



Peacebuilding and the Arts

The International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life at Brandeis University

Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts *A Virtual Collection*

The Goodness of Lives

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I remember the walk we took during the first institute. Farhat said that we had to pick a problem central to our projects and workshop it in front of the participants who were thought to be engaged in similar endeavors in pairs around the world. It was cold in a way that I am no longer used to. There were a lot of leaves to kick around on the well-paved sidewalks of the New England town. We both agreed - unusual as that was in those days - that the problem that we had to present was us. the two of us. I think now about the cold and teary clarity with which I returned from our walk, re-entering that utterly artificial - yet wonderful - third space which we had created in which I was supposed to - or was it still "we" then? - present "our problem." We were very good at articulating our problem. But not so good at finding the way out. Because of Farhat and the leaves and the sidewalk and the way I remember that day, I have come to wonder whether reconciliation is something that can be studied, analyzed, distilled, put into kits and shared; or whether the obscene particularity of each individual and utterly personal conflict overwhelms attempts to find a way out, to somehow remold hearts, "transforming aggression into empathy and desire for revenge into desire for affiliation" (Longe & Brecke, cited in Cohen).

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On the opening day of a recent exhibition at Reyum, one of the art school¹ students who helped to put together the exhibition stole a camera belonging to his teacher. Because that last day was chaotic and rushed, it provided "an opportunity" as it is called here, an opportunity to steal when people let down their guard from exhaustion, from exhilaration, from feeling that they are within a community working together on something that has, for once, made things safe. Such sudden twists happen often here, I realize. Something that seems wonderful suddenly becomes bittersweet by the use of a

word, a fist, a gesture, an act which turns everything upside down - ugly, alienated, empty - the opposite of what it was a moment ago.

In our initial application to Brandeis, we claimed that we were "contributing to coexistence – if not reconciliation – in Cambodia, by 'restoring and enhancing individual and collective capacities for intellectual, social, emotional, creative and spiritual life.'"² But that sentence seems to claim too much now: the individual *and* the collective; restoration *and* enhancement of intellectual, social, emotional, creative, and spiritual life. I think that at our art school we have made a bubble, a place that is not real, a problematic dream. We have in some small way built a collective group of students - perhaps a community of friends out of what was once strangers - in a place where distrust, disengagement, and reliance on the family unit at most are the norm. But the school is repeatedly convulsed by individual acts which remind us of what runs underneath and cannot be escaped in the larger society. Individual attitudes of survival and self-interest, open disregard for others, lack of empathy, refusal to envision how one's actions might feel to someone else - these attitudes return again and again in "incidents" that blot the idyllic picture greeting visitors when they first enter the garden and see young students drawing. The longer these students stay with us, the less I feel convinced that art in any form can overcome the everyday realities which they face in the society in which they live.

There seem to be a set of attitudes, behaviors, ways of being and dealing, which harden to become normative as Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia where I have lived for the last eight years, settles into its so-called "post conflict" phase. Take opportunism for example: for the student who stole the camera, the nervous chaos of the opening day of the exhibition was simply an opportunity in a society steeped with models for such acts. An accident is an opportunity for everyone from the police to the emergency room doctor to shake down the victims for money. A fire is an opportunity for the fire company to extort money from property owners before putting out the flames. An exam is an opportunity for those grading it to make money, both by selling the answers prior to the exam and by taking money to ensure a passing grade after the exam, regardless of the actual answers. Any stamp, document, signature, service is commodified, justifiably many will say, given the abysmally low civil servant salaries paid months late to those supposed to render such services. Opportunism is not, however, simply a tactic of those who have survived the recent history of internal events which could be said to have brought things (people) to this state. It seems to pervade the actions of those who come from the outside as well. An array of dubious foreign companies and enterprises come to Cambodia for the opportunity to employ young docile women at remarkably low wages in factories with light or no regulation. Those who traffic in human beings or toxic waste come to Cambodia for the opportunity of legal flexibility in which money can buy all forms of permission including official ignorance. World powers take the opportunity of Cambodia's relative economic irrelevance to make it a poster child for their "concern" over human rights, "rule of law," "good governance," and "judicial impunity." To complete this cynical survey, those who labor in the name of "human rights," "gender equity," "poverty alleviation," and "development" readily accept the opportunity of being paid hardship wages and immense housing allowances, employing entourages of drivers,

maids, nannies, and security guards while salting away considerable savings in their foreign bank accounts. These forms of opportunism seem to simply read situations for what they provide for oneself, taking advantage of the existing configurations and particular givens of "post-conflict." They accept more than they try to change. It is the way it is, so make the most of it.

The idea that the student stole the camera from his teacher was upsetting to me in several ways. Not only is stealing completely "wrong" in the (for here, foreign) value structure with which I grew up, but "Khmer culture" as it has been traditionally described to me, reveres the figure of the teacher. Elderly artists I know still worship the memories of their teachers and hang pictures of them in altar-like arrangements in their houses. To steal something from your teacher would be unthinkable within the framework of this (imagined?) traditional culture in which a lifetime of gratitude and respect is thought to barely repay all that one has been given by one's teachers. But there is more. Having worked hard to establish and fund the school, those of us who run it, especially those coming from the outside, are invested in the "dream" (illusion?) that the students suddenly become "good" in the wonderful environment which we have created. We want to believe that such projects transform lives, effect change, create models. We don't want to think that such initiatives are simply more opportunities to be used by those in them for what they offer and then to move on, without basic change, to whatever can be found next. On all accounts then, the theft was an obscene reminder that things are not at all as they seem.

