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JILL GOCHER Return to Kathmandu

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY JILL GOCHER



Stray cat, Luang Prabang, Laos. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



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Live Encounters is a not-for-profit free online magazine that was founded in 2009 in Bali, Indonesia. It showcases some of the best writing from around the world. Poets, writers, academics, civil & human/animal rights activists, academics, environmentalists, social workers, photographers and more have contributed their time and knowledge for the benefit of the readers of:

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Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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JILL GOCHER RETURN TO KATHMANDU

Text & Photographs

Kathmandu - the very name evokes images of the exotic. A random mix of Hindu Buddhist beliefs, this eclectic city that still verges on the medieval continues to charm. I returned after almost eight years at the time when there was a confluence of Lhosar -Tibetan Buddhist New Year and Maha Shivaratri which celebrates the grand marriage of Shiva and his goddess Parvati. What a time to visit. If I had expected change due to the increasing presence of the folk from the north - I was to be disappointed! Apart from the obvious and welcome proliferation of more Chinese eateries, change was not apparent. The first impression coming from the airport remains a vision of half finished badly made buildings, drowning in dust, was there and my heart sank a little! But there is something about Kathmandu and its charm quickly blinds you to all its many flaws.

Days flew by in a succession of visits to beautiful renovated old Rana Buildings like the Kaiser Mahal - the Garden Of Dreams or the Baba Mahal Revisited - both modern portrayals of the grand Rana architecture. Down by the holy Bagmati River the ancient Pashuptinath Temple complex was revving up for the forthcoming Shivaratri celebrations. Scantily clad Shivarite sadhus wearing iconic makeup and beads descend from who knows where to partake in the celebrations. Chai shops and others selling religious paraphernalia spring up overnight! it is probably the best place in the world to enjoy this extraordinary time. Not far away in Boudhanath, the Tibetan monasteries come alive with the sound of chanting and clashing cymbals as Lhosar celebrations start. Once the whole complex would be alive with celebrations, chanting monks lining the circumambulatory pathways, prayer flags and the smell of burning juniper. Celebrations are now more low key but it takes a lot to kill the staunch Tibetan spirit. Tashi Delek!

There is always more but to my great delight, Kathmandu continues to resonate to its own unique and wonderful vibration.

Jill Gocher







05



06







Father Ivo Coelho earned a PhD in philosophy at the Gregorian University, Rome, for his work on the hermeneutics of the philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan, SJ (1904-1984). After teaching philosophy in Divyadaan: Salesian Institute of Philosophy, Nashik and holding various offices in his religious congregation, in Nashik, Mumbai and Jerusalem, he is currently based in Rome, where he is in charge of the sector of training and formation for the Salesian society of Don Bosco. Besides his interest in Lonergan, he has also edited collections of the essays of the Indologist Richard De Smet, SJ (1916-1997).

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<https://liveencounters.net/2013-2/12-december-volume-one-2013/ivo-coelho-guest-editorial-does-religion-have-a-political-role-in-a-country/>

DR FATHER IVO COELHO DOES RELIGION HAVE A POLITICAL ROLE IN A COUNTRY?

Does religion have a political role in a country? This is a thorny but very actual question, especially in those countries where religions have large and significant presences. We might think most spontaneously of Christianity in its different forms in the West, but we ought to keep in mind also Islam in many countries around the world, Hinduism in India, and Buddhism in several countries of Asia.

The question has a history that is long and pesante, heavy, as the Italians would say. After the post-Reformation wars of religion in Europe, for example, there has been a tendency to relegate religion to the private sphere. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for preachers in certain countries around the world to give unambiguous exhortations to direct political action.

In a certain sense, the overlap between religion and politics is inevitable, given that religion is so all-encompassing. In my opinion, it would be a poor form of religion that concerned itself only with the hereafter to the exclusion of any concern for the here and now.



Dr Father Ivo Coelho

I cannot help remembering the question asked to Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar. Jesus is being asked to take a position on the issue of the Roman occupation, and it would seem that, whichever way he answers, he will get into trouble, either with the Romans or else with his own compatriots. His response is wonderful: “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.” I find this astounding. Jesus’ questioners are the ones carrying coins with Caesar’s image on them. They are, in other words, consenting to the Roman occupation at least in some way. And then, what is it that belongs to Caesar and what to God? Is it not true that, in the final analysis, everything belongs to God, including Caesar and all that belongs to him?

The point is that there is an inevitable overlap between religion and politics, religion and the state. Jesus’ answer is profound, but it leaves plenty of room for interpretation, negotiation, learning. And I think we have to learn from history.

So I want to say that, despite the fact that everything belongs to God, including Caesar, there is place for the legitimate autonomy of the political sphere. Religion, therefore, cannot become a force that dictates terms to the state. Just as faith does not do away with reason, so religion does not attempt to replace or take over the functions of the state.

But it is also true that, just as faith somehow transcends, goes beyond and sublates reason, religion cannot simply withdraw completely from the sphere of the political. So the question before us is not whether religion has anything to do with the state, but simply what its role might be.

One way of putting the matter might be to hold that religion has the role of Socratic gadfly – and the more powerless the better. If politics is not merely a mechanism for regulating public life, if its lofty aim is to provide and achieve justice in the here and now for all, then the question inevitably arises, what is justice? And here is where religion is one of several forces that can contribute, by casting light on and by challenging or perhaps inviting to constant and ongoing purification.

Politics tends to be linked to national, special, and even often simply personal interests. Especially when a religion is able to rise above such interests, it can play the role of gadfly, asking questions that no one else seems to be asking, provoking reflection. It will keep in mind, of course, also the fact that Socrates paid for his questioning with his life.

So did Jesus, I can’t help thinking. He makes shrewd distinctions between Caesar and God, but everything he does has inevitable political implications. He invites himself to spend the night at the house of a Roman collaborator, the tax collector of Jericho, Zacchaeus. He heals the servant of the Roman centurion and even praises the centurion’s faith. On the other hand among his disciples there is not only a tax collector but also a zealot, someone who might be termed a terrorist or a patriot, depending on which side we are on. Faced with the ultimate test, however, Jesus does not shirk. To Pilate he says: You say that I am a king, and it is true. But my kingdom is not of this world. I have come to bear witness to the truth.

Jesus is a witness to the truth who does not hate anyone, who is willing to meet and eat with Romans and Samaritans as well as Jews, tax collectors, sex workers, people who like to live it up, but also the more orthodox. He is a witness to the truth who keeps crossing boundaries.

So when John Paul II became instant friends with the young Communist mayor of Rome in the early 1990s, he was not really doing anything new.

And when Jyoti Basu, the Communist chief minister of West Bengal, spent half a silent hour at the body of Mother Teresa, it was not really anything astounding. That is how it should be. We speak, we bear witness to the truth as we see it, but we do not hate, we keep crossing boundaries, we are friends. So when I hear about certain extreme Catholic attitudes towards President Obama, I find myself disturbed. I may not agree with certain of his stances, but I would not be blindly against him. We can work together even if we disagree on certain fundamentals.

And, besides, religion itself has to keep purifying itself in its concrete incarnations.

A one-track morality frightens me: Catholics, for example, who shout loudly against abortion and homosexuality, but are quite unmoved about war and injustice.

Cardinal Peter Turkson, who was with us here in Jerusalem recently, used a phrase that I like very much: gentle accompaniment. That is a good way of putting it: religion as gently accompanying humanity, politics, as the case may be. Not a heavy-handed religion, not a religion that is prepotente or attempting to dominate, but a religion that gently bears witness to the truth. And here, I must say, religion has its own rights to be respected and to be respectfully heard.

And then there is what Bernard Lonergan calls the dynamic of creation and healing. All religion bears witness also to the existence of Something or Someone by which or whom we are carried beyond ourselves, as it were. We do our little part to improve the lot of humanity, and if we believe, we do it not with cynicism but with hope. Lonergan refers to this component as 'healing': God is at work to redeem, heal, save, in ways that we know and in ways that we do not.

But there is also the component of 'creating'. God's ongoing work does not take away the need for human creativity, for insightful responses to concrete needs, for an ongoing evolution of systems to meet the needs of human beings on smaller or larger scales. Lonergan is engaged in making two points: first, that creating and healing are both necessary: the creative process, when unaccompanied by healing, is distorted and corrupted by bias; but the healing process, when unaccompanied by creating, "is a soul without a body." Second, that moral or religious theorizing needs to arise from intimate knowledge of economic or political processes.

Thus economic theorists are called upon to work out a new type of analysis that acknowledges the inevitable component of human insight and decision in economic process, and that therefore works out how moral precepts have both a basis in economic process and an effective application to it.

Moral theorists, on the other hand, must be able to see the need to descend from abstract and lofty moral principles to "specifically economic precepts that arise out of economic process itself and promote its proper functioning." "When physicists are able to think on the basis of indeterminacy, economists can think on the basis of freedom and acknowledge the relevance of morality. Again, when the system that is needed for our collective survival does not exist, then it is futile to excoriate what does exist while blissfully ignoring the task of constructing a technically viable economic system that can be put in its place."

While economics does not coincide with politics, no one will deny that the two are inevitably connected. So while religion might play the role of Socratic gadfly, witness to the truth, or gentle accompaniment, and while it also is a witness to its conviction that there is a component of healing in world process, there is also the fact that believers and religious and moral theorists, like everyone else, are called upon to contribute to the component of creating, so that their invitations to the purification of reason arise from proper familiarity with the economic, social and political processes in question.

And if I am right in my suspicion that this last part of my essay is intolerably vague, I will try to offset this by referring my readers to Lonergan's essay itself, "Healing and Creating in History," found in a collection of his essays entitled simply A Third Collection.



Based in China since 2008, American photographer Eleanor Moseman focuses on social and cultural narratives involving women and ethnic minorities of Tibet and Xinjiang. Striving to create stories that seek resolutions for the oppressed while sharing the voices of the unknown and persecuted. Eleanor has been using her photography and storytelling skills to contribute to the work of anthropologists, historians, conservationists, and activists. Her pictures are often used to supplement work published on the cultural genocide taking place in Xinjiang and Tibet, and the environmental changes occurring on the Tibetan Plateau.
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ELEANOR MOSEMAN

PORTRAITS OF TIBET JANUARY 2020 BEFORE THE WORLD LOCKED DOWN

Text & Photographs

During Tibetan New Year (Losar) of this year, I was visiting a family as the Corona Virus began ravaging across China. The world had yet to stand still and only those in China were fearing for their lives and future.

In the Tibetan regions, where remote villages lay, the place remained untouched during the beginning. Tibetans thought it would be a problem that wouldn't reach the high plateau.

These were some of the last portraits I made of Tibetans during January 2020, before the world changed. The smiles and joyous moments shared over a holiday are some of the last memories of a region that I frequent every year. As many of us, you and I, don't know when we will ever be able to return to lands that are nearly as close as "home".



Eleanor Moseman















Mark Ulyseas has served time in advertising as copywriter and creative director selling people things they didn't need, a ghost writer for some years, columnist of a newspaper, a freelance journalist and photo-grapher. In 2009 he created *Live Encounters Magazine*, in Bali, Indonesia. It is a not for profit (adfree) free online magazine featuring leading academics, writers, poets, activists of all hues etc. from around the world. March 2016 saw the launch of its sister publication *Live Encounters Poetry*, which was relaunched as *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* in March 2017. In February 2019 the third publication was launched, *LE Children Poetry & Writing* (now renamed *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers*). In August 2020 the fourth publication, *Live Encounters Books*, was launched. He has edited, designed and produced all of *Live Encounters'* 203 publications (till January 2021). Mark's philosophy is that knowledge must be free and shared freely to empower all towards enlightenment. He is the author of three books: *RAINY – My friend & Philosopher*; *Seductive Avatars of Maya – Anthology of Dystopian Lives* and *In Gethsemane: Transcripts of a Journey*. <https://liveencounters.net/mark-ulyseas/> <https://www.amazon.com/Mark-Ulyseas/e/B01FUUQVBG>



MARK ULYSEAS THOUGHT FOR THE YEAR 2021

Each year that passes is unnatural, unnatural in Time. For all these days, months and years have been created by us. We have yet to understand Universal Time. We live by this unnatural Time and write our histories by it... histories that defy the truth because many among us write history to appease our own and not necessarily a truthful rendition of past events. One supposes that Napoleon Bonaparte was right when he said, 'History is a set of lies that people have agreed upon'. Generations upon generations have been and continue to be fed lies. These lies infect all who believe them thus creating schisms between countries and peoples.

Schisms within a religion and between religions have been crafted to 'manage the masses of illiterates'. These illiterates are preyed upon by self appointed gendarmes of faith who put the fear of God and everlasting damnation into the hearts of the faithful. Furthermore, for their own narrow vested interests, they deliberately create schisms so as to perpetuate a fraud on the unsuspecting masses – *us and them* has become the mantra fuelled by hate. And while the blade rises and falls on the expendables (faithful slaughtered by other faithful) people watch dispassionately as newsreaders belt out the deadly digits of senseless killings, day in and day out. The litany of bloodlust appears to be flowing unabated. Life is now disposable, particularly those of others. It would appear that a sense of exceptionalism has engulfed our senses. Our dead are better than their dead. Our country is greater than their country. Our religion is the only true religion. Where have we gone wrong?

A long time ago I had the opportunity to discuss these issues with a wandering Sufi, who summed up this distortion of humanity in one sentence – 'We have lost our *insanyat* (humanity)' we lost it a long time ago and now, as the Hindus say, we live in *Kali Yuga* – the end times."

