

reflections and appreciation (Southeast Asia)

August 12, 2008

Everything still feels off. Over a week later, everything still has a different texture, a different tone to it. Aside from the "big things"--no more bargaining for meals, no more wearing the same shirt all week, no more burning my skin off with DEET spray--there's something more subtle, a deep, overwhelming feeling I wouldn't even know how to put to words.

And although I'm slowly getting back into a routine (or as much routine as a teacher on break can have), I still miss traveling with all of my being. I miss the adventure, I miss the plan-less plan, I miss that amazing feeling you get only when everything you need is right on your back--or more specifically, in a money belt around your waist. Most of all, I miss making those instant connections with the stranger to my left and the stranger on my right.

It's funny...I had hoped this trip would satiate my wanderlust, but it only served to inflame it. It's not that I don't have my fair share of urban adventures in New York or that I don't love this city, yet already I'm restless to leave again.

I took a walk through Manhattan the other day--watching the sun slide across The Reservoir in Central Park, down the storied buildings of Midtown, and finally behind the hills of Jersey--and a line from Dar Williams' "Mortal City" kept running through my head. She says about New York, "People came to this city because they love other people." I've always agreed; because beneath the buildings and in those parks and on those subways are the people, the personalities that breathe so much life into this city. This is the same reason I adore backpacking. Southeast Asia for me wasn't the temples or the landscapes or the waterscapes I encountered along the way, as much as I enjoyed them. It's the mundane, everyday moments that stand above the temples of Angkor Wat and the waterfalls of Luang Prabang. It's the old men playing checkers on the sidewalk and the boy flying his kite along the Mekong; the weeping girl holding onto her father during a funeral procession, the family sharing a meal and singing beside the railroad tracks; and the late-night conversations I had with friends around the bar table. I went to Asia expecting the exotic, but not surprisingly I found the universal.

It's so easy to give into negativity when I read about the horrors and injustices that are going on in the world--and in my own country. Every day "on the road" reminded me how much I'm insulated from poverty, from violence, from having to choose between 75 cents for a day in the rice fields and \$5 for 30 minutes with a Westerner. Yet the more I travel--and the more I teach--the more I find those negative aspects of the human condition outshone by those small moments of humanity, those thoughtless acts of kindness that highlight, to quote Faulkner, our innate capacity for "compassion and sacrifice and endurance," that demonstrate mankind's ability to "not merely endure," but to "prevail." In short, I'm coming back from my trip with informed optimism, and--if not a greater understanding of the world and the people in it--at least a greater desire to understand...and to make a difference.

Before I close, a lot of thanks are in order. First of all, to all my friends and family in the "States": thank you for all your support and patience. Your messages of encouragement meant so much to me, especially considering my anxiety about my lengthy, rusty writing style. I hope that in between the wordiness (and all those ill-placed parentheses) I was able to reveal at least the core of what I was experiencing.

To those of you whom I met while traveling: you made this trip. I was so worried it wouldn't meet my expectations, but because of you those expectations were smashed, and I can only imagine what the journey would have been without all of you. I can never fully impart to you my appreciation...but I will start with a simple thank you.

I said earlier that I don't really know how to express what it feels like to be back. A few days ago I stumbled upon the final strip from "Calvin & Hobbes," my favorite comic strip. Snow covers the ground, and the two are discussing the newness and the beauty of it all. In one of the last frames, Calvin says:

"It's a magical world, Hobbes, ol' buddy.
...Let's go exploring!"

My thoughts exactly.

peace & love,
corey