

The Principle of Good: TIEP NGUYEN

Some people's altruism receives applause and accolades. Others labour quietly in the background, achieving much but without the public awards. TIEP NGUYEN, STARTTS Vietnamese bicultural counsellor and one of our longest serving staff members is one of the latter people. He talks to REBECCA HINCHEY about a life of service.

Justice – or its absence – is at the core of STARTTS work. Like millions around the world striving for fairness and equality, it enflames our passions to see human beings disregarded, denigrated and dealt with as unworthy.

Tiep first displayed this fire for justice while attending a high school for future priests in Vietnam. The spark was a new system for deciding which students were most devout and virtuous. A privileged group, handpicked by the school's new spiritual advisor, became the core group of religious activity in the seminary. An indignant Tiep reacted to what he saw as blatant inequity. In the dawn hours following the announcement he crept into the classroom, scrawling on the board in Latin:

"Without discrimination the sun shines on everyone"

He was expelled for this act of disobedience.

Was Tiep born with this zeal, or was it a product of early discrimination and deprivation? Tiep shares his birthplace, Vinh Yen, in the province of Nghe An, with many other heroes of modern and ancient Vietnam. Before he'd reached double figures the young lad had already lived through tragedy, displacement and persecution. His mother died from illness when Tiep was just seven or eight. Not long

after, the menace of communism began to impact his catholic majority village. A young man active in the community was set aflame by the Viet Minh forces. Soon after, his home was raided by four officers, who forced the family to pack their belongings away and never touch them again. Sensing the impending danger, his father bundled up part of his brood, heading north to the nearest village free from communist control. Arriving in the safety of Phat Diem, the young student completed his primary education.

Many years on, Tiep is compassionate and wise. His clients give him credit for helping transform their lives. He is an institution at STARTTS and in the Vietnamese community,

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held in extremely high esteem. His influence among STARTTS and the Vietnamese community is quietly significant. Tiep declares that when he began he was humble and ignorant and felt inadequate among the western educated staff. Yet like other bilingual workers at STARTTS, Tiep learnt from life how trauma,



SURVIVAL CAME FIRST

"We were sort of paralysed emotionally and physically on the day of the 30th," Tiep explained.

"My brother, father and I sat in the kitchen. We were crying. This was the collapse of everything. We thought it was over, finished. It came so fast we were totally unprepared for the event.

"On the second day, every teacher had to report to school. A military man was there to take registration. He knew we had been in the military [mandatory under the previous government] and we had to declare it," he said.

DEMOTION OFTEN FOLLOWED

"I wasn't looking after the guidance office anymore. People from the North and people from the South trained in the North came along to manage all the institutions," he told me.

"I was sort of a second class citizen," he emphasized.

After one month, school term ceased, and the teachers were sent for a 30-day stint in political indoctrination, where they were told about the crimes of the US imperialist government and the victories of the PAVN. For now, supplies were available in cities, but rural residents were reaching desperation. Fears of similar shortages lead metropolitan households to amass supplies; rice, oil, water, sugar and the distinctive fish sauce. According to Tiep, this habit still influences many Vietnamese families living in Australia today.

The process of moving from the country of origin to resettlement is usually

exile and cultural displacement can disrupt a successful resettlement.

Life experience has enriched Tiep's counselling, but a passion for learning has played a huge role. Notwithstanding his earlier school rebellion, Tiep was and is extremely studious. His aptitude for liberal and English studies combined with a dedicated learning regime resulted in the award of the South's top school prize, awarded by the President of the Republic when he completed his last year of secondary education.

By 23, Tiep was standing in front of 50 students, teaching them the subjects he himself so enjoyed. Early days were difficult, as he struggled to maintain discipline in class, but he enjoyed the experience overall. Perhaps more importantly, his career offered education opportunities that served as a foundation for his future life of service. The first of these was a scholarship offered under the Colombo Plan. With 70 other teachers from across the globe he travelled to New Zealand for nine months of English tuition, remaining behind for a further three months to instruct new students in one of his favourite disciplines. The following year, in 1971, a fortuitous training prospect presented

itself. Returning to his former teaching ground he was sent on the country's first course in guidance and counselling. Arriving back at school, he headed the Office of Guidance, organising activities and information sessions while seeing a small number of individual students.

