

As Peace Corps Volunteers, it seems that we each have a particular someone who watches out for us, taking us under her wing making sure we're fed, etc. For me that person was my neighbor Yam.

Yam had little education. Although I didn't speak Thai very well, that didn't deter Yam at all. Where I live in northeast Thailand, they speak "Isaan". Although I might catch some, it doesn't sound like the Thai we were taught during PST. However, Yam always spoke Thai with me and spoke slowly, complete with charades, if needed. She often invited me over for dinner and took me to meet other neighbors. Perhaps the best thing we did together was harvesting rice, which we both looked forward to doing again this year.

The head village master of my village died of liver cancer in January. My co-worker said he was diagnosed three months prior and that people get liver cancer from eating fish. Really? Is this one of my language misunderstandings?

That same evening, while reading a week-old Bangkok Post, there happened to be an article about liver cancer in Isaan. The cause is from eating raw or undercooked fish, practically a staple here! Life expectancy is 3 to 6 months after diagnosis.

The next day at the market, I saw Yam's sister who told me that Yam was in the hospital. I knew Yam was going to see the doctor because her leg and foot hurt. She said that Yam has "ma-reng".

"Cancer?"

"Yes. Dtap."

I looked up "dtap" in my dictionary while in the parking lot.

Liver.

Liver cancer.

Yam had liver cancer.

I had a sinking feeling. I rode my bike home slowly. I called Yam at the hospital while the neighbors listened. Yam's daughter, Lit, was with her. Yam sounded very tired and kept asking if I were coming to visit tomorrow.

The liver cancer article stated that there are two types. Isaan has a high rate of the cholangiocarcinoma type, caused by eating raw or undercooked fish. A parasite, liver fluke, and a chemical used for preservation causes the cancer in the bile ducts which are part of the liver, thus inoperable and no treatment is available. Typical rate of this cancer in the West is 1 in 100,000. In Isaan: 80 in 100,000. And 87% of the diagnoses are in an advanced stage. Sigh.

I visited Yam at the hospital, about a 45 minute bike-ride away. Her daughter and other neighbors were visiting. She seemed fine, but missed eating fruit and treats. Her left leg and foot were so swollen! I'd not seen it that bad before. She said that it still hurt. I visited her several times during her two weeks in the hospital.

Three months later, Yam had lost a lot of weight and was completely jaundiced, including her eyes. She had been unable to walk at all for a few weeks. She barely ate and most things nauseated her.

The rest is from my journal: Yam's been asleep the last three times I've visited. I usually visited before and after work. Kueng, her husband, told me that since he came home from Bangkok to care for Yam, her sisters have visited some but I visit every day.

Kueng said that their three kids were born at home and that Yam had only ever gone to the doctor twice in her life; the second time being this year when she was diagnosed with cancer.

When I first met Yam, she lived alone or with grandkids. Later I learned that she had a husband who worked in Bangkok. I hoped that he was a nice guy and Kueng turned out to be a kind man. He teasingly joked about being "Nurse Kueng", giving her sponge baths, massages, etc. Throughout all of this, he remained light. Perhaps it's the Thai Buddhist concept of fate and acceptance of this life's lot.

The other day, I told my partner that I don't think I'll ever see Yam smile again. It goes to show what I take for granted.

A couple times last week, Yam asked me to take and hold her hand. I know Yam has appreciated our friendship. Literally from the first day I met her, and regularly since, Yam has been saying, "I'll miss you a lot." I remember thinking that I just moved here, there's a long way to go yet.

April 30, 2012 - Yam was asleep this morning. She seemed more uncomfortable today. This is her fourth or fifth day of no food. Yam is dying. Tomorrow, the first of May, feels like a countdown...

May 1, 2012 - I woke up this morning thinking about Yam. I had a rough morning as I really allowed myself to cry about her dying. I felt like I didn't want to see her today. It's really hard to see her dying. When I stopped in to see her this morning, both she and Kueng were sleeping. It must have been a long night for them.

This evening, when it appeared that she'd fallen asleep again, I held her hand to say that I was going home. She awoke and asked, "Where are you going?" Asking it in Thai rather than the usual local dialect indicated that she was still aware and remembered me. She shifted position slightly, taking my hand to hold it. I waited until her grip loosened before going home.

May 3, 2012 - Last night when I visited Yam, several people were gathered around her, kneeling as she was sitting up. Yam rarely sits up because it hurts too much. She was miserable trying to get comfortable, leaning forward on the pillow, arranging them and re-arranging them again.

At one point her husband told me to take pictures. Really? OK. And I am so glad I did. Utterly belying her misery, she looked so content, so peaceful, so pretty, and young. Somehow those pictures truly captured her essence. As my partner said, it's as though her Spirit was showing through as she got closer to dying.

Yam was close to dying. I knew, or hoped, that death would come by evening. I decided to go to a daycare this morning but would return around noon, sure that Yam wouldn't have died by then. I asked Kueng to call me if she got worse.

A couple hours later my phone rang. It's Kueng. Yam died.

Damn! As I biked home, I kicked myself for not staying with Yam. I arrived at Yam's house. Many people stood outside already. I saw Yam's body lying on her back. I thought I should take an extra moment before assuming I could just walk on in. But just as quickly, I decided not to wait, to go inside to see my friend. Looking at her, the first thing I felt was relief.

As I watched family members wash her body, I noticed that her daughter, Naam, had tears in her eyes. Another woman bathing Yam was crying too. OK. Good. I wanted to cry too, but knew that displaying strong emotions in public isn't done. I went outside to sit and I couldn't help but cry. Yam was dead, finally free of pain. She was 57 years old.

I watched as family members dressed Yam, all in blue: a pasin, a dress-like cloth, and the blue Minnesota t-shirt my partner bought for me to give to Yam. That was very touching and unexpected. As I saw that gesture and looked at Yam in blue, I felt her there, if only for a moment.

Late afternoon, I finally had a chance to speak to Kueng. I asked, "How are you?" He smiled and said, "I am well", but a little tired, he added. Then, "Yam sa-baai lae-o."

Yes, I agreed. Yam is comfortable now.

The day of the cremation, was an intense, yet very special day. That night, rain poured during a torrential thunderstorm while the nearly full moon showed brightly. It was a magical moment.

The family surprised me by including me in the cremation ceremony rituals and pictures. This was meaningful to me because I loved Yam too, and with the language limitation, I wasn't sure what had been communicated over the months. As I hoped, the language of the heart was clear and unmistakable.

At one point during the merit-making ritual, the family had me sit, not only with them at the front of the wat, but on the raised stage with the monks and Yam's son. He and I kneeled immediately in front of them and presented them with gifts. The significance of this is almost overwhelming.

I asked Kueng, "Do you miss Yam?" He said yes, touching his chest. He put on his sunglasses, pointed to his eyes, and teared up. I told him that I now have a much greater appreciation for all aspects of Thai culture because of what Yam taught me. I am fortunate and truly have been blessed.