



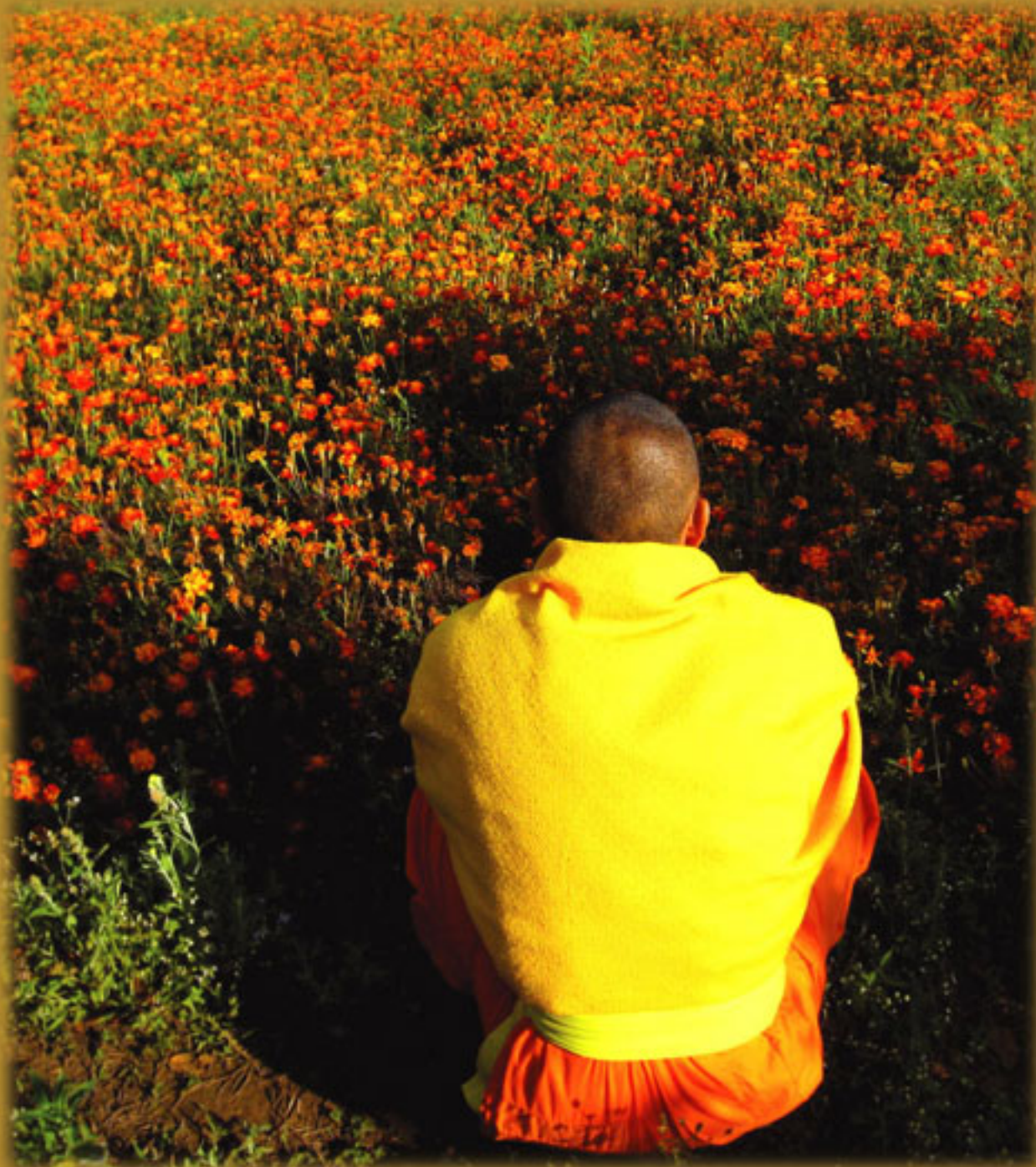
THE

Chiang Rai, Thailand

# TROPICAL TELEGRAPH

Greetings and good wishes from Thailand!

No. 7 Christmas 2008



High in the mountains near Doi Chang (Elephant Mountain), my friend Pramaha Gumpone, the scholarly monk, contemplates a garden of flowers which echo the colours of his Buddhist robes.



On 14 August my friend Bui received his Bachelor of Engineering degree from the Thai Crown Prince at Thammasat University.



My first trip to the lovely island of Koh Samui, in the western Gulf of Thailand in August. This was the view from my hotel balcony.

## Headlines for the year

- ☀ Hugman's book goes into production
- ☀ Chai's family betray years of generosity
- ☀ Major makeover in Balham
- ☀ Travels to Ghana, India, the Philippines
- ☀ Fighting the coconut hispine beetle
- ☀ Last farewell to Wappa and happy times in Utmyrby
- ☀ Friends, family and holidays



Worcester College: a day out with the family, and happy memories of a lovely place.



The annual glories of the vine's orange flowers at the farm



## Reflections on the year

It has been a year of intense highs and lows, and of very hard work. At times, my commitment to Thailand and my pleasure in living here have been seriously threatened, while at others I've enjoyed the substantial delights of friendship, lovely places, good food and some adventures.

