

NOVEMBER PASSING¹

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul...—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball.

- *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville

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The first time we met, we were in the teachers' office. Lokru Dei—or Teacher Dei—taught English at the local government high school in the mornings and came to the Jesuit school in the afternoons where I worked. At night, he had his own English classes for high school students around the neighborhood. On the weekends, he took classes for his MBA at a local university. His wife was pregnant with their son.

He saw me, a foreigner, and shook my hand with his two hands. He had a firm grip.

“*Bong sralanh oun*,” he said. “Do you know what that means?” I did. *Older brother loves little brother*. “You know a lot of Khmer!”

Lokru Dei was about 5’6” with a big build and a big belly. He had puffy cheeks spotted with brown and black moles on a round head that he had recently shaved for his father, who was sick. He had big eyes and big hands. He knew everything about Cambodian history and society and liked to share his ideas.

“People don’t like to read books,” he’d say. “This is the problem, James. They are always on TikTok!”

When his wife pointed out that he didn’t know what a papaya salad was called in Khmer, he laughed: “I don’t know papaya salad, but I know history!”

He was from a poor village in Pursat Province. Girls from that village usually finished middle school (up to the ninth grade) and went to Phnom Penh to work in factories. Boys usually became fishermen or illegal migrant workers in Thailand, doing tough labor. There were few ways to make a living in remote villages. Lokru Dei was an exception.

He was obsessed with the U.S.

“I’m like Teddy Roosevelt,” he told me once. “He was sick when he was young. Me, too! Teddy Roosevelt used to run three-miles a day. I started running, too!”

On weekends, we would sit in a cafe and talk through large chunks of American history—fleeing England to the thirteen colonies, the Revolution, the Louisiana Purchase, the Trail of Tears. He told me about Cambodia—the traditional flowers used for red tea, the twelfth grade national exam, the influence of Pali and Sanskrit on the Cambodian language.

He asked me all sorts of questions.

“Do you know, my teacher, the three icons of America?”

I didn’t know.

“Baseball and blue jeans and the Statue of Liberty. Why?”

¹ NB: When dialogue is *italicized*, it is spoken in Khmer, the Cambodian language.

NB #2: Minor details have been modified for confidentiality.

I explained as best I could.

“What about the hotdog?”

He was passionate and sometimes he would raise his voice and turn heads.

“The people are suffering! I see them in the villages! At the hospital! The poor people are not educated! Rich people don’t care about poor people!”

A few months after first meeting him, he invited me to his village some two hundred kilometers away for the upcoming *Pchum Ben* holidays, the Buddhist “Festival of the Dead” in Cambodia. It was in October, in the middle of the rainy season. It was the biggest Cambodian holiday after Khmer New Year, and these were the two times in a year when families could get together.

It would be my first time in the remote areas of Cambodia.

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It had rained in Lokru Dei’s village. The morning air was fresh, the ground heavy with mud. There were paved roads by the town nearby, which was a strip of a few elementary schools, restaurants and gas stations. My motorcycle—called *moto* after the French—got stuck in the mud in front of the house. Lokru Dei called his brother-in-law, and the three of us lifted it out.

Lokru Dei lived in a house on stilts. The house proper was one big room, where his older sister’s family slept. They had extended the roof so that the surrounding area was sheltered. His older sister used part of the platformed area to cook, part of it was for storage, and the rest of us—Lokru Dei, his wife, his father and I—ate and slept there with mosquito nets. A hen and her chicks pecked at the ground, and the one-eyed family cat, beloved by Lokru Dei’s late mother, was also there with a pregnant dog. The animals were fed fish bones and other scraps, and they drove out poisonous critters—snakes and scorpions and giant Asian centipedes. Two large stone jugs collected rain water used for food, laundry, and bathing. In the yard were two female cows, one of them pregnant. Having cows meant you had money—each one was a hundred and fifty dollars. You could sell them in case of emergency (hospital fees, etc.) or for special purposes, like gathering money for the bride price, which can be four to ten thousand dollars, depending on how rich the bride’s family was. Most villagers didn’t have cows.

Lokru Dei gave me coffee—boiled water from one of the stone jugs with a packet of Gold Roast, a Singaporean coffee brand we liked. I couldn’t drink it. I went to the side of the house and, out of sight of his family, poured it out.

