

What Lead Me to Thailand:
My Decision to be a Conscientious Objector
and My Alternative Service in Thailand
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I was a college student during the tumultuous 60's and the Vietnam war. After several years of soul searching what to do, I decided I could not be involved in killing, so I applied for the status of "Conscientious Objector". But it took two years of wrangling with the Draft Board to win my case and then to get my "alternative service" accepted. Of the many options I had, I chose to go to Thailand as a teacher. I went there in 1971 and worked 2 years to fulfill my service obligation and then continued working another year because I liked it so much. I came back to America to get a PhD and then went again to Thailand for another 3 years to learn and enjoy more of the Thai culture and Buddhism. During this second period I learned "Nuat Boran" (Thai Massage), seeing in it the Buddhist qualities and practices I had learned in the first period. A third trip in '92 was devoted to further study of Thai Massage.

What I did was called "alternative service". It was alternative instead of military service. As a conscientious objector I refused to have anything to do with the military, even as a so called "non-combatant." But I was quite willing to serve my country in another way – which was in fact provided for by the law but they didn't want anyone to know it. The law that allowed the draft was called "The manpower service act" and it provided for a number of ways to serve the country: basically anything for a non-profit organization that was for the health or welfare of the country. The military was listed as only one of several types of service, but of course that is all the law was ever used for.

The idea of making everyone including women do some kind of national service has been around for awhile and I believe has some merit; some other countries have it. But this being basically a warrior culture we only think one serves the country when one kills a so called enemy. We don't recognize service to Country in doing things like educating children, helping poor communities make improvements, helping in nursing homes etc, like VISTA and like the Peace Corps. [About the Peace Corps, general Hurshy who was the head of the Selective Service during my time said that "alternative service for a conscious objector must be a hardship, not a junket in the peace corps." In other words, a punishment for not going along. So I was not allowed to join the Peace Corp for my alternative service and VISTA wasn't invented yet.]

Anyway, I felt I had talents in language and teaching and I could serve America better by being a peaceful worker among the people of a foreign

country than being a soldier.

It was a messy two year ordeal for me to get the status of "Conscientious Objector". My local Draft Board in Georgia automatically refused it and all appeals and I then had to refuse induction and face court trial. The headquarters in Washington, DC decided I would win a court case because of the stack of documentation I had of all the infractions and mismanagement my local board did in my case and so they ordered my local board to give it to me. My local draft board was in a poor very conservative cotton farming county. They thought I was a communist.

After finally being granted the CO status, in accordance with the law, I submitted several proposals for doing an alternative service. But the Board ignored them and ordered me to work as a janitor in a Hospital in Atlanta. It took another arbitration with someone sent down from headquarters for my proposal to be considered and accepted.

My proposal was to work as a volunteer teacher in some school overseas. There were several organizations that supplied teachers and aid to schools around the world. I decided to go with a program call Volunteers in Missions by the Presbyterian Church. I was given the choice of Kenya, Turkey, Iran, Berlin (I had studied in Germany during college and spoke German), and Thailand. They all sounded good, but finally Thailand seemed like the best for me.

During the 2 years it took to get the CO, I got a Masters Degree in Language Education at the University of Georgia. So I was trained to teach languages and was interested in learning languages. I knew that the Thai language is tonal like Chinese and I thought that would be unique to learn, plus Thailand is Buddhist and I had some curiosity about that religion.

I spent 3 years in Thailand teaching, came back to the US and got a PhD in Linguistics, and then went back to Thailand for another 3 years, again teaching but more doing various projects, living in villages, and studying in the Buddhist monasteries. I still think those were the best, most important years of my life. I don't know how much I helped the Thai people, but what they gave me is priceless and shaped my life.

I think I was a good ambassador for America, dispelling some of the Ugly American images they got from the military presence there during the war and the tourists. I learned to speak Thai and integrated into the culture and religion and made many good friends. My Thai students, colleagues, and neighbors were so happy that someone appreciated them and their culture and went to the trouble to learn their language that they were always doing things for me. But then that's the kind of people they are, generous and

genuine, and I'm sorry that soldiers and tourists don't get to know them.

Now I am a bridge bringing some valuable things of Thailand to America. That was President Kennedy's ideal for the Peace Corp – taking good will to other countries and then bringing understanding back to America to create a climate of mutual understanding and respect among nations so we would not have to go to war.

