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The Land of Smiles

A world religions class struck my attention the beginning of my sophomore year. I was especially interested in Buddhism, and even more so, curious about how people whom follow the Buddhist religion would live. Therefore I choose Chiang Mai, Thailand, home to hundreds of Buddhist temples and a country were merely everyone is Buddhist. Chiang Mai is a very traditional, cultural rich city. Another reason I wanted to go abroad was to be pushed out of my comfort zone and forced to see life from a new perspective, and Thailand did just that for me. Not only did I learn a ton about Buddhism and Thailand in general, I learned a lot about myself.

During my time there I was in school 5 days a week. All of my classes helped to integrate me into the society by teaching me things such as the Thai language, Buddhism, the cuisine, and even about remote hill tribes deep in the mountains. I met many other students and local Thai people whom I grew very close with. I also got the chance to travel a little while I was there and see the breathtaking beaches. My time in this country was one I will never forget, if I could change anything it would be to stay there ever longer than I did.

A lot of things were very different in Thailand. The food, the bathrooms, the people, and the list goes on. Many things I saw as “strange” or “not normal”, then I took a step back and realized that my “normal” essentially means nothing. My “normal” is something me and my society have constructed through the lens in which we see the world. I then started to think deeper about these differences and tried to understand to my best ability why things were the way they were. Respect is something I feel the U.S. sometimes lacks in, however, respect is seen in the everyday lives of people in Thailand. The first and foremost, the king. People admire him, look up to him, and trust him, and he is seen as almost a godly figure to many. His face is

everywhere from roads, to money. A citizen would never talk badly of the king, nor would one ever do anything to hurt his image. For example you would never step on a Baht bill with your foot if it was flying away. In Thailand the foot is considered the dirtiest part of the body and the lowest, therefore stepping on the king's face with your foot would be illegal and taboo. I found this interesting because by having freedom of speech in the U.S. people talk poorly of our president all the time and aren't afraid to show it.

Another place you see respect being part of everyday life and society is when greeting someone. When greeting someone you wai which is where your hands are in a prayer like position, the hands will be placed somewhere from your chest/heart all the way to the top of your head depending on the social status of the person. I found this interesting because in the U.S. we essentially greet all people the same. Although we have social classes in the US you do not see them as prominent in society. You may not say what's up dude to the president, but you would essentially greet him as if he was any other adult or authority figure with a simple "hello" just as you might greet a friend or acquaintance. Respect is also seen highly in the schools of Thailand. Thai students respect their professors as much as they do their parents. I knew this was prominent there but because my classes were mostly all Americans I didn't see it hands on. However I did still notice it. For example one day I was talking to a guy who helped with the program, he was about 2 years older than I am. He was explaining to me his frustration of other American students complaining of homework and professors. He saw this as extremely disrespectful because some of the professors were also professors he had in class. This struck me as odd at first because in the U.S. students complain about professor's all the time and no student would ever get offended from hearing you talk about a professor they also had in that manner. This same guy and I were talking one day about birthdays and he was confused about why

American college student's just go drink on their birthdays and receive presents. I asked him what he would do on an average birthday and he replied by saying he would call his parents and thank them for giving him life. This took my breathe away because I had never thought of it from that perspective and I feel as if this really goes to show how important family and respect is to them. In America we have a lot of individualism, therefore a birthday is all about that individual and them celebrating their birth, but why not thank the two people who actually gave that to you in the first place? It's something that I've given a lot more thought and consideration that I never would have before.

I greatly admire the respect the Thai people have and since I've been back I've tried to integrate some of these values into my own life. By being mindful about how I treat my elders. By being respectful to my parents and thankful for all they have done for me. By appreciating my professors and their hard work and dedication to help me succeed in life. And even our president for the amount of time and effort and stress I'm sure he has to experience every day. I live in a country where a lot is handed to me and I realized how many people I take for granted and don't take the time to thank or do something in return.

As I mentioned before Buddhism is very prominent in Thailand. Like other religions it teaches good morals and values as well as provides some sort of structure or code for society to follow by following the five precepts. I think that Buddhism as a religion has a large impact on institutions in Thailand. Institution is defined by google as "a society or organization founded for a religious, educational, social, or similar purpose." Therefore society is an institution. Buddhism teaches to be kind, generous, and giving, this can be seen everywhere. I never once felt unsafe in my time there and never hesitated to ask for help if I needed it. Everyone was so kind to me and always willing to help, this made me feel as if I belong there and as if I could call it home for a

short amount of time that I was there. I loved that they were open minded and didn't just avoid me due to the fact that I was a foreigner or treat me different. This can also be seen when the monks go around and gather food. I loved that society respects the monks, and instead of it being viewed as begging it is giving you good merit to provide them with food. Buddhism also teaches people to be mindful of what they do in all tasks. This is practiced in everything such as eating, walking, your actions, your words and many others. This teaches people to think before they act and to act in a positive manner. Another thing Buddhism stresses is detaching from things. I like this because it teaches people that they do not need many material things to be happy. Therefore people are happy whether they are poor or rich and make the most of what they have. I find this important because it is one of the greatest things I took from my time there. Appreciating the little things and not worrying so much about material things that Americans tend to believe bring us "happiness", instead of things like family and nature for example. Following the precepts, being mindful of your actions, and detaching from unnecessary things all influence the country and institution in a positive manner.

