and private cram classes for their children. A few are even able to buy educational certificates through social connections or with plain cash. For the most fortunate, a scholarship to the US, for themselves or their children, is the most valued ticket to success. Indeed, the Vietnamese have tossed out the Soviet educational and technical model (while still praising it as "fundamentally very good") and crave for the Yankee entrepreneurship (more "pragmatic", they say). Sadly, for the majority of young Vietnamese, already set back by the consequences of 30 years of war that crippled their parents' generation, the quality of higher education here falls short of preparing them to compete against the elite from other Asian economic "tigers".

While an emerging middle class is often seen as a force for democracy and progressive political changes, it seems to thrive here mainly as a new autocracy created by the greenback dollar. Yuppie parents, while proud of their Vietnamese heritage, will show off that they can afford to feed their chubby kids American-style hotdogs, whole cow's milk, sliced white bread and potato chips, pushing the obesity rate among urban children to double digits, while UNICEF still reports that 30% of all Vietnamese children are undernourished. Everywhere I look, the effort the Vietnamese are engaging in "catching-up" with more developed countries seems to be a double-edged sword. Little do they know that Westerners have overrated their own civilization and are now taking a step backwards!

Finally, new social problems are being identified, and aggressively denounced in public: HIV and the drug epidemic; human trafficking and prostitution. By many accounts, these problems are just the new faces of the miseries that the human race has struggled with for centuries. Still, you can't go anywhere in Việt Nam today without being reminded of these "new social evils". These problems

are addressed mainly through public billboards and posters, harsh laws and social rejection, as if waving the banners of morality will be all that is needed to make them go away.

And so, Việt Nam, at the dawn of the new millennium, seems to be full of paradoxes and uncertainties. The neat Yin and Yang circle (in Vietnamese, we call it *Âm Dương*) that symbolizes the traditional harmony in the Oriental cultures, tangled here with the old and rusty socialist hammer and sickle symbols and the power of the greenback, is rather blurry nowadays.

For a few years to come, I suspect that Việt Nam will continue to fascinate many visitors. From their air-conditioned buses, and now safe from the pestering of souvenir street vendors because of the government crackdown, tourists will love the beautiful, idyllic green rice fields with rugged mountains in the background, or the long beaches of white and golden sand for a fraction of the price they would pay in Hawaii or the Caribbean Islands. They will wonder about the strength of tiny women balancing huge piles of vegetables or fruit on their shoulders, and they will shake their heads at the traffic chaos and the plastic litter along the streets. World economists will applaud Việt Nam's economic potentials, as globalization means finding cheaper labor and larger consumer markets. But overseas investors will need much courage to cross the Vietnamese city traffic, and should be warned that all these entrepreneurs on motorbikes and cell phones will move Việt Nam to where the Yin and the Yang are no longer a circle of harmony, but a circle of paradox and chaos, the Yin of a smiling face juxtaposed with the Yang of foreign mistrust. Bleeding-heart humanitarians who want to help this country will quickly feel wounded if they want to "change the system". The best hope is to offer the young people of Việt Nam an opportunity to think "outside the box", so that they may someday change the system from within. Vietnamese are very quick at learning streetwise skills; if motivated, they are also hard working and industrious; and above all, forever friendly and appreciative, but only after mutual trust is established.

On Kỳ Mã avenue, on the way to the glittering Dae Woo hotel and to the run-down National Pediatric hospital a few blocks beyond, there stands an office that offers employment and job referrals. In big English letters, it says: *"Brains for Rent"*. By the Hoàn Kiếm Lake, in the new bookstore that is Hà Nội's version of Barnes and Nobles, Bill Gates with his broad smile, and Harry Potter behind his thick glasses, both translated in Vietnamese language, are the best sellers. And in a country where most professionals earn a monthly government salary equivalent to $35-50 US dollars, the newest TV show is a Vietnamese version of "How to become a Millionaire". Maybe for now, Việt Nam has found its own answers to the twenty-first century challenges.

In the final analysis, Việt Nam's vitality and future has always been and will always be its resilient, intelligent, and hard working people. Yet its curse for decades to come may be its overpopulation: too many kids to educate and employ. The encouraging statistics that one reads from UNICEF and the World Bank do not tell the story of many of the people here who labor and struggle quietly, the widening inequity among its citizens, and the uncertainties of this society in transition. How will the Yin and Yang of an old gentle land of Taoism and a polluting consumer market of “everything plastic” coexist? How will the mass of destitute peasants in over-cultivated lands, and of migrant workers in the polluted cities confront the new arrogant and privileged upper class minority? Will this nation of proud warriors and great revolutionaries ever find wisdom in peace as it found strength in wars? When will there be another turtle emerging from the sacred Hoàn Kiếm Lake, bringing wisdom to its leaders and a magic sword to fight off another confrontation with its giant neighbord, the Chinese? To navigate through challenging times, a nation needs either a great leader to guide the masses, or a solid political system to protect it from poor leaders. In these April days of the IXth Party Congress, my eyes are getting too blurry in this sea of red flags and banners to answer these questions. Oh, how I wish that a gentler Yin and Yang, a wiser *Âm Dương* would embrace poor Việt Nam!

From: Lê trung Chính <chjle@hn.vnn.vn>
Date: 15 May 2001, 7:05 a.m.

Victoria train to Sapa

Dear Ben, family and friends,

For the tourist tired of the crowds and noises of Hà Nội, Sapa is an enchanted place that transposes you to another world. It is a land of rugged green mountains shrouded by the morning fog, and terraced rice fields reflecting the mid day sun like mirrors of the sky. Men tracking behind water buffaloes, and women in black clothes lined with brightly stitched garments work the narrow strips of land as if they were climbing a stairway to the heavens. It is one of the few places on earth where the artist in search of the enchanting world can capture exotic snap shots or create idyllic paintings, but his art will likely fail to capture the hardship of the people who live and work the land. For here in Sapa, the clay soil blows as a pink dust in the dry sun, and turns into a red gooey mud in the rain. Here, the earth delights the soul of the artist, but this same earth breaks the back of the laborer and stunts the growth of his children.

The *H'Mông, Giây* and *Yao* people of Sapa, generation after generation, terrace upon terrace, seem to have a unique resilience that helps them endure conditions that have driven other populations away. Here, working for basic survival can break all your bones and drain all your sweat. Here, for a full year's work, the earth rewards you with only one crop of rice - a third of the yield that the *Kinh* (Việt) people get from their fields in the Red River or Mekong deltas. Recently, electricity has been brought in to these ethnic minority communities, but just enough to light a 25-watt bulb for each household. Occasionally a small, homemade turbine captures the falling water from a brook and discharges electricity through a thin wire, to the delight of trekking tourists who marvel at the ingenuity of the local peasants. Water is still a gift collected from the mountains and clouds above, and preciously stored in big urns or a few cement tanks donated by UNICEF a few years ago. Women and children attend to a few farm animals, gather firewood, and don a happy smile if they can sell you a homemade souvenir. Schooling ends by the age of 10 or 12 for many, but these merry kids manage to pick up quite a bit of English vocabulary from tourists. But here in these villages, suspended in silence after the tourists have gone home, who needs television when one can watch the skies at night and listen to the heavens whisper through the bamboo forest?

The visit to Sapa reminded me how immensely diverse our human conditions are. We declared a world where “all men are created equal” and where “the pursuit of happiness” is a constitutional right. Not just for the sons and daughters of Thomas Jefferson in America, but Hồ Chí Minh himself also proclaimed this in 1945 for all Vietnamese. But these “self-evident” and noble truths will never speak the global realities of life. A child born to drug-addicted parents, a young peasant girl at the mercy of human traffickers, or a *H‘Môn*g child destined to work the clay soil of Sapa will never have the same opportunities as the child born into a privileged family.

Perhaps the spell of these green mountains and valleys, hidden by the morning fog and baked by the mid day sun, will haunt anyone who chooses to leave the ancestral ground. As much as they seem to be destined for a life of hard work and poverty, the villagers of Sapa seem to be in complete harmony with the colors and sounds of their land; with the tall bamboo trees that cluster together, bending in the wind but never breaking; with the terraced sides of mountains that hold the water and the red soil for a few bags of rice; and with the rain, the sun, and the wind that have carved out the wrinkles on the faces of the elders. One can wish for better economic opportunities, bring better education and modern technology to the villagers of Sapa. But try to transplant one of these children who hop and giggle with neighbors, friends and water buffalos among these mountains and rice fields to a city of neon lights and honking cars, and you might take away his or her soul without a guarantee of a kinder and gentler world away from home.

Traveling to Sapa in the Victoria train that carried all the comforts of life that Western tourists desire, I counted the blessings of my own pursuit of happiness. I have climbed the towers of education and the ladders of economic opportunities. I have lived in relative luxury and feasted on the healthiest food. I have studied present and dead civilizations, and I now live in one of the richest nations on earth. I have even developed new material “needs” that other human beings here don’t have, since living in comfort has softened my bones and weakened my mental resilience. Most of all, the feeling of “belonging” escapes me at times, like a stranger wandering in a distant land. In Sapa, I met a young *H’Môn*g girl who lived as simply as a fish in water and who sold me an indigo handbag decorated with brightly colored needlework. I don’t even know her name, but her simple smile told me that she knew exactly where she belongs: where her family water buffalo steadily walks the green rice fields dug out of the red clay soil that terraces up to the heaven of the cool morning mist.

From: Lê trung Chính <chjle@hn.vnn.vn>
Date: 20 June 2001, 8:10 a.m.

"Adieu to Hà Nội"

Dear Ben, family and friends,

We departed from Việt Nam rather abruptly in May, to the surprise and regret of many of our new friends and students. It seemed that several big and small things have unexpectedly worked together to cut our stay shorter than originally planned. Small things that come with living in a tropical territory, like cockroaches the size of your thumb that make their Texas cousins look like wimps; small things like finding that someone overnight had taken a big bite of your mangos on the table, and realizing who it was when a rat dashed across the kitchen counter, unbashfully like a nude college stud across the football field. And big things to which Hà Nội residents have adapted, but we couldn't: the sweltering heat of the summer that is so intense that even your bones feel they are softening, and your brain feels it is melting down; big things like the 24/7 noise and air pollution, and the crowded living quarters that make impossible the simple pleasure of a stroll down a quiet street, with your mind free of human concerns for just a precious moment. Of course, Hà Nội at the start of the twenty-first century is by no means the Congo of the 1960s so vividly portrayed in Barbara Kingsolver's "Poisonwood Bible", but everything is relative, I guess. Jeri and I felt that this stay was not going to be good for us as a couple with such different backgrounds and expectations.

Something in the air has been so bad that Jeri's eyes have been inflamed for a few weeks, soon after we moved to a nice flat on Nguyễn Trường Tộ Street. Is it from the incense sticks that our landlady burns at her husband's altar everyday? Or from the traffic pollution that drifts up through the windowpanes? A bad case of *Chlamydia* passed on by contaminated hands or towels? It wasn't very comforting to find that the over-the-counter eye drops the local pharmacist recommended was a combination of chloramphenicol and Decadron drops (a rather dangerous drug combination no longer used in the US). We did finally get some more appropriate, safer eye drops from my cousin's wife (an ophthalmologist) some days later. With my current knowledge of how undependable the local health care system is, this incident gave us a personal warning that obtaining reliable medical care in case of emergency may be a bit risky. Hence, the mixed feelings I had about leaving Việt Nam early soon evaporated when it stood to reason to consider our health first. We later learned that the CDC project I would be working on is coming to a standstill for the next few months

because of staff changes, and a “time-out” for the Vietnamese government to review the proposal. Tourists, we no longer were, so there was even less of a reason to stay.

We have had a rather unique experience living with the "real people" of Hà Nội. We did not retreat to some high-priced residential quarters sanitized to the standards of Western expatriates. Our acquaintances in Việt Nam all had the sincere and generous desire to integrate us into their lifestyle, and with all our five senses, we did the best we could. But, in the final count, we underestimated the fact that our basic needs were different from those of the local residents. Basic needs as simple as the need for privacy, or just for a quiet evening without honking motorcycle or car horns blasting under the balcony; the longing for some familiar food and faces like old friends and close family. Jeri made some great efforts to learn Vietnamese, but realized that she will never be able to be her independent self in a foreign land of complex intonations and a fast moving streetwise culture.

There is certainly much work - yes a lot of work one can volunteer to do, and many good people to meet and know better, had we decided to stay longer. But work is never finished. Some acquaintances, we will remember simply as a smile, a handshake, or a lasting impression. Others, we hope we will meet again, having struck a common chord of music or a bonding chemical formula. We both enjoyed our work. Jeri naturally won the hearts and minds of many of her students, and she will be missed. I helped write a few grants, gave HIV seminars that were well received, and even did a brief consultation work for the CDC to set up a peri-natal HIV prevention program in Hải Phòng (a port city of > 1.2 million). And we sang plenty of Dylan and Lennon to the young and not-so-young-anymore souls of Hà Nội who joined us *"Blowin' in the Wind"* and *"Imagine"* a world living as one.

We went to “experience living in a different culture". Jeri read a beautiful poetic translation of "Kim Văn Kiều"[5], the 16th century epic of pure love, honor and ill karma that all Vietnamese identify with. Despite the cultural divide, Kiều’s story reminds us of Tess of the D’Uberville, Thomas Hardy’s beautiful heroine so badly treated by her ill fate. I was ecstatic to find Vietnamese editions of Tintin's adventures, and I do confess they were the extent of my enjoyment of the “Vietnamese literature” for these few months. We did not have much time to sightsee as tourists, but mountains and valleys, bricks and stones don't make up a culture as well as its people. We certainly met up with, and learned from so many interesting Vietnamese individuals from all walks of life: sons, daughters

[5] Written in 1813 by Nguyễn Du (1765-1820) as a poem of 3250 verses, adapted from a Chinese novel

and grandchildren of Communist Party founders who now long for a ticket to America; a guerilla veteran from Điện Biên Phủ (she was 17 years-old then) who married the general who helped the North Vietnamese army defeat the French and Americans by building an incredible network of tunnels. She later became a prominent Party leader and feminist, only to fall disappointed in her 70's with the promises of *Đổi Mới* ("Renovation"); students and professionals in search of a quality of life that for now only money or social connections can buy; motorcycle-, taxi- and cyclo-drivers, many of whom are the forgotten warriors of now forgotten wars; street vendors who barely make a dollar a day, sharing the street with a new generation of Asian Yuppies who cannot live without cell phones; HIV-positive drug addicts who have nothing to live for, and dedicated health care workers with limited resources to combat so many illnesses. They reminded us that, here in Việt Nam like anywhere else in the world, caring for the most rejected individuals in our society is perhaps the ultimate measure of our own humanity. We heard from farmers and writers who seemed to be the last ones holding on to the mythical tales from this Land of the Dragon. Our best images of Việt Nam and its people are eternally fixed in the oil paintings we bought from an artist on Tràng Tiến street by the historic Hoàn Kiếm Lake. Foreign businessmen and humanitarian workers shared their insights about this nation full of paradoxes and potentials. And of course, we had wonderful reunions with family. Many of these voices and faces will stay in our hearts and minds for quite some time. Our impressions may just be snapshots of a complex society in transition taken through the lenses of a romantic expatriate, but for now, we believe we know Việt Nam rather well.

So it was time to move on. Just one last good farewell note from Hà Nôi. Jeri accidentally chopped off the tail of a house salamander while she was cleaning behind the suitcases one day. Was I glad we did not kill it, since it (or he/she?) may be a reincarnated artist or poet in another life! We have stayed long enough to see him (her?) grow back a full-length tail. With the Dengue fever season starting, an agile newt, well fed on mosquitoes, is worth a thousand doctors.

The images and sounds of Hà Nội still haunted me for a few weeks after we left my native city for an R & R. Singapore was of another world, a highly disciplined, well-organized city that takes sanitation to a pubic OCD level, and an Asian culture where East drifts West. The only things Asian about Singapore are its food and Chinese code of business dealings. Otherwise, it seems obsessed in advancing Anglo-American standards of perfection even more than the British or Yankees themselves, as if being at the cutting-edge of a techno-consumer wonderland is the final measure of civilization.

From Singapore we went to Australia. Seeing it as tourists in search of rest and recreation after a "hard life" in Việt Nam, we quickly appreciated this vast, “down under” vacation-land which breathes a unifying national motto: *"Have a great day".* Of course, if you have so many beaches for snorkeling, so many out-backs and deserts to cross, and so many snakes and crocodiles to keep your toes moving, why stress yourself at the office? Life is wide open here, the outdoors are for the restless to roam and conquer, the cities are graced with clubs and pubs for a beer or two among friends, and laced with beautiful botanical gardens for lovers in search of the ultimate rose.

After teaching English in Việt Nam, it was amusing for us to hear Australians speak their British Queen's language with a laid back, cockney Southern US-like accent. And on this continent where the kangaroo is the national icon, men strive to have its physical strength and agility, and women its big eyes and calming grace. It seems to me that Australia as a nation is still defining itself, balancing its British and multi-ethnic heritage with American pop culture - a kangaroo hooping around unpredictable Asian tigers. Its national obsession, besides sports, is the immense national guilt for what was done to the native, indigenous people. Everybody talks about aboriginal spirituality and “dreamtime”, and like in America, the native culture seems a little bit cheapened when turned into a commodity of crafts and commercial arts. But as tourists ourselves staying in hotels and going on guided “safari” tours, we barely scratched the surface of this gentle and kind nation. We miss not having the opportunity to know the Australians at a more personal level. And besides, with the memory of bustling crowds of Hà Nội and the spell of Sapa still fresh in our minds, we could not absorb another cultural experience. We were already longing too much for home, sweet home, back in California.

"A time to be reapin', a time to be sowin',
The green leaves of summer are calling me home."

Reaching out to boat families

From: lg282@columbia.edu
To: Chinhlego2@aol.com

Subject: CGFED awarded first price
Date: Fri, Jan 11, 2002 11:34 AM

Dear Dr. Chính,

I am very happy to inform you that the project prepared by CGFED has won the prize given by the World Bank at the Development Marketplace competition held in Washington D.C. on Jan 9 & 10, 2002. This project is among 34 projects selected from around the world (out of 205 which made the finalist round) that share 4 million dollars of start-up fund. You could imagine how proud Đức and I were to represent CGFED at this event in Washington D.C. We want to thank you for your help in laying important groundwork for the whole process and for your continued interests in the project.

You can read more about the event and about information on other winners at the World Bank's website www.worldbank.org

Please keep in touch.

Best wishes,

Giang

World Bank Awards $4 Million for New Ideas in Development:
Vietnam Won $175,000 Award

Hanoi, January 11, 2002— Press release

World Bank President James D. Wolfensohn in Washington DC yesterday announced the winners of the 2002 Development Marketplace (DM) innovation competition. Among the 34 winners sharing

approximately $4 million in start-up funds to transform their ideas into projects to help to reduce poverty worldwide, one project from Vietnam to improve understanding of and basic services for populations living in coastal waters and waterways prepared by the Research Center for Gender, Family and Environment in Development (CGFED) won $175,000.

"The Development Marketpace program is a great opportunity for a civil society organization like CGFED to make innovative ideas work for the poorest," said Mr. Andrew Steer, Director of the World Bank. ""We believe that this innovative project to bring education and reproductive health services to 10,000 floating families in Vietnam, is an excellent project that has been well-prepared. It should be replicated to serve many other floating families along Vietnam's 3200 km of coast line."

The project ***"Understanding of, and Services for Coastal Population"*** *introduces solutions that will benefit a large number of people working and living exclusively in coastal waters or large waterways. Very little is known about this "floating" population other than the fact that they belong to the poorest and most neglected segments of the society. The project aims to improve existing understandings of this vulnerable population and to improve access to quality services in education and reproductive health care for women. Repeated Participatory Rural Appraisal exercises for learning and empowering throughout the project cycle combined with appropriate interventions to improve educational and reproductive health services are fundamental building blocks of this project. Two representative "water communities", one in the coastal waters of Van Don district, Quang Ninh province and the other in large waterways of Phu Vang district of Hue are selected in the initial period.*

Prof. Le Thi Nham Tuyet, Director of the Research Center for Gender, Family and Environment in Development said, "Our project has been prepared in close consultation with people in two trial districts, and with various local government agencies and civil societies, and the World Bank. It is expected that the project will enrich our understanding of this "hard-to-reach" population and will identify appropriate ways to work with them towards empowering and sustainable growth. Other expected results include high enrollment in illiteracy eradication classes and elementary schooling as well as high turnout at reproductive health clinic and marketplace. It is expected that this project will be a model for assisting many other "water communities" in Vietnam and throughout the developing world."

[...] Some other winning proposals included AIDS Campaign Team Mining *(South Africa,$100,000);* Improving Maternal Health in the Amazon *(Brazil, $94,940);* Buy South Africa Online *(South Africa, $155,913); and* Well-Being of Disabled and Women in Areas of Poverty *(India, $77,918).*

The competition finals, held at the World Bank's headquarters in Washington DC, were open to anyone in the development community. The event showcased more than 200 projects which represented over 70 countries and were drawn from a wide range of development players. DM recognizes innovation and encourages creative partnerships among the NGO, business, development banking, and government sectors. Over the past four years, more than 90 projects have received DM awards, totaling $8.5 million. Today's awards ceremony brought that total up to124 projects, worth a total of $12.5 million.

"We received 2,400 proposals from over 122 countries for this year's competition--from places as varied as Mongolia and Myanmar, Sudan and Togo, Iran and Bhutan, Moldova and Haiti--and this reflects the fact that people all over the world truly want to be involved in the fight against poverty and are trying to make the world a better place," says Development Marketplace Team Leader Arshad Sayed. "DM is helping to remove barriers and is reaching people of good will and creativity, giving us a real chance to make a difference."

A boat family, Hạ Long Bay

Boat villages in Hạ Long Bay (Quảng Ninh province), North Việt Nam, and along the Hương (Perfume) River, Phú Vang district, Huế City

"Boat Families", Hạ Long Bay (original painting 32" x 40")
"Mending the Net" (original painting 20" x 27")
"Boat Families", Hạ Long Bay (original painting 24" x 28")

Hà Nội, April 2002

Of Vitamin K, cochlear implants and fertility clinics.

“What are the most common causes of prematurity in your country?“
“Malnutrition, and too much hard work”, answered Dr. Nga, the chief of Neonatology at the National Institute of Pediatrics (NIP) in Hà Nội.

Dr. Steve R., a neonatologist from Boston, remembered very well this brief conversation he had a few years ago on his first medical tour to Việt Nam. He said to himself then: “What am I doing here? I have nothing in my clinical bag to offer these people.” Yet Steve has come back to Việt Nam every year since then, and has gradually learned to work with the doctors at the NIP to help make significant changes in their nurseries. He now understands that what first appeared to be questionable clinical practices were dictated by limited local resources, while other issues have persisted purely out of sheer bureaucracy and inertia. Equipment donated by visiting medical teams was stacked away for a few years, while some have finally been put to use after much troubleshooting. A pilot study, initiated by Dr. Quỳnh Kiều, a Vietnamese-born physician working with the American Academy of Pediatrics, introducing the routine administration of Vitamin K to all newborns to prevent intracranial hemorrhage (a standard, practice in industrialized countries for decades now) is going well, and upon its completion, the government promises to make it a national standard for all deliveries in Việt Nam. Thousands of infants and their families will be spared the pain and cost of devastating disabilities with such a simple routine measure.

I have great admiration for Q. Kiều and Steve and their colleagues for having the good will and dedication to come back every year to Hà Nội and work at the NIP. They have taken the time to build bridges with their Vietnamese counterparts rather than promising castles in the sand. They demonstrate patience and some humility to gain the trust of the people they want to help. Every year, numerous well-intentioned medical missions go to Việt Nam and other developing countries, donating drugs, materials, services and expertise to assist local health care providers. International teams come and go with great hope and much fanfare. Some aid workers are immediately frustrated by the seemingly chaotic, archaic and “corrupted” system, and won’t return. Some have good intentions but will not make much practical impact. What good is a demonstration of cochlear implants when the country still needs investment in basic maternal and childcare that can prevent

many causes of hearing loss? How much do Vietnamese doctors need to know about stem cell transfusion when 40% of the children living in rural areas are malnourished? Those who come and offer seminars on the latest technologies and therapeutics with little understanding of the local health care system would go home happy, stating: “We’ve been there, and done that“. They may have temporarily satisfied the Vietnamese thirst for new knowledge, but they are more likely to leave a trail of impractical information, unfulfilled needs, and growing frustrations.

Every health care system in the world has its broken pieces and inadequacies. Coming back to Việt Nam, a “socialist” country where one would expect a strong governmental emphasis on public health and investment in basic health needs from cradle to grave, I was shocked and saddened by the disarray in medical services for the majority of the population. Health care workers are paid so poorly that most need “briberies” from patients to make their living. Patients carry their own “medical records” to the clinics, and inserting a few money bills increases their chance of walking out with a prescription, I was told. A simple visit to the doctor may cost some the equivalent of a week to a month’s salary. Water supplies are unreliable even at the Hà Nội NIP, and intensive care units still lack proper hand-washing facilities. Residual effects of the infamous Agent Orange left from the “American War” are blamed for everything, but all waterways are polluted with new industrial and urban waste, and 70% of the adult male population smoke. Children in some provinces have 1-2 meals a day and weigh below the 10th percentile on the WHO growth curves, yet local district officials are resisting aid offers for school nutritional programs because they cannot work through the mace of bureaucratic jurisdictions. Prenatal care in rural areas, where 75% of the population lives, involves no more than one or two weight checks and measurements of abdominal girth. This year, UNICEF reported in its survey that 25% of the population does not have access to iodized salt, setting a quarter million children at risk for hypothyroidism and irreversible mental retardation. It seems to me that a national program for iodization would cost almost nothing! Last, but not least, to control the population growth and curve the rise of “social evils” such as sexually transmitted diseases, public posters are everywhere praising the benefits of one-or-two child families and avoiding HIV. But since sexual health and education is still a social taboo, Việt Nam still has one of the highest rates of abortion in the world, and condoms are used by only 6% of surveyed couples.

Ethical dilemmas of how to prioritize the spending of limited resources are common issues everywhere, but in societies where the gap between the rich and poor is wide, discrepancies in health care services appear even more outrageous. Unthinkable paradoxes continued to puzzle me during my recent visits to Việt Nam. Just an example: Headlines in the newspaper recently lauded

that "*specialists at Từ Dũ Hospital, in Hồ Chí Minh City, are pioneering another high-tech fertility treatment"*. This procedure costs the equivalent of $650 US dollars and boasts a waiting list of over a year, the article continued. But nowhere it mentioned that the yearly public health care expenditure per capita is less than US $4.00, that population control is the most pressing national problem, that only 14% of rural community health centers have piped water, and that 30% of all pregnant women suffer from significant, but treatable anemia. Is it right to by-pass 19th century public health measures that could save the lives of thousands to offer twenty-first century medical advances for the privileged few?

On the other hand, Việt Nam has made some significant health care progress. Its success rests on a well-developed network of community health centers that, while lacking many essential facilities and drugs, have an army of healthcare workers delivering basic preventive measures. Life expectancy approaches that of industrialized nations, maternal and child mortality rates are much lower than in many developing countries, if one can trust the published statistics. Poliomyelitis has been eradicated for many years, measles is under renewed attack with a second vaccine dose, and more childhood immunization programs (against hepatitis B and Japanese encephalitis) are on the way. Unleaded gasoline has become standard in Hồ Chí Minh City since last year, the first in the nation, and iodine supplementation in commercial salt is finally being addressed. While I fear that the rise of a private "fee-for-service" healthcare system will only widen the health equity gap, I am seeing investments in the nation's infrastructure that will pave the road to better education and access to improved health care for more people, hopefully lifting them out of poverty and ignorance, the sources of most diseases. That more people are wearing motorcycle helmets this year compared to the last time we were here was a progress worth celebrating.

My observations here are just snapshots of a health care system where the present "Greenback fever" has replaced the socialist utopia. Of course, snapshots do not paint the whole picture, but they may capture specific events symptomatic of their time and leave us with lasting memories. Việt Nam is a country with many talented and hard working people, and where education has always been the most cherished asset. When asked what is the most important measure to improve the health of the Vietnamese people, a young doctor in the Department of Social Medicine in Huế responded without hesitation. I was glad he did not say: "Give us more money, more drugs, more technology". He only pointed his index finger to his head and simply said: "Education. Convince people to do reasonable things." A brighter future for Việt Nam clearly lies with young minds like

him, hungry for changes and full of unrealized potential. May we all remember the words of their once and mighty leader, controversial as he may be:

“To reap the benefits within 10 years, cultivate a tree.
To reap the benefits for 100 years, cultivate the people.”

Hồ Chí Minh (1890-1969)

Hà Nôi, October 4th, 2002
From the Galaxy Hotel, Hoàn Kiếm district

Back in Hà Nội !

Went to bed at 10 p.m. last night, woke up around 11:30, and again at 1:30 a.m. this morning, my head still heavy from jet lag. Tossed and turned, then grabbed my Roosevelt book[6], read it on and off between bouts of drowsiness, learned about the 1940 democratic convention, and about Eleanor's "friendship" with Joe Lash, a 30-year old romantic socialist the age of her son – just a great chapter, so well written...Then dozed off again...

Soon, starring down from the same window where Jeri and I watched the traffic for so many hours when we stayed at this same hotel in 1997, I watched the city gradually waking up at 4:00 a.m. under low clouds. First trickling in toward the market a few blocks away were the poorest of the poor merchants, the street vendors carrying bulky baskets on their bikes, or balancing them on their shoulders, as they seemed to push, then pull their own shadows under the lazy yellow street lights.

It always seems that the poor have to work the hardest and for the least return on their labor. They are the faces behind the World Bank's statistics of population groups that make less than a dollar a day. Yes, around the globe, these "less-than-a-dollar-a-day" poor constitute 25% of our humanity. And yet, for each one of these vendors I saw today, what they carry to the market before the break of dawn, for less than a dollar a day, means so much to them. These "*rau muống*" ("morning glory spinach") would sell for 1,000 *đồng* a bundle (less than a dime) - but bundle by bundle, customer by customer, that is how the vendors' earnings will be gathered, how their family will get their next meal, and how their kids' schooling will be paid for. Yes, thank God for morning glory spinach, one bundle at a time. In the early hours with the city still asleep, under the dim yellow streetlights, moving like ghosts in the eerie early morning fog, silent and lonely, unseen by most and soon disappearing beyond the next street corner, they are the shadows of resilience, and the faces of this other world that first greeted me back to the city of my birth.

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[6] *"No Ordinary Times", by Doris K Goodwin*

By 5:00 a.m., knowing that I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep as the motorcycles and buses started rolling in, honking and roaring, I got out of bed and took a nice shower. Then back to read some more about the Roosevelt's. Soon a bright orange sun slowly emerged from the clouds like a lost balloon suspended by its own weight – only to disappear again moments later in the morning fog. By then, senior citizens were assembling gaily in the park to the left of the street intersection, ready for their morning group Tai Chi. Soon, they would be swinging their bodies and stretching their arms and smiling in unison to the sound of a squeaky music from the park loud speaker. And then, waves of motorcycles would stream down the streets in all directions, like schools of fish guided by some unseen supernatural forces.

Good morning, Hà Nội, on my first day back!

I have returned to start work with the US CDC /Việt Nam office. Jeri will join me in a month, allowing me to concentrate on my work early, and so that we can have more time together later.

December 2002

Christmas in Hà Nội

Dear friends and family:

Hà Nội has changed a lot since 1997, our first trip to Việt Nam, and every year since we have been back. If glitzy high rises were chart bars that measure economic activities, if remodeled French villas were glorious relics of a much hated colonial time, if traffic jams of roaring motorcycles and cars indicated higher living standards, and if Hà Nội Medical School on its 100th anniversary thought of itself as the Harvard of Indochina, then Hà Nội in 2002 has it all. Charming and bustling, artistic and entrepreneurial, this capital of one of the last five communist countries of the world has certainly forgotten Karl Marx's warning that religion is the opium of the people. But religious or not, Christmas here is mostly celebrated as the birthday of Santa Claus, the Lord of Consumerism. Nothing wrong with that, I guess, since Việt Nam is just catching up with the rest of the world. For us Westerners away from home, we are enjoying the merry season ourselves just as much! On Christmas Eve, Jeri and I went downtown with Dr. Mary Kamb, who I work with at the CDC Hà Nội office, and her adopted 3 years-old daughter Megan. An inflated Santa Claus balloon was climbing the walls of the Opera House, as the immense and tightly packed crowd of young people filled the surrounding streets like a slow moving larva from a volcano erupting to the deafening sound of rock music. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, everyone!

Back to the reality of life, one of our "must-haves" is a local newspaper to keep up with the events of the day. As we have noticed in previous years, the "*Viêt Nam News*", the national English-language newspaper is quite colorful in its choice of words and leaves no room for the imagination. For the last few weeks, its headlines have been ringing out the economic news of the country in better ways than our *Wall Street Journal* could ever do. Here are some examples, straight from the press: *"World Bank and ADB* (Asian Development Bank) *sanguine about VN economic prospects";* "*Cần Thơ* (province*) to juice pineapple potential"; "Nha Trang* (city) *pours money into drains"* (it is building a waste water project); "*Thanh Hóa* (a coastal province in Central Việt Nam*) prospers from fishy business"*; "*New dental care facility cuts its teeth"* in Hà Nội; "*Rubber company bounces ahead"; "English is good for the hip pocket"*. News from the US is usually sparse and not always flattering. Here is the report about the nternational skating event in Spokane earlier this year: *"Figure Skating*

officials rush to exorcise Olympic Demons: Skating haunted by Salt Lake City." While government officials and the young generation could not get enough of American dollars or pop culture, news about American investments or humanitarian programs in Việt Nam were seldom featured in the media. Instead, new ties with Luxembourg or opening markets with Iceland were symbolically more important to report.

For several weeks, another headline in the newspapers was the "catfish trade war" between the US and the Vietnamese. Probably it hardly made news in the US, but it was daily talk among the people here. To avoid the flooding of the American market with cheaper Vietnamese catches, the US apparently drew up technicalities and used biological Latin names that define what can be called a catfish and what cannot. Economic interests were obviously behind this verbal tug of war which went on for a while, only to reinforce the Vietnamese's mistrust of foreign investors and the hard lessons of "free trade" and global markets. And here is the latest shoot out*: "US legal minds set to tackle Việt Nam's intellectual property issues"*.

So, in many ways, Việt Nam's relationship with the US remains a little schizophrenic. George W drumming up war talks against Iraq has not resonated well globally, and naturally in this country where the memories of the "American war" are not yet forgotten, it is easy to understand the general condemnation of a military aggression by the US in Iraq. In early December, Hà Nội' s streets were decorated with red banners celebrating the 30th anniversary of th*e "Điện Biên Phủ in the skies: Victory over the B-52's"*. For a week long, art exhibits and television shows glorified the people who gave this nation the equivalent of the Battle of Britain in 1942. Never mind the fact that London was practically burned to the ground by Nazi German bombs, while the US Navy planes only targeted industrial sections of North Vietnamese towns. December 22nd, 1972 brought the heaviest bombing over Hà Nội. Most local residents still believe that the carpet bombing of one neighborhood and the destruction of parts of their largest city hospital, Bạch Mai, was intentional and not a logistical mistake. Part of the burned wing of the hospital was left untouched, as a memory of this infamous day. Had the civil population not been evacuated to the countryside earlier, my cousin-in-law Khanh said, many more people would have died from American bombs. "But it's history now", she quickly added, we always separate the goodness of the American people from the (bad) policies of its government."

