

IN SEARCH OF STILLNESS AND SERENITY

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WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I DID NOT THINK SILENCE and serenity were important. As a child, I liked being taken by my mother on Christmas shopping expeditions when the crowds were thickest on Escolta, Raon, Carriedo, Avenida Rizal. As a teen-ager, I enjoyed holidays at the beach with the family and with friends, the more the merrier. I loved sound and movement, loud throbbing music, fast dances, flashing lights...

It annoyed me that my father preferred to take the family to tourist spots off season. So very typical of him, I thought, resentfully. I felt left out of things, was afraid I was doomed to be *forever* left out of things. Of fun things. Of things that mattered. Of things that mattered to me and my friends. Things like being popular, being in the know, being cool.

So perhaps what I feared was aloneness. Only much later did moments of solitude become precious, something to be hoarded and treasured. This was when I had been married for a while, and had small children, and sometimes felt that the demands on my time and attention were endless.

And then my husband accepted a job with UNICEF, and solitariness was thrust upon me. His job required us to move around the world a lot, and there were periods—after we had settled into our new house and found reliable help—when I would be by myself a lot. Tony would be travelling on official missions, or working in his office. The children would be in school,

but I would not have found a job of my own yet. So I would invent little errands for myself.

In Bangkok, I used to walk from our house on Sukhumvit Soi 23 to Asia Bookstore at the corner of Sukhumvit and Soi 15, select a paperback, then walk a couple of blocks farther to this Danish Bakery, where I'd order a cup of coffee and a pastry. And I'd just sit there, reading my paperback. Bangkok's roads were strident with traffic sounds, but both that bookstore and the café were quiet.

When I found a job as an editor in a magazine, my schedule filled up. And in time, we had made a good number of friends, both foreign and Thai. Tony's job required that he do a lot of entertaining, and in those days I found that lifestyle fun.

And so it was to be, in all the countries to which he was posted. But even as I threw myself willingly into that social whirl, part of me would sometimes seek out stillness.

Sometimes I found it in unexpected places. Like the home of this lady who made beautiful batik clothes which she sold in trendy boutiques. As she drove me to the place, Chalee, my Thai assistant, told me that the lady did everything herself—from dyeing the material to designing, cutting, and supervising the sewing. She was “a *Mom Chao*,” Chalee said, “a real princess,” not just an ordinary “Khunying,” who acquired the title because of “new money.” She was descended from the brother of a queen. Thai people used “a different kind of language” when talking to the “real royalty,” like her, Chalee added.

To my surprise, I found the princess to be, not just beautiful and remarkably youthful in that improbable way of some Siamese women, but disarmingly down-to-earth and unassuming. Her house was a lovely, old Thai-style villa, in Thon Buri, across the Chao Phya River from Bangkok. It had a great many windows and verandahs, so the indoors flowed seamlessly into the outdoors. What had been the dining room now served as her work room. It opened into a rambling garden, full of fruit trees, flowering plants, little ponds traversed by footbridges... and dipped gently down to a little dock on the river bank. Her old tables, jars, scrolls, tapestries had that indefinable quality which comes from, not having been bargained for and acquired, but anciently owned and treasured.

Chalee and I had come unannounced, so the princess—who said we must call her simply Nunie, which was her nickname, and never mind the

title—had to finish attending to a client before coming to us. She waved us out into the garden. And Chalee and I sat in basket chairs under the frangipani trees, sipping the cold lime juice which had been served to us by a maid in a sarong, and watched the barges and the small boats gliding slowly down the river. Behind us, Nunie's newly dyed fabrics, hung out to dry, were bright splashes of color, billowing like sails in the breeze. In my memory, it is one of those perfect moments, frozen in time.

When I was hired to teach literature by the Jesuit University in Seoul, the first office assigned to me actually belonged to an elderly Korean male professor who was on sabbatical leave. Nothing in the room belonged to me, save for a white porcelain tea set that I kept on a low wooden table against one wall. It was a Korean tea set with small, handle-less cups, a gift from one of my classes—one that I had taught earlier at Seoul National University. (It was a Korean custom for students to present their teachers with a gift at the end of the term, they said. But my good friend, Kang Bong Yang, told me that they did so only if they liked their teacher.) I brought in a small electric kettle so I could boil water to steep the tea leaves in. And that table with its tea things became my own little corner in a stranger's office.