"It was less personal counselling and more educational guidance," Tiep clarifies.

Craving further knowledge and contemplating an academic career, the teacher began weekend studies towards a Masters in Education, covering research, psychology and testing.

This was all set against a backdrop of mounting menace and violence.

As Tiep described, "War is permanent, but you have become 'immune' to this risk, to the insecurity and the lack of safety.

"You still have to survive; organise life, do your job as if it is normal."

On the 30th April 1975 – the month known by many Vietnamese as Black April – the President of South Vietnam surrendered to the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and Saigon fell to communist control. His country changed irrevocably and his life spun about. This sort of unthinkable, massive disruption stamps refugees forever, as it did Tiep.



protracted and arduous. For Tiep it took seven years.

After his first bout in prison, Tiep taught in school for a further two years, replacing traditional teachings with compulsory subjects in Marxism, Leninism and communist literature. At the close of the second year Tiep and his peers were destined for internment number two in political propaganda. Before the appointed day Tiep attempted his first escape from the oppression and persecution of Vietnam. As with the hundreds of thousands of other Vietnamese who took the same risk, the boat wasn't fit for the task.

"We were afloat for several days and we ran out of water and food, fourteen or so people," Tiep shared.

"We could see land, we were moving between two islands. The engine didn't work and we didn't have oars. Finally we had to organise people to swim. We used the petrol containers; others sat on these and used small pieces of wood to row ashore.

"The first group of three swimmers didn't return. After one day we sent another group who had wives on the boat so we knew they would return," he said.

Even today, dreams of those terror-filled times sometimes slither in at night. It's rare in recent years, but like most refugees Tiep knows how past horrors come haunting after dark.

The next leg of his journey would bring nightmares as well as guilt.

Rescued and then interrogated, Tiep was imprisoned in a stinking, teeming cell. Denied sufficient food and surrounded in filth, Tiep couldn't distinguish the night from the day. After two months he was freed, courtesy of his sister's bribe.

Unemployed and penniless, Tiep shrunk from the world around him. He stayed with family, alert for the chance of escape.

It came soon but it once again failed, this time without him even leaving the shore. Interrogated, imprisoned and released once more, he became homeless.

His dear father, who had also tried to flee, fell ill. Medical attention of the most serious nature was necessary. They parted in hospital.

"That's the last time I see my father for four and half years.

"They arrest me, put handcuffs on and take me away.

"People had to tell him I was going overseas, had already gone. I still have the guilt. I feel distressed, pity for my father. When I was released in 1982 my father was very old.

"Years of suffering, years of unnecessary suffering.

"I feel guilt that my father had lived a delusion, lived a lie. Thought that I was safe when in fact I was not," he lamented.

Guilt lives with most refugees. Guilt that they've escaped guilt they've left others behind, guilt that they've survived.

That some survive while others do not

is often just luck. The reality of refugee survival is a daily miracle.

Personal characteristics can also help carry some through. Courage and resilience stand out, but there are many other influences. Fortitude, perseverance, ingenuity, dreams and values were part of the mix keeping Tiep alive.

The brutality of the infamous Vietnamese 're-education camps' is ugly and true.

"We had to go into the fields with empty bellies. Only two meals a day, one at midday, one after work," Tiep remembered.

"They use fear to control you; they use hunger to control you. Intimidation and deprivation are their tools.

"When there is a good crop you get a bowl of rice and watery vegetable soup. When the crop is bad we have to eat the corn they feed the cattle.

"If you found a potato in the field you would have to eat it raw but if you got caught eating it you would be severely punished. This didn't happen to my group but some of my clients have told me. If you got caught eating raw potato they made you eat two or three kilos," Tiep elaborated.

The Vietnam War and its aftermath killed hundreds of thousands. Millions were scarred physically and psychologically. The burden has destroyed countless.

