

Culture Shock

I often feel a sort of vague and general dis-ease since I left Vietnam for England. I have named it a dislike of English culture, or a cultural re-entry shock. But these labels explain little, and the first seems simply false. I have lived and continue to live in England and I am much too happy a person to continue on in this happiness if I am truly living in a culture I dislike. What is going on here?

The central difference between life as we encounter it and work with it in Vietnam and our lives in England has to do with basic survival. Life in Vietnam, in the circles of our work and primary concern is basic survival. People struggle for daily food, they scrounge for potable water, they hunt for the basic health care to stay alive, they search for shelter from the rains, bugs, rats or beating sun. They struggle to find part-time work on a daily basis. They are underclothed, underfed, undersheltered and undertended. On the other hand, most of us from the middle and upper classes not only have all of these things but we take them for granted, view them as sort of birth right. Our struggles are for growth, security, personal pleasure, entertainment, enrichment, culture etc.

There is nothing wrong with any of this. In fact living on the edge of survival, living in misery -- which I would define as facing what most Vietnamese people face-- is a bloody drag. I find nothing valuable in it at all. Nothing romantic, nothing noble. But, when one has been in intimate contact with people struggling for the basics, when one has thrown one's lot in with them in their struggle, no matter how minimally one has joined them, one gets

sensitized to life on the edges. It begins to be part of our thinking, what we enter into each day, what gives our life guidance and meaning.

Here our lives are full. British lives are notoriously full. We pick up our own works, working, studenting, mothering and fathering, whatever. Yet beneath the surface the contrasts are there. Somehow, and I think this is almost always beneath the level of conscious awareness, this duality between the struggle for necessities and the pursuit of what's beyond, raises its nagging head. Something else is required in all of this. There must be mechanisms in us, or at least those of us to whom this happens, which deeply and intuitively recognizes the priority of the necessary over the beyond-the-necessary. If both of these phenomena were in place -- the distinction and awareness of the distinction and the priority of the necessary -- then one could understand and explain this heavy feeling which comes so powerfully.

Suppose this were so. So what? This would seem to be so much counterproductive pain. Why not learn to purge it? What good can it do? This is tricky because such feelings of discontent may well serve no good purpose at all. Certainly we do not want to retreat in our own lives to the level of the struggle for necessity. Most of us simply cannot (either realistically or psychologically) devote our whole lives to others' struggles for survival. So how can these inner proddings be converted into positive energy? I believe there are several powerful messages trying to break through the barriers of our protective consciousness, and these feelings can be put to good use. I have developed a number of these themes in things I have written before, but I will enumerate some of them here.

We need to study the relationships between our world of plenty and others' worlds of the lack of necessities. My contention is that they are related causally, that in numerous cases of having (though not in all cases), our having luxuries --anything which is not a necessity -- (as a culture or whole economy) is had at the expense of others' necessities. To the extent that this is true and discoverable, then we would have a moral guide to shape our own consuming, no matter how "used" to it we were. In addition, whether or not we are causally responsible for others' lack of necessities, each of us could certainly trim our luxuries to make space for others' necessities in our lives. The easiest is with money, or excess goods, which we could share. Much more importantly is with our lives. By cutting back here and there in our pursuit of our luxuries, we can make time and energy and space available to work in solidarity with those who struggle for necessities.

Thus I believe I can better understand what happens to me. Something deep inside me is calling out, pleading with pain, saying in effect: K, do not forget so soon. Do not turn away. You were closer to where you belong. Do not go away, K, do not. And the trouble is not even that I turn away. I really do not. But, I drift. It is as though I had been driving alertly down the highway for hours, then as I get close to home I get sleepy. I am still driving; I am still on the road. But from time to time I am drifting, sliding now toward the center, then toward the shoulder. The consciousness is calling to stay awake in my fullness.

So how should I -- we -- respond? The call for vigilance is a good one. The call to keep alive the struggle and not to get caught up in our other worlds here. That is important. We need

to keep the place of the other alive. To work one with the other to reinforce and help each other. To reach out to bring us into the struggle with us and not let them pull us away into their worlds. My mistake is to keep thinking it is some huge call to chuck it all and doing something grandiose. No. I think that is probably not it at all. At least for me. I have chosen my work and it is good work. There is nothing to apologize for or be embarrassed. I do good and important work. I just have to keep hard at it. No doubt there is more going on, and maybe what I describe above is not it at all. But, it seems quite plausible, and seems to fit my own experience.