So who decides these end times? When was it decided and if it was written in the scriptures of a religion/s – who wrote these scriptures? And why should we believe what has been written? Could it be that these scriptures too had been written by people with vested interests to promote one religion or another? How can they prove that it came from God? And does God exist? Who can prove this? Who can disapprove this?

According to Swami, a Shiva Bhakt, indeed we have lost our *insanyat*. People have become more self centred, the *me-me* factor has become synonymous with the Self. Social media has brought us closer and yet alienated us all by deleting the human touch and in its place introduced the *touch pad*, *ipad* et al on one side, while on the other side it has further divided the haves from the great unwashed millions who live off the refuse of the privileged.

A Catholic priest once told me – "One day at a time sweet Jesus – go out and share, love and forgive. Then return home. And the next day do it again. And again. And again. And you will discover after sometime that people will reciprocate in the same manner. This is how you can make the world a little bit better. Your actions should be your words."

In this day and age to follow his advice is scary and this is where, I suppose, the strength and depth of one's faith is truly tested. For what is the purpose of one's faith if not to serve those in distress – the hungry, homeless and the weak, and without harming others?

In my travels I have met people from many faiths who were kind and generous without a hint of ill will towards those who were not of their faith. Their religious charities help all with food, shelter and education without bias towards religion, caste or gender. It is these people who have not lost their *insanyat*. It is through their humanity that their faith speaks. And this is comforting to know that there are people of faith out there who are not aroused by rabid religious preachers nor moved by the machinations of those seeking to create schisms in a faith or between faiths.

May their numbers grow in 2021.

I shall leave you now with this quote from Thomas Aquinas –

"To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible."

Poet, writer and artist Greta Sykes has published her work in many anthologies. She is a member of London Voices Poetry Group and also produces art work for them. Her new volume of poetry called 'The Shipping News and Other Poems' came out in August 2016. The German translation of her book 'Under charred skies' has now been published in Germany under the title 'Unter verbranntem Himmel' by Eulenspiegel Verlag. She is the chair of the Socialist History Society and has organised joint poetry events for them at the Poetry Café. She is a trained child psychologist and has taught at the Institute of Education, London University, where she is now an associate researcher. Her particular focus is now on women's emancipation and antiquity.

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DR GRETA SYKES FRIEDRICH HEGEL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Introduction

Called 'the philosopher of modernity' Georg William Friedrich Hegel was born 250 years ago on the 27TH August 1770. His birthday is an invitation to explore some of the major ideas that led to his prominence. At the present time we find ourselves in the uncomfortable yet fascinating situation of watching the solidity of the Western world crumble and diminish to something not unlike a walnut shell being rocked on the ocean of our time, lost and about to sink. It might be useful to find out what we can learn from the originator of dialectics who had such a profound influence on Karl Marx and other philosophers of modernity.

French Revolution

Born only nineteen years before the French Revolution that event became a determining feature in his thinking. Throughout his life he celebrated the storming of the Bastille. He regularly raised a glass on the 14th July and declared it to be the principle of his philosophy. Whether as private tutor, grammar school director, University professor of philosophy or newspaper editor, Hegel praised the revolution even when it metamorphosed into a dictatorship and the death of Robespierre and many others. Its influence on his thinking was as fundamental as Emmanuel Kant's theories (1724-1804).

In 1806 Hegel commented: 'Like a dream image did previous conceptions and notions of reality fall apart, the restraints of the world have been dissolved.'

These prophetic words sound strangely modern, as we are entering a phase of late capitalism's decadence, treachery and betrayal of ordinary working people, a process not dissimilar to dissolution.



Dr Greta Sykes

Hegel and his friends

Hegel shared a room with Friedrich Hoelderlin and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling while studying at the ‘Stift’ in Tuebingen. The protestant residential school was founded as an Augustian monastery in the middle ages. After the reformation it was turned into scholarship residential college for theology and philosophy. It was the location where the three young men experienced the cold in their room, sparse food and disciplinarian rules. A close friendship developed during that time as well as a growing rebellion against the severe restraints, which led to a deeply felt desire for freedom. Hoelderlin and Hegel are said to have planted ‘the tree of freedom’ by the river Neckar to symbolise the ‘philosophy of collective symbiosis and love’. Hoelderlin became a famous poet with a failed romantic love expressed in lyrical poetry. He ended up being a recluse after appearing to go insane, while continuing to write poetry. By 1812, at the time of Napoleon’s defeat by Russia Hoelderlin was living in a tower by himself and Hegel and Schelling were newly married and had lost touch with their former friend.

Hegel’s career

Hegel’s fame grew steadily. Aged forty-six in 1816 he was appointed professor at Heidelberg university after years of teaching as a private tutor. Two years later he followed Johann Gottlieb Fichte to be offered the professorship of philosophy in Berlin. He was at the height of his fame. Students crowded his lectures. Among them were Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx and Ludwig Feuerbach. But these were rocky times and opinions among the Prussian elite was turning away from a politics of reforms back towards beliefs in privileges for the few. Hegel had praised the developments towards reforms towards more citizen’s rights. Critical views of Hegel’s celebration of freedom grew more pronounced.

Hegel’s philosophy

Hegel never gave up on his belief in freedom. It was for him linked to reason, meaning that a government needed to achieve a balance between rights and responsibilities. It was not the type of freedom we are familiar with under capitalism, namely the freedom to: Buy, sell, self-destruct or make large amounts of money or both. Instead, it was a humanitarian form of freedom from: Debt, poverty, homelessness, lack of education, and health provisions; in other words, the freedom progressives and socialists speak of.

Hegel’s ‘freedom’ and reason’ go further in that they are forged into a holistic notion of an ideal society. He sees it connected to what he calls the Weltgeist. For me this Weltgeist idea is not dissimilar to the pantheon of polytheism. It is comprehensive in having contradictory forces within it striving for unity or a form of equilibrium.

The Gods in the Mesopotamian polytheism also work in contradictory ways. Inanna is the Goddess of love and battle. Tiamat created the world and her consort Apsu destroyed it. The individual is dialectically embedded into the social context by also being a social being. Everyone has to live with this internal contradiction, whether aware of it or not. The central paradigm of German Idealism and the Enlightenment arises out of this philosophical stance. Like Marx Hegel viewed the individual as part of the larger whole of their social setting and dependent on it.

In a similar manner, Mesopotamian citizens were reassured by the presence of their Gods and Goddesses who instructed them on how to lead the ‘good life’. Juergen Habermas explained ‘only when Hegel had tied the revolution to the beating heart of the world spirit, did he feel less anxious in the face of its (the revolution’s) grandeur’. Hegel declared that the French revolution with its people battling for freedom ‘had eliminated for ever the emptiness and vagueness of the meaning of the word freedom: ‘The concept of freedom is being made in the process of the revolution.’ Hegel explained to his students at the Berlin university ‘As long as the sun stands at the firmament and the planets spin around it, we have not seen a moment when humans start with a thought and build a reality out of it.’ This phrase becomes familiar if seen in the context of Marx commenting ‘the philosophers have only explained the world, the point however, is, to change it. Hegel saw the French Revolution with its cry of ‘egalite, liberte, fraternite as an inspiring action potential in which rigid, traditional ways of life have given way to galvanise a new reality in its course.

Hegel’s other key term is reason. He saw reason as being linked to freedom in the sense that the latter can only be achieved by a route through the former. He castigated ‘beliefs, wishes, and subjectivity as hopelessly inadequate: Everything has to bow to reason. To achieve that one needs insight. He recognised that the freedom and chaos unleashed by the revolution could lead to a ‘self-destructing atomisation of needs and wants among the people.’ In other words what holds a society together can be squashed through individualisation and atomisation. How can individuals be reminded to pay attention to the society as a whole without which they could not function?

At a time when late capitalist developments, such as cancel culture, is experienced as destroying the freedom of debate, discussion and expression of diverse views, Hegel's double notion of freedom and reason seems highly pertinent. Every week one individual or another is cast outside the social dialogue or even imprisoned for exposing lies (Julian Assange). What can we learn from Hegel and how can we best use his ideas to progress?

The relevance of Hegel's thinking is portrayed in his main oeuvre 'Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts (Fundamentals of philosophy of law and natural law). Hegel's ground breaking ideas led to the conjecture that law, politics and morality exist all in a relative relationship to each other within a particular context in a particular society within the wider global context of what he called the Weltgeist. Applying these thoughts to our present situation we learn readily that law and morality have become divorced from our particular society and thus probably are not linked to any Weltgeist anymore. When functioning as Hegel envisaged it is possible to interpret the Weltgeist as akin to a holistic, Gaia (James Lovelock) like construct in which all things are relational to each other and thus interdependent. The Chinese concept of yin and yang can also be seen as a way of interpreting activities on earth as being in a balancing act with each other. Yin and yang are dialectical entities requiring each other to produce a whole. Recently the moon and moon phases, originally researched by Frank Brown (1959) have re-emerged in scientific circles as affecting all living creatures. In this sense Hegel's ideas sit well with philosophies and meditative theories from diverse corners of the globe.

Gegenwart und Wirklichkeit (The present time and reality)

Hegel lays great importance on the notions of 'Gegenwart' und Wirklichkeit. 'Philosophy is nothing but an expression of the current time in thoughts.' It presents the present time and reality of its time and can therefore be understood as being practical and concrete. Political action consequently derives from an understanding of the present time. Hegel criticised law specialists like Karl von Savigny for declaring that whatever law existed was good and worth keeping. Instead, Hegel argued just because something is there does not mean it was good for ever. He said getting rid of slavery and feudalism was a way of giving up something that was formerly declared right and proper. Hegel also protested against those student organisations that engaged in emotional pleas for liberalism calling them 'a broth of the heart'. He found that their language quickly led to resentments and a corruption of a rational debate about freedom and reason.

He compared both left-wing students and reactionaries as having much in common in that they did not treat citizens as citizens but as a rabble, thus denying them being persons, instead they were 'a catholic, Jew or German or Italian'. Hegel's Dialectics - thesis – antithesis – synthesis is described by him as 'a form of speculation': It must not be applied too rigidly so that it can be applied to living situations: A part needs to be understood as a part of a whole. A human being has a body and a brain and both are part of the whole person.

Metaphysics

When tackling the subject of metaphysics Hegel applied humour while speaking to his listeners by making fun of their hatred of abstract thought, showing the reader/listener that not liking abstract thinking, thinking for itself, the reader rejects something they most likely don't know: 'Das Bekannte ist darum, weil es bekannt ist, noch nicht erkannt' (The known is not necessarily understood, just because it is known). Such metaphysical thoughts were difficult for people to stomach in Hegel's days, but they still are alien to us in the 21st century. Climate change is forcing us today to face the planet as a whole to curb global warming. We have to understand the complexity of many systems interacting, seeing the earth as a Gaia living organism and our individual and social responsibility in it. It is a task affecting us universally. It runs counter to the neoliberal subjective and pervasive focus on the fetishism of the individual and big tech solutions currently dominating our public domain.

Barricades in Paris

In the summer of 1830 sedate Berliner students and professors were stirred by learning that barricades had been erected in Paris. The restlessness of people affected everyday life and governments. Malaria was an ever-present danger in Berlin. Hegel was disturbed by both. He moved into a flat outside town where he celebrated his 61st birthday with friends. At the time Russian soldiers driving the French army west and out of Russia were arriving via Poland in Germany and brought cholera with them. Hegel fell ill and died on the 14th November 1831 from cholera. Due to his fame, he was not buried on the cholera cemetery but next to Fichte in Berlin.

New biographies about Hegel:
Klaus Vieweg 'Der Denker der Freiheit', Beck, Muenchen 2019.
Slavoj Zizek 'Hegel in a wired brain', Bloomsbury, 2020



Bibhu Prasad Routray

Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray held the position of Visiting Professor and Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) chair, India Studies at Murdoch University, Perth between July-December 2017. He served as a Deputy Director in the National Security Council Secretariat, Government of India and Director of the Institute for Conflict Management (ICM)'s Database & Documentation Centre, Guwahati, Assam. He was a Visiting Fellow at the South Asia programme of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore between 2010 and 2012. Routray specialises in decision-making, governance, counter-terrorism, force modernisation, intelligence reforms, foreign policy and dissent articulation issues in South and South East Asia. His writings, based on his projects and extensive field based research in Indian conflict theatres of the Northeastern states and the left-wing extremism affected areas, have appeared in a wide range of academic as well as policy journals, websites, and magazines. This article republished by permission of www.mantraya.org

DR BIBHU PRASAD ROUTRAY

COVID-19 PANDEMIC & PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has impeded the fight against violent extremism. Lack of resources has affected operations of extremist/terrorist organisations as well. However, to overcome the limitations, extremist/terrorist organizations have expanded their presence in the cyber space. As South and Southeast Asia prepare for the post-pandemic period, extremist activism in the world wide web may pose a new danger in terms of expanded cadre base and novel techniques for perpetrating violence.

