

Finding Peace at Wat Opot Orphanage

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In 2007 I came to Cambodia to visit an HIV/AIDS orphanage in Takeo province called Wat Opot. My friend, a full-time volunteer, described Wat Opot Children's Community as "the happiest place in the world." I had a difficult time absorbing this definition, and mentally prepared for what I assumed would be a sad and emotionally challenging few weeks. However, I was quickly proven wrong. During my visit I was amazed by the overwhelming display of warmth, acceptance and strength of the children.

The Khmer Rouge are a long-ago story compared to the struggles the children have experienced, and continue to face. Wat Opot Orphanage was originally an AIDS hospice started by an American former marine medic, Wayne Matthyse. Essentially, Wat Opot was a place for those seeking a peaceful place to die. Many came with their children, a number of whom were also HIV+. Until 2006, when life-sustaining anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs) were introduced to Cambodia, an HIV+ diagnosis equated a death sentence. Today, thanks to the availability of ARVs, the children at Wat Opot now have a hope for long, fulfilling lives.

Upon first glance, it is impossible to perceive the tragedy the children have experienced. The orphanage is filled with hugs, paintings, games, and the natural mischievous streak. The children take care of one another as a large community of brothers and sisters. Furthermore, they are willing to include anyone into their family, regardless of their health, age, ethnicity, or any other status. Within moment of arriving I was immediately befriended by a toddler ready to take my hand and lead me around the orphanage.

Although the children are not directly victims or survivors of the Khmer Rouge, the devastation of poverty in a post-war society is a part of their everyday lives; particularly, education and health.

The Khmer Rouge designated intellectuals were among the "enemies" chosen for dislocation and execution. Although many of the children are diligent students, weaknesses in the education system have resulted in apathetic teachers, and bribes are required to advance. Wayne shared with me that the brightest students will likely seek scholarship opportunities abroad. However, HIV+ students will not be able to seek out these opportunities, as they are not allowed to travel outside of Cambodia.

Furthermore, the impact of war and execution of the most-educated has resulted in a health system that is itself undergoing a recovery process in a struggling economy. For example, Wat Opot currently has two lines of ARV medication available. Every child begins on the "first line," however, if they miss their medication for a few days, or the medicine suddenly stops working, the child would need to move to the second line. Although multiple lines of ARVs are available in countries around the world, Wat Opot only has access to two lines, and several children have already reached this limit. This is just one example of how the devastating effects of the Khmer Rouge are evident in the widespread poverty across Cambodia, particularly the children in vulnerable situations.

Ironically, the civil war until 1997 stopped an early introduction of HIV/AIDS. It was when the fighting ended in 1998 that foreigners were able to enter and, with them came the introduction of HIV/AIDS. However, with the stream of foreigners also came Non-Governmental Organizations who were able to quickly educate the population about HIV/AIDS and prevention methods. Consequently, Cambodia has lowered their HIV/AIDS rate and many lives have been saved.

This summer, I had the opportunity to return to the orphanage and distribute DC-Cam's textbooks. The children are not taught about the Khmer Rouge in school, and most do not have family members who could share stories of the past. However, they are better informed than most. International visitors have been able to teach the children enough that they can recognize pictures of Pol Pot or Ieng Sary in the textbooks. Additionally, several of the older children have developed an interest in following the Khmer Rouge Tribunal on television.

While distributing textbooks to the older students, I had the opportunity to meet with a woman, Dara*, who lives nearby Wat Opot and volunteers her time there. Dara herself is a victim of the Khmer Rouge. Originally from Takeo, the Khmer Rouge killed her parents and siblings when she was a teenager. Dara managed to escape, but was eventually caught and sent to prison for three months. When she was released, she was forced into an arranged marriage. Dara remained in the marriage for a short time before running away again. Eventually, Dara was able to jump into a Red Cross truck that brought her across the border to a refugee camp in Thailand. At the camp, she met her future husband, who brought her to America.

When I asked her what she thought about the trials, she said if I had asked her six years ago, she would have wanted to "twist Pol Pot's head off." Post-traumatic stress disorder is rampant among those who survived the Khmer Rouge. Dara discussed how, while in America, she was given ineffective prescriptions of anti-depressants to address her pain. However today, through years of mediation and personal initiative, she has been able to reach her own reconciliation with the past and return to Cambodia. A few years ago, Dara visited Cambodia and saw Wat Opot in her old neighborhood. At the time, Wat Opot was still a hospice where deaths were a regular occurrence. It was there when she realized she could return again and help in the community that had always been her home.

Upon reflection of my time in Cambodia, I am inspired by the strength of the Cambodian people. The Wat Opot children have experienced death, abuse and abandonment. Yet, despite the challenges they continue to face, they still have enough energy for hours of somersaults and an unlimited number of hugs. At court, witnesses recount the worst moments of their lives and proudly participate as civil parties. Around the world, survivors like Dara proactively seek reconciliation with their past. Despite the history of hatred and fear, these images attest to the resiliency of Cambodians, and their potential for reconciliation and a better future.

**name has been changed*