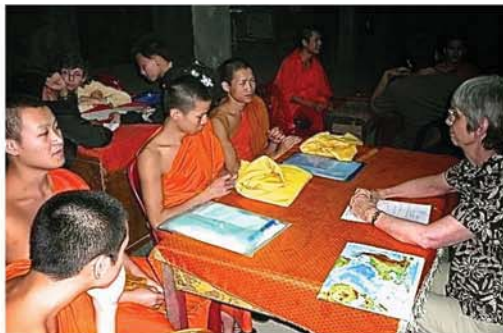


TOWARD THE END OF THE SESSION, I'M PAIRED WITH A VERY BRIGHT, ENGAGING YOUTH WHO INVITES ME TO JOIN HIM AT ANOTHER CLASS AFTER THIS SESSION WITH HIS OTHER ENGLISH TEACHER AT A TEMPLE NEAR BY. I'M HESITANT... IT'S GETTING LATE, DARK...THE NEXT CLASS STARTS AT 8:30.. BUT I CAN'T RESIST THE ENTHUSIASM OF THIS YOUNG

STUDENT.



THE DIMLY LIT, OPEN-SIDED TEMPLE SPACE IS FILLED WITH STUDENTS OF ALL AGES, MANY OF THEM NOVICE MONKS, BUT ALSO WORKING LOCALS AND LAY STUDENTS WHO KNOW THEIR LIVES CAN ONLY BE IMPROVED THROUGH EDUCATION... AND THEY LIVE IN A COUNTRY THAT DOES NOT MAKE EDUCATION A PRIORITY. IT IS HERE THAT I MEET HIS ENGLISH TEACHER, MICHAEL. IT IS APPARENT THAT HIS STUDENTS HOLD HIM VERY DEAR, AND FOR GOOD REASON. HE IS THE CONSUMMATE TEACHER, NOT ONLY IN HIS ABILITY TO TEACH, BUT HIS OBVIOUS LOVE AND DEVOTION TO WHAT HE IS DOING AND THE STUDENTS HE IS TEACHING. KNOWING THAT BASIC EDUCATION IS NOT AFFORDABLE FOR MOST OF HIS STUDENTS, MICHAEL IS TEACHING FOR FREE! ACTUALLY, AT HIS OWN EXPENSE, AS HE HAS SOLD ALL HIS POSSESSION IN THE USA AND TAKEN OUT A PERSONAL LOAN TO BE IN LAO.



THE FOLLOWING EVENING I TAKE A TUK TUK TO ANOTHER TEMPLE A BIT OUTSIDE THE CITY TO WATCH MICHAEL TEACH TO A GROUP OF VERY YOUNG NOVICE MONKS. THE BOYS ARE A DELIGHT! THE MAJORITY OF YOUNG BOYS BECOME NOVICE MONKS SO THEY CAN GET AN EDUCATION THAT IS OTHERWISE NOT AVAILABLE DUE TO THE COST (\$25USD/YEAR.... AND MOST LAO CANNOT AFFORD THIS) OR BECAUSE OF FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES – ABANDONMENT AND/OR SINGLE PARENTS WHO CANNOT CARE FOR THEIR CHILD IS NOT UNCOMMON.



HERE IS SHORT VERSION OF A LONG JOURNEY FOR MICHAEL: HE HESITANTLY VISITED LAO WHILE ON A TRIP TO THAILAND IN 2008 DUE TO A FRIEND'S RECOMMENDATION. WHILE THERE HE MET SEVERAL NOVICE MONKS WHO WERE EAGER TO PRACTICE ENGLISH WITH HIM AND HE EXPERIENCED THEIR DRIVE AND SINCERITY. BY 2010 HE HAD BECOME CERTIFIED TO

TEACH, QUIT HIS CAREER AND LIFE IN SAN FRANCISCO AND MOVED TO LUANG PRABANG TO TEACH FULL TIME.

I KEEP IN LOOSE CONTACT WITH MICHAEL AFTER THAT FIRST MEETING. HE WORKS ON HIS WEBSITE WHILE CONTINUING TO TEACH AND ASSIST STUDENTS WITH EVERY NEED THEY MAY HAVE. HIS ABILITY TO STAY AND CONTINUE TEACHING IS ALWAYS IN DOUBT DUE TO FUNDS. HIS COMMITMENT IS FUELED BY KNOWING IF HE DOES LEAVE, HIS STUDENTS WILL ONCE AGAIN FEEL THE PAIN OF ABANDONMENT, WHICH MOST HAVE ALREADY EXPERIENCED DEEPLY. HE ADDS PAYPAL AS A WAY TO DONATE TO HIS ORGANIZATION, S.M.I.L.E. PROJECT, AND I BECOME A MONTHLY SUPPORTER.