My work at the US Embassy, for the Centers for Disease Control/Global AIDS Program (GAP) has not been affected by the political and historical strains between the two countries. The US has

recently become the biggest donor supporting HIV prevention programs in Việt Nam. I did not know that working for the government comes with so many perks. I had the once-in-a-lifetime chance to ride in an US Embassy SUV that roared down the city avenues or country roads like a Sherman tank, bullying cyclists, street vendors and water buffaloes alike. I got to dine with public health officials at some of the best provincial restaurants, in smoke-filled rooms. (Yes, believe it or not, I have yet to meet a male Vietnamese public health officer who does not smoke!). CDC values my services enough that I got a helmet from the office to wear when I ride on the back of my *"xe-ôm"* motorcycle taxi. On it, the words "Brain Vaccine" were inscribed.

On a more serious side, I had a unique chance to understand the complex health care system of Việt Nam and its challenges in a way that would not have been possible without being part of the CDC AIDS prevention work. Better yet, the greatest serendipity happened through folk songs: I volunteered to provide some singing entertainment at the restaurant *Hoa Sữa* in Hà Nội, a culinary school for disadvantaged youth, and well known to most foreigners. (By the way, what kind of songs did I perform, you may ask? Well, a pot-pouri of Edith Piaf and Bob Dylan. Does that sound outrageous?) Well, the husband of the school's director/restaurant owner turned out to be the professor-mentor of the current Deputy Minister of Health, who then invited me to give a presentation of my proposal. The project was on how to prevent the mother-to-child transmission of HIV. He was an immediate convert, and vowed to support the proposal and implement it quickly nationwide. So hopefully the program will soon move from being just a document in a white binder to being a real effort to reach out and give some hope to HIV-positive women in Việt Nam.

On the living aspect, Hà Nội has changed a lot, but so have we on this trip. Last year, we came to Việt Nam with the idealistic notion that we could live like the native people here, and that only through complete immersion could we appreciate the Vietnamese culture. We were wrong on both counts. This time, we are renting a very nice apartment in a friendly and convenient neighborhood just South of Hà Nội's old town. The Belgium-French deli *("Aux Delices")* located at the corner of our street delights Jeri with good cheese and ham, just as much as the sidewalk food carts outside of our apartment offers me wonderful French baguette bread stuffed with Vietnamese meat and veggies (*Bánh mì thịt*) for less than 50 cents for breakfast. We decided that spending our money on culinary experiences throughout the city would probably be more fun than buying mosquito repellents and anti-malaria pills, or playing tourist at some distant sites. So the Ninh Bình caves, famous enough to be on UNESCO's natural treasures' list, and the Cambodia's Angkor Wat will have to wait for another time, or may be can be safely enjoyed on the Discovery Channel back

home. For now, more than visiting museums or attending theaters, street watching in Hà Nội and eating out will remain our favorite past time. Surely, there were days when the ever constant traffic noise and pollution could really get us ready to pack for home immediately, but for most days of this December month, we had a life of leisure and pleasure.

By staying in our apartment in the "*Sunrise Building*", at 21 Hàn Thuyên, we have grown to be part of this happy neighborhood. I guess we knew that we had been truly accepted when the local merchants no longer jacked up their prices for us as they would for tourists, and they called us "aunt and uncle" ("*Cô Chú*"). They even learned quickly what type of meat and veggies I want in my morning sandwich, or what flavor yogurt Jeri likes. Grocery shopping is easy, as local street vendors are ready to sell us 4 eggs, or 3 carrots, or 2 apples for the equivalent of 30 US cents. We soon developed our favorite addictions: Jeri elected the *Crème Caramel* at the *"Paris Deli Café"* and the pizza at "*Pepperoni's* " the best in town. And I can't get enough of the duck or goose noodle soup from a street vendor ten steps from our apartment, my perfect late evening snack.

Our place is called "*Sunrise*" perhaps because at early dawn every day, the neighborhood rooster calls the local eatery owners to start getting ready for the stream of people who will soon dismount from their motorbikes and squat down for a hot bowl of soup or sticky rice, or a sandwich on their way to work. Then come the street vendors balancing their goods on their heads or in two hanging baskets across their shoulders. Veggies, fruits, flowers, eggs, animal meat and viscera of all types are for sale along the sidewalks. Lunch calls for deep fried eels, soybean cakes, and more soups with various flavors. Life slows down for the afternoon nap, and then the street market gets ready for dinner shoppers on their way home from work. Late evening clients enjoy duck and eel soup by yellow street lights, and the neighborhood finally dies down to a standstill by 10:00 p.m., with all the tables and chairs put away and the trash picked up from the sidewalks. Patrols of street sweepers roam the neighborhood late at night, getting the city clean for the next day. The silent night is only broken by an occasional car that blasts its horn at the intersection rather than slowing down. Soon the rooster will crow for another dawn to rise above Hàn Thuyên street, as the ebb and flow of life takes us from day to day, week to week.

And so it is, the daily cycle of life for us in Hà Nội. We have made some friends and had cousins visit us. A nice couple, George and Susan, from Schenectady College in NY, lives in the apartment below us. They mentor a bunch of American college kids in their overseas studies. Jeri occasionally has a few ELS students dropping in for conversation, but life in general is quiet and the days belong

to us. There is not much on television to watch (although there is an Asian CNN channel), no movies to let our imagination hitchhike an escape to Hollywood land, no PBS or NPR to bring global issues to our armchairs. We have not and probably won't check out the city library to browse or borrow books, CDs, or magazines. Jeri enjoys her lacquer art classes at the university, and has done some watercolor paintings. We play Scrabble every night, and fill our world by watching other people live or struggle through their days. In our quiet hometown, Davis, California, our life would have been "more cultured", but here, we felt less insulated emotionally from the sweat and blood of the rest of humanity. For here in Hà Nội, scenes of other people's lives flash in front of our eyes as soon as we draw back the curtains that cover the Swedish windows of our apartment, or as we open the glass door that guards the entrance to our building.

Life in Hà Nội has improved for many of its middle class residents who ride the economic opportunities like they ride their motorcycles in an ever more dense, more chaotic city traffic. But it seems that many of the people we see in the streets of this vibrant city will continue to live in the shadow of high rises like ours for many years to come: although the government has "cleaned up" the city of beggars and invalids who embarrass everyone, there are still plenty of street kids who sell lottery tickets and shine shoes, but who will never strike luck and for whom the sun never shines; street vendors will go on balancing their daily earnings and the survival needs of their loved ones on baskets hanging over a strong bamboo stick. Rickshaw-pedaled rides ("*cyclos*") have been banned from many congested streets, so the livelihood of many men has been cut back. Out in the countryside a few miles from the city lights, and a stone's throw away from the fancy Japanese-built highway, farmers continue to break their backs over rice fields that bring bountiful crops but for a lesser market value every year. Boat families bob on the stream of polluted waterways and over the swells of vast seas for fish that sell in the global market at prices they don't control. Highland coffee bean pickers earn pennies for every $1.00 we pay for a coffee drink in the US. For most of these people, opportunity means working harder for less. As tourists, we capture their lives with our digital cameras or with the stroke of our paintbrushes. They capture our hearts for their resilience and endurance, going about in the dust that rises from the sidewalks of a marginal life, day-in and day-out. For a day's work, they earn less than what we usually pay for one dessert in a restaurant. At times, it makes it harder for me to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. Somehow, even reasoning that spending my money will help them economically does not soothe my guilty conscience of the affluence I possess. I may "make their day" with a generous purchase, but can I ever lift them out of poverty?

Soon, we will be home again, in Davis. Life will go on in Hàn Thuyên Street as it has before we came and after we leave. Our apartment guards and a few merchants will miss us, but for a while only. Like a train that pulls away, life moves on, and memories become pinpoint shadows that draw thinner and dimmer in the expanding horizon. Long after we are gone, Hàn Thuyên Street will still wake up to the sound of its rooster. It will continue to have the best duck soup in town, and for some time at least, the two young girls who make the friendliest sandwiches for breakfast.

Well, that's all the news from Lake Hoàn Kiêm district, Hà Nội town, where the men are loud and spoiled, where the women are tough, and where all the children could be above average, if given a little more chance in life.

Jeri is cooking an All-American Turkey dinner for Christmas Eve, with mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce and all the goodies that come with the festive event. My cousin Lai's family and a few friends will join us here. May you and your loved ones find joy and peace in this holiday season.

Davis, CA, March 25, 2004

No chicken flu over the cuckoo nest…

"Sunrise Building", 21 Hàn Thuyên Street, Hai Bà Trưng District, Hà Nội.

It felt like home, the minute we arrived there on the last day of January 2004. Of course, that was the way it should be, since we stayed in the same building last year, but just a flat below. The building's security guards, and soon the street vendors, all recognized us, welcoming us back and calling us by the familiar *Cô Chú* or *Bác* pronouns, meaning "uncle and aunt" in an affectionate way. It was a good feeling being accepted again as part of the neighborhood. The street has not changed much, except for a new cute three-story house that now has taken the space where a tiny store used to be. Like everywhere in Hà Nội, new construction is putting a brighter face on the city, as colorful ginger bread homes, built with bricks and the finest ceramic titles, are the pride of the upper class.

We are happy feeling that life has not changed much on Hàn Thuyên street: the bustling of vendors squatting behind their baskets; people sitting on foot-high plastic stools, savoring the soup or sticky rice bowls of the day; the unruly concert of honking and roaring motorcycles, cyclos, cars, and bikes speeding down the street. As in years before, all of these scenes provide us with endless hours of people watching, whether it is from the sidewalks of the neighborhood, or from behind the window of our very modern (and expensive) flat, nicely furnished with Scandinavian flooring, appliances and furniture. Although living abroad should be a new adventure, there was comfort in familiarity.

However, we realized the morning after our arrival that one thing was missing: the morning call of the neighborhood rooster. Perhaps it was appropriate that our apartment building was named "Sunrise Building", since there was a rooster somewhere nearby, and last year, we heard him every day at the crack of dawn, before the horns and the roaring of the motorcycles started filling the air. Hearing his crow was a very pleasant way to start the day, as if he wanted to wake us up to enjoy the day while the air was still fresh and virgin, with the early morning lights breaking dimly through the morning fog, and before the city drowned in its noise and air pollution. Whatever happened to "our" neighborhood rooster this winter of 2004, we would never know. Perhaps he fell to old age, and provided the main course of a festive family gathering. But his absence highlighted to us the

anxiety of the time: avian influenza has been hitting South East Asia very hard, and the sight of any chicken, dead or alive, would have been a great cause for public health alarm. Hà Nội had banned all poultry in markets and restaurants, and although we missed our romantic rooster, we too prayed for *"no chicken flu over our cuckoo nest"* during our stay in Hàn Thuyên street.

On this trip to Việt Nam, it was planned that I would spend two weeks finishing my CDC contract, which was to help with monitoring and evaluation of the PMTCT (prevention of mother-to-child transmission) of the HIV program I helped CDC and the Ministry of Health design in 2001-02. A few friends will be joining us in late February, to travel around, and we will show them some of the best sites of the Việt Nam we have enjoyed in past trips. But even before we left California, two events had dampened our enthusiasm: first, the infectious threats: the concern over a possible return of the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) virus, that was quite scary in the spring of 2003, and now the H5N1 avian flu, that could become a dangerous pandemic "if the virus jumps species", as the experts were fearing. Then e-mails came from CDC/Hà Nội Office that the PMTCT demonstration projects that we laid the foundation for 2 years ago had not even started yet, so I would be doing more paper work than field evaluation. I had expected bureaucratic delays all along, but this news really put me in a depressed mood this time around. So, as January came and went, the thought of the expenses of living abroad, interrupting our life in Davis, and canceling our plan to experience a winter season on the Oregon Coast to go to Việt Nam (and for what purpose?) was not very uplifting. But when the day came to leave, we got on the plane for a long flight to Hà Nội to make the best of what we anticipated to be our last trip to Việt Nam for the forseeable future.

But now, we are back home in Davis, to live and tell about the good times. The SARS virus stayed away, dormant and invisible somewhere, perhaps to sneak back another time. News about the devastation of the poultry industry by the avian flu in Việt Nam and regionally were everywhere during our stay, but we felt quite safe in Hà Nội and wherever we traveled. A few deaths occurred among exposed chicken farmers. Perhaps these unfortunate human victims had a very peculiar genetic background that made them deadly susceptible to the avian strain. How else can we explain that only a few die when thousands of others were similarly exposed? Any way, we only saw a few chickens out and about in the countryside during our trip. But we did have an exciting occasion to see a Hà Nội resident discharging his bee-bee gun at a bird perched near the tree near the Ngọc Hà temple. Like CNN war reporters, we quickly all dodged and shot back at him with our new digital cameras.

I mentioned earlier that this trip to Việt Nam would be our last for now. It certainly felt that way with the CDC contract. For two weeks, I helped the Vietnamese staff at the US Embassy update the monitoring and evaluation tools for the PMTCT program. My work on that project got the attention of the deputy Minister of Health, and he vowed to use his passionate energy and high position to promote the project. On the last day of my stay, he asked me to deliver the keynote lecture on HIV immunology at the annual conference hosted by the Hà Nội Medical School. It was indeed a great honor, and I felt I did it well. Perhaps, it was somewhat of a consolation prize for me, for now I had to leave the PMTCT project in somebody else's hands. It was difficult for me to "let go", as the work had barely started. "After more than a year of work, not a single life had yet been saved", I told Dr. Mary Kamb, when she asked me how I felt about the project. She smiled and said: "But from the public health point of view, we have laid the foundations and the tracks for a great prevention program." May be. With other staff members, we have designed a program that I am quite proud of, from its needs assessment to the "nuts-and-bolts" for its implementation, everything from screening and management algorithms to patient education leaflets. Along the way, we have fired the enthusiasm of many and gave hope to others. But we have decided that Jeri and I could not afford to commit the next few years to live and work in Việt Nam. Work is never finished in a program like this one, even if one chooses to spend a lifetime on it. Perhaps it is a fair statement to say that we have done our part, if saying it would bring any consolation to my mind. Or, like some "ex-pats", will I always feel that I have not done enough to lessen the suffering of those I left behind? Regrets and guilt. Sounds very typical of me, Jeri would say. But moving on, we should.

We spent the next three weeks as tourists. Or more exactly, I was an uprooted native accompanying my wife and some dear friends in this land that I was supposed to understand well. I was expected to have all the answers about the idiosyncrasies and paradoxes we encountered along our journey. But it was not easy to be a *"Việt Kiều,* or "ex-pat". Even now, I often catch myself referring to Việt Nam as "my country, my people" when I paint or talk to others, although there is no question that I am American in many ways. Through my education and work, I have become much more a man with Western habits and expectations than a traditional Vietnamese. While in Việt Nam for a few months at a time, I felt like a fish swimming in his own pond, but it was easy to feel that way when one knows that one could swim back to the vast open sea of a comfortable Western life anytime.

On this trip, our tour took us through wonderful places, some we have visited in the past and were eager to show to our friends, and to other sites that were new to us. Through my nephew Long, who

co-owned a small tourist agency in Hà Nội, we rented a private van with a driver, Mr. Trang, a quiet and kind war veteran, and an English-speaking guide, Mr. Thịnh, a younger fellow with the disposition and belly of a jolly Buddha. We went to Hạ Long Bay, where we stayed over night in a comfortable sampan to watch the sunrise lift the fog over towering rocks, and where our kayaks glided over waters of emerald and turquoise; Sapa, where we came by the Victoria train and hiked its terraced fields once more; Huế city, where the *"aó dài"* school girls still scattered like white butterflies at the end of the school day; Đà Nẵng, where we ate fresh sea food under a bamboo hut and where Terry and I threw friskbees on the beach with the fishermen's kids; and Hội An, where we strolled the brick pavements and had wonderful meals in cafés and restaurants nestled in its 15th century historical district, site of a maritime silk road for many civilizations long ago. And all along, there were too many other beautiful and memorable places to name here, too many small heart-warming events to write about. Just to say that, in this three-week span, we saw many green rice fields and handsome mountains, met delightful people along the way, ate great local food without getting sick, and soaked ourselves in the warmth of family rediscovered and friends reconnected, and all forever bonded.

Not unlike my tourist companions, rather than hailing Việt Nam for its economic progress, I marveled at things of the past, and the exotic scenes of a rural and poor Việt Nam. We were amazed at the number of cell phones being used in the cities and along tourist tracks, and were taken back by the number of motorized vehicles and SUVs that crisscrossed our path. But a modern Việt Nam was not what we came to see. We came to see water buffalos attended by children who should instead be in school. We came to get a pleasure ride from the *cyclo* peddlers, men of half of our weight and made of pure muscles and bones, and skin toughened by an unforgiving tropical sun. We came to photograph the rice farmers breaking their backs cultivating a crop that brings meager nutrition and a diminishing income in a global economy they have no control over. These scenes made good pictures that tourists and ex-pats send home or down load on their i-photo at the end of their trip. But maybe we too were a bit insensitive when we took pictures of people in their daily struggles. Traveling in Việt Nam, we caught ourselves smiling and joking at the new consumer society we saw in the cities, although we were quick to remind ourselves that they only want what we already have taken for granted in our own lives back home.

Like many immigrants who left their homeland a long time ago, in returning to my native country, I was looking for the romanticized past. Life and time should have stood still for me so that I could recapture what I had left more than thirty years ago. Changes that are occurring now seem too fast,

too loaded with uncertainty, and too materialistic for this Asian soul who came back looking for the ancestral balance of the Yin and Yang, the *Âm Dương* my parents talked about. I went "home" looking for the aesthetics of bamboo, and found a culture in pursuit of the convenience of plastics. Perhaps it is a sign that I have aged too fast, for only old men hang on to the past and cannot keep up with the present. But again, even in our old age, as long as there is a heartbeat, life, and dreams, and memories, and hope will go on. Deep down, even if this were to be our last trip to Việt Nam, I knew I would be back there someday, at least before my last heartbeat.

Hà Nội Farewell[7]

Down the way where the night are gay and the lonely hearts sing kareoke,
I took a ride on a Honda "Xe Ôm", and thank the Lord! - I'm still alive today.

Chorus: But I'm sad to say I'm on my way,
Won't be back for many a-day.
My heart is down, my head is turning around,
I'm going to miss that "phở" in Hà Nội town.

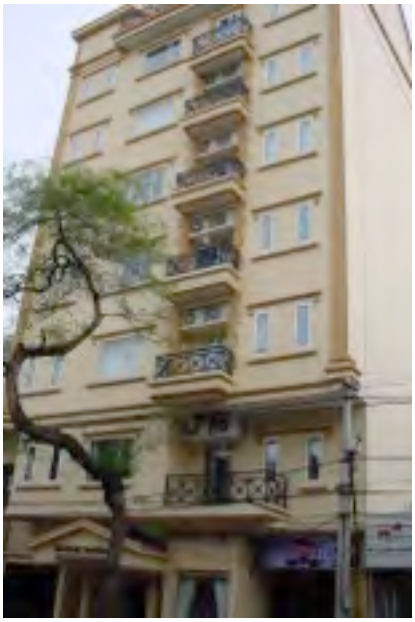
Honking motors everywhere, and the "áo dài" girls swing to and fro,
I must confess I was scare to death, though I've been to New York and Mexico.

Chorus

Down the market you can hear ladies cry out while on their heads they bear,
"Mango, rice, salt, fish" are nice, and the Tiger Beer is fine anytime of year.

Chorus

[7] Lyrics adapted from Erving Burguess' "Jamaica Farewell"



32 Điện Biên Phủ Blvd, where we lived behind the Lipton Café
With the neighbors kids: Linh, Anh, Hùng and a cousin
Anh Tiến, Jeri's dedicated "cyclo" driver
Hà Nội: of wars and revolutions
Jeri on the balcony of the 3rd floor apt., Hàn Thuyên St.
Working for CDC came with perks: I got inoculated against traffic head injuries

Images of Sapa, Lào Cai Province

Baby Mơ [8]

She seemed to weigh no more than a feather, and her eyes seemed to probe deep into the soul of whoever held her. Her mother had given her the name Mơ, which in Vietnamese means “Dream,” but her mother was nowhere to be found. At the age of 2 months, Baby Mơ was to be adopted from an orphanage on the outskirts of Hà Nội by a young couple from the United States. Tears of joy suddenly became tears of sorrow, however, when Baby Mơ’s HIV test came back positive, despite earlier assurance by the maternity hospital that all mothers had mandatory screening for HIV at the time of delivery and that Baby Mơ’s mother’s test was not among the positive results. Where and how this “error” happened, we probably will never find out. But all dreams of a happy life for this beautiful infant suddenly ended, since the adoption process could no longer go through. Where did “the system” break down for this child? And for how many more infants will the window of opportunity for the prevention of HIV perinatal transmission be missed?

In 2002 I was hired as a consultant for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/Global AIDS Program (CDC/GAP) in Hà Nội to design a program for the prevention of maternal-to-child transmission (PMTCT) of HIV in Việt Nam. Baby Mơ’s story was just one among many that made my experience more than simply a bureaucratic assignment. Saying it would be a cliché, of course, but there are true faces and lives, tears and hopes behind the statistics I was working with. In the process of making an assessment of the PMTCT situation in Việt Nam, I visited many public health centers and maternity wards. Everywhere our CDC team went, health care workers freely expressed their concerns and frustrations about the inadequacy of “the system” to deal with the emerging crisis of HIV: lack of resources to follow written medical protocols that have come down during the last few years from the Ministry of Health; costs of testing; lack of counseling and medications; and the social stigmas that drive individuals away from HIV testing or follow-up. Was Baby Mơ’s mother just another failed statistic?

There was no denial by public health officials that the HIV epidemic in Việt Nam was getting more serious every year. Since the first case of AIDS in Viêt Nam was diagnosed in 1990, a reasonable sentinel surveillance system has tracked the concentrated epidemic among intravenous drug users spreading to commercial sex workers and the general population, especially in urban areas, port

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[8] *Published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, July 14, 2004, Vol 292(2):153-4*

cities, and provinces that share borders with southern China and Cambodia. In 2002 the national HIV sero-prevalence rate in military recruits had climbed to 1% (range within the provinces surveyed, 0%-5%) and to 0.4% (range, 0%-1%) in pregnant women. On billboards along highways and city streets, one can catch glimpses of the “Catch-It-and-Die” and “Just-Say-No” messages of the “Information-Education-Communication” campaign. They feature cartoons of young couples embracing, girls in miniskirts, and karaoke bars, warning this country’s deeply Buddhist populace that pleasure seeking and loose sexual behaviors can lead to death. At the Bạch Mai Hospital, the largest referral and teaching hospital in North Việt Nam, HIV patients double- or triple-up in twin beds, surrounded by dedicated medical and nursing staff and loving family members. They are among the very few privileged infected individuals who can afford treatment. In the port city of Hải Phòng, public health officials told us that many dead young men are quickly buried in shame by their families. They probably never made the statistics for whom the HIV bell has tolled.

I came back to Việt Nam to rediscover my roots and to repay the debt I feel I owe the people I had left behind. A puzzling question lingered in my mind as I first started to work with HIV/AIDS there. I remember my native country as deeply molded in the values of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. How can an epidemic that thrives on “high-risk” sexual behavior and drug addiction set foot in a society that cherishes the traditional and holistic values of these philosophies? The answer to my naive question did not take long to come up. The social and economic situation that opens the door to the HIV epidemic is the same everywhere in the world. While the economic policy of “open market” has improved the lives of many Vietnamese, it has also created an upheaval in a society that for centuries has placed community values above individual needs. The “free market” has created competition and population mobility, and wealth is now the measure of success. Many feel the loss of family support, the shame and despair of being left behind, and fall into the exploitation by others. The forces that now drive Vietnamese farmers and fishermen away from their homes, the trafficking of desperate young girls into brothels and young men into drug addiction are the same that are affecting Mexican migrant workers, the newest faces of HIV in central California where I live. Perhaps Baby Mơ’s parents were just nameless victims of this “market” and global economy.

With annual health expenditures at $US23 per capita, it would be easy to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of problems that Việt Nam faces in its control of the concentrated HIV epidemic. But there are many positive signs that the time is not too late to turn the tide. For one, despite their economic poverty, the Vietnamese people and the country’s socialist government have proven they

can achieve great successes in public health. The immunization coverage for children is over 90%. The childhood mortality rate is equal to that of some countries that have 5 to 10 times the gross national income of Việt Nam. Malaria is well controlled, and an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) was quickly controlled in 2003. A 95% adult literacy rate and a widespread net of community health workers are 2 important factors that allow basic preventive health care messages to be delivered to the general population. So, given the political will and the international support, Việt Nam should be in a good position to control the spread of HIV. Many international humanitarian organizations are working there, donating supplies, giving technical expertise, and conducting small interventional pilot projects. The United States has committed a 5-year assistance under its Global AIDS Program. The momentum for prevention and HIV care is building every day, and this optimism cannot be lost.

Earlier this year I came back to Việt Nam to help set up the monitoring and evaluation of the PMTCT program. One of my first actions was to visit Baby Mơ. Citing national regulations, the orphanage director, a dedicated, soft-spoken pediatrician, told me that she had no choice but to transfer Baby Mơ to a “Number 05-06 Center” in Ba Vì, outside Hà Nội. My heart was torn in sorrow when I realized that the nightmare I feared had happened. These so-called “rehabilitation” centers for “social evils” such as drug addiction and prostitution are no more than a step above imprisonment. Many abandoned children with HIV are also “nurtured” there. Without the means of providing adequate care, it seems like society just wants to forget them, their fate now cruelly sealed by HIV. But can we ever forgive ourselves for losing them, for denying them the right to a decent life? Can the lack of resources ever justify the lack of caring?

Like many US physicians, I have been involved with the HIV epidemic since its emergence in the 1980s. We have come a long way, only to face newer, more difficult challenges. Going back to Việt Nam was like reliving the epidemic in its infancy. The initial reactions of fear, the blame-the-victim attitude, the despair, hopelessness, and social discrimination are still quite prevalent among the general population and some healthcare workers. But can Việt Nam afford a 20-year learning curve on how to approach and manage this human and public health tragedy? Do lessons learned the hard way in other countries need to be repeated with a local flavor?

Back in Hà Nội, as my colleagues and I worked on implementing our program, we shared the common hopes and frustrations that many impatient, goal-oriented, performance-driven Westerners feel working in developing countries. How many times do we have to go over paper protocols,

reschedule meetings, and renegotiate working plans? I was reminded that we are laying down the foundation for a strong public health project. Deep inside, I cried that we have worked for over a year on this project and have not yet saved a single life. How many Baby Mơ's will be lost each day to the bureaucratic process? Please, everyone, please remember Baby Mơ. Let her loving eyes probe our souls and lift us into action. Now.

Chính T Lê, MD
Davis, California,
July 2004

The responses to my JAMA article on Baby Mơ were quite favorable, as I received quite a few complimentary e-mail letters from colleagues, and even some academicians and clinicians in the world of HIV-AIDS I have never met.

Below is a rather intriguing, and very powerful message. I don't recognize its author, presumably Mr . Lê Vinh, if the e-mail address gives any clue to the name of its user. I must have met him some time during 2001-2002, in Hà Nội, likely at one of the many meetings I had with the Vietnamese Ministry of Health officials. He was perhaps among the dozen of people who shook my hand while donning one of those gracious Asian smiles that Westerners encounter all the time, but don't really understand. He may have been among the many technocrats who clapped politely at the end of my presentation, while hiding a deep resentment behind a smile, the kind of unscrutable smile and handshake diplomatic photo-ops are made of. In the end, I was glad he spoke his mind, even if this was two or three years after we met, and a few thousand dollars of US aid money later. I am not angry at him. Like all of us, Mr. Vinh is a product of his society, and perhaps like many people presented with moral issues, he feels that life could be best understood in black and white.

Here is his e-mail letter, in its entirety, and without any editing on my part. How representative or widely spread the feelings he expressed here were among other Vietnamese officials I worked with, I could not tell then, or even now. I am not surprised that many in the world see America in the most unfavorable light and with much resentment, even as they accept American aid. But I am saddened that the cultural gap between us could be so vast, deep-rooted, and for so long, unspoken.

Here is Mr Vinh's letter:

Friday, July 30, 2004
Dear the author of "Baby Mo",

I have taken a quick glance of your message about "Baby Mo". The letter gave me a little indignation and a little regret of your attitude towards Vietnam, a nation where you were born. For some reason, you have blamed her too much. To tell the truth, if I were Baby M, I would rather die of AIDS disease than be sold to an American family. That's a shameful act, not an honor when a poor orphan is sold to a rich family.

It is quite true that the Press has said that a large number of Vietnamese people have been acquiring HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. But it is also quite true that AIDS disease never developed at the first time of its spread in this country. It was said the virus was born in America. The epidemic was first developed in America and Western countries.

How can it be spread to the poor countries all over the world, including VN? I don't know. But I pretend that through tourism and commercialism the West has spread it to other parts of the world. The West is the culprit, the rest of the world its victims.

As a guest, I often go to the VCD shops in a big city and see that almost all American movies for adults being displayed there contain scenes of sex and violence. And the Internet, if it is not controlled by the government, will be harmful to young children, for a large number of west pages from the West are obscene. Is sex and violence, as a whole, the trueborn tradition of America? When one thinks about America, they think about money and materialism. They never think about morality.

Although I am not a historian, I can still remember some historical points of time in the world, though not of accuracy. It was the English colonists in the nineteenth century who forced the Chinese feudal government to sell marijuana to its people. And likewise, tobacco and the western styles of dancing, etc. never originated from the Orient.

The future of VN and its young people seems not very bad as you think. As an optimist, I am counting on them. Contrary to America, prostitution and social crimes in VN are immoral and

unlawful. Though some girls may fall in this way unwillingly, they may still be "nurtured" and adjusted by the society as long as they still remain in their homeland. Many male drug addicts are recovering from their "illness" with the help of governmental and private organizations and are now learning the "IT"!!!

While writing this message to you, I feel lucky and proud of myself. Never have I left my homeland for America! And never do I think the overseas Vietnamese are better than I am now. You once wished me that I would have worked in a foreign company in order to earn high wages. That's wrong, sir. In Iraq presently, it is said that many people have been assassinated ruthlessly just because they are working for the Americans. So, no one is better than the other, and no one is certain of their fate.

In conclusion, I felt quite shameful to get an acquaintance of you, as I was reading your postal message in haste. You are right in your scientific point of view, because you are a former medical doctor; but you are quite wrong in political sense, because you are merely a human.

Yours truly,
Levinhsg1965@yahoo.com

My response:

August 1, 2004
Dear Mr. Lê Vinh:

Thank you for taking the time to write to me about your reaction to my letter about Baby Mơ and my view of the HIV-AIDS situation in Việt Nam. I welcome the opportunity to clarify a few points.

1. Families who adopt children do it out of love and compassion. They have to pay large sums of money to various agencies, and the adoption process is strictly regulated by national and local governmental agencies. To say that adopting children is just a "sell-and-buy" transaction is, I think, a rather unfair and insensitive attitude about the tragic and joyful issues that come with this great

act of compassion. There are many adopted children in the world who have been given better life opportunities than they would have ever known.

2. The epidemiology of HIV is complex, but actually it has been well studied. May I respectfully suggest that we put our emotions and preconceptions aside and read up some good scientific reviews that describe the origins and the spread of the HIV. I would also like to point out how the use of HIV-subtyping has helped us fingerprint the viral origin and transmission of various regional epidemics, including in Việt Nam, where the dominant strain is E, while it is B in the US.

3. You stated that I put too much blame and shame on the Vietnamese for the HIV problem. On the contrary, if you read my letter carefully, I fully acknowledged and proudly exposed to the world the public health achievements and potentials in Viêt Nam to combat HIV. I expressed great admiration for the work and dedication of many health workers who are actually providing care for HIV patients. Of course, I cannot speak for some of the bureaucrats who make HIV policies for the country but who have never taken care of any AIDS patient nor understood the tragedy of HIV in people's own life. When I complained about the bureaucracy taking too much time to get things done, I certainly referred to all bureaucracies (governmental and international).

4. I sense in your letter a great deal of resentment toward the Vietnamese who have emigrated overseas, in particular to the USA. Let me first say that for most of us, in our life on this earth, where we are born and where we live depends greatly on factors beyond our personal control. I don't know where you get the impression that emigrants are "better" than their compatriots who stay in the homeland. I may have said that, at the present time in Việt Nam, people who work with foreign companies seem to have more opportunities (learning new things, and expanding their professional skills), a view shared by most Vietnamese I met. But I can’t believe that I would ever imply or suggest to anyone where and for whom they should work mainly for monetary reasons.

5. Regarding the image that America projects in the world, I very much agree with you that sex and violence are despicable, and over-glorified in the media, especially in the USA. It is very unfortunate. Like many others across the USA and around the world, I too strongly condemn the present US policy in Iraq (and in many other areas of the world) and I know that our democracy is far from perfect. There are, however, many good and bad aspects of any culture, of any society. I hope that someday you will be able to have a balanced view of the world. But I am not so sure that blaming others for our own problems is the best way to start resolving them.

Let me say, in closing, why I wrote my letter in JAMA the way I did: I wanted to put a human face on the worldwide tragedy of HIV through the true story of Baby Mơ, whom I have met and bonded with in Hà Nội. She is the sweetest baby I have ever held in my arms as a pediatrician, and I think about her every day. I also want people to understand that the various HIV epidemics around the world have many of the same causes, dynamics and realities, regardless of culture and ethnicity. Việt Nam has much to learn from the world, just like the world can learn from the Vietnamese experience. There is nothing to hide in this tragic pandemic of global dimensions, only things to learn from one another. Unfortunately, I do believe that morality and ideologies are double-edge swords when used as public health tools: weapons that are easy to wave, but hardly tools that can heal.

Finally, you and I do agree on one thing: that in science and in morality, to err is human. I shall always be humble for my mistakes and misunderstandings, and I welcome the opportunity to correct myself as well as learn from you. Should you want to continue our dialogue by e-mail, I shall be more than honored.

Respectfully yours,
Lê trung Chính, MD
Davis, California

A footnote – Just short of ten years after the birth of Baby Mơ:

On June 5, 2010, the following article appeared in the "*Nhân Dân*", the official newspaper of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (as reported in the Kaiser Foundation Family Global Health Weekly News)

"*Pregnant women encouraged to test for HIV"*

"The Ministry of Health has launched a Month of Preventing Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV, calling on pregnant women to take HIV tests for their babies' health. Addressing a launching ceremony in Hồ Chí Minh City on June 2, Deputy Prime Minister Trương Vinh Trọng, also Chair of

the National Committee for AIDS, Drug and Prostitution Control, admitted that the number of HIV-infected women, especially those with pregnancy, is on a rise. "It's very important to help pregnant mothers access early diagnosis and take timely intervention measures in order to mitigate perinatal HIV transmission," Trọng pointed out. Deputy Minister of Health Trịnh Quan Huấn said during the month from June 1-30, services are available in 225 sites across the country, where pregnant women will be provided with voluntary HIV tests, antiretroviral drugs to prevent perinatal transmission and powder milk for babies born to HIV-infected mothers.

