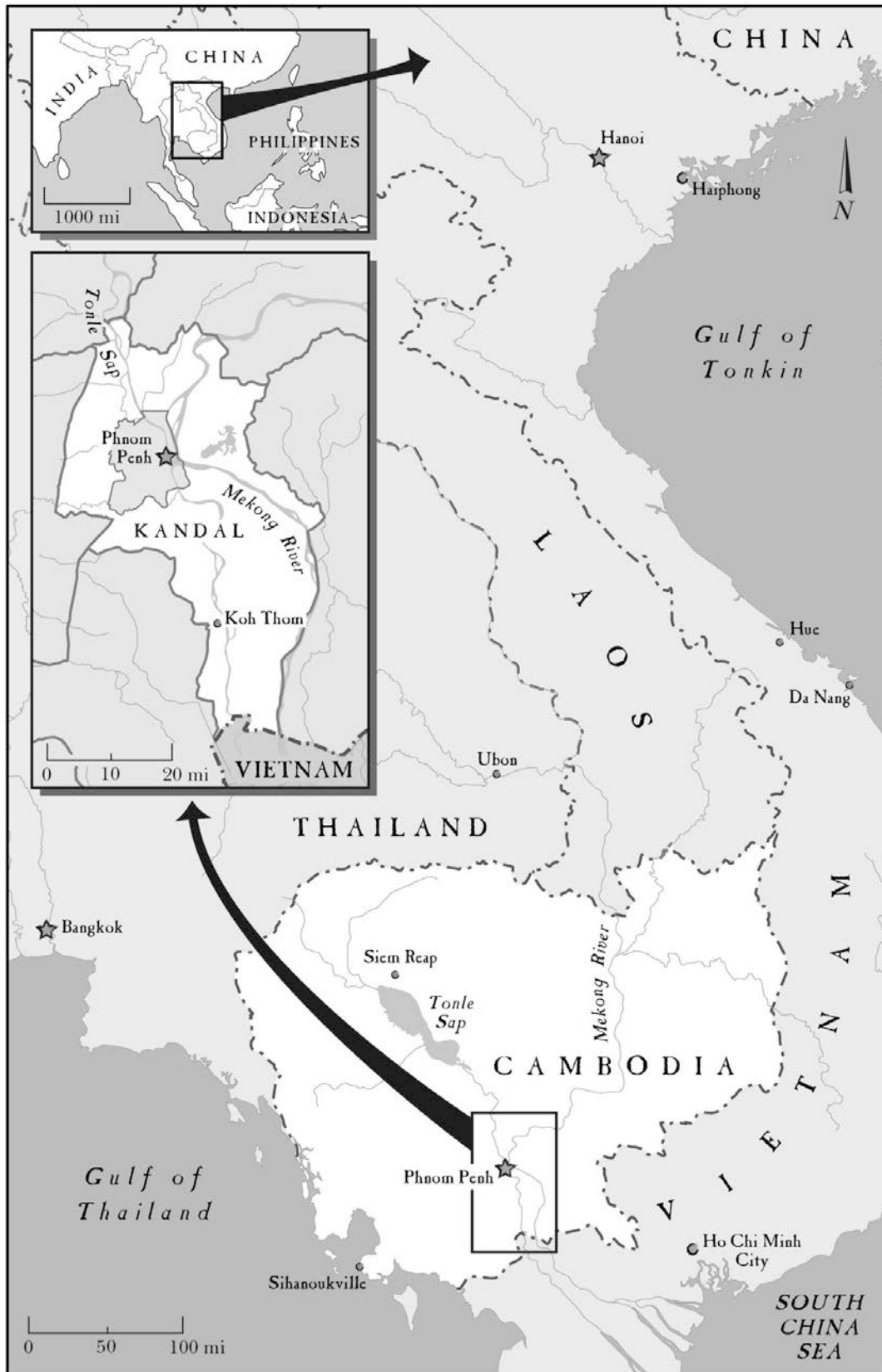


## **Part II**

### **Devoted to the Commonweal #3**

**Chanthol Sun**



Devoted to the Commonwealth #3: Chanthol Sun

I was raised to be a humanist. My father was a history professor, and making money was neither a goal nor a worry for him. Our lives overflowed with the richness of the written word, and the life of the mind. For many years, I thought we were the wealthiest family in the world because I had never been exposed to financial aspiration. When I went to work for the Wharton School, accordingly, I was a bit apprehensive about what I would find. By that time I was worldlier than during my youth, but not at all convinced that additional remuneration or capital accumulation were proper goals. As a precautionary measure, one of the first actions I took when I arrived at Wharton was to write myself a letter, with instructions on the envelope to “Open In Case of Emergency.” The content of the letter, which I stored in my Safe Deposit Box at the bank, was as follows: “*You can always quit.*”

One thing led to another, and thirty years later I had not had recourse to open the letter, which surprised me. But I certainly had learned a lot over these thirty years. One of the reasons I was proud of Wharton (and accordingly, one of the reasons why I never opened my emergency letter in thirty years) as an institution was that each one of the four deans under whom I served had uniformly relegated the making of money to a secondary level of importance in the hierarchy of the school’s goals. Consistently, the highest priority was placed on training the students to work together for the benefit of the group or organization that they represented. Similar emphasis was placed on the development of a keen understanding of ethical choices. Especially in later years, students were encouraged to look beyond their self-interest and to commit themselves to making the world a better place without thought to their own personal reward.

And yet, despite the school’s enlightened leadership, the thirty generations of students with whom I coincided, as well as their predecessors, with remarkable consistency and predictability, aspired for the most part to amass fortunes, to keep score and to accumulate money for the sake of accumulating money. It was their goal, and not a means to an end. As the reader will have learned already, not everyone I met suffered this fate, and I have taken great pains to explain how success in life can and should be measured in ways other than material assets. But there is one person, more than any other, who exemplifies the ideal that I have slowly and carefully conceptualized over these thirty years. His name is Chanthol Sun, a country lad from a small farming village outside Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and whom I have designated as *Devoted to the Commonwealth #3*.<sup>1</sup>



**Chanthol Sun running the marathon in Singapore on December 4, 2012.**

## **Setting the Stage**

It was a cold and blustery day in the middle of January, 2010 in Philadelphia. The previous summer, long-range weather forecasts had predicted that the winter would be a record-breaker for the volume of precipitation and the depth of the cold. Surprisingly, the predictions were correct, and the results were a school child's dream – howling blizzards, deep snow, and many days with school cancelled because of impassable roads and dangerous conditions for walking. Never in the years since Thomas Jefferson (who was actually a better record-keeper than Benjamin Franklin) had carefully recorded temperatures in Philadelphia had the freeze

been so deep or so prolonged. Eventually, this winter would re-write the 130-year old record for snow – 78.7 inches.

