

2,190 Days Later

Another Return To Vietnam's Central Highlands

By
Michael Little

*“Dear Grandmother and Grandfather,
...When we hear you are coming to visit us, all of your grandchildren are so happy. You leave your family so far apart to come visit us, but we don't know why all of us can't come to shake hands with you. That day Kanh cried all day, did not go anywhere. Do not worry, God will let us meet together some day....” Tut*

*“Dear Father and Mother and family,
...We are all well since we met together, only one day, like a night's dream. In that day, I wanted to hold your hand, embrace you, my head on your chest. I wanted to carry you on my back until tired. The time we said good bye, my tears were on your chest. I know you love us so much, I felt so sad because we will be far apart. You were also weeping, following us to the hotel gate. My tears did not stop until we were far away from Pleiku....” Djuk*

Preparation

The letters above, written by Bahnar family members, arrived a few weeks after I returned home from Vietnam. They capture the experience of this, my 8th visit there since 1992. As you'll learn at the end of this summary, I'm no longer considered a “tourist.” In many ways, this trip was one of the most satisfying, yet one of the hardest to emotionally survive. Extreme joy was often replaced by terrible sadness. Everything did not go according to plan, not unexpected for Vietnam, but still hard to swallow when one travels from the other side of the world.

Well in advance of the March 10th departure date, I took steps that were intended to make things run smoothly. In hindsight, those actions may have worked against me, don't know for sure. Vietnam is such a labyrinth of intrigue, mystery and corruption. Because of the disappointments during the 2003 and 2004 visits, when planned reunions were halted at the last second by the authorities, I felt it necessary to seek outside help to ensure “visitation rights.” For the first time since the War, I was about to enter Vietnam alone, and I couldn't stand the thought of going that far, only to be denied access to the family.

Years ago, Ambassador Pete Peterson helped us get into the Highlands at a time when Vietnam had denied my visa. His personal letter to the Province Chairman resulted in a wonderful visit, when Marion and I were actually allowed into the villages. That was in 1998, but conditions have greatly changed since the 2001 and 2004 Montagnard protests. At times, the Highlands have been sealed off to all foreigners. Sensing there might be resistance to my visit, I decided to use that strategy again.

So, I contacted our current Ambassador, Michael Marine, and after explaining our relationship with the Bahnar, he kindly agreed to help. Armed with his letter of support to the GiaLai

Province Chairman, I applied for and received my tourist entry visa. Next, I began the planning process by activating an old Vietnamese friend of ours who is an independent travel guide in Pleiku. At my urging, he held meetings with local authorities and secured the permissions necessary for a family reunion. Satisfied that all the bases were covered, I was fairly confident by the time my flight left Southern California.

However, one should never assume too much. Until the reunion actually happened, I would worry and fret over all the possible scenarios leading up to a devastating letdown. Was the Ambassador's involvement wise? Was hiring a non-government travel guide smart? Was my paranoia getting the best of me? Time would tell.

Was I concerned about my safety? No, not really. I wear my heart on my sleeve, and hope the security people can see it. Must admit, however, that without Marion there to cover my back, I felt exposed, and wondered if I was strong enough to navigate the system, alone.

A number of friends and family had donated medicine and vegetable seeds, so I had a full duffel bag when Marion and Sean waved goodbye to Dad. Because of work and school considerations, they couldn't join me this time, and as I rode up to LAX airport, the sentiment played over and over in my head, "...you really have to want to do this..." Remember, it had been 6 long years (2,190 days) since I'd seen my other family, our family-far-away. Hundreds of letters and dozens of photographs notwithstanding, I "needed" to see them, to hear their language, to embrace them, to place my head on their chest.

Pleiku Part 1: The Rules

It all began too easily. Normally, when I clear customs in Saigon, computer sirens go off and the agent steps away from his booth to find a supervisor. This time, silence. I was waved through without hesitation. Expecting a thorough search of my bags, I was pleasantly surprised to enter the Saigon heat and bustle undeterred, where a smiling hotel driver held a sign with *LITTLE* on it. I was almost home.

The reception staff at the Que Huong Hotel remembered and welcomed me, as they have since 1992, and were amazed at the pictures of Sean. Now 6-feet tall at age 13, I'm convinced that my son would certainly cause havoc among the ladies. He was just a child during his visit in 2000 and 2003, but now he's probably taller than everyone in Vietnam! It was Sunday evening, and as I enjoyed a few cold Saigon Beers in the Hotel restaurant (at the table Marion and I always sit at), I began to address 42 large envelopes, destined to house gifts for each of our families. A friendly waiter voluntarily sat down across from me and helped fold pictures. How do you not love Vietnam?