An estimated 6,000 pregnant women catch HIV annually in Vietnam, of whom 35% are likely to transmit the virus to their newborns unless appropriate interventions are taken, according to a recent survey. If HIV-infected pregnant women take timely interventions the perinatal transmission rate will be reduced to just five %, thus saving over 1,600 newborns from the risks. However, most HIV-infected mothers in Vietnam get late diagnosis, mostly at the delivery stage, causing difficulty for health workers to give consultation and provide treatment against the transmission of the virus from mothers to children."

Top left: Baby Mơ and I, at the orphanage in Hà Nội, December 2001
Top right: Baby Mơ and pediatrician Lê Thị Kim Hà, MD, at the "Center for Social Labor Education", Ba Vì, North Việt Nam, 2004

Bottom: Public "Information-Education-Communication" billboard in Hà Nội on HIV-AIDS, linking the epidemic to the "social evils" of drug use, immoral acts like prostitution, Karaoke and Western style dancing (Photo taken in 2001)

“Đât´ Nước” through silk painting

“Đât´ nước” is the Vietnamese word for *“country”.* Literally, it means *“earth” (“đất”)* and *“water” (“nước”).* In the past several years, I have rediscovered my *“Đất Nước”* in a way I had not known as a child. And, like many emigrants, I should admit that my images of my native land are seen through lenses and filters that are tinted by selective memories and romantic reflections.

The people I have left behind are among the poorest in Asia. Thirty years of war have robbed two generations of Vietnamese of educational and economic opportunities - first the men and women who fought on “either side” of the conflict, but also their children who were born in a land devastated by bombs and torn by misleading ideologies. Left behind by the tide that should have raised all ships, many work in the fields and cities before sunrise and past sunset for less than one or two dollars a day. Their streets seem in constant chaos, their river banks and sea shores are ravaged by yearly floods or typhoons, their mountains stripped by deforestation, and their rice fields and fish ponds contaminated with chemicals from last century’s wars and from newer pollutants of a booming “free market” economy.

I paint rivers that flow and oceans that swell, full of wonderful fish and food, but the waves often do not return the fisherman to his home. I paint the clay soil of North Việt Nam in magnificent red colors, but the same earth breaks the bones of the rice farmer and stunts the growth of his children. I paint veterans playing chess with gravel pebbles, or pedaling “cyclos” in the sweltering heat, like withered leaves blown in street gutters, their sacrifices wasted and long forgotten. I paint street vendors balancing baskets on their shoulders or on their heads, and the children of *“Bụi Đời”*. Yes, these people are literally called *“Dust of Life”* – a dust that tourists, expatriates, and the nouveau-rich citizens can stay clear of by staying in their air-conditioned vans and high-rise hotels. Yet, I have chosen to paint their lives with the brightest colors that the ink can hold.

For I don’t know how to paint despair, hunger, sorrow, or injustice, like many artists do. I just try to sketch the poetry of simple life, paint human resilience in the face of adversity, express the values of harmony and community, and color in dignity where poverty reigns. There is so much energy and hope in my *“Đất Nước”.* There is no other way to experience my Việt Nam nowadays.

My mother used to quote a popular poem in Vietnamese, describing the lotus flower that grows in murky, muddy water, only to give out the sweetest scent:

Trong đám gì đẹp bằng sen,
Lá xanh bông trắng lại chen nhị vàng.
Nhị vàng bông trắng lá xanh,
Gần bùn mà chẳng hôi tanh mùi bùn.

(Nothing is more beautiful than the lotus,
Green leaves, white flowers and yellow pistils.
Yellow pistils, white flowers, green leaves,
Lying close to the mud, yet never affected by its smell.)

And so, as the sun rises at dawn behind the mountains and tumbles across the sky to sink in the rice paddies by dusk, as the wind blows the *"Bụi Đời"* children down crowded streets in the shadows of elegant hotels, and as the waves swell to bring home the fishermen, *Đất Nước,* Earth and Water, is the soul of every Vietnamese.

"From Dawn to Dusk"
(Original painting 32" x 22")

“Sea of Bounty, Net of One”
(Original painting 16” x 24”)

“Fish Tales” - Đa Nẵng
(Original painting 28” x 20”)

“Veterans”
(Original painting 25” x 15”)

"The Rice Merchants"
(Original painting 26" x 19")

"Hà Nội Street Eateries"
(Original painting 38" x 26")

"School girls"
(Original painting 18" x18")

"In the shadow of the Five-Star"
Hà Nội Hilton Hotel
(Original painting 17" x 23")

"The Lotus flower pickers"
(Original painting 18" x 24")

"The Street Vendor" - Hội An
(Original painting 24" x 20")

Hà Nội – My Kind of Town

"I was born in Hà Nội" – that is the simple answer I would give to people who ask me where I came from, perhaps even with an inner pride. Ten years ago, I would have some anxiety making such a simple statement, but not now. If I perceive a blank on the person's face, I would quickly add: *"Hà Nội, Việt Nam",* wondering at the same time what the person's reaction to that information might be. Have I dug up the memory of a terrible war, evoked the image of a poor boat refugee, or would I even be suspected of being a Communist agent? But often the blank look only reveals that Hà Nội means nothing to most people now. Where is it on the world map, anyway, even if the name of the country, Việt Nam, may bring a vague recollection of an unpleasant chapter in the American history, or a foreign name on the label of a Nike sport wear.

I was born in Hà Nội, lived there the first six years of my life, but only now have I discovered how deep my emotions run for the city I knew almost nothing about until I returned more than fifty years later. How proud I was of myself when the native residents of Hà Nội commented that they could tell I was born there, just by the tone of my voice, even after so many years of absence. How happy I was to be addressed as *"Chú"* or *"Bác",* meaning "uncle", by the vendors in the street where Jeri and I lived the few months when we went to work in Hà Nội. No longer did they inflate their prices charged to us as they would do to other ex-pats. They even remembered very quickly what flavors I liked for my *"Phở"* beef soup, and what fillings I wanted inside my morning French baguette. They also knew that Jeri liked the local yogurt made with a touch of condensed milk. Hà Nội is my kind of town, because the people made me feel that I belonged there, even if they all knew that I am a naturalized American citizen back in Việt Nam only for short working visits.

Despite its history, its 5 million or so inhabitants, and for being the capital of a nation of 87 millions, Hà Nội has been described by many as a "provincial" town, lacking the international name recognition that Bangkok or Singapore have in South East Asia. In some ways, Hà Nội even feels eclipsed by its rival sister in the South, Hồ Chí Minh City, formerly known as Saìgòn during that stretch of history starting with the French colonial domination in the mid 19th century (during which it earned its title of "Paris of the Orient") until 1975, at the end of a conflict Americans called the Viêt Nam War, and referred to by Vietnamese as the American War. Hồ Chí Minh City is where most of the economic boom, associated with outsourcing in the global market, is occurring in Việt Nam, and Hà Nội residents are envious of the entrepreneur's spirit and business skills of the Southerners

whom they defeated 35 years ago. Hồ Chí Minh city is where one of Asia's "little tigers", the so-called Eastern Pacific manufacturing engines of the global economy, has made its home, not Hà Nội. As the seat of a very centralized government, Hà Nội has all the political power, including the power to make economic policies for the whole country. Yet Hồ Chí Minh City, with its capitalistic background, its industrial parks, its shipping containers full of Nike shoes, Columbia sportswear, and other cheap products heading to Western markets, is where money grows.

But as the capital of a David nation who defeated the Mongol, Chinese, French and American Goliaths, Hà Nội has history on its side. And in a country where bureaucrats have high self-regard, Hà Nội has to act like the city where everything is right and relevant. If you don't believe me, just drop in any government office in the city. There, bureaucrats and technocrats chain-smoke all day and move slowly, perhaps at the speed of the sluggish ceiling fans left from the French colonial years. Most of the time, they even seem to be nailed to their desks, and glued to an ideology they still profess but never practice. By late afternoon, after the government offices have closed down and the cell phones start ringing, these same officials earn their "real income" through the new wheels of fortune they control through their "People's Party" affiliation. But if you need an authorization signed for this or for that, or a report on some important matters, they are the ones charged to make sure that all things appear right and relevant in the land of the Soaring Dragon. And after all, they may be doing something right. They are also the ones who provide WHO, UNICEF, the World Bank and all the respected global institutions the impressive statistics of a nation with rapidly improving "human development indexes": literacy rate of 90% for adults and 95% for youth; infant mortality down to 12 per 1,000; childhood immunization rate above 90%, life expectancy of 74 years. All of these achievements for a poor country with a GNI of only US$ 890 (in 2008). So don't argue with the bureaucrats. They must be doing something right.

But let us set national and local politics, and population statistics aside, and forget for a moment the maddening economic race that drives many cities in the developing world today. If one is looking for a sense of history, a trace of tradition and culture, or a touch of romance in the air, then Hà Nội is the place to be.

The origins of the Vietnamese people can be traced back to the Mesolithic and Neolithic cultures, with primitive agriculture being practiced as early as 7,000 BC. The "Great Việt" (*Đại Việt*) are considered the founders of Việt Nam, descendants of a tribe South of China. Archeological findings have documented their culture back to the sophisticated Bronze Age Đồng Son period, famous for

its enormous bronze drums, that emerged sometime around the 3rd century BC. Hà Nội, first named *Thăng Long*, was founded in 1010, on the banks of the Red River, a river untamed by levees when the tropical typhoon rain pours down from heaven. The Soaring Dragon is its mythical mascot, and when the Dragon breathes flames and convolutes its long, powerful body, royal dynasties rise and fall, peasant revolts topple kings, and revolutions come and go. Although Việt Nam suffered a thousand years of Chinese domination, many Mongols and Chinese armies were crushed at the city's borders. Forward now to the 20th century, and modern Việt Nam has Điện Biên Phủ that made world history, a massive mausoleum to its greatest "Uncle", a "Victory over American B-52's" and a "Reunification" to celebrate every December since 1972, and every April 30 since 1975, respectively.

But the city had its moments of peaceful grandeur as well. Hà Nội is the site of a 10-century old Temple of Literature, dedicated to Confucius and where Việt Nam's first university was established in 1076. Hà Nội's unique One Pillar Pagoda was built in the image of a Buddha sitting on a lotus flower by King Lý Thái Tông (1028-54) who married a peasant girl. (The temple was blown up by the French retreating from Hà Nội after they lost the war in 1954, but was fortunately rebuilt according to its original design). French colonialists destroyed the old *Thăng Long* capital in 1887 and partially rebuilt it along wide boulevards lined with stylish villas encircled by shady verandas and elegant balconies that could claim to be smaller Gallic versions of the charming antebellum mansions of the American South. The Sofitel Metropole Hotel boosts its reputation with past patrons like Graham Green, W. Somerset Maugham and Charlie Chaplin, not to name countless French military officers whose names went into infamy after Điện Biên Phủ. More recently, President Bill Clinton was pictured with a bunch of kids at the Koto restaurant, perhaps the best gesture of reconciliation and good will between two former enemies.

With Hà Nội celebrating its 1000th anniversary this year, efforts to designate *Thăng Long* as a UNESCO World Heritage Site is in the works. Within the 7.3 square miles of the Ba Đình Square in the heart of the old city, excavation has revealed a royal complex in the tradition of Beijing's Forbidden City and Japan's Heido Palace. Wells dating from the 7th century, foundations for eleven royal palaces and Buddhist temples built between the 10th and 15th centuries, terra cotta sculptures of five-toed dragons and coli-tongued phoenixes – all symbols of kings and queens - and the largest ceramic collection in Việt Nam, all are being un-earthed to the great pride of the Vietnamese people.

But however impressive these may sound, the ghosts of history do not drive the life of a city. While new high-rise construction is redefining the city's panoramic skyline, the waves of human and motor traffic below capture the pulse of everyday life. Like many cities in the developing world, Hà Nội is seeing a population explosion, mainly of migrant workers from the countryside looking for better economic opportunities. Although Việt Nam is one of the last five socialist communist nations left since the collapse of the Soviet Union, one would not find here the utopia of a classless society, if one ever existed at all. A rich, new upper class has emerged rapidly since *"Đổi Mới"*, the economic "renovation" policies adopted by the Vietnamese government in the mid 1980s, very much along the same socio-economic lines taken by its big brother, China. The gap between the rich and the poor is easily measured by the difference between new multi-storied, ginger bread-colored townhouses squeezed between dilapidated Soviet-style tenements and crumbling shacks. Even street vendors are cleared from the shadows of new 5-star hotels, as litter should not be allowed to spoil the new show cases of the city, or to be an eyesore to tourists. But late into the night, laying in the dark alleys of the city and steps away from karaoke bars that blast the sound of love and loneliness, migrant workers of this socialist republic rest quietly under corrugated metal roofs or plastic awnings that ward off the torrential monsoon rain, their bodies crushed by the day's labor, and their spirits too tired to fight for the human rights we take for granted in the industrialized West.

Morning comes over Hà Nội with the sound of a military trumpet coming from the Old Flag Citadel (*Cột Cờ*) in Ba Đình Square, near the Army Museum and the Hồ Chí Minh mausoleum, followed by public news and official messages blasting from loud-speakers along main city boulevards and market places. During rush hours, you may feel caught by wave upon wave of motorbikes, honking and roaring in deafening sound. By mid day, the noise and air pollution can be suffocating. The city seems to thrive in a chaos that only its residents can understand. To most tourists who only experience Hà Nội for a few days, the city life is what happens on the sidewalks of every street: shoeshine boys and barbers setting up business along brick fences, next to massive bundles of dangling telephone and electric lines; men squatting to play checkers or sipping tea under the shade of a plastic canopy; families enjoying a tasty meal from street vendors; frail women balancing heavy baskets on their shoulders, waddling across the incessant traffic of bikes, trucks and cars. Occasionally, an SUV carrying a Party official or a diplomat, a Toyota or a Mercedes belonging to a successful entrepreneur bully their way through the crowd. By late evening, the street vendors are still out to offer everyone a last chance for a delicious fruity snack, a sweetened rice cake, or a hearty bowl of duck or eel noodle soup. Only by 1 or 2 a.m., after the street sweepers have cleaned

the sidewalks and circulated their last gossip does the city fall asleep in the whisper of its big banyan and sycamore trees gently swaying in the Red River delta breeze.

I went back to Hà Nội looking for the city that I have seen so many times in a few faded black and white photographs that my family kept. I wanted to find the village of Triêù Khúc, Hà Đông province, where my parents helped create one of the first farmer-artisan cooperatives in Việt Nam in the 1940s, but it was nowhere to be found, swallowed up in one of those boundary-less suburbs of Hà Nội. I went back to retrace the memory of that hot afternoon long, long time ago when I was a very young boy, and an African French Legionnaire walked by and took a big bite of my ice cream. My childhood house on Khúc Hạo street is now part of a huge Chinese embassy complex, guarded by uniformed men with AK-47s, so I did not dare take a picture of the home our family had left behind some 50 years ago. But I did take one picture that captured with one click of the camera the whole history of Hà Nội: It was in the old section of town. On Hoàn Kiếm Lake (Lake of the Returned Sword), one sees the Thập Rùa (Tortoise Tower), built for the 11th century King Lý Thái Tổ who defeated the Chinese; its shadow dances lazily on the murky water of the lake. On the other shore, the rigid and imposing headquarter of the People's Communist Party, built with concrete and marble, looms in austere triumph. And rising well above the horizon, the glitzy Melia Hotel which declares to the world that Hà Nội has stepped into the twenty-first century, ready to reap the fruit of global capitalism.

As mentioned earlier, Hà Nội is celebrating its 1,000th anniversary this year. History comes and goes. Many things have changed, and more changes come every day to Hà Nội, my native city. Like many things I found in Việt Nam, life there is full of paradoxes, with the old and the new, the glitzy and the dilapidated, the privileged and the less fortunate, the commendable and the unreasonable, all coexisting side by side. But it has been said that there is no life without paradoxes, and so, I love Hà Nội for all its paradoxes, and will always love it that way.

There is a Vietnamese poem I remember well from my mother. The verses paint the image of the lotus flower that grows in murky, muddy water, only to give out the sweetest fragrance. Somewhere in Hà Nội and other parts of Việt Nam, I have rediscovered that scent, fifty years after I have left my native country. It is perhaps because of the way the street vendor said: *"Bánh mì nóng đây*!" ("Warm bread, here it is!") as she passed by our apartment on Hàn Thuyên Street every morning, balancing her basket of freshly baked French baguettes over her head. Perhaps it is because of Mr. Tiến, a veteran with one arm, the other one was blown off during one of those now forgotten wars. Mr. Tiến

pedaled Jeri through town in his “cyclo”, and we felt safe under his service the many months we lived in Hà Nội. And perhaps because of a lady street vendor, named Thảo, somewhere on Nguyễn Trường Tộ Street, who cooked the best *“Bún Chả”* [9] the way I thought only my mother could prepare. Or perhaps because deep inside us, Jeri and I wish that the future will be kind and bright for that young couple we saw holding hands by Hoàn Kiếm Lake, indifferent to the chaotic traffic around them, just living for the moment.

In my world, museums, buildings, and boulevards don’t make a city. Bureaucrats behind their desks don’t make a city. Having history on your side helps, but even history does not make a city. For the soul of a city can be found only in its street people. The way they move, the way they talk, eat, and laugh; the way they endure the day and survive the night. Believe me, I felt this in Hà Nội. My native town, now so far away, yet so near.

Corvallis, October 2010

Legend for the artwork included in following pages:

1. Photograph: Young couple by Thế Hức bridge, over the Hoàn Kiếm Lake, in the heart of Hà Nội Old Town
2. Photograph: Hoàn Kiếm Lake, reflecting three historical eras of Việt Nam
3. Silk painting: “Market Place” (original 31” x 25”)
4. Silk painting: “The Rice merchants”, by the Temple of Literature (original 26” x 19”)
5. Silk painting: “The Street vendor” (original 14’ x 18”)
6. Silk painting: “One-Pillar Pagoda (riginal 18” x 16”)
7. Silk painting: “Under the Banyan tree”, Hàn Thuyên Street (original 28” x 20”)

[9] grilled pork served with fresh herbs over thin rice noodles, bathed in a slightly sweet vinaigrette fish sauce

Book Two: America

“Every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity life follows my pen. The days and hours of it are flying over my head like clouds of windy days, never to return...”

Lawrence Sterne (1713-68)

“The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy, Gentleman” (1760-67)

“There may be more beautiful times –
but this one is ours...

Jean Paul Sartre

(1905-1980)

The Bodega Bay years

August 28, 1988

So, what did I do today? Well, I finished making a work table for my saw. I feel somewhat proud of it despite its imperfections. It is sturdy, movable, and has a unique, “homemade” design. As I look around my workshop, I feel this 10x16-foot space being an extension of myself. I like my things organized, logically placed or tucked away. I love that sense of efficiency. Even my craftwork needs a sense of relevance. So I am using up leftover wood pieces to express my frugality, my belief that a lot of things can be made out of practically nothing or things that are considered “throw away”. At least it justifies my being a packrat.

We had a busy weekend in Bodega Bay at the end of our summer vacation. The Homs came to visit. They are an interesting family. I have a deep affection for Paul, maybe for his personal features and idiosyncrasies that make him awkward in some social circles: big, old-styled black framed glasses to correct an extreme myopia; a wide mouth that frequently blasts out an unrestrained laugh, or a down-to-earth rhetorical remark; Salvation Army clothes that don’t fit; and a frugality that borders avarice. The youngest son and the “black sheep” of a prominent Republican Chinese American business family in San Diego, Paul Hom went to the Southern states in the 60’s to help Blacks register to vote, being a staunched, bleeding-heart Democrat who never feels he has done enough to help the poor and underprivileged. He and his wife Christina “took me under their wings” when I was a med student in Sacramento, opening their home to me. Paul taught me how to drive and helped me buy my first car. He often addressed me as a “poor Vietnamese refugee” - teasing me, of course, but perhaps also relating a sense of sympathy from knowing the difficulties his own Chinese ancestors encountered as immigrants.

Jerry and Dorothy Foytik also visited us this week. I also feel a deep respect for the values they hold and practice. They have traveled the world and done so much in their lives. I guess we often like people not just for their pleasant faces or cheerful company, but because they are, in a way, a projection and an extension of ourselves, for the good things they are able to do that we wish we had done ourselves, or for simply iving our dreams. Perhaps that is why good friends enrich our lives, and why a friend who dies takes away a part of us.

September 15, 1988

I found these verses I wrote for Jeri for our wedding in September 1973, as I was going through the loose pages of my songbook. It was scribbled on a half-sheet of paper.

"Where shall we be, when waves are rushing to the shore?
When in your eyes, I see the sunset glow?
The sand and sea have kept the whisper of our song,
If we must go, let's go back to the sea.

Or shall I take you to the meadow down the stream?

Or to the mountains, where we can touch the sky?

Just hold my hand, we'll find our magic wonderland,

Oh Jeri love, Jeri my love, please come with me!

Where shall we be, when the September roses bloom,
When down the park, the breeze sweeps through the trees?
The summer's gone, remember how we sang its song,
Where shall we be, when leaves must fall from trees?

Or will you take me to the magic of our home,
Where we can see our children play and grow,
Where in the eve, our music makes our hearts mellow,

Oh Jeri love, Jeri my love, I love you so."

These verses were to be sung to the tune of the traditional “Londonderry Air / Danny Boy”, a melody some say has been “murdered” over the years by many people trying to sing it badly or by changing its lyrics - and mine didn’t even rhyme! But I did not feel too bad doing just that, nor am I feeling guilty now, fifteen years later. For what a prophecy my verses turned out to be! How could I have imagined, in 1973, scribbling these lines while riding the subway and buses in Toronto on my way to and from work, that we would one day have a home nested by the sea – our “Sea Hugger” in Bodega Bay? Yes, the summer’s gone, and the September roses have just finished blooming in the front yard of our home on Cornell Street in Davis. We celebrated our 15th wedding anniversary this past weekend, reflecting on how we started together in Toronto: the anxiety of a new family life with three teenagers, and the thought of my disheartened parents still living in Việt Nam; the long walks by the ponds and flower borders in High Park, holding hands; my subway rides home, so exhausted from the hospital duties and night calls that I sometimes slept through and missed getting off at the Runnymede station; my biweekly take-home pay checks, as an intern, that did not cover a full month rent. But yes, we did live on magic and romance then: an old piano was the first piece of furniture we bought for that dark brick house on Durie Street, matching its beautiful oak wood interior and squeaky floors; we planted daffodils that bravely pushed through the snow that lingered until late spring; and we bought an antique baby pram with big wheels for “David-Sue”, the baby Jeri would carry until June 28, 1974, when we found out that “it” was a boy, and we named him “Benjamin”, for my admiration of Ben Franklin, “the first American” the world had come to know and respect.

Yes indeed, we lived then with the feeling that as long as we hold on to each other, our life could only get easier and better; and it did. And yes, after fifteen years, our love has grown stronger than the iconic Monterey cypress that stands against the wind on the Big Sur coast, and sweeter than any wine that grows in the hills and valleys of Northern California. Perhaps for listening to our hearts against all odds, we did find that *“the sand and sea have kept the whisper of our song”*. Our song of September 8, 1973, on that crispy and clear autumn day when we got married at the Runnymede United Church, ate take-out Chinese food for our wedding feast, and took snapshots with our Kodak instamatic camera in High Park, in the heart of Toronto.

Holiday letter, 1988

Merry Christmas!!

I am writing this holiday letter on a quiet November evening, in Bodega bay. The fire is slowly dying in the woodstove. All is so calm, except for the lonely call of the distant foghorn breaking the silence of the evening. Piccolo, our faithful Dachshund, world-famous for his sharp bark, has wrapped himself in his cozy blanket, sound asleep. So is Benji, suspended in midair in his hammock up in his loft, at the end of a busy school week.

Jeri has given me the task of writing the “generic” holiday letter this year. No better place to compose it than at our seashore retreat, I guess. We call it the “Sea Hugger”, for its front deck and corner rooms fan out like open arms to the sea. We have come to love the ocean, like kites love the wind, and flowers the morning dew. The waves pounding on the shore fill our hearts with music, and thoughts dance in our minds like white caps surfing over the deep blue ocean. We have learned to enjoy the ever-changing sky over the bay – fog shrouding the hills at dawn, racing clouds over horizon of blue, rain beating on our windowpanes, sunsets painted with the wild brushes of an invisible, mad artist, and nights of a billion stars glittering across the dark sky ... Oh, how we love them all!

We don’t want you to get the idea that our life “is a beach” out here, though. Actually, we come to Bodega Bay only about twice a month, due to my call duties in Sacramento. I am lucky to have a challenging and secure job, and the joys and tears of medicine seldom allow a dull day at work. Jeri is busy with the international community in Davis, as usual, but she also tries to find some time for weaving and painting – perhaps as a much-needed expression of creativity and freedom from the constraints of daily routines. The frail health of our elderly parents gives a rather sober mood to our family life. At the other age range, however, the grandchildren (Kelly’s Kristen, Amy and Garett in NY, and Jimmy’s Aaron in San Diego) sparkle our days once in a while with their phone calls or rare visits. Linh (in nursing), and Bonnie (in vet medicine) are busy with their respective careers, but are able to visit us occasionally to bring us up to date on their progress.

Walking along the beach on this late autumn as the waves come in and quickly erase our footsteps, we wonder about the things that have come and gone, and things yet to come. Friends we’ve met, only to have the winds of fortune take them away across lands and oceans; but still our hearts feel

a little richer for the times we shared. Dreams that have come true, and dreams that still need some nurturing until they become realities. Will the hungry children and the homeless of the world be better fed next year? Will the sick feel less pain, and the miserable more dignity? Will peace come to war-torn lands, and will humility embrace intolerant hearts? Will we be kinder to our Mother Earth?

Perhaps you will come and visit us someday, and share with us your dreams and hopes. Come to where the lonely sandpipers run, and the waves tell the eternal story of generations who came and went. Even when there is not much left to say between us, dear friends, just listening to the sound of the foghorn together, and seeing the light from the Point Reye's lighthouse break through the thick night would fill our hearts with peace and hope.

Until then, have a Happy Holiday Season, and our best wishes to your family and loved ones.

Chinh, Jeri and Benji Le,
Christmas 1988

December 12, 1988

"Would you mind seeing this patient who needs her disability form signed as soon as possible?" asked Robin, the clinic manager, just as we were closing down the afternoon pediatric clinic. "She had a Staph infection. She is homeless, but we have arranged temporary lodging for her at the Motel 6 in town. She needs to catch the bus before the evening medical clinic opens." Robin and I both knew that this patient would never make it to the motel if she had to go wait for the medical clinic, where a line up of medical students and residents would take hours to clear her case and have her papers signed by the attending physician.

Pattie was her name. The room was filled with an awful smell of alcohol and strong body odor as I walked in and found her snoring away on the examining table. She was very obese, and her large, flabby belly hung out between her dirty blue shirt and her soiled, tight jeans. I gently woke her up by calling her name and shaking her right forearm. Soon she was sitting up, a little unsteady, but at least awake. I asked to see her wound, inquired about how it happened, and what she was doing in

Davis. It did not take long for her to tell her story, as she extracted her words between her broken front teeth and alcohol breath. “Worked in a plastic factory with special chemicals which burned my arms”; “worked all my life on the F-15, F-16, B1 stealth bombers”, she said. “Came to see my daughters at Thanksgiving, gave them all I had, but they threw me out because I drank too much” - she admitted. “But it wasn’t fair”, she added. She went on to talk again about all the planes she built, perhaps confabulating, just as most intoxicated alcoholics would. Then her eyes fell on my nametag: “Ah, you’re a pediatrician! I like pediatricians, they are nice and gentle”, she exclaimed.

Her arm wound was horrible, but at least it was healing. The dry bandages stuck to the third degree burn that had started to granulate. In her chart, it was recorded that she was treated with dicloxacillin at the Harbor General Hospital in Torrance, and later at the Sacramento Medical Center; and that she was also recently raped. I left her for a minute to look for cleaning solutions and new bandages. When I came back, she was again snoring away, almost falling off the examining table. As I started cleaning her wounds, she cried and choked off some tears. I thought the Phisohex solution must have hurt her sensitive wound, and apologized. “No, she said, you’re not hurting me, I am crying because you are caring for me, because somebody is caring for me.”

I was a bit surprised and felt that her appreciation was strange, since the only thing I had done was clean her wound. How much “care” was that? I did not know what to say to her that could be meaningful. I instructed her on how to keep her wounds clean, and packed her more Phisohex solution and sterile bandages to use the next few days. But would she do it, as drunk as she was? There was a good chance that, living in the street in the cold of winter, her wound would easily get infected again. Then I told her that she should stop drinking, get a hold of her life again, and get back to her family and friends, but who am I kidding that this would ever happen? Robin said that an appointment with the counselor had been arranged for Pattie for the next day, and I hoped she would find some more professional help then. Yet, I had a terribly sad feeling that the fight might already be lost. Hopelessly lost. How sad, how terribly sad! Pattie was obviously someone’s mother, child, wife, neighbor, sister, or perhaps even some child’s grandmother. How did Pattie fail in her life? Many possible scenarios could retrace for us her path to alcoholism and self-destruction, but it no longer mattered anymore. As family or community members, we probably all failed to be there for her when it mattered the most.

There must be thousands of other Patties tonight and every night, in and out of community clinics like this one in Davis, or lying in the hallways of emergency rooms elsewhere across America. In

and out, like through revolving doors, until one day they don't show up anymore. They have drifted away somewhere, like leaves blown by an ill wind, now stuck in street gutters. The homeless, with their pains numbed by alcohol and other drugs. With wounds we cared for, but never healed.

I probably will never forget Pattie, especially on cold December nights like this one, with Christmas around the corner. Christmas, with its message of joy, peace and giving. I knew I could not take Pattie home and nurse her until her wounds heal, or give her the real "care" she thanked me for. When I finally left the clinic and got in my car, I felt so selfish to be retreating into the warmth and security of my own home, leaving Pattie "in the cold" to remain no more than an invisible shadow, like a hundred others who have come and gone through our clinic, and who are desperately lost in the dark alleys of our society.

March 4, 1989

The rain fell over vineyards and rolling hills, over dairy farms and green meadows, and over acres of wild, yellow mustard flowers spreading like a carpet of gold toward the horizon. The rain fell, and the earth soaked up the water of her life.

The rain fell over rocks and houses, fences and trees, cattle and sheep, and my daffodils bowed to the raindrops that gently tapped on their delicate petals. The rain fell, and our grey beach house picked up its lusty color of redwood again. The rain fell, and we cuddled up by the warm glow of our burning stove, letting our hearts drift to the songs of Kate Wolf and Rod McKuen. The rain fell, and we made love to the rhythm of its drops falling on our roof, our deck, and our garden.

We took a walk down the beach. Everything seemed cold and wet, but what a nice walk it was! The grass was green and supported our feet that would otherwise slip on the muddy soil. Here and there, we had to be careful not to step on a budding wild flower, or to crush a seed that might have begun its own life story already. Above us, the cool air and fine mist caressed our faces and our hair, like a gentle spray of early spring.

On the beach, the sand was firm. Seagulls, sandpipers and curlews were out, here flapping their wings, there playfully trotting along evanescent laces of white foam left twisting and regressing by

the waves that came to die along the shore. Further up the cove, the surf was wild, crashing on the rocks with a thundering sound. The sky and the sea blended into each other, just as one could not tell the fog from the clouds. There was no horizon, just a blurred curtain of white and grey blowing in the distance. The rain fell, merging the sky and ocean as one. And our kisses, our kisses had the taste of the sea and the rain.

June 15, 1989

Alone with just my guitar, my cup of coffee (ah! enhanced by the sweet taste of Irish cream!) and my quiet thoughts. The night was beautiful. I went outside. The moon has cast a bright flow of silver and diamonds over the ocean on the South end of the bay, toward Tomales and Point Reyes. *"Silent night, Holy night - All is calm, all is bright"* would have been the perfect song for this evening. Toward Bodega Harbor, one could see dancing dots of yellow, red and white lights coming from the boats and cars in the marina, as if the lives of folks in town were bouncing gently to the rhythm of the waves. The only other heartbeat was the lonely foghorn, calling out into the night, for lost souls to come home.

I went out to the cliff to see the waves and the rocks, to hear the crickets around me, and to experience the sea beyond me. The moonlight drew my shadow behind me, thin and long across the meadow. I watched the waves. In my will, I have asked for my ashes to be scattered over the Pacific when I die, and so someday, my ashes will come ashore, perhaps right here, coming and going with the tides. Wave upon wave. Wave upon wave. I will be invisible, but everywhere, in this immense mass of water, in this sometimes tranquil, sometimes restless ocean. And maybe I'll be happiest then, as part of this natural beauty I love so much.

"Calm rock pool, on the shore of my security,
Hold me when the tide goes down."

I had copied these two lines on a post card to Jeri sometime ago when we were dating, and remember them by heart. Unfortunately, I don't recall the author's name.

July 28, 1989

I love the spirit and rhythm of a big city like Montreal. While visiting my parents, I went downtown for a short shopping trip, and what a wonderful feeling I had riding the Metro and the bus today! There were people everywhere, hundreds or thousands of lives crisscrossing one another every minute; all types of people, and in all shapes. Old and young, short and tall, fat and skinny; people of all hair colors and skin tones; people with scarves and coats; people in T-shirts and baggy pants. There were hundreds of shapes of the human nose to contemplate. There were mouths that laughed and talked incessantly, and mouths that held shut, lest the secrets of their owners escape; there were thick lips that bloomed like flowers, and thin lips of sorrow, drawn to the shape of a stretched-out, upside down U. There were eyes that stared away in the distance, evading any human contact; eyes that were glued to a page of a book; eyes that drooped from lack of sleep or from the boredom of life; and eyes that probed other faces as if to extract the meaning of their existence; There were faces furrowed by wrinkles, resembling Mother Earth herself, carved in erosion by wind and tears; and faces with glittering ear- or nose-rings, as gay as diamonds in the sky. Some faces were parched by too much sun, and others had the delicate colors of a timid sunrise painted on ivory. I heard dozens of languages, some in a pure native tongue, some with words all mixed up in a bilingual or trilingual slush. Some ears were plugged with wired earphones emitting a rap and rhythm meant to stimulate life and sustain passions; some ears are echo chambers of the rumbling of the crowd and the road, while some ears were only hearing the sound of silence so beautifully expressed by Simon and Garfunkel.

At each bump in the road, the fully packed bus bounced and everybody jerked a bit, some bodies bouncing against each other, other passengers tightening the grip on their bags and packages. And again, when the bus came to an abrupt squeaky stop at the next corner of the street, some bodies swayed, while others stiffened. Perhaps for some, it would be the only physical contact with another human being for the day. Then, one by one, two by two, people got off the bus and went on their way, and others got on the bus for the next stretch of the road.

