

EDITORS' NOTE

In “A Person Who Changed His Fate,” Van Anh Ho adopts a questioning rhetorical stance. She seeks to learn about Thich Tam Tu, a classmate who devoted his life to Buddhism after graduating high school. How does her profile essay help Ho and other readers understand Tu’s philosophy that “school is not the only place you can get an education”? As we learn about Tu’s unique career aspirations, we also gain a worldview. How does the author integrate her own world views with those of her profile subject? After all, in researching this profile, Ho made a trip to the temple in Orange County to meet with Tu. How might that journey have helped Ho approach this profile essay?

WRITER'S NOTE

When I interviewed my friend, I had to do multiple tasks like writing down what he said and paying attention to his expressions and the surroundings. However, the hardest part in this essay was integrating quotations so they could flow smoothly between my ideas.

A Person Who Changed His Fate

Van Anh Ho

Back in high school during my freshman year, I made friends with many students who were at least three years older than me. Most of my friends and I now pursue our dreams of mastering school at different places; unfortunately, we do not know whether we will be able to find jobs or survive in the workplace after graduation, because people in the United States are dealing with the economic recession. As life gets harder, I feel like my friends and I compete against each other for our future—except for Thich Tam Tu, who gave up his own life and now is ordained (authorized) as a Buddhist monk. As I recall, Tu’s decision surprised everyone who knew him (including myself), and we called him insane when he decided to join the Buddhist monastery for the rest of his life, instead of continuing in higher education since he academically ranked in the top ten of his class.

I got to know Tu when I first came to high school because we took the same Food Nutrition class—even though he was a senior at that time. Throughout the entire school year, Tu always impressed other people by achieving high test scores. Talking to Tu a few times, I figured out that he was an inquisitive person who had an interest in the online world; he loved to discover and develop useful software for computers. He wanted to become a successful computer engineer in the future. From my perspective, Tu was an intelligent person; however, he seemed to be self-centered. His “self important” stature caused him to lose a lot of friends. For example, he always wanted to be a top student and never wanted to share his study habits or strategies with anyone else. Any time his grades got lower than the others, he would get mad and usually complained for long periods of time.

Finally, his hard work paid off when many universities in California accepted him while he was still in the process of finishing high school. Unexpectedly, after his graduation, no one at school could contact him anymore. Once, I tried to call him on the phone, but someone else picked it up and briefly told me that Tu no longer used the number because he gave up every-

thing to become a monk at the Buddhist Temple in Orange County. I felt both surprised and curious about Tu's decision, but I could ask no more questions because the issue seemed to be Tu's privacy.

Three years passed by and the memories of Tu seemed to fade away in my mind. However, when my English 134 class discussed profiling "someone who makes change," I immediately thought of Tu. I wanted to know his insight on being a monk, how difficult it was, and if he regretted giving up on school. A few days later, I decided to take a trip to the Buddhist Temple in Orange County to see if Tu still lives there. I came to the temple around six o'clock in the evening when the sun was setting slowly above the horizon. The main gate of the temple still opened widely, but no one seemed to be there because the surrounding remained very calm and tranquil. The temple did not look ancient or scary, but the quietness made my heart pound rapidly as I stepped toward the entrance. While I was walking nervously toward the main house, I was startled by the rustling noise from the backyard of the house. My curiosity made me turn toward that direction to see what was there. In a dim light, I saw a human figure, who was sweeping the leaves on the ground. I guessed that he had to be one of the monks in this temple, so I stepped a little bit further to greet him. As he saw me approaching him, he stopped sweeping and bowed me. He smiled gently as he said, "Welcome to the Buddhist Temple." The voice sounded familiar to me because I had heard so many times in my life. After a few second flashing back my memories, I impulsively pulled back when I realized that was Tu's voice. In contrast, Tu had no trouble recognizing me. We were both surprised and happy to see each other at the temple because I did not contact him before I came.