Introduction

Debate on the way violent extremist/terrorist organizations (VETOs) have responded to Covid-19 pandemic has mostly centered on their proclivity to take advantage of states' reduced ability to initiate counter violent extremism (CVE) campaigns. VETOs operating across theatres have indeed called upon their cadres and sympathizers to launch lone-wolf attacks, largely exploiting what they believe is the pre-occupation of the states and their agencies in dealing with the pandemic. Attacks carried out by the Islamic State (IS) and its affiliates, consequently, have registered a notable increase in some theatres including the African states. However, in addition to perpetrating attacks currently, the pandemic could also have presented a unique opportunity to the VETOs to implement a game plan that zeroes on preparing for the post-pandemic world. This strategy comprising online radicalization and recruitment could potentially make preventing violent extremism a harder task for many states, once they emerge out of the pandemic. This policy brief analyses the present trends in South and Southeast Asia and predicts how violent extremism may change through the pandemic period.

Dried Coffers

While curtailing ability of the states to conduct their CVE campaign, the pandemic has posed a unique set of challenges to the VETOs. In almost all theatres, it has affected their fund-raising capacities. As a result, their coffers to manage organizational as well as operational activities have dried up. This is especially true in case of organizations that depended upon both voluntary contributions from their sympathizers and those who extorted the captive population. Economic downturn brought about by the pandemic has led to a drastic reduction in such contributions. Extortion options too have become narrow with visible winding down of economic activity.

In Indonesia, for instance, the flow of donations to the Islamist VETOs have choked. Not surprisingly, therefore, chatter on the social media channels run by VETOs in Indonesia have increasingly centred on [physical as well as digital fa'i](#) or usurping of resources from the non-believers. In Nagaland, Naga insurgent outfit, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) announced a [reduction in the percentage of 'tax'](#) it collects from the traders and general population in the state.

The reduction would drastically reduce the annual 'budget' of the group, but is considered to be necessary to maintain popular sympathy during the challenging times. In Kashmir as well as Indonesia, cash-strapped militants have attempted to [rob banks and cash vans](#).

Police in India's left-wing extremism affected areas have reported disruption of supply chain of essential items for the Naxalites. The latter, in turn, are reportedly asking the villagers to part with their share of rice and other items provided by the government. While fa'i or using the resources of the adversary to fight him is certainly not a novel method in terrorism/ violent extremism, increasing reliance on the method does point at the challenges of running a VETO during the pandemic.

While affluent groups like the Afghan Taliban, with dedicated flow of drug money into their coffers, haven't been really affected by the pandemic, a causal link between the lack of finances and declining terror attacks in many theatres of South and Southeast Asia isn't difficult to establish.

Online Radicalisation

At the same time, pandemic has provided the VETOs with a huge opportunity to expand their support base. The expansion of online medium has been a boon for the VETOs, who have begun to flush the web with extremist content. Sensing an opportunity to reach a much wider audience compared to the pre-pandemic times, the VETOs have gone extra miles to invest their scarce resources to provide a new push for online radicalization. Skillfully packaged videos ranging from translation of known jihadist leaders of al Qaeda and Islamic State to espousing the virtues of living under Shariah have flooded the cyber space in Bangladesh.

In Kashmir, the Islamic State has released [nine issues of web-based magazine, the Voice of Hind](#), in 2020 (till October). The pandemic has indeed exacerbated the conditions conducive to extremist threat, by increasing the climate of misinformation. Unemployment and lack of economic opportunities during the pandemic have significantly widened the pool of potential recruits for the VETOs. It can be argued that each of the countries in the South and Southeast Asian region, with a history of violent extremism, could be undergoing a sea change in terms of popular attitude towards the established regimes and their legitimacy.

The impact of such radicalization efforts can be assessed from the significant increase of subscribers of some of the YouTube channels that propagate such messages. [According to a study](#), in Bangladesh, the number of interactions per Facebook post on violent extremist channels has surged by 250 percent in only one year, between April and June 2019 and during the corresponding period in 2020.

Although no major terror attacks have taken place in the country since 2016, [popularity of groups like the al Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent \(AQIS\)](#) is perceived to be on a rise among university students.

In Kashmir, where the Indian government has been implementing a pro-active policy to end terrorism, local recruitment to militant groups have [continued unabated](#). [Killing of more than 200 militants](#) during various security force operations in 2020 (till October) notwithstanding, 145 youths have joined militancy, till 15 November. In comparison, 140 youths had joined militancy in 2019. In Indonesia, the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is estimated to have [recruited nearly 6000 cadres](#) this year.

Preventing Violent Extremism

Therefore, the present levels of extremist violence are not the accurate parameters to assess the future potential of the VETOs in South and Southeast Asia. The [post-pandemic economic outlook](#) for both regions is grim and these may plunge into worst ever recessions accompanied by contraction of regional growth and decline in private consumption. Millions could be pushed into poverty in the coming months. Dissent against the current regimes are projected to rise and alternately, the appeal of extremists propounding alternate worldviews may increase. This may provide an extremely fertile ground for the VETOs. In the post-pandemic period, an ill-prepared state may find itself pitted against resurgent extremist movements with vast cadre base and new techniques of destabilization.

State response, therefore, needs to embrace the new technologies, and evolve from the usual force-centric counter-terrorism (CT) approaches to focus more on prevention of violent extremism (PVE). In addition to allocation of additional resources to intelligence-based operations, deradicalization and counter-radicalization, the states need to drastically improve their strategic communication techniques targeting the potential recruits.

Learning from experiences of other states would help avoiding common mistakes. Joint efforts would pave way for synergy in approaches, exchange and sharing of information, and reaffirmation in the shared vision of a region where VETOs find it difficult to operate and enlist support.



Image courtesy The Jakarta Post

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Vũ Tuấn Hưng

VIETNAM LANDSCAPES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

VŨ TUẤN HƯNG

The landscapes of Vietnam vary in colour and mood.

In these troubled times I share these
photographs of mine to let people know
that Vietnam, despite its previous hardships,
has remained a land of great natural beauty.















From U.S. Marine drill instructor, to defense industry executive, to heavy construction project management, to single motherhood to retired expat in Asia, the seasons of life have been diverse, challenging and satisfying. But the best part has been the deep, intimate relationship that has formed with God through it all. Now God has asked her to share the spiritual adventures He has provided her to help others to know His healing, comforting and sometimes adrenaline producing love that is available to all who will allow Him into their heart. Several years ago God told her He would not release her into a hostile world until she was prepared. She is now released to deliver His message of healing that can only come from Him. How is He going to roll this out? And what will be afterwards? We will all experience this miracle of His healing love together. This is Jesus.

Available on Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08QWFXQKH?ref_=pe_3052080_397514860

DEBRA FREEMAN

IN THE SHADE OF THE LOTUS

Adventures with God

I can't talk to God

I slept, but my heart was awake, and I had a dream about a man named Thomas sent by God to hear me and read my testimony.

I was unchurched as a child and never interested in religion. Except oddly, when I graduated from high school. I wanted to be a Marine, but I didn't know if there were any women Marines. If there weren't, I'd become a nun. I felt either would be a safe alternative to having a boss chase me around the desk and having to let him catch me to keep a secretary job. But the Marines took me and I mostly enjoyed my dozen years, except for the career fatal tour with a boss whom I wouldn't let catch me.

By my early thirties I was unsettled inside. I had gotten a good job in the defense industry after leaving the Corps; built a house, collected frequent flyer miles and swapped out a boyfriend for one that had a bigger yacht. Something was missing. Education, success, money, men; nothing good or bad answered the wanting inside me for very long. Everything faded to routine. But I never gave God a thought. Religion seemed to me a marketing pyramid scheme to build the business of church.

During this time of discontent, I visited an art museum. I remember thinking that those men spent years of their life expressing their religious faith by creating incredibly beautiful paintings and sculptures. These weren't dumb men. Yes, they were being paid, but there seemed more to their creations than money could buy.

One day during a blood drive at work they wouldn't take my blood because I was anemic. That really scared me. I was bulimic and felt I had to get help before the disease did greater damage to me.



Debra Freeman

A local paper had an ad for a therapist who specialized in eating disorders. I made an appointment. What she knew and I didn't then know, was that eating disorders are typically rooted in sexual abuse as a child. She got to the root quickly. So much pain came out of me, I cried for three days straight. I kept going to work. I told my colleagues it was allergies.

I saw my interior self as living on an island. I was stuck in a place that I knew I would die if I didn't leave. My life was on the other side of the island. But I didn't know how big the island was or what it looked like or how to get to the other side.

In a few weeks, progression was made from individual therapy to small group therapy. One night at group I said something and the young, gay, anorexic man beside me said, 'You need to talk to God about that.'

I replied, 'I can't talk to God.'

He encouraged me, 'Sure you can. Just talk to Him like you do everyone else.'

A few nights later sitting in an empty sauna in an empty gym, I talked to God for the first time. I cussed Him out. I called Him all sorts of obscene names. I wasn't playing games, but to this day I have no idea why I was so very angry. Either He is God, or He isn't. I closed by pretty much screaming a challenge, 'If You are God, heal me!'

The men in my life

The next day passed without an urge to binge or purge. Then a second day. Then a third day. God had met my challenge and healed me of bulimia. He is real. He is God. Now what do I do?

A couple of days later I was sitting in a hospital waiting room beside a little old lady with too much rouge on papery cheeks. Out of the blue, she asked me, 'Would you like to go to church with me tomorrow morning for a Thanksgiving service?'

Without thought, I responded, 'Yes I would. Thank you for asking.'

Incredulous, she blurted, 'You would? I've never asked anyone before because I didn't think they would say yes.'

We made arrangements, met in the church parking lot, entered and sat in the back row. The choir was in place, but not yet singing. I remember nothing else of that day. I was seeing what I wanted for myself. All the choir members had shiny, glowing faces. At thirty-three I felt old, overused and washed out. I wanted a shiny joyful face that came from inside me. For the next several weeks, I continued to go to services each Sunday morning. I tried to sneak quickly in and out of the building without speaking to anyone, but wasn't always successful, being a new face.

It bothered me that the first question the friendly types always asked me was, 'What do you do?' I wanted to answer, 'Does it matter in Church? I can have this same conversation in a bar.' My sentiment is unchanged. I want to talk regarding the things of God, whether I'm in church or not. The matters of the world are already over discussed.

One woman was chatting me up and I told her about God healing me. I must have said something that offended her doctrine because she said, 'No one can come to the Father except through the Son.'

I said nothing but left thinking, 'I don't know Jesus. But I know God healed me.' I'm glad God didn't let her shake my faith too much, because what she said was right. But in later years I learned that the Bible also says that God is the One who draws a person to Jesus.

Before the year was out the baby Jesus of Christmas did love His way into my heart. After Christmas I went forward at the invitation to give my life to Jesus Christ and receive His forgiveness for my sins. The Pastor asked me why I was crying. I had no answer, but the tears continued. But I do know that I was suddenly on the other side of that island out of where I was trapped and dying to where my life was.

They put me in a new believers class to teach me doctrine and stuff. I only remember two things. "The priesthood of the believer." Which means I can talk directly to God. With that, I needed nothing else right? If I can communicate directly with God, The second was the "inerrancy of the Bible." Meaning that the Bible is without error. That idea took more than a decade for it to be made true for me. I'd been lied to, betrayed and manipulated, as we all are by life, so I needed the Bible and God to prove themselves to me. I was taking no man's word in this matter.

In February I was baptized. As I entered the water the Pastor asked why I was crying. I had no answer, but the tears continued. Later that night during a time of physical intimacy with my casual boyfriend, I knew I would never again have sex outside of marriage. I also knew that I had just become pregnant. Trying to do the right thing, we got married, but the pregnancy lasted longer than the marriage. Years later I read a proverb to the effect that it was better for a man to live on the corner of a roof than with a quarrelsome wife. I guess he didn't want to live on the corner of the roof, so he divorced me.

Every time the church doors opened; I was there. I served in childcare, in the kitchen, cleaning, driving, whatever needed done, I was grateful to do. This was my pattern for the next eighteen years that I had a church to attend. When I read the Bible, which was rarely, it was usually the Old Testament. I absolutely refused to read anything Paul had written because I hated his view of how women were to be treated in church. My judgment of him as a chauvinist caused me not to read and to tune out sermons and teachings from most of the New Testament for more than a decade. Later I came to think that maybe not reading those letters intended for our sanctification, is why it took me so many years to experience some spiritual maturity.

And I didn't pray. The few times I did, my life started falling apart, but I didn't know God enough to trust Him. So I felt it safer for me not to pray so I could maintain control. Life was a mess, but it was what I knew. And I was still waiting for God's other shoe to drop. After about a decade of being a single mom who didn't date, a man from church asked me out. He shared that he was divorced, but that he had taken a vow of celibacy until he married again. We dated a few months and he wanted to break his celibacy vow. So I broke up with him. What do I want with a man that won't keep a vow to God?

That's when God came into my life in spades. I accepted what Jesus said about a man causing a woman he divorced to be an adulteress if she took up with another man. I accepted that my husband was divorced by the laws of man, but that I was still married by the laws of God. This gave me great peace and freedom of heart. Relationship pressure was gone from me. Driving down a small hill about this time, out of the blue came a voice that could have been sitting beside me. He said, "*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want period.*" I went home and checked. There is a punctuation period there. Twenty years later, I can vouch that He meant what He said. To onlookers my circumstances may have looked meager or needy at times, but I was being taught to "*walk by faith and not by sight.*" Which is something that I want much more than physical comfort or possessions.