### Greed and ingratitude

There were several weeks early in the year when my anxiety and fury over the hostility and avarice of Chai's family, and their decision to sue me for everything I own, drove me to the verge of illness. The horror of it all, after so many years of generosity and concession, really subverted my health and morale.

Now with an immense amount of generous support from many directions, not least my team of two hard-working lawyers, our case in rebuttal is well-advanced, and I feel much more confident. On 10 November (after the Tropical Telegraph has gone to press), there will be a first hearing, when a judge will listen to the arguments and explore what possibilities there may be for a negotiated solution, before formal proceedings begin. I doubt if the family will concede anything, though I rather hope the judge may express some opinion about the strength of their case.

The really upsetting aspect of the possibly lengthy process is that my rights on the farm may not be established for years - so I cannot risk investing further in it (bringing electricity in, for example), though just keeping it going is expensive in itself (farm-worker's wages, fuel for machinery, and so on).

It remains a truly lovely place, though some of the joy in it I have felt in the past has been compromised and tarnished.



Defensive measures and a prohibitory notices at the farm to keep Chai's family at bay.



My friend, Khun Ped, the juvenile judge, barbecues chicken on a visit to the farm, with colleague Khun Jame and prosecuting attorney Khun Dam in the background shadows.



My dream of re-foresting the bare hillside I bought seven years ago is coming to pass. This view from the house never fails to move me as nature exuberantly fills the previously entirely empty space. It is this (and more) that the family want to take from me (they issued a notice of eviction before they started the court proceedings).

### Writer's euphoria

In spite of all the profound upsets and distractions, I managed to keep writing, and met the deadlines for first and revised submissions.

In July, I worked ten and twelve hours a day for several weeks, reshaping the whole book and was very pleased with the results and with my levels of concentration and application.

Now it's done, and by the time you read this, it will be well into production, probably past the page-proof stage and maybe on the presses. It's due out in the spring. I think it's a good book. It is very ambitious and covers a huge range of issues, knowledge and skills. It's far from perfect, but I feel proud of it and believe that there really is nothing like it on the market anywhere. Only sales will tell us if my confidence is well-founded!



# Old and new friends



## Legal circles

Mostly through my friend Khun Katai, I met several senior figures in the legal establishment in Chiang Rai (a prosecuting attorney and a juvenile judge, in particular), who were immensely kind and helpful. They introduced me to senior policemen, who have been helping in various ways, including patrolling the farm to protect me from Chai's potentially-invading family.

## Buddhist association

I've seen a good deal more of Pramaha Gumpone, my friend the scholarly monk from a neighbouring village temple. We have lots of fun, not least when wrestling with his Master's degree homework in English Linguistics (some of which is quite beyond me). We had a lovely day's expedition early in the year to Doi Chang, the famous coffee-growing mountain in the province.



Our 4WD mountain expedition early in the year to Doi Chang (Elephant Mountain) and the mountain-top temple at Tathorn, on the very border of Myanmar (Burma). The party included Pramaha Gumpone, a novice from his temple, Khun Katai and me.



## Young graduate



My dear friend Mr Bui (neighbour in my home village), thrilled himself, his parents and me when he achieved a 6 in his international English test (IELTS), the minimum grade which permitted him also to receive his engineering degree this year. During the year, we've met whenever we could here in Chiang Rai when he was home, and occasionally in Bangkok when I've been there. Now he has a job as a quality engineer at a lens manufacturing company near Bangkok, and will soon go to Vietnam to help establish a new manufacturing facility there. We shalln't see each other much, but will continue to talk and email most days, I don't doubt.



Bui visits me on his father's gleaming motorcycle. In April, for legal reasons (which I shall not go into), I spent a couple of weeks living in a guesthouse in town, where Bui visited for conversation and reciprocal language teaching.

## Friend and fellow-litigant



Mr Katai, whose (nick)name means Rabbit in Thai, has been a great friend through all the troubles and a great companion in good times too. He has a lovely small garden and a wooden cabin just across the river from the village where my farm is. Though it's only a few hundred metres away in line of sight, it's about 10 kilometres via the nearest bridge. He's in the midst of a decade-long dispute about the ownership of his land - so it's not just unsuspecting foreigners who have such troubles!

He and I often go to my farm for a few hours, checking on the farm-worker's activities and cleaning the house, walking and relaxing, then go across to his place, where he cleans the cabin and cuts the grass while I read or do my Thai homework on the bank of the river. We had a companionable few days in Koh Samui, where he indulged his love of scuba diving after years of neglect.



Evening in Mr Katai's garden, by the River Gok. Twice in the ten years Katai has been there, the river has overflowed its banks and inundated the land. His riparian defences are a constant concern and expense.



# Major makeover in Balham

I was in London twice this year, primarily to make arrangements for the sale of the house (I had, at last, made up my mind!) In the event, the market started its downward plunge virtually on the day the signboard was to be put up, and selling seemed a daft option at that point. Instead, I decided to renovate and repaint the whole place and rent it out, at least until the market recovers in a year or two.

The house was cleared out (with not a little help from my energetic nephew, Andrew), painted and improved from top to bottom, made to conform with regulations for multiple occupancy, and refurnished with a lorry-load of good stuff from IKEA. On 1 June, five young professionals from Australia and New Zealand moved in (having spent the previous day assembling their own furniture!) and signed up for eighteen months. So, once the exorbitant annual management fees have been paid off, I shall start to see some income.