Monday morning, I flew to Pleiku. The sky was clear and ride smooth. I stepped off the plane hopeful, full of memories, proud that I'd made it this far. The first time I'd flown into Pleiku was back in 1967 and a military truck had driven me and other newby's to Camp Holloway. Home.

As planned, my guide picked me up at the airport, and I checked into the Pleiku Hotel. Everyone tells me there are now better places to stay (and they're right), but I'm a man of habit. I was the only Westerner staying at the Pleiku, which has become a local businessman's hotel. In my 6-

year absence, the lobby had been remodeled, and now includes a large meeting room. But, the head waitress at the restaurant is still riding herd on the younger employees. She is half Rhade, and has been working there for years. Her smile had greeted us many mornings at breakfast, and dinner as well. She was genuinely happy and surprised to see me.

After lunch, my guide took me on his motorbike to a black-market banker (an elderly woman in a jewelry shop) so I could “quietly” change dollars for dong. Since those gift envelopes would eventually be stuffed with money, I needed a lot of dong. That’s why I carry the same old backpack; with an exchange rate of 15,800 dong to the dollar, you need something to haul it around in.

Small red flags hung everywhere from street side poles, and a hug banner was draped above Tran Hung Dao street commemorating the fall of Pleiku in 1975. Guess I would be in town for the anniversary celebration. Pleiku is quickly becoming a very attractive “city” and I was really impressed with the progress they’ve made. The only Montagnards I saw were at the central market, trading goods. Anxiously, I searched faces, hoping to see someone familiar.

Prior to my arrival, the authorities had approved 3 “visitations” between me and the family, comprising 20 different individuals each day. I had already submitted the lists, and agreed that the visits would take place in town or just outside Pleiku at a local water-park. Going into the villages was not permitted. Full of hopeful anticipation and joy, I returned to the Hotel in early evening only to be “intercepted” by two high-ranking government officials. They wanted to talk, and “invited” me into the hotel lounge, not wanting to have a conversation in their office.

An interpreter was present to act as our “dictionary.” One man was in uniform, a captain with Immigration; the other was from the Peoples Committee. The captain took the hard road, angrily denying that I could have an adopted family of 172 people. It was beyond his comprehension. Over the next hour, we postured back and forth, and I secretly panicked that all visitations would be cancelled on the spot. Obviously, the permissions previously granted by the Peoples Committee were in jeopardy and could be trumped by a higher authority in the pecking order.

I held my breath, attempting to act unassuming and at ease, while the questions came quickly. “How much money are you giving each family? Where does the money come from? Why did you contact the Ambassador? Why didn’t you use the government travel guide? How will the villagers know how to use the medicine you brought?” Measured responses fell upon deaf ears.

The final decision broke my heart. There would be one visitation only, and I could pick the 20 attendees...there was no arguing it. Fearful if I made too big a fuss, they would deny everything, I reluctantly acquiesced. The captain sat across me at the small bar table, eye to eye, but when he stood to leave, I noticed how much shorter he was. We shook hands. I looked down upon the top his official brim, pissed off, shaking and wondering why I put myself through this heartache. It isn’t easy for us Americans to have our freedoms taken away, but Vietnam isn’t about freedom. If you don’t understand that...

Pleiku Part 2: The Dream

You must forgive my indulgence here. Six years of separation had to be erased by one single day. Nearly 200 people (the current size of our extended Bahnar family) had to be narrowed

down to a mere 20. Put yourself in my place. How could I choose one family member over another and live with that decision? I gave the impromptu list to my guide, who, having already arranged for a large van, would be collecting the chosen 20 in the morning. In the hotel room that night, I recalled the movie, **Sophie's Choice**, and although my decisions weren't nearly that tragic, I felt terrible. Stuffing those 42 large envelopes with seeds, medicine and money, I knew most would have to be delivered for me. Saddened, but not defeated, I missed the support of my wife and son. Sean would have counted out all the bills for me. Marion would have comforted me, "things will be alright."

