

2011

# Healing Through Belief, Biography, and Social Connection

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10.1080/10402659.2011.625840

*This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in A Journal of Social Justice on 05 Dec 2011, available online: [here](#).*

This article was originally published as: Anomie. (2011). Healing through belief, biography, and social connection. *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 23(4), 491-497. Original article available [here](#)

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2011/435>

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A dirt road arcs upward over rising ground. As the road forks, a woman walking the road is confronted with a choice: to the left, a narrow path is flanked by two men each standing on a gold rug, and to the right a wide road continues up a hill. Beyond the men, obscuring the path, is a thicket of thorns. There is a way through the thorns, but it is small. Looking back, the woman sees only a few people on the road. The woman chooses to take the wide road to the right, but on walking the road, suddenly realizes that she has already travelled this road and that it takes her to what she loved before, but that was a long time ago and much has changed. The woman returns to take the left fork and is received and welcomed by the two men. She crouches down to move through the dried branches, afraid of the thorns above.

**F**or Reth, a Cambodian-born Australian, this dream both tells the story of her choice to believe in Jesus and confirms her connection to God, a connection that explains the mystery of her survival. It is one of many significant steps along Reth's journey "out of darkness" toward emotional peace and healing. The specificities of Reth's actions of remembrance, mourning, re-engagement, and restoration are the subject of this essay.

Survivors of the Cambodian holocaust work hard to interpret, explain, and comprehend their experience. They must grapple with existential questions that surround their own survival, their witnessing of unimaginable horror, and the inescapability of the perpetration of violence by Khmer-on-Khmer—although ethnic cleansing of those with Chinese, Vietnamese, and French heritage was also part of the Khmer Rouge social engineering program. Survival entails responsibility to the past and the future, the dead and to the next generations, within the family, the nation, the diaspora or the international community. Proclaiming life as victor over death, survivors are active, high-achievers. They may be obsessively driven to accomplishment in an effort to avoid painful emotions and the lack of sufficient answers to impossible questions. In healing, survivors move from the powerlessness and isolation that characterize their experience and its continuing trauma to reconnect with self and community. This engagement and empowerment may take the form of a cause or mission or the investment of great energy into the family's future. Such actions are ways to inspire hope. In the nonlinear movement towards individual peace, the actions, achievements, and symbolic world of survivors may speak of trauma or of healing as new identities and new lives are formed, especially for those of the diaspora.

Reth lives in a northern suburb of Perth with her husband, youngest son, and new daughter-in-law who has just arrived from Cambodia. She has two other sons and a daughter, also living in Perth. Since their arrival in Australia, Reth and her husband have worked very hard to provide for their children's futures. As a survivor, Reth has an acute awareness of the value of peace, freedom, health, and the basic amenities of Australian life, which she expresses in the Christian value of thankfulness. In Reth's words, Australia is "heaven on earth." Reth subscribes to the Australian myth of a lucky country, bearing without complaint the aches of an older woman who works restocking shelves in IKEA. It is very important to Reth that the experiential knowledge gained from her "Cambodian life" is conveyed to her children and that, as much as possible, they recognize a similar distinction between necessities and luxuries and are grateful for both.

In 2008, over the period of a year, Reth poured her tears into an autobiography, writing in Khmer language. Reth wrote on behalf of her generation with the aim to convey to the next generation a suffering endured by Cambodians that, according to Reth, is "unbelievable." Traditional Khmer medical practices leave marks on an individual that are identifiable to other Khmer who are able then to respond with compassion and care, and some treatments are performed in a social context of family

support. The communication of suffering allows for healing to occur in the process of sharing the pain. Conversations with Reth indicate that her published story functions to heal Reth in a similar way, particularly with Reth's emphasis on wanting her friends and colleagues to be able to read the book.