Farewell to Culverden! After more than twenty years, handing the house over finally and irrevocably to new occupants for the next few years, at least. I shalln't have a bed here any more, but I shall have an income!

# Text-heavy year

I think we'll find that this year's Tropical Telegraph has rather more text than in previous years (we squeezed more than a hundred photos in last year). I think that's because this year has been much more intensely emotional and cerebral, less visual and pictorial. We'll see: it's early pages yet!

**Hugman's writing**  
The book covers the entire range of communication knowledge and skills relevant to good practice for doctors, nurses, pharmacists and non-medical members of the healthcare team. It may or may not be called 'Living skills in healthcare communications' and will be published by the Pharmaceutical Press (London) probably in March or April. It will probably be between 300 and 400 pages long, so please get fit for carrying a few copies out of the bookshops!



Mr Katai all dressed up for grass-cutting in his garden. Like most Thais, Katai's everyday name is a nickname (others include such endearing things as One, Three, Fatty, Frog, Piggy, Red). His means 'Rabbit'. Here is Mr Rabbit with a real rabbit - a baby we found injured on my farm. I thought this was great fun!



Young talent: I've often bought these lovely ink and water-colour sketches from a stall at the night market in Chiang Rai. Recently I discovered that some of them are done by the owner's young son, Pantukit. Here he is with two of his small masterpieces. They sell for about US\$6 (£3). If you'd like a couple, let me know and we can help support local talent!



This year, I spent another week at Rangsit University, teaching communication skills to third year students in the faculty of pharmacy. This shows about two thirds of my 240-strong class



Frangipani on the farm - gorgeous colours and delicious scent from the white and dream varieties



Ui builds a restaurant from stones on the edge of the hotel swimming pool



# Life, the universe....

.....don't add up to 42 or anything else

I can't escape the growing conviction that the world is crazy and has a very troubled future ahead. Sport in general is not one of my primary pleasures, as you will know, but I admit to having watched the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, and to having been pretty moved as the 206 (was it?) countries of the world marched and danced and pranced and wandered into that startling stadium. As always on such occasions, I was humbled to realise there was a handful of countries I had never heard of, and many more that I could not place on a map with any confidence. To see representatives of the entire population of the world gathered convivially together (even if competitively) was marvellous: nations united, willing subjects of a common set of international standards and rules.

Except, of course, that in that other world, outside the fantasy, amongst the multitude of other horrors and disasters, Russia was simultaneously invading Georgia, even as the sportspeople of the two nations were joining the global party together. It's very hard to explain such irreconcilables, such iron-fisted duplicity.

When I was writing some material on communications and mental disorder for the book, I revisited R. D. Laing - that flawed genius - and came across the quotation that had so stunned and influenced me in the 70s: *Insanity: a perfectly rational adjustment to the insane world*. I feel increasingly that the assertion simply cannot be contradicted, especially in its (maybe unintended, but evident) ambiguous reference to both those labelled as insane and those lunatics who make the rules and the labels. In describing some of the symptoms of psychosis - disconnection from reality; low moral conscience and concern for consequences; unerring self-confidence, maybe megalomania; absence of empathy; manipulative talent (and much more) - aren't we describing more than a handful of world leaders (and maybe bankers and stockbrokers) in whose deranged hands our future lies? Who are the real lunatics? It's not a comforting prospect.