The decision process: I want to explain now more about my decision and the process of becoming a conscientious objector because that is relevant to young men today. I am glad that I had to make a choice and decide what I believe and what I stand for. That is one positive thing about the draft. But I was lucky that I could go to college and mature a little before having to make that decision. I am glad that I am on record as being against war and the use of killing to deal with situations both in my personal life and in foreign policy. And I am glad for the circumstance that lead me to Thailand and that I was mature and educated enough and free to take advantage of being there and learn from it. I am sorry for all the young men, including even my cousin, who were in Thailand at the same time but were prevented by their military situation from appreciating where they were. That is the tragedy for everyone that so many young men are put in situations in foreign countries that give both them and the natives of that country negative images to live with for the rest of their lives. That cannot lead to peace in the world.

I entered college in 1965 when the Vietnam War was just beginning. I was raised in a very conservative community and religion with traditional parents, though they were well educated. When I was in high school we were required to read books about how bad communism was. And of course the news always told about people trying to get out of their countries and come to America the "land of the free" and about what good things America was doing around the world to help poor countries. I bought all of that. I also wanted to become a preacher in my church and I thought everyone in the world knew America was the best country. So at the beginning of the war I didn't think anything about it. I assumed the President knew what was best and we had to defeat communism. We forget now that it took several years for people to even start to question the war. Growing up after WWII I saw soldiers and convoys and heard about war and assumed that I would be a soldier and there would be another war.

College studies [I majored in Philosophy & religion and minored in French & German] lead me to think and question (which is why conservatives have always wanted to control education, it's dangerous). Then the summer of '67 I went to Europe to travel all over and study in Germany. (That was when the student movement in Europe began in Paris and Berlin, and I was

accidentally there, but that is not the main thing.) I fully expected people in other countries to ask me about how wonderful America is and tell me they want to come live in America. Instead I found people quite happy living where they were and in fact questioning some things about America. It was a real wake up when someone confronted me and said "Why are you Americans so stuck on yourself?" I began to see the world was a lot bigger with more diversity than I had thought and it couldn't be reduced to 'us good guys versus them bad guys'.

My senior year in college I went back to Germany to study philosophy and religion in the University of Freiberg, a beautiful old city that still bore destruction from the war and occasional sights of maimed veterans. I knew that when I returned to America I would face certain draft into the military and have to make a decision about what to do. I toyed with enlisting and going to officer school to get some benefits from it. But as that reality sunk in and I thought seriously about it, trying to visualize myself in the military and what I might be required to do, I felt revulsion and realized that all my values were against it. Killing is wrong and doesn't solve anything. Thinking in Christian terms then, I could only see Jesus as the peacemaker working to defuse situations through compassion and healing. I thought more important things make a country strong than its military, like justice, education, good health care, goodwill, the arts, happy citizens. If all our resources are diverted from domestic well-being to making military might, then there is nothing left worth defending. We must change our perception of the world and priorities. I saw from every angle that my beliefs and values lead me to want to stand for something more positive and creative than fighting.

But the rules for conscientious objector status are that one must either belong to a certain religion or have a personal religious belief that prevents one from going into combat. It is easy if one belongs to a religion like Quaker or Mennonite that have stated church policies against fighting. But I was in a fundamentalist church that glorified the military – which the more I thought about it was a contradiction, a slap in the face of Jesus. My parents couldn't understand why I wanted to be different and make trouble for myself - and them if the community found out.

Without church support I had to show that I had a personal religious belief that had legitimate foundations and a history. It took some thinking, but once I got into it, it was easy. I could honestly state my beliefs about life and my convictions against violence and war and show how they fit with my religious view and how they evolved from personal experiences and my studies both at school and on my own and people I knew. And I could also point to a history of being a mediator among friends in situations of conflict and refusing to fight back one memorable time when a bully attacked me at

school. I had felt a little guilty that maybe I was a coward, but then I realized I had convictions at an earlier age. I had never been impressed by toughness in speech, physique, or manner and always felt that kindness accomplished more than threats. The people I respected the most were Gandhi and Martin Luther King and I was inspired by the theory of non-violent action for social change.

I discovered I already had a religious-like belief and way of being and I was now being given the opportunity to give it an official name. Thus the process was good for me; through it I discovered who I am and honored it. Declaring myself a conscientious objector was both a spiritual and existential act; it was self discovery and affirmation. The process leading to that decision took about 3 years, but the decision seemed so obvious and natural once I finally made it and filled out the application with my written testimonial statement.