Tuesday morning, the hotel filled quickly with Vietnamese businessmen and women, arriving on motorbikes to attend a meeting in the new conference room. As I enjoyed a pho breakfast, I stared out the window, wondering if the dream would finally come true. The 20 were supposed to arrive about 9 o'clock. I actually took my first photograph from an open window facing the parking lot, trying to "will" them into the lens. I shook with raw nervousness. Afraid of the unwanted unknown, I walked back to my third floor room, collected myself, the large envelopes, and said a prayer, "God, bring them to me."

About 100 Vietnamese business people were meeting in the lobby conference room when 20 members of my Bahnar family hesitantly walked though the hotel entrance. They had never been in a hotel before, and were cautiously looking for me. By the time I emerged from my room, they had partially climbed the stairs towards the restaurant, but soon descended when they heard my voice. Passing Vietnamese glanced in our direction, startled by the scene that unfolded.

Six years of forced separation, I am unable to adequately describe our reunion. Tears, everyone was crying, waiting their turn for a fatherly embrace. Arms reached out, names whispered, our moment was subdued, not wishing to interrupt the large meeting nearby. "Ethnic minorities in the hotel," was something out of the ordinary, that's for sure. A grey-haired American hugging, crying, addressing them by name was truly a strange sight. Thankfully, my guide had arranged for us to spend the day at a nearby park/restaurant called Thien Thanh, instead of staying at the hotel. We could have our privacy and let the emotions go.

Over the years, I've been guilty of loving my Bahnar family, refusing to give into a hostile government, and remove myself from their lives. But a nagging question has always haunted me, "Am I helping or just creating trouble for them?" On this lovely Tuesday, March 14th, I dispelled the doubts and embraced the fleeting opportunity to enjoy a dream. Blindly, I trusted a higher authority to protect and guide us. I relished every single second.

We all crammed into the waiting van and drove the short distance to the park. I sat in the front, attentive to the commotion behind me. Hands caressed my shoulders. Questions in Bahnar were tossed at me, and I flung back Bahnar answers as best I could. How I love the music of their language!

Pleiku Part 3: The Feast

I'd never been to Thien Thanh before but was pleasantly surprised. Vietnamese families must go there on weekends, enjoying boat rides on the pond, eating a quiet lunch in the peaceful

surroundings, taking pictures, holding hands. We did everything but the boat ride. There was nobody else there.

This was the first time that I'd ever spent time with our Bahnar family outside of their villages. It added to the dreamlike feel of the experience. Seated at a long table, I addressed everyone, words of love translated by one of the English-speaking uncles. We acknowledged all the missing family members, and handed out the envelopes. Everyone received the same amount of money, and I apologized that it wasn't more. A prayer of thanks was offered up. The food arrived, and we settled in, getting re-acquainted with one other.



I want to tell you their names. I want to give you their backgrounds, describe the special relationship with those I knew in 1968. Most of them have passed away. Some at the table are adult children of the children I knew back then. They all call me father or grandfather. The little kids (there were six with us that day) aren't old enough yet to call out "Hey great grandfather." That's ok by me!

But no, I won't write out the list of names, nor relate how each one has enriched my life for nearly 40 years. Perhaps, some other time. We simply shared a wonderful feast, a celebration of our victory...worlds apart by day, but reunited when the stars line up...and miracles happen. I will tell you that a pervasive sadness filled the air that day because we knew how little time we had. Every smile, every touch, each conversation, all were carefully treasured...moments counted. The government gave us...just...one...day.

However, since I possess the pen, I'd like to bullet-point a few observations, call them "notes" that I made in my travel journal. I don't want to forget them:

- Sitting at the table, long silences were interrupted by the wind and occasional rain shower.

- Absent family members weighed heavily upon the gathering. I handed out a letter, addressed to those not present, and asked that it be read to them later that night.
- The photo albums I brought were a huge hit. They contained pictures taken during previous visits, so everyone got to see themselves.
- Digital camera was the way to go, allowing the subject to immediately view the image; the camera got passed around. One of my grandsons, Sory, took most of the pictures so I could pose with the family..
- One family member wrote down the name of the park so that he'd be able to tell the police later when questioned.
- Peanuts-cookies-gum...goodies I'd brought with me from home, spread out on the table, devoured in minutes.
- Prot's daughter, Nek, cradling her baby, but never taking her eyes off me.
- The entire feast cost 800,000 dong, or about \$50usd...priceless.

Of the hundred or so pictures taken this day, one of the last was a group photo.