He introduced me to his older sister, who was cooking. She spoke loudly and didn’t smile. She was taking care of her frail father, who gently mumbled something to me in Khmer with the remaining half of his teeth and went to pick fruits. She asked if I had eaten. She prepared dried fish, a dipping sauce made from ground fish and vegetables, *korko* (the Cambodian national soup), and white rice.

He introduced me to his nephews, Nat and Thay. He was taking care of them while he taught in Battambang, putting them through school. Their father, a security guard at a casino town in a different province, wasn’t home much.

“Say hello to my teacher!” he said. “He’s from Harvard University! You can learn English with him!”

We ate on the platform by the kitchen using upside down buckets as chairs.

“*Korko* is really Cambodian!” Lokru Dei said. “When the Khmer people built Angkor Wat, they ate *korko*!”

After breakfast, we talked for a while. His wife listened. She would chime in sometimes, translating English words that Lokru Dei didn’t know. She grew up as part of a cohort of students housed by a French NGO that supported their academics in high school, so her English was very good.

“Do you like talking with him?” she asked me, after listening for a few hours.

I told her I do. I said I’m learning a lot.

“I am learning from my teacher, too,” Lokru Dei said.

He wanted to show me around town and go to the Tonle Sap lake for a swim. He wanted to be away from his wife; he wanted a cigarette.

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He drove my *moto* and I sat behind him.

“Now,” he said, “we are single, full!”

We stopped to smoke—Esse Change, the Korean slims with mint-flavored capsules.

We went to the nearby Pagoda. People came dressed in white bringing food to the monks. This was part of the *Pchum Ben* celebrations. The dead received merit this way.

Lokru Dei met a distant cousin of his he hadn’t seen in years. She lived in a nearby village. They seemed happy to see each other, but didn’t express a lot; just a matter-of-fact exchange of news was all. He paid his respects to the monks. He talked to some friends and found out that some land in the area was bought by a Chinese businessman with plans to build a factory.

We went around the village, visiting Lokru Dei’s friends and their families. He gave money to the elderly, who accepted it and said a blessing, which he received with his head bowed and his hands together in the gesture of prayer. This was also part of *Pchum Ben*.

He introduced me as “*my teacher*.”

“*My teacher teaches with me in Battambang Province*,” he’d say. “*He helps Cambodian children a lot! He can speak Khmer very well. He’s from Harvard University in the United States of America!*”

He didn’t get tired of that introduction.

One family we visited had their door open. Two girls were lying on the floor. When Lokru Dei found out one of the girls had had a high fever for a few days, he immediately took her to the local clinic and paid for the medicine.

“*Next time someone is sick like that*,” he said to the girl’s mother, “*take them to the doctor’s right away. Don’t wait in the house. The doctor will give you medicine.*”

We left the house.

We went to see Bong Sok. He wasn't at his gated house, which was one of the biggest in the district. A housekeeper told us that he was at the school.

We went and parked by a recently built two-story school with five classrooms. Lokru Dei had been sending books and raising money for bookshelves here before it opened.

"Building a high school—this was my dream," he said. "Mr. Sok did it for me."

We met Bong Sok, who gave us a tour of the school. He asked me if I liked the color of the paint—it was a light yellow. He was proud of the thick and wavy hallway balusters. He told stories from his life and the plan for the school, mostly in Khmer. Lokru Dei interjected a few times to make sure I understood.

"Did you hear that? He ate only rice and eggs to save money."

Bong Sok worked for the government and was back for the holidays. He grew up in the area, where there was only one high school within the commune of about forty square miles. He was angry about this. In the rainy season, it would be impossible for students to get to school by bike or *moto*. Walking would take hours each way. He had saved his own money to build this high school.

He had also bought the land nearby, which was bordered by a river. He planned to build more classrooms, a soccer field, and a computer center. Cambodian people wanted their children to be proficient in computers and English.

Bong Sok was wearing a black and white striped shirt that fit nicely, neat blue shorts and brown slides. He stood out from the rest of the town, a self-made urbanite.

"I want to get a Ph.D. in America," he told me, self-conscious about his English. "Maybe you can teach me English."

He wanted to get breakfast together. He had more ideas to share. We exchanged numbers and left.

The sun was starting to set. Lokru Dei and I had one more stop—the Tonle Sap.

We bought some beer and went to the edge of a rice field. On Google Maps, this place was supposed to be dry, but in the rainy season, the banks of the Tonle Sap were flooded for miles in every direction.