I did not expect that I would ever feel at home in someone else's space, among his personal things—massive wooden furniture, leather-bound books, paper weights, a letter opener... But, in fact, I spent many quiet, contented hours in that office. Its single window overlooked part of the campus. So I had a view of young people strolling arm in arm down the lanes, or bent over their books under the trees. And sometimes I would remember the other office I had left behind in Diliman, with its view of spreading acacia trees, and the sound of the Carillon bells as the dusk slowly crept in.

During those years that we spent in Seoul, we often took out-of-town trips. I particularly loved the mountains—Soraksan, Tohamsan, Songnisan... But they were usually teeming with tourists—mainly Koreans—for the country was on the brink of becoming a fully developed nation. Often we would encounter busloads of farmers and their wives, still wearing the traditional Korean costume, doing the sights in high spirits, indeed, sometimes in a state of disorderly inebriation.

But now and then, I would go with Tony on his field trips to inspect different UNICEF projects. This would take us off the well-beaten tracks. One such trip was to Jeungdo, a tiny island off Mokpo, early in the winter. It

was a long, tiring drive from Seoul to Mokpo, and then an equally long boat ride to the island. We were housed in a traditional inn, which was heated *ondol* style, with steam from the cooking fire in the kitchen, running through flues under the floor, on which lay our sleeping mats.

One afternoon we were taken up a mountain trail to the little village's look-out point. The pace set by the men was too brisk for me, so I fell behind and waved them on. There was a flat rock under the shade of a small tree, which struck me as the perfect spot to catch my breath. But as I was about to sit down, I looked up and realized that I was not too far from the hill's crest. For the view before me was spectacular. The sky was overcast, so the sea was slate-grey, and the islands in the distance, a smoky lavender. Immediately below, scattered haphazardly about, were little settlements, peanut farms, seaweed set out to dry on thatch frames, a fishing boat or two, some mountain goats. And all was quiet and still around me, save for the chirping of invisible birds and the crisp rustling of a breeze through the branches of the tree.

In Rangoon, we lived in a house that was off the main road, and had a large garden, bordered by tall coconut trees. One could sit with a steaming cup of coffee in the morning, or with a frosty glass of iced tea in the late afternoon, among the potted ferns and begonias in our own portico, and feel that one wasn't in the city at all. We were surrounded by sounds which brought to mind childhood and other lost seasons. Dawn was announced by the crowing of cocks, dusk by the cawing of crows. On clear nights, there was the chirping of crickets; when it rained, the croaking of frogs. And both the afterglow and the starlight over the Inya Lake were enchanting.

Travel was restricted by the Burmese government, but foreigners were allowed some freedom, provided permission was secured from the authorities. One time, we went to Taunggyi, an old town in the hilly Shan states, perched some 5000 miles above the Bay of Bengal. It seemed hardly changed from the British hill station that it used to be, with its cherry trees and bullock carts, the vendors in the open market still dressed in the traditional garb of the various hilltribes, and an old, rather dilapidated wooden house standing in a grove of pine and eucalyptus trees doing service as a hotel.

Toward the end of our visit, U Win Tin, one of Tony's staff members who had accompanied us on the trip, suddenly remembered what he called "the monastery on the hill." So we turned into this bumpy narrow road which cut through fields of sugar cane, raising great clouds of dust behind

us. We could see it from afar, a white pagoda at the crest of terraces carved into the slope of a mountain. (U Win Tin must have told us its name, but I no longer recall it.)

Past the fields, the road climbed up till it came to a rusty gate. There we had to leave our van, and proceed on foot, taking care to first remove our shoes, as the grounds of Buddhist temples are considered sacred. Up a flight of crude stone steps cut into the slope, and down a narrow footpath, and we stood on the temple's main terrace. Below us was Inle Lake surrounded by dark emerald foliage.

