This flight, this gate... they're becoming old friends of mine. The flight from CM is only an hour and departs at very reasonable times both coming and going. I was in for a surprise when I landed this time: Luang Prabang has a new airport! The architecture fits in nicely with the area and is beautiful, but the processing of immigration still needs tweaking. This year and last year, after my passport is hand passed to four different people, I have been offered the wrong passport at the final desk. NO! NOT MINE!!! I said this time when I saw the passport cover being offered was orange colored. The immigration person opened the passport up and held the picture for me to see... NO! NOT ME!!!! I said... I'M AMERICAN... he then searched for a blue covered passport and luckily held up mine. I have to assume the airport personnel are government employees.
I was greeted at the airport by Michael and this crew of his students. Michael's only means of transportation is his feet, but he always carries a helmet with him because he frequently gets rides from his students, as was the case to meet me at the airport. My luggage was put on one scooter with Michael and a student, and me another and off we went just a short way from the airport to visit the home of one of his students. That student is the young man on the far left in this picture, Mr. Her, who three years earlier insisted I meet his other English teacher. I'm thankful he was persistent in an enthusiastic way with me, because knowing Michael and these kids has made my life richer. Since my first meeting with Her, he has learned Japanese, along with being very fluent in English now. We chatted for awhile in the back yard of his home and I was given a piece of sugar cane for a quick energy boost and then scooted off to check into Villa Somphong, where I have stayed the previous two years.

I greeted Yee, the young man who has worked the front desk in the evenings since I've been staying at Villa Somphong, and told him I'm back this time to meet with Michael Sebastian. "Oh, Michael is my English teacher!" he responded. This is a response I got time after time whenever I told someone local why I was back in Luang Prabang. I'm beginning to wonder if there is anyone who has NOT taken class from Michael!
It was a week of tests for most of Michael’s students, so most were not coming to evening English classes the next night, but Michael arranged for me to meet with one of his novice monk students, Novice Luan. What a delightful young man!!! I may not have all the stats totally correct, but they are close enough for you understand why I am compelled to help Michael with his mission. Novice Luan comes from a village north of LP. It is a 3 hour boat ride and 4 hour walk to reach his village— which has no running water, no school, etc. His parents are considering moving to a different village that has a school for the sake of other children in the family. Luan left his village and became a monk a couple years ago to receive an education. Many ethnic groups in the north of Lao practice animism, but Luan’s father converted to Buddhism and was a monk himself. On the board are math equations this 17 year old is doing, he has only been speaking English for about a year and is quite fluent and his book shelf is populated with higher education/language/computer, etc books. He has a persona and presence that is soothing. I enjoyed every moment with him.

The next day Michael sent a student on a scooter to pick me up and off we went for me to meet Jer and his family at their house and then on to the family farm for a picnic.
Jer's village was demolished to make way for the new airport and a new village was build not too far away. The villagers were all given land, but it was awarded by a lottery; some got good land, some OK land, some not good land. Jer's land was in the OK category. When I arrived the yard was filled with the scooters of other student's of Michael's who were going with us. All the students in this group were Hmong, but many only knew each other because of Michael's classes. Jer was a beautiful smile and presence, and greeted me as warmly as I've ever been greeted. I felt immediately at home and he was genuinely pleased to show me his home. I met his father, an animism shaman healer, pictured below along with his brother in front of his father's shaman altar. His mother is also a healer, using local herbs, but Michael did not know the specifics.

Below is the kitchen, and the utensil on Jer's belt is a must for much of the work he does in daily life.
This is a family that lives off the land. Their daily life revolves around farming and gathering basic supplies: food, wood, water, etc. Jer's work is his land, but if there is a need for money, he has worked as a construction laborer and makes about $1,250 USD a day. They eat what is in season. The only crop they sell is from their rubber trees; otherwise, everything else if for the family's survival. The primary crop is rice, which sometimes is all they have to eat, depending on the season. Other crops are pineapple, mango, banana, pumpkin, herbs and various other vegetables.

