

**LI2-- "SOMETHING MISSING: A VISIT TO THE PLAIN OF JARS",
1994**

I was standing in a cave on a lovely spring day in May 1993, up on the Plain of Jars, in northern Laos. The cave is about a half-mile outside the town of Muong Kham, located on a hill surrounded by beautiful, wild countryside. It was a large, lovely cave with a wonderful view that stretched for miles, though it was strangely elongated.

It was a cave where you would have spent much of your time hiding from American bombers if you were a Muong Kham villager between 1964 and 1969. It was one of the few places deemed to be safe.

Until an American pilot spotted people going into it one spring day in 1969, after Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had turned northern Laos into a virtual free-fire zone. The reason it was elongated, my hosts explained, was that an American Sidewinder Missile had been fired into its mouth. All 500 villagers had been killed. At one point, immersed in the story, I looked up and said, "oh, and where did you bury the bodies?" My normally voluble hosts just looked at me.

Of course.

I was standing on them.

Five hundred villagers.

Buried alive.

Buried alive. Five hundred people, mostly women, children, old folks. I would later try to imagine the scene, from *their* point of view. The explosion. The smoke. The dark. The terror. The tons of dirt enveloping them. What's it like to be buried alive? How long does it take to die? How much does it hurt? Does one suffocate to death?

How slowly? What does it *feel* like to be one of the unlucky ones and die particularly slowly: choking, suffocating, vomiting?

And what's it like to be buried alive by people you've never even heard of let alone offended? Buried alive in a crime of war as defined by the Hague Convention outlawing acts of violence against civilian targets.

That night I was to remember with a start having read Bill Clinton's eloquent words opening the Holocaust Museum in Washington just a few days earlier, as he remembered German crimes against civilians 50 years earlier, near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that would have to be lengthened thirty times, to a distance of nearly two miles, to record the names of the Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians who died, most by American hands, during the war -- some 1.5 million according to the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Refugees.

The Germans understood it was important to teach their children what they had done to innocent civilians. So they agreed to pay enormous reparations totalling tens of billions of dollars to Israel after World War II -- for themselves not the Jews, because they knew that a society which denies its past loses its future.

How strange it felt to have my past so bound up with this faroff place called the Plain of Jars.

We all have places that become special to us long before we visit them. From the first I heard of it, the Plain symbolized to me a kind of Shangri La: a raw, isolated, beautiful society of peasants who lived in houses made of dark wood, walked in green fields, and experienced a oneness with nature that I could only guess at. My eyes widened and soul soared as I read lyrical French descriptions of it as one of the most beautiful places in the world, covered with lush vegetation sprinkled amidst a long vista of rolling green plains, fresh and scented air, and pink sunsets and red dawns that suffused all life with an orange glow.

In September, 1969, however, it came to take on a very different meaning, as I interviewed the first refugees to come down from the Plain to American-controlled zones, as an interpreter for U.S. journalists. At the time, the U.S. position was that the United States had never dropped a bomb in Laos. While rumors were flying about the bombing, there had been no evidence until now.

I will never forget my shock as the first villager crouched down and drew an "L" on the floor, indicating how he had hid from the bombers deep inside a cave for most of several years, only venturing out at night for food and water. Every one of the dozens of refugees interviewed that day said that he or she had been bombed over a period of 5 years, most intensively after November 1968, when the planes that had been bombing North Vietnam were shifted over to Laos.

What shocked the most was not the lies, or even the horror of hearing of mothers burned alive and seeing children without limbs or eyes. It was realizing that these were the lucky ones. That as we talked with these refugees, hundreds of thousands of others were being bombed at that very moment, that people alive today would be dead tomorrow from massive U.S. raids that killed mostly civilians and not the soldiers who were most mobile and able to live in the forest.

In the months to come I was to interview hundreds of refugees from the Plain working as an interpreter, journalist, author and source of information to U.S. Congressional committees. The refugees' testimony would eventually be published by Harper and Row as Voices From the Plain of Jars, the only book written by peasants to emerge from the Indochina war. I was to learn the Plain's geography better than that of my native Long Island.

And it was now May 1993, 24 years after that fateful conversation which was to change my life. And I was visiting, for the first time, the Plain of Jars.