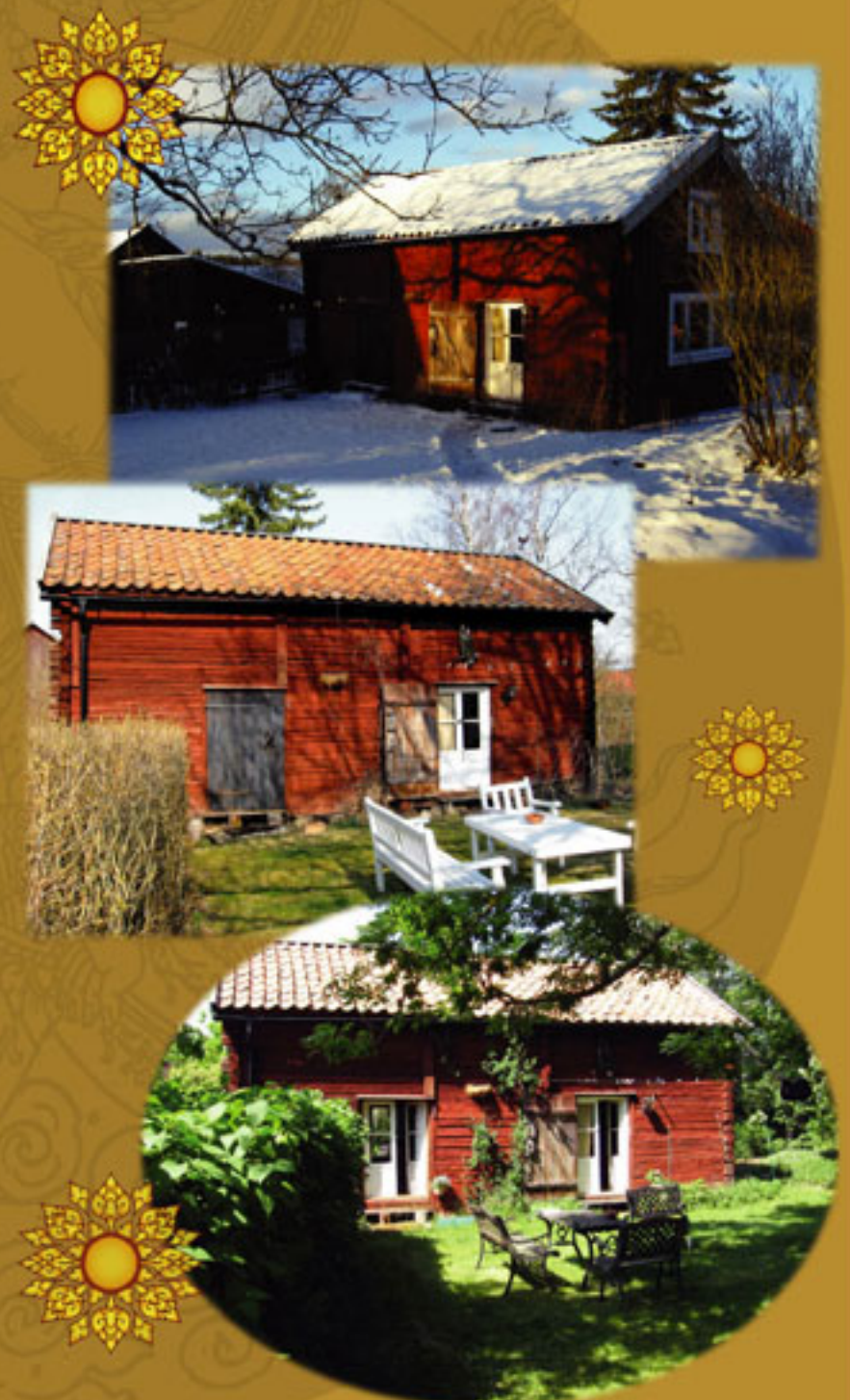
Immorality at the personal level - of which I am a wounded victim just now - is hardly eccentric or surprising when the behaviour of the powerful global élites is avaricious, corrupt, violent and - unapologetically self-interested and immoral.

Here, in Thailand, I do not know the true story of ousted prime minister Thaksin and his wife, nor the true affiliations of the present government, but the whole shennanigan (his and his wife's evident corrupt

enrichment at the country's expense, his skipping bail and fleeing to the UK, the occupation of Government House by anti-government protesters - and the raw memory of the recent military coup) - all, seem to me, to leave the country rudderless and confused and unstable. And what is happening here is a shadow of events in the Sudan and dozens of other tortured places in the world.

While all this kind of vicious nonsense is happening, millions are starving or dying of disease, millions are homeless as a result of a catalogue of natural disasters, the world is heating up, the seas are being poisoned, the forests are disappearing, whole species are being destroyed, oil is running out - and what are George Bush and his like doing? Sanctioning new oil exploration in the remaining few undisturbed areas of land and sea, and not much else.

Who is raising the flag for humanity, for nature, for the future of the race? And who is doing anything that will actually make any radical difference?



*Study in contrasts. Three views of my home in Sweden taken from January to June this year.*



# A writer's life

## What's it all mean?

This page appears on the website, but I thought it of sufficient interest to reproduce here for anyone who might not have seen it: it represents such an important aspect of my whole life during 2008.

Given the hundreds of thousands of books produced every year, I did ask myself just what I thought I hoped to achieve with yet another. The primary purposes are clear. I would like to influence healthcare practice around the world to become more compassionate and patient-centred; to open eyes to the ideal of partnership with patients in the complex enterprise of individual and public health; to convince everyone that expert and sensitive communications are as essential to good healthcare as the best therapy, technique, technology and medicine; to provide some of the knowledge and skills to achieve these lofty goals. That's the book's mission.

Then, there's another level. I was having an exchange of emails with Sigrid Kahle (the distinguished Swedish lady of letters, and previous owner of the estate in Utmyrby where I have my cottage). She was eighty last September, and has been struggling with writing the second volume of her autobiography - the record of a remarkable life lived all over the world. Her struggle was partly with the physical challenge of sitting, isolated at her computer for immense lengths of time, missing out on other activities and relationships, but also with the demoralising question: what's the point?

I had been thinking about this in relation to my own book, and this is what I wrote to her:

*"Any comparison [with your work and] with my own recently completed book is, in some respects, far-fetched, but there is one common element, I think. I asked myself what I was doing, why I was writing, what value my writing would have among the welter of other publications, to say nothing of its impact in the face of the overwhelming developments in the world hostile to many of the core values I espouse (in healthcare and more generally).*

*"Then I thought (maybe pretentiously): I am a member of that community of writers and thinkers who try to be guardians of humane values, to keep the flag flying for compassion and altruism, to assert*

*vision and to warn about corruption. Beyond the small-scale, utilitarian value of my work, there is a bigger picture too.*

*"You [Sigrid] belong to that community too: those who have read your first book ... encounter not only a vivid picture of a remarkable life, but also the wisdom and insight of a thoughtful and reflective personality. They are enriched by the experience. That's why such books are important. They make a contribution (however small) to the maintenance of civilisation."*

Delusions of grandeur? I don't think so, though I would not elevate my claims very high in the great universe of serious writers. What I do is on a small scale, and it is not art, by any stretch of the imagination. The book embodies much of the knowledge and wisdom of my life (such as it is), in the same way that my teaching round the world does: I want to help people discover their talents and understand how much more can be achieved than by simply going through the motions on the well-worn paths, accepting less than the best.