While being thankful for the language lessons provided to her as an immigrant and being proud of the English-speaking skills she has mastered, Reth is ashamed of being unable to write in English. At the same time, Reth is very grateful for her Khmer writing skills, being the only one of her siblings allowed to go to school, if only for a few years—a rare opportunity for a girl in the Cambodian countryside at the time. While Reth's chance to learn English in Australia was thwarted, she was able to learn how to sew, knit, and play the violin. In this context, Reth's autobiography in Khmer language is an act of accomplishment and determination, and the value of language has been transmitted to Reth's children who are proud of their knowledge of Khmer as a key indicator of their heritage.

Reth has made several trips to the homeland, first returning to Cambodia in 1992 in the hope that her parents may still be alive, and to find as many family members as possible. Reth had not seen her brother since she was thirteen and had only once been able to visit her mother after being separated from her just prior to the Democratic Kampuchea years. On return to Cambodia, Reth discovered that her father had died during the Khmer Rouge regime's rule and that her mother had received one letter with photographs out of the many that Reth had sent from Australia before herself dying in 1987. Reth met with her brother in an emotional reunion and consoles herself with the knowledge that at least her mother learned of Reth's survival and well-being before she died. This visit provided Reth with the information required to grieve for lost relatives and built a more complex understanding of her past through the sharing of stories with her brother. Reth was able to learn that many Khmer were assisted by the invading Vietnamese, while she had been told to fear the soldiers.

When war entered her life, Reth was about twelve years old. Reth has mourned the loss of her childhood as a result of the additional hardships of civil war and U.S. strategic bombing. But as the youngest of a family with a very small plot of gardening land, Reth already knew separation from siblings and had observed her parents' hard work in their efforts to subsist. Reth describes the years of 1970–1973 as ones of continual escape and flight or separation from family after being blocked from movement as a result of living on the frontline of fighting between the Khmer Rouge and Lon Nol forces. A scarcity of food, shelter, safety, and family affection characterized this period of Reth's life as the politics of civil war—such as accusations of being Khmer Rouge informants—operated around, and negatively impacted on, her basic needs. The experience, conveyed in conversation with Reth, was pervaded by a sense of disruption—of the social order and of production—and confusion, producing emotions of sadness and fear.

Just prior to the Khmer Rouge victory march into Phnom Penh in April 1975, Reth was recruited into a Khmer Rouge youth work group with other girls of her age from her village. For a large part of the regime's rule, Reth lived the relatively privileged life of a mechanic in a factory; Reth describes the intense fear of her time in Cambodia during the Pol Pot era as “darkness,” however. In addition to the common description of suffering and victimhood repeated in Cambodia today, that of working so hard and being so hungry, Reth's feeling of exploitation by the Khmer Rouge is connected to her inability to verbally resist. Reth states that to be silent while experiencing such injustice and inhuman treatment is to not exist. As a girl from a rural village who was defined as having a “good attitude,” Reth's identity as a victim is phrased in the communal pronouns of “we” and “us,” and her story confirms that the experience of starvation, exhaustion, disease, and fear that was inflicted on Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge is only part of what amounts to twenty years of warfare, displacement, and powerlessness.

In this way, regardless of any possible affiliation with the Khmer Rouge, Reth speaks of her suffering, a suffering that she emphasizes is common with all Cambodians living during this time. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge and over the eight months it took Reth to travel to the Thai border, the physical degradation of her starving body caused Reth to be invisible, as even those who allowed her to sleep in their houses could not bear to look at her swollen body. To be able to speak, in the writing of her autobiography, corrects the power imbalance and reasserts Reth's sense of self, substance, and value.