Shortly after I left Thailand there was a bombing in Bangkok. This struck me right in the heart because I grew very close to many local Thai people from Bangkok whom I knew would be effected. It also worried me because I knew many people still traveling there. The decision to place a bomb in Bangkok will negatively affect Thailand in many ways. Thailand relies heavily on tourism, and it brings a lot of money into their economy as well as provides a lot of jobs. Due to this bombing I feel that there will be a major decrease in tourism due to fear and turmoil in the country. Therefore it will hurt the economy of Thailand. Tourism in my opinion is hurting their people more than it's helping in the first place. With an increase in tourism, that raises the standard of living, therefore hurting the locals whom are not making enough to keep up with the

rising standard. With tourism also comes rising standards in comparison to their daily life. Toilets for example, Thai people use squat toilets, however most tourists would be turned off by this, therefore they must import / make western toilets, along with all the other amenities that tourist want. Therefore a lot of the money being made is going toward importing things that tourist will want and need while there. There is also countless companies, resorts, and common tourist attractions that are owned by non-local people. Therefore although the tourist money is being spent there, a lot of it isn't staying there. Instead this money is going into the pocket of someone who will then spend it in their home country or another country and not stimulate the Thai economy. I think that U.S. tourists and all tourists in general are negatively effecting Thailand because most people when they go to a country such as this do stay in the nice hotels, resorts, eat at non Thai restaurants etc. I believe that if people choose to stay in locally owned places, eat at local restaurants, and do more locally run activities it would help the economy and people greatly. I think that giving up some amenities and conveniences is worth it to help the country in a positive manner and get the most out of your experience. This also would help tourists learn more about the culture and have an understanding of it rather than just sitting by a 5 star hotel pool all day and contributing to funneling money out of the country.

With my hill tribe study course we would take the weekends to travel to hill tribes in the mountains. First we visited a Hmong village which I found especially cool because many people in the U.S., and world for that matter, know little no nothing about the Hmong people. Fortunately I grew up in the Midwest where we have many Hmong people. I went to school with many Hmong children and my best friends in high school was Hmong. I learned a lot from them as well as courses I have taken in college and high school about the Hmong culture and community. Therefore I was honored to be able to visit a village and have some previous

knowledge as well as help others from America learn and understand their culture and past. The other village we visited was the Akha village. This experience was hands down my favorite of my time there. The people of this village spoke neither Thai or English so I got very good at charades while there. My host family was exceptional, they provided me with shelter and welcomed me with open arms. Not being able to communicate put me in an uncomfortable situation, one that I have never been in before. I was also put into a situation where I had to eat food I would never touch in America simply because I did not want to be rude to these people whom were so kind. I was definitely pushed out of my comfort zone there because their homes are essentially bamboo ceiling and dirt floors. My “bed” was a little bit of hard bamboo sticks and a small blanket on the ground. However I was so grateful to be pushed out of my comfort zone like this because I learned a lot not only about myself but others. My initial thoughts were oh my god how do you people live with not even having a bed or a kitchen stove, and then it made me realize that once again my ideas are shaped by my own lens. And by putting myself in their shoes I was able to see that it’s not that they are unfortunate, that’s just the way they live. It made me envious that these people were all so close and so happy with life with having so little. It goes to show that life isn’t about the things you own such as a house, car, bed, etc. it is about being together with people whom you care about and making the most of what you have. My host “mama” as she asked me to call her was a phenomenal women. Although we could not talk we formed an extremely close bond, and I even cried when I left her and her village. I am thankful to of had this opportunity to be forced out of my comfort zone and realize that what I consider as being comfortable and happy can be a completely different thing to someone else.

My short time in Thailand has definitely change my life forever in many ways. Being there I realized how much we as a society and me as an individual take for granted, and waste. I

found it troubling when I was there that there was very few if any public garbage's. This made me realize that there was even simple things like public disposal and recycling programs that I took for granted, something I was never in a million years of appreciated as much if I hadn't been forced to be somewhere without them. The same goes for toilets, because when you are forced to use only "squat" toilets with no toilet paper unless your remembered to bring some, you learn to miss and appreciate things we everyday Americans use abundantly. We waste so much here in the U.S. from food, to resources and being in Thailand make me a lot more conscious of things like that. Since my return home I always only use reusable bags, I no longer buy or drink bottled water. I eat healthier, smaller portions and try my hardest not to waste food. I also try to buy as many locally made products as I can even if it means spending a little more money. After returning home I now take time to slow my busy life down and enjoy the little things, like walks. In America we are always in a rush and have somewhere to be that we forget to take the time to enjoy the beauty our country has to offer. I'm also a lot more conscious with my money and what I spend it on. This is because it seems morally wrong to me to buy certain things I know I don't need when I know that money would go a long way in Thailand and could possibly feed a family for several days. And lastly I have developed a passion for traveling so I can see what the rest of the world has to offer, and learn how other cultures live in comparison to mine.

Overall this was an amazing experience, one that has forever changed my life and one that I will never forget. I learned so much about the Thai culture and even more about myself as a person. I learned that many cultures are very different and that doesn't make one right or wrong over the other. And lastly I took away from this experience that it's the little things in life that

bring happiness, sometimes people need to take a step back and reflect on how they live their life and realize what their goals and aspirations are and do what is necessary to achieve them.