One afternoon shortly after that I was sitting on a blanket in the backyard. I was trying to memorize an evangelism technique that was being taught in a class I was taking. Five fingers were involved. There was an accompanying tract that had a print of a painting by a Latino artist on the back, of people in modern clothes standing at the foot of the cross. One man was holding a mallet. An awareness of the depth of my sin and what Jesus had done for me, washed through every cell of my being. I hurt everywhere. I cried and cried and cried. Then came gratitude and love, all over me. I cried and cried and cried some more. I had been a believer for more than a decade but had struggled with comprehending the necessity of the cross, and the unconditional love of God. Life for me was now forever changed. The Bible says, '*Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it, for love is strong as death, passion fierce as a grave.*' Of course, at that time I had no idea of how changed I would become and how many diverse avenues of life God would walk with me. But the One Eternal Love had claimed me, so it doesn't matter.

Called and fitted with power

The new house I'd recently bought was quite far from my Baptist Church, so after trying several churches nearby, I finally settled on an Assembly of God Church around the corner. I hated it, because everybody hugged me, but my son loved it, so that carried a lot of weight.

What finally sold me was what happened after service one Sunday. A burly, bearded, biker-type guy hugged me then said I should take the meds the doctor prescribed, and walked off. I was prescribed Adderall for ADHD but hadn't refilled for several months because I was afraid of speed addiction. An hour or so after getting home from church, the phone rang. It was my doctor (calling on a Sunday!) wanting to know when I was coming in for a refill. I went in the next day.

This was a full gospel Pentecostal Church. I was (and still am in many ways) a very conservative Southern Baptist. Sometimes during worship, the music would stop, and the congregation would start singing in tongues. It reminded me of an orchestra warming up before a concert. It was very beautiful to experience. It was not unusual for worship to be so awesome that they would forget to take an offering and the sermon didn't get started for several hours. After the sermon, worship again, sometimes to near midnight.

Only a couple of times did we sing a song by Ron Kenoly called, *All Honor, All Power, All Glory to You*. I fell in love with it and still consider it my life theme song.

After six months, I became interested in receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues and did some research on glossolalia. The AoG position paper quoted Jesus:

“These signs will accompany those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” Mark 16:17-18.

But AoG had replaced, *“they will pick up snakes with their hands”*, with three dots. That really offended me. Like Jesus needs to be censored. Maybe if those writers are still around when the horses with serpent tails of Revelation show up, they might be glad that Jesus included that promise.

One night after my son was in bed, I was up reading the Bible. The chapter ended with, *“But earnestly covet the greater gifts.”* A minute before in a previous verse I had read, *“God has put these in the church: first apostles, second prophets....”* So putting these two elements together, I prayed to be a prophet, a greater gift, but not first. And I knew more about prophets from reading the Old Testament. After that prayer pause, I for the first time ever, started following the cross references in the Bible. I was flying back and forth in the Word until well past dawn. I think I read most of the Bible that night, some of it several times. It was supernatural...and terrifying, because about a dozen or so times the references led me to the same verse in the Book of Revelation:

“But the beast was captured and with him the false prophet These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with brimstone.”

I took a break for coffee, got my son off to school and went to Prayer at the Pole at the High School. Upon returning home, I returned to the Bible, continuing to read where I left off, before the all-nighter of following references. First the love chapter, followed by a chapter discussing spiritual gifts. There was a verse I didn’t understand, so I closed my Bible and paused in prayer. Then I just understood that God was giving me an option. He desired that I be His prophet, but He wanted me to know the high price of getting it wrong. If I was willing, and still desired to be His prophet (knowing that the only alternative to being HIS prophet is being a FALSE prophet), just open my Bible and read the verse I hadn’t understood.

His acceptance of me as His prophet would be that I would understand that verse. If I chose not to accept the call because getting it wrong carried forever consequences, simply don’t open the Bible to that verse. It took me several hours to decide, but then I turned to that chapter and understood the verse perfectly. For many years I forgot which verse it was, but last month, it returned to me, and twenty years later I still understand it, and now it has a very rich deep meaning to me, and I can appreciate why He chose to use that verse in that way. Before going to Bible study at church that evening, I told God that I would be willing to receive the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, but that I wanted to speak aloud a prophecy and I wanted to know what the given interpretation should be. And that is exactly what happened. As an added assurance, my initial prayer language sounded Hawaiian and I recognized some of the words I spoke from being stationed in Hawaii decades before.

In the Bible Paul writes, “I thank my God that I speak in tongues more than you all.” Evidently, Paul not only found benefit in frequently praying in tongues, but so much so that he thanked God for the gift. I also sing and pray frequently in the Spirit and thank God for the gift that helps me set aside the cares and worries of this world so I can hear Him. About this time God also helped me make peace with my dislike of Paul, so I could get past my emotions and believe that what he had written was inspired by the Holy Spirit. To help me accept Paul’s teachings that seemed chauvinist, God used two of the oldest books in the Bible and opened ideas regarding women that I had never considered or heard preached before. So now I’m good with Paul.

Emancipated and set apart

One morning a few months after receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit, while laying prone before the Lord on the dining room floor, I remembered a dream I had at twelve. It so terrified me; I remember dreaming only one other time in the twenty years before I became a Christian. But that morning God let me know that the dream had come from Him, and He gave me the meaning of that childhood dream: ‘You will have no hands or feet of flesh.’

I was raised one of seven children on a dirt farm in West Virginia without indoor plumbing. In the dream, I was walking up the holler coming home from school. Ahead of me I could see Honeysuckle, a sweet Hereford calf that grew into a mean bull, in the middle of the road ahead snorting and pawing up dust.

In my dream, I went into the barn and up the rotted staircase to the loft. There was a woman up there! She was dressed in a simple long white dress standing in front of a supporting beam for the roof. Her arms were outstretched against the roof struts like a crucifix in worship. Her hands and feet were sandwiched between hand-sized keystone shaped boards. The boards were bolted together by a single bolt through each palm and each foot. I wanted her to come home with me but she would not. So I left her there and went on home.

Perhaps the terror the dream gave me as a child was because subconsciously, I knew she was me. I still don't know what God means by me having no hands or feet of flesh. But since the dream was twenty years before I knew Him, I think it must be important to Him. The behemoth dream of a hillbilly girl. During a sermon, the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus caught my fancy. I was only a couple of years shy of turning fifty and prayed for a jubilee year in my life. As it happened, right after I turned fifty, came the vision of the little Lao girl in a bamboo cage. Before turning fifty-one, I was established in Luang Prabang.

I wanted to be free of debt. I cut up my credit cards, cutting out my name so no one would know it was me who left the mess on the corner of the altar table in front of the church. Within about seven months I was debt free, except for the mortgage on the house. I have continued to be debt free ever since. For five years I attended that AoG church before coming to Laos, and was prepared there in many ways, not knowing at that time that I was being prepared, but I did understand that I was being sanctified.

After about my first year there I was asked to accompany the youth to summer camp. I agreed. God had me talk with a couple of the girls individually. After the first one, the girls ganged up angry against me. I was reluctant to talk with the next girl, but God has His gentle ways of insisting. First, He very strongly gave me six verses from Isaiah that in part read: *"Do not fear, for I am with you...Bring My sons from afar and My daughters from the end of the earth...."*

It was a bright sunny perfect June morning. An eagle circled above me. Suddenly a cloud burst! Everyone ran for cover. I went to the big meeting hall. It was empty, except for the girl God wanted me to talk to. In the corner, beside the stage, the only two chairs in the room sat facing each other. We sat and I talked to her closed up angry face. I have no idea what I said but it threw fuel on the fire of the girls grudge against me. They talked to the camp youth pastor and I was to be taken away from the girls' room for the remainder of camp. I opted to return to the church - halfway through camp.

I returned because I felt it would be deceptive to have parents thinking I was with their children when I was not. I explained as best I could to the church pastors and the two girls' parents. But the rest of the people in the small church knew something was amiss. The confidence of the children couldn't be broken, so the situation couldn't be explained to them. Consequently, I was understandably ostracized by the church and I think God arranged it. I was set apart, but I didn't know that until years later. I kept going to church, thinking to myself that Jesus's 'church' really hated Him, but He never stopped going.

Another morning during this lonely time, I was again prone on the floor before the Lord. Waiting and listening. After about an hour I remembered that my father gave me a lamb for my twelfth birthday. I named her Patsy. We were inseparable, at least when mom wasn't around because she didn't like Patsy in the house.

One night I snuck Patsy up to my room to sleep with me. I awoke in the morning and we were both smeared with blood! I checked Patsy. I hadn't hurt her. The blood was coming from me! I sneaked her out of the house and went and woke up my mom. Mom seemed unconcerned and gave me some old, folded rags to put in my underwear. I gathered at the time that this would be a weekly event. I was greatly relieved it turned out to be monthly.

As I laid there on the floor with my childhood memory, I thought, 'Funny I should have named her Patsy. A patsy is a fall guy. What Jesus is for us.'

Then God said, 'When you became a woman your blood was on the lamb. When you became a woman of God, the Lamb's blood is on you.' My revulsion of the blood of Jesus from the cross dissipated.

On the one night of my life that it was possible, God did this for me. He provided for me, decades before I needed it. But I think that if I hadn't taken the time to wait before Him, caring what He had to say, I might have missed out and continued to be repulsed at the thought of the blood of Jesus on me. That's the very heart of the gospel! Sometimes when it's hard to wait in the silence, I say to myself, 'Debra, how long would you wait to talk with the President?'

Shortly after this time an evangelist was at the church one night. He said that people who had something wrong with their head (meaning eyes, ears, etc.) should come to the front. Physically my head was fine, but I had ADHD and depression inside my head, so I went forward.

The evangelist then said for other people to come forward and lay hands on those of us up front. Nobody would touch me! Inside I refused to leave the altar, knowing that if someone touched me, I would be made well. Finally, a young woman who attended sporadically and didn't know she wasn't supposed to touch me, laid her hand softly on my shoulder. Suddenly it felt like warm honey was being poured on my head and flowing down my body for several minutes. It took me a couple of days to believe, but I quit taking the meds that a year before God had wanted me to take. Now, I no longer needed them. I was first prescribed antidepressants when I was nineteen. My life had a pattern of falling apart every February whether I was taking antidepressants, anti-anxiety, Adderall or any other drug prescribed to keep me functional. This seasonal depression never happened again after the warm honey anointing of that night. Like Jesus with the lepers and prostitutes in the Bible, God touched me when no one else would.

Ants on a blanket

After the first two long, painful soul-searching weeks of being ostracized by the entire church, I felt inspired by Tess on the radio (wkbo.net) to return to the place of brokenness. I'm still not super spiritual, so for me that meant physically returning to the blanket in the backyard where a year or so before I had come face-to-face with my sin and Jesus' forgiveness. (See the last few paragraphs of the chapter The Men in My Life.)

So about eight a.m. I turned off the radio, took that same blanket (actually a comforter) and sat in the backyard. I started feeling I should pray, but after a minute or two I ran out of words. So I started praying in tongues. Then came great concern for a lady in the church, so I prayed for her in my mind while praying in tongues, which can only be done aloud. Then I noticed that when my mind drifted, ants crawled on the blanket. When I refocused and prayed 'pure' prayers in my mind while praying in tongues, the ants left off the blanket. Then came a knowing that I wasn't to swipe the ants off the blanket anymore. Pure prayer focus would keep them away. But when my focus slipped, as it frequently did, the ants joined me on the blanket.

That humid mid-July day reached temperatures in the nineties. I was sitting in the sun in men's boxer shorts and a tank top. Later in the morning God told me to lay on my side and rest. I did. In my mind the blanket was God's will. The six-inch border all around it was a danger zone. I was careful to keep my feet inside the border, because I didn't want my foot to slip.

I fell asleep right away. God woke me up and told me to turn over. I did and went right back to sleep, after making sure my foot would not slip. Then God woke me up again. I was refreshed, so I centered myself on the blanket and started praying again. Once again the ants, which hadn't come on the blanket while I slept, returned when my focus slipped. At one point a dragonfly landed right in front of me. It just sat there with an air of defiance, seemingly staring at me. But I prayed earnestly, and it eventually flew off. Back to only ants.

Sometime later God told me to go inside. I told Him that I wanted to keep praying for the lady. He told me, 'Obedience is better than sacrifice.'

I rolled up the blanket and went to the house. It was three p.m. With parts of me uncovered that had not been in the sun for more than a decade, I had sat in the July sun for seven hours and had only a touch of pink on my upper thighs and shoulders to show for it. I never got thirsty, though I had no water. And even after my several mugs of morning coffee, I never felt the urge to...a need to leave the blanket.

This incident follows a pattern that I have experienced repeatedly over the years: When I am hurt and broken, as I was by being ostracized, God has ways to deal with me that affirm that I am His and brings me a step or two nearer to Himself.

Speaking of dealing with me, a third and final blanket call was yet to come.

Leviathan pride

About ten days later, I sensed another blanket call, this time with my Bible. I sat in the middle of the blanket and prayed for a while. No ants. No dragonflies. Then I felt I should get on my knees and read the Bible. So I positioned myself in the center of the blanket and opened the Bible.

The first words from the top left corner on the page I opened to were in the Book of Job, '*Prepare yourself like a man; for I will question you, and you shall answer Me.*' Terror raced through me and I began to sob. I couldn't stop, sobbing or reading and I don't know if I was reading or listening. "*Where were you when I...?*" "*Who shut up the sea...?*" "*Have you commanded...?*" "*Where is the path...?*" "*Have you entered...?*" "*Does the rain have a father?*"

Still on my knees. Still sobbing wretchedly. On and on, dozens of questions I had never even considered could be asked. (I later learned that God asks Job seventy-seven questions in these four chapters.) Before reaching the end of the chapter, I started shutting down. It was too much for me. I thought ahead to the next chapter. Only animals! Yes! Then this will be over.

