

## Life is Beautiful If We Know How

By Nguyen Hoang Dieu Thuy

The Monday morning streets were desolate and deserted. Approaching the office, I saw the familiar seller of *banh cuon*<sup>1</sup> quickly pass by. Oh my gosh! Incredibly he was steering his motorbike with one hand while holding with the other a tray of *banh cuon*, a sauce bowl, and a little vegetable plate, a combo I sometimes enjoy. Following the government's directive for the weekend, all food and beverage stores, except for takeaways and essential shops, were closed to prevent a COVID-19 outbreak in Hanoi. The *banh cuon* store was shuttered, apparently, but he was delivering breakfast to someone nearby. I was so worried, not about his falling but more for the windblown vegetables threatening to take flight before reaching the customer.

I entered the office through the back door. The bookstore on the first floor in front was closed. It was absolutely quiet and drearily dark. Light streaming through the metal bars created a wonderful pattern. *Beautiful and sad*, like the title of a KAWABATA Yasunari novel we were about to publish. I went to the office to retrieve some necessary documents, while my design colleagues had to take their desktops home: the era of teleworking had arrived. It was not quite a shock to anybody as we had done this several times since the pandemic's outbreak in the spring of 2020 through the fall of 2021. What was worse was how the pandemic was making it more difficult to deliver our publications to social distancing areas. In a developing country such as Vietnam, even in normal circumstances the issue of mental health is not viewed as greatly important. In difficult circumstances, the demand for culture and knowledge is the first to go. In Vietnam, books have never been considered essential as they are in many countries around the world.

\* \* \*

The messy groups of migrants in Saigon<sup>2</sup> returning to the central provinces and the Central Highlands obsessed and pained me. Saigon is a big and vibrant city in the south of Vietnam where so many migrants from other provinces earn a living, but the city, seriously impacted by the pandemic, could not take care of everyone. They had to return to their hometowns in large groups, on motorbikes carrying all their belongings. Adults and children, men and women, all sleeping overnight in the open air on the street. A nine-day-old infant traveled 1000 km on a motorbike to his

---

<sup>1</sup> Steamed, rolled rice cakes

<sup>2</sup> Former name of Ho Chi Minh City

parent's hometown. Some simply journeyed on foot. One man lied down forever along the way.

Hanoi where I live was much luckier, but many migrating laborers from other provinces also suffered hardships.

My Facebook for ages had been filled mostly with books, literature and daily topics. But reading books lately has worried and perplexed me. It seems that I was reading meaningless and useless things in an overwhelmed reality. I did not dare to post the image of a book I had just read or share some thoughts on it as I often did. That made me feel graceless or even immoral.

But what could I do? I wished I could prepare free meals for the poor, but I was not living in an area hit hard by the pandemic. I wanted to organize donation drives to support the unemployed, but I was not a KOL. Apart from donating small amounts of money to my friends' charities, I could not do much. That made me think a lot.

\* \* \*

Going to the market during the pandemic was an unforgettable experience. Shoppers left their motorbikes at a distance and walked to the market. Moving on foot I was still wearing the "rice cooker"<sup>3</sup> on my head, a black heavy full-face helmet made for long rides because of the face shield. I wore a black face mask, short jeans, and black sports shoes, convenient clothes as I expected to be carrying a lot.

In the afternoon, only one fresh fish store remained open in the market where normally there would be a dozen such stores. A bunch of people gathered round the shop. I moved close, pointing to a huge common carp and told the female vendor I would buy it. But she did not look up or even nod. It was not clear whether she had heard me or not, so I maneuvered to the other corner and patiently waited for my turn.

The store this time sold only huge fish, either four to five-kilogram common carps or five to seven-kilogram grass carps. Everybody bought the whole fish, not half or part as usual. The seller scraped away at the grass carp's scales, then took a special curly knife and with trembling hands tried to cut between its head and body. Buyers neither pushed to hurry her nor bargained, but patiently waited. Looking at her hands, it was obvious to everybody that she was exhausted. It was not clear how many fish she had prepared since the market's opening.

---

<sup>3</sup> Widely used term for helmet in Vietnam

The next person bought two huge common carps, nine kilograms in total. I could not endure the wait any longer and left to buy other things. When I returned, the fish store was empty. The female vendor was sitting still as a stone, with her back against the wall, not even bothering to swat the buzzing flies away from her face. Her mouth yawned drowsily like a fish out of water, looking funny yet pitiful. Good sales but no joy at all!

I was overloaded with too many goods. I had to buy as much as possible as I might not be able to return to the market so often. I sweated like hell and the face mask was suffocating.

