

March 15, 2023

Thùy An

Thầy

Unlike most speakers at this event, I came to know Thầy Long much later in his life. We first met in 2013, when I took his classic course – the United States and Vietnam – as a first year M.A. student at the University of Maine. Less than a year before that, I had been a student at a private Law School in Ohio. When I realized Law was not the right path for me, and that my greatest desire had always been to learn about what *really* happened in my country, I decided to drop out and went to Maine to study with the person I believed could guide me on my quest to find the answers to that question. It was one of the best decisions of my life.

From Thầy Long, I was able to learn much more than the knowledge, insights, and skills necessary to ask and analyze historical questions. I also learned the burdens and the privilege of being a historian and an educator, whose responsibilities must extend beyond the classroom. I learned that writing history is not about speaking for, or even giving voice to, people of the past, but about listening to what they had to say and creating the space for them to tell their own stories. Teaching, similarly, is not about fulfilling a job, or imposing facts on others, but about active sharing: sharing knowledge, experience, understanding, and empathy.

From Thầy Long, I learned that if the country is a ship, then the intellectuals' place is at the bow of that ship. "The intellectuals are the first to be able to warn their country of an impending storm," he told me, "the first to get hit by the waves, and also the first to see the horizon and the possibility of arriving at a better Tomorrow." Thầy never stopped striving to be *that* intellectual, that scholar-activist for his countries: Vietnam and the United States.

Through his actions and the way he lived his life, Thầy Long taught me that being "hiền" – a word that has no easy translation in English but which can be roughly translated as "tender-hearted" and "unassuming" – is not a weakness but a strength. It can even be a strategy that allows one to straddle between the lines of fire and search for peace and reconciliation, as Thầy and many of his friends did during and after the American-Vietnam War.

Because Thầy was so "hiền," as an advisor, he rarely imposed a deadline on his advisees. His flexibility was happily welcomed at first but soon became a challenge, as it compelled me to be independent, self-disciplined and self-reliant in my own academic pursuit. Because he was so "hiền," Thầy usually found himself unable to say No, for example, to the countless requests for last-minute interviews or letters of recommendation from others. It was often frustrating for those who loved and cared about him, but putting others' needs before his own was also what made him the Ngô Vĩnh Long that I knew and admired.

Like all mentors and their students, we did not always agree on everything. But precisely because of those disagreements and differences, I came to respect him and our egalitarian relationship even more. Indeed, despite our age difference and common Confucian cultural background, Thầy Long never imposed any sense of hierarchy on me. He always made sure I felt equal and confident in expressing my opinions and disagreements. The respect, compassion, and

trust that Thầy accorded me as my mentor, my intellectual companion, and as a fatherly figure were among the greatest gifts I have ever received.

Last but certainly not least, from Thầy Long, I learned how to properly open a lobster, and to make delicious traditional Vietnamese food in innovative and incredibly efficient ways. I learned to be patient and optimistic in cooking, writing, teaching, advocating, in work and in life.

My intellectual journey has become infinitely lonelier without Thầy Long. But thanks to him, I know I *am* walking toward the right direction.

I would like to end this talk with a very short poem that I wrote for Thầy Long three years ago, after we had a spirited discussion about the over-commercialization of holidays in recent years, including the National Teachers' Day in Vietnam, November 20.

Teachers' Day

*I don't need to wait until Teachers' Day
To whisper to you a student's wish
For old songs and new lessons only you could teach,
For seeds of the soul
only you can help
to grow.*

*You don't need to wait until Teachers' Day
To know how grateful many are for your love,
For the myriad ways your voice and stories have given them hope
That they too have much to give,
Many to love,
And all to live.*