I've written of this place in my book on Burma: "It is a secret, magical place, more precious than poetry... warm sunlight, soft whisper of a breeze through teakwood banyan trees, gentle harmony of birdsong and temple bells, wildflowers growing in the crannies of old walls, low, even chanting of a kneeling monk.... It is dearer to me because I know I shall never see it again. Even if I were to return to Burma, I don't think I shall find it. It will have disappeared, like all perfect things."

Paradoxically, it was in war-torn Beirut where I think I found more places to be quiet in. When we lived there, Lebanon—and Beirut itself—was divided into east and west. The west was where most foreign embassies and the international agencies were located. This was the Moslem side, controlled largely by the PLO, under the protection of the Syrian Army. The east was under the power of the Maronite Christians, led by the Gemayel and Chamoun families, who had their own private armies. We rarely crossed the border, an invisible demarcation line guarded by snipers strategically perched in the surrounding buildings, their pock-marked walls mute witnesses to the long-running civil war which had not really ended.

My favorite walk was on the promenade along the Avenue de Paris, early in the morning, after I had brought the girls to their school. At that early hour it was empty, save for the thin grey-haired old man in a faded blue tunic, selling fresh orange juice from a little cart adorned with plastic gladioli, not far from the lighthouse. I never grew tired of gazing out into that sea, the Mediterranean. The mist would still be banked on the horizon, and I could only make out the silhouette of Mount Lebanon, and the ship or two docked at the Beirut Harbor. The tide would be out, so beyond the craggy rocks close to the sea wall, men in windbreakers would be sitting on the large flat, moss-covered rocks, with their fishing poles and their baskets

full of bait. The grayness suited my mood which during those early months was untroubled but lonely.

When the mists lifted, the Mediterranean would turn a brilliant sapphire blue, its waves gilt-edged, the gulls swooping in graceful arcs. And the mountain would come to life—snowy crests, pine forests, little white houses with gleaming rooftops, grey rocks. But soon the old men would come with their dogs, to sip their cups of Arabic coffee while playing *tric-trac* (the original Arab version of backgammon) on the stone benches... and the housewives with their babies in their prams would stop by on their way to the grocer's... And I would walk on.

One morning, I discovered the seaside gate to the American University of Beirut campus. I followed the footpath past the football field, the basketball courts and the tennis courts; then climbed up some steps that led through the trees to the school buildings. About halfway up I found what I was looking for.

The stone steps were shaded by many old trees, and the ground around them had been allowed to practically run wild. In one spot, stood a little grove of pine trees, their branches growing quite close to the ground, forming a natural bower. And one of them had a trunk so bent to one side that it could serve as a bench. Off to one side were three girls, perhaps in their early teens. Two were busily scribbling on sheets of paper on top of books balanced over their knees. A third one, a bit younger than the other two, was trying to amuse herself by gathering into a pile the dried pine needles that covered the ground like a thick carpet. None of them paid any attention to me. From that height I had a clear view of the young men and women working out in the track, or kicking a ball around, and beyond them, of the promenade, and the sea. Now and then a couple would pass by, on their way up or down, absorbed in each other. This little pine grove would become “my” special little place.

But the protracted fighting—which went on long after the so-called ceasefire between Moslems and Christians—had isolated Lebanon, which at one time had been what its residents still liked to refer to as “the Paris of the Middle East.” So it was not difficult to find, within an hour’s drive from where we lived, a little deserted grassy spot under some umbrella pines, where one could simply spread a blanket over the grass, open a picnic basket, feast on Arabic bread and Haloumi cheese and whatever fruit was in season, and then lie back and enjoy the birdsong.

One time we were invited by Frieda, a member of Tony's staff, to her family's old villa in the small Druze town of Abey, up in the mountains. Her great grandfather had been the village blacksmith and had built the house in the late 19th century. It had walls of thick stone, deep windows, a high, vaulted ceiling, beautiful rosewood furniture, hand-carved and inlaid with nakkar and mother-of-pearl, and lovely old rugs, lamps, pipes, copper coffee pots...

Frieda walked us through a small forest of oak trees, to the olive orchards, where her father was cutting off large branches and putting them into baskets—the white (green) olives to be made into araq; the red, into vinegar; and the black (the sweetest of all), to eat as part of the traditional Lebanese mezze. And then we came to the olive press, and were offered some freshly baked Arabic bread to dip into the freshly pressed oil, which was delicious.

