



H. C. Westernman/Alan Frumkin

## Learning From the Vietnamese—and Giving

By Richard Hughes

"Please, Dick, take me go school tomorrow," Hung said, struggling in English, as we held hands and walked along mud trenches out to the main road. Wide-eyed and taut, he forced a smile.

"Amid all the carnage, they still insisted on having a childhood."

Back at Pham-Ngu-Lao house, hours after Minh's street-boy funeral, on Aug. 23, 1970, Tuyuh, the house leader, read Minh's interview for the first time. Then, he searched Webster's dictionary looking for a word. He put it back down. Perhaps, I thought, he hadn't found the word; he was looking away and silent. Then, in halting English, "I think he . . . was . . . oppressed . . . all his life."

Outside the room, another boy—wanting Minh back—was scrawling in chalk on a black aluminum locker, "Someone please go buy for me a cricket."

Throughout those years their words went on and on.

"Older brother! I never had a home, why they even still ask me when did I leave home? My parents are no more, why am I still asked why I do not live with them? When I could reason, I knew I was among the lost children."

Their tattoos: "Weep for those just born," "Life is a scabbies, men of this world are flies," and "Adore and respect parents."

No amount of stomach pumping could save the streetboy Nghi the Cripple—there were so many cripples. "Older Brother Tuan, I write for you this letter today when my mind it seems miserable. . . . Please try to understand for me. Bye, Nghi."

At a different Saigon graveyard in 1971, Hung, our first streetboy, a veritable Jimmy Cricket, stood in bare feet, shorts and T-shirt, his small, skinny body quaking as his stepfather, a beggar, howled inside the cemetery over Hung's mother's opium-filled, tuberculosis-ridden corpse.

In February 1970, seven months before he was accidentally crushed to death in Saigon by a 16-wheel American military vehicle, Minh the Cripple (nicknamed for his deformity by the other "dust of life" street children) smiled and whispered into my ear from atop his perch on my back where he often rode:

"You know why I learned to do back-wheel spins and tricks on my bicycle? Because when everyone sees that they say, 'Wow!' and forget about my small legs."

In a society so devastated, Minh was one of thousands of victims with secrets and private dreams. In his wallet, he carried a one-plaster note upon which he'd written, "How many drops of tears, how many drops of sweat?"

He learned to write at our Pham-Ngu-Lao street-boy house. Late at night, after showering and moving about on his strong arms and hands to clean all the floors, and sitting against his immaculate footlocker-desk, he'd write the Vietnamese alphabet and chimp "a cricket song"—a song he made up—while the other boys smiled with their eyes shut.

In June, two months before he was killed, there was an unsuccessful suicide attempt. In his note, which he had wrapped around his finger like a ring, after having crushed all the tablets for easier swallowing, Minh asked my student helper and me why "the police find any excuse to arrest me."

On that particular day, they had taken his bicycle again. He was too proud and too angry to pay the bribe. And the bribe demands never stopped. So many times before, they had taken him in, beaten his chest and abdomen with blackjacks, and placing him out on the cement, in the noonday sun, said: "Can you swim? Let's see the breast-stroke." Fortunately, they did not beat him that day. He did not intend to give them an opportunity to do so again.

"I believe I was possibly born in Saigon," he said, in a recorded interview after returning from the hospital two days later, where he had come out of a coma at 3 A.M., and slurred,

I owe the people of Vietnam so much. They have reordered my life by teaching me simplicity, brotherhood, how to touch, and a reason for carrying on—that it does count.

Are we really not going to help them rebuild? When they have such spiritual resources for rebuilding our nation—and healing the wounds—are we not going to share?

At Christmas dinner, in 1975, Duong Dinh Thao, chief of Saigon city's foreign affairs section under the new national Government, interrupted my comments on the "dust of life" children to interject: "If you love them you can do everything. Without it, you can do nothing."

It was a response I had been seeking for seven years from just one—any one—official in the former regime. It had never come. Talk of money, yes. Trips abroad, yes. But never love.

When my scheduled flight left Tan Son Nhut airport on Aug. 7, 1976, I not only felt a debt to the Vietnamese people, I knew the kids I loved were finally finding people who cared.

The postwar problems we often only give lip service to are, in fact, enormous. I saw them. Without resources, the Vietnamese people's suffering continues.

And I'm at a loss how to tell my own people that Vietnam's needs are our remedy—to say that what the Vietnamese people have to offer us—as they did me—is so great that for our own sake we must help them.

Richard Hughes spent eight years in South Vietnam founding and running hostels for street children under the Shoeshine Boys Project. He is now back in New York City.