

Dear Thailand:

When I walked out of the plane into the vaulted spaces of your internationally acclaimed Suvarnabhumi airport at the end of the first decade of the third millennium on my *first* one month visit with you, I was wobbly and jet-lagged and yet zinging with a feeling of arriving somewhere absolutely foreign and also strangely familiar and also comforting.

There's that airy, soaring spaciousness to your showcase arrivals building. There are those hundreds of not-plastic-but rather green and growing standing, flourishing plants. You also offer real multicolored orchids hanging in pots throughout the airport which add an exuberant, colorful and also Zen artfulness to its décor.

I must admit as I made my way outside to the taxi stand, I was embraced by the most pungent humidity I'd ever encountered. And yet I had to chuckle as beads of sweat formed because by dint of an overnight flight, I'd become merely another hot *farang* (foreigner) who'd decided to give up on Western culture for a bit, another white face for your immigration authorities to keep track of for however long my airline tickets and stamped passport said I could stay.

Upon arrival, after traveling from West to East, I'd already become a different character on a new stage-set, not knowing the rules or what if any role to play. And what I found within you, Thailand, is something profound: I didn't have to know anything. I only had to offer your people goodwill and respect. For no matter the chaos, no matter the heady mixture of the bustle of modernity with ancient traditions, your people offered benevolence from the moment I stepped outside to wait for a taxi driver to give me a nod. And from then on, as I moved from Bangkok to Chiang Mai to the shoreline, I found an outrageously good-looking people with wide

open smiles and an infectious humor who lived from the inside out. I met a people who so often melted layers off this Western cynical heart with their open, giving, curious, smiling, dark shining eyes. Seeing grace was easy during this first visit because your people seem to be born to it. And, by the way, many of your people move like modern dancers.

And even though I felt too white and too big boned and ungainly and dense -- like some barbarian -- I knew after one month of being within you I'd have to come back. I was seduced enough to know your people and culture could split me up wide open, rid me of arrogance, ask me to know humility. I knew I'd probably never fully understand you, but I also knew my heart's rhythm would often be stopped by something perceived, and I would be made breathless by some sight, some sound, some presence.

I knew someday my wound up Western mind would want to unwind, Thailand, that at some point that "Western anxiety of being" within me would become too much, and I'd want to remember that bubbling up feeling of laughter your people so often display. I'd want to remember the true nature of being a being -- not a doing -- and I'd want to leave chunks of sarcasm, suspicion, and doubt behind -- the ones that clog arteries, veins. And I could sense your people and land could help me shed these denser aspects of self.

Among your people, I could learn to downsize to light-living and light-heartedness for how could I not be inspired by a people who offer such simple gifts as wanting to share a bowl of rice – which for them is not gift at all but rather ordinary?

When I came to you on that first visit – imagine: my heart immediately remembered it could sing and that it was large, and that it could grin, smile -- even in sleep. And I became

aware of how small it had become, how sore and confused it was; how twisted, how crusted over, how blocked and jaded, how judgmental and world-weary it felt.

Ah. Yes. And then I remembered -- it had been steeped in the mechanistic clamor of a demanding, fast-paced, industrialized Western culture for far too long. And ah, yes. In order to survive it had grown a thick and brittle shell.

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*two*

Dear Thailand:

I flew over the Pacific and South China Seas to visit with you that first time after experiencing three deaths: of a close friend, Julia; my mother; and six weeks after my mother left my older brother left too.

I'd arrived on your shores after sifting through every item, small and large, of the "stuff" they'd left behind, putting them into one of three piles: to sell, give, or to throw away. It was after this lengthy process that something shifted enough in me to say: "go East now woman, go to Thailand." And if you ask why I chose your Kingdom -- well, there must have been a deeper knowing at work and the mystery will forever remain.

I had fingered thousands of their "things." From saved notebooks and address books and note papers, to old letters and photos and pens and collections of paper clips and rubber bands; to clothing and shoes and jewelry; to books, vinyl records, CDs, DVDs, furniture, cooking equipment, dinnerware, kitchenware, and sculpture and paintings. As Nikos Kazantzakis' *Zorba the Greek* would say, "the remains of *the whole catastrophe*."

My pawing through the shelves and drawers of those that had slipped out of their mortal coil made me clarifyingly aware of how brainwashed I'd too had become. For like them I'd never asked: aren't most "possessions" unnecessary? Isn't much of the "stuff" we own silly? And how about imagining what it takes to make the money to buy it all, keep it all, clean, and cart it all around? And what if any true value does much of what we've accumulated have at the end of our days?