After all the students arrived, about 10 or so, Jer's family and the rest of us troops hopped on scooters to head to Jer's family's farm, about 7 km away. We first went on paved road, which turned into gravel road, then back to paved road, then to a dirt road which started up a hill and became a dirt path and then what could be called a mountain bike trail which even included crossing several small streams. These kids really know how to handle their scooters!!! And I quickly learned how to hang on and go with the flow! We reached the farm but to access it required crossing a small ravine with only two poles across it! YIKES!!! Michael said there used to be three poles... humm... luckily it's the dry season so Michael and I climbed into the ravine, crossed the small stream and walked up the other side. This was NOT like a walk in the Art in Paradise Museum! I was thankful to be able to save face and not have to crawl across the poles.
This is the farm house. Someone from the family must stay here each night to take care of the animals. I think primarily chickens, but the family is having holiday gatherings so all the animals have been moved down to their other house during this event. This was a farm picnic outing, and Michael had purchased fish and oranges and the rest of the meal, rice and vegetables, came from the farm, as did all the herbs used in the food preparation.
I was impressed how all these youngsters immediately set about doing various chores without being given assignments. Or maybe they had assignments but I didn’t know about it. During all this busyness, I wandered about with Michael as he explained things to me, him ever vigilant to keep his young charges speaking English (but not always being successful!) These kids are cleaning the fish in the same stream that is used for all the family needs... be it bathing, washing clothes, etc. A shower is created by having the stream water run through a bamboo pole at a higher elevation than the person showering.

While everybody was busy doing tasks to prepare the meal, Michael took me on a short walk behind the house where pineapple and rubber plants were growing. The hill was incredibly
STEEP (40 DEGREES?) SO WE DIDN'T VENTURE FAR.

Everyone was very adept at using knives and pitched right in cutting up lemon grass and other herbs for cooking the steamed fish in and stuffing the grilled fish.
The food storage area was under the house;

The boys quickly created a grill area for cooking the fish.
Rice and steamed/wok cooked veggies were cooked in a covered area by Jer’s mother and sister.
Jer with his mother, nephew, sister and niece. A BEAUTIFUL FAMILY inside and out!!!!

Patiently waiting for lunch :)

The fish was grilled to perfection.
These chicken coops are awaiting the return of their inhabitants.

The family home and farm home do not have tables. Banana leaves are spread on the ground and food is eaten from a squatting position. Neither Michael nor I have knees that accommodate this position for much more than a nanosecond, so we sat on small, and I mean SMALL, benches. Jer's mother was very attentive and brought me a small, woven stool that gave me a tad more height and softer sitting area. I never heard her say a word but her gentle presence was always felt.
The table is set and

The food was DELICIOUS!
After eating there were songs around the "campfire". First, they were singing Lao songs, but Michael, ever the vigilant English teacher, brought out his iTouch and speakers and played American songs with clear English words that he uses in class, and the kids chimed right in.
Then he announced he will be visiting the States to attend his brother’s wedding in March and played “If You Are Going to San Francisco” (where he last lived and is going for the wedding) on his iTouch...Oh my!!! I captured it on video but somehow I’m unable to upload it... it’s so precious to hear them crooning to it!!!
Such beautiful people, in all ways...

A great time was had by all, and as the sun started to go down, it quickly got chilly.
I rode across the streams, down the dirt paths, the gravel roads and on the pavement on the back of this scooter, as I had going to Jer's, and we headed to the British-run learning center where Michael gives a class in the evenings.
The students trickled in, all ages and stages of learning. One student is even a local doctor. Some students walk to class, as did Novice Luan that night. We began Zentangling and experienced the Zen part as well as the tangling. Each student was totally engaged. I LOVED IT!!!
AS DIFFICULT AS IT WAS TO LEAVE, I DID SO WITH A NEW PERSONAL COMMITMENT AS TO HOW I CAN HELP MICHAEL CONTINUE TO PROVIDE SO MUCH TO SO MANY FOR SO LITTLE. I PLAN TO RETURN AGAIN, PROBABLY IN OCTOBER, FOR A LONGER STAY. UNTIL THEN, I’VE GOT SOME ZENTANGLED TO DO AND MORE STORIES TO TELL. JANET HAS ALREADY SAID I CAN TURN HER LIVING ROOM INTO A FUND-RAISING ZENTANGLE STUDIO. THANK YOU JANET! I WILL BE IN CONTACT WITH SOME OF THESE STUDENTS VIA FB AND EMAIL. OTHERS WILL WRITE ME THEIR STORIES AND MICHAEL WILL PASS THEM ON TO ME. AND I HOPE TO PASS THEM ON TO THOSE WILLING TO HEAR THEM. IT REALLY IS EASY TO BRING MORE JOY INTO SOMEONE’S LIFE WHILE CREATING MORE JOY IN THEIR OWN.

S.M.I.L.E. Project
Supporting Multitudes In Life & Education
Sharing Light
Spreading Kindness

PO Box 371
Swampscott, MA 01907
USA

US Phone: +1-415-935-6109
Lao Phone: +856-20-5610-6034

www.SMILEproject.US
Founder/Director/Teacher
Michael@SMILEproject.US

Thank you Michael for making this opportunity possible.
ALL this is only possible because of YOU!