

5.11.2010

It's been a long time. I don't expect any of you to forgive me for the large gap between entries of this e-journal, weblog, or whatever you wish to call it. Still, I am writing some thoughts down finally, despite my own fear of another impending desert between this entry and the next (There is certainly another impending dessert [ha, ha... I know, I know]). I simply must keep writing, for my own sake. Also, while I was visiting the U.S. recently, a few of my friends requested more. Since I now know at least a few people are actually interested, I will try to be more diligent in posting these things. Still, I'm not promising anything other than to try.

The fact is that I was simply overwrought by the spectacle of another kind of desert. For those of you who have not lived overseas, this is not possible to explain, really. I just feel that there is this vast incomprehensible wasteland between myself and Thai culture. That may sound despairing and, at times I admit to feeling quite lonely and out of place. Lest you, dear reader, worry too much – please know that I'm fine. I'm just trying to describe the difficulty of traversing this immeasurable distance without water or compass, with little way to gauge the distance I've traveled. I've read books, I've studied the maps but still... Am I walking in circles?

Of course, sometimes this stark landscape is mesmerizing, exciting, and enchanting. Some of the most beautiful places I've ever been have been deserts, after all. And, of course, I have Amy to steady my nerves. Thank God (or Whoever). Some days I feel so absolutely blessed for this amazing opportunity and for the person I have with whom to share it.

The truth is, though, I truly believed I had lived overseas before but this is unprecedented. In both previous instances, I knew the date of my return. In fact, I booked the return ticket before departure. This time is different. I don't know how long I will be gone. I'm just trying to learn as much as I can and enjoy every precious moment of my life as much as possible. That is the key for me.

O.K. On to other things.

Mark Twain once defined education as: "that which reveals to the wise, and conceals from the stupid the vast, vast limits of their knowledge." These words strike me in a personal way, as well as in my professional life. As you can see, I am undergoing a humbling kind of education now. The ability of life to convince me that I am ignorant persists, in fact, as it has throughout my travails. As a teacher, though, Twain's words strike even closer to the heart of my existence, for it is my lot in life to "reveal to the wise" how little they know. As for the stupid, I must convince them to find a different path. Music theory is a lot like ornamental gardening, in that respect. There are weeds in every classroom (although some of them blossom when placed in a business, economics, or biology classroom) and many of the most intoxicating flowers require delicate treatment.

I am trying to tread lightly but Thai students have a very different learning style, as a product of their extant system. Many of my students want "just the facts." They want

to memorize, not to engage with the questions of their encounters. With this attitude comes an unquestioning authority, certainly, that is not found in the U.S. classroom. If I took gratification from that, then my job would be so easy. If I were able to simply bask in the glory bestowed upon me, as my rightful status, then I would be so content. But... I want my students to contradict me. I want them to ask questions, not only of me but, also, about the validity of their textbooks. I'm not talking only about music, here. I want my students to have a sense of history, an ability to think critically. That is my own upbringing and, if they are to succeed in the "Westernized" world, then they truly have no choice.

Twain was referring to the immensely large array of information in this stupefying world; however, I think his words also apply to the importance of questions. Questions are the vehicle to uncover more questions, in his worldview, and a life lived fully would have to constantly engage with information in the pursuit of more. I want my students to live this way because it's what I find gratifying. I want them to succeed in the world at large and, although my style of questioning may seem at odds with Thai culture and tradition, I feel that it poses less challenge to me than would a Thai style of education in the modern world.

This is the dilemma; these are the questions that surface for me as I prepare for another semester at Mahidol. I'm excited for the upcoming year and all the challenges that may arise. I love what I do and I return restored and ready to face the task at hand.

More later...