

From Vietnam to “Gianh Dao” in Canada: A Sojourner’s Reflections

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Thank you! I believe that you should hear these two words at the beginning of my sharing because it is most appropriate that I should preface my reflection with a heartfelt “thank you” to both our Mennonite and Canadian friends who welcomed us and cared for us in those early days. Since this conference’s purpose is to evaluate, reflect on and most of all celebrate the tremendous effort that was generated by our country to meet the needs of the Boat People, I will endeavor to give voice to the specifics as to how you have impacted and transformed us by your generosity.

I first became aware of this conference two years ago when in perusing the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, I noticed an announcement that a conference was being planned to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the arrival of the Boat People. I knew then that it was essential for some of us to acknowledge how Canadians and especially our Mennonite friends have demonstrated their love and compassion for a landless and stateless people.

Over the years, as I became aware of the depth and scope of the effort that extraordinary Canadians made in those two critical years in 1979 and 1980, I am humbled by the love, care and compassion that was extended to the Southeast Asian communities. At the forefront of these men and women were the Mennonites across Canada. Although, my family was not sponsored directly by Mennonites, I was able to observe over the intervening years the Mennonites’ longstanding commitment to love and care for the dispossessed, the poor and the needy. Our journey as a family over the past quarter of a century here in Canada has been providentially blessed by the friendships of Mennonite friends. I realize in hindsight that before I knew of the Mennonites, they had already made a conscious decision to love and care for many refugees like myself.

The beginning of our story began when my family arrived in Canada on November 5, 1979 from the refugee camp in Malaysia. I must confess that we did not know very much about Canada or Canadians. In fact, we were told repeatedly by many of our fellow refugees of two things that were absolutely true about Canada.

First, Canada was a country that was very “Gianh Dao,” which in Vietnamese means compassionate. Second (and please excuse me for relating the next item, but it does put into context our general perception of Canada at that time) they said that Canada was so cold that when one urinated outdoors, the liquid froze before it even hit the ground! A third impression developed when officials from the various nations arrived in our camp, and everyone from the French, to the Norwegians and the Americans were impeccably dressed in at least nice shirts and ties. The Canadian official, on the other hand, was less than impressive in his worn and torn jean cut-offs, faded Hawaii shirt, and to put it kindly, exuberant hairstyle. We surmised rather innocently that if Canada couldn’t afford to give its representative decent clothes, a hair cut, and a shave it must be pretty poor as compared to the other western nations. Many of the older people would shake their heads slowly and say that it all makes sense, that to come half way around the world to help us from such a poor and cold country, one must have a lot of Gianh Dao.

I remember with clarity landing in Winnipeg, staying a night at its Balmoral Hotel, and subsequently being transported by Greyhound to Brandon, Manitoba, where we were greeted by our sponsor and driven in a full size van across the prairie to Birtle in western Manitoba. I have to tell you that we stared in a daze at the surrounding gray, white and very desolate countryside; this was November after all. My uncle succinctly expressed our collective misgivings when he said that we were being sent to “*trai cai tao*,” which means, re-education camp; and this phrase in turn is a communist euphemism for the concentration camps where my father and uncles and other Southerners had been imprisoned after the Vietnam War. However our misgivings quickly gave way to relief and joy when we arrived in Birtle, where we entered the house that was provided for us and to our delight, my siblings and I discovered the toys and household goods that were neatly arranged for our use.

As I adjusted to my life in Canada, I continued to wonder why these Canadians had chosen to provide us with access to the resources, academic and economic opportunities to lead a life of dignity and meaning. What a sharp contrast Canada was to our home country which had chosen to cast us adrift. What was it that enabled Canadians to be sustained in their willingness to serve and aid the seemingly least of people? I came to realize that the answer was found in their deep-rooted and personal faith in a loving and caring Creator God. This newfound faith was something that we did not have until we came into contact with these men and women.

At this time, I would like to digress a little in order to give you a sense of my family faith journey prior to our arrival in Canada. As a cultural group, my family belongs to what is known as the

Hakka Chinese. My grandparents journeyed south from Guagndong province in the late 1930s and 1940s in search of a better life for their children. In fact, this wandering was programmed into us as members of the Hakka minority that have been migrating steadily south from Northern China for 2000 years. This tendency to migrate is reflected in the very name of the Hakka, which literally means, guest people or sojourners. Like our forefathers before us, we too have sojourned and moved to a new frontier. I am particularly in awe of people like my grandmother, who made that first move sixty years ago to settle in Vietnam only to be to be uprooted and moved to the United States.