He opened a can and handed it to me. He opened another. He poured some beer on the ground with a Pali mantra.

We smoked and drank and swam in the warm and quiet Tonle Sap.

"Three more years to support my nephews and my mission will be over," he said. "I need to start thinking about my own family."

He asked me what I wanted to do.

"I think you should write, James. You can tell stories. And you can make money, James. I want to do that, too, when I'm old. For us it is too dangerous, but we can teach students."

I asked him if I could write his story.

He said he had more to tell.

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Back at the house, Lokru Dei told me about his life.

He didn't know his father's age or birthday or his own. I had thought he was avoiding the question, but in fact documents like birth certificates got lost or destroyed during the time of the Khmer Rouge. People had to be as inconspicuous and as far away from any semblance of urban influence and education as they could.

He grew up very poor. His village was known in the area to be poor where nothing good came out of. Sometimes, there would be no food for the family. He mentioned domestic violence and police involvement, but he had no resentment against his father, taking good care of him in his old age. He loved his late mother. She had been a cook in the labor camps of the Cambodian Genocide, which ended in 1979. She suffered from a bloated stomach—probably caused by lack of protein in the blood, a condition called edema, which was common during the genocide when people were severely malnourished. She passed away before the pandemic. He showed me a video of her. She was on the platform where I'd be sleeping that night. She was almost blind, yelling into the phone, a stern look on her face. Lokru Dei got his puffy cheeks from his mother.

"Around 1997," he said, "the Khmer Rouge were still everywhere. There were many gun fights, my teacher—in my hometown. The Vietnamese and the government against the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge, they asked me, 'Oh, I want chicken'—and I gave it to them. I was in grade three! In one week, we would study only two days. My mother always said, 'Come to the shelter!' We would hide there until the fighting stopped. That's why I'm not afraid of guns, my teacher."

He stopped school around this time and became a fisherman to make money to support his family. He would sometimes sleep in the forest, in the rain. Then, on a friend's suggestion, he became a "pagoda boy," washing robes and cleaning the premises of the pagoda for the monks. He was taught basic English and the Dharma. To register for high school, he asked his parents for two thousand riels, or fifty cents. They didn't have it, and his mother broke down. He started teaching English to pay for his education. He attended a church where missionaries taught him Korean. Soon, he was also teaching the Korean he knew.

He became a monk and continued his studies, living in a pagoda near his high school. He learned Pali, the language of Cambodia's Theravada Buddhism, and continued to learn English. He picked up the habit of smoking, because "when you go to the forest, there are a lot of mosquitoes." After high school, a teacher advised him to leave the province and see the bigger world. He passed an exam in Pali and was admitted as a monk in the historic Wat Langka pagoda in Phnom Penh. He saved up money by begging, especially during the Cambodian holidays when people gave money to the monks. A full morning of begging got him five, maybe seven dollars. He did this for three years. "Whenever I see monks, I respect them. It's not easy, my teacher." He said it was the hardest three years of his life.

With the money he saved he put himself through university. A "consultant" told him to study science education and marketing which he did—"Haha! Very crazy, you know?" He could speak English by this time and volunteered with Japanese and Australian groups working in education. He passed the certification exam for further study to teach at a government high

school. He left the monkhood and became an English teacher in the city where I met him. He had been teaching there for over ten years.

“The villagers always told me to not go to school—it’s not going to make money for the family. But I had a teacher who told me to never stop; I never stopped. I am the only person in my village getting a master’s degree.

“My wife always asks me why I have so many foreign friends. It’s because I want to learn from them, and they learn from me—haha! I am open-minded, James.

“I met everything in my life,” he said. “That’s why I am strong. Poor people meet everything in their lives.”

He finished and asked me my story.

I told him—about moving from Korea to a suburb in Los Angeles; how a good college was my goal; how I stopped seeing my friends to focus on school; feeling lost as an undergrad; internships and travels; my stint as a cook; still feeling lost; how I got a call from my dad who knew a Jesuit in Cambodia; how, immediately, mysteriously, I felt inner consolation; how I felt different here.

My story felt so out of place, like a wrong note in a symphony.

He shook my hand firmly with his two hands.

“You are really amazing, my teacher,” he said.

He meant it.

“I met a lot of good people in my life,” he said. “God and the Buddha helped me meet you.”

