

It was the last day that I lived in Sa Pa. This town lies a mile high on the Hoang Lien Son mountain range along the Chinese border in Northwest Vietnam. Three main tribes inhabit the region: Hmong, Tai, and Red Zhao. Because the province lacks teachers, volunteer students from the University of Ha Noi arrive each year to share their knowledge in different subjects. As one of these volunteer students, I taught mathematics, my favorite subject and my concentration in high school. The 45 days spent there went by so quickly. Now on my last day, I realized that I had learned more during that experience than I had ever expected.

My daily routine started at six in the morning when the fog still covered the mountainous village. I walked to the stream down in the valley and washed my face with cool water running from the top of the mountain. A feeling of freshness embraced me. Then I came back to my house and prepared for my lecture one hour later. On the first few days, I had to use body language to communicate with my students because, though we were of the same nationality, they spoke only limited Vietnamese. We quickly came to understand each other, however, through the language of mathematics. Problems that related closely to their lives, such as counting the number of buffaloes and oxen, attracted them more than I had expected. Day by day each young learner tried to show up for class, although some of them had to walk across a mountain to reach the school. By looking into their eyes I could see that the children had a true thirst for knowledge.

While the children learned from my math lectures, they also taught me lessons of life in the Highlands. As a 17-year-old man who had lived all his life in the city, however, I found it difficult to complete the daily tasks to which the children were accustomed. They showed me how to lead a buffalo from the terraced rice fields. When I tried to lead the animal, it was

intractable in my hands. It pretended not to hear my commands and bounded off in a completely different direction. Only when my small students told me to shout “Tac-Tac-Tac” did the buffalo obey my orders. Five days later, leading a buffalo felt like a familiar activity to me; my little tutors even coached me to ride it. All of my expectations were exceeded when I managed to climb onto the large back of this mammal successfully on the first try. The feeling of this unique experience still remains in my mind.

Life is never boring in this land despite the lack of television, computer games, or other entertainment media. Smiling never ceases on the faces of the children. During the first few days in Sa Pa, I wondered how the children could feel so much joy when they lacked the variety of toys and games and other material things which seem to preoccupy the more “fortunate” children. But within a short period of time, I understood. The richness in simplicity creates their happiness. The distraction of entertainment media and material possessions, which so many of us take for granted, focuses our attention on things that cannot bring us true joy. Closer fellowship with family and community nurtures us in ways we cannot fathom, and that “hands-on” connection with things of the earth (dirt beneath our feet, water in the stream, rice growing in the fields) and with the earth’s creatures (like the buffalo) produces a sense of larger connection that we, as human beings, need.

The following day, I would go to the train station and return to my home. My bag was full of traditional presents from my students: a full black dress of the Hmong, wooden toys of the Tai, and silver rings of the Red Zhao. But the most wonderful gift was the image of the tribal people in Sa Pa: “Many people in this world live happily without what many of us assume to be indispensable material comfort.”