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*Please note: To save paper, I have modified this essay's format. Also, I have numbered the paragraphs to facilitate discussion. --PClauss*

### Tho Cau, The Village of My Heart

(1) In July, my parents and I, and three of my cousins visited Vietnam for three and a half weeks. It was the first time my cousins and I had been to Vietnam. My mother left Vietnam in 1985 along with her six siblings and my grandmother. This was her first return visit since leaving twenty-six years ago. The trip was also very significant for my father. It was his first visit since his Vietnam tour of duty with the U.S. Army in 1968. We were all excited. Stepping out of the airplane after an eighteen hour flight to Ho Chi Minh City, we were instantly pounded by the extreme heat and humidity. The next day we went to a local tourist office to plan our tour. It began two days later in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and ended in Hanoi with numerous stops between. Before returning to Ho Chi Minh City, we planned to visit relatives living in a small village, Tho Cau, located ninety kilometers south of Hanoi. During the tour we stayed in nice hotels and resorts. I became a little apprehensive about a four-day stay at my relatives house in a poor northern village. Fortunately, those four days in Tho Cau became the best days of my trip. Out of all the places I visited, Tho Cau was my favorite.

(2) My apprehension diminished quickly with the warm welcome and friendliness shown by my relatives when they came to meet us in Hanoi. We had just returned from visiting Ha Long Bay. Arriving at our hotel, a middle-aged woman and two men, my second cousins, approached us with a big smile. They gave each of us a big hug and handed us a large sack of fruit picked from their garden. Since our relatives did not own any cars, they had arranged for a large van to take us to Tho Cau. Throughout the two-hour ride, my second cousins spoke to us about their family, work, and community. We were no longer strangers. I soon felt at ease and looked forward to arriving at their village.

(3) The hospitality we received in Tho Cau made a big impression on me. We would sleep in my cousin's new house. My heart dropped when shown our beds - bare wooden boards without a mattress or any padding. After unpacking, we all walked over to my great uncle's house to eat dinner. The women brought out a huge tray with all sorts of Vietnamese food. They had spent the entire afternoon preparing a special dinner for us. It was the best Vietnamese food I had ever eaten. Later, our younger cousins taught us to ride a bike "two up", showed us card games, and joked with us even though there was some difficulty in communicating as we spoke different dialects. At bedtime my

second cousin set up mosquito nets over our beds and placed all the electric fans the family owned around our beds to keep us comfortable. Having given up their beds for us, they now would sleep on the concrete floor. Their heartfelt hospitality touched me deeply and completely alleviated my discomfort from sleeping on wooden boards.

(4) Tho Cau, where everyone knows each other, has a strong sense of community which I came to appreciate more each day. The children showed us around their small village and talked of friends, school and hobbies. Occasionally, some neighbors came over and introduced themselves, asking where we were from, and offering, to help if we needed anything. In the late afternoon, we further explored the town on our bikes. People waved and smiled at us as we passed. It seemed the entire community was aware of the visitors from America staying in their village. When peddling past the Catholic church an old woman stopped me, grabbed my arm, offered some fruit, and began telling me the history of the church. Although her abruptness startled me, I quickly realized she was just trying to be nice. Later that afternoon my cousins and I stopped at the open market. The vendors were happy to describe each type of fruit and showed us how to pick the best ones. Everyone was kind and amicable. I felt very welcome here. The village's strong sense of community was exemplified by their openness and kindness in welcoming us. In Tho Cao, everyone was family to each other, even outsiders.

(5) Besides, Tho Cau also has a strong sense of family. The men returned from work in the evening. Once again, the entire family ate dinner together. We sat next to each other on the floor and enjoyed our food while talking and laughing. I began to recognize the benefits that come from a tightly bonded extended family. It is almost a necessity for economic survival. It also serves to perpetuate the family history and adherence to cultural traditions. On the second night, my great-aunt Lan sat on her wooden chair and told us about the difficulties Tho Cau community experienced during the war. Then my great-uncle Khai explained to us how the communist government awarded him the silver-star medal for his bravery in a battle during the Vietnam War in which everyone was killed except him. Although few, the moments I shared with my family all around me became very special.