Some of his friends came over. We made a fire in his yard and sang karaoke for the rest of the night. When his wife wasn’t looking, he snuck in a few cigarettes. There was lots of beer and we danced until we sweated off the alcohol in the cool night—he said it would help with the hangover.

As we were wrapping up, he shook my hand again.

“Now you are my brother, and I call you ‘*lok p-oun thor*,’” he said. *Little godbrother*. “You don’t have to call me *lokru*. You can call me *bong*.”

Bong means older brother.

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Since *Pchum Ben*, we got closer.

We talked about how to teach English well. Bong Dei was a talented teacher of the upper grades and had the same philosophy I did: make learning as fun as possible. I came to observe his class once. There were games mixed with grammar lessons, American movies—an exceptional experience in a Cambodian classroom—and group work with the textbook, with him bouncing around here and there. I hadn’t seen this in a Cambodian classroom before.

Bong Dei was a sponge. We talked about the Bible—Abraham, Moses, Jesus—and the Pali texts. We talked about our families and dreams for Cambodia. We studied TOEFL together. He was slow at understanding some concepts, but once he did, he shared it with everyone he knew.

He was fiercely loyal and, when there were disagreements between me and the Khmer teachers in the elementary school, he was ready to tell off the principal to defend me. (Luckily, there was no showdown.)

When I was sick, he got me coconuts to drink. He asked me about my symptoms and got medicine as well. “It’s hard for Westerners to stay here.”

He continued with his teaching load and took on another: a university class. “This is a big honor for me,” he said. It was hard work. He would prepare three hours for each hour of teaching after I told him that’s how long it takes college professors in the U.S. to prepare their lectures.

He called me one day and told me his son was born.

A few weeks later, I went to his wife’s hometown, a small village in Battambang where the whole family was. The baby liked the sound of a wheeled fence moving back and forth. He had puffy little cheeks, like his father, and big eyes, too. Bong Dei held him, bouncing him in one big arm and moving the fence back and forth with the other.

“*Say hello to my little godbrother, James,*” he said. He had named his son after me. “*He’s from Harvard University!*”

Back at school, Father Luke, a new Jesuit director, outlined the “adaptive challenges” of being in a mission school. I was the only foreigner in the elementary school, the “eyes and ears” of the Jesuits, who had their hands full elsewhere in the mission. My job was to soften boundaries, maintain high visibility, get to know people in the office, learn their way of doing things, listen, and observe. I should refrain from proposing any changes. First build trust, then suggest changes.

It was too late. I’d been shocked by the way teachers managed their classes. Classes were big—over thirty students—it was hot, none of the rooms were sealed or air-conditioned, and sometimes the power went out. Teachers had to discipline and take command of the class. Even in kindergarten, standing up from your seat would get you yelled at. At least at our school, there was no hitting. But something had to change.

I talked a lot in the office—about John Dewey and the linguist Stephen Krashen and the progressive education at Summerhill and how the strict hierarchy of Cambodian educational culture was getting in the way of learning. I managed to annoy everyone in my office, especially Liya, the English teacher that sat closest to me. They started talking behind my back, and the principal was irritated that I wasn’t educating the children.

Bong Dei was on my side.

“The Khmer teachers are like frogs in a pond!” he’d say. “They don’t know the ocean! Send them to Singapore or Australia! Then they will see the world!”

His support helped, but I wasn’t getting anywhere with the teachers. I focused on my fourth grade class. One day, I came with “English Olympics” for my lesson. We put the desks to the side. The kids were jumping up and down, running around—no place for a Khmer teacher. We chose team captains—two boys and two girls—and went through the cruel process of making the strongest team.

First game: color grab! Four representatives were up. The rest crowded around us in the center of the room.

“Get me something that is...” I said, “red!”

Shrieking, shoving, cackling. A girl sprinted back with a red pen.

“Team Two wins!”

Cheers from Team Two filled the class.

After a few more rounds, I felt I needed to move on to keep up the energy.

Next: math! At the board, each representative had to solve a math problem as I dictated it.

Team One shoved Samnang to the board. Samnang was a small and dorky boy. He wasn't in the popular crowd, but he got along with everyone. He transferred from a government school and didn't get the three years of English our kids got from grades one to three. His class teacher told me he had cried last semester when he failed the English exam. But he was a smart kid. He was the math whiz of the class, and this was his time to shine. I wouldn't have known. The boys in Team One were high-fiving each other, doing victory dances.