I visited St. Peter's School, where my younger daughter Angie was enrolled as a Fourth Grader, that morning. I was accompanied by Arony (known to all as "Nyny") Sun, the middle daughter of my good friend Chanthol Sun. Nyny and I visited the school to make a presentation at the weekly "school service" that was one of the vaguely religious activities in this ardently non-denominational academy. All 213 of the students, ranging from the 4 year-olds in "pre-school" to the 14 year-olds in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, along with the school's 26 teachers, the principal and staff, assembled on Wednesdays to hear someone address the school's "theme" for the year. In 2009, the theme was "compassion," a favorite of mine. In 2010, the theme was "giving back" and the principal had invited me to share my thoughts on the subject at this assembly.

I decided to talk about Cambodia. Why? What could this impoverished country have that it could "give back"? It all relates to Chanthol Sun. I met Chanthol in 1997 when he was a participant in Wharton's Advanced Management Program, a five-week boot camp for those middle-to-upper level managers who were destined for positions of responsibility and trust in their organizations. He had been sponsored for the program by the U.S. Agency for International Development as a person who was likely to make a difference in his country. But there is much to explain before we arrive at 1997, to say nothing of 2010.

## **The Early Years**

Cambodia became semi-independent from France on November 9, 1953. Chanthol Sun was born in Koh Thom, Kandal Province, Cambodia, in 1954 (coincidentally the same year as the French defeat by the Vietnamese at Dien Bien Phu). Kandal Province surrounds but does not include Phnom Penh. Koh Thom was and still is a farming village, 35 miles from Phnom Penh. But it might just as well have been 3,500 miles from the capital. In Chanthol's words, life in Koh Thom was "static, peaceful, and unchanging." A traditional, isolated community in a small, poor country. No prospects for growth or change. Everyone's life is determined from birth, and relationships are fixed and stable. Chanthol's family consisted of his mother, his father, 3 sisters and 5 brothers (including Chanthol). Who would

have predicted that this young man would have such an adventurous life, encountering and overcoming immense challenges and succeeding to an extent that would be totally unexpected?

In 1957, when Chanthol was 3, his parents moved to Phnom Penh, an unusual but not unknown event for families in Koh Thom. Chanthol stayed behind and lived with his grandparents until 1961, when at the age of 7 he joined his parents in Phnom Penh. His father had by that time started a small business, renting and repairing cyclos, the primary form of transportation at the time. He also opened a small bookstore.

From September, 1967 to October, 1973, Chanthol attended Sisowath High School in Phnom Penh, at the time considered to be the best high school in Cambodia. The language of instruction was Khmer, and he learned French as his first foreign language. After school, he worked for his father, selling books and newspapers as well as repairing cyclos. This was a gruesome time in Cambodian history, with America conducting a secret war and raining death and destruction<sup>2</sup> on an innocent and helpless population for 14 months from March, 1969 to April, 1970 while Chanthol was a freshman in high school.

I was an active participant, at Columbia University where I was a student, in massive protests against this illegal and immoral bombing campaign. I remember well that the university had to shut down in the spring of 1970 because of the protests, although our actions had no immediate effect on U.S. government policy. We were inspired by Robert F. Kennedy, who was murdered two years earlier, when he used words remarkably Buddhist in his exhortations to Americans when he spoke of “tiny ripples of hope” that, added to millions of other ripples, “can build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”<sup>3</sup>

In March, 1970, the Cambodian Prime Minister Lon Nol led a *coup d'état* that ousted Prince Norodom Sihanouk. A month later, U.S. troops invaded Cambodia. The bombing, which had been going on for a year, had driven rural people into the cities, had caused the collapse of the agricultural system and had contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge. This homegrown communist movement arose out of anger with the United States and the regimes of Prince Norodom Sihanouk and General Lon Nol, but later metastasized into a monster that would all but consume the country. I will

feel shame and remorse until the day I die for this monster that my country helped to create in Cambodia.

### **Chanthol's First Black Swan – United States of America**

In the early 1970s, the situation in Cambodia rapidly deteriorated. The Khmer Rouge was gaining momentum in its civil war with the U.S.-backed government of Lon Nol. By 1973, the U.S. had abandoned its support for Lon Nol and within two years, the Khmer Rouge took full control over Cambodia. It is challenging for me, in retrospect, to imagine the despair that must have descended on the long-suffering people of Cambodia, caught between impossibly miserable alternatives. For some, including the future Prime Minister Hun Sen, the choice was to join the “*maquis*” and engage in guerilla warfare. For others, the choice was to seek a safe haven. Many years later, when I asked Chanthol why he did not become a guerilla fighter, he laughed without a trace of bitterness, “Can you imagine me with the Khmer Rouge? They would have killed me in a week.” You will learn in the course of this chapter why this retrospective prognostication was so prescient.

In 1973, a chance encounter with an American backpacker inspired Chanthol's older brother to go to the United States. In August of that same year, Chanthol completed high school and applied for a visa to follow his brother to the USA. He knew that his future in Cambodia was bleak for the foreseeable future, but had faith that someday he would be able to return to serve his country. The Consul General was out of Phnom Penh, and the Deputy C.G. denied his application. One month later (September 1973), Chanthol reapplied for a visa, and the Consul General, having returned to Phnom Penh, approved his application. A Black Swan!

Chanthol sold his motorbike to purchase a one-way ticket to Washington. D.C. His grandmother gave him US\$50 and he left home with two suitcases (one filled with clothing and one filled with books). He arrived in Silver Spring, Maryland, intending to enroll at American University, to which he had been admitted. He needed a job to support himself, so he visited Georgetown. Nearby, he was offered a job as a dishwasher at a restaurant named “Jour et Nuit.” He sent most of the money he made home to his parents in Phnom Penh.