I suppose we all need to find some meaning in our lives - especially as we drift towards the end. My existential weakness is sometimes to question the value of the sequential activities, achievements and relationships of my life, to regret their transitoriness and insubstantiality, but that doubt is a denial of all I've lived for and believe in: the substance and authenticity of the present moment lived as well and fully as possible. For me there's no destination (only death) and so the only thing that matters is the quality of the journey to that point - and you cannot hold journeys in your hand and admire their shape and weight and elegance.

A book offers both substance and delusion: it's a real object that can be held and appreciated and it may influence others to a greater or lesser extent; but it's also an object in the material world which will decompose and disappear in the end like everything else. (Ozymandias was a victim of the delusion that great deeds and their memorials would last for ever, though it has to be said that it was a writer who gave him such immortality as he has, though even that only relative and temporary.)

The book has been such a large undertaking, that, now it is completed, I am a little unsure where my life may go next. Also influenced by my encounter with the dark side of Thai character, I think change of some kind is probably on the horizon, though I have yet no idea what it might be.





# Coconut beetles cause havoc in the region

The spread of the coconut hispine beetle (*Brontispa longissima gestro*) across S.E. Asia has been a great worry to scientists and farmers in many countries. It's now arrived in Chiang Rai province, and is attacking almost all of the sixty or so coconut palms I planted on my farm - of which I have been so proud (some of them are six metres tall after seven years).

The larvae of the beetle feed on the new fronds emerging at the crown of the palm and destroy them. Damaged fronds are then dry and brown and the palm slowly loses productivity and vitality. In countries like the Philippines, where coconuts and coconut products (sisal, for example) are major earners, the plague is having a big impact on local and national economies. Coconut palms are also a vital aesthetic element in the tropical landscape, especially on beaches, and the threat to idyllic islands (like Koh Samui, where I spent a few days in August), is real and serious. Resorts and hotels face a real threat to the beauties of their ornamental gardens, and civic horticulture is endangered too.



A small palm, showing the typical destruction of fronds

Here's the bloody beetle on the trunk of a palm.



The coconuts are such an important part of the aesthetic pleasures of the farm, their loss would be a tragedy

I am ashamed at how long it took me to realise that something serious was happening



## Remedy

Because of the difficulty of application (palms may be ten or more metres high) and the danger to workers and the environment, chemical solutions to the problem are not favoured. Instead an antagonist insect, a parasitic wasp, is introduced. This seems to have had some success in controlling and destroying the hispine beetle, but it is not a perfect answer. Earwigs have also be used, as they are believed to attack the hispine beetle, though there is some disagreement among experts about their effectiveness.



The Director of the Chiang Mai Pest Control Centre hangs a container of beetle 'mummies' which have been parasitised and from which adult parasitic wasps will emerge in due course.



Coconuts are woven into every aspect of the life and image of tropical places: how would tourism survive without them?



Here I am with the scientist from Chiang Mai and the huge delivery of live earwigs he brought with him

## Amazing response

Alarmed by the possible destruction of my pride-and-joy palms on the farm, and before knowing what the problem was, I started sending off enquiries and requests for help. Khun Katai and I visited the local agricultural office and the regional pest control centre in Chiang Mai.

Within a week or two, the Director of the Chiang Mai centre himself drove to the farm, bringing twenty containers of earwigs and a batch of parasitic wasps. A scientist working with the UN Food and Agricultural Office came from Bangkok with further batches of wasps. On the same day a lecturer from the local Mae Fah Luang University (where I'd also made enquiries) came with a group of eight industrial agricultural students. She agreed to help breed the wasps on my farm, and the FAO scientist taught her and the students how to do it. We also made contact with the local district officials and offered to help in any effort they might make.

It was all quite wonderful! It remains to be seen, of course, if all this effort pays off, and it will be a few months before we can hope to see undamaged, new fronds emerging from the crowns of the palms.



# 5ive days on Koh Samui

**I**t was my first trip to this renowned holiday island in the Gulf of Thailand, and it was a delight. I went with Khun Katai, whose dream for the trip was to go scuba diving again after many years. First impressions are great: the (private) airport greets one with a profusion of blossoming trees and flowers, and a collection of low, modern-rustic, open-sided buildings. It's the most attractive airport I have ever visited (with several shops that sell excellent, fresh coffee).

There are lots of lovely beaches, clear turquoise water, and very friendly and welcoming people. The infrastructure of the island, particularly its roads, is terrible, and the lovely environment is being aggressively destroyed by rampant development - including at least one huge, hideous building on the very top of a mountain cleared of all its trees.

We had a great time!

We stayed in an excellent, new hotel on Choengmon Beach.



A lovely garden environment at the airport on Koh Samui



Our hotel on the beach had this splendid swimming pool - long and narrow and ideal for those guests (like me) who mainly want to swim up and down in straight lines. My room was on the second floor at the end

We hired a long-tailed boat for a few hours, and pattered along the coast in the early evening. It's one of my favourite activities, especially if there's a bit of a swell. Katai took this odd picture of me as I connected with the rhythms of the sea, flat on the deck.