“What is five hundred and sixty-three,” I yelled, “plus two hundred and seventy-two?”

Team One went wild, yelling in Samnang's ear to hurry up, grabbing his shoulders, pushing him, jumping around him. Samnang, amazingly, tuned everything out with a little frown, hands moving fast on the board. He was done in seconds and looked up.

“Team One wins!”

The class exploded. Fists in the air and more dancing. The other teams were numbed by defeat. “Really, bro?” a boy from another team asked me.

This *was* education.

“Alright, alright, next!”

I was prepared. The kids were hungry for wins, like little wild cats. They challenged every point, and little fights broke out among them which they forgot about in the next minute.

I felt we were coming to the climax of the Games, the peak of our energy. It was time for the big game: True and False Dash.

“Now!” I yelled. “Listen up!” My throat was sore. It always was and that's how I ran my class. “I will read a sentence! If it's true, run to the board; if it's false, don't run! The first one to touch the board gets a point!”

The kids went around explaining to each other in Khmer. More dancing and cackling. The boys volunteered themselves to their captains, eyes big, fingers pointing at themselves. The captains sent their fastest and most daring representatives.

I set up a tape at the back of the class as the starting point. Two boys and two girls lined up. Some of the students were by their side to help them with the English. Why not?

“Number one!” I yelled. “I am... a doctor!”

No one moved. Rapid words of advice, slapping of the back, then they shut each other up. The runners inched forward—the starting line had no meaning.

“Good! I am a teacher, not a doctor—*kru bongrien* not *kru pet*! Next sentence! I am... Ready? Hey, hey, behind the line! Ready? I am shorter than... Teacher Liya!”

No one moved. More slaps, more yelling.

“Very nice! I am taller than Teacher Liya! Teacher Liya is shorter than me! Next sentence!”

We all felt it. The next sentence would be true.

“Today is... Wednesday!”

I didn’t see who made it to the board.

Long, a chubby, clumsy boy, was on the floor. Someone had shoved him from behind, and he hit the metal edge of a table. He checked his head with his hand, saw blood, and was about to cry, then stopped. Instinctively, he went outside to the faucet by the garden. He bent down and put his head under the running water. His uniform, usually dirty, was stained with blood.

I put my arm on his shoulder, and we rushed to the office. The teachers noticed. “*He’s bleeding! Quick!*” The English coordinator and the principal ran and grabbed the first-aid kit. His mother was one of the cleaners in the school. She saw him and ran to him.

Three teachers were on him, trying to stop the bleeding. I explained what happened. I got a wet wipe and wiped Long’s red hands. The teachers used a white cloth to cover the wound. One teacher drove him and his mother by *moto* to the local clinic. The principal and the coordinator followed.

I got back to my class. The kids were nervous. They had put the seats back in their places. After a few attempts at explaining themselves, they got quiet. No one came forward.

I didn’t know what to say. I used to blame the language barrier. This time, it wasn’t that.

The next teacher was waiting to come in. I went back to the office.

“What happened, Teacher?” Liya asked.

I told her. She said nothing.

After a few minutes, another coordinator responded, with a tone that was more compassionate than usual: “*Are you okay, Teacher? It’s your first time. We have a lot of experiences like this. This time, we won’t say anything. Just be careful from now on.*”

The principal came back. I knocked on her door.

“How is Long?” I asked

She smiled. She was serene, as usual.

“He’s okay, Teacher. They...” She made a stitching motion. “Two, Teacher. Teacher Chea is at the hospital. It’s hot, Teacher. It’s hard to stop the blood.”

Long came back a few hours later; he didn’t want to go home. Two untrimmed blue stitches were on his head and stuck out like antennas.

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Long lost his appetite. It took him a few weeks to be himself again in class. He and his mother had to make visits to the clinic for antibiotics and checkups. She didn’t own a *moto* and had to arrange things with her husband. They were from a poor family that lived in the village next to the school. I felt powerless to do anything. I couldn’t just go and buy his medicine—but

if I had been more careful, he wouldn't have gotten hurt. All I could do was buy Long coconut ice cream from the street vendor. He shared it with his family.