Early in 1975, realizing that the tuition at American University was too expensive for his budget, he took a Greyhound bus to Alabama A&M, where the tuition was lower and where other Cambodians had gravitated. There were no jobs for Cambodians in Alabama, so during vacations he traveled back to Washington to work at a restaurant named “Pier 7.” This arrangement lasted for eighteen months or three semesters, after which time he applied for re-admission to American University, where he spent his Junior and Senior years.

### **The Khmer Rouge and General Electric**

Meanwhile, back in Cambodia, things got much worse. The Khmer Rouge, having defeated Lon Nol in 1975, initiated the political nightmare that became known as the “Killing Fields,” and which resulted in the extermination of almost two million<sup>4</sup> Cambodians, uprooted the entire nation and plunged the country into four years of self-inflicted terror. The regime asked all Cambodian students living abroad to return home and join the revolution. Every student who accepted this request was immediately murdered on arrival in Phnom Penh. Chanthol wisely stayed in the United States. Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts sponsored legislation that granted “Green Cards” to all Cambodian students in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Chanthol received his Green Card through this legislation.

He graduated from American University in 1978, was recruited by General Electric and started work soon after graduation. In that same year, he applied for and was granted U.S. citizenship. For the entire four years of the Khmer Rouge reign of terror, he heard nothing from his family. But he was sustained by a strong belief, based on nothing but his innate optimism, that his family members were safe.

In 1979 the Khmer Rouge was defeated by the Vietnamese and driven out of the capital and into the Cambodian jungle. Slowly, the full story started to be told. Tens of thousands of Cambodians were living in refugee camps in Thailand. Chanthol’s younger sister, having survived the Khmer Rouge, was living in one of these refugee camps. She wrote a letter to Chanthol which was faithfully forwarded by the U.S. Post Office from one address to the next until it finally arrived in his current mailbox. Chanthol also saw a photo in the Washington Post of a group of Cambodians in a refugee camp. He thought that he recognized his father and sister. He called UPI (which was the source of the photo) and asked them to enlarge it so that



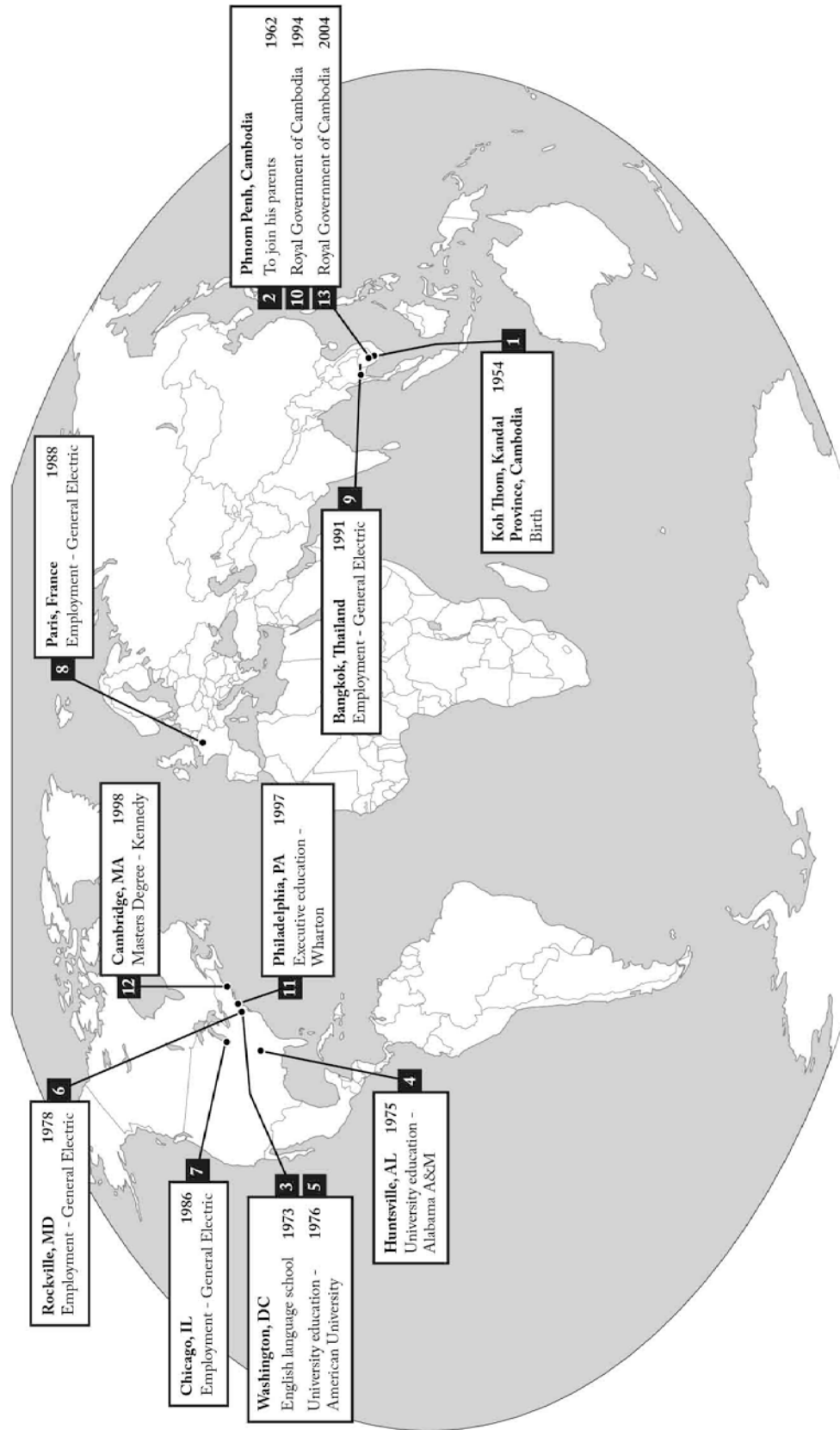
he would be able to determine if it was really his father and sister. Enlarged, the photo revealed that the man and woman in the refugee camp were not related to Chanthol. But this tantalizing piece of hope encouraged him to continue searching, still believing that his family was safe.

Finally, he located his family and learned that his father, two brothers and two sisters were safe, although suffering horribly in a refugee camp in Thailand. His mother had died in a Khmer Rouge labor camp in 1979, and one brother was missing (Chanthol will only call him missing, although he never has been seen again after 37 years). He sent money to the survivors so that they would be able to come to the United States.