Our man at the tiller, the owner, was a cheerful fisherman, with squid-fishing lights fixed to the side of the boat, and a tank of small bait-squid swimming around in the gunnels



The happy serendipity of travelling with nowhere in particular to go, brought us to a temple where an old monk was working on the latest of his collection of wooden phalluses. Here he is grasping one of the smaller versions, with a larger phallic profusion on the table (I bought both). In some animistic or Hindu myth (nothing to do with Buddhism) it is said that the possession of these suggestive objects will make the owner rich. The monk pointed out to us that it was this object which created and maintained the world of humankind.



I met Khun Aot years ago, and he visited Chiang Rai once with a bunch of friends from Khon Kaen. He now lives and works on Samui. Here, the three of us were having a delicious seafood dinner on the beach, the sea lapping on the sand just a few metres away. I was touched by the magic of it all!



We hired a 4WD Suzuki Caribbean (hideous vehicles, actually, especially when they have been thrashed by thousands of tourists) and took a hazardous, broken road up into the mountains. Through forest and endless durian gardens, we lurched and bumped for a few hours, occasionally rewarded with wonderful views of the island below.



I'm writing this page at the end of August, sitting in the Thai Airways lounge at Bangkok's new airport, Suvarnabhumi, passing an irritating six and a half hours until my flight to Manila for the WHO training course.

### ☀ Crumbling infrastructure

Shortly after this showcase airport opened, serious problems started to emerge in the structural integrity of taxiways and runways (and various other less critical aspects of the construction). As a result, the old Don Muang airport was reopened, and a percentage of domestic flights were rerouted from the new to the old. The evening flight from Chiang Rai which would make a decent connection with almost all late-night departing international flights from the new airport, now arrives at the old airport (50kms distant), leaving little alternative but to take the afternoon flight to the new airport and hang around for hours and hours. The reverse is also true: incoming international flights arrive around dawn, and then there are no connecting flights to Chiang Rai until early afternoon. On my way back from Manila, I have to change airports AND stay overnight to make a reasonably quick return home - how daft is that after a three and a half hour flight?

Of course, I've written to the President of Thai Airways and made my protest. What they will do remains to be seen. Probably not much.

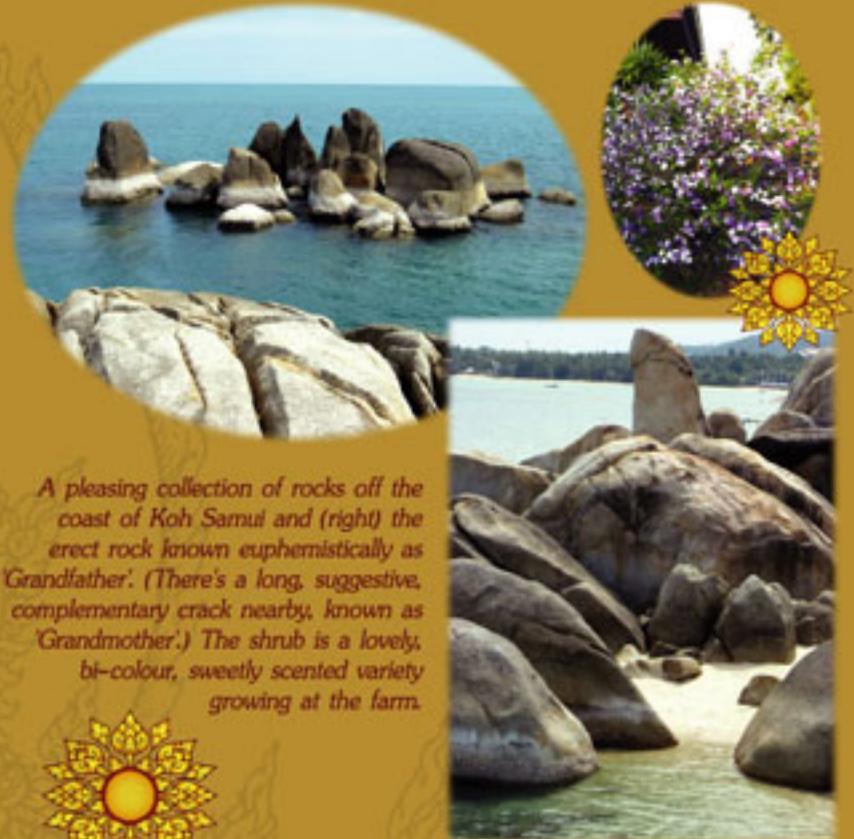
### ☀ Seasoned traveler

On the whole I like flying and the kind of hermetic few hours it gives me, protected from all responsibilities and demands - and of course the pleasure of arriving. This year it's been the UK (twice), Sweden (thrice), Ghana, the Philippines and, to come, India in November plus several trips to Bangkok and one to Koh Samui.

I'm usually utterly unsociable on planes, burying myself in book or newspaper the moment I sit down, lest I should be assaulted by some awful freak next to me (not excluding the possibility of reciprocal feelings from my neighbour, of course, should I thrust myself upon them.) I've had some bad times, I must say, in contrast to many of my friends who frequently eulogise the delightful conversations they've had on numerous flights and the charming people they've met. (My active engagement with adjacent passengers is usually limited to a silent struggle to resist invasion of arm-rest space and to maintain possession of my slim portion of it. Occupation of the arm rest and invasion of seating-space by the falling blubber of very large passengers is a further risk of economy-class travel and a frightful harassment, remediable only by removal of one or other of the parties.)

