

SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS, INDONESIAN STYLE

Cedar Barstow, M.Ed.

Cedar Barstow, M.Ed., is a certified Hakomi trainer and therapist and has been associated with the Hakomi Institute since 1980. She and her husband, Dr. Reynold Feldman, spent the first six months of 2012 as volunteer English teachers in a small bi-lingual elementary-high school in Indonesia on the island of Borneo, now called Kalimantan. “School of Hard Knocks, Indonesian Style” is one of a series of prose poems about her cross-cultural experiences. She is currently working on a book that will include both the writings and pictures. She lives in Boulder, Colorado, and in addition to conducting Hakomi trainings, therapy, and mentoring, she is the founder and director of the Right Use of Power Institute: www.rightuseofpower.com

A note about some Indonesian words, used here to convey a flavor of the Bahasa language:

Men are called *Pak* and women *Ibu* (or *Bu* for short). These words mean literally father and mother. *Warung* is the word for little store, *bis* is bus, *klotok* is a canoe-like wooden boat with a motor, *Dayak* is the name of the natives of Borneo.

“We’re leaving at four am?! Wow.
Forty-two of us? Two buses?”
It’s a national holiday so school is closed.
Ibu Endah and a few teachers
organize a trip to the coast and Banjarmasin,
the biggest city in Central Kalimantan.
The school is paying for buses and meals.

“Send him back here.”
A couple of hours into the journey
Ibu Endah’s littlest son, a three-year-old,
gets handed back to “Aunt” Rida and her husband, Hassan.
He talks away, describing everything he sees.
We pass *warung* after *warung*,
side by side selling identical items:
drinks, snacks, groceries on open shelves,
table and chairs set out under an open air porch,
shopkeepers sitting ready
to serve customers who may arrive
or not.

Dayak “longhouses” in major disrepair,
wooden, on stilts, weathered, a city block long.
In the not-too-distant past each longhouse
was occupied by a village of families,
a commune/co-housing mix.
We see palm plants, coconut and banana trees,
and fields and fields of rice.

Villages are built around little waterway roads,
boats tied up on the banks,
houses on stilts at the very edge of the canal,
a woman washing clothes at water’s edge,
a man carrying stalks of bananas
in his *klotok* with the sound and turbulence
of the motor trailing behind him.

Cedar Barstow

Mosques and homes are under construction
with thin, lashed poles as scaffolding.
(How does this flimsy skeleton actually hold anything up?)
“What are these weird square concrete three-story buildings
with little round holes in the sides?”
“For swallow nest eggs, Bu.”
“Are swallows endangered or something?”
“No, for Chinese, eating eggs and nest a special thing.
We sell to Chinese. Big business.”
(Oh yes, I’ve heard of these expensive bird’s nest soups.)

Inside the *bis*, are our teacher friends and their spouses,
other school staff (driver, cooks, handyman, office help)
and their families—kids ranging from two to fourteen, mostly little boys.
This is a family vacation for them.
Many have never been to Banjarmasin, a four-hour drive.
They are pretty excited.
“*Gua, Gua, Gua*” calls out the “bus father,” Pak Baktiar,
as he steps over the big spare tire on the floor of the middle of the bus
to pass out water bottles (*Agua* is the brand name),
chocolate cupcakes, and breakfast rice treats wrapped in banana leaves.
Music is loud and jaunty—a Javanese pop group based on
classical Arabic and Javanese rhythms.
Atmosphere is light. Even after two hours
the children are very quiet and easy to be around.

The road buffets and bangs us around.
The pavement is only wide enough for two narrow cars to pass.
The driver moves into the right lane
to see if there is an on-coming car.
Yes, there is. He moves back behind the truck.
He tries again, coast is clear.
He passes with two wheels in the dirt beside the road,
then speeds up as fast as he can
and slides back into the left lane with inches to spare.
Once again his calculations were good.
We speed along,
suddenly slow down,
pothole,
bump,
gravel spot,
speed, sudden slow down,
jounce,
bump,
sway and swipe.
This is hard knocks, Indonesian style.

Bus slows down and pulls over,
the bus ahead has stopped:
bus trouble.
Ten minutes later:
they are changing a tire,
Baktiar is directing traffic.
Thirty minutes later
“big bus trouble,” we guess,
apparently more than a tire is needed.