Which was like what I would imagine it would have been to visit 19th century frontier America. The energy! Everywhere you look, from

the capital town of Phonesavan, to dozens of villages, to mountain-sides, one sees people building, scurrying, going to and from market, hoeing the land, tending their cattle, praying at the pagoda, partying. The marketplace is jammed with people from a dozen different tribes. Phonesavan, muddy, built along both sides of one long road. There is a photo/copy shop, where you can get photoes and xeroxes done during the 4 hours a day when the generator is running.

If you walk down the main drag in Phonesavan about a half mile, you will see it. Up on a hill.

The town cemetery.

The cemetery at Phoensavan is different from other cemeteries. For one thing, it's huge for a small town of maybe 10,000 people, with graves strung over a large expanse of hillside overlooking the town. For another, so many of the gravestones say something like "1947-65". So many young people buried at the Phonesavan cemetery. So many teenagers, so many in their early 20s. Like the American soldiers they fought, just beginning life.

Phonesavan has a significant population of Vietnamese who were born on the Plain of Jars. There are Vietnamese buried on that hill.

One day Ngeun - my old friend, a person I deeply loved and had taught me much, whom I was seeing for the first time since 1969 after giving him up for dead - came home drunk and deeply upset and kind of weird, crazy. "I've just learned Hien, a boy who had saved my life during the war, was killed. I didn't know it!, I didn't know it!." He proceeded to talk for an hour about the boy who had befriended him when they were both in the army, a lovely, kind, sincere, boy who loved his friends and one day risked his life to pull Ngeun to safety after he had been wounded.

A Vietnamese boy. Hien was born on the Plain, died fighting in the country of his birth, one of hundreds of thousands who died fighting the Vietnam war.

We never thought of them as human beings, as "Hien" or "Troï", or "Thai", with desires and dreams and hopes not very different from our own. They were just "the North Vietnamese", as in "20 NVA (North Vietnamese Army) were killed outside Ban Hue today" during a U.S. briefing in Saigon.

Today, however, for me, one of those "Vietnamese" had just come to life, through Ngeun's eyes and voice. He spoke of him with so much love, so much pain. He rejoiced to remember Hien. He wept as his death. He invited me to visit his grave the next day.

With flowers and candles and incense. And Ngeun lit them and then walked around the grave for a while, talking out loud to him. We then walked back down the hill. In silence.

The good news about the Plain of Jars is that it is being rebuilt. There are some 192,000 people on it today, more than the 150,000 or so who were there when the bombing started in 1965. What seems like hundreds of villages have either been rebuilt from scratch or started in new locations. A civilization is being both restored and created anew. Lots of young people.

The bad news. Well, like Ngeun's cousin. A sad man, maybe 50, lots of kids, a farmer, with a large house by a dusty road in the small village where Ngeun's wife had grown up prior to coming to Vientiane. He lives in an open Lao-style house on stilts, only the stilts were not very high off the ground, and the wood had a rough-hewn, cheap, feel to it, unlike the deep dark rich wood, as smooth as only wood can be that had been walked on by bare feet for decades, that comprised traditional Lao homes.

How many head of cattle did he have today? "Eight", he said. "Great!", I said. "Not so great", he said. "We had a 100 head in 1965."

I get it. If he's lucky and continues to work until the point of exhaustion, and manages to live, he may in the year 2015 be where back where he was fifty years ago.

The good news: a few people have electric generators on the Plain of Jars, and many villages have television. The bad news: the television is Thai. Soap operas, tawdry game shows and insipid musicals have finally reached the children of the Plain of Jars.

But it's still the kind of place where the kids gather around you, follow you through the village, and then, when they get to the pond, the same pond in which Ngeun's wife swam 40 years ago, strip off their clothes and dive in, joining you a few minutes later, refreshed.

You can buy both an American T-shirt and jewelry made from shot-down American planes in the Phonesavan marketplace. Which is about 50 yards from where an American family - father, mother, two kids - live on the Plain of Jars. Mennonites. Fundamentalists. Running a school. Father, maybe 35, with a long beard. Mother in a long dress. They provide home schooling for their two kids. But the heart of their instruction is religious. Lord Jesus is fiercely believed in up on the Plain of Jars.

It was one of those unconscious slips. Weird. I had asked to be taken to a place where one could still see the unexploded pineapple bombs, those "bombis" we dropped solely to kill and maim people since their pellets could not destroy structures but could and did deeply pierce the flesh, entering in a zig-zag pattern so as to be difficult to remove, even in the unlikely event that one could reach a doctor and have an operation.