Walking to the market's back door, I suddenly found a fresh flower store. Fresh flowers at this time? I was surprised and disquieted, but I also felt something like happiness. During days such as these, one might think that food is the only "essential." The light pink roses and blazing yellow chamomiles, so glittering and so obviously luxurious; though inedible they set my mind at ease. It was a wonderful indication of the need for beautiful things in life. Luxurious items are also essential, right?

Suddenly I remembered *Life is beautiful*, a movie about Guido Orefice, a Jewish bookstore owner leading a simple life with his wife and a son when suddenly the family was dragged off to a horrific Nazi concentration camp. In the middle of paupers' graves, gas chambers and guns, the optimistic father, in a smart and funny way, tried to protect his son by making believe they were playing a prize-winning game. When he somehow managed to air a romantic song of memories through a loudspeaker directed towards his beloved wife, she smiled with overflowing happiness. She knew it could only be him. That very wonderful, romantic and emotional moment removed any doubts about the essential need for music. Obviously, life is beautiful if we know how.

I also remembered *A time to love and a time to die* by Erich Maria Remarque. What obsessed me was not the terrible war but soldier Ernst Graeber's capacity to find happy moments. Graeber tried his best to enjoy life with his girlfriend in the midst of the last fierce struggles of World War II—a good meal, strong liquor, a nice room, a cup of coffee, youth and love. Graeber turned his back on war by living a wholesome life and finding happiness whenever possible.

\* \* \*

When Graeber bought a bunch of narcissus for his cherished girlfriend and walked down the street ruined by bombs and bullets, amid crumpled faces made miserable by war, he faced disapproving looks and felt ashamed. I have felt the same way

reading and talking about books these days. Graeber did not give up and I discovered he was right.

Finally, I determined it was best to focus my mind on what I had been doing. I could not ignore the pandemic, but neither would I be overwhelmed by it. I was handling an important book, and as the editor in charge I had to do my very best. I tried to finish a kids' story that I was half writing. I moderated online talk shows about books. As an editor with a bit of fame, I often received invites for interviews or requests for help. Normally I would think twice about doing these things. But now I take them all. I agreed to help some publishing students with their graduate theses. I accepted interviews with some magazines and talk shows on the radio.

I am no longer ashamed of posting photos or sharing my thoughts on recently read books on Facebook. As an editor, I need to read to broaden and deepen my knowledge. As a writer and speaker, I talk and write about what I am reading in order to share my love of reading as the average number of books read in Vietnam is worryingly low. As a mother, I read and expect my children to follow suit. As a reader, I simply enjoy reading. I had just finished reading the *White* by Han Kang, about the color white in a person's life, snow, white house, dead-body cloth, anchovies under the sea, exhaled breath... It was a surprisingly gentle but perceptive book, and it gave rise to a deep feeling of purity. I finished reading *Runaway* by Alice Munro, *Moby Dick the White Whale* by Herman Melville, *My Sweet Orange Tree* by Jose Mauro de Vasconcelos, and *Ant, Mouse and Fly* by Nguyen Quang Lap.

My husband was reading *Zhuangzi* by Zhuang Zhou and *Prisoners of Geography* by Tim Marshall. My elder daughter was reading *Thousand and One Nights*. When we had time, my husband and I read *Aybolit Doctor* or *Totto-chan*, *The Little Girl at the Window* to our younger daughter.

An online conference with the participation of state managing agencies, publishers, and press was just organized, along with suggested books to be included in the "essential list." I thought the inclusion of books in the "essential list" would be the best way to change the public's awareness of reading books.

\* \* \*

I was boiling morning glory vegetables for lunch, one of the most popular dishes of the Vietnamese people. I was so dedicated to it. Boiling morning glory is not difficult, but it can be disappointing if not done right. The vegetable will not turn bright green if boiled too little; it becomes crumpled and tasteless if boiled too much. In Vietnam, there is no other vegetable as popular or as fascinating as morning glory. It can be used for salads or sauce, boiled or sauteeded. There are also thousands of recipes for

vegetable salads and ways of combining it with other ingredients and foods such as bone, fish, crab, shrimp, shellfish, chicken, duck, and beef. Morning glory can be grown in dry soil or in the water, during winter or summer. It grows in dense thickets and spreads quickly. Morning Glory is also the vegetable that appears most often in Vietnamese folk songs.

More than ever, I think the morning glory vegetable resembles the Vietnamese people with their vitality and flexibility in any circumstance as well as their bountiful love and community consciousness. Looking at the pictures of people giving away morning glory vegetables in pandemic-stricken areas, the vegetables being delivered by hand, placed at the front door of every house, on charity vehicles or in apartment lobbies for anyone in need. I believe Vietnam will be fine in the end.

*Hanoi, August 2021*