Riding city buses and Metro trains makes me keenly aware of the essence of our human condition. Here in these tight, crowded spaces, we come together, with the multicolored aspects of our existence and our personal boundaries open for everyone to see and test, all of us blended and packed in civil bondage for a bumpy ride. Some would trade a look, or engage a conversation that

might change their lives forever, while others would keep their minds wandering miles away, with their secret hopes or despairs wrapped in invisible cocoons. All of us would soon disperse again at a bus stop or train station, scattering apart and drifting down the alleys of our destiny. But if every man is an island, are we not all connected in a chain of landmass under the vast, deep, and mysterious blue ocean? Or if we were a herd bound in a common migration, heading toward well-linked drop-off destinations, why are we so lonely in the final steps of our journeys?

I love being in the crowd of city buses and metro trains. I feel most human, there and then.

December 23, 1989

I have not got over the fact that Piccolo is no longer with us, on this earth, at this very moment, no longer a companion to me. We had him “put to sleep” about three days ago, as he suffered terribly from back pain. With crushed spinal vertebrae compromising his bladder and bowel functions, there was little hope of full recovery, even if he were to go through more diagnostic tests and surgery.

He had quite a personality, Pic. Even at times when his loud and persistent bark was annoying, one ended up making peace with him, like one would forgive a kid after a temper tantrum. What I miss the most are his eyes. The way they begged you for affection, or attention, or for food. Even when he was just lying around on the sofa, looking so bored, his eyes followed every move you made, and he was ready for the slightest signal that you wanted to play with him. He was cute, and so funny when he ran around and around in circles in the house, or when he rolled and rolled over the carpet, perhaps one way to scratch his long back, or when he “stood up” on his hind legs to look out through the screen door. He always wanted to be kissed and hugged in the morning, and I seldom failed to disappoint him in a simple show of affection. It took very little to make Pic happy. He was like a baby.

I wonder whether he has a soul that survives him after his death. I guess we will never know, just as we will never know what happens to us after we die. Pic had always enjoyed life, I think, and it was a pity that it ended in so much pain. I feel guilty that we made the decision that he should no longer live, and he had little to say about it.

I will miss him a long, long time. I will never forget Pic's eyes, how they probe my soul, and how they may still ask me, long after he is gone: "I have been your faithful companion, so why did you ask for my life to be taken away?"

December 1989

Excerpts from our holiday letter to family and friends:

...And so, as the 1980s come to an end, we see a chapter of our life closing and another one opening up. From the hot and flat Sacramento Valley where we have made our home for 12 years, we will start the 90's as new settlers in the rolling hills of Sonoma County, among apple orchards and vineyards, dairy farms and lazy meadows, or lost somewhere in the pine and redwood groves. We will leave many good friends and acquaintances from Davis and its international scholar community who have enriched our lives in many ways. But the call of the ocean, the early morning fog shrouding the coastal mountain range, and the soft sunshine over the hills where artists and poets hide, all of that life is just too lovely to ignore, and that is where our hearts are going. Please come to see us when you can - we think you too will love this gentle land of green and blue and gold.

The past decade has been kind to our family. The fruit of parenthood and grandparenthood have been fun and rewarding. Job satisfaction, school, friends, family, all have been good to us. We wish we could say the same thing about the world we live in, as we reflect on painful events and the sad shape of things for which the 80's will be remembered in history! Will the 90s be a truly gentler and kinder decade? For those who hunger but are not fed, for those who cry but are not comforted, for those who pray but are not heard, and for Mother Earth who needs respect and care, there is so much for us to do.

January 1, 1990

Jeri called as soon as I came back to Sebastopol from Bodega Bay. She said the moon was so beautiful over the ocean, although it was just a silver crescent. I went outside and saw it too, playing

behind the branches of the mulberry tree that had finally lost all of its leaves. It was nice that tonight, while Jeri and I were apart, the moon was our common link and messenger of love.

We had a really quiet New Year's Eve, last night. We just went out on the deck, looked at the ocean, the stars, and bright strings of lights that came from Bodega Harbor at one end, and Dillon Beach and Tomales Bay at the other end of the horizon. And above us, right above us, was the brightest star of all. We just held each other tight and warm as the old year slipped away and the new one came along, heralded by the faint and brief outburst of horns, bells, and whistles of partying neighbors in the distance. We didn't even toast to the decade, nor did we make any New Year resolution. We just held each other tight and kissed under the stars.

January 2, 1990

Every newspaper, magazine, TV show had its analysis of the past year and the decade of the 80's. Of course, I have my own. The winter of '89 was indeed historical with the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The thought came to me that our generation has its heroes too, no less admirable than those from centuries ago: Sakharov, Solzhenitsyn, Walesa, Havel, and other unsung men and women of tremendous courage who gained the freedom of their people and won "the Cold War" with the strokes of their pens.

But I was disappointed with the 1980s, overall. I felt that this past decade was dominated by the "me-first" mentality. The greedy and powerful won out, and the poor and unfortunate lost out under Reagan. George Bush's "thousand points of light" were "feel-good" acts of charity, but no respectable substitute for a civil and compassionate society. There were great advances in medicine, like CAT scans, MRIs, and more organ transplants, but they benefited few people and bankrupted our medical system, at a time when more people could not afford even basic healthcare. The music of the 60's was brought back by the young generation, but there were no hearts for civil rights, just loud rock-n-roll beats. The big "moral " debates in the US centered on abortion and gun control, displacing the plight of the homeless, the poor and the sick. And we did terrible things to our environment: acid rain, deforestation, oil spills, and garbage crisis made headlines day after day. Thus, while rejoicing about the political changes in Europe, I cannot stop thinking about the fate of other people in the world as we enter a new decade, thinking about those

living in societies where human life is very “cheap”, where human cruelty is beyond our comprehension, and where the divide between the have’s and have-not’s is getting wider and wider.

June 17, 1990

My sister Hằng and her family came to Houston in March, and I finally went to see them about a month ago. We were very glad to see each other after so many years. I saw she had the resilience to make the best of her life beyond the daily burden of a passionless marriage arranged along family ties when she was just 18. But she is very happy now and proud of her four daughters, whose future is all she seems to live for. In her I found the picture of a mother swan and her babies swimming together, upstream, where the water is fresh and joyful, full of promises.

January 17, 1991

Christmas and the New Year day came and went. We had good holidays. Chi Hằng and Châu came for a visit, and left, perhaps with the difficult choice to be made whether Châu will come to live with us or not. My nieces Bích and Giao seemed to have had a good stay with us and enjoyed their first Christmas in America. They are very sweet girls, indeed.

Amy, Ben’s first girl friend, came to have lunch with us on New Year’s Day. We met Amy in June last year, and we’re happy to know her better. Ben has changed a lot in the past two years, having become less self-centered, more self-confident and responsible. Amy and he are now planning to go to the Junior Prom.

We carry on with our lives, all together busy with work and family matters, but this New Year has come with the clouds of war gathering rapidly on the horizon. I am glad to see Ben and his friends speak up against the Gulf war. The music of John Lennon and Bob Dylan has touched his heart and mind, after all. We are convinced that war will not solve any human conflict. Even if the goals are justifiable, the means and the costs of war do not justify it as a solution. I see the Arab world getting more “anti-West”, and even after a “victory”, the Middle East problem will be very difficult, unless the Western countries change their policies of exploitation of the Arab oil and their blind, unconditioned

support for Israel against the Palestinian people who have rights to a free and decent homeland in their part of the world as well.

March 9, 1991

The Jensen family. They seem very “down to earth”, Jeri’s brothers and sisters: friendly, without hubris, vanity or hypocrisy. Perhaps that is why I feel so comfortable being around them. Higher education is not necessarily their strong point, but I have learned that education does not make people more pleasant or goodhearted. The Jensen siblings are mostly employed in service areas, earning middle class wages through good and honest work; their families are quite diverse in fortune and life-style, every one with their own problems or heartaches; but between the siblings, there is a generous dose of acceptance, understanding and sympathy. A drinking problem ruined Grandpa Frank’s life after the family moved to California; it turned an honest, hard working, fun-loving man into a difficult father, leaving some unseen scars among his wife and children. Still, much joking and teasing happens at the Jensens’ frequent family reunions. And if they recognize each other’s strengths and weaknesses, no judgment is passed. They just offer mutual support in difficult times.

It is unusual to meet such a large family getting along so well. Grandma Jensen had a hard life, but the legacy of her good heart and resilience lives on in her children. We all know families where vanity, jealousy or simmering resentment lies beneath the veneered layers of traditional values, respectable pedigrees, and claims to fame, often through money or diplomas. In my youth, I have observed these issues in many Vietnamese circles, and I would have traded them anytime for simpler and more openhearted family dynamics - the Jensen way.

March 16, 1991

Poppies are out, blooming everywhere. Driving from Sebastopol to Bodega Bay, I felt so elated, so happy! The sky was blue, the fields and hills green, and poppies lined the country roads, like

sprinkled by a happy, carefree artist. Poppies squeezing out of rocks, hanging over cliffs, poppies waltzing in the breeze, poppies of yellow and orange glee, colors of my true sweet love!

If I had a million dollars to spend right now, I would buy a million dollars worth of poppy seeds and sprinkle them all along the country roads of California!

November 23, 1991

One of the best things I have done for myself recently was to enroll in an astronomy class at the Santa Rosa Junior College. Inspired by the thousands of stars we can see over Bodega Bay on clear nights, mystified by the Milky Way that throws its veil over our dark sky, and ashamed of my ignorance of celestial wonders, I decided that I should explore a different world of science outside of medicine. So every Tuesday evening, I leave the clinic and human diseases behind, to become what Carl Sagan would say, “a traveler in space and time, ... born of stardust and gases, ... and bombarded by cosmic rays”!

Mr. Ron Smith is an excellent and entertaining teacher. We barely scratch the topic of astrophysics, of course. We are learning a few basic laws of the universe, but more than that, I am being made aware of the genius of the people who persevere in trying to unlock the secret forces of the universe, to measure dots of matter that are millions and billions of light-years away, and to catalog the millions or billions of quasars and galaxies “out there”. I am dumb founded looking at page-long mathematical formulas and equations astrophysicists scribble, wondering how some human brains can process such a wealth of information and communicate in such a language. And do it so accurately, as our space ships and satellites almost never miss their targets.

My understanding of the laws of nature stops with Isaac Newton. The world comes to me through my five physical senses. I can feel when I fall, therefore I can understand gravity. How can I understand what an atom is when I cannot see it, hear it, or touch it, taste it, or smell it? It is no wonder then that I stay skeptical about astrophysics, which requires one to understand the universe through abstractions and calculations, even when they are presented to me in brilliant, digitalized pictures of bursting novas, or as marvelous, twirling clouds of galaxies. How can we be certain that our instruments and mathematical formulas are accurate enough for something as big as a star, a

galaxy, millions of light-years away? How can the description of a celestial object be complete with just a spectrum of colors, a flash of radiating waves recorded millions of light-years after they were emitted, for a few milliseconds? How can we understand the universe with our very limited senses and minds, with tools that are so microscopic and so rudimentary compared to what they try to measure? How do we know that other physical forces unknown to us are not interfering with our measurements? Our human lives are so finite, so how can we even think in the scale of billions of years?

And so, as much as I am enjoying my astronomy class, and with all respect for the astrophysicists and their genius power of their mind, I am finding that, in the end, I will understand very little of their theories and sciences. I feel more like a child ever asking more “why” and “how” questions that math equations cannot answer. Then I remember Marcel Proust’s universe re-synthesized in a cup of tea. Well, here is my even more advanced explanation of th universe: Imagine someone with a cup of coffee. He picks up a creamer, and dribbles a few drops of white cream into the black liquid, and with a spoon, sends them swirling madly. And so it is, our Milky Way spinning in a dark universe. Could it be that our galaxies are but tiny drops of white cream spinning for a brief moment of time in a giant cup of coffee? If cosmology starts by our questioning our raison-de-vivre and our destiny in the immensity of the universe, I can comprehend my universe in my cup of coffee better than any other scientific or metaphysical quest.

July 28, 1992

I rode my bike this early morning between our campsite at Paha and Bridgeport, and back. The air was cool and fresh, not yet heated up by the summer sun that could be scorching by mid afternoon. Just me and my bike, and the wide green meadows along each side of the open road, the breeze softly blowing into my ears, the big open blue sky above us, and the silent purple mountains in the distance. I stopped to take pictures of the flowers, of an old, rusty red colored barn, and of the cows. We had a staring contest, the cows and I, to see who would blink first. I looked at them, trying to get the best angle and composition of my pictures, while thoughts ran through my mind. Do they know who they are, why they are on earth, what will happen to them? Do they appreciate the beauty and serenity around them, like I do?

They stared back at me, perhaps ready to move away at any threatening gesture I might make. Like with dogs, deer, and other living creatures, their eyes seemed to say so much about their soul and conscience. I understand now why some people just can't bear the thought of killing animals, even for food. One just needs to look into their eyes to understand they are like us, with a natural instinct for existence, with the right to be here to enjoy life and the beauty of nature around us.

October 8, 1992

"You'd probably write in your journal that tonight you are sitting in a nice Swiss restaurant, yet thinking about Bodega Bay", Jeri said with a teasing smile as we enjoyed the fondue dinner over the lake.

She read me right, as usual! We are now on a wonderful, well-planned European trip that would take us all the way from France to Austria, Hungary and Ukraine, and yet at times I do miss my little corner of the world – Bodega Bay. I miss our small table by the triangular cove off the living room, where we often have our breakfasts or lunches looking out toward the harbor jetties and tiny Seal Rock Island. As often as I can, every time I have to leave Bodega Bay, I would walk out to the cliff across the street from our Sea Hugger house, and look down to the small beach below. To the waves rolling in and out, and crushing against the rocks, I would murmur: "So long, Bodega, so long, waves and ocean, sea gulls and starfish. When will I see you again? Or could this be the last time I see you, my good old friends by the bay?"

But tonight, on the other side of the globe, we are in the wonderful town of Spiez. After a nice visit with the Waldvogels, who took us walking through the woods and villages near Zurich, we headed for the Swiss Alps. We quickly escaped from Brig, where we had planned earlier to stay overnight, but the tourist town was too crowded for our mood. So we jumped back on the train, which took us winding 'round and 'round mountains and valleys, and through endless tunnels, to land in this idyllic little town perched over an emerald lake. The village landmark is a small castle that immediately captures the ideal postcard image of Switzerland. We were lucky to find a wonderful family restaurant and a cozy room at the Bellevue Hotel. The church bell struck at 9 p.m. in the distance, as the gibbous moon rose above a thin veil of fog that had crept over the lake. Just a perfect spot to rest after two interesting days in Geneva, where the crowd and big hotels were all charming and

welcoming, but again too busy for us. So now, in this little Swiss town surrounded by mountains and overlooking a lake, we are two happy and contented travelers, asking for no lesson in world history or museum arts, but simply enjoying the quiet beauty of nature.

January 2, 1995

A big rainstorm outside tonight. It was already grey, cold and windy earlier as I took down the Christmas wreath that we have hung over the deck railing for the holiday season. I dispersed the holly twigs and their red berries around the garden, hoping that may be next year, the holly bushes may come up. I have always had the fantasy that any seed will turn into a plant, and will eventually bear flowers or fruit, just by the grace of Mother Earth. Yet I know too well, from the hundred of various flower and vegetable seeds I have bought and sowed over the years, very few grew. But it is always good to hope that the future will bloom for everyone.

The rain is always welcomed in California, and always welcomed in my soul. Sunshine is nice, but the rain reminds me of the greater power of nature on the human body and soul, and of the bond between the sea, the sky, the earth and us. The rain outside beating on the roof and windowpanes makes our home a more appreciated shelter, as we hear the melancholic weeping of the earth and the sky outside.

But the rain tonight also echoes the melancholy of my mind. It is not the post-holiday blues. We had a good holiday season, and even in January, we can already think about spring in California, since daffodils will come out in just a month. But Jeri has been saying recently that I seem depressed, especially about my work. Depressed? No, I denied, maybe I am only a little bit stressed out.

She is right, indeed. I have come to the stage of my career where one starts doubting a lot of things. I am certainly in a profession many consider “noble”, although I have never felt comfortable when people shower me with comments, like: “Oh, you must have studied very hard to become a doctor”, or “it must feel good to make a sick child well again”. I don’t want to diminish the contributions of the medical sciences to the wellbeing of humanity, nor the care that many physicians provide for their patients. Some even belong to the ranks of geniuses, heroes and saints. But they are few in number. Most physicians have brought some relief, reassurance and hope to their patients sometime in their careers. There is another side of the profession, however. It

seems apparent to me over the years that most of medicine, the daily “bread-and-butter” practice of the “healing art”, especially in a suburban clinic for the relatively well-to-do “customers”, is made of illusions and deceptions.

Here is what some have said, and how I feel at times:

Voltaire: *“Medicine is the art of keeping the patient amused while nature does the healing”*. Indeed. At times, a “good doctor” is a good actor and not much more, giving the patient the perception that he knows a lot and cares even more. Patients are now considered “clients” and “customers”, as if medicine is but a trade, a service industry, after all. Keep the “customers” happy with your “products”, so the medical CEO tells the troops, and keep them coming back for more services, whether they need it or not. That seems to be the business of medicine today.

Voltaire, again: *“Doctors put drugs, of which they know little about, into our bodies, of which they know even less, to cure diseases, about which they know nothing at all”*. Well, two centuries of medical sciences later, we have done a little better, but we continue to stumble on ailments we don’t understand, make up some untested scientific conclusions, and prescribe remedies with exaggerated benefits and potentially unknown harms. And the band plays on...

And not the least, George Bernard Shaw: *“Mankind made a big mistake when it allowed the practice of medicine and the profit motive to intertwine.”* Alas, how can these words, professed nearly 100 years ago, still hold so true? Have we learned anything at all? If medicine at its core is a wonderful world of science at the service of humanity, are we all blind to the effect that profit motives are unfortunately the driver of much of the “healthcare industry” today?

Most of all, it is not the cynicism expressed above that drives my deception with medicine. Two darker clouds have been hovering in my sky of melancholy and rain: the pain of many of my patients, and the larger suffering of the masses in this world. Medicine has not offered adequate answers to either of them.

February 11, 1995

After all the incisions are sutured, the test results reviewed, or the last prescription written, it seems that the work of the physician has just begun: the art of healing. In the final word, I don't see anything more important for the doctor to do than to ease the pain of his patient. Because, in the final sense, it is the pain people feel that matters most. There is the physical pain, the emotional pain, the pain of losing hope, the pain inflicted on us by others, the self-inflicted pain, and yet all types of pain are real and can be devastating.

I would give up the promise of curing diseases if only I could deliver peace of mind and freedom from suffering, and a painless way to part with this world when our time has come. But I look around, I think what I have done and can do for my patients, and I feel like a big failure at times. I consult on many "chronic fatigue" patients, because their illness is believed to be an immune-mediated response to some unidentified, cruel infectious agent. Yet I have little to offer them, and they will continue to look elsewhere for "cure", often denying that the pain in their bodies can only be relieved when there is less pain in their souls. My AIDS patients will ultimately die, their hollow sunken eyes staring at the ceiling and at me, asking "why?" – while gasping for air through Venti-masks that drench their faces in sweat and chills but do nothing to ease their breathing. I see families and kids sliding down the vicious cliff of psychosocial pathology, yet they come to me only to fix the kids' bellyaches. They come expecting the latest scan, or for the magic medication, not for parenting guidance. The few words of reality check and advice I share with them won't end the years of family dysfunction. They don't need me as much as they need a social worker, but how much can a social worker do if the social frame of their families and communities is crumbling? At times, in a span of an afternoon, I feel like a revolving door. Patients come and go through it, and they eventually get lost in the crowd, crushed by the ultimate socio-economic machine that shapes their destinies and delivers their doses of unhappiness or misfortunes that I can't measure or control.

Perhaps nearing the age of 50, I have come to some middle life crisis when one challenges the rituals and myths of one's trade, and sees the futility of many things one is doing, when larger issues are ignored or beyond one's grasp. People call this "burnout", I suppose. Faced with other people's problems every day and being at the front line for easing their distress, I find myself pitifully unable to implement the behavioral and social changes needed to solve their problems. At times, I thought how wonderful it would be to be an artist and expose the cries of our humanity on a canvas

for the whole world to see; or to be in academics, and propose elegant and rational solutions from my Ivy Tower; or be a writer and a poet, and speak out for justice with eloquence and passion from the shelter of a rustic cabin serenely tucked somewhere in the woods! It seems so easy to take on these noble roles. But it is the teacher, the social worker, and the healthcare worker trying to "manage" dysfunctional families or self-inflicted diseases who feel so frustrated and powerless at the end of the day, for their voices are not heard beyond the walls of the schools or clinics.

Perhaps it is time to hang up the white coat and pick up the pen, time to teach medical students, house staff, and other healthcare workers the lessons of my failure.

February 12, 1995
My sister Oanh

Imagine a thin woman always preoccupied with something, never satisfied with herself, always feeling that she could have done better and should have done more, although she has delivered a lot more than anybody could have asked of her. Imagine someone who finds inner joy by trying her best to please others, and demands little for herself. Then you have found my sister Oanh.

You can guess that such a person always lives under a lot of stress and feel the burden of daily chores. Long hours preparing food and fixing things for her family, even though her children could be taught or told to do a lot more for themselves. Long hours making sure that her elderly parents in the house next door have what they need, and staying one step ahead of her mother-in-law's demands within her home. And even longer hours preparing for large gatherings of her husband's friends and relatives, all delighted by her generous and tasteful cooking. Then feeling torn between taking a rest and getting up to perform the next round of household chores. She can hardly keep her eyes open when her friends socialize with her. Sleepiness takes over as her vision becomes blurry through the microscope when she spends the rest of her waking hours at her laboratory work. She is my sister Oanh.

You see the frown between her eyebrows. The endoscopist sees the ulcer in her duodenum. Her siblings see the martyr woman who feels she has to live up to the reputation of being THE irreproachable daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, sister and mother, despite the toll on her health. But

it is not for vanity. She truly cares for others and gives all of herself. This is her way of being happy. My sister Oanh, she'll never change.

October 14, 1995
Frank Denny

So you died last weekend, Frank Denny. I did not inquire how you died; I just assume that you gave up. Like so many before you who died of AIDS, once you realized there was nothing to fight for anymore, you gave up. Just like a candlelight that went out. Silently. In darkness. The tiny flame fought so long and so hard when the wind was blowing like hell all around it, yet it burned out when the wind finally calmed down. Just like that. No more wind, but the candle light went out.

You first came to me in April, having lost 30 lbs, weak and scared. Boy, did your hollow eyes tell every one how scared you were! I was sure you had come down with an opportunistic infection, or with HIV-wasting syndrome. But no, it was a new onset of diabetes! It was so easy to give you back your weight, energy and strength. A little bit of insulin and tolbutamide, and there you were, happy and enjoying life again, walking every day to the local restaurant, bouncing like a kid with small change in his pocket and ready to spend it on a candy bar. But still scared. You knew you were very close to death, and got pulled out at the nick of time, like someone who got so close to a deep cliff that it took the breath out of him for a minute. But the cliff was still right next to your feet. You knew that, living with AIDS, death would be knocking at your door some day. But not now, your hollow eyes told me. Not yet, they screamed out to the world, please, not yet.

One day, you came down with fever and shaking chills, and then days and nights of fever came and went and came back without a diagnosis, despite dozens of blood tests, medical imaging and biopsies. I dug deep in my doctor's bag, considering the most common to the most exotic diseases that might give you those fevers. So you lived in Morocco for a few years, it must be leishmaniasis, of course. Negative. You never liked cats, therefore it would be improbable that you were exposed to Bartonellosis, but we tested you anyway. Negative again. For weeks, there were no answers to those fevers. But one day, they just left, with no reason. By then you were more scared and weakened. I remember you brought your Teddy bear along for your first hospitalization. It was over half the size of your chest, and bigger than your handbag of clothes. You said you were scared and the Teddy bear might help.

Soon, diarrhea plagued you. Hospitalization and a short course of empirical antibiotics was all it took to give you *Clostridium difficile*. It finally "responded" to vancomycin and cholestyramine, but it had already drained your body of more fluids and energy than you could afford to loose. Home health, house call visits, IV nutrition, nothing helped.

When I visited you at the North Coast Rehabilitation Center, there was not much left of that body of yours, but a bloated belly, a little bit of pitting edema on your feet, and a loose, brownish wrinkle of skin wrapping around some thin bones. You recognized me, but avoided looking at me most of the time. For twenty minutes, the only thing that came out of you were these moaning cries: "Oh, please help me", and "please, let me go home". On and on: "Please help me, let me go home". But how could you go home, Frank Denny? There was nobody home for you, Frank Denny. Your neighbors were kind, but they could only visit you for a few minutes a day. Your friends loved you, but they have their own lives in San Francisco. Your brother from back East came and visited one Saturday. In a sad voice, he told me he needed to get back to his business by Monday, and asked me "how much time would I give you". Yes, how much time would I give you, as if I had a time bank and would have the power to loan you time. If I had the means, I would distribute segments of time like logs of firewood to burn and keep warm, and I would pass out calendars like tickets to the theater of life, so that each one of my patients can live a month, a year more on borrowed time.

Frank Denny, I would have let you go home anytime if I knew someone would be there for you, to bring that spoon of food to your dried and chapped lips, or to cleanse those shrunken, shriveled buttocks of diarrheal stools, and to roll you out to the garden to take in the last rays of the September sun. But there was no one home for you, Frank Denny, no one but your faithful Teddy bear. So your social worker and I thought it was best for you to stay at the "rehab center", as if we could indeed rehabilitate you someday back to your life of that early summer, when the cinnamon rolls from the neighborhood bakery tasted so good. We have left you in that "nursing home", as if we could nurse your body back to the day before the HIV invaded your lymph nodes, the day they came off a Trojan horse to attack you from within. But we were ourselves either deceptive or full of delusions. We told you that we would get you home as soon as you have the strength to take care of yourself, and that you would soon. Logically, it made sense. Deep inside, I knew we were lying. I knew there was little chance for you to ever get your strength back enough to go home. What else could I do, Frank Denny, but, in the name of hope, lie to your eyes, to those hollow eyes that beg for the impossible?

The Wednesday before you died, the nurses wheeled your bed out into the garden. I came for a brief visit, propped your pillow up so you could see the mellow sunlight dancing in the fall foliage, between the last green leaves of summer. You avoided looking at me, and said nothing, except when I asked you about going home, and then you exalted: “oh, yes, I want to go home!” I told you that I would call Ann, your home health nurse, to see whether she could arrange to take you to your apartment for a weekend pass. But it never happened. Ann’s answering machine said she was on vacation, and you passed away before the Saturday moon cleared the tree line above the nursing home garden.

You avoided looking at me the last few times I visited you. I had always tried to signal you hope. You counted on me to get you well, to give you answers, to push back the moment of your death. I knew all along I would eventually fail, but we were both pleading: “not yet, please, not yet”. I think I gave up sooner than you did. I knew that you would never walk a free and healthy man, ever again, after the diarrheal illness and your wasting syndrome. Deep down, my empty words of reassurance did nothing to ease your fears and your feeling being abandoned. And yes, in the last weeks of your life, I abandoned you in that “rehab” center, that “nursing” home, so we called them. When you starred away and avoided eye contact with me, I knew that you knew that I had given up all hope on you. I wished there were something I could offer that you wanted, Frank Denny. It must be a terrible feeling to have lived as a lonely man, and now to die as a lonely man. You were so scared of dying, Frank Denny, and even with me there, you had to do it alone.

I did not cry at the news of your death. But now tears are fogging my eyes as I write about you, about your loneliness when you hung on desperately to life, and about your fear of abandonment when you were at the doorstep of death. I have thought about you everyday since the day you died, you, the lonely and scared Frank Denny; you, the gentle and kind Frank Denny; you, the Frank Denny who trusted me so much. But I was not there for you at the time of your death. I am writing your obituary today, for myself mostly, sitting in a hot and arid campground by the Kern River in central California, and already the desert breeze has dried my tears for you. I will think about you from time to time in days to come, but you are gone now, Frank Denny, and gone too are your fears, your AIDS, your loneliness. The pristine river runs by my campsite, some 10 feet away from where I am sitting under a willow tree. Wild, joyful, carefree Kern River, humming the song of the desert wind as it flows toward Lake Isabella. Wild, tormented, dangerous Kern River, roaring and wailing like a wounded mountain lion as it tumbles over rocks, for miles down the canyon. Like our pains, our hopes, and our lives on this earth, its water flows downstream, irrevocably, to the ocean miles

and miles away. So have you, Frank Denny. You have made your journey. And so will I, someday. I will flow down the river, back to the sea, perhaps me too alone in my final journey.

Kern river, by the River Nook campground,
Kernville, CA

Excerpts from 1995 Holiday letter

Dear friends,

We hope this holiday letter finds you and your loved ones in good health and cheerful spirits. To our non-Californian friends who are experiencing winter weather, we would love to ship you a slice of our balmy, late autumn sky in exchange for some rain for our thirsty brown hills. Even now, the serene Pacific Ocean a few yards from our deck is still calling out to those intrepid sea-kayakers before the first winter storm slams its fury on our windowpanes.

Just as much as we are blessed in 1995 with good health, a secure job and a happy home, we can't help feeling that the year has quietly ushered in our hearts a sense of passage into a new period of our life. Even in a large medical group, the stress of "downsizing" the staff and "reengineering ourselves" is being felt, as business mentality and efficiency sound bites take over the practice of medicine. We keep our mental health up with our usual arts and crafts, quilting and weaving for Jeri, and woodworking and gardening for Chính. We even discovered the delightful magic of a new art medium, silk painting. How relaxing to see the color dyes flow through the silk, like sunlight filtering through the evening fog or the hair of a lovely maiden! We also started tiptoeing into cyberspace with e-mail but just enough not to get sucked into the black holes of the information superhighway.

On weekends, we often find joy meeting old friends and neighbors in Davis, or hosting guests in Bodega Bay, including new acquaintances from Chihirin, our Ukrainian sister-city for Sebastopol. Long trips this year were taken mainly to visit our families, whether it was to see Chinh's mother in Montreal, or the Jensens at a large camping reunion in October. In May, we took a marvelous trip to Iowa by Amtrak, where we saw Ben at Grinnell College, and retraced some of Jeri's childhood paths in Everly. Since then, Jeri's new passion is genealogy. So far, she has found 41 first cousins just from her mother's side, has 1,500 names of relatives in her files, and claims a distant grandfather who fought in the Civil War. Little did that gentleman know that some 150 years later, one of his descendants would marry a chopstick waving, rice-eating, slant-eyed immigrant from half the world away!

The feeling of "passage" that we have as the year comes to an end probably reflects our realization that we are starting to "feel our age" a little bit more now. Feeling like: if it is so hard to get used to

our new bifocals, what would it be like to gradually recognize ourselves in every chapter of a geriatric medical textbook? How strange that the stock market value is becoming an almost routine dinner topic, as if one's hope of retirement rides the ups and owns of Wall Street? Or, how a daily glass of wine or an aspirin every other day now sounds much safer than the promises of Medicare in years ahead?

During our quiet evenings, as the foghorn calls out to the ocean and the Point Reyes lighthouse flashes like a faithful star, our thoughts and conversations often seem to dance to a melody sometimes sweet, sometimes melancholic: how nice that the music we grew up with is coming back with so much more charm and meaning; how seeing the siblings we fought with during our younger years seems to bring now a new bonding of warmth and love. The job of raising kids is over now, but was there a time, a decision, or a gesture that could have made the difference between bliss and blame, fulfillment or regret? Illnesses and surgeries among friends and relatives, and a few minor car accidents suddenly reveal to us our own vulnerability. But, best of all, after 22 years of marriage, romantic moments are still like rainbows and moonlight, and companionship is our sweet daily bread.

It seems that the world around us is getting more complex, the choices ever more confusing, the struggle more prolonged or costly. Yet, last weekend, as we took our grandkids to play in the autumn leaves and check out books from the library, we felt that the next generation will somehow find its own way to survive and succeed. Somehow. There is so much truth in Robert Louis Stevenson's advice: *"Make the most of the best, and the least of the worse"*. May we leave you with these wise words, as we welcome 1996.

With love,

Chính and Jeri Lê
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October 25, 1996

"You don't care much about your life, do you?" Jeri told me one day, not long ago. "What do you mean? That's a strange thing to say." I replied, surprised and taken by the rather cold and slightly reproaching tone of her voice. "Well, you are very foolish going out in the ocean by yourself, and you don't seem to care about what can happen", she added.

Jeri's concerns were real and sincere, of course. She has never been someone who would disguise her feelings. From my point of view, her fears seemed exaggerated, but she felt strongly about the dangers I have been exposing myself to by taking my kayak out beyond the harbor, into the bay. I briefly argued that the chance of an accident happening would be very small, and somewhere in my answer, I even implied rudely that my death would be a rather trivial thing, anyway. It must have been a cruel note to end the conversation on such a serious matter, but we left it there that day, unfinished and perhaps still tormenting both of us in a different way.

Of course, Jeri had a good reason to be concerned. There have been recent reports of aggressive activities by sharks in Tomales Bay and Salmon Creek beach. Yes, I could die of hypothermia if I fell in the ocean and could not get back in my kayak within minutes. Yes, one of the best of ocean kayakers made local news a few months ago when his body was found days after he disappeared in the fog that suddenly rolled in over Point Reyes. The ocean is full of dangers, no question about that. A calm morning can quickly turn treacherous when the West wind whips up to 30-40 knots in no time at all. Those gusts and swells can sweep and blow away my 9-foot kayak like a loose feather of a seabird. And that fog, blinding and chilling, can wrap around me, like a misty, grey veil of a mournful widow. And this wide and unpredictable ocean has not returned many seasoned fishermen to their families, everyone knows that, too.

Of course I have tried many times to reassure Jeri that I am not foolish enough to go out when the weather is poor or is predicted to change quickly. But when the ocean calls out for me, on a beautiful morning, it is such a thrill to be out there, with the salt water splashing on my face; out there where the gentle swell bounces my kayak, pushing the horizon line higher, then lower, then higher again; where sea lions and seals come frolicking by my side, as I paddle toward the rock where their colony of alpha-male basses and younger baritones bark in a broken chorus; and where, above me, flocks of brown pelicans take turns gliding and diving in impressive shows of grace and feast. Most of all, to be out there, me in my yellow kayak, a tiny dot of life bouncing to the

rhythm of the immense ocean. How else can I describe it to you, Jeri, my love, that thrill to feel so alive, when, from the window of our house, you could only have a vision of..., of a foolish, unnecessary play with death?

I have thought a lot about the meaning of life and death, recently. Or, to be precise, how I feel about my own mortality. The answer is very simple. Not much at all. I am saying this with much sincerity, without vanity, without asking for pity or regret. Poets, men of faith, world leaders and philosophers have already said much about the sacredness and the immeasurable value of a single human life. We should stand up for human rights, of course, for the injustice of men can never be tolerated, and no political cause should be higher than the respect of human life. However, I am focusing here more on the metaphysical aspect of our human life. Perhaps because we think we have a soul, a conscience, a mind, or a larger brain than other animals, we think our lives are more important or more essential than theirs. Here is where my atheism serves me well. Since I do not feel I am a unique child of any God, nor have I created my own God in the image of a Superman, I do not believe that my life should be any more precious than that of a tree, an insect, or a rock. Come to think of it, that mountain peak out there, covered with an early October snow, looks so beautiful in the dancing lights of the sunset, that I get the deep feeling that its presence on this earth is much more valuable than my own life. The mountain has been there for millions of years, and will be there for millions more, ever so beautiful in the sunlight, ever supporting more trees, flowers, birds and butterflies, and thousands of other living things. In comparison, my life means nothing in the minuscule stretch of time I spend on this planet. Like the trees, insects and worms of the earth, my body is totally biodegradable, recyclable into millions of molecules that will keep other lives coming and going. So, why should it be a big deal if I die?