As I spent hours burrowing into closets, I became aware how easily we can jump on a treadmill, getting caught up in lives that become busy, complicated, and demanding if we allow them to be, bound up with shopping lists, and other lists of “shoulds,” “cannots,” and “musts;” lists that look to the future, to plans, to kept schedules, to maintaining social and professional positions, and refrigerators and homes and closet-fulls of clothes, handbags and shoes.

During this period of what I now call “the great shedding,” it became obvious how for decades I’d tied myself to clock time and become addicted to linear time-frames, and to “doing,” and to “buying,” and to pushing myself into accomplishing this or that, into keeping up a certain self-image.

I’d also become cognizant of this: I’d never stopped to ask any of the larger questions. For example: what do I believe about the life I am? What is valuable to explore, enjoy, know, be?

Yes. In the middle of being surrounded by death I grokked I’d been following old and well-worn cultural lines for decades, and had not consciously questioned any of my steps. I’d been sleepwalking. I’d become possessed by feeding “needs” and desires” without even knowing the difference. I’d been hypnotized by a Western-style dream.

In my confusion, I’d made endless “to do” lists, consumed items for fun -- mostly as a way to run away from any hint of boredom for I’d been taught “boredom was bad.” I had spent countless hours in all types of restaurants and bars and coffee shops and stores, bought “stuff” I may have used, or worn briefly, or maybe not even looked at very much.

After the last death in the series of them, after my brother died, I felt myself arid. I'd been moving very fast since university. My schedule had been morning until night full-up. I was a so-called leader, a so-called achiever. And recently, I was again keeping myself upright and standing on the surface of a rather dry existence – kept insulated by a so-called “productive,” “meaningful” and “secure” life. Yes. I was going from home into a car, to work, to exercise, to meet with friends, to home again. And yes, I could afford oh so healthy and nouvelle cuisines, and car and health and home insurance. But I began to notice I had to stop at the Church of Starbuck for a reward -- a *grande chai latte* -- sometimes twice a day. And why? To boost an ever-sagging *élan*?

As I sat with the idea of flying East, heading to a land called Thailand, a Buddhist country (and not even knowing what *that* quite meant) -- no matter the bank account -- I knew it was a right direction.

My compass had always been to places West – Western Europe, Western Art and Philosophy, Western History, Western languages -- yet I knew I'd become tied to an unsatisfying and spiritless lifestyle and was feeling bound up – not free. And so, another question had become ever-apparent: “What would stopping and getting out of the Western world be like?” And yet another question: “What has been driving this engine of mine?” Over the years, I'd never stopped. I'd never stopped to question my internal operations manual.

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Dear Thailand:

On that first visit to your Kingdom, I stayed on one of your islands south of Bangkok, in the Gulf of Siam. And after waking up in a tiny cottage I discovered footsteps that took me through a coconut grove to arrive on a mile and a half crescent moon beach. “Watch out not to get hit by a dropping coconut,” the owner of the cottage enclave said while laughing, as he watched me begin my short journey.

When I reached the beach -- not conked by a coconut-- I was speechless. The sand was white and sugary and the blue-green sea was tranquil and shot through with sapphire.

For someone who had been moving at seventy-five miles per hour for most of her years to be in you, Thailand, on this island, on this beach, where the sea quietly lapped at the shoreline, where no one person I met up with exhibited anger or fear or impatience, where people sauntered by slowly, mostly in flip-flops, and nodded or smiled, or said hello -- “*sawasdee*” -- was absolutely out-of-this-world-heavenly. “*Sawasdee ka*,” I replied as females do. “*Me quam suk maak*” was also a phrase I learned early on. This means “I am very happy.”

I’d never before experienced a people who had a habit of cheerfully asking after you, of acknowledging your presence with a light and peaceful mien. And it’s not as if I’d never lived in or visited other countries before. But obviously never yours, never a Buddhist one, a so-called “developing” one, one of the East, one named “Thailand.”

Within your land what I immediately found were sights -- like mountains walking green out of mists, the brilliant orange topping of a flowering tree -- and a people who continually reminded me that I was alive and happily so, no matter whether the sun was out or not, or whether there would be a tomorrow.

“*Sabai dee mai?*” (How are you?)

“*Sabai dee...tuk wan!*” (I am good every day!)