In 1980, he petitioned the International Committee of the Red Cross to sponsor all his living relatives. Miraculously, everybody still living in 1980 escaped. Ten family members in all (including the husband and children of his sister) left the refugee camps and arrived in the United States unannounced, utterly destitute but profoundly grateful for their lives and their freedom. They all arrived within one week of each other over the Labor Day holiday in 1980 and Chanthol suddenly had ten mouths to feed and ten sleeping bags on the floor of his small apartment as he went through the General Electric Training Program.

### **Sotha, Ratavy, Arony and Mony**

During this time of exhilaration that most of his family had survived, but also of exhaustion from the workload of supporting ten people, he met his future wife, Sotha, in 1982. They married and started a family. Their eldest daughter, Ratavy, was born in Chicago, where Chanthol was assigned in 1986 when he joined GE Capital. Their middle daughter, Nyny, was born in Paris, where Chanthol was assigned in 1988 when he joined GE Medical Systems and worked on the integration of Thompson CGR. Their youngest daughter, Mony, was born in Bangkok, in 2001.



The Peregrinations of Chanthol Sun

## **John Rice**

By 1982, thriving in the GE meritocracy, Chanthol was invited to move to the GE Audit Staff, which would require long periods (4-6 weeks at a time) of travel away from home but which paid a higher salary. John Rice, in 2013 Vice Chairman of General Electric, joined GE at approximately the same time in 1978 as Chanthol. John, also, was invited to join the Audit Staff, which he described as the “fast track” for those executives identified by GE as being “high potential” for advancement under the company’s highly-competitive, merit-based personnel system.<sup>6</sup>

According to John, the Audit Staff was a difficult, high-pressure job. Teams were formed and then sent to locations to perform audits, which could take up to three months. During these three-month assignments, the team members worked hard and developed strong bonds, based on understanding, trust and common purpose. John and Chanthol met in January, 1982 when they were assigned together for the first of several such audits and quickly became close friends. Although their career paths later diverged, they are still close friends today. I met John at the wedding of Chanthol’s eldest daughter, Ratavy, in the summer of 2014, 32 years later. Several months after Ratavy’s wedding, John and his wife donated funds to establish a comprehensive educational facility in one of Phnom Penh’s most impoverished areas. This facility will provide washrooms, clean water, medical care and nutritious food in addition to schooling.

“Chanthol was a very special person, even then,” John remembered. “He was both passionate and compassionate. In my more than thirty-two years of knowing Chanthol, I have never had the slightest doubt about his integrity or his passion. And this applies to Chanthol as a man, as a husband, as a father, as an executive, and as an advocate for Cambodia. He has always been the same person – engaged, involved and energetic. He has always been a ‘giver’ without calculating what his reward would be.” Such a man would not have lived long under the Khmer Rouge.

“At GE, Chanthol was known for being relentless, but in a positive and infectious way. Everybody wanted to be on his team because any team that included Chanthol would always be high energy, high performance and high morale,” John added. Friendship is truly a powerful force for good in the world.

## **Chanthol's Next Black Swan: Cambodian Politics**

The next major stage in his life started in 1992 at the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok, when he met Prince Sihanouk's younger brother, Norodom Sirivudh, who worked for Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the second son of Prince Sihanouk. Sirivudh took Chanthol to meet Ranariddh, an introduction that would prove to be the next Black Swan in Chanthol's life.

At the time, Cambodia was preparing for a national election, which was held in 1993 with the assistance of the United Nations. The results of the election were ambiguous. FUNCINPEC (Ranariddh's party) won 45.5% of the vote and the Cambodian People's Party (Hun Sen's party) won 38.2% of the vote. A complicated dispute ensued, which was resolved with a typically Cambodian compromise. Two prime ministers were appointed. (Chanthol ruefully describes Cambodia as the only country in the world with two prime ministers, a river that runs in both directions, and a father who succeeded his son as King.) Prince Ranariddh was "First" Prime Minister and Hun Sen (a former Khmer Rouge) was "Second" Prime Minister. Ranariddh asked Chanthol to join the government as Minister of Energy and Mining. Chanthol, sensing that this compromise would not work, declined the offer.

In November, Ranariddh again asked Chanthol to join the government, this time as Minister of Tourism. He declined again.

In early 1994, Ranariddh asked Chanthol to join the government once again, this time to head the Council for the Development of Cambodia, which would be the nation's engine for growth, the governmental agency responsible for promoting the direct foreign investment which Cambodia so desperately needed. Chanthol once again declined.

By April, 1994, Chanthol decided to accept Ranariddh's request. He asked GE for a leave of absence and agreed to start the Council for the Development of Cambodia as Secretary General. His devotion to his homeland overcame his trepidations about working in such a complex political environment. Twenty-one years after his departure from Phnom Penh amid the chaos of war, he was back to do his part to rebuild his country.

According to John Rice, “Chanthol was doing well at GE and could have had a comfortable life. But he decided that his country needed him, and he left the corporate world to help the people of Cambodia. Chanthol is not content to leave the world as it is; he needs to help make the world what it can be. He wanted to clean-up, fix, re-engineer and give the people of Cambodia better lives.”

Chanthol rented an office in the basement of the Cambodiana Hotel in Phnom Penh and borrowed three desks from the United Nations. Starting from scratch (including sweeping the floor and cleaning the windows), Chanthol created the Council for the Development of Cambodia. By August, the government had codified the CDC into law. By October, he had accepted the additional post as Deputy Minister of Finance, working with Keat Chhon, another former Khmer Rouge who was by then Minister of Finance.

Three years later, in 1997, Chanthol applied to the Wharton Advanced Management Program and spent five weeks in Philadelphia. This was when we met for the first time. In one of those great ironic moments in life, on the day of his graduation from Wharton’s AMP, Hun Sen seized power. Chanthol quit his job with the Council for the Development of Cambodia but returned to Bangkok (where his family was living.) Ranariddh fled the country.

The next year (1998), Ranariddh was allowed by Hun Sen to return to Cambodia. At the same time, Chanthol was recruited by Philips Lighting to head their Southeast Asian operations. He stayed only six months because Ranariddh once again asked him to join his party in opposition to Hun Sen. Still deeply conflicted about entering Cambodian politics as practiced and led, he applied to the Kennedy School at Harvard and earned his Master of Arts in Public Administration in 1999.

After his return from Harvard, Chanthol established a private consulting business, which lasted for four years, until 2003, when Ranariddh once again asked him (this was his sixth request!) to join his political party, FUNCINPEC and run for public office. Chanthol agreed, campaigned for FUNCINPEC and successfully won a seat in the National Assembly.