Wrong. It intensified. Now God was not only reading, but simultaneously interpreting the imagery in my mind. Mountain goat, wild donkey, wild ox, peacock, ostrich, battle horse, hawk and eagle. These were choices I could make as to the type of person I wanted to be. My behavior would dictate my choice. None of them appealed to me.

Next chapter and still God continued to read, *‘Will you indeed annul My judgement? Prepare yourself now like a man; for I will question you, and you shall answer Me.’* My thoughts (as if He couldn’t hear them) were, ‘Oh no! More? Will I survive.’

After reading, *‘Look now at the behemoth...’* God went off scripture and interjected, ‘I want you to be My behemoth...’ He then returned to read with great pride the description of the behemoth through the rest of the chapter. I was completely undone. Nothing about me was working.

Before starting to read about the next creature, God finished the sentence He had started earlier, ‘I want you to be My behemoth,’ by adding, ‘but the problem is your leviathan pride.’ Then He read the scripture about the leviathan. I saw who I was in His eyes, yet He wanted me. I was catatonic. But even then, two verses stuck strong with me.

“Lay your hand on him; remember the battle—you will do it no more.” From this I knew there was nothing I could do about my pride. Only God could conquer me. And *“Sharp stones are his underside; he leaves a mark in the mire like a sharp threshing sledge.”* I accepted that indeed I had no soft (vulnerable) underbelly. I was closed up, protective and hard all over.

I sat there for a while longer, but it was too much to even consider. Then, while still on my knees a blurry impression of pierced feet and the bottom of the cross. My place was at the foot of His cross. Then an image of me wiping His feet on the cross with my hair, my glory. I waited, still sobbing until I knew it was over. Then I gathered up the blanket and went in the house.

Over the next couple of years that I still owned the house, during times of great desperation, I would take that blanket and Bible to the back yard 'spot', but God didn't come, and the pages of the Bible were just ink on paper.

But knowing that only God could kill leviathan, gave me courage to submit to Him and His ways. Over the years some of those ways have gone deep, been painful and mystifying. But I learned not to put out my hand to save myself from Him or the purifying discomfort, embarrassment or times of seeming lack that He led me through.

When I came to Luang Prabang four years later, a town then of about twenty thousand population with more than thirty Buddhist temples I knew I was where I was meant to be because the grounds of each temple are encircled by a wall and the tops of the walls are decorated with stylized lotus flowers. God had told me on the blanket, not that I understood that until I arrived in Laos.

“Under the lotus plants it (the behemoth) lies, hidden among the reeds in the marsh. The lotuses conceal it in their shadow; the poplars by the stream surround it.” Job 40:21-22 NASB

I am His behemoth. Now what woman in her worldly mind would take pleasure in being a behemoth? Especially a former bulimic!

But my great joy is that I am His behemoth, and His desire is for me. Therefore, my testimony is entitled *In the Shade of the Lotus*. The behemoth, the lotus, the river and me are all created and maintained (or made extinct) by God.

Last night after writing this I slept, and I awoke a few hours later grateful for everyone and everything that has happened in my life. I want nothing of my past changed. If something or someone was missing, I might not be exactly who I am, where I am.

I want nothing of the present changed, so I fully accept that God's hand guided my past to this point. I do not annul but accept His judgement.

Bizarreness books and Betty

During 2001 and 2002 a multitude of sometimes weird things happened. The only date I'm sure of is when I submitted my first correspondence course to Bible school. The transcript is dated as enrolling in the course November 2000 and completing the first lesson a year later. A pastor was offering a class, so I signed up and bought a box of books. I remember a question on the enrollment form asked if I was studying for credentials. This was inconceivable to me, but I marked yes, thinking, 'Who am I to say what God can or can't do with me.' We had a few classes then stopped. The barely started, *New Testament Survey* served as coffee table decor for the next year.

About a year later, I left work one day to go for lunch and when I got in the car I started crying and couldn't stop. So I went home and called off sick. As I sat on the couch sobbing, looking at that book, I suddenly knew that I had to go to the church and take the test. The crying stopped. I washed my face, picked up the dusty book and drove to the church. The secretary couldn't find my package. Unconcerned, I went into the sanctuary, sat down and flipped through the book, stopping to read a sentence here and a paragraph there. Then she found the test. After marking a few answers, I saw that those random sentences and paragraphs I had just read were the test questions! The Holy Spirit had cheated for me! I was so humbled. On the return home I knew I was to complete the rest of the courses quickly and that there would be no more such divine assistance. I completed the courses required for certification and licensing. Submitting the last one the day before I left to come to Laos three years later.

Betty, a church lady was in the hospital, I visited her before she died, although we weren't very close. She opened her Bible to First Corinthians, chapter three. Almost the entire chapter was highlighted. She said God had told her it was for me. So I copied the highlighting to my Bible. The applicability to the ministry now before me is evident. Over the years the instruction and warnings of that chapter have been imprinted in my heart, as I read and reread wondering why God gave it to me and why through Betty.

These next three things happened in close sequence:

Dead birds: I parked my car about fifteen feet from the house. Every morning for about a week there would be one of two dead birds when I went to the car.

Snake and frog: I could quickly walk to church by a small path through the woods. One day across the path was a snake and it had a small bite on a frog from its behind. It looked as if the frog was coming out from the snake's mouth. Neither moved as I watched for a minute or two, so I stepped over them and went on my way. (In the Book of Revelation frogs coming from the mouth of the serpent are evil spirits, thus my fascination.) Also, that morning a Bible verse promise had become illuminated during devotion, "*The God of Peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*"

Angel and demon: I was asleep and got a weird kind of cold feeling. I could hear a really strong wind blowing in my dream. While lying in a fetal position my lower left elbow was urgently shaken up and down as with intent to wake me up. And it did. But the strange cold and wind continued after I was awake. The only thought that entered my mind was to sing the chorus of the song, 'There is power, power wonder working power, in the blood of the Lamb.' As I sang over and over just those words the cold and the wind diminished and after a few repeats, I fell back asleep.

I felt God wanted me to apply for ministerial credentials with the Assembly of God. I passed the written test and had the interview at district on the same day our congregation moved into its new church building. The board asked about my call and I told them. They agreed that I was called. I however, did not feel I was called to a pulpit. They argued that a pastor was also a prophet. Maybe. But I was called to be a prophet, not a pastor. I declined credentials as I wasn't called to serve in a pulpit, so they sent me a letter declining my application. But the confirmation of my call by those in leadership meant a great deal to me. I wasn't running in vain.

Praise break here to share my still favorite Bible story that made me laugh out loud when I first read it during this period.

"When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon and set it by Dagon. When the Ashdodites arose early in the morning, Dagon had fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. And they took Dagon and set him in his place again. When they arose early on the next morning, again Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold. Only the torso of Dagon was left to him." 1 Samuel 5:2-4

Dagon positioned to worship the one true God! I don't think the Philistines got the message. A few decades later they put King Saul's head in Dagon's temple, but Dagon stayed put. About five hundred years later the Philistines were made extinct by the Persians and to this day what Dagon looked like is only a guess. No bits of him survived. Too bad the Philistines chose not to give up their idol, I'd like to meet a Philistine, but they are no more. At church one night I went to the altar after service. My hands and arms began to tingle and then tingle more intensely. Then I couldn't move them. The tingling got so intense it was painful. After about thirty minutes the paralysis and tingling started to slowly recede. Even after I went home, the tingling took hours to recede. It has periodically returned over the years, but not with pain or paralysis. At some point in that year, I had to stop reading my Bible because it was as if it turned on me. I couldn't trust how I was understanding what I was reading. So for several days I just walked around the house stating my greatly paraphrased version of the Nicene Creed, waiting for God to rescue me. Another time I threw my Bible and notebook away, I was done with God. I don't remember why. But my son retrieved the Bible and notebook from the trashcan (because he 'knew they were important') and kept them in his room until I came to my right mind again.

During these couple of years, in addition to the Bible, I read Christian books voraciously. Old books, new books, library books, borrowed books. The State Library was nearby and there I could get some really old musty books. Some books I put down after only a page or two, others I soaked up like a sponge. I found that by reading books from different eras I learned to distinguish what was cultural and what was truly biblical.

The fascinating work of Ivan Panin, a Harvard educated, Russian mathematician, provides scientific proof that the Bible is by a Writer outside of time. I love finding that Writer's secrets as He reveals them to me. I most of all enjoy finding Jesus in the Old Testament, a form of prophecy. The first thing Jesus did after His resurrection, was to wait for the apostles to leave His tomb so He could talk to a woman, giving her a message for those very same apostles. I love that. The second thing He did was walk along a road with a couple of unknown guys and give them a prophecy class; Jesus in the Old Testament.

My brain works best if I can see the big picture, then I can find someplace to hang the smaller bits and pieces. As best I can understand the big picture of the Bible is that in the books of Moses and the rest of the Old Testament, we get a complete picture of God, and there is a lot of judgement. But Jesus came and judgement was put on hold. Plus, since we are unable to live a life that will allow God to be

with us, with Jesus, the barrier of sin is removed just by believing and asking. Plus, the Holy Spirit is sent to be in us and help us. It's a foolproof plan of salvation. Only Jesus can deliver us from the wrath to come, but the choice is entirely ours.

This time that we know will come to an end. Judgement will come. If it seems like it's taking a long time for Jesus to return: How many lives do you think are enough for the price God paid to save us? We are blessed above all people of all time to be born during this era. I for one, am going for the golden ticket. It's very sad to hear people, who want nothing to do with God during their time on earth, talk of going to Heaven, which is all and only about God.

My preteen, Spirit-filled, tongue-talking son had a dream. He saw himself being sucked into the TV screen as he was playing a video game. After that he quit playing and sold his games and gaming consoles. This warning went unheeded in later years. His gaming prowess was a big part of his eulogy when he was twenty-six. When all these things and many others were occurring, I saw myself only as a suburbanite soccer mom. Now here I am, far removed from what I was, knowing I'll soon be moved into, yet another season far removed from the current life I live. In the Bible, God states: *"I am the Lord your God who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way that you should go."* And elsewhere, *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord."* So, I will not worry, and keep my hands off my own life. I only know what I know, God knows all.

The voice of God

During those same intense two years after being called and set apart, these things happened. One evening as I sat reading the Book of Nehemiah, God told me He approved of me. I didn't know it then but that would be the last time I routinely heard His voice: In me but not my voice. After several months of not hearing His voice in the manner to which I had grown accustomed, I started getting really frightened.

This state continued for about a year, until I realized that I had been hearing Him all along. His voice was now more like my own thoughts. Different from mine, but not much. It caused me to have to slow down and take time to pray and discern. And His voice could easily be overridden by my emotions, thoughts and beliefs. This makes being set apart necessary. The world is very noisy, seductive place.

I even went through a devastating period where I contributed my natural impulsivity to Him. That was very difficult to stop doing despite the always bad consequences. And I am still sometimes prone to contribute my thoughts to God. That is so scary. He has warned me about, ‘wanting what I want’ and to ‘stay free of expectation.’

Frequently however, I don’t hear His voice at all, a doing just happens on my part. Even to this day, I don’t recognize God in the beginning of a doing, but only in hindsight, sometimes.

But one thing I have learned for sure, if I’m feeling pressured to a choice based on either time or money, God is NOT in it. His concern typically is with the condition of my faith or my character. And He gives me plenty of time to work through those issues with Him. Then time and money fall into place. “*Seek first the kingdom of God....*” “*All things work together for good....*” Overused but true.

Life circumstances took a big turn in the spring of 2003. I felt God didn’t want me to work but to volunteer to help clean the church. So for about six months, I was without income and my house was foreclosed on, and I was cleaning a church for people who mostly still ostracized me two years later. I couldn’t fault them for their reserve toward me. But because I knew God was in it, I kept cleaning and going to services every time the doors opened. I refused any type of assistance that was available for the poor. I wasn’t poor, I was in God. Mornings in my prayer chair were extended, intense and intimate, but what people saw was just an unemployed person.

As the foreclosure notices started to arrive, someone asked, ‘Aren’t you worried?’

I replied, ‘I’ll worry when I have no place to lay my head.’

A few weeks later, having received the final notice to vacate, I was moving all our household goods into storage. I loaded a twin sized mattress into the back of my SUV, it fit perfectly. I burst out laughing! A place to lay my head!

The first night sleeping in the car, hurricane Isabel came through; noisy, wet and breaking trees windy. A few days later, through Tess on the radio (wkbo.net) I felt that I should apologize for failing to make mortgage payments. When I entered and spoke to the receptionist I said, ‘My mortgage was foreclosed on and I’d like to speak to the president or mortgage manager...’ Her face went hard. But I continued, ‘...to apologize for not making payments.’

Her jaw dropped open. She recovered and said, ‘I’ve been working here thirty-five years, and no one has ever come in to apologize.’

She called the mortgage manager, who cried and expressed concern. I assured her I was fine. The house had a new owner, and the mortgage company was made whole, weeks before my forty nights of homelessness came to an end. One late homeless afternoon I badly wanted a friend and a home-cooked meal, so I cried out (whined?) to God. A few minutes later my phone rang and Dolly, the prototypical church lady, asked me to come to her house for dinner. ‘It’s on the table, come now, I have prepared too much.’ It was prepared before I even asked God!