There is a saying in the missionary community: what matters is not the quantity of your work but the quality of your presence. I hadn't understood this. I was forcing what I thought was a better system. Western-style progressive education may in fact produce the most well-rounded individuals, but rural Cambodia was a different world.

The Jesuits came to the area because it was neglected. The school was built on marshland, which they filled up with hundreds of thousands of tons of soil. The people in town ridiculed them and were certain the school would fail. They had only completed the land-filling for their 15-hectare campus when I got there, eleven years later.

Eleven years later, with over nine hundred students in their K-12 programs, the Jesuits worried that their focus had shifted. Now they saw too many fancy cars, too many of the Cambodian middle-class who came to the school because of the international leadership, the cheap \$20-per-month tuition, and caring teachers. But the Jesuits had originally discerned that the school should serve the communities in greatest need. They considered building the school in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. But then the school would have become elite, the way it usually goes for Jesuits schools, and the special identity of the Jesuit school—manifesting a “particular concern for the poor”—would have gotten hazy. They wanted the school to take on this specific mission.

As one Jesuit explained to me, poverty is “context.” It's not that people are just poor because they make \$180 a month at a factory in Phnom Penh. Poverty affects their cultural know-how, what they eat, what they are taught at home, what they value. Some of the parents of our students were out in Thailand or in a different province for work, leaving the kids to stay with their extended families. No one was there to keep an eye on them and teach them to not pull each other's hair and to brush their teeth properly. I couldn't just insert a foreign model into this community.

Back at the Community house², I had dinner with the school director. He had been in Cambodia for twenty-four years as a Jesuit missionary. I told him about Long.

We had been talking here and there about Western educational models. He dismissed them; they wouldn't work in rural Cambodia.

“It's good people are seeing a different way to learn,” he said. “But let's flip it around. Imagine a Khmer teacher came to an American school and started telling you that you had to teach in the Cambodian way. How would you feel?”

The Jesuits used the word “accompany” for their work, not “serve” or “lead” or “change.” An old Indian Jesuit said that “we are not just *for* the poor; we are *with* the poor.”

Accompanying the kids didn't mean playing the rogue teacher. That got Long two stitches on his head. I let go of my way more. I learned to be stronger, like a Khmer teacher, more of a teacher with clear boundaries. I worked on controlled anger to discipline some of the

² The house where the Jesuit Community lived. I will capitalize “Community” to refer to the specific Jesuit Community in rural Cambodia I was a part of along with the other volunteers, different from “community” in general.

kids who needed it. The textbooks that I had found irrelevant to rural Cambodian life and antithetical to second language acquisition were, I admitted, a source of structure for the class.

I was beginning to find an equilibrium for my teaching.

The end of my contract was coming up. I had to decide whether or not I'd volunteer at the school for another year. I looked into Ignatian discernment using Chat-GPT. The Jesuits are known for their education, missionary work, and spirituality. Discernment was at the center of it. When I told the Jesuits about consulting Chat-GPT, they laughed.

After that, Father Clyde came up to me in private.

"I'm sorry I wasn't around these days," Father Clyde said. He'd been traveling across Cambodia and Southeast Asia for his work. "It's my fault."

We sat down after dinner one day, and he guided me with practical steps.³

"In discernment," he said, "indifference is very important. We also call it 'holy indifference.' It's kind of Buddhist. You have to release all attachments and stop all thinking from the head. Then you can listen to your heart."

A deadline was important, he said. I was to set a time to discern everyday. Then I could go about my day as I would normally, not thinking about discerning, and when I came to discern, I could "meditate and pray." "The two are not very different," he said. In case I didn't know what to do, I could stay in silence, which was "the best prayer."

"At one point, your thoughts will stop, and you will feel ready to listen to your heart. Get a piece of paper. You need a clear statement. For you it is, 'I will stay here another year.' Then, on one side, you can list the reasons from your heart for staying and on the other side write your reasons for leaving. The next day, when it's time, look at the reasons and listen to your heart. You can add and cross things off.

"Ask God to show you His will for your life. If you are sincere, He will show you."

I started my discernment on the fourth of June. My deadline would be June 25th, when we had a sharing during the Community Mass.

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In the three-week period, when I quieted all the little calculations for my life, when the question of what I wanted arose from a deeper place within, I wanted to go back to the U.S. No concrete plans, but I felt free to go. The reasons I wrote on the "stay" side of the paper were crossed off. I felt I'd be forcing it if I stayed another year. "That's a good sign," Father Luke said.

