

The Family

Bill & Noy Peeler's Mission Letter

November 2015

bill.noy.peeler@worldpersonnel.org

<http://www.thefellowship.info/Missions/Field-personnel/peeler>

PO Box 93299, Siem Reap, Cambodia

“A father to orphans and an advocate for widows is God in his holy dwelling place. God causes the lonely to dwell in families. He leads prisoners into prosperity...” Psalm 68.5-6 ISV

The family is the basic unit of every social structure and the foundation of culture and civilization. In fact, it's innate to our very nature. Family forms the framework for what we are because our entire lives are built on relationships. All that begins with the family. So it should come as no surprise that our Maker is a Personal God. It's what Jesus had in mind when he taught the disciples to say, “Our Father who art in heaven...” when they prayed. To call God Abba is to see ourselves as family. I have family back home and I miss them. I have family here as well. I've got my two brothers-in-law, Chet and Phut and their families. I could never have foreseen that my family would one day include Cambodians. But what in life is predictable anyway? Even so, whenever I think about it, I'm always intrigued at how we're made the way we are. I never really thought about it when I was a kid. Like most kids, I just took it for granted. I mean, who wouldn't? We're born and presto, there they are, the Fam. But since then I've come to appreciate the fact that I belong to and am a member of a family. After all, it's the most important thing we have going for us.

When I worked on the Thai-Cambodian border back in '79 at a place called Sakeo, there was a



little girl in one of the Unaccompanied Minors tents that had just been off-loaded from one of the trucks that were bringing the refugees in. She couldn't even pick herself up off the ground. She just lay there flat on her back. A doctor came by and looked her over. He told me to take her to the Blood Tent for a pint because she was anemic. I carried her over and put her down. I was about to leave but she grabbed my shirt sleeve. She wouldn't let go. The doc noticed and suggested I stick around to keep her from getting any more stressed than she already was. I had work to do that I needed to get back to. But I stayed. Consequently we became friends. Our friendship didn't last long though. I had to leave for another location along the border after a couple of weeks. But by the time I left she was doing fine, gaining strength, getting back on her feet, and able to produce a great big smile. I never learned what became of her. But I have to believe a kid that's had it as tough as she has and still managed to survive has the wherewithal to make it in life with flying colors. Anyway, that was the gist of my prayers on her behalf.

I didn't have a team to work with in Sakeo. My two teammates had left me there after a few days and had gone back to Bangkok to be with their families. I was single then, so I guess they figured I didn't need anybody, that I could handle things on my own. I thought so too but soon discovered that I did need somebody and it just so happened that scared little kid did too. Turns out her name was Choeun. We didn't have any language between us either but that didn't matter so much. It was just having somebody to be with. So I'd take a few minutes now and then throughout the day to look in on her and in the evenings I'd spend a little time with her too. You could say we'd become an *ad hoc* family of two. A

temporary arrangement, to be sure, but at a critical time for both of us. I don't need to say how bad things were on the border back then or how hard an ordeal it was she'd gone through to get there or even how much the place wore me down in both mind and body there in the midst of all that debris and human detritus of war and famine spread out all around me. There she was nonetheless without any family dumped in a muddy field with a barbed wire fence around it and armed security, not to keep the refugees safe, but to keep them in. And all that would eventually become a refugee camp. There I was too without any family. I was the first thing she grabbed onto. You might say I was drafted. Or maybe adopted is a better way of putting it. However that may be, all we had for the moment was each other. The irony of it is, as weak as she was, I was leaning on her for moral support. The least I could do was give hers a boost.

That experience has stayed with me and has shaped my thinking about a great many things, including what it means to be a family. And now here in Cambodia where I also have family from Noy's side, that time on the border makes me see things in a way I might not otherwise have noticed. Most of us probably think of family along the lines of blood ties and marriage connections. And that's certainly true for the most part. On the other hand, here I am in Cambodia related by marriage to a people who are not my people in a culture that is not my culture. And though I speak their language at least enough to say, "I'm hungry. Where's the food?" it's not my language. Nor is the food. As a matter of fact, I'm so un-Cambodian it isn't funny. And still, here I am. When I'm here in their neck of the woods, they're all the family I have and I can't deny that I need them.