Hun Sen won the election with 47.3% of the vote, but did not have enough seats in the National Assembly to form a government without

forming a coalition. The result once again was political paralysis, and the new government was not formed until the next year (2004). Chanthol was asked to take the post of Minister of Public Works and Transport, and he accepted. From 2004 until September of 2008, he served in this capacity.

Anvanith Gui, a childhood friend of Chanthol's wife, worked for Chanthol during this period as Chief of Staff.<sup>7</sup> Today he works as General Manager of the Foreign Trade Bank of Cambodia, which started as a state-owned financial institution, but which is now 90% privatized. He tells wonderful stories about Chanthol's indefatigable energy, perfectionism and commitment.

"When Chanthol was Minister of Public Works and Transport, he would frequently visit villages throughout Cambodia. His purposes were to see first-hand what condition the roads were in, and also to build credibility with the villagers," remembered Anvanith.

"The villagers in the countryside were initially somewhat skeptical of Chanthol," continued Anvanith, "because he did not behave or look like either a villager or a government official. But the villagers were eventually won over by his energy, his down-to-earth demeanor, his commitment to the practical solution of basic problems, his sincerity and his openness. People responded to the man and not to the office, which was new for Cambodia, where traditionally ministers do not care very much about their constituents but remained focused on power politics in Phnom Penh. No minister had ever visited most of the villages where Chanthol spent his time."

Although Chanthol was a member of the opposition party, he was perceived as competent, largely apolitical and devoted to the Cambodian people. He was soon promoted to Senior Minister and Vice Chairman of the Council for the Development of Cambodia.

## **Reflections on Life and Politics**

I met with Chanthol in his home in Phnom Penh in August, 2011 to ask him about the people, forces and ideas that shaped who he is today.

"Honest, hardworking parents and grandparents," he quickly and earnestly replied to my question. "They taught me to treat everyone with dignity. I was a Boy Scout in high school. I was a member of the

swimming team. I am very competitive. I always want to win and to succeed. I always felt the duty to study and work hard. My purpose in going to the United States in 1973 was to study, learn, and someday to return to Cambodia to help my country and its people.”

“What about your religion?” I asked him.

“All Cambodians are Buddhists, and so I am a Buddhist. I believe in the Law of Karma. What you do will come back to you. If I am wronged and I seek revenge, I gain nothing and in the next cycle of life I will suffer because of my selfishness. I also believe in the Principle of Detachment, which is a central belief of all Buddhists. We try not to worry too much about things. Too much attachment to power or material possessions is bad and delays our release from suffering. I believe it is important to detach from the need for power, money, recognition, possessions, even family.”

“Isn’t this in conflict with being competitive?” I asked Chanthol.

“No,” he replied with a slight tilt of his head, “I don’t think so. I will work hard and strive to succeed, but if I lose, I can detach. I am happy to go back to the farm in Koh Thom tomorrow, if necessary. I am not attached to material possessions or power and influence. It is a mistake to be greedy. I also need to be able to look Hun Sen or my youngest daughter in the eye and know that I acted honestly. Don’t envy anyone, because if you have envy in your heart, you will never be happy. The only route to happiness is to be satisfied with what you have and with who you are.”

Peter Singer had some relevant thoughts:

*If one can...transcend one's ego and know the sufferings and joys of every sentient being...there is no sense of loss in this transcendence of the quest to satisfy desires that previously seemed so important or of the pleasures that came from their satisfaction, for enlightenment involves detachment from one's desires.<sup>8</sup>*

Many of the leaders of Cambodia today, including Prime Minister Hun Sen, were Khmer Rouge who became disenchanted with Pol Pot. Some of the disenchanted escaped to Vietnam and convinced the Vietnamese in 1978 to help them liberate Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge that they had

once supported. “How can you work with former Khmer Rouge, knowing that one of them may have killed your mother?” I asked.

“I can work with them because they liberated Cambodia. In addition, they have changed. We must be able to detach from our anger over what someone was or did, and accept who they have become. Hun Sen cares deeply about Cambodia. He changed. In addition, without his strength, Cambodian politics would be chaotic. There is no value at all in being old and angry. I cannot help the Cambodian people if I am alone and isolated.”

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At this point in my narrative, I need to take a short pause to catch my breath. To me, Chanthol’s ability to work with the former Khmer Rouge is challenging to understand. Baffled by his Buddhist inner peace, I turned once again to **The Lucifer Effect**, by Philip Zimbardo. This book, which we will reference again in the context of Shiv Khemka (*Steward But Not the Owner of His Wealth #2*), helped me to understand Chanthol from the Western perspective. Professor Zimbardo’s analysis provided me with a useful bridge to the murky territory that was occupied by the Khmer Rouge.

*This behavior [evil] lies just under the surface of any of us. The simplified accounts of genocide allow distance between us and the perpetrators of genocide. They are so evil we couldn’t ever see ourselves doing the same thing. But if you consider the terrible pressure under which people were operating, then you automatically reassert their humanity—and that becomes alarming. You are forced to look at the situation and say, “What would I have done? Sometimes the answer is not encouraging.”<sup>9</sup>...Good people can be induced, seduced, and initiated into behaving in evil ways.<sup>10</sup>...The negative, anti-social reactions observed were not the product of an environment caused by combining a collection of deviant personalities, but rather, the result of an intrinsically pathological situation which could distort and rechannel the behavior of essentially normal individuals. The abnormality here resided in the psychological nature of the situation and not in those who passed through it.<sup>11</sup>*

Although Professor Zimbardo did not study the Killing Fields of Cambodia, these words could well have been written about the actions of the



Khmer Rouge, and helped me to understand somewhat the psychology of Chanthol's willingness to engage with those who formerly perpetrated evil.

Nelson Mandela put it in simpler, but just as powerful, terms when he wrote about one of his cruelest jailers that "...all men, even the most seemingly cold-blooded, have a core of decency...inhumanity had been foisted on him by an inhuman system."<sup>12</sup>

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Returning to our discussion in 2011, Chanthol continued, "In General Electric, you work hard to increase shareholder value for thousands of anonymous investors. Working in the Cambodian government, my shareholders are all the Cambodian people. When I get discouraged or frustrated, I leave Phnom Penh and go visit the Cambodian people in the countryside. I am inspired and energized. The purpose of all my effort is to help the people of Cambodia. This is how I will earn good karma for my next incarnation."