Reth was baptized a Protestant while on the Thai border in a processing center for immigration to United States. Afraid to return to Cambodia, this conversion would improve her chances of migration. In the violent limbo of camp life, Reth was forced to break with tradition to negotiate her own marriage in order to increase her safety. Reth was moved to Khao-I-Dang, a United Nations refugee camp, where she sought entry to Canada, the United States, France, and Australia. Reth spent five years on the Thai border and birthed two children before her migration to Australia was facilitated by a friend from the same camp who, on arrival in Australia, sought a suitable sponsor for Reth. This sponsor was a Seventh Day Adventist and Reth subsequently converted and joined the multicultural congregation in Perth. During the birth of her children in Khao-I-Dang, Reth received assistance and care from the Christian missionaries working in the camp and, on arrival in Australia, much support and spiritual guidance from her sponsor. The strength of her belief today can be partly attributed to this treatment, coming at a time of great transition and vulnerability.

Reth is able to restore the humanity denied her during the Khmer Rouge regime's rule and in the chaos immediately following through connection and social bonds. This is framed in a Christian demonstration of gratitude, as well as acts of reciprocity based on shared understandings. Reth has bought houses for both her brother and her sister. The friend who negotiated Reth's family's sponsorship has brought Reth's brother's daughter out to Australia in an arranged marriage agreement, while Reth's daughter-in-law is this friend's niece. In this way, the families can express their friendship, not just with intermarriage, but with reciprocal sponsorship and the accompanying opportunities to increase the wealth of those in the homeland and to provide family support to those the diaspora; Reth's daughter-in-law may look after her uncle in Perth and also financially support her parents in Cambodia, as may Reth's son. Reth helps relatives in Cambodia along with supporting a Cambodian charity as a minimal act of caring because she understands the experience of poverty. Reth sees her visits to Cambodia as supporting the Cambodian people through her small contributions to the economy.

Many friends encouraged Reth to write her story, particularly her sponsor who hoped to have the church translate the Khmer into English and publish the book for Reth. When this was not possible, Reth approached a writer in Cambodia, hiring her to edit the story. For 500 U.S. dollars, Reth received 30 copies. Although Reth requested final approval of the story in a verbal agreement, the book was printed without Reth having a chance to read the rewritten draft. The result is a romanticized and more tightly edited version of 15 years of Reth's life, beginning in 1970 and ending with Reth's arrival in Perth in 1985. While Reth would have preferred a greater adherence to the veracity of her experience, an autobiography that serves as testimonial to her suffering, she has accepted these changes as the cost of the opportunity to share her story and believes that the style of the book will reach a wider, younger readership as a result because, according to Reth, in Cambodia, people do not want to read history. As Reth describes the changes, the book is a "love story instead of a sadness story."

A superficial analysis of the book, roughly translated in English as *Life Under a Dark Cloud*, confirms that it is a genre-crossing biography that combines fact and fiction. The cover illustration depicts Reth as a young woman embracing a man under a purple and fuchsia sky. There is a bomber

plane and a burning village in the distance. The color, expression on the couple's faces, and style of illustration signify the genre of romantic fiction, as do chapter titles such as "Destiny" and "A Flower Blossoms in the Winter." The book contains three black and white photographs: one of Reth and her husband, one of her sponsor and her husband, and one, taken in Khao-I-Dang, of Reth's husband with the friend who facilitated Reth's family's sponsorship. In keeping with the genre of biography, the back cover of the book has a black and white photo of Reth. The images work to verify the factual elements of the story, but they also speak in the tropes of romance because they depict historically formal poses of married couples. The included images are acts of grateful acknowledgement on Reth's behalf that additionally support the romanticism of the story because they show the reader the people involved in Reth's salvation. The preface, signed by Reth, is a message to the reader, which introduces her story and makes claim to its truth. Reth's identity as the subject of the story is established in the preface as that of a woman born into a rural life of poverty who had little education. This is the *status quo* from which the romanticized rescue of the storyline can occur, and this places Reth as a feminine victim in contrast to the reality of the empowerment of Reth's act of writing and her determination and efforts to self-publish.