And my soul? My legacy in this world? Well, perhaps my soul is just a self-illusion, a vanity that I, as a human being, give to myself over the rest of the plant and animal kingdoms. Do I have more of a soul than a mountain or a bumblebee would? Does that tree, out there, that tree that listens to the song of birds every morning, that shivers in the December winds and weeps in the chilly rains of January, that bursts in white blossoms in April, that adorns tender green leaves in May, and explodes in red and gold foliage in the cool crisp of October, does that tree have less of a soul than me? I don't know. I can't tell you. But I don't think so. And my legacy? Of course, I have loved, and may be missed by a few people who had known me. But in the history of mankind, among the billions of humans who have come and gone, and the billions living now, and the billions more to come and go, I can't say I matter much, can I? Probably no more than the legacy of a single

honeybee that pollinates the flowers and helps bring out the crop, one season after another; the legacy of a branch that once housed a nest; or the legacy of a wave that flushes the tide pool sands and plankton over these orange starfish. Yes, I am a human being, perhaps with a soul and a conscience, but my life and death is so much part of this earth, and so much like those growing or dying plants and animals out there, that no, when comes the time of my "passing", it really is not going to be a big deal. It should not be a big deal. That mountain, and thousands of bees and butterflies, and millions of trees will still be there to keep this world so beautiful. Even as I now enjoy what life has to offer to the best of my ability, from the practice of medicine to the appreciation of the arts, from the warmth of my love cuddling up to me through the many precious years we have together, and as I take pride and joy in the few things I have done – loving my Jeri, raising Ben, painting a silk scarf, or riding the swell of the ocean, well, I would probably die without regret, without asking for more, when my time comes. Everything is still going to be all right without me.

And so, my love, when you asked me: "You don't care much about life, do you?" - it is not that I don't care about life; it is just that I take my eventual death as natural as living, loving and being loved, and knowing to let go, when it is time for me to return to the sea and the earth where I came from.

When you spread my ashes on the beach,

don't feel like you have to go far to the deep blue sea to do it.
Just climb over a few rocks by the shore,
even if it is not the best time for a splendid tide pool.
Sprinkle my ashes over the dancing water,
r on a smooth, black, shiny rock sitting still,
and leave it for the tide to take me out to the deep blue sea,
and for the tide to bring me back closer to your feet,
when you return.
I'll be riding the waves,
you won't know which one.
Is it this gentle splash, this white foam,
or that big one roaring?
You may not even know whether I came,
or will I be leaving with the tide.
Just look up to the sky and the horizon,

or look down to the waves, the rocks and the sand,
and you will feel that I may be there with you,
for you,
the next time you come back
to this beach,
to this ocean,
to me.

December 1996 - Holiday letter

They call him Kokopelli, the humpback flute player.

He first appeared to us in Arizona, as iron sculptures in front yards dancing under the unforgiving desert sun, and as cheap art decals on mugs, restaurant menus, and souvenir T-shirts. Another commercialized icon propped up for tourist dollars, we thought.

But we soon discovered the mythological symbols of this Native American folklore. The legend was that Kokopelli wandered throughout the ancient South West, playing his flute to announce his friendly intentions as a trader of goods. Some believe he was a hunter or a warrior, or better yet, a rain priest, bringing water and fertility to the land. Some say he celebrated life, a minstrel carrying bags of songs, trading old songs for new ones, playing his flute to the rising sun and dancing to the blue moon of the desert. Some even say he had healing powers, bearing gifts of fire and water, and tales of harmony.

As we traveled home from the red rocks of Sedona and the sandstone of Arizona to our rolling golden hills of Sonoma County, it slowly came to us, this feeling that Kokopelli had more than once wandered into our life as well. Many of you are the Kokopellis who brought us the music of friendship, the seeds of harmony, and the gift of love and hope when you came to our home to share a meal, when you called to share a feeling of the heart, or when you prayed for our brother, firefighter Bill Jensen, who is now making a miraculous recovery from the Malibu fire in California this past October.

In many ways, 1996 has been quite an eventful, and at times, trying year for our family. Perhaps believing in Kokopelli helped. The contortions of his body as he dances to the music of his flute seem to tell us that life can only be learned backwards, but it has to be lived forwards. May you too lift your head and fill your heart with joy to the music of this hunchback flute player!

Happy Holidays, and the best of the New Year to you and your loved ones!

Chính and Jeri

September 29, 1997
My dear sister Yến:

As the morning spreads its shy pink color across the horizon that divides the blue sky and the brown earth, I see the American landscape unwrapping itself below the wings of the airplane that is taking me back to the city-by-the-bay. What a magnificent country, I tell myself, flying above the clouds and thinking of all the rich forms of life below. Where valleys and rivers intertwine, I picture marvelous trees, bushes, flowers and animals that breathe life as they have for hundreds or thousands of years. And like patches of an autumn-colored quilt, the fields cover the earth with the warmth and bounty of the harvest season. This is the land I now call my country.

Who would have guessed, when we were just little kids running home barefoot on the hot pavement of Khúc Hạo street on some humid summer afternoon in Hà Nội, that 50 years or so later, we would be scattered half a world apart? All those years that went by – the *"lycée"* years in Sàigòn that nourished our hearts and minds with poems of Lamartine or Alfred de Vigny; the years that saw our childhood shattered and crushed in the course of war and displacement; and then, the years of a new life and new struggle in America and Canada – did you ever imagine, my dear sister, that they would be our stories? Who was that little girl in Saìgòn who sang: *"Ma cabane au Canada / est blottie au fond du bois / On y voit des écureuils / sur the seuil"/.* Did she really think she would be living in Canada thirty years later? What happened to "*Diane, Hoàng Nga*", and to "*Minerve, Hoàng Yến*", and to the gentle yellow canary, *Hoàng Oanh*, or the melancholic little sister *Tuyết Hằng*? Where is that little boy who played with Napoleonic lead toy soldiers, and the adolescent dreamer of the 1960s who thought Việt Nam needed its own Robespierre in a time of social decadence?

The only certainty we can say about human life is that it is unpredictable and unforeseeable. As a youngster impatient to grow up, I often wished I could run backstage and preview the next act, or skip a few chapters and read the epilogue of the book – the book of our lives. But now, I am not even sure that the last lines have been written yet. Yes, biologically, we are born already programmed for health and disease, our cells will die of apoptosis, a term that means “programmed death” - that much I know and accept. Our parents have now passed away, their own lives built on dreams and patched with moments of joy and pride, but more often sewed together with threads of resilience and regret. They now live in our memories, like the sound of that last wave that landed on the beach. We are the next wave coming ashore. The undercurrent that each wave creates as it retreats from the sand may affect the next wave, but each surf has its own momentum, its own white cap and spray, as each tries to reach the starfish that cling to the rock. And so it is, of generations of men and women. Wave upon wave, we are coming ashore, in wandering lines of white foam that bubble and disappear as fast as the retreating water pulls away from the beach.

I remember you, my sisters, best in your moments of youth. I recall and smile at the Greek Goddesses that you idolized, the melodies that pulled a special string in your soul, the poets that courted your heart in your adolescent dreams, and even the Hollywood actors that fancied your young mind. Of course, these favorites have come and gone mostly with the flowers of your youth, although I suspect they could comeback in a flutter of your now old, aching heart. Much time has passed under the bridges, some we crossed, others we did not. The country of our youth is no longer the same, but neither are we now the same innocent students of St Exupéry or André Gide.

I know, my dear sister Yến, the autumn days are calling for you now to rake the leaves that have fallen, and to prepare for rain and snow. But as you plant your flower bulbs and cover the seeds for your next spring garden, remember those fluttering moments of grace and poetry of our youth. Sprinkle them all over the ground, for that is the only way we will find ourselves again. Hidden deep in the layers of time, seemingly lost in the seasons of sunshine and rain, you are still very much there, for me, my dear sisters from the Hà Nội and Sàigòn of our innocence.

Love,
Em Chính

February 12, 1998

Well, the meeting is over for now – my third attendance as a member of the ACIP (Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices). Even the seating arrangement in the large "A" auditorium at the CDC, with ACIP members in the center and each one with his/her own microphone, surrounded by "ex-officio members" and "liaison representatives" seating on the outer ring, themselves encircled by rows of CDC staffers – well, the seating arrangement surely makes one feels like being the center of a brain trust. Exerting more than a shadow on the working committee, the press people, other vaccine scientists, and individuals with "special interests" occupied the rest of the room, mostly immunization opponents and vaccine manufacturers.

My ACIP appointment last year represented perhaps an ultimate career achievement for me, and it would also make a great immigrant story. After all, I came to America on a USAID scholarship, knowing very little English, and now, this immigrant is ultimately "giving back" and serving his adoptive country by being part of a committee responsible for immunization recommendations at the national level. How did I get there, while other individuals with more respectable credentials could be well seated at my place? The truth is very simple and humbling: I just happened to be a lucky person, being in the right place at the right time, pushed and pulled, supported and groomed by many invisible hands that paved the path of my "success story".

My appointment at ACIP would not be a reality if it were not for Dr. Caroline Breese Hall. I don't know why Caren took a professional interest in my career; I can only think it was from pure kindness. She was especially kind to our young family when I did my Infectious Disease fellowship in Rochester, NY. We later kept in touch at least yearly, at ID conferences, and through personal Christmas cards where she never failed to inquire about our family. After she visited us in Bodega Bay and saw our bell collection, she even bought us a carved wooden bell from a trip in Egypt. I never guessed that she trusted me, a junior colleague, so much as to nominate me to an immensely responsible and prestigious task as with the ACIP. Lately though, the rumor of her ill health alarmed me, and when I wrote to her, she never answered back. It remains a great sadness in me to have lost contact with her. Did I say or do something that was unspeakable?

Back in Atlanta, what a challenge and real joy it is to be part of the ACIP, to take part in discussions led by experts and respected peers! I feel very lucky to learn from some of the highest authorities in public health and medicine. Particularly from Dr. Samuel Katz. He is such a gentleman, with a soft,

kind voice that speaks from wisdom and experience, especially when we are facing controversial and divisive issues. He teaches young men like myself the humility that comes with patience and honesty, and holds us to the highest ethical standards in research and policies.

But the ACIP has taught me other things as well. It did not take me long to see what, or who could derail or hold our immunization recommendations hostage to its "special interests". With all respect to the scientists who devote their careers to bringing vaccines from the laboratory benches to the clinics, I would say that the vaccine companies' CEO's are the ones who pull the final strings. Fresh in my mind from this meeting, the coming of age of the rotavirus vaccine is a case in point. With the results of safety and efficacy studies confirming the benefits of universal infant immunization, the ACIP still has to decide whether the vaccine program should be recommended on "cost-effectiveness" or not. Meaning, how much the program would cost, and on the other side of the equation, potentially save money for society when medical and indirect expenses associated with the control of the disease (estimated to be around $300 millions per year in the US) are factored in. As a clinician, there is no question that I would vote to recommend universal use of the vaccine. As a public health official, I will have to draw the line at the balance of cost and saving to society, since resources are always limited and health benefits have to be prioritized. For months now, the Wyeth drug company has refused to disclose the price it would charge for the vaccine, although it must know quite well by now its R & D and production costs. Therefore, ACIP cannot finalize the vaccine cost-analysis. Apparently Wyeth is maliciously waiting for academicians and medical economists, including CDC experts, to provide the range of cost-effectiveness figures, so that it can push the vaccine price right up to the line that would guarantee CDC immunization recommendations, and maximize its profit beyond the true production cost. Many ACIP members, including myself, felt deceived and manipulated by the arrogance and greed of vaccine manufacturers, when the process was supposed to be a partnership between the scientific community, public health, and private enterprise. The February meeting ended in frustration for most ACIP members and staff, since we were unable to make our final recommendations without the vaccine price. Guess who will again take advantage of the number game and control the price outcome at the next meeting.

To some degree, I have been protected within Kaiser Permanente, a nonprofit health organization, from having to confront an aspect of our American healthcare system: corporate greed. ACIP provided my first bitter pill of the marketing schemes that undermine the promotion of medical science and public health. As I was moved by the estimate that every year 40 to 60 American infant lives would be saved by the rotavirus immunization program, and hundreds of thousands more

spared the diarrheal illness, it did not feel right to me that the price we all pay would include huge bonuses to drug company executives whose job was to maximize profits for their shareholders.

That issue aside, the rest of this February ACIP meeting went well. I was able to express my opinions openly, and felt invigorated by interactions with my colleagues. I was proud of the committee work and the other vaccine recommendations we were able to make. I was happy enough that I bought myself a CDC sweatshirt and mug as souvenirs.

February 15, 1998

We had Cally put to sleep by the vet today. Euthanasia is the term, I guess. Her illness was so unexpected, but her agony was quite brief, thankfully! Yesterday evening, she came up to the deck, and she and I exchanged our *"Meow's"* as usual, as she let me caress her thick fur while I gave her food and milk. She was her affectionate, usual self, arching her back as her body flirted with my hand, like a coquettish lady. A few hours later, I found her in the garden crying loudly and unable to move her hind legs. Something was terribly wrong, I sensed, although there was no sign of injury or recent illness. We put her in the pet cage to sleep through the night, protected from other wild animals that might harm her, as she could not move.

"Saddle thrombosis", said the thin, long-faced vet who examined her this morning. It made clinical sense, although I did not think of this diagnosis before. Cold and paralyzed lower legs, pulse-less limbs, and an abnormal heart gallop. Of course, it was a blood clot in her abdominal aorta. But Cally has already outlived her life expectancy, and therapy would have been very expensive, perhaps futile. As we chose to let her go with a shot of barbiturate, then cremation afterwards, I spent a last minute caressing her neck. She was calm, resilient, and undemanding. She has that characteristic feline personality: engaging, sometimes; cuddly, when she wants to; independent, always. She was a beautiful, sweet cat, till the very end.

It is strange how one feels a heavy loss with any death, even if it is a most peaceful and painless one. Even if I should feel quite accepting of my own death when my time comes, and even if I know that death is as natural as birth, death always brings a sense of irreplaceable loss for those who are left behind. Later in the evening, I kept looking at the sliding glass door where Cally would have come up for her dry food and milk, and I would have returned her *"Meow"*, and let me caress her for

a few seconds. But she won't be coming anymore, not tonight, not tomorrow night. And the green cliff overlooking the ocean, the wild irises that will be coming out later this month will no longer feel the quiet footsteps of Cally, my cat. The ocean beyond my window will continue to rush to shore, yet someone is no longer there to hear it, to be part of this dance of life and joy. Cally, why did you have to die and leave us before the blue iris flowers bloom this month?

March 29, 1998

A brief storm pounded the tent with all its might, but it left as quickly as it came. Strangely, it also took with it the gusty wind that blew over Bodega Bay during the last two days. After hours and hours of wind that shook the tent and dotted the oceans with dancing white caps, suddenly the weather turned very quiet. Just like somebody had cried really hard, and suddenly found serenity as the tears dried out. By nightfall, it was so quiet that I came out of my shelter to listen to the stars, the million of stars that were sending us messages and stories of their distant worlds.

South of the harbor, across the bay, the hills were lit up by the homes of Bodega Harbor. I have not seen them from the campground before. Usually, we would be on the deck of our "Sea Hugger", looking North at the cluster of lights from the marina, and to the West, where the lamps of a few fishing boats dance on the dark ocean like lonely souls lost in the night. But viewed from the campground at night, the hills of Bodega Harbor were like fields of white and gold diamonds, sparkling in the dark. And how full of joy they were! For one of those lights is my home, where Jeri and her IFC (International Friendship Committee) friends are having a wonderful time with their annual retreat.

"Exiled" from my own home to make room for this "girls-only" slumber party, I had a great weekend to myself camping in our tent trailer. A unique weekend packed with NPR programs, writing, reading, and singing with my guitar. The meals were simple, quickly fixed over the gas stove, but tasty and filling. I recorded some songs on my tape recorder for my sister Oanh's birthday. She has always wanted a tape of my songs, she once said, and this year it would be a good surprise for her. With her thyroid gland swelling and affecting her vision, she has recently endured her illness with the patience and resilience of a true Buddhist. I hope my songs will cheer her up, although some

may bring tears to her eyes, especially the Vietnamese folksongs that grip our hearts, lovesick for our distant homeland.

I even got some silk painting done yesterday. The colors played joyfully on the fabric, the colors of the Mekong delta that were still in my mind a year after our trip to Việt Nam: emerald water, many shades of green foliage, and splashes of red and yellow here and there. I am particularly happy about the picture of the three boats that carry fruit and produce to the river market. After all, when the misery of life is too great, people remember best the joy of the harvest, and the painting seems to have captured the colors of hope and bounty.

I woke up this morning to a beautiful, warm sunshine over the campground. Quickly, I got in my kayak before the wind picked up again. The salty waves splashed on my face, just enough for a taste of a playful ocean. The swell lifted my boat to eye-level with the green hills beyond the water, and sunk it again below the horizon line. Two and a half hours later, I yielded my ocean to wind surfers in the harbor, as the ocean breeze predictably blew back into the bay from the North.

It was soon time for me to break camp and return home. Garrison Keillor just finished a delightful show from Portland on NPR, with its usual dose of heart-lifting songs and subtle jokes. By now, Jeri's friends must have finished lunch and would be packing for home. I know from the affection and friendship they have for her that my Jeri is a real jewel to have and to hold. No, my wife is not a Susan B. Anthony, a Hillary Clinton, or a Mother Teresa. She is not a "career woman", although her intelligence certainly would equal that of many college professors. She does not entertain like glamorous ladies in TV shows, and does not speak in theater lines. But her words are always true and deep from the heart, and her quilts have the comfort of the earth and the soft laughter of flowers. This year we will be celebrating our 25th anniversary, and oh, how I do love her!

July 15, 1998

I love taking pictures of windows. Of pretty windows, of course, like those with colorful flower pots in front of them, and gracious white-laced curtains behind them; or old wood-framed windows cut out of brick walls. Some windows are for people inside the house to look out, and they have outdoors

flowers and plants to soften the view of the outside world. Some have candles, or fine horse statuettes and vases showing from the inside, as to share with the people passing the little treasures of the homeowner. Low windows let the light come into the world of those who stay down in basement apartments. Windows on the roofs are there to let the soul of the dwellers escape to the sky above, or go chasing clouds. But you can't always tell what is behind a window. A nicely decorated window with beautiful lace may not always tell the true story of happiness or tragedy of the family who lives behind it. Still, I like to look at windows and wonder about the homes and the lives of the people who live behind them. Like pores on our skin, windows express the world inside us and absorb the world outside us. If eyes are the mirrors of the soul, windows are the eyes of the home. I like windows.

August 16, 1998

She stood at the corner of a field bathed in the summer sun, the barley waving in the breeze like a sea of amber and gold. The road sign spelled "HØRBY, 4 km ". She stood and had her picture taken on this land that her Danish ancestors sowed and ploughed many year ago, and worked hard for harvests that often failed to fill the barns. She had come all the way to see and stand on this corner of the earth that her grandparents decided to leave, a century ago, in search of a better life in America. To see the land, to breathe the air, to touch the grass and the trees, to look at the same sky her grandparents and other ancestors before them looked at for centuries as they prayed for a blessing from heaven, a gentle rain, a full harvest. Today, the land presented itself as a perfect painting of yellow, blue, green and earth brown colors, a canvas of joy. So she stood there, on this wedge of land – known by the locals as "Kilen", the same word that was engraved on her great grandfather's gravestone at the Thorshoj Church, a few miles down the road. Niels Christian Andersen (1845-1906) was his name. Having never set foot in this part of Denmark before, for Jeri, this day was nevertheless a homecoming.

As we were about to get back in our rental car to drive away, a man and his black dog came out of the farm house behind the trees. He seemed to be in his 70's, but was vigorous enough at his age to run toward us. Although we did not understand Danish, his facial expression and gestures told us that he was very excited and wanted to invite us in. At the same time, the priest who gave us information on Niels Christian Andersen drove up and told the elderly man who we were, and soon

the old man's daughter came home to translate: it all became clear that Jeri had found her Danish relatives – cousin Henry and his wife Anny, their children Olav and Berthe, who still farm and live on the ancestral land. What a remarkable event, one we could not dream of when we left for this Scandinavian vacation!

We toured the farm buildings where century-old tools and farm equipment were stored. Sunlight came through small windows, enough to show the old beams and pillars that held up the barn and the heavy roof. One could imagine the folks who worked there, the animals it sheltered, the seasons of harvest and years of labor that came and went under that roof. As we emerged from the barn, the arched door opened into the courtyard flooded by the bright morning light. An old tractor sat on the left, vestige of years of hard farming, and in the distant right field where the golden barley is ready for the harvest, a state-of-the-art white, slender, three-bladed windmill whipped the breeze in a humming rotation. What a great image of the old and the new in this little plot of land!

The Andersons served us a simple but delicious candle light dinner, with all the typical Scandinavian fare of boiled potatoes, carrots, peas, and minced meat, followed by a plate of dessert pastries, all sprinkled with a genuine dose of good cheer and laughter. Berthe and I did the dishes while Jeri and Olav poured over their genealogy notes. A few snap shots, handshakes and hugs later, and it was time to say good-bye to our newfound relatives. Henry proudly gave us a small doll rocking chair he had made. In him we found the typical image of the resilient farmer we have seen in some history books; Anny, his caretaker turned wife, and younger by 30 years, was a warm and quiet woman whose stocky features reflected her generous character. Berthe charmed us right away with her outbreaks of laughter, with a spark in her eyes, and dimples in her cheeks. And Olav was a delightful host, quite sincere in his enthusiastic welcome and his eager questions about America. Like his father, this young countryman cherished the family land, although he was admittedly no longer a farmer. Later, as we read more about the Danes in a clever and funny book entitled "The Xenophobe Guide to the Danes"[10], we quickly recognized the *"Hygge"* (conviviality and intimacy) and the *"Janteloven"* (deep-rooted community values) blood that still runs in Jeri's Viking relatives.

[10] by Helen Dyrbye, Steven Harris and Thomas Golzen, 1997, Ravette Publishing Limited)

August 31, 1998

They have dark skin and black hair, among blondes and brunettes. They have broad noses, among sharper and more pointed noses. Some of their women still cover their heads and faces with black veils, to shut out the evils from outside. Some of the men lower or turn their eyes away when you look at them. They walk lonely in crowds, or stand out in small groups, like zebras among horses, goats in a sheep farm, palm trees among pine firs. They own exotic restaurants and small food stores that are poorly decorated, smell a little unusual, and sell rice, strange sauces, fruit and spices that few locals want to buy. They are part of the new "melting pot" of Europe, but in metropolitan cities or in small towns, they seem a bit lost and forlorn. They are the new immigrants to Scandinavia, the land of Carl Larsson and Gustav Vigeland.

Because of their ethnic backgrounds and racial features, immigrants from Asia and Africa stand out more than white immigrants. Uprooted from their tropical jungles or from deserts parched by a feverish sun, they have to adapt to this land of cold winters and short summers. The Nordic communities have adopted and embraced them with generous help for shelter, food, healthcare and education, but when will they, or will they ever truly feel "at home"? Will their faces always bear the scars of past atrocities and persecutions, of war and fear? Will the world ever forget the pictures of flies landing on their children's bodies so weakened by famine and disease? Will they, and their children and grand children, ever be called Scandinavians?

These are strange thoughts from another immigrant like myself, indeed, who, thirty years ago, barely spoke English and knew so little about America, the land I now call home. Although I am more integrated into the American society than many others who came about the same time or after me, I still carry deep inside me that "immigrant mentality", especially when I am self-conscious about being the only "Oriental" among hundreds of white faces: the anxiety of being different in a crowd; the question of how well I am "accepted". These thoughts, I am sure, will always linger in my heart and mind, until I die.

September 8, 1998

For our 25th wedding anniversary, in Bodega Bay, I translated for Jeri Enrico Macias' song, *"Pour toutes ces raisons, je t'aime."*

You gave me your smile, your smile of loveliness.
I kissed away your tears, your tears of happiness.
Together we have built many fires a-burning,
As the ocean fog gently comes a-rolling.
For all those little things, je t'aime.

When we travel the world, I am home in your arms.
You weather out the storms, hugging close to my heart.
And when the sun dies out, and darkness fills the sky,
A million of candles, our stars, we would light.
For all those little things, je t'aime.

I am not man's hero, I'm just a fool in love,
A crazy fool, so crazy over you.
You know my story well, my open book of dreams.
You know me by the songs I sing for you.

We walk along the beach, we paddle down the stream,
We share a glass of wine, and talk about our dreams.
The patterns of your quilts, the colors on my silk
Are paintings of our life as the years go by.
For all those little things, je t'aime.
Pour toutes ces raisons, je t'aime.

October 1998

For my 50th birthday, I wrote English lyrics to a music piece by Phạm Duy, the great folksong writer who is for the Vietnamese people what Stephen Foster is for the American musical tradition.

"Not Regretting My Life"

Chorus:
By and by, I shall die on my way through the night, what will I take with me on that day?
By and by, I shall die, not regretting my life, what will I take with me on that day?

I cannot take with me silver plates, rings of gold,
I cannot take with me all the things I have owned,
I cannot take with me red houses or bridges,
I cannot take with me great honors and riches.
But I will take with me children's smiles, shinning eyes,
As they reach for a bowl full of rice, full of rice.
And I will take with me the moonlight on your hair,
The sunrise on your face so bright and so fair.

Chorus...

I cannot take with me golden bread, feather beds
I cannot take with me summer fruit, herbal roots,
I cannot take with me wild horses and sea birds,
I cannot take with me wild flowers of the earth.
But I will take with me lovers' wail, fairy tales,
And I will take with me poets' dreams, painters' gleams,
And I will take with me the song of the West wind,
That carries my boat home at the end of my day.

Chorus...

Excerpts from our Holiday letter, 1998

Dear Friends,

1998 was a series of snap shots and postcards. Grandkids growing by leaps and bounds. A summer evening with old friends in a Swedish cottage by a pristine lake, worth a Carl Larsson's painting. Red trains that crisscrossed the gentle hills and farmlands of Denmark. A must-do pilgrimage to Legoland. Statues at Vigeland's park in Olso, where all human emotions and conditions are as bare and real as stone and granite. A peaceful cemetery in the shadow of a white stone church in Torslev, Jutland. Family and friends who found themselves lifted in our kayaks by the waves of the Pacific Ocean, to the gleeful bark of seals and sea lions. Birthdays, anniversaries, family reunions and weddings that marked the year like milestones on a scenic road.

Of course, every passing year makes us a year older, like adding another ring beneath the bark of a tree. Woven into this new ring are more memories and a stronger feeling of Danish *HYGGE* (conviviality and intimacy) and Vietnamese *NGHĨA* (social duties for justice/equity). Like for the trees that soaked up the sun and the rain on this El Nino year, perhaps the rings on our tree grew a little bit bigger for the Hygge and Nghĩa we nurtured this year of our 25th wedding anniversary.

As if 10 grandkids were not enough, we adopted 10 Trolls from Jutland. We found them lost among fancy porcelain dolls and peeking out of drawers in antique shops, longing for a good home. Yes, dear friends, they are the latest immigrants from Vikingland! So if you want to experience the Danish Hygge without crossing the ocean, hear what giggles and chats sound like in Danish, and go to bed being watched by ugly yet charming creatures with big round eyes, wild untamed hair and wrinkled foreheads, then come and visit us at the "Sea Hugger" in Bodega Bay!

Till then, have a Merry Holiday Season and a Happy New Year!

Chính and Jeri Lê

Susie

June 2, 1996

“I feel great! -- I’ve never felt this good before.” There she was, a young woman with cherry-red lips, in casual but well-groomed clothing, hugging a two-inch thick appointment book, slouching slightly in the chair across from the examining table. Only a slowly healing herpetic lesion below her lips might have revealed her immuno-suppressed state.

Susie[11] has AIDS. I first met her a few months ago when she came to the Saturday urgent care clinic, with a generalized measles-like rash and swollen lymph nodes. I can’t remember now what happened between the time of HIV diagnosis until the day she came back to be my regular patient. Perhaps, like many kids seen in the “drop-in clinic”, she chose to “drop out” of care for a while. But now, here she was, bright and gay as the morning sun in June, as if she wanted to prove to me that her “alternative medicine”, with herbs, vitamins and rectal ozone had done her a lot of good. Yes, the natural healing of life itself. Never mind that her CD4 count has decreased dramatically in the last four months, that her viral load was very high. But, no, Susie would not take antiviral therapy, despite much “rational” discussion. No, Susie was not dumb. She understood she was sitting on a time bomb, perhaps burning bridges of opportunity to suppress her HIV a little longer. But no, she “does not want drugs in her body”. No, not yet.

“Tell me, Susie, tell me how you feel about having AIDS, about the fact that you are going to die someday – well, of course, we all die some day,” I added in a quick embarrassment – “but how do you feel about dying of AIDS? Are you afraid of dying?

-Yes, I am afraid of dying, she said, with a little twitch in her voice that revealed her loss of composure just for a few seconds. “I do want to live, I feel quite good, I have a lot of things to do, and more things I want to do.” A few seconds passed as she looked at the floor, pensively. “I’ve thought about death since I was nine, she continued. Actually, I’ve always wanted to die, but not now.”

-Tell me more about what happened when you were nine.

-Well, she said, my father died of AIDS when I was nine, and since then, I’ve always wanted to die to be with him. My parents divorced when I was three years old, so I was never close to him. But I

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[11] Susie is a fictional name I use in here to protect the privacy of the family of the real patient in this story

did not forgive him when he died, and I wanted to die too, since then and right up to now. I wanted to be with him.

-Tell me, Susie, how did you get AIDS?

-I always wanted to die of AIDS, and I am sure I brought it on myself.

-What do you mean?

-Well, I was very depressed. My mother, my sister, and I all had lots of counseling. My sister was raped by my father's friend, you know. It was a mess. When I was younger in high school, I started fooling around and I went out with a guy I knew had AIDS. I wanted to get AIDS, somehow. I knew he had AIDS because he was very sick and getting sicker. So I had unsafe sex with him.

-How did you feel when you found out you had AIDS?

-I don't know, I wanted to die, like my father... But now, I don't want to die anymore. There are so many things I enjoy doing.

-Tell me what you enjoy doing.

-Well, I work a few days a week catering food. It's a lot of fun. I hang out with my friends, go shopping, go to church.

-Church? What church do you go to?

-The Mormon Church. Nobody there knows I have AIDS. We hang out and have a lot of fun."

No, Susie, I thought to myself, no. You look so full of life, with your calendar and notebook packed with I don't know what, with your sweatshirt flashing the Sonoma summer colors. No, of course, nobody would ever believe, as you hang out with the kids in your church, that you are living with a deadly secret. But how can I not think that you are in denial, and that you're playing with a time bomb? You know it too, but "now" is all that counts for you, and the "now" in you is yelling out loud that you are healthy, full of life, full of dreams.

"-If you enjoy life so much, but know you'll die of AIDS someday, don't you want to take medications that would prolong your life?" I ventured to say, coming out of my own thoughts.

-Yes, but not AIDS drugs. I don't want drugs in my body right now. I know my T-cell counts are not good, but may be it's because I've not been taking my vitamins faithfully, and my ozone machine is not working well. I should have it fixed."

And she went on to talk about natural healing remedies, about ozone and herbs, while pictures of viruses eating up her lymph nodes and dying cells flashed in my brain. But Susie believed she could beat the odds.

“-Look, Susie, I respect what you want to do with your own life, with your own body. I know you are a bright person, and I won’t nag you by talking about things you don’t believe in. Having faith in what you do is all that matters. Sometimes…” I added quickly, changing gears: “I only want you not to be in pain. I have no illusions, the drugs will only suppress your HIV infection, and there is no cure now. But I don’t want to see you in pain from infection, from pneumonia, from wasting syndrome and diarrhea, and nerve pain in the late stages of AIDS, so if somehow we can delay it, I feel it’s my duty to help.” Here I was again, lecturing young Susie about things that might happen in the future. “I don’t want to see you suffer, Susie, I’ve seen too many young people suffer from AIDS”.

She understood me, I knew, by the deep look in her eyes, and I felt she appreciated my saying that. But she was unconvinced. A few more exchanges about lab work and next appointment scheduling, and the visit ended. I weighed her - 123 lb – and hugged her good-bye in the hall, reminding her to call me anytime she wanted or if she had a question. She gave me a big smile, and quickly walked down the hall, like a college kid who just finished class and was ready to bounce out there - yes, bouncing out there to do cool and fun things with her friends - like soaking the balmy mid-summer sun into her thin body. Susie, 21-year old, with AIDS, a CD4 count of 60, and what a story to tell and to hide! Susie, 21-year old, with AIDS and red-cherry lipstick that covered the anemia of her disease, sipping perhaps her last glass of the wine of youth and summer!

March 28, 1998

Gary shot himself in the head two weekends ago. I was shocked when I heard the messages the police and his partner left on my phone mail recorder the next day. “I couldn’t take the pain anymore”,Gary had told me a few times over the years I took care of him, but always we seemed to have been able to jump the hurdles together. His arm and leg pains improved with epidural injections, but then his right heel became slightly purplish and tender. Perhaps an early Kaposi’s sarcoma lesion? No, it turned out to be an ischemic heel. He consented to a trial of calcium-channel blocker and vasodilator drug. He will go to see a vascular consultant, as recommended. After all, his AIDS medications were “still working”, and his viral load was very low. I even gave him my old copy of an Elderhostel catalog as he wanted to travel. He refilled his medications, and reminded me to send out the surgical consult as he left the office. The next day, Gary shot himself in the head.

“I couldn’t take the pain anymore.” Why did I not hear these words loudly enough? Why did I not know that the temporary relief he got from the pain clinic experts was not enough to keep him going? It was one pain after another. One more pain, one new pain to deal with, day after day. Gary was assertive about his medical needs, and very compliant with his therapy. He was a quiet man whom you knew took good care of himself, and that he had resolved to have ultimate control of his life. Yet, the manner he chose to die, I, his physician, never suspected. Behind the wrinkles of his large forehead evermore accentuated by his total baldness, and behind the penetrating eyes that greet you warmly, depression was eating his soul away. So, two weekends ago, Gary decided that he did not need me anymore. He shot himself in the head. He was another patient of mine whom I had grown fond of over the years. But I only heard him too late, when he took control of his pain in his own way. With the blast of a gun.