Not Tiep.

In part the explanation lies in an epilogue from a verse novel by Nguyen Du.



It has been a guiding principle throughout his life and sustained him throughout the horrendous years in the concentration camp.

Each of us has a burden to carry. Let's carry it and not accuse Heaven of what might happen to us. The principle of good comes from our souls and a good heart is much worthier than all the talents.

Dreams helped as well, but they also hindered. As Tiep has written, his dreams 'soothed and calmed' but also 'troubled and disturbed' him.

"The first trauma nightmare, it's recurring, it's symbolic. The first dream was the loss of my motorbike right after April 1975. It was a dream of loss," he told.

The second inserted the dreadful daily reality of camp into the blackness of night.

The third reassured and relaxed. It was also real, set in the bliss of early childhood when both mother and father were alive.

The last, which came on Christmas Day, 1982, was a dream of release, a dream representing hope for the future.

From that day until his successful escape in September 1983 Tiep lived an invisible sort of existence.

He was: "Without fixed accommodation, without a place in a household register, without a job, without income, without social status. You are nothing in that social structure," he explained.

"I have nothing. No identity paper. You are a person without an identity," he said.

Attempt three was fruitful, but petrifying.

"It was very cold and rainy under the dark sky. I don't know if I pray or it's a just a faint hope that the boat wouldn't come and I would never try again," Tiep recalled.

"It was so scary. The dogs were barking all around. We were afraid the security police would come and get us.

"It was very hard to find our way. The plants were above the surface of the water, sort of like a forest. We moved around for hours before we found the sea," he remembered.

After five nights the starved and dishevelled crew arrived on an Indonesian island and were eventually brought to a United Nations processing centre at Galang. Processing was quick, but Tiep chose to remain, and to be of service. As voluntary organiser of a school, Tiep helped hundreds of Vietnamese with their first foray into the English language, among other things. It was a two-way street. Being of benefit to others was cathartic for Tiep.

"From 1975 to 1983, eight years of wasted time. Non-productive years," he said.

"This short time was most fruitful, most happy. I was very useful.

"It was something to make up for lost time. I was respected by the Indonesian and American management and my compatriots" he continued.

Six months later, on the 29th of March

1984, Tiep and his nephew touched down in Australia. The Endeavour Hostel, Coogee became their home. Loneliness plagued them.

"I was one of the longest stayers, five months," Tiep explained.

"We could stay six months but most people left earlier to stay with family or friends. I didn't have family.

"The first weekend was very sad because they had family or friends to take them out, there were only very few left in the big hall.

"I was sad and a bit lonely," he mourned.

Like in many Vietnamese people, self-sufficiency and independence are deeply ingrained in Tiep. As soon as he arrived he was exploring the city, Gregory's in hand. It wasn't long before he found his first job. In 1984 services for refugees were immature and few. The government was only just beginning to realise the importance of non-material support for people who had survived so much.

Tiep became one of the first Bilingual Vocational Support Officers for the Department of Education, liaising between school, student, and family.

This was quickly followed by employment with Anglicare supporting unaccompanied refugee minors. The two are a perfect match. Tiep brings his education and experiences as a teacher, refugee and school counsellor to the role. The position brings him more counselling experience and knowledge of refugee

Loneliness is often the refugee's friend

services in Australia.

It was the perfect preamble for his position at STARTTS.

Over 20 years Tiep has made a deep impression on STARTTS, our clients and the Vietnamese community in Sydney. At the launch of the 2nd edition of the Vietnamese Resource Book, written extensively by Tiep, STARTTS Executive Director said

"We'd like to be able to clone Tiep, but since we can't, we want to make sure other staff are able to absorb some of his wisdom and experience.

"Tiep Nguyen has been at STARTTS since its inception, and has been untiring in his work to assist Vietnamese clients," he said.

As his words suggest, the credit for STARTTS' close relationship with the Vietnamese community goes largely to Tiep. STARTTS can also thank him for helping us to reflect on how ethno-cultural factors influence the treatment and rehabilitation of torture and trauma survivors.