On occasions when I think back on it now I feel a warm smile. I don't fault those who made different decisions if that was right for them. But I feel sorry for those who were not allowed to make a true decision for themselves and discover who they are before they were thrust into impossible situations. It is an enormous thing for an 18 year old to do. I am glad I had until I was 21. And I am thankful to people who helped me because that is too big a thing to do alone. First help came from the Quaker organization, American Friends Service Committee which had informative publications and counselors to talk to. Then a Campus Minister, who was skilled in the various problems and issues we 60's students faced, guided me through all the legalities of the process. He gave me the technical understanding and confidence to go through all the appeals process and finally refusing induction, a criminal offence, which was necessary to force recognition of my claim, and then the ensuing Grand Jury and FBI inquiry with the threat of 5 years in prison. All the way, the head of the Local Draft Board, kept saying, "You are throwing your life away." It was a learning experience about the law and our government, which I admit taints my view today.

How Thailand helped me: Now back to Thailand. Having begun to discover my values, Thailand turned out to be the perfect place for me to further develop my manner of being. After the ups and downs of adjusting to a different world, I found myself completely at home and still think of it as equally home. Having lived in Europe, Asia and America, I consider myself a citizen of the world and wish countries would get over their jingoistic fears and fighting. I do not believe any country is perfect; all the ones I have lived in have their shadow sides and their nationalistic distorted views of the rest of the world. I like different qualities from all the countries I know and find I carry them all in me. Living and especially working in Thailand I found I was in some ways inescapably a product of America: my work ethic and

my sense of justice. But I resonated with and admired other qualities in Thai culture: their generosity, their unhurried patience and joy of just being, their graceful manner of moving and doing everything, their sense of respect. Their lives are people-centered rather than materialistic.

The most endearing, profound and lasting things that affected me came through the pervasive spirituality in Thai culture and some incredible Buddhist elders. One story is illustrative: Within a few months after arriving in Thailand I befriended a man from India who introduced me into the sizable Indian community in Thailand. When a young Swami came from India to give teachings, I was invited to accompany him for a week. I was much impressed with instructions he gave me. A Thai Buddhist monk, the abbot of an important monastery, heard about the Swami and wanted to meet him. I accompanied the Swami to this very special meeting. The Swami was full of enthusiasm for how the ancient wisdom (that is common to both Hinduism and Buddhism) is applicable today, sharing his personal insights and ways of teaching. The Buddhist monk said very little, he was so delighted and intent on hearing what the Swami was sharing. The Buddhist monk was much older, smaller, and less robust than the Swami, but his countenance was so radiant, peaceful and inviting I felt gladdened just to look at him. After the visit, walking out of the monastery, the Swami turned to me and said earnestly, "That man is a saint, if you have a chance to study with him, do it."

I did get the privilege to study with that Buddhist monk for 2 years. The widow of a former American ambassador to Thailand and China, then in her mid 80's, who had stayed in Thailand to study with this monk, made the arrangements for me. I found out this man was the teacher for the King of Thailand and held many important positions beside running a large monastery. He must have been extremely busy, but he always had an air of peaceful patience, quiet attentiveness, and interest in everything and everyone around. This profound non-judgmental presence and awareness was a quality I met in many Thai Buddhist monks and lay elders, especially a Thai yoga teacher I studied with later. It is an image and ideal that has stayed with me even if only as a question, how can one be that way? I must say that I have also met this quality in a few monastics and priests in other religions including Christian as well as some wise elders in America. But Thailand is where it struck me the first and strongest and where I got some practical guidance and support from a culture that is conducive to that way of being. (I must add that I am speaking about Thailand as it was over 30 years ago before the onslaught of so-called modern development.)

It was not so much the instructions and teachings as his manner that affected me. He had a quiet way of conveying in a few words more than I could fully comprehend but still gave me inspiration as over the years I saw

deeper layers of what he meant. I remember one evening all he said was, "A quiet mind is a bright mind and the bright mind sees." That was his summary of the whole topic of meditation. He was also very simple and practical, which is a common virtue in Thailand. He taught me a very simple meditation, mindfulness of breathing. Nothing dramatic happened, but I noticed after a few months that I felt less reactive to daily frustrations and enjoyed life more.

When I later encountered "Nuat Boran" (Thai Bodywork) and learned it, I recognized another Thai art form that shown with the gracefulness, efficiency, wholeness and even playfulness that marks the Thai manner of doing things. Americans today are impressed with the "yoga" in Thai Bodywork. But I see in it the Buddhist meditation, compassion, and presence. Imagine the healing power of the touch of someone with the presence of that venerable monk I described above. Not that many people who did Thai Bodywork did it with that degree of presence, but when it was there it was noticeable - and healing. This presence can attend any modality of bodywork and make it more effective. But combined with the graceful dance of Thai Bodywork it is awesome. That image is my ideal and inspiration. The best of Thailand brought back to America. That is the fruit of my "alternative service" as a "Conscientious Objector" to war.

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