Whether it was in a small village or on the beach on that first visit, I met people who didn’t have much in terms of “possessions.” Some had a few clothes, a few sticks of furniture, a mat, a little portable stove run on propane, and a television set. And many of the young and middle-aged scrimped and saved to send money back to their elders and home village monthly. And yet often they wanted to give, to share...and no one ever complained about anything. They felt good “*tuk wan*”... all the time, throughout time.

I also met a people who moved with a low center of gravity – as if they’re connected to the earth – yet who also had enlivened steps. I met a people who didn’t take much of anything for granted yet who also didn’t take much if anything very seriously. It was as if they knew we’re all alive on this Earth’s skin for only a brief time and so why not have gratitude and be buoyant about it – no matter. They quickly taught me how flat-footed I’d become since childhood – much too heavy.

On that first trip, there was an inner stillness, a certain simple sense of inner aesthetics that I noticed your people carry that captivated me then – and still captivates me now.

On that first trip, I found a people intrinsically gracious. I felt little fear among Thais. And there was something different in their eyes, in the way they could twinkle. And I also noticed that for Thais, the briefest of connection, a nod, an exchange of eye contact, was important and brought a smile. And when Thais smiled it was genuine: their faces so expressive. On them everything showed. They literally could light up, glow.

One early morning I observed a young man, Geng, sweeping the beach in front of the restaurant he worked for. He was one with the wooden rake as he cleaned and evened the sand. He *was* his purpose. He was the content. And as I passed he was clued in, he was present: he looked up, and we shared a grin.

The expression *mai pen rai, mai mee punhaa*, meaning it doesn't matter, no problem, is a Thai approach to life, and it got me centered during my introductory visit to your land. It was said often to me. Don't get bogged down by the details, the obstacles. Don't worry. Relax. We're here for one another. Take it easy. Enjoy "*jai yen*" – enjoy a calm cool heart.

No wonder once I met you and your people I had to return. I'd certainly found a "yin" place to the push and shove and competitive "yang" of the Western culture I'd grown up in.

No wonder then. Yes. I've traveled miles to come back across the waters to linger within you once again, to soak my cells in you, in Thai-ness.

Have you looked at yourself on a map? You're a kite in the shape of a heart with a tail trailing down to Malaysia. You're a gem in the center of the folds of land belonging to Laos, Burma, and Cambodia.

I have traveled far to be with you again, Thailand. I've arrived once more on your shores to be deconstructed by you, for in you I recognize something noble and healing.

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*three*

Dear Thailand:

I have come back to live within you. I have returned to stay for who knows how long.

And this is how these radical new plans came about...I left the cottage and the small Thai village by the sea early one morning as my one month visa was running down. I traveled to the local island airport made up of a cluster of one-story, open-air spaces -- with thick thatched roofs -- with blooming, green and luxuriant vegetation defining their parameters. That morning I caught a plane back into your Suvarnabhumi airport, and from there I left to fly back to the States.

As I watched tourists pour onto the Departures floor of your airport with their tans, their carts full of matching Samsonite luggage, and their packages of newly bought clothes and souvenirs, I was unsure whether any of them had become as altered as I had by their visit to your Kingdom. Then, after twenty-one hours, when I walked out of the airport back in the United States my body immediately contracted. I was hit with being in exile from a certain feminine ease with life, a graceful and tamed beauty. I felt a hardness, an arrogance in the air, a sterility. I sensed danger. I was in a very fast and highly managed culture, hidebound by rules -- a fearful culture. The sensations were unexpected, irrevocable.

All of a sudden I was a stranger in an aggressive land I'd once called my own for many years, with a people not seemingly peaceful or happy. Many of those I met in the airport felt wound up and disconnected from one another, themselves, from the rest of nature and the world; in their own bubble; not content and so serious as they pursued whatever they were doing, on their mobiles; trained to be wary, on guard and demanding: tensed.

And as I stepped back into my town and business, I could tell --it was plain – that being within you had turned me upside down. I'd already begun to crack open. I was a “jack” who had jumped out of “her box,” no longer able to be who I'd been, care about what I used to care about, behave as I used to behave. And within thirty-six hours -- after I'd landed and unpacked and listened to messages, reviewed mail, and managed to sleep -- I got in my car and drove to visit my father, now housed in an assisted living home.

So fresh was I, from being with a certain new and other sensibility – yours, Thailand – that along with other experiences upon my return, this morning's visit with my father was so shocking to my system that an idea of leaving the States and moving back with him to be with you sooner rather than later – no matter what -- shot up through me with force, with a momentary virility.

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