I made the announcement at the June 25th Mass. People accepted it with grace. "It could change, you know," Father Luke whispered to me. I said I'd be open to it.

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³ Practicality is a Jesuit virtue. Father Clyde told me this "famous" story. "One time, there was a retreat with many priests. They were praying when the lights went out. The Benedictine started to pray for the lights to come on. The Franciscan went outside and contemplated the stars. Suddenly, the lights came back on. A Jesuit had fixed the light!" You get a sense for the different flavors of spirituality: Benedictines are contemplative and prayerful whereas Franciscans have a deep connection with nature. Jesuits are practical: they discern the will of God and act.

The process of discernment is “not about choosing between good and bad,” Father Clyde said. In that case, there is nothing to discern—you simply choose what is good. Discernment is about choosing the better among good options to serve God and others best.

In the Ignatian tradition, the discernment process will lead you to a definite and authentic decision that is accompanied by spiritual consolation, a feeling of peace, hope, etc., that brings you closer to God and your community. For Protestants, too, inner peace is a sign of God’s presence.

There are some other voices I’ve heard. A young Korean Jesuit said that in our decision-making, “God respects our freedom.” A Japanese Jesuit added that “it’s dangerous to be too certain about who you are. What does it mean to be a Jesuit? I’m not sure I’m really a Jesuit.” St. Ignatius talked about ongoing discernment as well as informative spiritual desolation. There is also what one priest called “sufficient certainty” for a decision.

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I had a nice routine. I would wake up, prepare lessons, have lunch with the Jesuits and volunteers, play tag with the kids, teach English, play trumpet, have dinner with friends, some more students, read, exercise and sleep. I had Saturdays off and I’d go see Bong Dei. On Sundays I played my trumpet at the Mass and taught students in the afternoon. It was a simple and happy life.

There was progress on the changes I had recommended to the directors. After Long’s stitches, I didn’t bring up Summerhill in the office. I got along with the teachers better, and the principal started to lower her guard. I still played games with the kids, but in a more controlled way. A new volunteer was joining us, and she and Father Luke wanted to see if we could organize a musical in the coming year.

I wondered if I had been honest with my discernment. I had prayed for indifference and I did arrive at a new place—but even as I was telling everyone I’d be leaving, I had felt a tug inside. People talked about the “movements” of the heart. This was a movement.

In July, I discerned again. I didn’t tell anyone. This time, I wanted to stay.

One day in August, the Community went out to brunch. The subject of my leaving came up. I said that maybe I would stay. One Jesuit, who is very perceptive, said that I wasn’t done discerning.

Father Clyde was there. He asked to see me after.

He told me the story of his discernment.

*

Father Clyde was finishing up his master’s in theology at Georgetown as a Jesuit. He was a talented student, headed for a promising career as an academic in the study of missions. He was set on getting a Ph.D. One day, the Jesuit mission in Southeast Asia called him to come back to Cambodia.

“Going back would mean I’d have to give up on the Ph.D.,” he said. “Can you imagine the chaos I was going through?”

So he went to Georgetown's retreat house in the forest to discern with a spiritual director over eight days of prayer.

For the first five days, all the feelings inside came up. Father Clyde exhausted himself with anger at the whole situation. By the sixth day, he couldn't bring himself to pray and went for a walk instead. The Bible verse for the morning prayer was from the forty-second Psalm: "as the deer pants for water, my soul thirsts for you." The moment he laid eyes on that passage, all the voices inside him became quiet and he was given spiritual consolation.

On the seventh day, he went for another walk. Suddenly, among the trees, he saw the faces of people he had met in Cambodia.

"I didn't know what was happening—I thought it was an illusion. I saw the school children I met, the lady who got a heart attack and passed away—their faces appeared one by one. Then I heard something. It was a voice. '*I am here,*' it said. '*I need you.*' It was the voice of Jesus."

Hours had passed when he came to himself.

"I knew where my heart was."

On the last day of the retreat, he had to find "confirmation," the last step of the discernment process. The spiritual director told him to ask God directly for it. When Father Clyde came to pray, there was overwhelming peace about leaving academia for the mission in Cambodia.

He went back to Georgetown, where his friends and professors thought he was crazy. But he was at peace. Years later, Father Clyde was sent to get a doctorate in order to support academia and spirituality in Cambodia. His reach today goes beyond Cambodia, and he is a prominent figure in education and publishing in Southeast Asia.

