

April 14, 1985

One of my office mates is from Cambodia. He came to the U.S.A. as a refugee less than a year ago. It is fair to say that he is a shy person. He definitely likes to remain in the background, although he also unfailingly projects a spirit of kindness and helpfulness. But one has the impression that, given the difficulties of a strange language and a new culture, each human initiative that he undertakes requires an act of courage.

The day before yesterday he came to my office with a package. He said that it was the Cambodian New Year's Day, and this package was my New Year's gift!

I was immersed in somewhat feverish preparations for a conference the next day, and it took me a few seconds to register the fact that this was not just April 12, the day before a conference, but it was also New Year's Day. Finally I managed to say, I hope with some brightness and enthusiasm, "Why, Happy New Year!" as I took the package.

I asked his permission to open my gift, and found that it contained a kind of carved plaque showing a dancing figure poised in an elegant, ballet-like posture.

"How beautiful!" I exclaimed quite genuinely. My coworker then explained to me that he had made the plaque himself two years ago while in a refugee camp.

I was very deeply touched by this gift; yet I looked uncomprehendingly at the dancing figure. "Who is it?" I finally asked.

"Apsara," my colleague explained.

"Oh, Apsara," I said.

Then, sensing the need to explain further he added, "A favorite deity of the Cambodian people."

And in that instant, as I looked at the figure he had given me, I saw a whole new dimension to the refugee experience of which I had not thought before. After losing members of one's family in a holocaust, after the terrors of escape by leaking boats or through jungles and mountains, after the hardships and uncertainties of years in refugee camps, and amid the difficulties of trying to put oneself together in a foreign country, one then also meets with incomprehension on New Year's Day. It seemed to me, in that split second, just as if a Christian, uprooted and cast into an alien universe, discovered not only that people did not know when it was Christmas, but also did not even know who Jesus Christ was.

The next day, at our conference, my coworker placed some Cambodian delicacies on the table next to the chocolate donuts. And as our other associates, one by one, caught on to the fact that it was Cambodian New Year's Day, they did, of course, wish my coworker a cheerful "Happy New Year," as I had done. And I think I detected that with most of them, as with me, the day did indeed change. Something was added—a new lilt, a brightness, a sense of affirmation and of celebration.

Some people in our Meeting, in fact more than just a few, have the same effect on

me that finding out about Cambodian New Year does. Something about the quality of their attention and awareness, and their sense of the celebration of life, brightens each encounter. For, as has been said, just as last week was Easter for us, and today is Easter for the Russian Orthodox people, every day is Easter for those who live sacramentally.¹

Those people who give us this sense of celebration do so as an act of courage,² just as my coworker's sharing his holiday with us was an act of courage. And this capacity for sacramental living is as mysterious in its origins as the Cambodian diety Apsara was mysterious to me. To live sacramentally, then, to celebrate each moment, and it is to have the courage to share with others a wonderful mystery.

(For New York Yearly Meeting): I have been given to understand that some among us who know the living presence of Jesus Christ in their lives feel, as they wander around in our Religious Society of Friends, like Cambodian refugees, like aliens in a foreign land—in terms of the courage required of them to share their gift, and the incomprehension with which it is met. I cannot speak for any Friend other than myself, but as a person who is probably much less conventionally "Christian" than many among us, I would like to share the feeling that I could withstand much, much more celebration in our life as Friends of the good and beautiful things that come to us through the living presence of the ministry of Jesus of Nazereth. (Develop further the idea of bird song from the Song of the Bird by Anthony de Mello.)

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¹ Reference to earlier ministry.

² Reference to earlier ministry.