

Pre-Thailand: College, Marriage, Joblessness, and Couple-ism

I'm nearing the end of my eleventh month here in Thailand and I have no regrets, only the lament of seeing such a wonderful year pass so quickly. It's difficult to sum up this chapter in my life, but no problem to give testimony for why everyone considering this journey should take such an easy step that will change their life. It really is quite easy. Before coming to Thailand, traveling and teaching abroad were only delicate bubbles in my mind. They were fun ideas for me and my, then, fiancé to talk about over coffee on those dark rainy days in our small college town. After college we had that cliché wake up to the so called real world where jobs are scarce and the people you've just come back to seem once or twice removed from the realm you only just got used to. Coming home from college can be considered somewhat of an existential crisis, I would argue. My high school sweetheart, turned fiancé, became my wife only a month after graduation and we soon found an apartment to share when the reality of the job market really started to sting. It happened quickly, and I'm thankful for it because it was then when that long talked about dream seemed to become more practical than the conventions, the prescriptions of post college, post marriage life. It is here where I can give my first glowing praise to Peter and his agency, Super English. There is this strange phenomena in our culture I can only call couple-ism. My wife and I faced it at every turn in college and again when we began looking into the world of ESL. No couples. We found this phase repeated in most places we looked. But Peter hired us and suddenly we were leaving for Thailand.

Surat

It's hard for me to remember what I imagined before arriving in Surat. Oh, wait, no it's not. I imaged Surat to be an ancient village with small homes made of coconut palms propped on bamboo stilts with holes in the ground for squatting and every snake I've loved on Animal Planet crawling everywhere. Before I go on, though, I will say that there is a side to Surat that fits that image surprisingly well. But all in all, nothing in life ever fits the romantic picture we paint of a foreign place before going there, at least not in my history. Surat is a semi-small, semi-modern, semi-third world, city in southern Thailand. It's hot and there are hardly any foreigners, unlike other parts of Thailand. There are café's and bars but also strange restaurants where you realize you're eating in someone's bedroom/living room/convenience store. Surat is an interesting place with more to it than it gets credit for. I've lived here a year and I feel that I've only peeled away the first layer. The people are friendly and the town is cut to pieces by many rivers and canals leading in from and out to the Gulf of Thailand. Ok, you may feel a little freaked out when you first arrive but give it at least 48 hours and you'll fall deeply intrigued.

Travel

If you're coming to Thailand to travel then you're looking at the right city to live in. Surat is right at the southern end of the Gulf of Thailand. It's sort of the pass between for all destinations in Thailand. From here you can catch the train to the north and visit Bangkok or Chiang Mai, among all the other gems hidden up there; you can head south to Krabi, Phuket, or even Malaysia; and you can catch a ferry to any of the islands in the Gulf. Locally you can drive your motorbike to neighboring cities like Chaiya, where there are beautiful hot springs, a silk town, and an amazing Buddhist monastery called WatSuanMokkh (the Garden of Liberation [an understatement]) where they hold ten day silent retreats; or you can ride to Khanom on the east coast and check out the beach for a day or weekend—up to you, as the Thais like to say. The one thing I recommend taking advantage of is WatSuanMokkh. There are innumerable retreats, meditation centers, monasteries, and such all over the place but this temple is only in Chaiya, and after fifteen years of studying and “practicing” Buddhism, this was my first true experience of what the teachings really carry. I tried to write about it but couldn't, because it was truly wordless. And my life will never be the same.

Teaching

Ok, enough sounding like a travel agent. I'll tell you a story that really sums up my experience here as a teacher in Thailand. Just like anyone, I assume, I have days or sometimes longer periods when I'm fed up with things. I don't feel like “performing,” I don't feel like being stared at or bothered or noticed as different. I sort of just want to be free from the containment of the perception as other. Being in the office feels claustrophobic and being in the classroom feels draining. I got up one morning from meditation with a feeling that comes when you transcend dualism. I thought, “I'm just going to be love,” and I went out for Jok hoping to have an opportunity to share some of this unbiased love I was feeling. Maybe I'd run into some people who usually annoy me and I could just be warm and friendly to them. The preceding week had been stressful, one of those I just mentioned above, and while I was eating peacefully alone two little girls appeared with their tiny hands on my table and both their faces filling my peripheral vision.

“Hello!” the older said. I knew where this was going.

“Hello” I responded.

“What's your name?” she said. And just like that I was back at work. Their big black eyes shined through me and their parents smiled warmly behind them. At that moment I had an insight into some of my stress, and an insight to my overall experience here. Many of us, or most of us, come here partially to be teachers but mostly to be “travelers.” Travelers: such a romantic notion.

I'm gonna see the world and the world will open my heart and mind and I will come back home bigger. SO big everyone will notice how big I've become. Something like that, right? The conflict is that we come here with the mindset of a traveler, and become a teacher. These are two roles that are in direct opposition to one another. A traveler is completely in the role of receiver. You pick up and move from place to place to TAKE in as much as you can. And eventually there is no limit to the amount that you desire to take in: How many stamps? How many pages? How many facebook pictures and tags in various countries? However, as a teacher, your role is 100% to give. When you are in the classroom you are giving your full being to these children whether you realize it or not. That is why teaching can be so tiring. What's more is that in Thailand teachers, especially foreign teachers, are held with a certain regard so that you are constantly approached by parents and children at which point you have to switch back into the giver role and pour more energy out into another when you thought you could just kick back and take. The stress we face as expat teachers is this internal conflict between the taking that comes with being the backpack/traveler and the giving that comes with being a teacher. The two little girls became my teachers this day because I was in desperate need of that particular insight at that moment. The previous day I had been asking myself why. Why am I so stressed out? Why am I taking this for granted? Why after all I learned in the monastery, and all the meditation I've done, am I still allowing my mind to dictate my experience? And the answer was simple. There was still in me this selfishness, this desire to take and to absorb life and a resistance to giving. Those little girls took the knowledge of the value of non-dualistic presence in the world and turned it into realization. Teaching has been my greatest teacher in Thailand.

Why choose Super English over other agencies?

All of my experiences in Super English have fallen in line with what I was told to expect, which is rare to find in Thailand. There many agencies that will push and pull you around and won't mind if you get fed up and leave because there is always someone to take your place. But at Super, we're treated like a family. There are once a month events that Peter holds to let us know we are appreciated and to keep us close, and he does his best to keep us around as well, offering very convincing incentives to stay on beyond the yearlong contract. There is also a lot of support with this agency. We're given breathing room to be creative and find our own way as new teachers but if you are struggling then there will always be people to help you out. Just ask. Having a support system like the managers, co workers, and Peter, at Super English is rare and invaluable. If you've taken the time to read this long winded testimonial then you have a strong desire to take this journey. I say go for it, you will not regret it.