(6) The thing I most liked about Tho Cau was how strictly my relatives and the community adhered to Vietnamese traditions. Although only a few hours away from a metropolitan center of business and modernization, Tho Cau is a place of tradition. My third cousins who are older referred to me as their older sister because my grandmother was older than their grandfather. Children show respect to their elders by bowing, listening and taking care of them. They do not move out until they get married. My great-uncle Khai's children and his extended family ensure all his needs are met. His position also meant that our family's socializing and all our meals took place at his house. The respect

and care given to the elderly is in striking contrast to the institutional housing of old people so common in the U.S. The night before we left Tho Cau, everyone visited the grave of my great-great-great aunt. My relatives lit incense and said a prayer asking her to watch over my family and protect us during our trip home. As I am half-Vietnamese, I have experienced some Vietnamese culture within my family and my Vietnamese community. But it was not until my visit to Tho Cau that I came to truly appreciate my culture.

(7) The Tho Cau community and my relatives lead a simple, yet happy life. The house we slept at was new. It had a stand-alone structure for bathing and a separate room for the commode, a luxury for village life. With no hot water, we showered quickly by dipping water from a bucket. The water source was rain, collected run-off from the roofs. The rain water then enters a filter tower containing layers of gravel and sand before flowing into an enclosed concrete cistern. Every family in Tho Cau own their own padi field, usually enough to meet their personal rice consumption with a little left to sell. Everyone seems to raise chickens. One evening, I watched my second cousins grab one of their chickens, slice its neck and drain the blood and prepare it for the evening meal. Small garden plots supply most their vegetables. Drinking water is always boiled. At meal time the dishes of food are placed together with everyone sitting around within arm reach. Sometimes we sat on the concrete floor, other times on the wooden bed. Furthermore, I walked everywhere during my stay. Tho Cau has few cars, with most people either riding bicycles or small motorcycles. Everyone wore simple clothing. In fact, some of my second cousins sew their own clothes. Also, I enjoyed the fact that most homes in Tho Cau kept their doors open all the time. One afternoon, two neighbors just took off their shoes and walked inside the house without knocking or asking for permission. They sat down on the wooden beds and waited until my other cousins came down the stairs. Soon after they began sharing stories of their day! My family does not have much, but they appreciate everything they have. I realized how fortunate I really am.

(8) Before I knew it, it came time to leave. In just a few days, I had developed a strong attachment to my family and their village. I would miss them very much. Once again, they rented a large van so all of us, thirty people, could go to the airport in Hanoi. For some it was their first time in Hanoi. Our departure was very emotional with a lot of tears and sad eyes. During the plane ride to Ho Chi Minh City, my mind was still remembering all the things that had happened in Tho Cau. I would never forget Tho Cau, our family and the awareness I gained.

(9) My visit to Tho Cau was the best part of the wonderful trip to my mother's homeland. I was most impressed with the simplistic lifestyle, family emphasis, and the sense of community within the

village. It can be misleading. Life in the extended family can be tough. Everyone must work and contribute in any way they can. During planting, harvest field work is from dawn to dark, often stooped over and shin deep in water. Cash jobs are often transient, lasting only a few days or weeks. Women labor at construction sites the same as men. It is common for one or more adults in an extended family to seek work in the cities where the better jobs are. Illnesses can have a devastating effect as medical care is difficult to obtain and can be costly. Simple conveniences I take for granted are out of reach luxuries for most villagers. What impressed me most is their ability to address the hardships and challenges and still have a genuine willingness to help others and be happy and appreciative of what they have; true hospitality and kindness. My experience in Tho Cau became truly memorable and I could not wait to return to “my village Tho Cau” again. Maybe next year...