With free time on my hands, I started doing odd jobs for elderly; yard work, painting, cleaning, shopping, drive to the doctors, etc. Annabelle needed to go to the University Hospital every month. I’d drive her then go in and chat with her while they drained an IV into her. Then she would take me out for lunch. We did this four or five times before I saw the oncology sign. What? She was having chemo for cancer!?! I can only think God blinded me to seeing the signs before so the cheery chats would continue for Annabelle’s sake. I say that because she didn’t want anyone but me taking here. In retrospect, maybe that was God’s plan for us.

She took a turn for the worst and a hospital bed was put in her house. One evening, I went to see her. I wanted to sing her a song, but all I could think of was, *Jesus Loves Me*. There were church deacons and pastors coming in and out, and I felt too embarrassed to sing a children’s song to an old woman. So a pastor’s daughter came to my aid and we sang to her. Annabelle couldn’t talk, but she heard us because she made faint grunts and groans as if singing along with us in her soul. At her funeral a few days later, her daughter shared that Annabelle’s favorite song was *Jesus Loves Me*. Lesson learned. In my selfish failure to bless Annabelle, God blessed me.

I received a job offer. But I was undecided about taking it even though I was broke and homeless. While cleaning the sanctuary I went to my knees and buried my face in the altar, badly needing guidance. When I arose, with my heart still unsettled a piece of paper was lying beside me. It had been put there by Robb the church janitor. I don’t remember if he knew my dilemma, but the paper gave me great encouragement to stay the course and not bail out by taking the job. A tough word to give to me. In retrospect, I think part of the reason God had me cleaning the church was to be near Robb, one of the modern-day mighty men of God.

This was the first of many times to come, where God set two paths before me. The path I knew He wanted me to take which was very daunting because it looked impossible, too difficult and unreasonable. Or another path, more comfortable for me, where things would be alright, but it wasn't really what He wanted. One Friday afternoon, about five weeks into homelessness, as I was cleaning the Pastor popped his head in and said, 'It's time...' I don't know what else he said because I heard only the first two words. Early the next morning I went to Perkins Restaurant for coffee. On the table was an ad seeking employees. My thoughts responded to God's comment: 'REALLY!?! You want me to be a waitress? I have an MBA. I'm forty-nine years old!' But assuming this was about my pride, I asked for an application. So before seven o'clock on a Saturday morning, it was indeed time. I had a job, with a salary of less than four dollars an hour plus tips.

A week or so later I moved into a lovely townhouse, where the rent was forty percent more than the foreclosed mortgage the month before. At a time of great anguish during the homelessness, I had cried out to God, 'Please let me know that You have a place for me when this is over.' That evening at church a shadow on the wall behind the guest speaker looked like a uniquely gabled roof line. The next day as I drove past Queens Court, I saw a townhouse with that same roof line. I thanked God for letting me know He had a place prepared for me, and after starting a job, I rented that townhouse for a year.

Called to Laos

There is a unique relationship each of us can enjoy with God, but it's by our efforts on His terms. "...for whom is he who will devote himself to be close to Me?" declares the Lord."

Shortly after moving into the townhouse, I felt God wanted me to put the TV in the closet. So I did and went and bought some used books. I started reading *The Cross and the Switchblade* by David Wilkerson. Just a few pages in, God had him sell his TV. It was a welcome confirmation that I was in obedience to God's will.

During the days that followed God desired me to read three books. The biography of David Ben Gurion. The biography of Joan of Arc based on her trial transcripts. And the biography of a US female suffragette, who's name I don't remember. I was engrossed by each fascinating world changer.

I didn't like being a waitress. I was really horrible at it. I wasn't cute or perky or efficient. In fact, I am quite clumsy. Most shifts I was assigned a few small undesirable tables to work. I thought of them as my speckled, spotted and striped tables. After the first few months my feet and legs stopped throbbing for hours when I went to bed and amazingly the rent got paid on time every month. I had more than a few humiliating encounters. I reckoned those were steps toward humility, since they share the same root word.

In the summer of 2004, after living in the townhouse about seven months, one morning while hanging out with God in my prayer chair, I had a vision. I saw a girl about nine or ten years old sitting cross-legged, with her head down so her long hair hid her face. She was locked inside a small bamboo cage. On top of her was a fancy high-end department store with a moving escalator. I knew she was Lao, but I didn't really know where Laos was.

For months I cried for her and prayed for her pleading with God to send someone to help her.

After several months I started feeling like God wanted me to go, and I felt released by Him to started doing a bit of research on caged children and Laos. I bought a *Lonely Planet* Laos travel guide and read it cover to cover.

Then for about a week I kept repeatedly seeing and hearing the same Bible verse. At a ladies Bible study one night I mentioned seeing this same verse everywhere I turned. Everyone agreed it was God and that I should obey. When I told them the verse, they all agreed that verse wouldn't be God. This was the verse: "...sell what you have and give to the poor...."

During one Sunday worship service in late October there came a tongue message followed by the interpretation. I only remember the first three words, 'Will you go?' I went to the altar after the service and told God that I would go. My son was living with his father and they seemed to be doing well.

Shortly afterwards, the year lease on the townhouse was up. I moved out and put everything I owned back into storage and gave the papers and storage unit keys to a church member who was a former drug addict and mother to several girls. They were without a home. I don't know if she ever got the furniture and stuff out of storage or not, I never asked.

My personal possessions now fit into my son's discarded middle school backpack and an oversized purse. It didn't sink in until about ten years later that I wouldn't be returning to the States to live. Sister Dolly, the church lady who fed me dinner a year earlier, invited me to live with her until my flight to Laos a few months later.

A strange thing happened at work after I had committed to go to Laos. Even people who didn't know me started leaving huge tips for me. Ten dollars. Twenty dollars. Forty dollars! With such incentive I worked until the day before my flight, so even after buying a passport and a one-way ticket, I had cash to last, as it turned out for four months in Luang Prabang before I went broke.

Luang Prabang coffee shops

After three days of flights to get to Laos, I rented a cheap room and slept through until the next morning. I hit the streets early seeking coffee and found Joma Café. I sat at the table by the front glass and read my Bible. Buddhist monks in long flowing saffron colored robes walked past. A European woman stopped on the street and stared at me, then came in and started reading me a riot act, 'You can't read a Bible in public here, it's disrespectful to the people.'

Expressing a calm, I didn't really feel I replied, 'I have to read my Bible, so I will know where to go.' She grumbled at me some more then stomped out.

Despite my distracted state, I continued to read and felt God wanted me to go north. So early the next morning I boarded the bus to Luang Prabang, arriving after dark. Early the next morning, again seeking coffee, I followed the side street where I stayed up to the main road. Smack dab across the road was a long stairway leading to the temple on the hill. The stairs were flanked by a set of huge seven headed concrete serpents. Their bodies were the handrail all the way to the upper wall, which was adorned with stylized concrete lotus blossoms. Yep! I'm in the right place! Joma Café was a block to the left.

Daily I walked about the town, bought silk scarfs at the night market, cut them up and made Bible character dolls. For some reason I thought I was sent to Laos to make dolls. At the end of four months, I had four dolls and no money. So I spent the night on the street.

The next morning there was money in my bank account! Elderly Sister Cora had given Dolly some money to deposit for me. I went to Joma for my usual morning coffee and a woman (who turned out to be one of the owners) started a conversation with me about needing a manager. Suddenly the year at Perkins made sense to me: I had management skill, but I needed to learn the restaurant industry (and some humility.) I told her I was interested in the job. They hired me. To help the reader understand: I felt that being a night on the street was God's way of asking me, 'Are you sure you're supposed to be here?'

Not seeking human help was my way of answering, 'Yes. I trust You.' The next morning, with those things settled, it was time to go to work. The job came with a house, a maid, a gardener, a cell phone, a laptop computer and a generous salary. I was completely provided for. As I write this, I realize that has been the case ever since. Maybe without realizing, during all those years volunteering in church, I was sowing. Here I reap. God is good. He says what He means and means what He says.

At work, I spent most of my time in the customer areas. Very frequently I was asked how I came to be working in Joma in Luang Prabang. So I related the story of the vision of the Lao girl in the bamboo cage, getting a passport and buying a one-way ticket. But I felt I wasn't being faithful because even though I talked a lot about God, I never mentioned Jesus.

I really missed going to church, so I took vacation after the first year and went to the Hillsong Conference in Sydney. Three years before coming to Laos, I was given a vision of thousands of worshippers under falling peculiar shaped golden confetti. The last night of the conference, during worship, that same peculiar shaped golden confetti was released. From where I sat, I saw happening before my eyes the exact images of the vision recreated. I was right where God wanted me to be!

From Sydney, I went to Hobart, Tasmania. I was leaving from there on a Sunday but had time to go to church. So finding a nearby church, I rolled in with my luggage, which was no doubt the reason I received a cool reception. But God greeted me warmly and let me know that for the last year I had been doing exactly what He wanted me to do, pre-Jesus evangelism. People needed to know that there is a God and that they can have a relationship with Him, before they see their need for Jesus. My guilt at my perceived unfaithfulness was replaced with awe of God.

There were management changes above me at Joma that made things challenging for me, so I decided my skills could be better used elsewhere. But that morning during devotions, I read in *Streams in the Desert*, March 17, “I’ll stay where You’ve put me; I’ll work, dear Lord, Though the field be narrow and small,” So I stayed for a few more years, until God set the time of my departure.

During the nine years that I worked in coffee shops in Luang Prabang, about forty thousand people heard my testimony. And they had each asked me! I quickly learned, not to offer the story if I wasn’t asked. That is how I figured out that God was sending them to me to ask me. I remember only one woman for whom I didn’t stop, saying I’d be right back, but I failed to return and answer the question. Obviously, I still feel unfaithful in not being more conscientious. I’ve never learned the Lao language. Being a Christian here can be a problem for a Lao citizen. I didn’t want young people that worked with me to fake being a believer to please me. If you talk with me more than five minutes, you’re going to know who my God is. When I told God, I would come to Laos, I attached the condition that He would have to separate their culture from their religion for me, so I wouldn’t inadvertently absorb of practice their religion. He seems to have honored my request. I lived in town for fourteen years before I knew that there was a huge annual parade of fire boats to go to the Mekong and float their sins away.

Here are three short God stories from that time:

The electricity on the wall for the espresso machine went out and three different electricians hadn’t been able to find the problem. Plus, several other bad things had happened in the lives of the believers who worked there, so I felt like we were being attacked by the demonic. I asked the six or seven Lao believers who worked with me to pray with me. It surprised me. They did not stand quietly and pray one by one. They all prayed loudly at the same time! I loved it! We were in an unused room upstairs and after we finished praying came down. When the foot of the first person down the steps hit the floor, the lights came on. The power was restored! The huge smiles on the faces of those young Khmu pray warriors, I still hold in my heart.

My glasses broke and I wired them together with a piece of paper clip. I hated it, because I worked with customers. But one morning discussing it with God I said, ‘You know I hate to spend my money on myself.’ Conversation finished. But I didn’t get the final word. A couple of days later a missionary came in, handed me three hundred dollars and a plane ticket to Thailand and told me God had said for him to do this for me to go get some new glasses. I went.

I hired a woman with three children. Turns out she was a third wife and her husband had told her he didn’t want her anymore, so she had moved back to Luang Prabang from the capital city. One day I saw her walking home after work. She looked so tired and skinny and dejected. My heart broke for her. Later that night I very faintly heard God say to buy her a motorbike. It was so faint I could have easily ignored it and kept my hard saved dollars for a small vacation as planned. I had bought other employees bicycles over the years, but she had three kids. The next morning, I had her take a tuk-tuk with me to the motorcycle dealer. A school chum of hers ran the place and gave us a good deal on a bright pink motorbike and matching helmet. Papers were in her name and she drove back to the café. My broke self followed in a tuk-tuk. We never said a word to the other staff, but they figured it out.

After a lot of loud telephone drama over a couple of weeks, her husband showed up in town. He’d drop her at work and drive off on her motorbike. I seethed every time I saw that no good so-and-so. A few months later she came up to me at the Christmas party and in her pidgin English with her husband standing smiling behind her, said, ‘My husband enjoy you buy him the motorbike.’ I wanted to slug him. The amazing part is that a dozen years later they are still together, and I go have breakfast at her shop about once a month. She’s not a Christian, but God gave her the desire of her heart; she wanted her children’s father to be in their lives. That’s worth the price of a pink motorbike.

Dreams and visions discussed

At this point I would like to take a break to talk about dreams and visions. But first a few biblical references to put them in their proper context.

“I slept, but my heart was awake. A sound! My beloved is knocking. ‘Open to me, my sister, and my love, my dove, my perfect one;’” Song of Solomon 5:2

“He (God) said, “Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream.” Numbers 12:6

“In a dream, in a vision of the night when deep sleep falls upon men in slumber on their beds, then He opens the ears of men, and seals their instruction, that He might turn aside man from his purpose, and conceal pride from man. He keeps back his soul from the pit, and his life from perishing by the sword.” Job 33:15-18 (Elihu speaking)

There have thus far been nine visions given me. The first was given during worship in 2002. I saw a multitude of people, dressed in colorful native attire from around the globe, worshipping joyfully around the throne of God. Right then the Pastor went to the pulpit and shared a vision he just had. He perfectly described the vision I had seen! That was the Holy Spirit vision class 101.