Unable to stop the clock, we hesitantly walked back to the waiting van, holding hands. I had a small white towel ready, the one I'd use to dry my eyes. If it hadn't been for the children buzzing around, you wouldn't have heard a sound, like the solemn atmosphere in church. Even the birds seemed to fall silent.

Back at the Pleiku Hotel, the business meeting had concluded. Motorbikes no longer crowded the driveway. Just us. One of the hardest things about saying goodbye is not knowing if or when we would see each other again. Think about that for a minute. Saying goodbye is much like saying hello, lots of hugs and tears. Few words get spoken, mostly heavy sighs and moans. The trouble with goodbyes is the terrible emptiness afterwards. As Djuk mentioned in his letter,

I followed the van out of the hotel parking lot, stood at the gate, and waved my white towel until the van disappeared from sight down Le Loi Street.

Left alone, their smell permeated my skin, their voices echoed in my mind, and I didn't know what to do next. My mission was incomplete, but completed. Trying to remember a dream isn't easy. At least, I had the pictures.

Kontum: Y Nhun

Emotions raw, I needed Kontum. Back in year 2000, Marion and I had brought our 7-year old son, Sean, with us to Vietnam. In Kontum, during the Easter midnight Mass at the old Wooden Church, he had received his First Holy Communion, a little white boy among thousands of Montagnards. The next day, Easter Sunday, we returned to the Church to spend time with the children at Vinh Son Montagnard Orphanage, Sean handing out candy like the Easter bunny. That's when we first met Y Nhun.

She was four years old at the time, and immediately stole my wife's heart. Something about her smile and the glow in her eyes, Y Nhun became part of us. Through the parish priest, we began, what became, annual donations to support this little orphan girl. Marion's devotion to Y Nhun reminded me of a 21-year old soldier who, once upon a time, opened his heart to children in need.

The Nuns at the orphanage had been told that I was coming, and prepared for my mid-morning arrival. They even wrote a get-out-of-school pass for a certain 3rd grader! It was a festive occasion, and my guide did another good job of interpreting for us. As a benefactor, I had no idea what to expect when little Y Nhun entered the room, now 10-years old. It was a bit awkward at first and I certainly didn't want to overpower her. However, the Nuns (and even other children) kept referring to me as "Ba Nhun," translated as "Nhun's father". Proud, indeed, but I didn't understand what that meant to her. I still don't.

I took Y Nhun's picture...



...and you can see a little bit of confusion on her face. I didn't want to "scare her away," and adopted a very low profile. But, in those initial moments of meeting each other, I immediately recognized what it was that my wife had felt. Love.

Eventually, I took Y Nhun and the Sisters to lunch at a local roadside restaurant. She ate "like a horse," and I asked about her appetite, "She doesn't get very much to eat." Her plate cleaned, I asked if she'd like to take a walk with me, intent on taking her shopping at one of the countless store-fronts lining the road. Y Nhun took my hand, and we entered a small shop, her eyes lighting up as she looked over the items in the display case. A small purse, a set of colored pencils, and a clip for her hair...I paid the lady and stood a little taller. We strolled back to the restaurant, where she proudly displayed what became of her first ever shopping spree.

Unlike most of the children, Y Nhun attends daily Mass at the old Wooden Church. We entered the "shrine" together, just the two of us, and offered a silent prayer. Kneeling, I asked God to watch over her, and wondered what was in her heart this day. Did she offer a prayer for her American family? Afterwards, with help from the Nuns, she wrote a nice letter to Marion, and drew pictures with her new colored pencils. I was a bit shocked (but totally understood) when I realized Y Nhun's letter was written in Vietnamese, not Bahnar. That's reality.

I was led into her dormitory, where Y Nhun proudly showed me her wooden bunk. I met some of the other children and took more pictures.



Another set of goodbyes soon followed. Tenderly, we shook hands. I handed Sister more money for Y Nhun's annual support, but it felt like something had changed that day. Y Nhun is now old enough to "know" us and sense the love coming from a family far away. She now has our pictures in a thin little photo album to help remind her. I learned that a much younger orphan had been recently adopted by an Italian couple, which got me to thinking, "Is it possible....?"

On the drive back to Pleiku, my thoughts were invaded by a new dream. I closed my eyes and tried to interpret what had just happened. "Ba Nhun," had really taken me by surprise. We would have to deal with that.