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Fifty minutes later it's HOT.
No one on the bus complains.
Not one of the ten children fusses.
No one even asks what's happening.
Ibu Rida hands me a chocolate cupcake.

Two hours ten minutes after stopping:
"It's going to take a long time to repair.
Our bus is going to go ahead.
They will send two vans for the people in the other bus."
Off we go, arriving at noon.
Four-hour ride becomes eight-hour journey.
"Have anything you want. Go up there to order. Sit at tables six or eight."
"Saya mau udang bakar." "Satu? Dua?" "Satu."
("I'll have one large barbecued shrimp.")
Open air barbecue restaurant—*Fauzan 2*, it's called.
All you can eat: chicken, shrimp, fish, soup, baked tofu, corn fritters,
all with rice (of course) and homemade hot sauce (*sambal*),
long, long picnic tables, good food, happy conversation, but
even the Indonesians are sweating with the heat.
"Hey, we're eating lunch in the oven!"
This is where we find out that our teacher friends
refer to us lovingly as "our ancient ones."
We are indeed ancient to be sixty-seven and seventy-two in this culture
and still active and lively.
I try to explain that I am going to my fiftieth high school reunion
and that my mother is going to her seventieth college reunion,
but this is a bridge too far
"fifty. . . five and a zero? 1962? seventy. . . seven and a zero? Your mother is still alive???"
Right now I am happy and honored to be one of their ancient ones.

We drive around the city,
for them, their first view of buildings higher than three stories,
then go to the mall,
for many, this five-story, modern mall is astonishing,
for us, familiar. . . Kentucky Fried Chicken, big box grocery, Pizza Hut, Body Shop,
A & W that they call "ah way." "Too much effort to say 'A and double u,'" says Kris.
The A & W motto in Indonesian is *restoran khas Amerika*
(authentic American restaurant).
The furniture warehouse has fancy upholstered living room sets—
elaborate Victorian styles with multi-colored fabric patterns,
gaudy to my eyes; a sign of wealth and success in theirs.

We don't go to museums, or monuments—I don't think there are any.
We spend our remaining four hours in Banjarmasin
exploring the mall—where everyone goes for a taste of luxury,
a bite of western food, and a respite from the heat.
There's something for everyone at the mall:
children's play area, inexpensive interesting food,
luxury window shopping and budget purchase opportunities,
eye candy galore,
and escalators and decks and spacious open areas—
all Free no matter what your status.

Cedar Barstow

We set out for home at six,
we should be back by ten.
Children settle down on laps to sleep,
the spare tire is converted to a bed for Anon
with a little mattress that appears out of nowhere.
Surya puts her hand around him
to keep him from rolling off into the door-well.

Seven-thirty, the bus pulls over and the driver gets out.
We try to sleep. Twenty minutes later, he gets back in and we take off.
LOUD music overwhelms us,
while our friends are unperturbed,
and the children sleep.

Thirty minutes later we pull over again.
“Do we know what is happening? I gently ask Ibu Ellis.
“The driver is sleepy and needs to rest and smoke.”
Forty minutes later, the driver returns and we move again.
The bus father goes up to sit in the front with him.
Two more stops to check on the broken bus—still where it was left—
and help a guy with a broken motorcycle.
We arrive back in front of the school at one am.
What a day! Amazing and long.

No one questions, no one demands, no one gets angry.
This is “the way it is.”
This is the best of Indonesia, where life itself is a gift
and you accept and express gratitude for whatever you are given—
sickness, low paying job, days off, food, broken bus, sleepy bus driver,
why complain? Wasted energy. . . just be grateful.

We Westerners could benefit from a gentle and strong infusion
of acceptance, surrender, and gratitude.
At the end of the day, Surya, our housekeeper, says, “I’m very, very happy, Pak.”
And she is. Always smiling. Smart, bright, grateful.
Perhaps this infusion could bring a relaxation, appreciation, and happiness
that we long for.

The Indonesians could benefit from a gentle and strong infusion
of energy to create, to change, to move ahead.
We have a lot to offer each other.
There’s a “zone” along the continuum from extreme surrender to extreme willfulness
where we could all be happier and healthier,
and where the most lively question is
when to accept what is and when to change what is.
And where the most lively process is that of
growing into the wisdom of knowing the difference.