This rigid habit of withdrawal was broken today by a seemingly agreeable 61-year old man from Kentucky (as it turned out) - but there was a sting in the tail: after exchanging tales of our lives (him of his family dairy farm among other interesting enterprises) he revealed that he was a member of the Gideons - did I know about them? Uncertain if he meant the irritating, proselytizing, intrusive depositors of Bibles in hotel drawers, I prevaricated, but, sadly, it was as I feared.

## ☀ Loitering in airports and other adventures



*A pleasing collection of rocks off the coast of Koh Samui and (right) the erect rock known euphemistically as 'Grandfather'. (There's a long, suggestive, complementary crack nearby, known as 'Grandmother'.) The shrub is a lovely, bi-colour, sweetly scented variety growing at the farm.*



### Passing the time ☀

I've become very ingenious at finding distracting ways of spending long periods in airports - mainly by parceling out my time in hourly chunks - coffee in a restaurant where I can smoke; occasionally eating (when I'm feeling rich); browsing the bookshops; checking emails in the lounge; reading a book; occasionally (oh joy!) meeting friends who come to see me when I am not locked air-side. Sometimes it all works wonderfully well (swift connections, especially), but it can be a real pain - and all because (in Bangkok anyway) some bloody construction company (probably owned by a politician) probably took the cash for the job and then spent only a fraction of it on sound engineering and decent materials.

Maintaining a degree of polite restraint, I told him how much I deplored such activities, and all religious efforts to convert the world, how everpeaceful the means. He quizzed me about the origins of my views, and then said, 'I hope you feel better now you've got that off your chest.' Sensitive to a fault, I suggested he should not patronize me either because he thought he had access to a superior version of the truth or because he imagined his path was more strenuous than mine. We parted after the short flight on perfectly agreeable terms, neither remotely influenced by the other, of course.

All said and done, I love travel and, with the privilege of a Gold Card, can enjoy many of the real luxuries of quiet, comfortable lounges and free internet and complimentary snacks and drinks, even when traveling cheaply.





Bui on one of his horse-riding expeditions when he was in Chiang Rai. I take a book and read while he's galloping around the countryside.



Bobby (whose insistently Spanish name is Roberto Labrador) brought a holiday-spirit to my time in Manila, staying with me for a few days and distracting me agreeably from serious issues of patient safety training.

It's been a year of making new friends and renewing old relationships as horizons and opportunities have opened up since Chai's illness and death.

Bui and Katai have played a large and important part in my life in Thailand, in my feeling socially-rooted. In Samui I met up with Khun Aot, a friend of Chai's from Khon Kaen, whom I met some years ago, but with whom friendship had been proscribed by Chai on the grounds of his jealous fear that it was a threat to our relationship.

## Friends, family and holidays

In the Philippines, Bobby, whom I've known for ten years, came from his coastal home four hours away to spend some days with me during my training trip, and his mother and sister came for a day out in the capital with us. I hadn't seen him for four or five years (though we'd kept in touch) and meeting up again was a very pleasant treat.



Young Ui takes instruction from a soldier on his first horse-riding trip at the military stables near our home. On his second trip, over-ambitiously galloping his horse before he was ready, he fell off and prompted a race to the hospital - where he thankfully turned out to be undamaged.



Nephew Andrew - one of those people who gets things done



Worcester College is one of the loveliest places in the world, I think, and this view of the quadrangle from the lake side gives a taste of its magic

Young Ui continues to play a large part in my daily life. My place is his second home, and he spends a good deal of time coming in and out and staying at weekends. We still go swimming most Sundays and often go into town for an evening meal - when he bolts his food and rushes off to the nearest internet games shop to play while we finish our food.



The male Hugmans in the garden of Worcester College - on an ancient seat by the lake where I had sat many times during my undergraduate days

**Family matters**

My nephew Andrew played an important part in helping me clear the house and dispose of its entire contents at the municipal dump or in storage. Without him I doubt I would have found the grit and persistence to get it done. There are some people who are just brilliant at managing the material, physical components of life; who find ingenious solutions to seemingly intractable issues; who get things done - he's among them (just like my brother and his wife, too). Our father was much the same, but his practical and craftsman skills almost entirely evaded the genes and talents I inherited. (The other male Hugmans construct working steam-engines and strip and reassemble cars and poke about productively inside computers - mysteries beyond my capabilities.)

I had a few days with the Hugmans in Whittlebury, eating their spectacular food, driving in their racy cars, visiting Oxford - and feeling very proud of the tiny clan we are.



Racy tastes my brother and his wife Jenny do like smart cars: here's their BMW Z4 at on of the massive entrances to what was the Buckingham family estate, now occupied by Stowe School





# A weekend on the West Coast

It's the end of September, and I am sitting in my little wooden house in autumnal Utmyrby, just returned from a weekend in Göteborg (Gothenburg) with Marie. It's a four hour journey from here in the East of Sweden, on a typically clean, efficient and comfortable Swedish train. Göteborg is Sweden's second city, once a great port and centre of shipbuilding, now a thriving, bustling, modern city of half a million people with much reduced maritime activity.