Nice family men living in beautiful, quiet, suburban communities in Maryland and Virginia, good, church-going, family men, would - after a weekend of mowing the lawn, shopping, doing stuff with the wife and kids - go to work on Monday and ponder new ways to kill and wound villagers in the most painful way possible.

Ahead of me was a bombi. My hosts told me that although a few people were being killed or wounded every month by stepping on or hitting unexploded ordinance with a hoe, I had nothing to worry about as long as I didn't directly step on it. So when they took me to a field

of bombs, and I went walking in it, they told me to be extra-careful and not step on any of them.

I remember thinking I should be extra careful just before I kicked one.

Kids. Lots of kids on the Plain of Jars. Good.

Ghosts, so many ghosts, on the Plain of Jars. Not so good.

As we drove about for 4 days Ngeun and our guide would talk, softly, as Laotians do. "What about Nang Sao's father? Where was he?" Ngeun would ask. "Killed back in 1967, walking down the road," the guide would say. "Oh," Ngeun would say, saying something to remember him. Each person a person. With spouse, children, a story, a life.

We spent \$100s of millions of dollars bombing the Plain. We've contributed nothing to its rebuilding. Oh, we offered a school here, a hospital there. But the Laotians were not too enthusiastic. It seemed too many still remembered what had happened. Like the Israelis, they might have accepted serious reparations capable of rebuilding their society and making a life for their kids. But serious reparations were not even discussed back in a nation bent on forgetting its ghosts.

Ghosts. It's something about the Plain of Jars. Like a faint scent in a mist-filled garden, the past is everywhere. So much history. So much life that has passed. And where is it now? Are you dreaming or being dreamt, seeing or being seen, hearing or being heard?

"This is where Kong Le set up temporary government and all the Embassies relocated here," our guide says in the ghost town of Khang Khay, pointing to broken plants and bare ground and decaying buildings where once Prince Souvanna Phouma, Pathet Lao chief Prince Souphanouvong and rightist Phoumi Nosavan signed an agreement in a famous photo that went around the world.

It was John F. Kennedy's first foreign challenge after taking office, the one serious issue raised by Eisenhower as they drove together to JFK's Inauguration. We were summoned to "pay any price" for freedom. People like those on the Plain paid the cost.

But that was three decades ago. Today Khang Khay is just one more dusty old village where farmers use old wood to construct new homes board by board and break the land with hand-held hoes because they have no livestock, and because noone likes to remember ghosts.

The Jars. They are still there, large jars mysteriously strewn amidst the Plain of Jars, here for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years.

The Jars. Noone knows exactly what their function was. But it's believed that they were built by rulers at the time of their death and filled with alcohol and other treats to please the phi or spirits who served as guardians to the next life. Funeral urns.

Ernest Becker would suggest those ancient rulers built those Jars as "immortality projects", one of humankind's most basic activities as we seek to transcend our creature deaths. The Kissingers and Nixons wage wars and seek to make their mark on history. The rest of us sign up, have children, write books, turn to religion. Pilots drop bombs on villagers. Only the villagers don't get to have immortality projects. They just hide in the caves.

Buddhism, too, has returned to the Plain of Jars, which one discovers at a well-attended luncheon ceremony for a set of Buddhist monks in Ngeun's wife's village. Yes, they still believe in the Buddha up there though he had been bombed as thoroughly as had they.

One of the weirdest things about the Plain of Jars today is the resort. A Frenchman has built a beautiful set of hotel bungalows up on a hill. For \$40 a night or so one can rent a room that overlooks the Plain, sit on a porch up above the clouds, and think or meditate.

Think of Ngeun. How strong and straight and handsome he used to be! A cadre, come out as a refugee. Refugees in the village would light up when they saw him, calling out to him to come and visit. When he did, full of jokes and warm laughter, he would begin boil water to make some medicine, find out how everyone was, trade news and stories late into the afternoon. Nguen: former soldier, former spy, former cadre.

How much he had loved the Pathet Lao, believed in the revolution, as night after night we would both lay in our beds, and he would tell stories late into the night, his voice wafting through the darkness, about the revolution.

The time he was thrown in a pit, had a gun pointed at his head by the Meo, asked to talk and when he refused, had heard the trigger cocked, then pulled, and the explosion as the gun pointed at his head missed by inches.