Also, in 2002, there was the golden confetti on worshippers vision, which came to real life in 2006, on the other side of the world, mentioned already. Shortly after there was a vision of a box of keys with paper tags on cotton strings. Earlier this week when the hotel owner gave me a key to the hotel front door, it caused me to think maybe they were an indicator of the many temporary rooms in hotels, bakeries and other people’s homes that I would live in until I was settled again in a home of my own at Siensavan. Then the vision of the girl in the bamboo cage in 2004, which brought me to Laos and was used for evangelism. I still don’t know if there is other significance, but I think there is.

Three visions came in quick succession in February 2014. I’ll talk about them later.

In the summer of 2015. An unseen stopped clock on the door of a refrigerator. Food is still a huge topic between God and I. It is so much more accessible for immediate comfort than He is. And even though the comfort from food usually backfires, I persist.

In 2016, the last vision to date, four letters of a logo name: Aiwa. In 2016 their product line wasn’t useful for Siensavan, but it’s changed a lot and now is very useful, particularly considering the mission God added two years ago. There have been a multitude of dreams. The few earlier ones are included in earlier pages. After 2018 dreams became a regular part of my life. I started writing them down because they were being so quickly forgotten. Visions seem to have a ministry focus, while the dreams are all about me: Warnings, corrections, cautions, encouragements, guidance and more corrections and warnings. Typically, the dreams occur during that just waking up stage. Not awake and barely asleep, even during naps. They are typically barely moving images. More like a still life with a moving element but the story is known to me.

Sometimes there is no image at all, just a thought or a few words, or scripture I haven’t memorized. Typically, very concise and insightful. Sometimes in devotions later that day God will put things together for me.

I have learned to be careful what I expose myself to and to not eat in the hours before going to bed. What is on my mind when I go to bed, is the first thing there when I wake up. I don’t want to block God’s access to me and be robbed of my morning hours with Him.

There seems to many times be a timing element, especially to the warnings. Most dreams I don’t understand at the time, but sometimes over the course of the following three months or so, what was in the dream has bearing in my life.

I’ll share a few dreams to help explain, so if God gives you one you can more quickly identify it as being from God than I was able to do.

A few years ago, I became aware that I sometimes do things that cause unnecessary obstacles and complications in my life. So one night I asked God why do I do things to hurt myself. The next night a dream of a puppy in a cage, throwing itself against the bars. And the thought, ‘Sin feeds on pain.’ A day or so later I came across a quote by Ida B. Mills, “The appetite grows for what it feeds on.”

Dream words from January 31, 2019: ‘If the shoelace end (aglet) is pulled through a loop, it adds a tangle to the knot. If the lace end is pulled from outside the loop, it unties the main knot.’ Useful wisdom for how to position yourself.

A waking thought from November 9, 2019 during an extended period of monotony: ‘Just sit there and grow sweet like a watermelon.’ I googled: Watermelons need full sun for eight to ten hours a day and will not grow sweeter once removed from the vine.

This was my waking thought October 7, 2020: ‘A car taken out of gear and coasting along, has to be slowed to an almost stop to be put back into gear. Therefore, it is better to stay in gear.’

Maybe it’s peace that seems like boredom to me. Shortly after writing that sentence, I read in the Book of Isaiah, “...in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.”

This is a diary entry from a couple of years ago. “Debra, stop showing your underwear to others. Put it on and wear it!!! You need the support, that is why God gives it to you. In addition to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control of the Spirit, you need the Rhema Word, dreams, visions, wisdom, understanding and all that the Lord gives you.

It is all for you! Don’t share and don’t give it away.

That day will come. But first you must be made into His vision for you. The power is not in what you say but who you are. Put on the clothing of a mature woman of God. God desires to dress you in the embroidered gold of heaven.”

The last dream I will include is: A vision of a wooden nightstand with a single large drawer on half circular legs curved front to rear. The words in my mind added directions: ‘My unlocked nightstand that holds all my God wisdom, knowledge, insight, revelation, understanding etc., is to be left unlocked and Lao people who want can help themselves to my treasures when I am unaware of them doing so.’

King Hezekiah sinned by showing all the treasures God had given him to the Chaldeans. There is a fine line here, that only God can keep me safely from crossing, even as I write this book, He has asked me to write. Perhaps this is also for the day that will come. Because as I write this, I don’t know if it will be published, or blogged or what form it will take. I only know it’s for God’s Thomases.

Fig tree in the vineyard

Almost five years at Joma Café ended. Another night on the street. This time it was tough on me. My faith failed. Maybe that was part of the lesson, it’s faith in God, not faith in faith. But the next day, another restaurant management job that provided for me completely. A few months later the owner went to Singapore. For three years, it was for all intents and purposes my restaurant. The owner asked no questions, gave no input and took no money. Strange.

My favorite God story from that time took place during afternoon tea. I was sitting on restaurant balcony looking across the street at our tables on the riverbank filled with customers. The upwind neighbor decided it was a good time to burn trash.

I saw a black cloud headed for the customers and said, ‘Oh God! Do something!’ Immediately the wind shifted back about forty-five degrees and the smoke went across the road directly into that neighbor’s front door. They ran out with a bucket of water and doused the fire. None of my customers were disturbed.

Three years to the day from the day I started work there, I closed the shop. So the building wouldn’t sit vacant, I continued to live there for about three months. My holiness had slipped during my years working there: I’d occasionally have a beer or a glass of wine with a customer, my reading turned to novels, I joked that CNN was my best friend and I watched TV every evening.

I still read my one-year Bible every morning and my pink Bible at other times during the day. I can’t say I didn’t hear Him, because there were about fifty verses, dated in the margins of my pink Bible from these three years. But I didn’t apply them to myself, preferring to believe they were for a generalized someone else. Those three months of solitude living in the closed restaurant quieted me down and gave God opportunity to clean me up and prepare me for what was to come next.

About four-thirty on the afternoon of July 3, 2013 began the worst year of my life. I was reading in the book of Luke, when God chimed in to read me these verses:

“A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, ‘Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?’ But he answered and said to him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.’”

God was telling me I was that fig tree! My emotions ran the gamut; fear, denial, pain, and most of all betrayal: ‘You wait three years to tell me! Three years!’ I was shell shocked. Not able to function, I went for a walk.

After about thirty minutes I came to a main road from a side street. Standing there, I very clearly heard God make a covenant with me: ‘If you will work one year in this building, I will give you that building. If you become a more gentle person.’

The 'work at' building was a coffee shop in the hotel across the street, the 'give to' building was an old empty theater that had captured my attention from my first day in town almost a decade earlier.

I packed all my possessions into my carry-on suitcase. The next morning, suitcase in tow, I went to the restaurant and told the Christian owner that God wanted me to work here for one year and I'd work for free if he wanted. It took him several hours to get back to me. But he gave me a job, a salary and a room at the hotel.

He is a very good man. God chose him well to have patience and kindness to me, while God went about disassembling me from the inside out. I didn't take it well. Anger was still my default mode when things didn't go my way, and nothing at this job ever went my way. Many Christians who met me during that time still don't like me.

Five months later, I told God that if I had to accept this (it had to do with a bagel), then I was the wrong person for the job. I disappeared without a word to anyone. I was done with Laos. I tried to leave town but that became a comedy of frustration. So I rented a cheap room for ten days and lived on a sachet of coffee and a bowl of noodle soup every day. For ten days I was dangled by a thin thread over the pit of hell. A very dark week of my soul.

I returned, humbled, to the restaurant. He took me back without question and said he had decided to sell the business. That confirmed my previous suspicion that God had custom designed circumstances there to specifically torment me. God had taken five months to 'dig around' and break me to get me ready for what was coming next.

About six years later God let me know that walking away from the job rather than compromising my standard was the response had He desired. Those six years in between I thought I had failed.

What added to make those five months of work so horrible was my continued feelings of anger and betrayal by God. I read my Bible every day, (He didn't stop being God just because I was upset with Him.) But I didn't want to talk with Him. I chose to hang on to my grudge. Eventually I forgave Him. Yeah, how arrogant to think God needs my forgiveness. I was still way off base, but that step did reopen my heart to Him.

T-shirt technology and prophecy

The building where God said I needed to work one year was gone after six months. Confusion reigned in me. I continued my employment and moved to a room above the bakery that supplied his second restaurant.

About Christmas I started really missing God in my life and resolved to worship and seek Him again. Early February on my way to Joma for coffee I passed the old theater (that God had said He would give to me) and it was opened for cleaning. So I went in.

When I first saw the building nine years earlier, my first thought was, "That needs to be a house of God!" That thought became stronger over the years, but I had never been inside until that day. I checked it out top to bottom. Basically, the building was sound but needed some repairs and upgrades.

Moments later, sitting on the bank of the Nam Khan River sipping a latte, I had three visions in quick succession. Then I randomly opened my Bible, and my eyes went to:

"Thus says the Lord of Hosts: "Here is a man whose name is Branch; for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord; he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule on his throne. He shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both."

I started sobbing from joy as I read. After seven months, God and I were tight again! Siensavan was still in my future! God was going to build it into a house of God! I also understood the other meaning, I too am His temple.

Almost seven years afterwards, I still don't know for sure what the visions mean. But I think the first was about things happening when they were meant to happen in an orderly fashion. The second that things will start rapidly then slow to a stop. The third that I would live there.

I had recently received a letter from my mom asking me to come spend the next winter with her. My mom never asks for anything, so I asked God if I could go. No answer.

My last day of work in Luang Prabang was July 4, 2014. Exactly one year from starting there and exactly nine years from my first day of employment in Laos.

During the three months after finishing work in Luang Prabang, waiting to see what came next, God did some amazing things. I'll share two:

First, He gave me part of Psalm Forty-five, but spread it out over six days.

Day one: *"Listen, O daughter, consider and incline your ear; forget your own people, and your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty. Since he is your lord, bow to him."*

‘God are you asking me to forget my son, my mother, my friends, my church, my country?’ The next day I questioned myself, ‘Could I give up my US passport to be a Lao citizen.’ That took a few days, but I got to, ‘Yes. I trust You to do what is best. Even never seeing my son or my mom again.’ I found out a few days later that under Lao law I can never become a citizen. Laos is a communist country with a Buddhist temple on their currency.

Day Five: *"The daughter of Tyre will be there with a gift; even the rich among the people will entreat your favor."*

I think, ‘That sounds good. God has promised to give me a big old vacant theater. That would be a nice gift.’ At the time this happened, I couldn’t legally own property. But laws have changed and now I can own a building.

Day Six: *"The royal daughter is all glorious within; her clothing is plaited gold. She shall be brought to the king in embroidered garments; the virgins, her companions who follow her, shall be brought to you. With gladness and rejoicing they shall be brought; they shall enter into the king's palace."*

Again, I think, ‘Nice! Both my girls and I make into God’s embrace.’ As amazing as these promises are, just wait, they yield a deeper application.

Before I relate the second amazing thing God did for me during those three months, I need to talk about "T-Shirt Theology."

When my one year was up at the café, I went and stood in front of the promised building waiting for the key. No key arrived. The t-shirt shop across the street had only one shirt on display, a big red one with huge white letters, STAY CALM. I knew it was God, so I took a deep breath and went for a bowl of noodles a block away. As I was slurping up noodles, I looked across the intersection and there was another t-shirt shop, and guess what? Another prominently displayed shirt. With a big key on the front! I laughed out loud because I knew that was the only key I was going to get that day.

That evening I went to the café for dinner (the owner gave me free eats after leaving his employ.) A young newly saved Lao woman was working. (She has an amazing testimony of Jesus in a dream, about that time she stopped being a Buddhist.)

She told me she had a dream about me the night before. ‘You were wearing a t-shirt and on the front of it God and Satan were having a battle for your soul. But don't worry, God wins.’ That explained things. Two warm up T's so I could believe the delivered message.

This same young woman gave me a handwritten paper a few days later and said, ‘God gave this to me for you. Take it. It's for you.’ The paper seemed to question my parenting among other things. I took it as being from God, and for the next horrible month reviewed and questioned my parenting of my twenty-five-year-old son whom I had left at sixteen to come to Laos. After a month of guilt, tears, blame, tears, regret, tears and more guilt, I arrived at a place of peace. I had done the best I could with who I was at the time. Perfect parents don't exist. This was the second amazing thing God did for me, but that story isn't finished yet either.

A few weeks later God told me to go to my mother, and to ask my ex-husband of twenty-five years to pay for it, because I had no money. So I emailed him. He sent money right away and within about seven hours of God saying, ‘Go.’ I was gone.

I spent the winter with my mom and clerked at a nearby grocery story. Two weeks before Easter my son asked that I come stay with him for a while before returning to Laos. The invitation pleased me and the week before Easter I moved.

We baked bagels and went for walks getting to know one another again. He sang an aria to me in his beautiful tenor voice. He asked me several times to read the Bible to him. Which I enjoyed doing. As a child, I had read to him every night. He went to church with me and rededicated himself at the altar. On Good Friday he fasted all day. A few times he touched on some deeper struggles when we talked, but I was still walking on eggshells around him, so I didn't ask many questions.

He was on meds for bipolar disorder, but they evidently weren't working well because at an appointment that week the doctor took him off the one and put him on another. We had planned on using the Saturday before Easter to rearrange the living room. About eight a.m. Saturday, April fourth, before I'd gotten up, there was a huge thump. Thinking he'd started rearranging without me and dropped something, I got up and went to the living room. He wasn't there. The front door was chained but his bedroom door was open. I called, then looked into his room. He was on the floor against the footboard. He had shot himself with a twenty-two rifle in his chest. I called 911. They kept me on the phone and told me to hide the gun.