And there was a serenity about the olive grove, and the day, and the village itself, which seemed far removed from the ceaseless strife that plagued Lebanon.

I was delighted that New York City was full of pocket-sized parks tucked away among the imposing structures of glass and steel, where one could pick a stone bench among boxes planted to yellow jonquils or blue and violet petunias or orange daisies, and munch on a hot dog sandwich at one's leisure, sometimes while listening to a single man playing on a Spanish guitar, and sometimes to a full string quartet. They were tiny tranquil oases in that throbbing, speeding city.

But when I felt really troubled, and needed something to soothe my spirit, I would go—not on a week-end, when there were bound to be crowds, but on ordinary work days—as my friend Akiko Kitatani once suggested, to visit Monet's "Water Lilies" at the MOMA. In those days, the triptych was by itself, covering three walls of a small room. The fourth wall was all glass. And there was a couch in the middle of the room. So one could gaze at Monet's blues and greens and lavenders and pinks and turquoises for as long as one wanted. And then one could turn one's head, and gaze at the very real trees standing tall and stately against the very real blue sky. And both Monet's canvas and Nature's brought me the tranquility I sought.

When we returned to Manila, the biggest blessings of our homecoming were the renewed company of old friends, the picking up of my interrupted career, the resumption of activities I had always enjoyed: classes, book

launchings, writing workshops, conferences and seminars, art exhibits, lunches and dinners with students, colleagues, and friends, huge clan reunions... Life lived to the full for twenty years.

And then I found myself, once again, seeking stillness and serenity. But they seemed to have grown ever more elusive. Perhaps they were more accessible in those foreign countries because, over there, we did not have the same options that we have here. The many ties we forged were superficial. There were spaces closed to us, experiences unavailable to us. There was much we would never know, much we would never understand. Often we were thrown back on own resources. Often, we were actually alone, and not always by choice.

But when I once again had what I have called “life lived to the full,” I found myself wondering whether it was not simply life lived at a kind of breakneck pace, life crammed full of things which in the end would prove of dubious value.

One day, a graduate student of mine asked me when was the last time I was in a quiet place. And I thought: do I know any quiet places in this city which is my home?

There is a little Carmelite Chapel, just down the block from our townhouse, a white chapel, with a neat little courtyard planted to tall trees and flowerbeds, and a vine with yellow flowers clambering over its cloisters. When I was a child, I would sometimes walk to it, with my Lola and my Tita Pacita, to hear Sunday mass. In those days, Gilmore was a quiet little road. Around it were medium-sized houses with gardens. Today Gilmore feeds into Ortigas Avenue, and is never not clogged with traffic. I have often wondered why the nuns choose to stay. Sometimes I fancy that it might be because they know people like me need their chapel. I visit it now and then, just to sit in one of the back pews and be quiet with my own thoughts. Sometimes I pray.

Back when I was a university co-ed, my close friends and I had discovered, tucked away in one corner of the campus, a place which in those days was called the “Pharmacy Garden.” It was located between the Main Building and the University Chapel. We never saw Pharmacy students—or any other students—there; we didn’t know what purpose it served. We liked it because of that. It was our discovery, our little secret. There was a well in there which my friends and I chose to believe was a wishing well. I recall our skipping class one afternoon, shortly before graduation, and actually

throwing some coins in and making wishes. And mine was actually granted. When I started working for my old university again, I would pass it every day on my way to the office. (It is now called the “UST Botanical Garden.”) But for some reason, I have never thought to walk in.

In February of this year, my husband died. Had he lived three months longer, we would have been married 45 years. His dying revealed to me a solitude that has nothing to do with stillness or serenity. This solitude is a deep, dark place. And within it is only turbulence and agonizing pain. And I know that even if I were to revisit all those places I remember as tranquil havens, and even if I were to find new ones, or try to create them, they will not bring me peace or comfort, for the turmoil and the tumult are in my heart.

One thought alone sustains me: that if I so choose, the searching can go on.

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