

A Cultural Union of Hearts

By Rob Conley



We are a wonderful mix of nationalities and cultures here at Ruamrudee, Redeemer and the Swiss Section. Every morning more than two thousand people pour through the gates. Thousands of interpersonal interactions happen every day in different situations and combinations, between students, teachers, counselors, psychologists, parents, administrators and classified staff.

On Friday, September 26 our counselors and some administrators attended a workshop at Manarom Hospital, a private psychiatric hospital in Bang Na. The workshop was entitled *Cross-cultural Issues in Family Counseling*. The workshop was presented by hospital director Dr Chantima Ongkosit Krairiksh, a psychiatrist who has practiced in Thailand and the USA. She is also a teacher who has been a professor of psychiatry at Mahidol University and at the University of Illinois. She describes herself as someone who has been "tossed between cultures" as all of us here at Ruamrudee have also been. The workshop was specifically designed for school counselors, psychologists and administrators from international schools.

It is difficult to talk about culture without some explanation as to what culture is. Dr Chantima describes culture as *"An ever-changing concept, one that is learned, taught by one generation to the next, and obviously an integral part of all society. Culture contains patterns of belief, feeling, and knowledge that ultimately guide everyone's conduct and definition of reality. . . it is an abstract concept that describes a particular society's way of living."*

Dr Chantima talked mostly about Thai and Western cultural traits as her examples.

One lesson of vital importance for those of us who live, study and work in Thailand is about *sombat phudee* (the qualities of decent people). These qualities provide guidelines on how we need to behave in our dealings with others to be able to preserve harmonious working relationships. We need to be self-controlled, tolerant and

restrained. We need to be polite and humble and contented. We need to take care of our relationships with others by being kind, caring and considerate. We cannot be unbending and unchangeable, as these attributes do not allow us to be responsive to situations and opportunities. We need to be flexible. To be flexible allows us to adjust our behavior in such a way that we place the relationship in the position of prime importance. *Sombat phudee* is about these, but it is even more than this, as it refers to the whole person ~ how the person carries him- or herself.

Another important cultural trait is *boonkoon*, or the sense that one has an obligation to repay the kindness of others. *Boonkoon* leads to the preservation of harmonious relationships. We also need to speak and act in a way that does not hurt the other person's feelings (*raksa nam jai kan*).

A course in *sombat phudee* for world leaders would be a great idea!

At times, though, we (and by 'we' I refer to everyone) may find that Western values such as individualism and assertiveness may conflict with *sombat phudee*, or other cultural values, particularly when trying to solve a complex personal matter when people's emotions are high or there exists a strong difference of opinion that is blocking a decision.

When discussing cultural difference it is not about what is right or wrong. It is simply about the need to know each other better so that we don't misinterpret each other's words and actions. To possess cultural knowledge is vital for our community to move forward.

Ofentimes students will comment that it can create confusion to be "Western" at school and to be Thai at home. That these cross-cultural factors can exist within one person is a feature of our school community; we consist of Thai families that have lived for many years in the UK, Taiwanese families from the USA, Thai students who have come from Thai schools, students with parents from two different cultures, students from Korea, India, Japan, Sweden, the USA ... and it goes on. We are a fantastic mix of cultural experience. The one common cultural reality is that we all now live in Thailand and join together to create the culture of RIS, RIST and the Swiss Section.

I think we all get along extremely well together here at school and have created a very positive and diverse environment because of cultural differences; an environment where the student's wellbeing is at the forefront of all our thoughts and actions.