When the paramedics arrived, he could respond when they asked him to wiggle his fingers, but he couldn't talk. They took him by helicopter to a hospital about thirty miles away. The police stayed and questioned me awhile, seemingly to want to make sure I hadn't shot him.

I cleaned up the blood and mess before it dried. Then I showered, made a cup of coffee and called his father ten hours away before driving to the hospital. At the hospital they explained that they had started to cool his body because his brain was swelling. The bullet was not in his chest. What I thought was a hole was a drop.

Mostly they kept me out of the room as they worked to keep him alive, but about two p.m. they let me in for a few minutes. I saw him take a couple of deep breathes and sigh. I knew God had let me see his spirit leave his body. God told me he was in heaven and I was not to pray for him to be revived.

When I went and sat back down in the waiting room a woman stopped and stared at me, then came over and said, 'You're glowing.'

I replied, 'God is with me.' Because He was.

Later I went down to the lobby for coffee and people were turning around in the halls to keep looking at me after I had passed by. I guess I was still glowing. On the elevator, I started singing a familiar old hymn. Everyone joined me. Everyone cried; me, visitors and staff. There are lots of hurting scared people in hospitals.

In the days after, the things that happened in Laos before I left, fell into place. First, asking my ex-husband for money opened that relationship so I could be there for him through this. He is not Christian. Second, not one member of my family called or came to me, not even to his funeral. Some of them only twenty minutes away, others only an hour or two. I guess they didn't know what to do or say, so they stayed away. But God had told me this was going to happen; *'forget your own people, and your father's house.'* I was hurt, but not angry with them.

I could deal with all that graciously, and mourn and grieve for my son without guilt, because God had delivered me from parental guilt seven months before. An amazing gift of love and grace for a time of incredible grief and pain, just as His word promises, repeatedly.

The doctor who made the meds change volunteered to pay for all the end-of-life expenses (how guilty he must have felt) and my church donated the funeral and meal. My son had a lot of friends. I asked the Pastor to share the gospel. And he found a way to do it.

For the next seven months I lived in my son's house and settled his estate. About a month after his death my Bible fell open to the back fly leaf and there six years earlier, I had penned his exact date and time of death. He had pulled the trigger during the third blood moon of the tetrad, April 4, 2015. Written there also was a quote from the Bible about the sun and moon being for signs. And God reassured me again that my son is in heaven.

About this same time God said to me, 'Now you know how I feel when My people commit spiritual suicide.' And a few days later, 'Read the Song of Solomon to know how much I love you.'

During the days of mourning, I came across what is called the Population Circle. Inside this small circle on the earth lives more than half of the world's people. Luang Prabang is pretty much the center of the circle that extends out twenty-five thousand miles. Interesting.

When my son's house sold, sweet Sister Dolly let me stay with her again. I clerked at a department store through the holidays and had the joy of leading a home small group using a study of the Book of Hebrews written in 1894 by South African Pastor Andrew Murray, *Holiest of All*. One of my all-time favorite books, that also works well as a daily devotional. It's free online.

I filed to receive Social Security income and left the next day. I returned to Laos in mid-April, a year and a half after leaving. But now financially independent.

Love under the mango tree

Back in my hometown of Luang Prabang again, I checked into a room shaded by a huge mango tree that most years, littered the ground every morning with sweet, delicious mangos during the summer months.

In summer, the tourist low season, I generally had the gardens and grounds to myself, being the only tenant. This room was to be my home for the next three and a half years. Frequently, I sat in a chair in my doorway during the cool quiet nights and slept during the hot sticky afternoons. Yet with only a Bible and worship music, no two nights were the same. I streamed a Christian radio station (wkbo.net) from the States because I liked the music variety and because the husband-and-wife owners ministered to me with their few words each day.

It took me a couple of decades to learn to trust God with things of my heart and soul that I didn't even acknowledge to myself, but He helped me come to grips with. Ever so patiently, first gently tugging one string, then another, then going back and tugging the first again, sometimes over and over, He disentangled the sin, guilt, fear, anxiety, and wrong identity that burdened me. He showed me new ways of thinking and being that settled me. 'He will teach us of His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.'

As a mother, all I ever really wanted for my son was for him to be comfortable in his own skin. I couldn't help him with that, because I was so uneasy and inadequate in myself. God gave me what I couldn't give my son, He guided me to accept and love myself for who I truly am, not who the world helped me to become or judges me to be. But I am now who He created me to be. And everything God makes is good.

Dreams from God became a regular part of my life when I put away everything of the world that wasn't necessary to maintain my life - taking care of my body and living space. As Joseph was unable to keep quiet about his dreams, I was unable to keep quiet about mine. I gave my Christian friends lots of opportunity to practice forbearance and little air space to speak, naturally they started politely dodging me. Thankfully, there were no Ishmaelite traders around to sell me to.

Remember my leviathan pride? Well, it seems the flip side of that coin is self-rejection. The coin of humility has a flip side of self-worth. God was trying to build my self-worth so I could accept my true value. I'd spent a lifetime trying to make myself look of value in the eyes of others because my own acceptance wasn't possible to me. No wonder God hates pride above all sins.

Wisdom and understanding have come in various ways from an assortment of sources. I had several emotional challenges for God to guide me out of: Depression, ADHD habits, selfishness adopted in childhood plus faulty thinking I'd added as an adult. So there was a wide range of emotional, psychological and behavioral healing being addressed. God is holistic in His healing of us.

Childhood circumstances allowed for unfulfilled needs of acceptance, love, focused attention, affection, approval, guidance and protection that every child needs. I converted the unmet needs to shame, anger, and cravings to dull the pain. Then wrapped myself in pride to keep from getting hurt again. The layers of pride were deep and entwined with shame and feelings of insignificance. God heals. But He involved me in the process. Initially I was unaware of these things in me, hampering me. But as I noticed and made effort and prayer to change, God helped me. For example, I've noticed that when I'm doing something for which I was criticized as a child, that I suddenly want to eat something.

One of the more difficult aspects of this calling is the loneliness. Until one day I heard a bible teacher say that the early verses in Psalm twenty-two are about the loneliness of Jesus. Then I was fine with my loneliness because it's just a small sharing of His sufferings. The latter verses in that Psalm are what Jesus saw and felt while on the cross – written a thousand years before He was crucified.

God has never criticized or condemned me. He identifies then gently, usually with scripture, questions, stories or comparisons to nature, brings me to a point that I see the wrong belief or behavior for what it is, and I can abandon it by choice. Then I can easily adopt His more sane, mature belief or behavior. He renews my mind.

My favorite attribute of God is that He is holy. He displays none of the petty, selfish behavior of the gods of ancient Greek and Roman mythology. He has always been pure and straightforward yet gently honest with me and always encourages me to that same heart condition of integrity.

I'm reminded that pride parades itself, love doesn't. Writing this has given me some encouraging remembrances and I hope encourages the reader to let God have His way. But I think to continue writing might draw me into a place of pride rather than stay as a testimony of our gracious loving God's work in my life.

What follows in my life is the work that I have been prepared to do, as I understand it thus far. I recently gave a short presentation regarding Siensavan Church.

Here is that four-minute speech:

In February 2005 I came to Luang Prabang by vision. Not knowing why but knowing it is where I am to be settled. During my first few days I wandered about town, shuddering at the sight of temple grounds adorned with multi-headed serpent images that come right out of the book of Revelation.

One day I walked past an old theater that had been closed since 1975, all decked out like a quasi-temple. And my first thought was, "That needs to be a house of God."

Over the next nine years as I managed restaurants and struck up friendships with Christian tourists, I'd drag them over to Siensavan theater insisting that they agree with me that it needed to be a House of God. Most folks opted to just pray for me.

Then in 2013 God said He would give me the building if I met certain conditions during the next year. What followed was the worst year of my life. But God wouldn't accept my resignation.

Fast forward five years to three years ago, God said it was to be a "tourist church". And even though I googled it, I still don't know what it is.

Two years ago, He gave a seven-word mission:

'Equip village churches to be community assets.'

Most obvious is that assets aren't persecuted. Maybe He's planning on sending, via the church the gifts and talents for what He wants done because I don't speak Lao and I get car sick coming from the airport.

Also, over these last three years at God's leading I've made some bold requests:

-I've visited a multitude of government ministries seeking permissions to open a church. Even contacting the American Embassy as instructed to do by one Ministry.

-I've applied for a seven hundred-thousand-dollar grant from the United States Government to buy and equip a church building that will seat seven hundred people.

-And last December I asked the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) to ordain me.

No one has said no to anything. No one has said anything at all. There has been absolutely no movement in the natural world, in any direction, from day one.

Over the years the owners have kept the building repaired and cleaned. Anytime I saw the building unlocked for cleaning, I'd pop in. So over time I've become friendly with her son who usually supervised the work crews.

The owner died in May and the son inherited. He is a very devout Buddhist and wants the building used for traditional Lao purposes. He is the one who has added all the Buddhist elements. They were not a part of the original working theater.

But He knows I love the building and that I want to live there. Last month I started feeling like I was being dishonest with him as to why I wanted the building. So I took him a copy of my little one-page business plan for a "Christian Theater". (I had gone the business plan route because I never heard from the LEC about ordination, and the business plan actually seems to be a better option under Lao law, because I can't foresee a tourist church having membership).

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Anyway, I gave him a copy of the one-page business plan that had been translated into Lao language and told him I'd be back next week so we could talk. I went back the next week. He had obtained government approval for me to conduct a Christmas Eve and a New Year's Service.

You are all invited to the Siensavan Christian Theater in Luang Prabang, for a Christmas Eve 2020 Candlelight Service.

End of speech

That's how God brought this to be. He took an emotional bankrupt hillbilly girl, waited until she had made her life a mess then stepped in and guided her, when she let Him. All for His glory.

I once had a low opinion of Christians, now I am one. I once had a low opinion of missionaries, now I'm on the other side of the world, on a mission with God. I didn't much like to hear women preachers.... Now I accept the uniqueness of His call on my life. My sufficiency is from God. He has made me capable of whatever He asks of me. He knows I can do nothing without Him. And me knowing that brings comfort. He knows how old I am. I've stopped reminding Him. God has a unique amazing plan for each person's life. Just have an honest talk with Him. He'll take it from there. You're free to quit anytime you like. But if you don't quit, God won't quit. He will make you sufficient for what He asks of you if you allow Him. If you chose not to trust Him completely, you may never know what could have been. But He will continue to be with you and sanctify you, even if you miss out on being of service, because He loves you. It's what He does and who He is – Love.

The Bible puts it this way,

"In a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also those of wood and clay; some are for honor, and some for dishonor. One who cleanses himself from these things will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, fit for the Master's use, and prepared for every good work."

If you're unfamiliar with the Bible, a good place to start reading is the short Book of James, or the three-thousand-year-old poetic wisdom of Proverbs. I suggest a modern translation, so you don't get stuck in the quaint language of the King James Version (KJV) if you're reading in English.

Seek the Lord. He loves you. "Take courage."

Revelation

In mid-October of 2020, I started a blog. I wrote for about an hour a day for fourteen days, then I was finished. But it was historical, in reverse order of a blog. So I took it down. In mid-November, in obedience to a dream of October 31 to write my testimony for a man named Thomas who God would send to also hear me, I combined the blogs into book format. The only substantial addition I made was inclusion of my son's death.

I was ready to publish the eBook of my spiritual journey, when on November 25, my son's birthday, God gave me a revelation of what He is going to do on the date of my son's death, this year on Easter. Easter is also the Christian celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is God's son, born of a virgin. His birthday is Christmas. While in His early thirties, Jesus was killed, buried for three days then came back to life and ate fish and honey with His friends.

This book evidently, is to write down what is going to happen. In this context, I now understand that God wanted the spiritual credentials, He has given me, recorded in the previous chapters so the reader can more easily believe that I am God's prophet and have been given this message to give to the world. Here is the revelation:

At 12:00 UTC on Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021, God is going to lift all COVID-19 from the earth. From every being, every test tube, lab slide and laboratory. No trace will be left.

He is telling you now, before it happens so you will know that He is God.

I will also make this proclamation at the Christmas Eve Service at Siensavan.

This is a one-time event as declared in Jeremiah 16:21.

*"Therefore, surely I will this once
cause them to know,
I will cause them to know
My hand and My might;
and they shall know
that My name is the LORD."*

And as prophesied elsewhere in the Bible,
*'For the earth will be filled with the knowledge
of the glory of the LORD,
as the waters cover the seas.'*

The Lord had earlier said to that same prophet,
*'Look among the nations, and watch - wonder and be amazed!
For I am doing a work in your days
that you would not believe, though it were told you.'*

I will make this proclaation at the Christmas Eve Service at Siensavan, because I believe that God has told me He is going to erase COVID-19 in an instant on Easter Day.

May the Lord give you, the population of the whole earth, ears to hear the Holy Spirit. Ask Jesus that you may hear Him. Don't wait in unbelief waiting to see what will happen. *'Seek the Lord while He may be found.'*

Of my brothers and sisters in Christ, I ask, 'Who will you be come April fifth, someone with questions or someone with answers?'

Consider the many one-thirds in the Bible and consider the 'coincidence', that from Christmas Eve to Easter Eve is one hundred days, and from Easter to Pentecost is fifty days.

Give thanks to Jesus for the healing and deliverance of the whole earth as He promised.

Jesus is the Lord, and He is mighty to save.



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Live encounters

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