Although he had joined the government at the invitation of Prince Ranariddh and in opposition to Prime Minister Hun Sen, Chanthol had eventually switched parties and now is a member of the Prime Minister's party. Another conundrum for me. "Why did you quit FUNCINPEC and join Hun Sen's political party?" I asked.

"This was a very hard decision for me because I am extremely loyal. But FUNCINPEC's ship sank and my larger loyalty is to the people of Cambodia, not to an individual. I determined that I would be able to bring about more positive change by working within Hun Sen's party than by being marginalized as an outsider who had no influence. In 2006, Ranariddh resigned from the Presidency of the National Assembly and went to France for six months. At the same time, I was convinced that Hun Sen had changed and was devoted to the improvement of the lives of all Cambodians. If I wanted to have a positive impact on Cambodia, I had to join forces with Hun Sen and the CPP."

John Rice, Chanthol's former colleague from GE, put it this way:

"There are many leaders in the world, and not one of them is perfect. Each person needs to decide if their goal is to make a difference, and then to

decide what would be the most effective way of making that difference. Hun Sen is the leader of Cambodia, and if you want to bring about positive change in Cambodia, then you need to work with Hun Sen and the government he leads.”

Chanthol continued, “Cambodia is full of a spirit that asks people like me to return home and to help. I felt this so strongly in 1993 when Ranariddh first approached me about joining the government. The spirit of the Cambodian people begged and pleaded with me. The Cambodian people have suffered so much and for so long. I could not refuse, and I finally agreed to join Ranariddh in 1994. I believe that you cannot bring about positive change by sitting outside and criticizing. You must be engaged and be part of the change you want to see happen.”

### **A Man of Deeds, Not Just Words**

What kind of a man is Chanthol, outside his official capacity? I learned several clues to this question during my conversation in his home that long and languid August afternoon.

Chanthol’s middle daughter, Arony, wants to be a gynecologist and to help the mothers of Cambodia. In the summer of 2011, between her junior and senior years in college, Nyny worked in a hospital in Phnom Penh. She was saddened to learn that the hospital had no proper beds for women when they were delivering children. When she reported this to Chanthol, he asked Nyny to conduct research on this equipment. When she identified the appropriate bed, he purchased two and donated them to the hospital.

Chanthol has personally paid for the construction of two schools in his home town of Koh Thom.

On August 21, 2011, Chanthol visited a town outside of Phnom Penh that was celebrating the re-opening of a temple that had been destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. Learning that the monks who rebuilt the temple had done so by taking loans, he made a personal donation and persuaded another, far wealthier, Cambodian to do the same so that the debt of the monks would be retired.

## Another Political Campaign

The year 2013 brought another national election in Cambodia. Chanthol was a candidate for the seat in the legislature that would represent the district in which his home town of Koh Thom is located.



Chanthol meeting the voters in Koh Thom in 2013

“During my campaign, I ran from village to village to say hello to the people,” he began. “I normally did around 10-12 kilometers each afternoon. I asked about 100 youths to ride motor bikes in front of me. They made noise to attract the people to come out and stay along the route to allow me to greet them. A group of 5-10 youths ran with me for about 2 kilometers, and then a new group would run with me and the old group got on the motor bikes because they could not keep up with me for the whole run. The youths stationed themselves at 2 kilometer intervals along my route.”

“This campaigning style was good because the people along the route got a chance to see me and to touch me. They felt sorry for me for campaigning so hard. They had never seen a candidate run like this. Old folks cried and asked me to stop running. Some just wiped my sweat with their hands. It was a very moving experience for me. But, I still lost the

election in my district! Even though they liked me, some voted for the opposition because they promised to raise salaries, give free healthcare, reduce the price of gasoline, increase the price of crops, etc. I refused to mislead them with false promises that I knew I could not deliver.”

“I lost my district but the CPP (Hun Sen’s party) won overall in the country, which allowed the CPP to form the government. You don’t have to be a member of parliament to be a cabinet minister. If I had won, I would have been required to resign my seat to be in the cabinet. Only the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister can both hold a cabinet post and be a member of parliament. So Hun Sen asked me to serve as Minister of Commerce in addition to re-appointing me as a Senior Minister and Vice Chairman of the Council for the Development of Cambodia. I also serve the government as ASEAN Economic Minister for Cambodia. And finally, I assist the Ministry of Public Works and Transport for the Chinese-funded roads and bridges. My plate is very full and I work long hours every day.”

“Tell me what you have done to bring about change in the Ministry of Commerce,” I asked.

“On my first day as Minister, I took two actions. First, I took the equivalent of US\$10,000 in cash of my own money (no government funds!) and gave the equivalent of US\$10 in cash to each of the top 1,000 staff in the ministry. I did this for two reasons. One was to tell them I appreciated their work. In addition, the day corresponded to the “tomb-sweeping day” when Buddhists are expected to make offerings to their ancestors. I told everybody to use the money to ‘make merit’ with their ancestors. The other reason was to signal in a concrete way that in the future, promotion will be based on merit alone. My predecessor as Minister of Commerce had done a great job, and I was continuing the reform process that he had initiated.”

“The second action I took concerned the procedure for doing business in Cambodia. Previously, the system was set up to make it easier to demand bribes. For example, despite the fact that it was not legally or procedurally necessary, there were thousands of pieces of paper that needed to be signed, stamped or otherwise handled numerous times by ministry staff. This was a terrible impediment to expediting business such as exports, and also resulted in mountains of useless paperwork and endless bribes. I eliminated thousands of pieces of paper and their associated opportunities for corruption. My next goal is to automate many of the processes that now are

done by hand, including the registration of company names and the payment of fees.”

“Isn’t this going to anger a lot of people who will lose income as a result?” I asked disingenuously.

“Of course. But this is a necessary start to reforming the system. The next phase must involve finding ways to compensate staff appropriately so that they do not need to take bribes in order to pay for doctor’s visits for their children. If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys for staff. I want the staff to be paid a living wage. They are good people, hard-working and eager to help. The government should not force them to do things they know are wrong.”