On this last mission excursion that Noy, Narith and I took, we thought it would be a good idea to go fetch brother Chet in Kampot and take him to see his brother, Phut in Battambang. We don't especially like to think about these things, but not knowing how much longer brother Phut might have, it seemed good to us to get the two brothers together one more time. At first, after he'd had the stroke, he'd cry a lot, especially when he saw our faces. Maybe he was thinking of our times together before he had the stroke, when he was strong. We'd sometimes take him with us wherever we were working. And now he can't do any of that. I'd feel badly too if it was me, unable to get up and go where I wanted. Then later on he went through a phase where, to me, he seemed doomed, like he was resigned to his fate. Like he'd given up on life. But this last time, there was something else. I can't see into his soul, but I did see in his face what looked like acceptance and not defeat. He could smile again and we even made him laugh. God knows how we've prayed for him. We've had some good times and it pains me to see him going through all this. I hope that what I saw in his face was due to the presence of God giving him the moral support he'll need to face his suffering with the hope that something far better awaits him up ahead. You see with me, my faith is always a target of ridicule and mockery. I'm not talking about other people, the ones who deride us for being Christian. I can handle that, but about the smooth tongued voice that whispers in my ear and says what an idiot I am to believe that a God who loves and saves us could ever exist. And yet when God speaks inside a man's heart, he's got to know that everything's going to be okay, like the voice of a father soothing his child after she's awakened from a terrifying dream.

I'm sure I heard God speak like that to me once. This happened in Vietnam. I wasn't a believer yet, but my mom and family and even my next door neighbors all prayed for me every day. I don't like to talk about it except to say I was scared to death up there in a tower half the night out on the perimeter. If



they'd have put two men in a tower I'd have been okay. But they had us working alone in six-hour shifts. This was my job seven days a week, six to midnight, that and filling sandbags by day. I was only 22. There was a Christian in my company, Specialist 4th Class Ralph Philbrick from Oklahoma. He sat me down one evening and explained to me about salvation and all. I appreciated his concern but told him I didn't really buy it. Even so he gave me a little book to read, the Gospel of John it was, and I did read it, the whole thing in one sitting. I couldn't put it down until I had gotten to the end of it. The timing was just right too because I had managed to get myself into a very bad state of mind until one night the fear that I had somehow died and was just now realizing it overtook me. It was the deepest despair I had ever known. Out beyond the wire was a strange and hostile environment unlike any place on earth and there was no way out of it. I thought it must be hell, that I'd been damned and this was how it happened to people when they died. But there were no horned devils. No fire and brimstone. Just a dark inhospitable landscape of everlasting loneliness. I longed to go home thinking that now I would never get to see my family again, that they were as unreachable as the stars. I thought even if a bullet found its way into my head I'd still be in the same place. But then out of nowhere I heard a voice, not my voice and not like a thought that pops unexpectedly into one's head, but a voice that spoke clearly and directly to me. The voice said, "Just believe. Everything's going to be all right." I grabbed onto those words and held on for all I was worth. I repeated them over and over until the nightmare inside my head had subsided. That was the first time I recognized that Jesus was close by. Later on, my Chicano buddy, Spec. 4 Lovato from Arizona and I put the whole shebang in God's hands and got baptized in the South China Sea by an Army chaplain by the name of Banks. He was a major. I don't know where he was from, but he was good to us and helped us get our bearings.

Well, that's the kind of thing we endeavor to convey to people here in Cambodia. It's not something we learned in school, university, or at seminary. Rather it's all about the lives we live, what happens to us along the way and the people we run into. But mostly it's about our God who gave us Jesus and made us a family. We were all orphans before he came along. We grabbed hold of his sleeve and wouldn't let go. He didn't pull away either. He stayed.

PS: All of you must know how much we love you. You're family to us. Not only do you make it possible for us to be here in Cambodia, but you care about us and about what we do. Your partnership in the Gospel is no light thing, but the vital link that binds us together. People are hearing about Jesus through you.