It has been said that our society has learned much about itself through the lens of the AIDS virus: How it exposed the deep core of our prejudices against one another. How the desperate activism of those living with HIV-AIDS helped launch a new paradigm in patients’ rights, a new area of public health policies, and a new code of medical care. And when challenged by tremendous suffering and loss, how individuals, friends and families have either sunk together, or bonded to bring out the best in them. Each one of my patients had his/her own unique story to tell. Ryan was my first AIDS patient, a seven-year old boy with congenital heart defect who acquired the lethal virus from a blood transfusion during his surgery a few years ago. The HIV epidemic just started to hit the news then. We really did not know what to do, and could not offer much to him or his parents. Eric, my second AIDS patient, died in his early twenties, scared until the end, even with his mother and sister by his bedside; his death was agonizing for everyone, as we watched him Cheynes-Stoking, diaphoretic, gasping for air until the last minute. James was an artist and a gardener. His Kaposi sarcoma was so painful that death came to him as a relief. He was a very gentle person. I wish I had one of his paintings to remember him by. Stev was the terror of the clinic: always demanding, obnoxious, and offensive to everyone. When he was diagnosed with inoperable lymphoma, he completely shut himself off, literally spending time just staring away into the empty space, and died within a few days. Frank went to a nursing home when there was no one else to take care of him, hugging a big teddy bear in his arms. When I last visited him, he cried so hard that he wanted “to go home”. His deep, sunken eyes stared at me accusingly, as if saying that I have abandoned him, and he died quietly a few days later. Tom was another one who went out like a light that was suddenly switched off. He had a horribly disfiguring herpes lesion on his cheek and ear. He demanded “aggressive therapy” until the end, enrolled in multiple experimental drug protocols at UCSF, complained that

the researchers were more interested in his viral numbers and the study protocols than in him as a patient. When he suddenly realized that there was no more hope in sight, he withdrew from everything and everyone, and he died quickly and all alone. He broke his silence only to tell me what he had always wanted to tell his father: “I am sorry, I disappointed you” - but couldn’t. His father was living thousands of miles away, on the East coast, and had not answered his calls for years, even in the very last days of Tom’s life. And so, Tom died without ever being able to say “I’m sorry” to his father. A father with a heart of stone, I thought. But who am I to judge others in their sorrows and their losses? Perhaps, hearts of stone are already the ones with the heaviest burden to bear.

I remember Leo, who never got to wear the Grinnell College sweatshirt I bought for him on a recent trip to Iowa. He surely looked like a rebel rouser with a sparkle in his eyes in one of the old faded pictures of the “Cyclone” college yearbook his partner showed me while Leo was in the hospital; he went on to be a prominent lawyer in the investigation and public release of the report on Robert Kennedy’s assassination; he even fought and won a Supreme Court case, I was told; in brief, he had a brilliant career. Yet, within a matter of three to four months, his cerebral cortex literally shrank away, atrophied like a dry apple. Leo rapidly lost his balance control and no longer could walk his dog after dinner; one month before his death with AIDS dementia, he could not recall the name of the current Governor of California, nor the town he was living in. Leo was handsome and warm, funny at times, and always very inquisitive. Perhaps his dementia protected him from the pain of knowing he was losing his mind and bodily functions. But for those who knew him and witnessed his wasting away, the literal decomposition of his brain was horrible.

By 1995, many of my earlier AIDS patients were already dead, and others had advanced disease too late to be helped. But the promise of new wonder drugs was high in everyone’s mind. We refined old regimens, started prescribing combination therapies fine-tuned at “state-of-the-art” symposia put on by drug companies. Expert opinions raised science and patient management to “new paradigms”. Clinical “remissions” and improved laboratory results from patients filled our HIV clinic with much optimism. But now, in 1998, for a few of my AIDS patients, the promised miracle of “aggressive” combination therapy has started to evaporate rather rapidly, like a bright morning sun that was quickly drowned out by afternoon clouds and thunderstorms. Like in a poorly played chest game, pieces are falling right and left, as we are now becoming more aware of viral drug resistance and other metabolic complications. Fatal diagnoses have started to pop up again. Frank died five months ago with a brain tumor and a rising viral load. I believe he did get through Thanksgiving with

his absolutely wonderful family, but did not make it for Christmas. He was perhaps one of my luckiest patients, for having a supportive family until the end. He died a happy man, even if that sounds a rather strange thing to say. Death came unexpectedly for Walter, who had an aggressive disseminated Kaposi's sarcoma; and for Jeff, who just a few days before succumbing to respiratory failure from PCP, had signed a consent form for two new investigational antiretroviral drugs. We wanted to give him some hope, although we knew it was futile, as Jeff was by then only skin and bones. But he had indicated to us his "will to fight until the end".

And so, over the years, the multiple faces of AIDS drifted in and out of our clinic. While medicine and public health need statistics to measure their successes or failures, just like military bulletins need body counts and bomb tonnage figures, AIDS and war could only be understood by looking at the faces of their victims. Faces of despair hanging over wasted bodies. Hollow eyes staring into empty spaces, when there was little to fight for anymore. Each time the scale at the corner of the hallway by my office made a detonating "clunk" sound as the wasted bodies of young men came on and off the plate form, we were reminded that each pound of weight loss was a step closer to the final cliff, resounding like a rock tumbling into the silent despair of the vast ocean below.

And then, there is Susie, as happy and carefree as she could be. A walking time bomb, I keep saying to myself, but what's the point of thinking about it? Susie came in the other day with Candida esophagitis, easily treatable when managed early. Her CD4 count has been slowly dropping, but she was still "not ready for drugs", she insisted. Married now, she told me she might want to raise a family in the future. I knew from her voice and the look in her eyes that she did not quite believe her wishes would be fulfilled. She would be depressed if she had to take antiviral drugs, she added. She has been volunteering at the local support center for HIV patients, known as Face-to-Face, and carries a heavy calendar notebook full of things to do. It is as though by planning every event and activity weeks and months ahead, she can keep death away, one day at a time, further than her own arm's length. Oh, yes, Susie you're only 23, and every passing day is accounted for, and tomorrow still counts!

February 18, 1999

"108 lb", I said in a neutral tone, reading off the scale on which she stood, feeble like a feather. That was 108 lb including three sweat shirts and two pairs of sweat pants. Nevertheless, neither Susie

nor I expressed great concerns about the weight loss she had been experiencing over the past year, because, on that day, both of us believed we had begun to turn the corner. A few weeks ago, at a CD4 count of 60 and a viral load hovering around 80,000 copies/ml for a few months, Susie left me a message on my phone: “Doctor Lê, she said in a perfectly emotionless voice, I am going to make *YOU* very happy. I am ready now to take *YOUR* HIV drugs.” With the *”la belle indifference”* typical for her, Susie spoke in the most ordinary voice to let me know of a decision she must have been struggling with for months or years. Happy I was that day, indeed, for many of my patients with advanced AIDS have recently “turned the corner” on newer anti-retroviral drugs. Susie will be one of them, there was no doubt in my mind, if she could follow through the vigorous therapy.

So she started her drug regimen soon after the New Year, wanting to avoid possible drug side effects during the holidays. We would start with a three-drug combination, I proposed, but no, Susie wanted the “real HAART” (Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy) with four drugs. A week into therapy, a bad rash developed, but it was “bearable”, and it eventually disappeared when Septra was discontinued. But soon diarrhea developed, along with anorexia. Susie wanted to hang on. Pancrease and Lomotil helped, she said, along with some drug dosing reduction. She also said that her mother was coming to help her eat and rest. And she added: “When I am better, I’d like Joe to go for counseling with me.”

Quite a few things happened since I last wrote about Susie in my journal, almost a year ago. She called and came in regularly for her lab tests and exams. When I informed her about the “good news” from the reported antiviral clinical trials, she invariably responded that she had not been compliant with her own herb and ozone treatment, and that she should try to do better and give it a good chance to work. She even told me that she was consulting with a doctor “who has a machine with lights going on and off as it measures various chemical sensitivities or deficiencies”. Identifying and reinforcing these “natural energy building” sources would restore her immune functions. “You’re too smart to believe in those blinking lights, Susie”, I said. She smiled as to remind me that so far, she had been winning this game of cat-and-mouse with death, or at least that she had been doing quite well living with a death sentence. After every visit with Susie, I felt sad, my thoughts revolting to the idea that a smart person could fall into the arms of a charlatan with blinking lights, while my “more rational” medical advice would go unheeded. Nevertheless, we always parted in good terms at the end of her visits, as I wished her well with whatever treatment she chose.

Months went by, and Susie always carried with her a fat appointment book, a common trade mark of successful career women of the time. She kept herself very busy indeed, mainly volunteering at Face-to-Face. One time, after I gave a lecture on HIV education to the county school district personnel, I spotted Susie in the audience. We spontaneously hugged each other as she replaced me on the podium. She was there to tell the crowd how her very strict family upbringing had turned her into a rebellious adolescent, and how she got HIV through her high-risk behavior. And typical of a youth getting back at an older, more conservative generation, she sounded a warning to "you, mothers and fathers and grandparents out there, my story could happen to your decent family, too."

When Susie got married sometime last year, she did let me know, and I felt I had to bring up the "medical implications" of her decision, such as: "Are you having safe sex"? "Do you know what could happen, and what you would do, if you got pregnant"? and: "Has Joe been tested for HIV yet?" Of course, Joe had tested negative, and they were having safe sex, but no preventive drugs. Then she added: "The only time I will decide to take HIV meds is when I am ready to have a baby, because it will give my baby a chance not to get infected".

"Joe does not realize how sick I am", she reported to me on one occasion. "We have great fun together, and it seems to be the only thing that matters to him. He does not understand why I am tired, why I don't eat well sometimes. We need to go for counseling as soon as I feel well." After Susie saw the nutritionist and had her lab drawn, I told her that I would call Joe and arrange for an appointment "just to talk". That was the first time I met Joe. He was a gentle-mannered, baby-faced guy with blond hair and the body build of a high school football player. She and Joe held hands as I impressed on him how fragile Susie' s health was, how important it was to support her nutrition, and how confident I was that the HIV drugs would suppress her virus and bring back her health. He was calm and showed eagerness to support Susie in her difficult drug regimen.

A week later, Joe, Susie's mom and her boyfriend all came along for Susie's follow-up visit. 108 lb still. Susie was "weak, but happy". She had been wanting to sleep most of the time, but did eat some soft food here and there, kept down her fluids, and about one can of Ensure a day. Her diarrhea had continued on and off, but at times it was bad enough that pills appeared undigested in her liquid stools. "Fever?", I asked. - "No"; "Headache?" – "No"; "Vomiting?" – "No"; "Abdominal cramps?" - "No". After an exam revealing no dehydration, no signs of acute illness, and surprising normal lab tests except for anemia, the family declined my offer for a home health nurse, as they

planned to take Susie to Berkeley the next day for the weekend. We exchanged phone numbers so I could be informed of Susie's condition daily.

I remember Susie's mother only very vaguely. I met her once a few years ago, when Susie first became my patient. She impressed me then as a tall and strong woman who exerted quite a bit of influence on Susie when they were together. She gave me the name and phone number of a doctor in New York "who had a remedy for immune restoration", and left me with a book she herself had written about "the spiritual and natural way to deal with HIV" – a book I quickly donated to the HIV Team library without ever reading it. The best news I gave the family the day before they took Susie to Berkeley was that her viral load had dropped to 84 copies/ml, a rather amazing response just after two weeks of rather poorly tolerated therapy, as it was. Her mother wanted to hold off all drugs for the weekend just to give Susie's bowel a rest and for the family to have a good time together. In reviewing Susie's prognosis with her and the family, I even said: "We are not promising AIDS patients just a few years of survival, but more likely, decades of healthy living, and Susie can be a mother and grandmother if she wants!" I said it gaily, remembering why Susie decided to go on therapy. At that time, I said it with the honest belief that, yes, Susie would make it. It was the new paradigm for HIV as a manageable chronic disease, and "aggressive and sustained therapy" is the answer now and for a lifetime. Her mother hugged me and said: "I'll hold you to that; and, by the way, thank you for not having given up on my Susie a long time ago." As compliments tend to be infectious, I found myself saying awkardly: "You know, Susie, when the bottom falls off, mom is always the best person for us all. Her nurturing is the best, her chicken soup the best cure."

And so, we left for that fateful weekend, I to our beach house in Bodega Bay, and Susie's family for Berkeley, knowing that Susie was still very sick but all convinced that by next week she would be better. Susie died six days later.

She remained weak and wanted mainly to sleep on Saturday and Sunday, the family recalled. She also started vomiting, but remained alert enough to say: "My hair is a mess!" - as she looked in the mirror on the way to the bathroom early Monday morning. "Can you bring Susie at 9 a.m. for me to recheck her?" I asked. Of course, they would. Need to reevaluate her hydration, start IV, and despite no fever, no headache, will have to do an LP to rule out cryptococcal meningitis, I rehearsed the upcoming clinic scenario in my head, gearing up for the worse.

Monday, 9:30 a.m. - Tara the receptionist rushed in my office, pale and panicky like I have never seen her before. “Susie is here! I’ve never seen anybody so sick!” In her wheel chair, Susie was having an obvious grand mal seizure. The cascade of events that followed came like a horrific, unstoppable avalanche. Rush to the ED; IV line in; dilantin given; oxygen started; stat CT scan; large frontal mass the size of a tennis ball squeezing the rest of the brain, rule out tumor, but hope against hope that it may be a treatable bacterial or toxoplasmal abscess; decadron administered; transfer to the Community Hospital three city blocks down the way, where the attending neurosurgeon said: “If she were my daughter, I would not do anything and let her die in peace”; and where the oncologist and another HIV expert physician both said: “If she were my daughter or sister, I would do everything”. Brain herniation. Emergency surgery. Brain biopsy with tentative reading: “likely tumor, but no final results until special stains are back”. Stat radiation therapy started that afternoon. All this avalanche rolled over me before I could even comprehend what we were trying to accomplish, as each clinical step just led to another, and another, once it was decided to “do something”.

Next day, the critical care note read: “Stable, on morphine and ventilatory support. Radiation therapy, second dose of a 10-daily course.”

Thursday, 8:00 a.m. “Fixed dilated pupils”. Six hours later, the family wished for withdrawal of all medical support. Susie was pronounced dead at 4 p.m. A few days later, a paper cranked its way out of the fax machine in our HIV clinic: ”Brain tissue, necrotic material with large cell lymphoma, intermediate grade”.

The next Monday morning, at our HIV Team patient care conference, we circulated a generic sympathy card, light blue in color with the clinic logo, where we all signed our names and stated our regrets to the family. Not really knowing what to say, I simply wrote: “Dear Joe, I’ll miss Susie. Please keep in touch”. The team went on to discuss that we, “providers”, should not take the death of our patients too personally, especially if they choose to deny themselves the benefit of “early treatment” against our medical advice. The words bounced loudly in my mind, like a ping-pong ball that hit the net and sputtered its way across the flat green table, then rolled on the floor with a pitiful decrescendo sound. The sound of another defeat.

I had gone to see Susie and her family for the last time, after clinic, four hours after she was pronounced dead. I made it just before the body was to be taken to the morgue. The family had

already left the hospital temporarily to make arrangement for her burial in Berkeley, I was told. The nurses had cleaned Susie up. There was no visible brain tumor, just a tiny fresh suture where the biopsy left its mark. There was not even a scar on her cheek, where a few months ago, an ugly and monstrous herpes lesion threatened to ulcerate, only to miraculously disappear with a course of acyclovir and Keflex. Her lips, outlined by a cherry-red lipstick in those balmy days of a Sonoma summer now long gone, were of a light purple color, like a withered pansy on a bed of snow. No more will she be telling students and teachers, parents and grand parents the story of Susie, the rebellious teen who got HIV, a story that it "could happen to them too." Her big, sad eyes were closed, of course, never to see the sun again, and never to see the child or grandchildren we said she could have one day. Actually, her eyes had remained closed since she left our clinic on that fateful Monday morning earlier this week. She saw none of her extended family – the in-laws and grandparents, her sister and others who flew in from all over the US, and who crowded around her ICU bed in the past several days. Gathered around her hospital bed, holding hands in a circle, they had been singing to her their last hymns and lullabies in soft and beautiful harmony since she came out of surgery. I heard their loving and praying voices, filtering through the glass door that was closed and hidden by the curtains of the ICU room, voices that now sang in a harmony that was never existed in Susie's lifetime. They had drawn a curtain between themselves and the world, to keep their family tragedy sheltered and private. For life must go on. For the living, the veil of harmony and spirituality must be worn after the curtain had fallen on the dead.

It was all over now. Looking at Susie for the last time, strangely enough, my thought was not that she died of a horrible disease, of AIDS. She looked so peaceful. It seemed like she could have died from drowning, or a drug overdose, or a sudden arrhythmia. It could have been a death by accident, not by some supreme design. But no, her death came like the thunderous lightning of a storm that should have cleared; her death came when her chemistry was at its best, when the "viral load" was miraculously lowered, when "the wonder drugs" were starting to work, when we were about to celebrate a victory. What an irony! Her death came as an insult of "intermediate grade", like the pathology report of her brain biopsy. Well, at least she died of a brain tumor, and nobody in her church community needs to know or hear about the other unspeakable four-letter word. All deaths come as a mockery of everything that makes us human: our fighting spirit, our trust in science, and our pursuit of the mirages and miracles of life. Our final need to cover up the unthinkable and the unbearable. Death teaches us nothing, except that we are all fools.

Susie was a wonderful kid and could have had a wonderful life. Her story contained all the twists and drama of the AIDS epidemic, scribbled like a badly written Greek tragedy. She was a fool for thinking she could beat that damned virus in its own game, on her own terms. But then, she was only a kid. And I, I was a just another, bigger fool for believing..., for believing that I could make a difference.

Every journey is a spiritual journey, if when traveling somewhere we also travel within ourselves. Apart from a fistful of inadequate images, I always return from my travels with new questions.

Ferdinando Scianna, Magnum Photographer

Summer 2000

In June 2000, I sent a farewell e-mail message to my colleagues and friends, as Jeri and I looked forward to our early retirement. This is part of it:

"Free, free, free at last!…"

"I have had a wonderful career with Kaiser Permanente, and it's time for Jeri and I to move on. I have enjoyed medicine as a science, but sooner or later, we must realize that scientific truth is relative and temporary, while human suffering is intense and eternal. It's time for me to search for truth, beauty and serenity in the arts, in music and literature, and in traveling the world around. No longer will I feel the burden of having to be a healer or vendor of miracles, nor will the uneasiness of being part of a corporate "medical-industrial complex" hang heavy on my conscience. Maybe knowing people for who they are, and walking by their side, would be more gratifying.

Over the next few months, Jeri and I will be traveling the US in our VW van, named Eloise. No, we won't be looking for Elvis, but if you happen to see a not-so-odd pair of "Bo-Bo's" (Bourgeois Bohemians) stopping at some back roads to smell the wild flowers, please slow down and wave: it may be us. Next year, we hope to go to Việt Nam. I have been asked to be a consultant for UCSF AIDS prevention Program in Hồ Chí Minh City, but Hà Nội is where our heart is. Public health projects would be a welcome change from clinical medicine. Jeri will teach ESL, and I may sing Bob Dylan to the new VC's (old VC = Việt Công; new VC = Venture Capitalists). But whatever we do, and wherever we are, we are sure to be discovering more of ourselves in the months and years to come."

And so, in mid August, we packed up Eloise and headed east. Below are edited excerpts of our e-mail messages back to friends and family.

“Rocky Mountain High!”

August 12, 2000:

John Denver had it right, of course. I am not referring to the high altitude sickness that valley dwellers from Davis, CA, might develop when transplanted to the majestic heights of the Rockies. I am talking about the feeling of being high, meaning so close to heaven. Our campsite at Signal Mountain, Wyoming, is indeed heaven for these Bo-Bo’s who survived the long desert drive through Nevada and Utah, played Scrabble every night, and who, this morning, made honey granola pancakes for breakfast before taking an easy stroll along the banks of Jackson Lake, looking for colorful pebbles left by glaciers years ago. All of this under the towering sight of the Grand Tetons. The name was given to these sharp-edged, almost threatening peaks by French explorers homesick and longing for some feminine forms, so went the folklore. Femininity? I would prefer softer, gentler and warmer contours, but never mind…

August 13:

We made only a quick incursion into Yellowstone to see Old faithful. We did not venture beyond the crowded, typical tourist route of the national park, so we had no one else to blame but ourselves for being a little bit disappointed. In the land where the last buffalos roam and where wolves have returned, roads are packed with campers and cars. Somehow the term “managed wilderness” seems to be an oxymoron. But that may be the cost that humans are willing to pay to control nature and ourselves.

August 15:

A gentle rain fell across the Rocky Mountain National Park, with the sound of thunder rolling in from the distance. The earth felt blessed with these tears from heaven that hopefully will stop and prevent forest fires. We too felt blessed, enjoying a small supper by candle light after a walk around Bear Lake. The Rockies are gorgeous and majestic. We have always been sea lovers, for the seashore has never failed to soothe our souls with its tranquil lullabies, and delight us with beautiful sunsets. The sea is for the lonely fishman who trusts the call of the foghorn; the sea is for the secret

lovers who walk the beach, knowing that their footsteps would soon be washed away by the waves. The sea surf, pounding on the rocks, tells the fateful story of human destiny that we have learned to accept. But the mountain streams and forests set free the wild within us. The mountain tells us to be young again, forever young.

The Mid West and Eastern States

"The cavalry charged, and the Indians fell.
The cavalry charged, and the Indians died.
Oh, the country was young then, with God on our side…"

August 24:

These lyrics by Bob Dylan continued to resonate in my brain as we started crossing the Great Plains on our own journey to rediscover America. Since we left Davis two weeks ago, we have felt like school-aged children again: We marveled at the geologic wonders we found along the way: the Rockies, Devil's Tower, the Badlands. The golden wheat and corn fields, the serenity of the meadows and the majesty of the forests awed us at every turn of the road. But more than once during our cozy campground dinners and fires, we had to put biology in its proper existentialist perspective: "What is the raison-de-vivre of flies and mosquitoes?"

Most of all, however, it has been US history that has come alive on this trip. Mount Rushmore gave us a catalytic dose of patriotism and American pride, as we gave respect to the wisdom and vision of the four presidents who peer down from the granite mountain of the Black Hills and gaze beyond the horizon. In their sober and penetrating eyes, the vision of our ideal and noble republic seems engraved. The monument is certainly a wonderful piece of art, a masterpiece of technology, and a powerful national statement. While visiting less well-known local museums that depict the early days of the fur-trade, the coming of the railroad and the loss of the American Indian culture, we were quickly reminded, with great sadness, how the combination of technology and greed can be a deadly force in the rise and fall of nations. As a young country, we passed severe judgment about

European nations fighting each other and exploiting other people under their colonial powers. But wasn't our Manifest Destiny to control the whole continent just as imperialistic? Indeed, it seems easy to romanticize our own history, *with God on our side*.

August 30:

Everly, Clay County, Iowa.

Ah, finally, the heart land of Americana! Our excitement was slightly dampened, however, for the hometown looked rather sleepy. Jeri was saddened that the old businesses in the one-block long town center she used to know have all but disappeared, lost to the Wal-Mart and other chain stores and fast food restaurants in Spencer, some 5 miles down the old Highway 18. Only an old tavern, a small post office and an even smaller library have remained. A few cars and trucks were parked diagonally in the middle of Main Street, as it used to be, although the street was mostly deserted now. An IT company has moved in where an egg store used to offer soda drinks for 5-cents198198 and other treats to the kids, in the days of Jeri's childhood. Just at the end of the block, new huge cement grain elevators now dominate the town landscape. To us, they are a powerful but sad statement that mega-farm corporations now dictate most of the farming practices and food production across this land.

Off Main Street, we strolled down the shaded lanes that dissect Everly in rectangular blocks of cottage homes and bungalows, like in many Midwest towns. The old school stood the same as it did a few years ago when we visited the town, although the large circular structure that kids used to swing wildly in all directions has been removed from the playground, perhaps victim to public liability laws. I imagined Jeri hop scotching with her friends after school on the sidewalks, or running around the blocks of her hometown, as she often talked about those innocent years. Jeri, the quiet lass much smaller than her classmates, who once played drum in her school and community band; the girl who wore

the hand-me-down clothing from richer families in the town; the child who rode with her father on snowy days to read electric meters of the homes in the town and county. How I would love to have known and cherished the young girl who now lives in the faded brown photographs dating back from the 40's and early 50's! I would have fallen in love with that young, sweet Jeraldine Jensen even then.

Surrounding Everly, along the straight country roads that crisscross each other and border wide fields of corn and soybean, tranquil farms dot the land, reminding us that perhaps the idyllic family life of heartland apparently still exists. For the moment, it seems easy to forget the hidden problems brought on by fertilizers, mono-crops and macro-agriculture. The monotony of vast fields of grain crops, stretching as far as the eye can see, does have its charm, reflecting a sense of stability, prosperity and faith. Roots seem deep here, and local residents think of California and New York as wild planets in turbulent galaxies far, far away. Many residents still remember the Jensen family who left town almost 50 years ago. Jeri had a great time meeting up with a few old school friends and relatives. On Saturday, in a newly erected town hall named after its rich financier, we danced. It was there that I overheard one of the men expressing to other old timers his surprise that *"a Jensen girl even married a doctor"*. I was lucky that the locals did not throw me out, being a "foreign body" tagged to this lovely local maiden. After all, the Midwest population is as homogenous as white bread, meat loaf and Jell-O salad are the quintessence of its cuisine. But now, even Iowa is showing some ethnic diversity. Mexican meat factory workers and Asian "store associates" are seen everywhere in Iowa, as the heartland opens its heart to a new generation of immigrants, the new faces and muscles of America.

September 18:

"They are gone, with the forests wide and deep,
And we have built homes upon fields where their generations sleep…"

These anonymous verses were engraved in the history monograph of the town of Eaton, Pebble County, Ohio, where we stayed a couple of days for Jeri to research the Waggoner/Wagner branch of her ancestry from the early 1800s. Little towns and rural America are full of historical secrets and surprises that reward the traveler who takes the back roads. It was here that Chief Little Turtle defeated General St Clair in a skirmish in 1792. The locals said that the same whispering willow tree that witnessed the fighting now shades the graves of six soldiers killed in that fateful battle. Later, as we approached La Fayette, Indiana, on our way to Ben's house, we literally stumbled on the battleground of Tippecanoe, where many men fought and died in November 1811. There now stands a monument to the white soldiers of the battle, but nothing to remember the fallen Indians, and those who went on to follow the infamous "Trail of Tears". On that late afternoon, as we walked the grounds of that historical park, only the dark forest seemed to mourn the fate of Indian nations.

Several townships in Ohio and Indiana housed the Underground Railroad stations before the Civil War. We walked through them in silence, unable to find words that could adequately express our respect for the courage of the people who fought against slavery. *"Follow the drinking gourd, follow the drinking gourd"* – so went in my head the song that tells the story of these brave men and women.

History also quietly came alive in the dusty, faded brown photos found in antique stores and in county museums and libraries. Stamped on the puritan and God-fearing faces of these men and women was their pursuit of the American dream which was, first and foremost, a simple matter of survival, as basic as food, shelter and health, and not like the frivolous consumerism of our time.

The Midwest also holds much of American folklore. We were not really interested in Buffalo Bill, but found the story that the 10,000 lakes in Minnesota were formed by the giant Paul Bunyan and his ox named Blue Babe quite appealing. We may even have run into a few of Garrison Keillor's Norwegian bachelor farmers, and the legendary lonely fisherman, daydreaming as his canoe drifted gently among the wild rice stalks bordering the pristine waters of a peaceful lake. Only the lines on

the maps would tell us that we were in Wisconsin, or Minnesota, or Michigan's Upper Peninsula, for any of these countries could claim to be the home to the elusive Lake Wobegon. For the hills and forests, the pastures and meadows of these states all breathe the same peace and tranquility. A man can live here in harmony with nature - yes, even I can feel it, in the crisp air of these early days of autumn. Well, at least until the hunting season opens, that is. We moved on, before anyone here would seriously take the NRA's promotion of semi-automatic rifles and machine guns as essential tools for the modern hunter.

As *Eloise* rolled us into Michigan, we were surprised to find lovely old churches in many towns where brick houses stand in the shadows of abandoned copper and iron mines. For decades, church steeples and smoke stacks must have competed for the souls and lives of miners and their families. Deep under the beautiful silent forests that surround the towns and villages of rural Michigan, below the hills dotted by gorgeous Victorian homes built for industry tycoons, miners have shed their sweat and blood to give America its economic strength during the past century. "Sixteen Tons" of coal or steel, worked for nickels and dimes to spend at the company store, so goes the song. That too was the America we have discovered on this journey.

However Michigan is not all depressing. It has 124 lighthouses, more than any other state. The few that I saw refueled my love affair with lighthouses. I am just a fair-weather coastal kayaker and beachcomber, but lighthouses have always captured my sense of awe. They are the perfect images of man facing nature: images of solitude, faith, beauty, sunrise, sunset, rocks, lights, fog, shadows, storms, salvation, wrecks, waves, courage, clouds, prayers, buildings, serenity, violence, fate, and above all, loneliness and strength – so many words and so many images that still cannot capture the romantic symbol of a lighthouse and the awesome relationship between man and the sea.

As we continued our journey eastwards and into early fall, the carpets of green fields of corn and soybean of Iowa have turned to brown and gold in Indiana and Ohio. I have never thought that these mid Western states can be so beautiful, but they really are, certainly in the rural areas. As our van coasted along winding roads and gentle rolling hills toward our campground in Mohican State Park, on a late afternoon, a thought came pounding on my head: If only Van Gogh's parents had immigrated here rather than being contented living on Dutch potatoes and Puritan theology, these brown and golden fields of Ohio, framed by twisted tree groves and waving forests against a sky of blue and swirling clouds of grey - these brown and golden fields would have made it to the most

prestigious museums of the world. But Vincent stayed intoxicated by the sunlight of Provence, and now the world only knows the American Midwest for its corn and tornadoes.

October 9.

"Almost Heaven, West Virginia,
Blue Ridge Mountain, Shenandoah River…"

An abandoned house stood by a grove of old oak trees, forgotten by the nearby residents and ignored by tourists traveling this country Road No. 11, somewhere in Appalachia. The only light that came through the house was from a broken window that framed a section of the sun-bathed meadow behind the house. Like so many other abandoned houses, barns and buildings that we spotted in the American landscape here and elsewhere, the sight of this house took me into the melancholic world of what-might-have-been. This house must have been a family's dream home some time ago. Prayers and hope were laid along its foundations and walls when this house was proudly erected. A family moved in, full of vigor and elated by promises of happiness and good fortune. I pictured a young girl, behind lace curtains, turning her dreamy eyes to the meadow of flowers, and beyond, farther on the land, a young boy climbing the mighty branches of these oak trees. Fruit and flowers adorning the dinner table, and candle light projecting dancing shadows on the walls were once live paintings in this home. Then one day, something terribly wrong must have happened here. Shattered dreams, broken promises, battered lives, restless souls, how have they gone wrong? This incidental traveler will never know. Perhaps the only witness with answers is the wind that still howls through the cracked walls and broken windows, or the towering grove of trees that peacefully cycles its foliage through seasons and people coming and going. Even time has made the gravestones nameless and unsteady. Dreams were left like decaying wood along this country road that took many families homebound, many days, many years ago.

Abandoned houses, collapsed barns, shattered lives that once were prayers and promises. Even the most terrible criminal, the most desperate mentally ill person was once a baby, a bundle of hope in his mother's arms. The mother may have nothing to live for, nobody to lean on, but she had hoped that her baby, this baby, would somehow turn out to be somebody, someday. Her second chance. Her redemption. A gift from heaven. But again, somehow, somewhere, it all went wrong.

Bad fortune, self-destructive karma, who knows. Every house was once a dream home, every life was once full of promises, a soul full of grace, and then, somewhere in the course of time, along a winding road, they were left behind in the restless American pursuit of happiness. How sad I feel every time I see an abandoned house, a fallen barn!

"Country road, take me home, to the place I belong…"

October 16.

"On top of Old Smokey, old Smokey so high,
I found Dolly Parton, my star in the sky…"

The fun thing about folk songs is that we can change lyrics or add verses to tell our own story, and so, here we go. Between the valley of the Ohio and the Great Smokey Mountains, through all of New England, we added another 3,000 miles to our journey. Too many historical towns, too many battlefields to visit them all. It was wonderful to be with friends and families in New York, Canada, Maryland and Tennessee. In a small village in Vermont, I lost $5.00 in a stamp vending machine outside the drug store. I told the storekeeper, and he gave me my money back, saying he would tell the mail man tomorrow. No question asked, nothing I needed to prove. Such a simple act of kindness and trust really renewed my belief in the goodness and civility of man.

Some other highlights: We set foot where Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg's address and proclaimed a government of-, by-, and for the people (are we there yet?) and walked the old streets of Harper's Ferry, where right turned wrong one day in 1859. Monticello was an open book on the life of the man whose larger-than-life statue we found again standing in the capital rotunda, in Washington, DC. As we descended the East side of the Smokey Mountains, we stumbled on Dolly Parton's entertainment empire, naively unaware that it even existed. Well, we quickly found our way out, since navigating the hills and valleys of Dollywood parkland was not our idea of a cultural experience.

October 17

"Home, home, sweet home
There's no place like home…"

Stone River, near Murfreesboro, TN, December 30, 1862: It was written in history books that here, 45,000 Union soldiers and 38,000 Confederates camped within eyesight of each other on this wintry night. To hearten the troops, the military bands of both armies struck up, each trying to outdo the other. When the music of *"Home, Sweet Home"* was heard, Union and Confederate soldiers alike joined in and sang together. Imagine the hills and valleys echoing the voices of 83,000 brothers singing as a single chorus, longing for the most precious thing in life: to be home. *"Home, Sweet Home…"*

The next day, they butchered each other, for a total loss of 23,000 men. Generals on both sides claimed victory.

Where have all the flowers gone?
Where have all the graveyards gone?
Oh, when will we ever learn?

The South West

October 25

Sky City, Acoma Pueblo Indian Reservation, New Mexico

The adobe walls of the San Esteban del Rey Mission stands white and tall against the partially cloudy, grey sky over the mesa where the Acoma Pueblo is nested some 7,000 feet above sea level. The church is beautiful in its simplicity, gracefully casting its shadow on the cemetery where

Indian villagers were buried 4 to 5 generations deep. The ceiling is held by huge timber that defies the rule of gravity. It took 11 years to build this Christian church with Indian hands carrying the logs twenty to thirty miles from the mountain, down into the valley, and up more than 360 feet high up the steep mesa, all without ever letting the wood touch the soil, so goes the legend of this mission. Otherwise, the Indians were severely punished, and the wood sent back for a “clean” replacement. The archives even mentioned that the bodies of 84 Indians who died in the construction of the church were buried in the thick walls that lifted the church 100 feet into the sky, as if by piling the bodies of dead Indians, the white men could save some stones and yet make their church a few feet closer to heaven. All in the name of a God made more powerful by the swords and gunpowder of its Conquistadors and the prayers of its missionaries. I never understood how such cruelty could be justified in the name of religion, just because “*our* God is better than *yours*.”