Did you ever wonder how guerrillas decided who would go first when they launched an attack that was suicidal for the front-guard when they attacked a fixed position? "It must have been hard to decide who would have to go first," I commented to Ngeun one day. "No, no, you don't understand!", Ngeun explained. People would VOLUNTEER to go first, saying "let me! They killed my mother! I'll lead the charge!"

What did he want to be remembered for? He grew serious, thought. "Well, I guess if there's one thing, it's this. I don't expect to live much longer. But when the war ends and some of the villagers are standing around some place, and one of them remembers me and they start talking about me, I hope one of them says, 'oh yes, Ngeun, he loved the people!'"

Ngeun had been so sincere. And courageous. It took guts to collect the drawings and essays that were eventually to comprise Voices From The Plain of Jars. I knew Ngeun as well as I had ever known anyone. He loved the people. It wasn't made up.

But now the war was over. Nine kids. A weak economy. Working 12-14 hours a day building roads at age 50. Life a struggle. His memories of the struggle no longer enough to lighten the load. His life was tough. And unforgiving.

I thought back on my own life. It ups. Its downs. The horror of the bombing. The years in domestic politics that had followed. How I had found some degree of peace in recent years through spiritual pursuits and learning to ride the waves of birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth.

I thought of Joseph Campbell's rendering of Schopenauer: one lives one's life as if by random, but at the end one looks back and sees it as beautifully constructed as a great play with a beginning, middle and end -- with each person's individual life woven into a great intermeshing clockwork of life that somehow had a movement, a movement that can somehow feel lawful in a certain kind of late-afternoon light.

My whole life had seemed random indeed back when I discovered the bombing. But now, sitting over the Plain, there seemed a certain kind of logic to it.

I thought of a skinny 25 year kid coming to Laos back in 1967 afer a year and a half in Tanzania, traveling half the globe to avoid the draft. How the Selective Service allowed a certain number of exemptions so as to "channel" people into other areas of "national service", as its chief Louis Hershey once described it, and how by the law of averages:

- o a certain percentage of those would identify with the New Left;**
- o a certain percentage of those would be in Laos when they brought the first refugees off the Plains of Jars in September, 1969;**
- o and of those a few would be in a place of being horrified by the fact that the bombing was continuing against more unarmed peasants,**

and would protest it, finding in that protest an outlet for years of accumulated rage.

And I saw how everything I had done, not only in Laos but elsewhere, had a certain rough logic to it, a kind of lawfulness, a movement of cause-and-effect, a feeling of having been "programmed" by nurture and nature to react as I did.

And I felt a degree of peace. I saw Samsara, the cycle of birth and death, the human condition: the arc of my own life, the arc of whole civilizations, the arc of the Plain of Jars. Birth. The rise of hope. Decay. Death. Rebirth. The rise of hope. Thus it had been. Thus it would always be. It was not given to us to understand. It was given to us to accept.

No people had ever escaped the fate of the Plain of Jars. It had risen, died, and been reborn again. Perhaps after some decades of rebuilding, it would be destroyed again. Only to be rebuilt. None escape such cycles, perhaps not even those who had destroyed the Plain and did not care to remember let alone do anything about it.

A law of life beyond human purpose or understanding. So deeply lawful. So deeply comforting. So deeply peaceful.

Till you remembered her eyes.

What a beautiful human being, that lovely Vietnamese woman who sold goods in the market on the Plain of Jars.

As the Plain is different from most places, this woman was different from most of the others. She's a mother, a shopkeeper, a wife. But unlike most of her compatriots back in 1969, she remained. Somehow, by hiding in the forest with her many children, her husband recently dead, she had managed to avoid the Meo soldiers and did not have to leave the place where she had been born.

She had remained. Up there. What was it like? "We lived like animals," she said. I don't remember now the details that followed: the

**exact number of children, those who had died, those who had lived.
And what she had had to do to survive.**

**But I do remember her eyes. So beautiful. So sad. So tired. With a
hint of something else.**

Something lost.

**Things had gone wrong: dreadfully, terribly, irremediably wrong.
The years had passed. Nothing but ghosts now. And yet it wasn't all
right, not really.**

**Most of the outer pieces had been put back together. Few visible
scars. A largish shop in the market. Enough to eat. A home. Enough to
make a case for the lawfulness of things.**

**But look into her eyes and it was clear there was something
more to the story.**

Or something less.

Something not quite right.

Something missing.