This is a good man, this Chanthol Sun. A happy man, also, who is earning good karma. He has a glass front and a back built with high quality titanium. But he is not a revolutionary or an ideologue. There are those, not surprisingly, who advocate “regime change” in Cambodia, but Chanthol has chosen to work with the existing political realities. As U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt wrote over a century ago when he was criticized by the investigative reporter Lincoln Steffens, who believed that radical measures were necessary to fix the American political and economic woes,

*“You contend that [Vice President William Howard] Taft and I are good people of limited vision who fight against specific evils with no idea of fighting against the fundamental evil.” After a quarter century in politics, Roosevelt observed, he had found that change was realized by “men who take the next step; not those who theorize about the 200<sup>th</sup> step... Indeed, history suggested that those...who fought “the system in the abstract” accomplished “mighty little good.”<sup>13</sup>*

Chanthol Sun, with his indefatigable energy, unquenchable optimism, and unflinching integrity is a modern-day TR in many ways.

## **Hit the Re-Set Button**

Now I need to return to that cold and blustery day in January, 2010, when Chanthol’s middle daughter and I visited St. Peter’s School. My assignment was to discuss “giving back,” which as noted above was the school’s theme for the year. The school collectively even had an assignment

to perform 175 acts of “giving back” to celebrate the school’s 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

I began by asking the assembled school if anybody had ever heard of Cambodia. Not more than a dozen hands (out of almost 250 attendees) were raised. I then asked if anybody had ever been to Cambodia. No hands were raised. So I described Cambodia – a small country almost exactly on the opposite side of the earth. I told the students and teachers that it was a very poor country, and that most of the people who lived there had less than \$1 per day for their food, clothing, shelter, health care, books, recreation, and everything else. Many children I told them, never went to school. Several students (the younger ones) gasped.

I told the school that the principal industries in Cambodia were tourism, assembling clothing for companies such as GAP, and growing rice for export. I asked everyone in the audience to look at the tags on the clothing they were wearing, and to raise a hand if any tag said “Assembled in Cambodia.” There were shouts of surprise from students in each grade, and about a dozen hands were raised.

I told the school that this poor country is trying very hard to improve the education of its people so that they can perform more complicated tasks that pay better wages. But it is a long-term and complicated process. I did not explain the Killing Fields and the genocide that took place in Cambodia because I knew that this was far beyond the capacity of most of the children to understand.

But, I continued, in my opinion Cambodia is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Not in terms of money and material possessions, of course, because they had very little. No, the vast wealth and capacity of Cambodia to “give back” took different forms.

First, Cambodia is the proud home to one of the most complex and evolved technological marvels of human history, namely the temples in Siem Reap, a small town in the northwestern part of the country. The most famous temple is called Angkor Wat, and its outline is featured prominently in the center of the Cambodian flag.

Originally built as a Hindu temple, it eventually became a Buddhist temple. It is a magnificent work of art and architecture, made even more

marvelous because it was constructed 900 years ago. And Angkor Wat is only one of more than 300 temples that exist in the region. Each temple is more beautiful and evocative than could be imagined, and no two temples are the same. What powerful faith and what extraordinary genius could have created these temples?



According to archeologists, a population of over one million Khmers lived and labored in Siem Reap to construct these temples. The leaders, craftsmen and laborers were supported by a vast army of 50,000 elephants which hauled massive stones from quarries 50 miles distant to build these edifices. Archeologists have established that Siem Reap was the world's largest and most complex city in pre-modern history.

The civilization that built these temples disappeared and the jungle overran everything. Recent research has speculated on the reasons why Siem Reap was abandoned. The first reason had to do with the complexity of the water management system, which was probably overwhelmed by the alternating periods of drought and deluge.<sup>14</sup> The second reason had to do with changing patterns of trade, which favored cities nearer the coast as engines of growth. It was only about 100 years ago that a Frenchman literally stumbled upon this treasure and started the process of uncovering and reassembling the structures that had fallen into disrepair.

In visiting these temples, one is deeply moved by the overwhelming value – beyond money – contained in these stones. I had personally never felt such an emotion before I visited Siem Reap, and I have returned several times to absorb the spiritual energy that pervades this city. The richness of this city and its heritage is more valuable than any fleeting coinage. In this

way, I believe that Cambodia is rich, and “gives back” to all of humanity accordingly. This wealth can never be lost or taken away from the Cambodians. No stock market crash or financial bubble can have the slightest impact on these glorious monuments. When I walk through these temples, I feel both humbled and enriched by the privilege of witnessing the work of geniuses. I also have the greatest respect for the managerial skills of the leaders who, 900 years ago, organized a million people and 50,000 elephants to implement this vision.

The second reason that Cambodia is wealthy involves an intangible called Buddhism, as noted above the faith of Chanthol Sun. This religion has been the spiritual guidepost for virtually all Cambodians for close to two thousand years. It is a complex set of beliefs and practices, and a thousand books have been written on its tenets and variations. I understand only a mosquito leg’s worth of this philosophy, but I have adapted what I do know to be one of the paths for my own spiritual growth and for how I hope to interact with the world around me. I told the students at St. Peter’s that Buddhists have compassion for and show kindness to all living things. I suggested that if we adopt this as our guiding principle, then maybe we will be on a path to find real peace and happiness in our hearts. I asked the students, “What would happen if you felt warmth in your heart for everyone and everything that lived, from the alligator to the bumblebee? And even for things that did not live, such as rocks and the wind? Wouldn’t this be a great world?” The little kids giggled.

I explained to the students that one of the most important goals for Buddhists is to help those you meet along your way, without thinking about what you get in return. “Imagine that each one of you is a small light in a dark night. Seen from far away, you do not make much change in the darkness. But if you all get together, your small lights will add up to a great shining light that will make the darkness go away and everybody can see. So don’t worry if your light is small or your kindness is small.”

So I explained to the students at St. Peter’s that Cambodia was rich in two ways that did not depend on material possessions. In fact, it was rich for just the opposite reason, and gives back to us spiritually.

I am not sure how many of the students understood the message that Cambodia was “giving back” through its cultural and spiritual traditions, but I tried to communicate to them that they should not think of “riches” and



“wealth” only in monetary terms. There are other forms of wealth that are equally (and even more) meaningful.

As I departed from the school, a group of younger students was gathered around one of their classmates. They clearly were showing admiration for this young man, who could not have been more than nine years old. It turned out that he had explained to his classmates that his Mom was Cambodian, a fact that he had previously been ashamed to admit. Emboldened by my presentation in the school service, he had proudly announced that his Mom was Cambodian. His classmates had all suddenly decided that he was the most interesting person who deserved the greatest respect. A small light had become a much bigger light because it had been joined by many other small lights.