After a few months of mulling over this and other bittersweet incidents that have occurred at the art school over the years, I started a project with the students entitled "The Goodness of Lives."³ The project focuses on the stories of the last lives of the Buddha prior to the life in which he achieves enlightenment, a set of ten *cheadok* (or jataka tales) central to Khmer Buddhist tradition. Each of the *cheadok* are said to illustrate a virtue or quality thought to be essential for living a good life: generosity, honesty, equanimity, tolerance, compassion, self-determination, diligence. The stories are perhaps intended, in a way which I am discovering through the project, as an invitation to discuss, to consider, to object, and to revise what each of those qualities might mean in ongoing life. Set in legendary forests peopled by kings and hermits, the stories tell very different tales from those encountered by the children of the art school living in early twenty-first century urban Phnom Penh. Since many of the children come from disadvantaged backgrounds in which they have limited access to both religion and education, the stories were not necessarily familiar to them in all their details. How then to make the stories come alive to the children?

At the beginning of the project, two exuberant interns from the United States were working at the art school.⁴ Over the course of the summer, they had introduced many new ideas and assignments to the school, managing not only to excite the students but also to step on a number of cultural toes, given the very different notions of education, discipline, and creativity which they brought with them. The three of us decided to plunge into the Goodness of Lives project together by telling the students the story of the Vessandaw Cheadok and then engaging in a number of activities that would re-tell the

story in creative ways. The aim in this initial phase of the project was to get the students to remember each story while also showing them that traditional cultural narratives can be played with, altered, and even critiqued. At the end of two somewhat raucous classes in which the students first listened to the story and then acted it out in different ways, I sensed dismay among some of the staff of the school. The students went home, we sat on the floor, and I asked them what was wrong. Their concerns crystallized in several complaints. It was irreverent to treat religious stories in any way other than to simply recite them, preferably with the help of a monk. Young students below the high school age are "not supposed to interpret stories. They are simply meant to listen to them and remember them."⁵ We would "get in trouble with the Ministry of Religion and the Ministry of Education" if we pursued the idea of bringing the stories in this form of interactive play to a larger audience of children in regular schools, as the initial proposal implied we would eventually do.

As is usual in the frequent situations in which something I try to do is received in an entirely unexpected way, I took their complaints and mulled over them. The appeals to authority of all kinds (religious, narrative, governmental) were familiar in a way. Anything out of the usual is generally called back to existing norms. But one suggestion seemed to point a way to continue: a monk should tell the story, the staff suggested. The students should be "taught" the story in a religious manner and context. But things are never that simple. For when I found an interesting monk, who found the project - and its questioning aims - thought-provoking and somehow appropriate, those who had suggested calling in the monks in the first place began to confide that they "didn't really know what religion was about," were "not Buddhist" (having been raised in the Communist 1980s), and found Buddhism as practiced today in Cambodia corrupt and hypocritical in many ways. As the monk told the stories, the students fell back into receiving them as "lessons" not to be questioned but to be learned. I began to fear that the whole project was a form of missionizing, conveying an official and singular "goodness" to those who still lived in ignorance.

The lure of crusades infects a surprising range of the activities which foreigners work on in Cambodia. This is to believe in the best and worst sense, completely and fervently with none of the nagging questions or uncomfortable holes that scar those less sure in their skins. Whether it is the belief that globalization is bad or that Christianity is good, those with this kind of faith passionately invoke right and wrong as two different worlds, so far apart from each other that they can never intermingle or become confused, despite the peculiar mitigating circumstances in which each local instance seems steeped. Unleashed as a practice, such certainty claims unassailable positions, issues unequivocal statements, and listens only to ascertain on which side (right or wrong, good or evil) a particular speaker falls. Change is not complex, unequal, uneven and always incomplete; instead, the final ideal is already determined and decreed to bring complete unity, happiness and fulfillment to all. Evil will be conquered, good will triumph. To talk about "goodness" tips easily into this world of absolute moral values from which all difference is banned.

¹ A brief description of the Reyum Art School is available in the next essay.

² From the application of Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan to the Brandeis International Fellowship Program *Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts*, citing "Engaging with the Arts to Promote Coexistence," Cynthia Cohen, in Martha Minow and Antonia Chayes, eds., *Imagine Coexistence: Restoring Humanity After Violent Ethnic Conflict*, 2003.

³ The original proposal outlining the Goodness of Lives project is available in the next essay.

⁴ Dan Ludevig, Ethics and Coexistence Student Fellow at Brandeis University, and Leah Tepper-Byrne from New York University.

⁵ I have tried to fairly and accurately represent these views without naming the particular person quoted.