

Title:

Build Monuments to Your Future

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Summary:

On my recent trip to Cambodia I was blessed to spend three days exploring the ruins collectively known as Angkor Wat. We experienced sunrise and sunset, as well as the noonday heat, in this magnificent complex of temples, many built more than 900 years ago.

Keywords:

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Article Body:

On my recent trip to Cambodia I was blessed to spend three days exploring the ruins collectively known as Angkor Wat. We experienced sunrise and sunset, as well as the noonday heat, in this magnificent complex of temples, many built more than 900 years ago.<p>

<b>Relics of Past Splendor</b><p>

These shrines were created with stones carried from far away; many were built without mortar, and all were built without modern technology. Yet the structures have withstood the ravages not only of time and weather, but also of mankind. Over the centuries temple figures sacred to one religion (Buddhism) have been removed or destroyed by followers of another religion (Hinduism), only to be replaced by the original worshipers (Buddhists). Just as destructive were souvenir hunters who have taken pieces from the carvings and sold them to collectors and museums. Lastly, bullet holes and bomb damage mar many of the temple walls – a legacy of the Khmer Rouge.<br><br>Like the pyramids in Egypt and the Mayan ruins in Central America, Angkor Wat is the relic of an ancient civilization that was far advanced for its time. Today many of the Angkor Wat temples are still in daily use. I saw monks and worshipers kneeling in the temples, burning incense and praying. Truly a profound experience.<p>

<b>Emblems of Today's Squalor</b><p>

In contrast, on my last evening in Cambodia, I took a boat ride through Chong Khneas, a floating fishing village. This loose collection of more than 700 families of fishermen and a complete support community live on boats and travel Tonlé Sap Lake following the fish and the rainy season.

To reach the floating village we drove through the town of Siem Reap and several smaller villages. The further from Siem Reap we traveled, the more primitive

living conditions became. Homes went from cinder-block and concrete structures to wooden houses to one-room bamboo shacks supported on spindly bamboo poles to protect them from flooding. I would have been afraid to roll over in my sleep in these houses, much less raise a family or ride out a monsoon in one. Electricity was nonexistent, and the only running water was the stream we were following to the lake. The only nod to the 21st century was televisions, running on car batteries and prominently displayed in the glassless windows.<p>

The floating village consisted of hundreds of boats, some no bigger than 20 feet by 6 feet. Entire families lived on each boat. Cages suspended underneath the boat served as impromptu fish farms. The back of the boat held a primitive outhouse. Children bathed in the lake while old women cleaned fish or cooked noodles in water dipped from the same source. The lake served not only a source of food and of cooking and drinking water, but as a bathtub and septic system as well. Here the ubiquitous televisions, and the outboard motors used to power the fishing boats onto the lake each evening, were the only lifestyle changes in the last 200 years.<p>

The floating village and the bamboo shacks were light years below the standard of living enjoyed by the Cambodians who designed and lived in the temple complex at Angor Wat 900 years ago. All of those past splendors seem lost today.

<br><br><b>The Lessons of Forgetfulness</b><p>

What caused such an advanced civilization to revert to a shadow of its former self? And what lesson can we learn from this study in contrasts? To paraphrase George Santayana's famous line, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to forget it." Somehow the people of that floating village have forgotten the grandeur of Cambodia's past. They have lost touch with the creativity and spirit that made Angkor Wat possible. Instead of moving forward, they either stayed the same or moved backwards – and perhaps that amounts to the same thing. Once we cease to learn, build, create and stretch, we not only stop gaining or growing, we allow the rest of the world to pass us by. This is the equivalent of moving backwards.<p>

We must ask ourselves each day, "Am I moving forward or simply standing still?" In our lives and at our work we all know people who refuse to change with the times. To our computer-savvy children watching us struggle to retrieve our email, we may look like slow-moving dinosaurs. We cannot afford the luxury of standing still. To do so allows the world to move past us. More importantly from a business standpoint, it allows our competition to move easily past us.<p>

Do you risk becoming a relic of the past or a dinosaur whose fate is extinction? If you have any amount of doubt coursing through your veins, commit today to education, growth and constant improvement, both personal and professional. And know that if up until now you've been a bit lax, you're never too old or too young to make this commitment to yourself. The lesson I learned in Cambodia is that I want to be the one who builds monuments for the future – not the one who wonders how the monuments of the past were built.

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