For a Hakka like myself, this physical wandering represents a spiritual yearning that found fulfillment when we were introduced to the transforming faith in a loving and sovereign God by Christians such as our Mennonite friends. It was in the introduction of this faith that we became aware and appreciative of the power of this faith to enable its adherents to do what we were never able to do – that is to love our neighbors. Many of us began to understand why our newly adopted country is one of compassion because at the core of its faith conviction is the belief in the uniqueness and value of the individual. This worldview contrasts starkly with the prevailing worldview of our physical homeland where the individual is viewed as expendable. My mother succinctly summarizes this belief repeatedly over my formative years when she stated matter-of-factly, “*May thang cong sanh hong coi man la cai gi het,*” which means the communists do not have any regard for human life. This viewpoint enabled them to treat people as expendable. Perhaps this worldview is best summarized by two of the most influential leaders of China and Vietnam in the twentieth century, Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh. Chairman Mao was quoted during the Long March that given a choice between shooting a buffalo and a man, he would shoot the man because the buffalo was more valuable. Ho Chi Minh told his Western counterpart that he was willing to sacrifice 10 of our men to every 1 of theirs in order to defeat them. By contrasts, our Mennonite friends lived out a compelling alternative worldview that values the individual because at its core is the concept of *imago dei*, which holds that because people are made in the image of the Creator, they are inherently valued and unique and therefore one ought to treat one another with love and respect because the Creator has commanded it.

St. Francis of Assissi once said, “Preach the Gospel and when necessary use words.” I believe that the Mennonites lived out this Gospel twenty-five years ago in front of a ragtag group of refugees from Southeast Asia. They demonstrated to us a gospel of love, peace and grace. In this process, they invited many sojourners like myself to find a home in a faith family that provided us with a contentment

of peace that is otherworldly

There is an old saying that sometimes; we are privileged to stand on the shoulder of the giants who have preceded us. I prefer to think that we are privileged to stand alongside my Mennonite brothers and sisters, who through their faith conviction, sustained by five centuries of persecution and wandering, are humble faith giants who came along side us and invited us to join them in their faith journey.

My own understanding and appreciation of the Mennonite faith and heritage has been recently strengthened when I married a most lovely Mennonite woman, Rebecca Braun from Niverville, Manitoba. The moment that I said, "I do!" I was related to half the Mennonites by marriage in both "Jantsied" and "Ditsied" (both "this side" and "that side" of the Red River) . They range from the Brauns, to the Funks, and the Friesens, just to name a few. Indeed these names are as dear to me as the Huynhs, Nguyens, Wongs or Lees. After having been surrounded by Mennonites for these past many years, I have learned by osmosis, a small sense of what it is to be Mennonite. In fact, I am not exaggerating when I make the claim that I can "Meddachslophen" and eat "Vaspa" with the best of Mennonites. I have taken seriously the charge my parents gave us as children when we first arrived in Canada to take the best of the East and the West to make it our own, as we adjust to our new home. I am deeply grateful to their foresight, which has guided all of us to develop the capacity to move fluidly between cultures.

Recently, this cross-cultural phenomenon has really hit me at the heart level with the arrival of our daughter, Lien, five and a half months ago. As I cradle and behold my daughter each day, I marvel and dream of how the two cultures will intertwine in this child of the East and the West. It is my hope that she will join the ranks of men and women of her generation, who will be committed to being the conscience of their society to continue the work of providing people with access to the resources and opportunities to live lives of dignity and meaningfulness. It is my prayer that she, and other children of such cross-cultural unions, will serve as bridges to unite us and to forge a new vision to welcome newcomers to our shore. As my wife and I dream of our child's future, we have often joked with each other as to what we should call our child. We came up with several possibilities to suit different situations and contexts. We decided that if she was being good, we would call her a Mennochine. If she was being naughty, we would call her a Chinonite, and if we wanted to be theologically relevant, we would call her a Sinabaptist.

In conclusion, I want to invite those of us in the Chinese and Vietnamese community to enter into a time of collective reflection, as we prepare to vision for the next twenty-five years. The Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese have been given much by our new home and I

am keenly aware that to those who have been given much, much is expected. After a quarter of century, many of us are now settled in our lives here in Canada and the United States, and we are now in a position to do our part. I believe that it is essential that we direct some key questions at ourselves. How do we share our blessings with the wider community? Have we as a community in turn welcomed the new waves of refugees and immigrants? Are we taking our place alongside other Canadians to continue building the legacy of “Giang Dao, compassion?”

Personally, I am determined that “as for me and my house” we are committed to serving others, knowing full well that as flawed people, we will stumble at times along the way. However, I know that we will be sustained by our newfound faith, which provides us with a compelling reason to “love our neighbors.” It is this very faith that has enabled me to grow and mature through the past thirteen years as an educator in the inner city. I count it a privilege that each day, as I stand at lunch time at the threshold of Gordon Bell Collegiate in Winnipeg, across from the most Canadian of icons, Tim Horton’s coffee shop, I am humbled by the opportunity to serve and teach our diverse student population which ranges from students from war-affected nations, to First Nations students from across the province, to students from the more numerous established cultural groups. In fact, it is often said at our school that we can predict the next wave of students to arrive at our campus by watching the news. With each new wave, I am reminded of the deep gratitude that I owe to the men and women of the Mennonite community who model for me what it truly means to be compassionate and to stand firm in our mutual commitment to serve the poor, the dispossessed and the newly arrived strangers in our midst. Thank you my friends for your past, present and continual commitment to a legacy of Gianh Dao/compassion.

