

The Story of Passion

by

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There is a Jewish proverb saying that a story is truer than the truth. Stories impress us with surprises, gratitude, and coincidence. They are everywhere, trying to give us a bigger picture of life. This is a story of passions which happened a year ago.

THE STORY OF SURPRISES



One day in July 2015, I did my daily routine--got up early in the morning, rode my Scoopy to the campus, wrote feedback for students and had chit-chat with friends. What made the day special was when Pak Kuswandono told me about a two-week program to teach English in Chiang Mai. I welcomed the opportunity with open hands and heart, not knowing about the surprises ahead. A few days later, when we discussed this program with Pak Ouda, Sanata Dharma University's Vice Rector IV, he ended the meeting by saying, "We will face many surprises."

Surprises came because we had no idea where this adventure would take us. The words on my notes after the discussion were: we are going to teach students from refugee camps in the borderline of Thailand and Myanmar. Those were the only clues we got because the teachers in Chiang Mai had not replied our email. This led us to make another assumption that there would be no Wi-Fi, or maybe no signal for phones. I type the clues in the Google search in the hope of enlightenment. A Google picture showed me a photo of cluttered tents and huts besides trees and dirt road leading to the top of the mountain. My friends kindly reminded me to bring as many as wet tissues possible because no one could guarantee that I could find clean water there. I convinced myself, "I'm ready with surprises." I closed my eyes not knowing where it would take me.



THE STORY OF GRATITUDE



On 3 August 2015, I flew to Bangkok together with Pak Ouda and Kitin, a Language Institute instructor. The weather was fine, highlighting that Bangkok was nothing but magnetic. However, our flight to Chiang Mai was delayed due to heavy rain and thunderstorms. We just remained in our seats until rain calmed down; we were drowning in our own thought, “Is it a bad sign?”

Or perhaps it was a sign of blessings. As we arrived at Chiang Mai, we met Father Vinai and Bang, one of the students, with their black pick up. He drove us to a nice wooden restaurant. We left our baggage in the open pick up. At first we were worried, but Father said that we didn’t have to worry because Thais didn’t take things that were not theirs. Tom yam, pork and grilled fish accompanied by the band’s song “Hey

Jude” created an aura of warmth. After dinner, we went to the designated place, The Seven Fountains. In contrast to what we had imagined, this place was nothing but delightful. It was a place where I could lay down on the grass, listen to the wind, hug the trees and kiss the flowers.



“Tomorrow is the first day. How are the students? How is their English? How is the class?”

I asked those questions until I fell asleep. The next day, we were greeted by the students’ humility. They welcomed us by simple gestures like folding their hands and saying, ‘Sawadika’ which means “Welcome/thank you”. The introduction was filled with laughter. They laughed at my name because it was quite hard to pronounce the cluster “tr” and I wouldn’t have trouble remembering names like “Bank, Few, Blue, Bee Bee”. Then, they told us about their backgrounds, which were not laughing matters.

They were from Karen-Thai and Karen-Burmese. Students from Karen Burmese were not as lucky as those from Thai. They were expelled from their country. According to the law, they did not exist. They wanted to fight for their

rights, but fear and shame dominated their existence. Whenever they saw police or men in uniform, they would jump, run and hide. They said they wanted to fight and gain their rights, but Father Vinai always reminded them to fight a peaceful battle, i.e. through education. They kept this advice at heart. They were full of passions when we taught them English. They attended the lessons from 8 A.M. to 4 P.M. They continued to study independently until 9.30 P.M.. The opportunity to learn without having to worry about whether the police is coming or not was luxurious for them.

Two weeks could turn strangers into friends. Besides having our lessons in the classroom, we also had discussion at the local waterfall, the Seven Fountains garden, city parks and National Obhan Park. At first, I thought my Karen students were mostly introverted. But, I then read an article stating that Karen people were culturally shy. It took a while for my Karen friends to share their stories. When we had a class on

Mothers’ Day, they told us how much they missed their mothers. They needed the whole two days to reach their mothers’ camp in the mountain. One student told me that because she was unable to meet her mother, she celebrated Mother’s Day by lighting a candle, praying that her Mom would always be fine. Another student told me that her mother was killed by her mother’s cousin because he experienced great despair.

The hero who understood their hearts was Father Vinai, a humble person who gave them appropriate shelter and education. He collected used phones from the Jesuits and distributed them to the students in hope that the gadget could lessen their loneliness. He was the one who was very passionate to give students real academic experience. But the most crucial lesson, he introduced passions to the students by narrating that determination and compassion could overcome poverty.

THE STORY OF COINCIDENCE



Encountering the representatives of Jesuit Pastors from Asia Pacific was a sweet coincidence. Kitin and I were even more excited to meet four Indonesian pastors: Father Irsan, Father Nugie, Father Setyawan and Father Heru. We spent our free time trying street food or coffee shops around the city. Together with the students, we joined the city tour. We were all very excited, especially the students. Father Vinai said that the students were willing to walk for miles to eat delicious food. Now with the Jesuit fathers, they could eat whatever they want.

Father Vinai treated us to “all you can eat” restaurant before we left Chiang

Mai. Dozens of items were available, ranging from fried chicken to sushi. With grumbling bellies, we planned our tactics and commenced the feast. However, the closing ceremony was a bit melancholy. We gave them English certificate and they gave us farewell gifts. They sang a Thai version of an Indonesian song, “Kukasih Kau dengan Kasih Tuhan.” Kitin and I went all misty eyed when we sang the Indonesian version:

*Ku kasih kau dengan kasih Tuhan
Ku kasih kau dengan kasih Tuhan
Ku lihat di wajahmu kemuliaan Raja
Ku kasih kau dengan kasih Tuhan*

They experience hurdles in life, but as the song suggests God’s glory is reflected through their passions. Instead of using their adversities as excuses, they hold on their passions to move forward. Whenever they grab their passions, they will continue to learn, strive and grow until they succeed. I believe their passions will lead them upward toward a brighter and better future.