Unlike many English language autobiographies of the diaspora, *Life Under a Dark Cloud* allocates about a third of its pages to Reth's suffering during the civil war years. A significantly smaller section covers the Pol Pot era, before a longer section develops the romance between Reth and her husband while telling of Reth's flight to the Thai border, forced service to a fragmented, exiled Khmer Rouge army, escape, and camp life. The book finishes optimistically with Reth's meeting with her sponsor and initial settlement in Australia as husband and wife embrace in hopefulness, looking forward to their new life. Many diasporic autobiographies set up a happy *status quo* that is then disturbed by the horrors of the Pol Pot era. In contrast to Reth's biography, a brief number of pages is allocated to the invasion of the Vietnamese and the experience of dislocation before migration. There are parallels in the way that these life stories, Reth's included, end without consideration of the continuities and disruptions of life in a new land. In all cases, the greatest suffering receives the most story time and, for Reth, it is not the period of the Democratic Kampuchea years, although Reth's story emphasizes consistent powerlessness, regardless of the political decisions being made above her. Reth's book serves as testimony, regardless of the fictionalization, as it is clear that Reth bears witness to death and loss, and that this, for her, occurs during the civil war and then during the period immediately after the Vietnamese arrive.

The structural difference between Reth's testimony and many autobiographies of the diaspora stem from the different experiences of urban versus rural Cambodians, as well as the colonial and post-World War II politics that created these distinct group experiences. In fact, it may be possible to argue that Reth's romantic biography, solely published in Khmer despite her deep wish to share her suffering in English language, would have greater likeness to other diasporic autobiographies if not for her disadvantaged rural background, for Reth was not able to produce the autobiography she envisioned.

The call for justice, international recognition of the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, and the need to bear witness of these crimes, which is found in many autobiographies of the diaspora, is part of a survivor's journey toward healing, but this political aim makes less sense to Reth's experience of suffering. Reth is not interested in following the trials of the Khmer Rouge leaders currently in progress, yet she demonstrates both an explicit awareness of the range of emotions surrounding the trials and empathy towards those who seek peace through the trials on behalf of their relatives. Instead, Reth calls for forgiveness stating that the obvious wrongdoing of those on trial, along with the length of time that has passed, makes the trial irrelevant to her. Reth does hint at her own obligation to be actively involved in the trials for her lost father, brother, and sister, but her personal suffering and her belief in the Christian requirement to forgive are used to exempt her from revisiting her pain by having to follow the details of the trials.

**A**s Theravada Buddhists, many Cambodians believe that the living can suffer as a result of being haunted by the ghosts of dead relatives who were unable to die with enough merit from accumulated good deeds, balanced against the actions of past lives, or who were neglected after death. These hungry ghosts are waiting to reincarnate. To testify or attend the trials is a merit service that cares for the dead, allowing their reincarnation. As a Christian, Reth stresses her worship of one God, yet Reth speaks of the role of the trials as a service to the dead, rather than healing for the living. Ultimately, having both shared her own pain and her generations' suffering with the younger generations of Cambodia, and honoring the dead through her writing, Reth speaks of having "settled down in myself. . . . Just a little bit" and this is enough for her. She does not want to dig up her emotions again. After the book was written, Reth felt better. She now wants to look to the future and the positive things in her life.

When Reth dreamed of choosing a new path and passing under a "crown" of thorns, for this is how she also described the thicket, it was explained to her that the dream confirmed her choice to believe in a God of Mercy and her relationship with Him. According to the Seventh Day Adventist believers of her congregation, in Cambodia, prior to knowing God, for the whole of Reth's adult life of suffering, Reth's connection to Jesus was always present, although not evident. It is Reth's connection that explains the miracle of her survival, yet it is her survival that indicates the existence of a prior connection. Reth's life changed drastically with her migration to Australia and subsequent acculturation. As this dream tells, Reth's new religion marks this change: the narrow road and the thorns associated with Christ's death are Christian symbols. In Reth's dream, Christ's crucifixion and rebirth mirrors Reth's passage to her new life in Australia. The dream is a visual and emotional working through of identity, suffering, and fear, survival, and transformation.

## RECOMMENDED READINGS

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