Fishing village on the island of Donsö in the southern skerries of Göteborg.



Nostalgic sight amidst the skerries

## Fine civic environment

With splendid wide, tree-lined avenues in the centre of the city, parks and open spaces, newly pedestrianised streets and some spectacular coffee-shops, it's a very pleasant place to wander. There's an integrated system of efficient public transport - buses, trams and boats - including ferries to the islands of the archipelago. We went on one of them on a bright blustery day and stopped at Donsö for half an hour before catching the ferry back on its return trip. The village was eerily quiet that Saturday, not a sign of the hundreds of local fishermen whose boats and gear were in evidence everywhere.



Hugman at sea



One of Göteborg's trams on one of the many lines



Marie, Anna, Gunnar and young Ludwig



This is the lovely Lovisa from Uppsala, who was one of the lecturers on the course. We were looking our best for the opening ceremony, me in my formal barong tagalog, though not the posh and expensive kind made from banana or pineapple fabric (which cost a fortune and are very difficult to take care of).

## Introductory Course on Pharmacovigilance



Renaissance Hotel Makati City, Philippines 02 to 11 September 2008

My reason for being in the Philippines was a WHO training course in pharmacovigilance for 25 representatives of 11 Western Pacific Countries. It was a nine day course, with trainers from various parts of the world, including me doing my communications and crisis management stuff - and a good many more topics nearer the boundaries of my usual knowledge and skills. It all went very well.



Bobby's mother and sister came into town from Cavite to see us while he was staying with me. He lives and works in the seaside town of Puerto Galera, four hours' bus-ride away.



## Cool reception

Marie stayed with her daughter, Anna and her partner and young son, while I lodged in a huge Novotel nearby. After staying in a hotel of equivalent rating in Manila, Novotel seemed like a monastic dormitory in comparison: clean and efficient, but without a touch of welcoming warmth or enthusiasm. I had a fine view over the water from my room and could watch the comings and goings of the enormous Stena Line ferries as they went under the soaring suspension bridge

## Giant book fair

On our first day we visited the huge Book and Library exhibition, Sweden's prime bibliophile show, where hundreds of publishers and bookshops were displaying their wares, and dozens of authors were speaking and signing their works. Given that the great majority were Swedish, it was astonishing to contemplate the huge scale of the industry and the massive numbers of titles on show in just one small country (the entire population of Sweden is only nine million). It was encouraging to see such signs of a thriving publishing industry, but I did wonder just how any author (including me) could hope to make a mark amidst such intense competition.



## What a wonderful world!

Well, yes and no, of course. I was terribly impressed by the fact that, in Göteborg, you could buy your tram ticket by sending an SMS after you had boarded - just one of a myriad examples of humanity's spectacular ingenuity and creativity, even in very small things. The large things (space walks and CERN amongst many others) leave one breathless.

Then, one is left breathless by greed and stupidity, too. When I decided not to sell my house a few months ago because of deteriorating market conditions, I could hardly have imagined that what I was seeing then in Balham was the beginning of a huge, global economic disaster - caused by those we have all foolishly and helplessly trusted with our financial security. Rapacious, short-term, short-sighted lunacy by hordes of those who promoted themselves as the stars of the modern world.

Terms like 'the stock market' imply some kind of organized and structured entity - but, of course, what happens to stock markets is just the collective result of the decisions and whims and ambitions of a bunch of largely greedy, self-interested, irresponsible, morally ill-disciplined prima donnas. How can the bowler hats of Bradford and Bingley ever hold their heads up in public again? When did stuffing banknotes in mattresses ever seem more rational and prudent? All the great institutions of civilization seem to be lost in a moral wasteland - democratic governments, banks, corporations (short-term profits and poisoned Chinese milk comes to mind) - what's going on? I seriously wonder if all the good things we all strive to do can really survive the onslaught of such overwhelming wickedness and stupidity.



Rafe, Marie and I in our finery, in the garden of the house at Utmyrby, before Sigrid Kahle's 80th birthday party.

Study in contrasts. On 1 April, I woke up in Balham to the astonishing sight of a recent snowfall. Here's the view from the top floor of the house then, and about six weeks later



## Wrapping up

Well, that's my rant for this year. I've been angered and deeply distressed by events in my own life this year, and while I'm calmer, and more resigned to the continuing threat and uncertainty of the court case, it has undermined my sense of security and peace of mind quite radically. It may have contributed to my feeling a greater sense of despair about world affairs and the future of our race, but I do think those are rational and legitimate concerns quite separate from my personal problems.

I've also had some great times, and need to remind myself that many real pleasures and opportunities are still available: I have many very good friends; I have interesting and enviable work; I live in a lovely place and have a second home which offers comfort and delight; I am anticipating the publication of my first big book - there is much to enjoy and look forward to.

## Goodbye for now!

As always, I hope to keep frequently in touch with friends in the year ahead (email remains a major contributor to my contentment) and hope that they will make sure they include Thailand on their itineraries: visitors are a joy and there are so many enchanting things to do and see in Chiang Rai.

I hope the past year has been kind (at least tolerable!) to you and your loved ones, and that 2009 will bring good things aplenty!

Best wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

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