### **Who Is Chanthol Sun?**

I have read a number of books about Cambodia, ranging from an angry polemic by Henry Kamm to a hagiography of Hun Sen by Harish Mehta and Julie Mehta. I have also read several books about Buddhism, Philip Zimbardo’s book about evil, and a long and depressing book about “genocide and extermination” by Ben Kiernan. I have walked through a small fraction of the temples of Siem Reap and wandered past (but did not enter) the casino of Phnom Penh. I have 57 business cards of people in Cambodia in my file. I have visited Cambodia on 11 different occasions. In light of all this, I would evaluate my knowledge of Cambodia as better than the average foreigner, but miserably inadequate to understand the country, its people or its challenges.

But Chanthol Sun is my friend, and I have undertaken to try to understand him, at least a little bit. I have also undertaken to place Chanthol in the context of this book, and to have an opinion about his relationship to the 13 Ariadne’s Threads that I have identified. Where does Chanthol fit into this complex matrix of characteristics and people from all over the world?

It will not come as a surprise to the reader that I admire Chanthol Sun, nor will anyone be startled when I say that I have affection for him. He has come more than half way. I do not speak a word of Khmer, and because of this simple but important fact, I have no way of knowing what part of Chanthol I will never understand.

Despite all these qualifiers, I feel completely confident in my judgement that Chanthol Sun fits perfectly with all of Ariadne's Threads. He is different in ethnicity, language and history from Luis Andrade and Boediono, but I do not detect the slightest difference among these three men in terms of their inner selves. The fact that they all lived through difficult and frightening times in the history of their countries helps to illuminate their resilience. They all act with complete autonomy and freedom, and are both fearless and harmless because every action they take is based on an understanding of their true, inner, value systems.

I will never be able to understand Cambodia, and I will certainly never be qualified to pass judgment on what has happened there, but I can say with conviction that Chanthol Sun is a once-in-a-lifetime person, and I feel lucky to have him as my friend for life.

Maybe Henry Kamm, towards the end of his 1998 book about Cambodia referenced above, prophetically put it best:

*Cambodia needs not one man on horseback who will be the savior but an elite of aware men and women of goodwill and creative energy to whom the fate of fellow Cambodians matters.*<sup>15</sup>

Or maybe it is Karen Armstrong, in her book on the Buddha to which I have also previously turned, who captured the essence of Chanthol:

*...anger, guilt, unkindness, envy and greed, were avoided not because they were forbidden by a god or were "sinful" but because the indulgence of such emotions was found to be damaging to human nature. The compassion, courtesy, consideration, friendliness and kindness ...created harmony and balance.*<sup>16</sup>

Or, more poetically, it is quite possible that Chanthol took up Tennyson's challenge:

*Rift the hills, and roll the waters, flash the lightnings, weigh the Sun.*<sup>17</sup>

Take your pick. Chanthol Sun gives me hope that someday we will achieve our goals of peaceful prosperity that is shared universally because of a pandemic<sup>18</sup> of compassionate altruism.

## Moving on to Dakar

We now turn to the next category, namely the *Compassionate Capitalists*, although there is much more to be learned from the heroes who are *Devoted to the Commonweal*. Please join me in journeying due west from Phnom Penh to Dakar, a flight of 8,104 miles which seems even longer than its actual distance because of the fact that there are no non-stop flights between these two cities. In Dakar, we will meet Dawn Hines, *Compassionate Capitalist #1*, and the only native-born citizen of the United States in this book. Dawn is an exemplar of a new breed of human. Let us explore this new concept and try to understand if Ariadne's Threads once again allow me to exit from my Labyrinth.

Let's go!

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<sup>1</sup> I have known Chanthol Sun for almost two decades and have had dozens of conversations with him, in Philadelphia, in Phnom Penh and various other locations. I also know his wife and three daughters, and have seen Chanthol interacting with them on many occasions. This portrait is a composite of information acquired in conversations, phone calls, and email messages and during breakfasts, lunches and dinners. I conducted two interviews with him, in Phnom Penh on August 21, 2011 and in Philadelphia on November 19, 2013, that added many details to the narrative. I also had the good fortune to spend a week with him in Phnom Penh, during which time I observed him interact with a number of government executives in his official capacity.

<sup>2</sup> Nobody knows how many bombs were dropped on Cambodia during this secret war. I have read accounts that range from an estimate of 110,000 tons to 2.7 million tons. Equally unknown is the number of innocent Cambodians who died in this bombing campaign. The consensus among the accounts I have read is that civilian deaths totaled more than 150,000.

<sup>3</sup> MacAfee, Op. Cit., page 178.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, nobody knows or will ever know how many Cambodians were killed by the Khmer Rouge. As an order of magnitude, it was about 30% of the population, which if it occurred in the United States in 2016 would result in the murders of 89 million men, women and children.

<sup>5</sup> Senator Kennedy was a tireless advocate for the helpless and a champion of immigration reform. The efforts he made on behalf of refugees was doubly impressive. Not only did he save lives, but he did so with no political benefit to himself. Refugees had no constituency: his efforts were altruistic in the classical sense of the word, namely taking actions to benefit others with no personal benefit and with some cost to one's self. Ted Kennedy literally saved Chanthol Sun's life.

<sup>6</sup> Phone call with John Rice on November 26, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Phone call with Anvanith Gui on November 22, 2013. I also had an opportunity to renew my acquaintance with him at Ratavy's wedding in 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*, Op. Cit., page 103.

<sup>9</sup> Zimbardo, Op. Cit., page 15.

<sup>10</sup> Zimbardo, Op. Cit., pages 210-211.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, page 254.

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<sup>12</sup> Mandela, Op. Cit., page 462

<sup>13</sup> Goodwin, Doris Kearns, *The Bully Pulpit*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 20013, Page 540.

<sup>14</sup> Day, et. al., *Paleoenvironmental history of the West Baray, Angkor (Cambodia)*, in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, January 24, 2012, Vol. 109, No. 4, page 1050.

<sup>15</sup> Kamm, Op. Cit., page 249

<sup>16</sup> Armstrong, Op. Cit., page 130

<sup>17</sup> From Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Locksley Hall*, 1835

<sup>18</sup> Defined as a “global outbreak that crosses borders and is highly contagious.”