Here in the Pueblo country of New Mexico, Spanish explorers in the 16th century were looking for the mythical Seven Cities of Cibola whose walls were built of gold. Gold, they found not, but they did find a blinding sunlight reflecting on white adobe walls, on cliffs made of grey sandstone and red clay. There, petroglyphs spoke of the eternal spirit of the sun, the moon, the rain and other living things. But spirituality was no match for the sword, gunpowder and greed. So here, centuries later, in the desolate desert littered with dead tumbleweeds and dry rocks, various Indian tribes were forced to settle at the end of the Trail of Tears, as a succession of US Presidents declared and enacted the American Destiny. Traveling in the Southwest and Indian territories, I could not help asking for whom the absolute truth were written, that all men are created equal, and that freedom of religion and the pursuit of happiness are undeniable constitutional rights.

Now native Indian artists and craftsmen sit by the sidewalks by the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, and elsewhere behind vending booths along highways and trading posts of the Southwest, selling turquoise jewelry and painted pottery, as if the spirituality of a lost culture can be saved by tourist dollars. They never seem to smile. Wrinkles run across their puffy brown faces, like erosion lines carved by wind and rain on the red barren earth. There is a deep melancholy in their eyes; they speak few words, their fate buried in the silence and the emptiness of hundreds of years since the white men came to their land. Of course, we do have a brilliant public health explanation for the Indian curse: they are all alcoholics.

Centuries after the missionaries came to deliver Indians to a God of Love, ravens still ride the howling winds like aimless arrows in the deep blue sky, and outdoors ladders leaning on the adobe

walls of the serene and peaceful village of Acoma still pierce the overcast heaven for rain that sees no reason to come to this corner of America.

If only the rocks could speak…If only the cathedral walls could scream... If only the old Indian man would smile…

October 28: Lake Havasu, Arizona

We have driven through the Southern states rather quickly to spend more time in the Indian Southwest. We never bumped into "The King", as we rolled through Tennessee and Mississippi, but that was OK. The Deep South has its own romantic culture, but perhaps we did not want to be reminded of the painful ghosts of slavery in Dixieland. The antebellum mansions and the world of Scarlet O'Hara have little in common with our own life. They are not our idea of romance, of a gentle and kind world, after all. We by-passed New Orleans as well, having been there some years ago at a pediatric conference, and feeling no need to say hello again to Andrew Jackson's statue in the famous French Quarter. But we got a glimpse of the Bayou along the Gulf Coast. It was enchanting, indeed. In Texas, the long stretches of highway littered with pieces of shattered rubber tires, and huge balls of dried weeds and bushes tumbling across the roads were not the most welcoming sceneries. Sorry, Lady Bird, we may have to come back for your bluebonnets in springtime another year, when we visit my Sister Hằng's family again in Houston.

But now, it's time for us to head home. Snow fell on Highway 66 in Arizona, and frost covered our van as we camped overnight in Kingman. No matter how wonderful our trip has been, we have started to miss our books and music, our garden and hobbies at home, our warm fireplace, and our neighbors' friendly waves, chats and culinary treats.

Traveling, in part, is living out our imagination. Wherever in America we were in the past three months, I found myself imagining what it would be like to live and belong, here and there, and I found myself wanting to be transplanted to various times in history. Every corner of this land has its tale of the American Dream. Imagine: What would it be like to be a fur trapper rowing a canoe in the wild streams or in quiet lakes of Minnesota; to be a Midwest farmer, standing in his cornfields stretching clear to the horizon, and gazing at the sky for signs of the weather; to be in Greenwich

Village in the 60's, and hear Peter Paul and Mary sing Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger; and even to be a Rod McKuen lamenting about lost love on a foggy day, on Stanyan Street in San Francisco; to live in Vermont and weave my days into the cycle of white and blue snowy winters, lush green summers, and flaming autumns; to be out at sea off the coast of Maine, looking for a lighthouse beam when the Atlantic Ocean rages in a dark and unforgiving storm. Then to be home again, where the wings of my imagination finally landed me back to the comfort of my own home and the simplicity of my tiny garden.

But traveling is also about discovering, of course. If you were to ask us what part of our journey was most interesting, we would have a hard time naming "the best place". Every place we visited has its charms, inviting us to reflect on ourselves, and making us feel blessed to belong here, in America. Coming home after roaming over 13,500 miles of heartland and back roads, I felt stronger in my conviction that the greatness of a nation or a civilization should not be measured by the might of its factories, or the grandeur of its cathedrals, the height of its sky scrappers, the beauty of its antebellum mansions, or the number of war hero statues. Those things make good post cards. And, more often than not, they are but testimonies that one group of man has exploited the sweat and blood of many others.

I believe that the greatness of a society is better measured by the kindness and civility of its people, the quality of its schools and libraries, the collections in its museums and art galleries large and small, and the sturdiness of its courthouses. Just as I romanticize lighthouses as brave sentinels standing firm and tall against a hostile Nature, I discovered on this trip many beautiful courthouses all across America. They symbolize the social contract that binds us together. These edifices built of bricks and stone proudly stand in the central town plaza, surrounded by old trees and vast green lawns. Their simple elegance exemplifies the charm and strength of American small towns. In their shadow, community bands strike the music notes that arouse the crowd, local artists and orators share their passions and visions, and simple folks spread their picnic blankets on balmy Sunday afternoons. Inside these courthouses, men and women practice laws that define the civility of a society. Slowly but surely, over the course of our American history, it is our libraries, our museums and our courthouses that have brought out the better part of our humanity – education, compassion, beauty and an incurable sense for justice.

We came home feeling that in many places across this diverse and complex land, many of these values were all around us to be found and revisited, even if our history could have been a little kinder and gentler, and even if the road behind and ahead might be long and winding.

A few last words: Some of you may ask: *"So how did your marriage survive, boxed in an 18-foot van for so many days?"* A card we received from our niece Mary said it best: *"You know you must be in love if you have to take your bedroom on vacation with you."* No further details necessary.

So long for now,

Love to all of you and your loved ones,
Chinh and Jeri

“All things right and relevant”

There are two sources to the title of this section. First, it is the name of a second-hand store on East 8th Street in Davis, California. The store is located in a section of town that is “on the other side of the track”, but unlike other thrift stores, it displays only well selected, fashionable items. It gives its customers a feeling of shopping at Macy’s, an experience worth a spiritual boost when your budget says you should stick to the Salvation Army store.

Second, Davis itself is a city that prides on being the “City of All Things Right And Relevant”. And why not? After all, the city has an ordinance for almost every behavior for its residents, a code for every building construction. Under the leadership and the wisdom of its city council, there is, there must be, there should be a reason to everything in this town. Furthermore, the glossy fund-raising brochures and periodicals of the local university remind its alumni of all the right and relevant things coming out of their world-class alma mater, like research and innovations that will save humanity.

Here in Oregon, sandwiched between two strong states with more vibrant economies and ambitious populations, and where pockets of Appalachian life style can be found in our forests of moss-covered trees, we don’t talk about things right and relevant. Somehow, we manage to do a few things right, like staying green most of the year, and taking good care of our mentally ill residents, and allowing people to make a conscious decision to die with dignity, rather than hanging to life in unnecessary pain and suffering.

And so, here is a collection of bits and pieces that do not hide themselves under the veil of modesty or humility, but may contain its own dose of hubris. It may not belong in the same bookshelf as the “*Essays*” of Montesquieu, the avant-garde of the French Enlightenment, or the 14th century “*Tsurezuregusa”* series *(“Essays in Idleness”)* by the Buddhist monk Kenko, or the *“Quốc Âm Thi Tập” (“Collection of Poems in the National Language”)*, by the beloved Vietnamese patriot, poet and sage Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442). But, for what it is worth, this section is devoted to all things that are right and relevant in my own mind, carefully wrapped in parentheses or quotation marks, whatever the case may be. Like thrift store items good enough for Macy’s, I hope these opinions may be good enough for a West coast college town with an Ivy League ambition.

Corvallis, September 15, 2011

Nobody asked me, but now you know...

Excerpts from " A Friendship Quilt for Jeri Lê", 1988

... I wonder how a matter as simple as water – an H2O molecule – can shape the world, carve mountains and seashores, play with light to make rainbows, and be the source of all life on earth...

... the art of medicine is, most of the time, probably no more than the skills of good acting at the bedside. Most patients still expect from us the rituals of the medicine man, half magician, half priest, dressed in a white coat with a stethoscope hung around the neck, saying words that strike deep in one's mind, mostly words that patients want to hear. No wonder why some of my colleagues enjoy theater acting as much as the practice of medicine...

...the problem between lawyers and doctors goes beyond the professional adversity of medical suits. As a jurist in a recent trial, I was impressed how different our thought processes are. "Medicine is a science of uncertainty and an art of probability", as Sir Osler put it. Lawyers don't want to deal with uncertainty. The only thing they know is to argue that things have to be, "beyond reasonable doubt", either black or white. Is life ever that way?

...If I believe in reincarnation, I'd like to be an ocean bird. Any kind of bird that lives by the ocean, and is part of the ever-changing scene of the sea. To breathe the morning fog, to feel the wind lifting me up as the waves rush to my feet, to sail from clouds to stars above and beyond, sensing that the horizon is my only boundary, and to know that life is as predictable as sunsets, and yet as unpredictable as winter storms...

... I planted some more poppy seeds today at our "Sea Hugger" house in Bodega Bay. Simple task, but quite satisfying. For $1.59, I can bring the simple beauty of nature to my doorstep. Sow, then wait and hope that black tiny seeds will turn into glorious yellow and orange flowers. And to see with gratitude and joy that they will re-seed themselves and bloom again, year after year, like cyclic bursts of life from an immortal sun. For my love and I, every time we walk out the door, in the lazy days of summer– it will be like finding gold at our feet -- all of that for just a $1.59 investment...

9-11

Burlington, VT, September 11, 2011

Dear friends:

By now, most of you must have known about the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, DC, earlier today. It is likely that as I write to you right now, every television set around the globe is playing and replaying the pictures of destruction that are unimaginable. For days and months to come, images of death and mourning will continue to overwhelm the hearts and minds of this American nation. Yet we are confident that our great institutions for democracy and civilization will go on, perhaps made greater even by tragedy and disaster.

The targets chosen by the terrorists could not be more symbolic: The buildings of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon stood for the economic and military might of America. The timing and the coordination of the attacks certainly point to a highly powerful yet invisible enemy who for some time has declared "War on America". The loss of so many civilian lives in a time when most of the world is at peace will never be comprehended.

Living in a free country where opposing social and political views are always welcomed, or at least openly discussed, many Americans do not agree with various policies that our government and giant industrial corporations conduct around the world, especially when they display either cultural naivety or economic arrogance. Most of us are uneasy with our role as global superpower and peacekeeper, but we do believe that, as a people, we are sincere and generous in our willingness to share our good fortune and knowledge with nations less fortunate than ourselves. Thousands of Americans have been, and still are, and will continue to be in every corner of the globe, not as colonial agents, but as humanitarians and educators for a better world. Thousands of international students and scholars come to our universities to learn our sciences and arts. And thousands of immigrants land at our airports, wash on our shores, or cross our deserts for a better life. Yet to feel today that we are targets of much hatred and violence deeply hurts all of us.

For Jeri and I, the tragedy of this attack on America could not come at a more ironic time. We are traveling in Vermont, a state known for its idyllic way of life, where there is no need to lock one's door, and where the gentle beauty of the land is matched by the arts, poetry and social grace of its citizens. We felt blessed to be in such a peaceful time and land, only to suddenly see the violence of international terrorism hit home.

Nighttime is falling now over America. In one way or another, deep in our soul, we will remember this day forever. As a nation, we know America will never be the same. Not diminished by fear, but hopefully strengthened by our own resolve to work together even more for what we all want: dignity and peace for all. Individually, we all have our own emotions. Some will feel only anger and outrage. I can only tell you, my international friends, that what I feel now is an immense sense of grief and sorrow. There is so much violence in this world today, not just in America, but in Northern Ireland, the Middle East and many other corners of the world. It takes so much work and time to build peace and love among mankind, and the world is so large when it comes to bridging the distrust between nations. Yet, it only takes a handful of individuals to spread hatred and violence, and the world is so small when it comes to bring death by warfare, terrorism or disease. Perhaps one can bring back the words of Thomas Paine: *"These are the times that try men's souls".*

Chinh.
Chinhlego2@AOL.com

Dear Jeri and Chinh,

Thank you for e-mail. It has certainly been a terrible couple of weeks, since the tragic day in New York. On the day, I had hardly finished the day at my job, when one of my colleagues told me what he had heard on the radio. During my trip home I listened to the radio - it was the time when the first building fell. My parents were already looking at the TV, when I got home. What a terrible tragedy. I felt mostly shocked, when we saw the great building go down - it must have been terrible to be in the building or among the pedestrians in the streets.

Both our national TV stations stopped their programs on the rest of the day - and instead send pictures from New York. Also from the American Embassy in Copenhagen, we saw many people arrive, and lay flowers on the sidewalk, exactly as when our Queen Mother died last year.

Here in Denmark most people think, that this terror also is an attack on all Danes - even if it is the Americans who have suffered this time. In a way we also live in a kind of American way - feeling that we have a common enemy. Among some of the refugees staying in Denmark - there were persons who were pleased with the action - and of course this caused a lot of angriness and lots of writing in the papers. Furthermore there were demands that we ought to send these people out of our country immediately. Many Danes has grown much more xenophobia - and I do not believe that is very good, even if it is easy to understand their reaction. We all feel worried about the reaction, which might cause a WW3.

Greetings to both of you,
Olav,
Denmark

Dear Chinh and Jeri,

Thank you for the eloquent way of stating the deep sadness which is pervading all of our lives.

Yesterday I spent 3 1/2 hours at the blood donor clinic in Halifax and I was one of the lucky ones who went through relatively quickly because I had called and made an appt on Tuesday as soon as I heard about the crash. There were a hundred people in the waiting room, sitting quietly and patiently for more than 5 hours to give blood.

I hope and pray that there will not be a too precipitous response which will make the US as guilty of taking innocent lives as the terrorists.

Love,
Susan,
Nova Scotia

Dear Jeri and Chinh,

We too were shocked when we learnt about this heinous crime against the US. When a colleague of mine told me what had happened my first reaction was disbelief. But when I saw the pictures on TV I had to acknowledge that this was the bitter truth. We feel very sorry for all those who died, those who lost members of their family and friends.

We fully understand the anger of Americans and also think that those who designed and controlled these attacks need to be punished as swiftly and as hard as possible. But we still hope that the desire to pay back isn't going too far and that Bush is smart enough to pay attention to more prudent members of his cabinet. If too many innocent people are killed in an act of vengeance the spiral of hatred and terrorism will just take another turn, the only people who will benefit from this are terrorists, and the ultimate victim will be our democratic way of life.

But why do I write you this? I certainly don't have to teach you - you know this as well as I do. Maybe just because writing can give some relief and a good friend may be patient enough to read it. But even if we had preferred to write for another reason, we are glad that you wrote us. This way we know at least that you were not by chance visiting New York when it happened and that you are still alive.

Love
Ursula and Andreas,
Switzerland

Dear Chinh and Jeri,

On Tuesday morning I went to the pier in Port Dalhousie and sat watching three enormous swans, glowing in their whiteness, quietly and peacefully sailing on the waves. They were so stately, so beautiful in the glistening sunlight, that my thoughts succumbed to the quiet knowledge that the world is a lovely place at its core, that beyond the cares of ordinary life, there is a solid foundation in

what I know as God. This was at 9:15 am, around the time of the tragedy in New York. There is no way to prepare for the images on the television screen I saw when I came home. It is pure horror.

Our hearts have broken with all who were there, with all who mourn, with all who must clear it up. It is a deep sadness that goes beyond the boundary of the United States. It is a tragedy of mankind. The tragedy continues when some target innocent people just because they are of the same race as the terrorists. How sad when the victims become terrorists themselves. Your eloquent letter said it all. We must stand together, hold hands with one another and cherish the values that make humankind truly great. The image of the swans has never left me this week. Deep down there is an unfathomable beauty and hope and love that will prevail against all evil in the world.

Our prayers go out to you and all Americans,

Love,
Irma.
Toronto

Dear Chinh and Jeri,

In few days we learnt so much about our vulnerability, and probably also about some reasons of this vulnerability. The explosion wh blasts a wide area in the south of Toulouse appears more and more as the consequence of severe negligence. Fortunately, we did not have to materially suffer of this disaster. This happens just few days after the 11th of September. This date will remain for us a day of nightmare and we share your sadness. Of course we would want to remain trustful for the coming years of this new century - but, will we be able to place Man at the main center of our interests?

Dear Chinh and Jeri, we also often think of you.

André and Jackie,
France

On traditional morality

Dear Editor:

In his commentary in the OSU Barometer, dated July 7, 2004, Mr. Nathanael Blake stated that he opposes gay marriages on the basis of "an intellectual and spiritual tradition, which has been developed over thousands of years", and on "morals" which have sustained society for millennia". I too respect tradition and morality, but only when it is just and fair.

May I suggest that "Tradition" and "Morality" have often been used by those in power to maintain the status quo of their own comfort and dominance over others who are weaker or more vulnerable. If societies around the world had not shaken up some traditions, women and minorities in this country would still not be able to vote, women in China would still have their feet bound, and girls in India would still be married for the value of their dowries. In some cultures, tradition and morality still allows the routine clitorectomy of young girls and the stoning of women (but not of men) caught in adultery. Can they still hide under the curtain of morality and tradition, even if they claim it to be thousands of years old?

To me, the legalization of gay marriage is no more than an issue of equal protection and equal rights under the law for gay people, just as it is for heterosexuals. If tradition and morality are the real and only issues, then I gladly and proudly can live without Mr Blake's deeply "intellectual and spiritual" tradition and morality.

(Submitted to the Oregon State University newspaper. “the Barometer, July 8, 2004)

Time for Universal Health Insurance

Last week Maryland passed the “Fair Share Health Care” legislation requiring large corporations to spend at least 8 percent of their payroll on health care for their employees, or pay the difference of what they do provide into a state fund. It was a significant victory for health care advocates concerned about profitable corporations failing to contribute enough to the social welfare of American workers. A great moral victory, indeed, but it will do little to fix the health insurance crisis in our country. Let me explain why.

We now have a health care system where access to, and quality of medical care is dependent on categorizing individuals by eligibility criteria: age (as for Medicare); income (as for Medicaid and other government programs, or if you can pay your own); special status (children, veterans, or with certain disabilities); and mostly, by employment status. Many people with “pre-existing conditions” are excluded from coverage, or have deductibles so high that care is no longer affordable. No wonder 46 million Americans (including 630, 000 Oregonians) are uninsured, and many more are “under-insured”.

Because of escalating costs, employers have shifted part of health care expenses to workers, and many small businesses have dropped insurance coverage altogether. A 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation survey reported that 60% of firms offered health benefits to current employees, compared to 69% in 2000, and only 33% offered benefits to retirees, compared to 66% in 1988. Yet, for firms that pay for their employees’ health premium, the costs can be as high as 14% of the employees’ payroll, or over $14,000 per family coverage. Convoluted tax-incentives and competitive “market forces” that only shift rather than truly reduce costs have not worked. Employer-based insurance and taxpayers’ government programs end up subsidizing the costs of medical care of our un-insured.

Mixing health insurance and employment status is a wrong social and economic policy. It is a losing war for both employers and unions. It is a drain on business. It antagonizes employers and employees, and creates an immoral competitive edge for one business against another. It corrodes the individual worker who is forced to choose between where he or she can best use his/her skills and who offers the best health insurance coverage. In recent years, unions have been fighting for health benefits as a main attraction to retain members, but ended up losing most battles. They

should concentrate on other important social issues, such as workers' wages, safety and pension plans.

It is time for both employers and unions to get out of the business of crafting health insurance programs for workers. That does not mean that neither should give up their social obligations for a healthy society and work force. The right way to do it is for ALL employers and ALL working individuals to contribute their fair share into a general public health fund. These income-based fees are not "new or more taxes", but they merely replace premiums we are already paying now in the current uneven playing field. A unified public financing system can offer coverage for all Americans by cutting administrative waste and consolidating services. Several studies have estimated that in such an efficient system, business and individuals end up paying less for health care than we are all paying now.

Providing equitable health care for all, regardless of age, income, medical conditions, or employment status is the only moral and economically sensible way. Other countries have been doing it for decades, there is no excuse for us not to join other civil and caring societies.

(Published in the Forum Section "As I see it" of the Gazette Times, Corvallis, OR 2006 – January 25, 2006)

Migrant workers

In our current debate about illegal immigration, let us not forget that “illegal” immigrants contribute much more to our economy and our comfortable life than they draw out in public services such as health care and education. In a recently published book, *“The New Rural Poverty”,* UC Davis professors Martin, Taylor and Fix pointed out that seasonal farm workers earn on an average between $8,000 and $9,000 a year. Raising their wages by 40 percent would bring many above the federal poverty line (defined as some $19,000 for a family of four). Yet, this would increase the retail price for fresh fruits and vegetables by only 2-3%, or about $9 more a year for the average American consumer.

Where is our moral decency? Perhaps it is time to bring back a quote from FDR: “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little”.

(Published in the Gazette-Times, Corvallis, March 2006)

“The March of Folly” – Latest Chapter

In 1984, Barbara Tuchman analyzed an array of national disastrous follies, even if they may actually strengthen a regime temporarily: the Trojan war, the Renaissance Popes that provoked the Protestant secession, George III’s loss of the American colonies, and America’s war in Vietnam. A policy qualifies as folly when it is a perverse persistence in a policy demonstrably unworkable, counterproductive and ultimately contrary to national self-interest. Components of folly include cultural ignorance, self-deception (staying with preconceived notions while ignoring or rejecting contrary signs or dissident voices), self-delusion (overestimating one-self and underestimating the opponent), and when things do not go well, self-imprisonment (”we-have-no-alternative” argument).

Does this sound familiar? Mr. Bush keeps saying: “We shall stay the course”, and “We shall be victorious”. We are now fighting an urban guerilla warfare in Iraq and conducting “Search-and-Destroy” operations in Afghanistan, but we should be reminded that no great army on earth has ever won such a war: not the Roman legions against German tribes; not Napoleon in Spain or Russia; not the Soviets in Afghanistan; and not Genghis Khan’s horsemen, nor US Marines and B-52s in Vietnam. So, when Secretary Rumsfeld lashed out at war critics for not learning the lessons of history, I wonder: Do they have mirrors in the Pentagon?

Tuchman wrote: “We all know that power corrupts. We are less aware that it breeds folly.” Unfortunately, the axis of power that runs from the White House to the Pentagon is currently writing Tuchman’s latest chapter of the “March of Folly”.

(Published in the Gazette Times, Corvallis, OR, October 2006)

A New Endangered Species: Our public libraries

It is with great sadness that I read the article *"Private sector called on to keep libraries going"* (Gazette Times, Oct 5). Faced with budget cuts and voters rejecting more taxes to keep libraries open, Jackson County has "outsourced" its library management to an "outside for-profit" company, Apparently "the average citizen will not notice any change in services", while the county library budget will be half of what it used to be. The catch: since the for-profit company will hold down operating costs by trimming the library staff, the libraries will be open only 24 hours a week. In my simple arithmetic here, I fail to see how the private company is more cost-efficient than the previous public administration.

What's next? What books will be on the shelves, what educational programs will be put on, what internet services will be available – will those decisions be made by an "outside" cooperate board? Will company stockholders make more money as they call for more civic volunteering by "friends of the library", while cutting down more paid staff? Will major shareholders quietly impose their ideology and for-profit motives as they take control of one of the last pillars of our democracy?

I fear that day when "for-profit libraries" will go the way our "for-profit" health care system has led us: higher costs, unchecked rationing, less accessibility, and no accountability. This time, it may be worse – if we passively accept the mortgaging of our brains to for-profit corporations.

(Published in the Gazette Times, Corvallis, October 12, 2007)

Healthcare reform: morality or economics?

I applaud the creation of the Oregon Chapter of the Physicians for National Health Plan, whose goals and strategies are morally just, medically sound, and make economic sense.

So, what will it take to achieve the goals of universal, affordable healthcare? I believe there are three essential forces. First, a change in the American perspective that “private enterprise is better than government”. Decades of “fee-for-service” and private managed care have proven this wrong. In a publicly funded, privately delivered healthcare system, government handles the bill (as a “single payer”) but does not practice medicine. Second, a change in American ethics, that now puts individuality above social responsibility. Should we not care for our neighbors beyond the Sunday church hour? Don’t we realize that everyone’s health affects the vitality of our society?

However, social reforms are slow coming from changes in mental attitudes and moral values. A more powerful force: “It’s the economy, stupid!” Whether we admit this or not, ours is a government of, by, and for the corporations. Comprehensive healthcare reform will come only when American businesses realize that it is in their best interest to get out of the messy game of trying to select insurance plans for their employees and retirees, and turn it over to public institutions in exchange for paying into a common health fund.

Grass root organizations usually use morality to demand changes. They can best change the “tipping point” for healthcare reform by talking real business values to American employers.

(Published in the Gazette-Times, Corvallis, Dec 19, 2007)

Keep our National Guard home

The 2008 Defense Authorization Act (Gazette Times, December 20, 2007) would leave governors as sole commanders of the state-run militias during disasters on US soil (such as natural disasters, domestic unrest or terrorism, and health emergencies). I wish it could have gone one step further: removing the President's right to deploy the National Guard to foreign countries during wartime.

When it comes to waging wars on foreign lands, I believe this should be the role of the "professional army", and not of militia citizens whose main mission is to protect the people in the communities they live. They should be available to fight defensive wars at home. They did not join the armed forces to be sent to fight for the political agendas of federal politicians or the hidden financial interests of national corporations. The current war clearly demonstrates that neither the President nor the US Congress readily responds to the will of the majority of the American people, and that our National Guard is less available for local missions at home. A Governor should be under much more popular pressure to carry out the mandate of his or her people. That's what democracy is all about.

Without the availability of the National Guard servicemen and women, US military commitment to Iraq would dwindle down rapidly. Returning the control of the National Guard to state control may be a great step in limiting presidential power to conduct military adventures overseas. It's time for a constitutional amendment to do just that.

(Published in the Gazette-Times, Corvallis, Oregon- Dec 27, 2007)

Vaccine safety issues

The vaccine news that flooded the media recently is bound to raise much concern among parents and healthcare providers. At the core of the issue is the *"admission"* by government scientists that childhood vaccines *"could have contributed"* to the development of autistic behavior in a child born with mitochondrial disease, and therefore allowing the family to receive financial compensation because of "vaccine injury".

As a pediatrician specialized in infectious diseases, I have seen vaccine issues from various points of view, listening to worried parents and understanding policies from public health perspectives. It is clear that decades of controversy will not end with the removal of thimerosal from current vaccines, as skeptics will just take on other agents or additives as "other causes of vaccine injury."

Public health authorities make vaccine recommendations based on many factors: (1) disease epidemiology and impact on health of individuals and society; (2) Benefits of vaccine-induced immunity far outweighing potential vaccine side-effects; and (3) projected or proven cost-effectiveness of vaccine programs to maintain quality life for the individual, at an affordable expense to society. The outcome of these complex analyses is an immunization program simple enough to be implemented at a large population level, but that is too often designed as a "one-size-fits-all" policy.

Parents and individuals make their health decisions in different ways. Certainly for most, "expert opinion" matters. For others, trust or distrust plays a more significant role. May I even say that, medicine, like religion, is a matter of faith. Just like there is *never enough* "scientific evidence" that would change the mind of someone who believes in creation rather than in the theory of evolution, there will never be *enough* safety data to reassure skeptics who have already chosen not to weigh in the overall benefits of vaccines.

So, where do we go from here? I believe we can all be helped if we re-examine our vaccine policies at the public health level, and make reasonable decisions at a personal level.

Some vaccine policies that were made from old data should be updated to reflect the changing epidemiology of diseases in the new century. Pertussis, diphtheria and tetanus, and a couple of bacterial infections (*Haemophilus influenzae* and pneumococcus) can cause life-threatening

diseases in infants, thus immunizations should be started early. The risk of exposure to other vaccine-preventable diseases is extremely rare among American children: clusters of illness from imported cases or travel (such as for measles, rubella, or poliomyelitis) or household exposure (like hepatitis B in well-defined high-risk populations). For these diseases, with an increasing herd immunity due to current vaccine programs, it may be possible to re-schedule vaccine administration until infants have been screened for early autism signs, now possible by a year or two of age, or even as early as 6 months. Better late than never.

For parents, I still urge everyone to follow the current immunization schedule, which is safe and effective for the vast majority of children. Have a discussion with your child's provider to ease your fears, or to select and prioritize the vaccines for which the risk-benefits are immediately relevant for your infant' s health. And then proceed with all catch-up immunizations when the fear of autism has passed.

Sir William Osler said it best over a century ago: "Medicine is an art of uncertainty, and a science of probability." As humans, we do not make the same choice even if given the same chance of probability or uncertainty, since all life decisions are a balance of *perceived* risks versus benefits. When making choices for our children, we cannot do so not out of fear, but we must do it out of trust.

(Published in the Gazette-Times, Corvallis, OR, March 12, 2008)

Health insurance plan choices

An uplifting message greeted me this morning as I opened my e-mail: “Starting August 1, Benton County will be offering a new option to the medical plan in the form of a Consumer Driven-High Deductible Health Plan (HDHP) with a Health Saving Account".

Alas, it did not take me more than a minute to discover what it is all about:

1.“Consumer driven health care”: Let’s face it: health care has always been consumer-driven, after looking at our own pocket books before deciding to see a provider or a pharmacist. This new motto of "consumer-driven choice" is a malignant disguise for a new scheme of “insurance-restricted options”.

2. “High deductible health plan”: This says it all: the co-pay and deductibles are set up by insurance companies to discourage patients from getting the care that may be needed, so high that they are actually financial barriers to care, even if the person “has health insurance coverage”.

3.“Health saving accounts”: another tax shelter scheme for the rich who already have maxed out on their IRA and need tax protection elsewhere. Middle class Americans have little savings of their own, often living from paycheck to paycheck.

The bottom line: “Consumer-driven HDHP” is nothing more than a new scheme for profit- driven health insurance companies who cherry pick the currently healthy, low-users of health system, and set up high financial barriers for access to care when they need them.

Is it the best our county can offer? “Where is the beef?

(Published in the Gazette-Times, May 22, 2008)

America's "thousand points of light"

It was Sunday morning when I wrote this letter, and all across America, "a thousand points of light" were flickering, as a former US president would have said. Candles and bake sales at churches, donations to "Walk For Life", and corporate sponsorship of benefit concerts reminded us how compassionate and generous Americans are for each other. Even local children were having a lemonade stand to help fight cancer.

As heart-warming as these events are, I can't help feeling that we are missing something big. Should the less-fortunate have to rely on our gestures of charity to survive, or could we all do better through more equitable social policies that narrow the gap between the have's and the have nots? A mental or physical illness in anyone of us may have an impact on every one of us. So, shouldn't we (as individual tax payers and employers) do our part to improve the system for everyone rather than patch the holes for a few?

Compassion and morality may begin with the family Bible, and we can continue dispensing "feel-good" band-aids to stop hemorrhaging wounds. But a well performing healthcare system is not composed of scattered acts of charity. It is a matter of human justice and common responsibility, enacted through progressive social and fiscal policies, for the good of all. In this political year, we must demand significant reforms toward affordable healthcare for all. Perhaps then, our children won't have to stand by a lemonade booth to help fight cancer.

(Published in the Gazette-Times, Aug 15, 2008)

Gross National Happiness

Last November, as Americans celebrated the promises of change from President-elect Obama, in the tiny country of Bhutan, the torch was passed from a king to his heir. More significantly, Bhutan also replaced the measurement of its Gross National Product (GNP) with a new indicator: the "Gross National Happiness", or GNH.

As the composite value of all the goods and services within a country, the GNP accounts for all of our economic products, but also how much we spend on lawsuits and medical bills, machines of war and prisons, and on many other unhealthy things. Perhaps Bhutan has it right: We should use another indicator that captures the true performance of our nation.

So how does one measure the GNH? May I propose that we start with all the statistics that we already have: healthy life expectancy, literacy and employment rates. The GNH is inversely proportional to the rates of childhood mortality, teen pregnancy, homicides and suicides, domestic violence and divorce; to the number of citizens who are homeless, incarcerated, or on death row; and to pharmaceuticals, door locks, and handguns sold every year. Finally, the GNH will be adjusted to account for the gap between the have's and have not's, racial groups, and genders.

We currently use the GNP to rank nations in economic power and wealth. From now on, let nations compete on the value of their GNH, which truly reflects the civility and quality of life of their people. That's the change we want, President Obama!

(Published in the Gazette-Times, Corvallis, OR, Dec 31, 2008)

The politics of health

In preparing for an upcoming healthcare forum, I mused over a statement made by the German pathologist Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902) over 100 years ago*: "There are two causes of ill health: one is biological, the other political".*

Those currently advocating for healthcare reform would certainly nod their heads, perhaps with a sigh of despair: We know that the appropriate solutions are clearly "out there", but it is the lack of "political will" that is impeding progress.

However, in health matters, pointing the finger at politics is more than saying that our elected officials are in bed with pharmaceutical or insurance lobbyists. Define politics as how the powerful few make life decisions for the mass, then indeed, everything outside of biology and affecting health is political in essence: the way we grow and market our food; our tax laws that shelter or redistribute wealth; our school system that privileges one child, or one neighborhood over another; our industrial practices whose first priorities are Wall Street shareholders, not workers or those who live downstream; and of course, health insurance policies that separate those who deserve care and those who don't.

And so, let us look beyond what health insurance reforms can or cannot do. Only when we correct the inequities of our entire social system can health be free of political determinants.

(Published in the Gazette Time, May 6, 2009)

“Occupy Wall Street”

I have grave concerns about the media coverage of “Occupy Wall Street”, focusing more on its “mob” behavior and the misconduct of a few, while forgetting its real message: Simply, that people are just saying “No More” to a “government of the corporations, by the corporations, for the corporations”.

But it will take more than “Bastille-style” mob action to make changes. We now need to take the discussion to churches and town halls, and local chambers of commerce; Hear economists, teachers and healthcare providers speak about how the middle-class America is robbed of its real earning incomes, its children of their future, and our nation of its health when military-industrial complexes and for-profit health organizations control our politicians; No longer be fooled by the claim that tax breaks for Wall Street are essential for our economy: Investors are more interested in quarterly profits than creating American jobs.

The “silent majority” can’t afford to sit out any longer. We may have a social revolution in our hands. Let us remember that the early 1960s marches in Mississippi eventually brought us many civil rights acts. “Occupy Wall Street” can bring out meaningful reforms in corporate laws and new directions in our social priorities. Perhaps it needs a Martin Luther King to help us keep our “eyes on the prize”. Until then, at least we can sing Bob Dylan again:

“Come senators, congressmen, please heed the call,
Don’t stand in the doorway, don’t block up the hall...
...For the times, they are a-changin’..

(Published in the Gazette-Times, Corvallis, OR, November 8, 2011)

Benton County Court house, Corvallis, OR

Sebastopol, Ca. Courtesy of Toni Winter

Reforming healthcare along American core values

Although the Supreme Court has ruled the Affordable Care Act (ACA) constitutional, significant healthcare reform will continue to be difficult because conservatives and liberals both refuse to "compromise on their principles". However, we can transcend ideological arguments by rallying around values all American share: efficiency, fairness, freedom of choice, and personal responsibility. Currently, our system does not measure up to those core values.