IF YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT LAO AS A COUNTRY AND ITS PEOPLE, AND MICHAEL AND S.M.I.L.E. PROJECT, VISIT:

[HTTP://WWW.SMILEPROJECT.US](http://www.smileproject.us)

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What seems like a simple goal....teaching literacy... becomes very complex when the country involved is Lao. Lao is a single-party socialist republic governed by a single communist party dominated by military generals. A third of its population lives below the international poverty line which means living on less than \$1.25USD/day. There is NO free public education in Lao, the government currently spends less than three percent of the nation's budget on education, ranking it 111th out of 132 countries worldwide, teacher's salaries are low, and 25% of the teachers lack formal training. Foreign involvement in education is not openly received and subject to



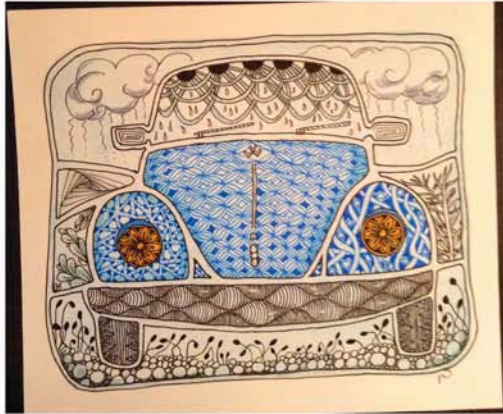


MEET SUSAN, THE WATER BUFFALO. THE BASKET ON MY BACK HAS A FOREHEAD STRAP AND ONLY ABOUT 1/4 FILLED...I COULD BARELY STAND UPRIGHT. THIS IS HOW RICE IS CARRIED FROM THE FIELDS, WHICH MAY BE MANY KM AND OVER RUGGED TERRAIN TO THE FAMILY HOME.



BACK IN THE USA FOR MY FIRST "REAL" SUMMER OF RETIREMENT, AMAZON (WHO KNOWS ME BETTER THAN MYSELF AND I'M OK WITH THAT), DROPS A BOOK TITLE INTO MY EMAIL THAT I CANNOT RESIST PURCHASING: ONE ZENTANGLE A DAY: A SIX WEEK COURSE IN CREATIVE DRAWING FOR RELAXATION, INSPIRATION, AND FUN. I IMMEDIATELY BECOME A

ZENTANGLE ADDICT, ACCUMULATING STACKS OF "TANGLE CARDS" WHILE LEARNING THIS FASCINATING ART FORM, NOT QUITE SURE WHAT TO DO WITH THEM.



OCTOBER 2013 AND I'M BACK IN THAILAND. PEOPLE NOTICE ME ZENTANGLING AT MY COFFEE SHOP AND OTHER PUBLIC AREAS AND ASK "ARE THESE FOR SALE?" "NO" I REPLY. "BUT I CAN TEACH YOU HOW TO DO IT." SO I BEGIN TO SHOW THOSE WHO ARE INTERESTED/HAVE THE TIME. STILL... WHERE IS THIS LEADING?!



THIS YEAR I FEEL COMPELLED TO VISIT LUANG PRABANG AGAIN, BUT THIS TRIP'S FOCUS IS TO MEET WITH MICHAEL. IN LAO I FIND AN EVEN BIGGER RESPONSE WHEN I ZENTANGLE IN PUBLIC. MICHAEL ASKS ME TO LEAD ONE OF HIS EVENING ENGLISH CLASSES. I AGREE AND TEACH ZENTANGLING AS MY SUBJECT, PROVIDING ALL THE STUDENTS WITH PEN AND PAPER.

THESE YOUNG, KNOWLEDGE SEEKING MINDS QUICKLY GRAB THE CONCEPTS AND RUN WITH THEM! A FEW STUDENTS QUICKLY COME UP WITH THE IDEA TO DO CARDS TO SELL AT THE LOCAL TOURIST MARKET. AND THEN IT COMES TO ME WHAT TO DO WITH MY EVER INCREASING STACK OF TANGLE CARDS: YES, THEY ARE FOR SALE, AND YES, I WILL TEACH YOU HOW TO DO IT, BUT THE PRICE IS A DONATION TO SUPPORT S.M.I.L.E. PROJECT IN LUANG PRABANG, LAO.

SOMETIMES WHERE THE DOTS ARE LEADING ME IN LIFE IS OBVIOUS, SOMETIMES NOT. I'M A PLANNER BUT I ALSO LEAVE ROOM FOR DETOURS. AS YOGI BERRA SAID: "WHEN YOU COME TO A FORK IN THE ROAD, TAKE IT!" THIS IS A FORK I COULD NEVER HAVE ANTICIPATED: DOING SOMETHING I LOVE AND PROVIDING SUPPORT TO SOMETHING I DEEPLY BELIEVE IN. THE COST IN LAO FOR A STUDENT TO ATTEND PUBLIC SCHOOL IS \$25 USD/YEAR, FOR COLLEGE ABOUT \$170/YEAR. IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN SOMEONE'S LIFE :)

NEXT UP: MY VERY SPECIAL EXPERIENCES WITH MANY OF THE STUDENTS YOU SEE BELOW DURING MY STAY IN LUANG PRABANG THIS YEAR.