Qui Nhon: Cam

Last leg, nearly home. With driver and guide, we sped down Highway 19 on Friday morning, March 17th, east bound for the coast, still wondering when I'd ever see Pleiku again. I held my breath, praying that family members would be waiting for us, roadside, at the turn-off to their village. Two days earlier, I had written a letter to the police, begging for more time with the family, at least a final farewell. They had quickly rendered their decision, "No." By the time we drove over bridge at the Ayun River, the turn-off was well behind us. The invisible wall of fear and intimidation had kept us apart. No one waved goodbye.

Like I said before, the great thing about a digital camera is the ability to immediately view the images. Scrolling through the pictures from the "feast" and that beautiful day in Kontum, I tried to be thankful and count my blessings. Despite the setbacks, I had partially completed two of my three objectives, and would soon address the third one.

During our 2003 Vietnam visit, Marion and I met a Koho Montagnard girl named Cam. She worked at the Chicken Village near Dalat, selling traditional textiles to tourists. Again, Marion "connected" with a stranger, and later announced that we would help Cam collect her marriage dowry of 5 water buffalo. Her reasoning went like this, "A girl as nice as Cam deserves to have children to help make this world a better place." Couldn't argue.

After Pleiku and Kontum, I needed time at the coast to unwind in the Sea breeze before going home. Qui Nhon was my first choice since the driving distance from Pleiku is doable. Arranged through my guide, I suggested that Cam meet me there so I could personally hand her another "buffalo installment" from Marion. Reluctantly, mom and dad agreed to let their Koho daughter travel to Qui Nhon, but not alone!

After enduring a hot all-day bus ride, and armed with a cell phone, Cam arrived with her close friend, Chau. It was a huge leap of faith for them both, since neither had ever strayed this far from home. The excitement of seeing new sights during the ride, and the first glimpse of the South China Sea put them in a very festive mood. Cam has maintained a visual memory of us since our meeting in 2003, and has been genuinely grateful for our buffalo-buying efforts. Now 30, she hasn't given up on having a family, and we'll continue to do everything we can to help her realize her dreams.

Mingling with tourists at the Chicken Village, Cam has learned quite a bit of English, so we communicated easily. Chau understood a lot more than she let on, and it wasn't until we hugged goodbye two days later that she confessed to knowing my language. I put them up in a hotel within walking distance of mine, feeling like a protective uncle. On Saturday we drove over the hill to Qui Hoa leprosy community, and enjoyed a quiet outing. There's a nice beach there, as you can see below. That's Cam on the left, Chau on the right.



We enjoyed almost two fun days together, a holiday atmosphere, learning more about each other. Gifts were exchanged, and I'd be bringing home three beautiful Koho blankets. One incident sticks out in my mind, an example of how things have changed with technology. Relaxing in a seaside restaurant one night, sampling the tasty Vietnamese cuisine, Cam's cell phone went off. It was her mom, just checking up! Vietnam used to seem so far away; now it's as close as dialing a cell phone.

The girls left early the next morning, Sunday. I had a day to fill and took a long walk through town. Qui Nhon is on the verge of a tourism explosion, cleaning itself up and attracting investment. I wouldn't be surprised if it rivaled Nha Trang one day. I spent most of the afternoon drinking beer and writing in Barbara's place, the Kiwi Connection, combination restaurant and mini-hotel. On the corner of Tran Binh Trong and Nguyen Hue, you can't miss it. American rock-n-roll boomed, and I ate a large slice of pizza, which wasn't too bad. Don't mind the ice in your beer...as advertised, Barbara's uses purified water!

Believe it or not, there's a tank partially buried in the surf across the street from the Quy Nhon hotel, a relic left over from the War. Locals told me there had been quite a battle here in 1975.



One thing Qui Nhon needs is a more accessible airport, something closer to town. Today, one must drive a good distance to Phu Cat to catch a plane. It's a lousy ride. However, the airport has been remodeled, and boasts a small café in what used to be the old terminal. I had my guide drop me at the airport early so he and the driver could return to Pleiku before dark. Sitting alone,

reading a book, there wasn't another passenger in the place, which prompted the airport manager to introduce himself. Wishing to lock the terminal door, he invited me next door to share a cold one. Nice man, I enjoyed his company until it was time to fly back to Saigon.

Busted

I felt invisible again amidst the clamor of Saigon, and immediately returned to the Que Huong hotel. There wasn't much left to do but get some rest and be sure to check out on time the next day. Utilizing the lobby computer, I wrote a number of emails...hotmail is a lifeline. Before leaving, I did promise the hotel ladies that I'd bring Sean with me next time.