"My identity is clear," he said. "I am a Jesuit. Our goal is the greater glory of God. But we have to discern the special purpose in our lives to accomplish this. When we discern that purpose, we can easily decide on the means to get to that purpose for the greater glory of God.

"Your discernment is not about whether you will volunteer at the school another year or not. It's about your vocation—what you will do. What do you want to do?"

*

The school year was coming to a close. I let people know I'd be leaving, but I spent August in prayer for greater inner freedom in one last period of discernment.

I meditated on the "Principles and Foundations" of the *Spiritual Exercises* by Saint Ignatius. Anything—"health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one"—could elicit a deeper response to God and inspire greater service. A deeper response to God was the point of the holy indifference that Father Clyde had mentioned.

I reasoned that the best thing I could do for the world was to stay and help with the English program. At a job interview in Phnom Penh, people would be asked about their English. If they could speak, the interview would be conducted in English and they'd be more likely to be hired. The Cambodian people were eager to learn English, and there was a clear need.

The Jesuits would say that I was accompanying them. For this, I admired them. They cared for each person they accompanied and didn't count the cost. The words I used to hear in my Protestant upbringing—"salvation," "faith," "miracles"—found layers of new depth through the way the Jesuits lived in quiet service. Their vows were to things people prefer to avoid: poverty, chastity, and obedience. Surrendering everything, they lived in deeper joy. If I stayed, can I offer not great service, but, like a Jesuit, *more* and *greater* service?

"There's nothing to discern," Father Clyde joked. "Just stay!"

"If you stay," Liya said, "you can see my son." I had just met her four-year-old daughter, whom she had been talking my ears off about. She was planning to have another baby.

"You can learn more about the students," the English program coordinator said. She had a rough school experience in a village nearby, and this turned into a great passion for education and children. Everyone respected and adored her.

"Stay at the school a year longer," another Khmer friend advised me. "You'll be in a better place to get a master's or a new job."

"Cambodian children need you," my best Cambodian friend, a teacher in Phnom Penh, messaged me.

"You create people," Bong Dei said. "Stay one more year. I beg you."

I considered the hard things of being there: the triple-digit weather without air conditioning, the fatigue that hit me every evening, mosquitoes, periodic stomach aches from the food, the smallness of what I was doing. I had nothing I could give to my own family. I was having hair loss—from the water, I think—and bad allergies, especially when the country was covered in smoke in January from the yearly burning of rice fields.

But I could lose some hair in Cambodia—it'll grow back—and spend January with a runny nose. I could also leave with nothing but gratitude and carve out a meaningful life somewhere else.

Each "movement" had dug deeper. Now I felt free for either path. I offered my path to God, but I prayed for the heart to stay.

Gradually, the self coloring the meditation less and less, it dawned on me that I'd be forcing a good thing that wasn't in my heart by staying. This time, I was sure.

What I'd do and where I'd go wasn't clear. But this didn't worry me.

One night, I had a late dinner with Father Luke. I shared everything with him.

"What are you passionate about?" he asked. I told him. "I could tell," he said. "Did you thank God about it?" I hadn't. "Start with that."

*

Then I came across Mark 5.

There was a man who lived in the tombs, cut himself with stones, could not be held down by chains or by people, and roamed about the tombs and the surrounding hills naked. In today's terms, we might say the man suffered from extreme cases of clinical depression, self-hatred, impulse control disorder, and antisocial personality disorder. He "had an evil spirit in him," many demons named Legion. Jesus healed him with his words and deeds.

This was my two years in Cambodia. The broken man was me, and the Cambodian children with their beautiful smiles, the friends that loved me with noncompetitive love, the strangers who welcomed me like their brother, and the Jesuits that showed me a new way of life were Jesus, the healer.

After being healed, the man begged to follow Jesus. Jesus said no. He had a different mission for him. Jesus discerned that it would be better for the man to go back home rather than join Jesus on the road. He had compassion for the broken man and his broken family: “Go back home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how kind he has been to you.”

The man went to his family and friends and gave himself totally, “all through the Ten Towns, telling what Jesus had done for him.”

What if I went home, too? I knew I could be the better son and brother I hadn’t been. I was different. The damp, drizzly November in my soul had passed, and I felt the coming of spring.

I had something to give.