Perhaps one of his most significant contributions has been the successful application of western models of psychotherapy with non-Western individuals, proving for hundreds of bicultural counsellors that followed that not only can it be done, but it can filter through the community, helping the individual at hand as well as their peer group.

Since his humble beginnings in 1988, Tiep has seen more than 600 individual clients originally from Vietnam. There are few who have left unchanged or unimproved. For example, there is Minh Nguyen, who thinks that Tiep and STARTTS are the best thing that ever happened to him, or Loi Nguyen, who describes Tiep as "the best listener... someone to help when we need it...we can talk to him about all the things in life."

Although Tiep originates from what might be described as a more 'community-orientated' culture, he sees work with individuals as part of the continuum of community.

"In our community there are many, many people suffering, including individuals and families," he stated.

By working with as many of those single units as possible, he believes he's helping to heal the suffering of the whole. Despite

his success, he admits that the Bicultural Counsellor's path is not always clear; it is missing in parts, overgrown in others, and each counsellor must travel with care. The first challenge is often limited understanding about working psychotherapeutically with survivors of trauma.

Discussing his lack of confidence in the early days, Tiep says, "When I first started I read ... collections of articles on post-trauma stress. I read to upgrade my knowledge and skills."

The two-worker counselling model, where new bicultural workers are teamed with experienced therapists during their first year or two, increased his confidence.

"The first person I saw with Robin.... during the trip from Vietnam to the asylum country he lost one son. He never allowed his kids to go on school excursions if it were to the beach or sea; he had never taken him to the seaside himself. ..That helped me to understand the effect of trauma. It's a story of loss and grief. Of course he still had other trauma but that's the main thing," Tiep shared.

With this client, as with all, Tiep doesn't explain what westernised professional counselling is.

"I say I'm a helper; emotional, family, trauma. If by sharing with me they feel relief or in the long-run they can resolve difficulties or symptoms subside, that's my work."

It's an approach he advocates for other staff.

"Clients are sensitive to our caring attitude. Make an attempt to understand and show you are generally caring. That's the first step to accessing people from a different culture," Tiep advises.

"There are implications and complications when presenting yourself as a helping friend.

"I've crossed the boundary.

"I accept a gift if it's not too expensive.

In Vietnamese culture when they give you something out of their own heart, freely, you take it, because if you don't take it, it might be hurting people.

"In counselling, sometimes you cry with the person crying. It can be a very strong advantage. It could be the highest and best sign that you are together with

your client. But that might not be acceptable to western counsellors.

"Sometimes the training asks you to be neutral, but sometimes taking sides can help you build rapport," Tiep advised.

He also employs strategies to avoid becoming unprofessionally close.

"I can make home visits, but not during holidays, and not during weekends."

"I'm a friend in need but I avoid seeing them outside of working hours."

Ending the counselling relationship when it's viewed through the prism of friendship can also be tricky.

"If you're a friend, how can you terminate, you have been on a journey, been through a lot together? When they feel they can go on by themselves it's not hard to terminate because they don't want to be a burden, they can go on.

"Also when I discuss it with them I tell them – 'this is a temporary ending, you can come back whenever you want.' That sort of termination is not very harsh," he clarified.

Harsh is not a word you'd associate with Tiep, yet there are times he believes a severe application of counselling theories have been detrimental to his clients. One in particular stands out, a Vietnamese man who had suffered extreme humiliation and physical punishment.

"The wound has to be cleaned before you can apply the ointment. I felt I could heal the wound by opening it up and applying something there but it didn't work that way. I was too fast and hurried. I followed the theory without considering the individual," he castigates himself.

Tiep today is mellow. He's more accepting of diversity, more flexible and patient. His personal life is as full as his professional one. A young son and wife keep him busy at home. Family life has necessarily decreased time devoted to work, but the core of the man remains service.

"STARTTS has given me a sense of achieving life goals," he states.

Goals epitomised in the words of Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore.

"When I'm asleep, I dream that life is enjoyment. When I wake up I find that life is service. I have rendered service and found that service is enjoyment." ■