



Beyond Deserving

Lessons in receiving well

HANNAH BRYANT

Get married. Quit your job. Travel the world. Check, check, check. Soon after my husband, Dave, and I got married in November 2011, we purchased one-way plane tickets across the world without any idea of when we would return. We both love to travel, so it made sense to start our marriage adventuring together on a new continent.

From the start, though, we knew we did not want to travel as typical sightseers. We wanted to engage with whatever culture we visited by volunteering. But we did not know where in the world we wanted to go or how to go about making a plan. So I met with my pastor, Ray Bartel at Quest Church in Seattle, and explained our hopes of working alongside local people while we were abroad. I left that meeting with the email addresses of missionaries on several different continents and quickly contacted them. Not long after that, I heard back

from two different Covenant missionaries in Thailand, expressing their excitement about our interest in helping out. Within weeks of coming up with the idea for the trip, the answer to our question of where to go was clear: we were heading for Thailand.

We made plans to visit with Bob and Grace Shim in northern Thailand and Carl and Karen Groot in Bangkok for a month in each place. We left the rest of the trip completely open to opportunities that would arise along the way. Resisting the temptation to try to control our itinerary, we tried to remember that trusting God would lead us to far better places than the *Lonely Planet Guidebook* would.

We had already decided the memories from an experience abroad together would be of far greater value than any towel or dish set we might receive, so we had asked for wedding gifts of money for our travels instead of household items.

How can we cultivate a sense of “what’s ours is ours” in a culture that is embedded in the mindset of “what’s mine is mine”?

With backpacks on our backs, a tentative plan for the first two months of our journey, and a hope to engage in the culture we encountered, we embarked on our adventure into the unknown. We decided that we would travel either until our money ran out or we felt it was time to come home.

Soon after arriving in Thailand, we met up with Bob Shim and traveled with him up a stomach-churning mountain road to the small village of Bo Klua. We lived there for three weeks at a learning center with children who either had no parents or whose parents could not afford to care for them. During the day we taught English at the village school. In the evenings we taught a two-hour English class to the students at the Learning Center, who had very little previous knowledge of English.

In that small mountain village, we repeatedly encountered startling hospitality. The teachers at the school treated us to lunch every day. We would barely set our dishes down after a meal before someone whisked them away and washed them. Leaders at the Learning Center would surprise us with meals or a bunch of bananas. When we inquired about getting something fixed, it was repaired immediately.

“Stop, stop! We don’t deserve your kindness!” we wanted to shout.

“Let us pay for you next

time,” we insisted.

“We really can do our own dishes,” we pleaded.

But we were denied all of these requests. We left Bo Klua with new insight into Thai culture and no idea how to repay the grand amounts of generosity that had been poured out upon us.

At our next stop we volunteered with Carl and Karen Groot, who work with the Abundant Life Center (ALC) in Bangkok. ALC is a ministry that helps women sew items such as purses, wallets, and laptop cases to be sold in the United States. Within just a few days, we were accepted and welcomed into one of most close-knit communities we had ever witnessed.

The women at the ALC sew together, eat most of their meals together, live near or with each other, sing together, worship together, and serve together. They welcomed us with open arms like we were long-lost friends.

Again, we were at a loss as to how to respond. We longed to show our gratitude in some physical form, but nothing we did or said seemed like enough compared to what they gave us. As time went on, one question burned in our minds: What does it mean to receive well?

We hated the thought that the



Dave and Hannah taught this class of second graders in Bo Klua, Thailand, the word “hat” and then they made hats together.



A busy market in Jiufen, Taiwan

people we met might think we were expecting to be treated so well. But, slowly—very slowly—we began to understand that this was far from the truth. We saw that the way we were welcomed as visitors was rooted deep in Thai culture where generosity is not a burden or inconvenience but a natural instinct like waking up and eating breakfast.

In her book *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*, Mary Lederleitner talks

Hannah Bryant is an assistant director of an after-school program in Calgary, Alberta, and is planning to begin working toward a teaching degree in ELL (English language learner) in the fall.

about differences between individualistic cultures and collectivist cultures. A collectivist culture, she writes, views life with a mentality of “what’s ours is ours,” not “what’s mine is mine” or even “what’s mine is yours” because nothing is “mine” in that context. It is all “ours.” When visitors enter a community like this, every effort is made to help them incorporate the mentality of “what’s ours is ours.” Coming from our individualistic culture, we truly



Above: Dave and Hannah teach English in Taiwan. Left: They share dinner with a crew from the Abundant Life Center in Bangkok.



struggled to receive freely.

After leaving Bangkok we traveled in Burma, Malaysia, and Singapore. Through some connections with people we met in Thailand we found out about an English center in Laos. We showed up in Savannakhet, Laos, with no idea what we were getting ourselves into. But as soon as we arrived, we were welcomed as daughter, son, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, and grandchildren to a very large (fifteen people living in one home) and loving Lao family. We lived with them for three weeks. We taught them English and they fed us, housed us, and loved us every day.

We asked ourselves again, *How do we receive well?*

“What’s ours is ours, what’s ours is ours.”

We traveled some more before ending up in Taiwan. There we partnered with Kong Ho Covenant Church in Taipei where we volunteered alongside church leaders, giving English presentations in

elementary, junior-high, and high-school classes. By then we had learned to expect the grand hospitality we received, but even so, it again overwhelmed us. We received a free apartment, many delightful meals, daily prayer from church members, and love from the entire congregation.

After nine months in Asia, our dwindling bank account told us it was time to head home. A Taiwanese friend drove us to the airport. On the way, she handed us an envelope. “We took a love offering for you at church,” she said.

Tears streamed from my eyes. The love offering covered the cost of our flights home. My tears became uncontrollable as I hugged my friend and thanked her for the unexpected gift. Clinging to her at the airport, I reflected on all the people who had impacted us throughout our time in Asia, and I knew I would never be the same.

We arrived home last October, and since then, our adjustment has been full of the normal reverse culture shock, along with the constant struggle to translate our new perspectives into daily action. How can we cultivate a sense of “what’s ours is ours” in a culture that is embedded in the mindset of “what’s mine is mine”? Standing firm in new beliefs that go against our consumerist and individualist culture is no easy task.

In fact, God provided us a way that we could never have designed ourselves.

We had decided to move to my husband’s home city of Calgary, Alberta, after our trip. During our last two weeks in Taiwan we met a married couple and discovered through a translator that they and their two children were planning to immigrate to North America in just a few months—to Calgary. A friend in Taiwan told us as we were leaving, “I think the reason God brought you to Taiwan was so you could meet this couple and be their angels in Canada.”

The family arrived in Calgary from Taiwan a couple of months ago, and we have been getting to know them, tutoring them in English, helping them furnish their new house, making meals together, and helping them navigate the city. The roles have reversed, and they ask us, “How can we receive well? We want to give back to you!” We just smile. We know that through giving and receiving so generously God’s kingdom is present here on earth.

Throughout our travels in Asia, we often felt like bumbling fools as we repeatedly received immense generosity and hospitality. We never felt like our words or actions were sufficient enough to bless the people who blessed us so well. Now we try to take one step at a time, still learning to receive the generosity of others gracefully. ■