We have the most costly and inefficient system in the industrialized world, spending 30% of our health budget on unnecessary tests, drugs, procedures, or bureaucratic hurdles, yet only half of the population are getting medical services deemed standards of care. The causes of our failure are simple: lack of care coordination, and a fee-for-service that rewards providers for volume rather than quality.

Our system is not fair. In a land where "all men are created equal" and the "pursuit of happiness" (with good health playing a fundamental part) is a "constitutional right", there is great variation in access to healthcare and quality. In some states, 40% of adults are uninsured, and 20% of insured Americans cannot afford recommended treatments because of high deductibles and co-pays. Meanwhile, private insurance companies manipulate the "free market" to maximize profits, and costs are often shifted to "third parties" or government (i.e. taxpayers).

Freedom of choice? Very little. Our choices are restricted by our employers or geographical location. In many ways, the insurance industry also controls how health professionals can practice.

While we value personal responsibility, we must realize that civil rights do not imply the freedom to shift the cost of our own healthcare upon others, and that our health is important to others in the community, just as the health of our neighbors can indirectly impact ours. Investing in public health is just as important as supporting fire protection, park safety, public education and libraries.

Given the complexity of modern medicine, the power of insurance companies and interest groups, it is no wonder that reforming our health system is difficult. Yet, most experts and economists agree that steps taken by the ACA should improve with better information technology and paying for performance with care delivered in patient-centered medical homes. Fairness is achievable if "everyone is in, no one is out", and cost shifting is not allowed.

If the ACA is taking us in the right direction, why is it so controversial? Because, for the conservatives, it raises the fear of “government run“ health care, and for the liberals, it is not a single payer system modeled after the VA health system or Medicare, programs proven more cost–effective than the private sector even when many Americans have a love-hate relationship with government programs.

Distrust of “big government” is deeper than conservative ideology, its roots going back to the American Revolution. I worry when decisions affecting my work and life are not made close to home, but by someone in Washington, DC, or when Texans or New Yorkers in Congress can determine what is right for Oregonians, or when a federal health board becomes politically polarized like our current Supreme Court.

A better solution would be for the federal government to set basic standards, regulations and accountability for the medical industry (just like it does for food, transportation and environmental safety), and leave the healthcare delivery to the states. Private and public initiatives and partnership are best worked out at local or regional levels.

We can uphold core American principles and get value for our healthcare money by supporting a system that is publicly financed by fair taxation, but is privately delivered and locally managed.

(Published in the Gazette Time, Corvallis, July 5, 2012)

On Faith and Religion

Thank you, Jim, for leading an interesting discussion on the "Future of Faith" at the Academy for Lifelong Learning (ALL) this morning. Unfortunately, the session ended when it just got heated up, as it is usually the case with complex issues.

To me, the last question that was raised *"What is the function of religion?"* went by unanswered, but it remains basic to any discussion on faith and religious beliefs. May I share with you my personal thoughts quoting Pascal, who simply said it all: *"If God did not exist, we would have to invent Him"* (or It?) (Excuse my translation here, since in French, *"Si Dieu n'existe pas, on devrait l'inventer"* – the pronoun " l " in front of *"inventer"* does not qualify whether God is a He, It, or even a She – but that is another distracting discussion we won't go into now!)

So what is my take on Pascal? That we, humans, are miserable creatures, most of us swimming in a sea of desolation and injustice, uncertain about our condition and our fate that we seldom control. Even the best and luckiest and happiest of us will face the thought of our own mortality. Therefore, most humans need hope to go on with our lives (even if hope may be just an illusion). So Christians turn to a "Loving God" who will forgive our sins or lead us to the promised land, and a better life (here, or more likely in paradise), while Buddhists turn to the belief of reincarnation to a better life the next time around. Call that Faith, if you want. We need it, we have to invent it.

Karl Marx had a different twist, as you know. He called religion "the opium of man". Yes, opium does make pain more bearable. But Marx was referring more to the fact that the ruling few (czars and aristocrats) had the blessing of the church to legitimize their control over the poor peasant and industrial masses, who were "drugged" by religion, just like the British wagged the opium war on the Chinese in the 19th century to control China.

Now to the contribution of religion to political order and world history. Since all humans are tribal creatures by nature, we congregate in families or those who are like us, have the same needs (economic or cultural), and think like us. This creates "communities", "societies", "nations", which then need common "values and rules" to stay together harmoniously. Social institutions, which help in governance and education, are then created, shaped by political or religious forces. "Institutions" and "proper governance" call for hierarchy, hierarchy justifies power structure, power invariably

brings.... I should stop here, since you know where I am leading to: the need to obtain or maintain power easily leads to the abuse of power, which is the first step for corruption, violence, all tracing back to the notion that “my Faith and my God” is mightier than yours. So has been the legacy of religions in the history of mankind. Just think how much power the church has over people during past centuries, and how much that power has been abused.

I am not denying that, for many, religion has been the true guide for “doing good” to our fellowmen. Arguing as a humanist, may I ask that shouldn’t our own, innate capacity for empathy, compassion, and altruism suffice, without a wake up call from a God?

In the end, I think separating “Faith” (which is inside us) and “Beliefs” (that we act out) is an academic exercise good for theologians and those who have the time and luxury to wander in the nebulous cloud of “spirituality”. Just as Democracy is but a word until one sees how it is exercised, Faith is nebulous, it can only be judged by the actions of those who claim to “act on Faith”. You may say we need to return to Faith, but our human nature will always make us act on the basics of common “beliefs”, crafted in tribal values, economic needs, and cultural bigotries and boundaries. And sure enough, history tells us that most religious “faiths” have acted out rather badly and violently. How many Mother Teresa’s or Desmond Tutus can you stack up against all the Popes or Khomeini’s who have sent men to their death in the name of God?

Finally, I am most bothered by the notion that the “Future of Faith” is “shifting South”, as Harvey Fox stated – meaning that the “true” Faith is being revived in Latin America and some parts of Asia and Africa, and that may be a “good thing”, since it carries the “true” message of Christ in helping humans deal with poverty and injustice. Who’s to say that current Christian evangelical missionaries are different than the ones of the 15-19th centuries that came to the shores of the Americas, Asia, Africa, to be followed by gunboats and capitalistic, colonial corporations? Promising a cure for poverty and injustice in the name of God, they perform their humanitarian acts by bringing surplus of unhealthy processed food donated by Wal-Mart, old T-shirts leftover from American suburban garage sales or Salvation Army stores, and by building Bible schools in local villages of developing countries – so that the Vatican can continue to canonize nuns in white robes or cardinals in red conical hats for doing “good work for humanity”. Do they realize that they are contributing to the destruction of local cultures and economies, which must find survival solutions in their own backyards?

May I suggest re-reading Barbara Kingsolver's "Poisonwood Bible" as a humble antidote to the "Future of Faith".

Best regards,

Chính
Corvallis, May 11, 2011

On Buddhism

Dear Andreas:

It was difficult for me to answer your broad question about Buddhism in a few words, especially during a copious meal on our Alaska cruise. So let me take a moment now to share with you the limited knowledge I have about the religion of my birth. I should first qualify that I am not a practicing Buddhist, let alone feel adequately prepared to discuss its deepest metaphysical message. Yet, despite the strong influence the Western world has on me, I am finding myself drifting back to the culture of my childhood, as I now contemplate the world around me and reflect on my own mortality.

Let me start with the life of Buddha himself, as it should by itself speak for the essence of the religion. He was born as S. Gautama in the 6th century BCE in Northern India, a happy prince well sheltered from the rest of the world and his people. When he first stepped outside of his palace at the age of 29, he realized how much misery, death and decay composes the reality of the human condition. He then renounced his privileged status, and went on a search to find a solution to human suffering. For six years, he lived an ascetic, homeless existence, to eventually find "Enlightenment" – freedom from greed, hate and delusion.

The term Buddhism comes from the Sanskrit verb *Budh,* which means to wake up, to know. While rejecting many Hindu deities, cults and other beliefs, Buddhism incorporates a fundamental Hindu belief in human karma and reincarnation. Karma is the moral law of cause and effect, and reincarnation implies the cycle of birth, sickness, old age, death, and rebirth, perpetuating the human suffering. "Enlightenment" comes from finding insight and understanding of onself, from the conscious knowledge of the interdependence of all things, and the discrimination of what is reality, and what is conceptual or imaginary. Since most human wrongdoing and suffering comes from our pursuit of material possessions or personal fulfillments, our human purification and ultimate liberation should start first with the shedding of all desires.

Within each individual, "Nirvana" is reached with the blowing out of the fires of longing and attachment. While on this earth, the practices that would lead to our own Enlightenment include

generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation and wisdom. Giving oneself in service of others is the way to live the interrelationship between all of us.

Well, Andreas, should you read books about Buddhism, you will notice that I have not discussed many other spiritual and metaphysical terms and concepts, either because I don't understand them, or do not find them terribly useful. However, let me make three observations about Buddhism, contrasting it with some Judo-Christian-Muslim beliefs.

1. Buddhism never brings up the issue of who created the Universe or life on earth. Buddhists do not evoke the existence or the grace of an "All Mighty God" as the Supreme Creator, Judge and Savior of mankind. For us, there is no God of Abraham to condom murder or revenge, and no Prince of Peace who would come with a sword to clear a path to salvation. There is no redemption through the grace of a God either. Under the moral law of cause and effect, we are individually responsible for our own fate, and we must "pay" for previous mistakes and wrongdoings. Our Nirvana comes from within ourselves, by purifying our thoughts and behavior, and by serving others, not by praying to a God figure. There is no Buddihst god that offers his blood to save us.We pray to Buddha for guidance, not for salvation.

2. Man is not the top of the food chain, nor is the animal kingdom created for man's sake. While the Christian God tells man "to subdue the earth and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over everything that moves upon the earth", Buddha teaches us that all lives deserve equal respect. Therefore, Buddhists true to their faith should be strict vegetarians. Since man is only one element of the circle of living things on this earth, nature is not ours to manage or control, but to live in harmony with. Nonviolence toward every living creature should be the way of life. Think of it, unlike other religions, no animal sacrifice, no martyrdom, no Inquisition, no crusade nor Jihad war has ever been waged in the name of Buddha!

3. You may notice that circles are very common in many Asian symbols. Under the law of cause and effect, life itself is a cycle. Buddha's teaching (or Dharma) is symbolized by an eight-spoke wheel; mandalas are schematic representations of ideal worlds, the macrocosm of the cosmos, and of individual psychic energy. Even the concept of time is circular in some Asian cultures. For example, traditional Chinese and Vietnamese calendars are based on lunar cycles, and years are named according to a cycle of animals, not numerically. In contrast, time is linear in the Western world, and life is a march forward. The belief that one's current condition is part of a cycle, the result of one's

previous karma helps Orientals be more “humble” and accepting of their “fate”, while the Westerners are more likely to work to “improve their lot” on this earth. Thus typically, Asians are more contemplative, determinist and passive, learning to appreciate the natural beauty around them, while Westerners are more active and ambitious, always seeking ways to conquer nature and dominate the world. If Harmony is a key word in Asian cultures, Progress and Competition are the driving forces in Euro-American societies. I think this philosophical difference and attitude in life may explain the competitive edge Westerners hold in science, technology and industry, and ultimately, warfare. In my mind, it also explains the eventual defeat of Asian nations when the European gunboats followed the Christian missionaries to the shore of China, Japan and Indochina.

Of course, these differences between the Western and Eastern worlds have narrowed quite a bit. Since the 19th century, Asians have adopted much of the Western education and practices to “advance” themselves, and by the end of the 20th century, Westerners have gradually learned that technology and material progress come with a cost, and are now more ecologically conscious and respectful of nature and other animal lives. We are witnessing the ill effects of a culture of consumption in this “American Century” that Henry R. Luce proudly declared in 1941 in his *Life* magazine, effects like global pollution and the epidemic of diabetes. Yet, today’s universal motto - “sustainability” – is just an empty word as long as we continue to rely on consumerism to drive our national economy and bring us personal gratification.

As for myself, a hybrid of two cultures, I am however neither a Christian nor a true Buddhist. I do not believe in the existence of an All-Mighty God, a Creator and Savior, and I don’t care who created the earth, since I don’t ask questions I cannot answer rationally. I believe where and when I was born, or the fact that I was even born at all, is an accident of nature - like the lives of billions of humans before and after me – and not a part of some divine scheme. But neither do I know for certain that my current life is the payoff from my past lives. I am not ready to detach myself from all desires, to live an existence of renunciation or extreme purity. I am not looking for that final Buddhist “Enlightenment” by living tightly defined codes of behavior. At my age, perhaps embracing a wider world of kindness may be enough.

However, I think the simple Buddhist law of cause and effect is as good a moral guide as any religion. Now as in other times of our history, with humanity consumed by craving and greed, riddled by violence, blinded by delusions, and driven and confused by technology, a small dose of Buddhism is probably good for everyone.

We recently visited Jeri's older brother Richard in Lancaster, CA. Richard is a WWII veteran who still has tears in his eyes when he talks about the three worse years of his life "spent in a fox hole" in the Pacific war front, about the hardship in his adulthood, and about the sweetest part of his life – his wife of over sixty years, Mary, who died a couple of years ago. On the eve of his 86th birthday, living alone on a meager pension and weakened by Parkinson's disease, Richard told us, with a big, toothless smile: "I have never had so little in my life, and been so happy". Reflecting on such a simple, yet deeply moving statement, I could not help but say to myself: "Now, can anyone among us be more Buddhist than that?"

May you find, my dear old friend, Love and Peace wherever your heart is.

Chính
John Muir Lodge, Kings Canyon National Park,
October 2, 2011

"One step at a time"
(Original silk painting 18" x 24")

Gardening

Autumn is such an enjoyable time of the year in Corvallis. After a dry summer, the thirsty earth soaks up the gentle rain. In the hills above our town, shades of gold and orange dot the evergreen forest, as swirling clouds from the West announce the coming of winter.

October calls the gardener outdoors for many chores. I find my most peaceful moments raking leaves that whisper the sad song of good-byes, or pruning branches that bore us fruit and gave us shade, or planting bulbs that will herald the coming of spring. Kneeling over the earth, I find my best moments reflecting about myself, and the world around me. I am reminded that there are seasons to everything on this earth, and within us. That seeding, nurturing, reaping, pruning, and decaying are but cycles of life and death that make us who we are; that many a seed I planted earlier in the spring never took root, like many great ideas conceived in the passion of the moment never go on to change the world. Yet some seeds blown from somewhere else manage to find a home in my own backyard; and that we can pray for sunshine and dance for rain, but much of what comes from the sky and the wind is beyond our control. We should just receive it with grace and humility. And that too much of a good thing can wilt plants, just like overeating can kill our bodies and greed can poison our souls.

The way we garden is an expression of ourselves or of our superego. A garden is a place where we think we can wrestle the control of living things from Mother Nature, and reshape the world, our world at least, to our own definition of beauty. Yes, I have to confess that in my garden, I have played God among living things, and divided the world between beautiful and undesirable, friends and foes, good and evil. In my garden, I have practiced racial profiling and affirmative action, and even ethnic cleansing with my weed digger, only to inflict at times much “collateral damage” to my more valued plants.

Gardening allows me to rediscover that my bare hands are still the most versatile tools I have, and that patience and moderation are the best virtues. There is diversity at every corner, for there are plants that thrive in the shade, and plants that thrive in the sun; plants that demand an abundance of water, and plants that are grateful but for a few drops of dew. My garden can bloom in its greatest splendor, but only if no tree monopolizes the sun above, and no single species captures all the

resources buried in the soil below. I humbly learned that the weeds and pests I tried to eradicate all summer long hold the survival gene that we, humans, wish we could possess. Finally beaten by the tenacity of these creatures, I decided that perhaps they too have the right to be happy under the sun and in the rain. Even in my own backyard.

Soon I will retreat from my garden, as winter sets in, still mourning this year's natural disasters and ongoing man-made calamities. When spring comes, I will pick up my gardening tools again. Next time when I kneel down over the earth, I will remember that all that I have learned about myself and about my world, I have learned in my garden.

(Originally our Holiday Letter to friends and family, December 2001; revised and published in "Local Writers' Corner" of the Gazette Times, Corvallis, Sunday October 29, 2006)

"Vincent's Irises"
(original silk painting 24" x 20")

Windows

I like windows. Among all the structures that make a home, windows are to me the most interesting ones. Not for what they actually are, but for the space they frame.

Windows come in all sizes and shapes, and locations. Some are no higher than the ground level, just enough for a beam of light and hope to streak into dark basements; others are on the roof, as to remind us that there is always an escape to the sky above. Some windows are huge, inundating the room with sunlight; some are narrow slits, just enough to let the archer point his bow and arrow from his fortress dungeon, or for the condemned man to wait for the crack of dawn. We open windows to welcome fresh air into our homes, and we close them for protection from natural elements or for privacy. We decorate our windows with lace curtains, knickknacks, plants and flowers - small treasures we want to show off to the world.

There are few things in the house that change by the hour of the day, or by the seasons of the year, but windows do. Clouds racing in the sky, trees shaking in the wind, rainbows and raindrops, sunrises and sunsets, a neighbor rushing by, the splendors of fall colors and the revival of spring, all are life pictures timed and framed by our windows. And when nighttime comes, a bit uneasy seeing myself reflected in the darkened glass pane of my window, I too draw down the shades and withdraw from the world.

Windows tell us so much about ourselves - how we see the world from the secure walls of our home, and what part of us we allow others to see. And like many questions and issues in life, windows are not defined by what they are, but by the perspectives they frame. Risk or opportunity; bad luck or blessing-in-disguise; revenge or justice. It's all about framing.

May your window frame, in this holiday season, be made of understanding, humility, and grace.

(Our Holiday letter to friends and family, 2007; and published in the "Local Writers' Corner" of the Gazette-Times, December 30th, 2007)

A luthier's journey through the woods

Two weeks into my guitar building class in Vermont, I realized that a guitar is just a big box with a stick at one end, made of wood - bent, braced, polished and held together by glue! But like any oversimplified truth in life, that description of a guitar hardly gave justice to the miracle of its birth and the beauty of its composition.

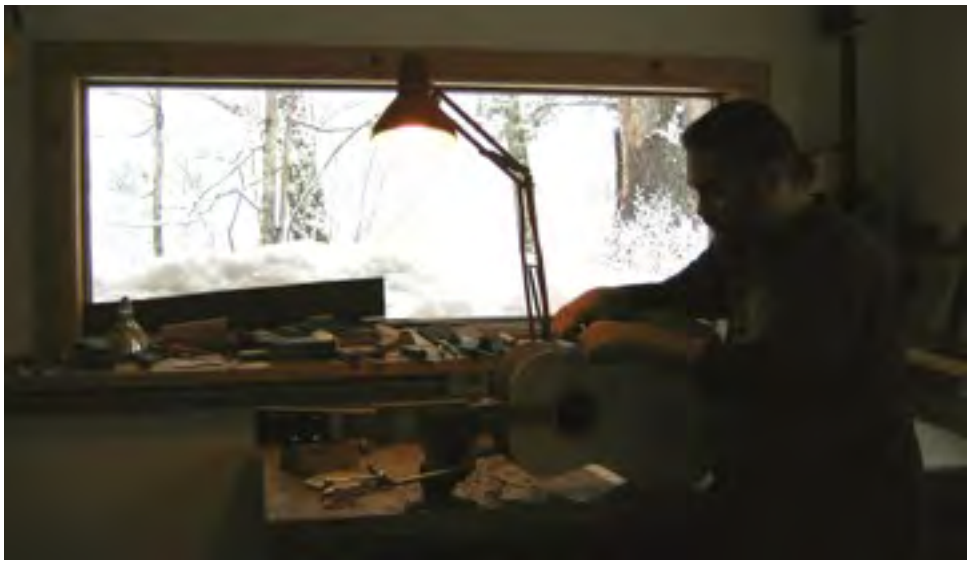
Building a guitar "from scratch" with George and Ben at the "*Vermont Instruments*" workshop was a unique experience for me. I learned to appreciate the properties and qualities of different types of wood beyond their grain, strength and coloring. Choosing the right type of wood is as important to a luthier as choosing the right fabrics is to the tailor. Like many things in nature, the full beauty of the wood only reveals itself to those who take the time to explore and study it. I also learned that a tool could help or destroy depending on how it is used, and that my hands need to be firm yet gentle. In using tools, one has breath-holding moments, especially for me with some non-forgiving high-speed power tools, and one can enjoy the journey in meditative motions, while gently tapping on a chisel. In making my guitar, each step required different materials, tools, and skills, but in the end, it all came together. I had to remind myself frequently that one should never fight or force one's own tool. If a process takes too much effort and causes frustration, one is likely making the wrong effort or not using the right tool. Life should be lived that way too. "It is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things", Thoreau said. I should always remember that, whether I am woodworking or dreaming about changing the world.

Planning the work ahead is very important, but so is the absolute concentration on the task at hand. Shortcutting or multi-tasking is a definite path to disaster. No longer can I hope to turn an "Oops!" into a brilliant, creative serendipity, like I have done at times in my paintings. In short, to reach perfection, the task of fine woodworking revolves around many "P" words: planning, preparation, precision, practice, patience, personality, and overall, passion. A passion for perfection itself. Yes, in the final sense, a guitar is just a wooden box attached to a stick and laced with strings. It only comes alive when we put forth all our heart and skills to bring out the music hidden deep in the wood. Build it to perfection. Then play it, and play it with passion.

Snow fell outside, silently, so pure and so white on these early April days in Vermont. It fell so peacefully over meadows and hills, trees and roofs, as we worked noisily inside our dusty

workshop. Snow and dust, dust and snow. Within myself, I became more humble as I coped with the limitations of my skills, the shortcomings of my personal traits, the “P’s” that I lack, as more than once I paid the price for forgetting to follow instructions, and for my clumsiness at the tasks at hand. I have in the past indulged in defining myself as a self-congratulating scholar or painter, but I now consider fine wood working a much more demanding science and occupation. I hold tremendous respect for the artisans and craftsmen of centuries ago who produced infinitely better work with simple basic tools than I ever could with the high-tech gigs that are available to me today. I am thankful for the masters who are passing the wisdom and skills of this beautiful trade to the next generation. If in an earlier essay, I stated that all I have learned about the world, I learned it in my garden, I can say now that all I’ve learned about myself, I have learned while building my classical guitar.

Post Mills, Vermont, April 2011



"Vừa vặn đủ"

They call it *"Wabi-Sabi"* time in Japan. The Swedish name it the *"Lagom"* solution. After reading about it in Cecile Andrews' and Wanda Urbanska's book: "*Less is More*", we realize that the Vietnamese too have a term for it: ***" Vừa vặn đủ".***

In the words of Robyn G Lawrence, *Wabi Sabi* comes from the Japanese philosophy of revering simplicity, frugality and finding beauty in the utility and imperfections of common things: a locally fired bowl or tea cup; a beloved chipped vase that belonged to grandma; or the bloom of time, like "the feeling you have when you're waiting for your lover".

Alan Atkisson told us about his conversion to the *Lagom* solution while living in Sweden. He wrote: "*Lagom* is neither too much, nor too little; but neither is it "*just enough*"...If it were a place, it would lie somewhere north of sufficiency, but south of excess. When something is "*just right*", it is *lagom*." Apparently, it was the practice of passing a bowl of beer around a circle of Vikings (*lag* = team; *om* = around), with everyone expecting to drink exactly the right amount for them, and leave the right amount for everyone else as well, that embodies the *lagom* concept of social solidarity, perhaps making Scandinavians one of the most satisfied people on earth.

I remember my mother serving elaborate dishes to family and guests at the time of festivities. We often had plain rice and veggies for our own daily meals, but for special occasions, mother always knew how to garnish the family altar with marvelous food, which would be consumed after being first offered to the worshiped ancestors. Once satisfied, the guests would politely decline my mother's pressure to eat more by gently covering their bowls with their hands, and saying with the most gracious smile: *Xin cắm ơn, ăn vừa vặn đủ" ("thank you, I had just the right amount to eat").* "*Vừa vặn đủ*" can also apply to the exactly right amount in anything: flavor in the food, water for houseplants, material needed to make something, or enough money to live on.

Finding beauty in simple things, virtue in minimalism, and happiness in our circle of friends and family is of course not unique to any culture, nor to any particular time in our lives. Shakers and Puritans, Buddhists and Taoists, Unitarians and neo-conservationists, all have found enchantment in lifestyles that shun excesses. Whether for you it is the wish for a less stressful life, a "time to downsize", "time to simplify", or just to age gracefully, we hope, on this Holiday Season and the New

Year, that the *Wabi Sabi* time and the *Lagom* way will be yours, and that every night, when you close your eyes, you can whisper to yourself: *" Vừa vặn đủ".* Just right.

Chính and Jeri Lê
Corvallis, OR
December 2011

(Published in the Gazette Times, Corvallis, December 29, 2011)

EPILOGUE

Who am I?

I analyze everything.

Early in my medical career, I realized that I could never be an emergency room doctor or a neonatologist, whose days mostly run on a set of routine and boring clinical algorithms, occasionally interrupted by crises and a sense of impending doom and disaster. Obstetricians don't have much to manage when Mother Nature has already perfected the wonderful process of pregnancy and birth, but they do get their moments of sheer panic. I hate practicing medicine in those settings. Cardiologists care about nothing but the heart, neurologists nothing but neurons and synapses, and orthopedists are happy dealing just with the mechanics of bones and joints. So, I found delight in my Infectious Disease (ID) subspecialty, which is not limited to a single organ system, and where diagnoses are not arrived at by following predictable road maps. Yes, we ID consultants, we come to an elegant list of "differential diagnoses" by fitting together every biological aspect of an individual human host, the details of his natural and social environment, and the trickeries of germs and parasites. Every infectious disease diagnosis is a final composite of this multi-analysis, eventually leading to the selection of a proper test that will confirm the initial clinical "impression". Yes, I even have a bumper sticker that says: "Infectious Diseases people do it with culture and sensitivity" – just like when we order our microbiologic assays.

Fortunately, or rather unfortunately, this professional trait readily spills into my private life, and I find myself analyzing every thing I see or hear, every decision I make or do not make, and reexamining

every minute of my existence. I do not just watch the social and political news of the day, or listen to words that flow out of people's lips, or contemplate the artwork that is hung on the wall. I analyze the history behind the news, the silence between the words, the message hidden beneath the paints and the reverie behind the brush strokes. I analyze the lines and curves of human bodies, the various shades of green on trees, and the images of clouds racing in the sky. In science, I have become a collector of facts and factoids. In love and in lust, I wonder what part of my behavior is reptilian, mammal, or quixotic. I always seem to be reacting to how others are responding, rather than allowing the spontaneity of passion carry the moment. For seeing the "pro's and con's" of everything I do, or of the things I do not do, "analysis paralysis" bogs me down at times, until a virtual lithium salt somehow kicks in to pull me out of my bipolar state. And now more than ever, as an old man seeing the futility of many human pursuits and the vanity of many of our feelings, and seeing how small and insignificant my dreams and concerns are in this enormous universe of star dust and galaxies, I find myself asking the question: "What's the point? WWBS?"; "What Would Buddha Say?"

Perhaps this is no way to live and experience the world. Feelings and people are to be accepted the way they are, without judgment, not to be analyzed and worked over like a math problem or a philosophy debate. Life is not meant to follow a doctor's prescription, dictated by a risk-benefit formula; nor is life a public health debate, solved by a cost-effectiveness analysis. In my work, I was project-oriented, detail-focused, and result-driven. But while careful attention to details makes a great surgeon or a trustworthy clinician, it chills the romance of the candlelight dinner and it kills the spontaneity of the moment, the magic of a tender touch, or the laughter in a bouquet of flowers, Jeri would remind me from time to time. Yes, my Jeri lives by her intuitions, feelings and common sense. Analysis does not move her.

Turning over my white professional white coat is not easy, however, and the complexity of human relationships continues to intrigue me. Reading Goa Xingxian's *Soul Mountain*, I too realize that at the beginning, and the end, there is the "*me*", that single, lonesome "*me"*. And then there is the "*you*", who is actually a perception, or a projection of "*me"*. And then there is a "*he*" or "*she*", who is outside of "*me* and *you*". And "*they*", who are composites or aggregates of "*he* and *she*". And the "*we* and *us*", who we refer to when we act as one, but these "*we* and *us*" may just be a delusion of adding the "*me*" to the "*you*". I'd better stop here - you can guess I am having fun with the English pronouns!

Yet I think I understand what Goa Xingxian is telling me. There is no reality, at least no one can ever claim to know the ultimate, universal reality out there, or the person inside each one of us. I can only express what feels real inside my brain and my guts, what is perceived by my five senses and seen through the filter of my mental and emotional lenses. Others do the same, they see through the filter of their own lenses. The shape, density and size of my prism are of course the product of my biology, and of my childhood and adult experiences, thus always evolving, and often elusive. And out there, there is not even a "*me*" as a single entity. I am, after all, the composite of what people assume about me, think of me, and expect of me.

I am the physician in whom some individuals have come to entrust their healthcare, at times even their lives. I am the son, the brother, and the uncle who, to some degree, has to live up to certain family expectations. I am the husband to a woman who has chosen me as a lifetime companion, the father to a son by whom I want to stand tall, and a friend or neighbor to others who might at times depend on me, just because their lives happen to cross with mine purely by random acts of fate. My existence is not an absolute necessity to them, for after all, I may be missed but never indispensable. Yet, these relationships make me who I am, they tell me who I should be, and how I should behave nearly every minute of my waking hours. Bits of myself will bloom or wither as these relationships flourish or tumble, for the "*you/him/her/us"* in them are parts of "*me"*. In their expectations lie my vulnerabilities and my strengths. The extreme parts of "*me"* swings between the moods of a neurotic Woody Allen trying to break away from his social boundaries, and a hopelessly lost Rod McKuen longing to dissolve himself in an all-consuming love, both men in the final sense quite lonely in their own ways.

So, is there an "individual" in "*me"*, the one not defined by duty or social bondage? Ah, that man, you will never find him at your fingertips tapping on the noisy circuit of Facebook, where one's individuality is posted almost daily, potentially for the whole world to "connect" and respond to. Perhaps at times, you may know me best by the songs that I sing, or by the twisted lines and daps of colored inks on my silk paintings - these may be the only public alleys to the deeper *me*. That deeper "*me"* lives in a cubicle I retreat to whenever given the chance, a solitude jealously cherished and guarded. That "*me"* lives in a world that echoes but my own voice, a voice that I only hear, a world with images sketched only in my mind, because no one else needs to hear or see that world. A world where two minds in simultaneous one-sided conversations argue about selfish emotions versus higher social obligations. A world where the love of work and the love of life are difficult companions. A world filled with scenarios entitled: *"what-might-have-been", "what-would-it-be-like",*

and "*this-is-what-I-should-be-doing-but-am-not*". A world of dancing shadows and fleeting images, like: what if I were, not a kite, but a cloud rolling across the sky; not a plant with roots, but a butterfly with large, wild wings; not a river contained by levees, but a torrential rain that overruns the gutters of life. These "*not-me*" are also parts of "*me"*, evanescent and recurring. The best poets and artists are the ones who have found their freedom by breaking from the pack – sometimes at high emotional costs. But an outstanding poet or artist I will never be, for I belong too much in the amorphous mass of humans that cling together. So, despite all my vanity for wanting to be different, better, or one step ahead, I readily fall back to be the man that gets dressed for work and greets the routine world every day, one step behind the shadow of the free person I wish I were. I am my own self-delusion, underachieved but often overvalued. I live the guilt for not doing more good on earth, for my acts of kindness that did not go far enough, because my idealism seldom becomes reality. I do not soar high enough in the sky, and I hide behind the excuse of feeling like a bird with a broken wing or in a bamboo cage. Jeri knows me well in this regard. "Your Buddhist guilt is acting up again", she would say, or "You're always doing something, yet wishing that you are doing something else, or being somewhere else".

And "*you",* my wife, my son, my friends, and my relatives, not all of you is *you*. You have your own bodies and minds, but you also come to me with social labels, assumptions and obligations, and I must be ready to fulfill my responsibilities toward you. You may hold the mirrors for a "*me"* I wish to be through "*you"*. You have your own life, of course, but I can't help feeling that you are also the projections of my dreams and wishes, my have's and have-not's. ou are the wood feeding my fire, the wind beneath my wings, and also, the strings of my kite, the anchor of my boat. You are my catalysts and my anti-ego.

And who are "*we"*? As a *"we",* we speak in a single voice, walk in the same direction, and share the same pleasures and sorrows. *We* should be *one*. The two shall be as one, so goes the Christian wedding blessing. But could it ever be so? Not really. The single voice is often not spoken by one "*we",* but by two or more "*me*'s" who have learned to compromise; *we* may walk in the same direction, but often it is many "*me*'s" walking at different paces, to the rhythm of different drums, each with our own perspective of time and space. And if "*we"* sing along in joyful harmony, the many "*me's"* in "*us*" often weep alone, for if pleasures are easy to share, pains are intensely lonely. I may be unfair to you for never knowing the real "*you*" outside of "*me"*, and for questioning the "*we"* you and I have worked so hard to become. But let me assure you, my "*me"* is incomplete without "*you"* and without "*we"*.

Should you ask me why I make human relationships so complicated, well - I can only answer by saying that I was born and raised in the land of the bamboo. Bamboos are simple as they grow straight and tall, but under the soil they are a complicated mesh. Bamboo plants may be seen as single vertical stalks, but they thrive only in clumps and groves. Dig down in the soil a little bit, and you will find not individual roots, but a system of interconnected rhizomes that project and repeat themselves in straight lines and from where culms or canes grow up in segments and produce lateral branches and leaves at their nodes. The rain waters all the bamboo plants the same, and all the rhizomes feed off the same patch of soil. Why some shoots are bigger and taller than others remains a mystery of life, but it is not important. Above all, the beauty of the bamboo is in its clustering of vibrant plants that shoot up to the sky and swing together in the wind.

And so it is in the culture I was raised. Individuality is not understood as character strength, for it is often viewed as a selfish behavior. Competition is not a driving force, because it only makes a person self-centered. Where I was born and raised, community values such as social harmony and tradition drive people more than individual passions or talents. "*Me, you, we, he, she,* and *they"*, are all from the same bundle. They all seem mixed up. We have no individual roots. It is the common rhizome that matters.

On the other hand, roses and fuchsias, which grow so well in the Oregon climate, are individual plants. They are grown in individual pots, and are watered, fertilized and pruned with individual attention. They all grow to be different, each plant so unique, so beautiful on its own way. So it is, in the country that has adopted me. Individuals are cultivated and valued. They need their own space to bloom.

Roses may be the queens of gardens. They have captured human hearts for centuries. But the Little Prince once told us that roses are too complicated. So we are happy growing fuchsias in our Oregon garden. Seasons come and go under the sun and rain, and our hardy fuchsias require little care and make us feel at home, rain or shine.

Jeri and I love our fuchsias and bamboos. It is not difficult to understand: I was raised as a bamboo, and she a fuchsia. And we have learned to share the same garden.

Now you know what I mean when I said I analyze too much. But you see, I have finally come home to my Buddhist roots, reasserting the basic unreality of a world learned and felt through my senses and expectations. And so far I have be unable to transcend my subjective self. So I better stop here.

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