

PHILOSOPHICAL MUSINGS AT 86 ON LIFE (Tet Canh Dan, February 2010)

In Vietnamese culture, we do not celebrate birth-day on the day we were born, but on (The Vietnamese) New Year's Day. So, on February 14, 2010, the Vietnamese New Year's Day – Year of the Tiger – I am one year older – 86 --, although, according to the Western recording system , I am still 85, being born on September 22, 1924. But that really has no real significance for a person's real life, which is counted in years. So, I choose 86....

I suppose that, as people approach their final moment, they tend to look back at the years they have lived through, reflect on them, trying to see what meaning it really has. This is what I am doing now, at the age of 86.

What meaning do I find in life when I look around me?

Since I decided at the age of 80 to retire completely, I have had time to reflect about what I have seen, near and far, around me. What has struck me was that I have been led to become more philosophical, ask myself more and more the question: WHY?

Taking things only from 1945:

Viet Nam: the Vietnamese people are now really worse off than before 1945, in spite of the end of foreign oppression and the apparent prosperity...

Pol Pot and the slaughter of millions of Khmers....

Indonesia: with the devastating tsunami ...

The Sri Lankans and their endless sufferings.....

Africa engulfed in unspeakable hunger, disease, killings, rapings, hopelessness.....(Darfur, Rwanda, The Congo, Somalia....)

The Middle East with endless killings and destructions....

Haiti with its unimaginable calamities....

Inevitably, I was led to ask the question: WHY so many calamities have been inflicted on people who are already crushed....WHY????

On the individual plane, the glaring fact is also a great discrepancy between the conditions of people. And that also leads to the question: WHY?

Some people are born into rich and influential families, and some others in desperately poor and downtrodden families?

Some people are born highly intelligent, and some very mentally slow?

Some people are born physically strong, and some weak?

Some people are born attracted to Good, and some to Evil?

Some people are born good hearted, and some incredibly beastly?

Etc.....

Obviously, individual action or social structure do not explain, certainly not fully, the above situation. Then inevitably, the question is What? Who?, and especially WHY?

Take the case of Haiti, for example. What, or Who caused so much misery on a people who obviously is already at the bottom, and deserves help a break instead of further miseries and devastations!!! But the real question to ask here is: WHY? Why pick on the Haitians, and not the Americans, or the Swedes???

I have always believed that there is a supernatural power – called “Ong Troi”/Heavens by the Vietnamese, “God” by the Christians, “Allah” by the Muslims, “Vishnu” by the Indians etc --, who ensures that Goodness and Justice reign in the human world and keep men from following the behaviour of the beasts who are governed merely by the law of self-preservation. Indeed, “civilised’ means “un-beastly”. Man is civilized because he does not behave like animals, at least in Asian culture.

But what one sees around us is not the prevalence of Goodness and Justice, and it is the little guys/nations that are picked for punishment.

WHY???

I have been musing on this problem, especially as I know that throughout my life, somehow, I have been a lucky man, compared to many of my classmates, compatriots, and fellow men.

And this also has made me ask myself: WHY???