Waiting in the check-in line for EVA Air is always an adventure. The Vietnamese returning to the States lug everything with them but the kitchen sink. Boxes on top of boxes, it takes forever for them to check in.

Finally checked the large duffel bag full of gifts, received boarding passes, and began the station-to-station process of escaping Vietnam. As my carry-on bags emerged from the x-ray machine, a hand tapped me on the shoulder, "Sir, please get your things and follow me." I knew what that meant.

In the cramped interrogation room, the only thing missing was the bright light shining in my face. Good cops, bad cops...everyone showed up for this one. I think there were eight guys in the room with me, some in uniform, bristling with impeccable ribbons and stars. Everything of mine was thoroughly searched, documents copied, one question following another. "How much money did you give your family? Where did this money come from?" Nothing new. At times, the head interrogator became stern, angry, threatening...but would then lighten up slightly. His English was very good, but the others didn't reveal their understanding.

It was obvious they weren't happy with me. I firmly believe they simply could not comprehend what an aging veteran was doing there. My guess is Communist cops receive little training in compassion. At the end of an hour's worth of sparring, they threw the book at me. A police report was quickly drawn up, in Vietnamese, but my new friend was kind enough to verbally translate it for me. I signed the damn thing with flourish. No reason to antagonize anyone further, I really did wish to go home...again.

Next, a notepad was placed in front of me, "Write down the crime in your own words, but be sure to say this and that..." I felt like an actor in *Law & Order*. Hurriedly, I wrote a full page, careful to use words like "unintentionally" and "unknowingly." All of my possessions were returned, a fact they were adamant about getting into my confession. No one could accuse them of stealing.

Guilty as charged, there was no denying it. I confessed.

The crime: **falsifying a visa application**. Like every time previously, I had checked "Tourist" as my reason for visiting Vietnam. Since I had come to Vietnam so many times, and had brought a good deal of "help" to the people, I was not deemed a "Tourist" any longer. Nope, I should have checked the other box, "Humanitarian." Lock me up and throw away the key. I just hadn't

thought of myself as a humanitarian. I expected a fine, but none was hinted at. I received a few handshakes instead and ushered away.

The lady at the x-ray machine apologized for the inconvenience of my delay. How I love the “people” of Vietnam.

Final Comments

Now you know why I began this essay with those two letters. This visit took a toll on all of us. As much as we tried, cutting through the red tape and cultural obstacles proved too difficult. In all honesty, I really don't know if going there at particular this time was the right strategy. The last thing I wanted to do was stir up a hornet's nest.

I sent a report to the Ambassador, along with a beautiful hand-woven Bahnar blanket. He'd been in the Highlands recently and got to see, firsthand, some of the conditions there. People often question me, “How are the Montagnards doing?” I don't have a good answer. They exist in a parallel universe with the Vietnamese, and the only time they seem to come together is in the marketplace. Freedom, no. Fear, yes. We've got two family members in prison, but can't discuss it. Visitation, no. I can't even tell you what crimes they committed or when they'll be released. Religious rights, don't know, but my guess is that activity is carefully monitored like everything else.

With very little opportunity to progress past the 8th grade, children join their parents in the rice fields. Nature conspires against them, and they go hungry every year. Since I wasn't allowed to visit their villages, I can't comment on current conditions there. Electricity is supposed to become available one of these days. I do know from pictures that many of our families have built new Vietnamese-style houses. Raising cattle has become more widespread; I know this because we've helped to purchase many of the cows with help from Operation Rice Lift. With abundant rice harvests fewer and fewer, secondary crops have been planted, which can eventually be sold, the proceeds used to buy rice.

Will I go back a 9th time? Hard to say right now, plus they might not let the “criminal” back in anyway. The oppressive nature of Vietnam can weigh a man down, and this time I felt defeated. As Americans, we aren't used to someone telling us “No, you can't go there.” The level of the authority's anger was worrisome, not for me personally, but for those who must live within their system. The family has not been allowed to telephone us since 2001, and we're fearful that our letters aren't getting past the police censors.

Not long ago, however, we telephoned Cam using the cell phone number she had given me in Qui Nhon...amazingly, she answered! Our Koho “buffalo girl” was in Saigon, training to do ladies fingernails. Maybe the trick of witnessing something good is just a matter of living long enough.

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