Tu physically changed so much that I could hardly recognize him: the image of Tu in high school—dressed in expensive clothes, and his hair in a Mohawk style—suddenly disappeared from my mind when I confronted him wearing a long dark brown robe wrapped around his body with his hair cut short. He looked skinnier than many years ago, but a calm and serene expression always remained on his face. Tu was not embarrassed by his appearance when he caught my eyes widening uncontrollably, but rather he gently smiled and explained, "The real happiness [did] not come from the materialistic side of life." His statement caught me off guard as I realized Tu has already become another person. Since he became a monk, physical appearance does not matter to him anymore. He seems to care more about abstract images in the mind that deal with spirit, wisdom, and thoughtfulness. Before I visited him, I knew that he would look different than he was in high school, but I did not expect to see him mentally change.

Facing Tu in the picture is a roughly fifty-year-old woman. She holds a box of instant noodles and a bag of clothes that she receives from Tu. Her body is covered by a big yellow plastic bag, which she uses as a rain coat. She looks pale as worry mounts on her face because of the destructive impact from the hurricane. In the photograph so many poor people just like her patiently wait for aid, even though apparent sorrow rises on their faces. They all live in the same financial panic since the hurricane hit their homes. Poverty has become their biggest enemy.

When I first looked at Tu's photograph, I was impressed because he changed my assumption about monks, who in my mind always stayed in the temple to practice their religion. Furthermore, seeing how Tu volunteers and helps unlucky people find hope and vitality in this huge world makes me glad. Although the supplies and money the monks have brought to those hurricane victims will not last for a lifetime, they show kindness among human beings. Besides helping those who happen to be the victims of horrible disasters on Earth, Tu tries to involve other people from different religions, races, and political beliefs to donate and make the world a better place.

I told Tu that his photograph reminded me of the time when I lived in Vietnam; I wished that I could have had a chance to volunteer like him when I eye witnessed people suffering in poverty because thousand of houses were destroyed, and hundreds of people were killed by the natural disasters every year. Since then, I idealistically promised myself that I would bring hope and happiness to these unlucky people when I grew up. However, when I came to America with my family in 2004, my life started to change: when I was in high school, I had tons of chances to serve a small community in Orange County and become an activist by volunteering, but I did not want to do anything for the others. I spent most of my time at school and online. And yet, I began to fret intensely when I saw the image of Tu serving a small community in Vietnam in that photograph; I felt so guilty for breaking my promise.

While Tu was listening to my anecdote, he showed himself as an open minded person because I saw his compassion expressed on his face. However, sometimes he just nodded his head. He waited a few seconds after I finished my story, and then he recalled his memories, “Everyone, including my family, thought that I lost my mind by going into the monastery.” And I was one of those people thinking Tu had gone crazy after he finished high school, because a lot of people including him wished that they could get admitted into universities, but the chances were rare. No one at that time knew why Tu wanted to become a monk. However, behind the mysterious decision was a traumatic event of his loveliest cousin passing away from an accident, and Tu suddenly realized that death was unpreventable and could happen to him at any moment. If he kept spending his time with the online world, it would make him become an inactive person in the real world, someone who would never know “the real meaning of life.” Instead, he wanted be a peace activist like the famous Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, so he could bring happiness to other people and would never feel regret if he had to face death.

In Tu’s philosophy “school is not the only place you can get an education,” which he then verified by saying that he learns valuable moral lessons—such as loving other people like brothers and sisters, treating animals like human beings because they have souls, and relaxing by practicing yoga—while he stays in the temple. The Buddhist Bible teaches him the meaning of happiness, which is about “caring, support, love, compassion, and wisdom.” Since then, Tu wants to share his knowledge with others, which he believes will benefit their lives. Throughout these explanations, I can see Tu as a beloved person.

Tu completely transformed from a competitive person into a generous monk, who now no longer sees himself as the most important person in his life. Indeed, his purpose is to promote non-violent activities along with other people, and together they will create change. Now, I agree with Tu’s decision when he chose to step aside from the materialistic and become a Buddhist monk. Even though I cannot join Tu’s activities, he still influences my life: his stories help me to become self-aware. At the same time, I feel is very disappointed with myself. Throughout many years, I had been working so hard but only for my benefit. I cared too much for my own life that I indifferently put aside the images of those who suffered from natural disasters around the world. But now I want to get involved in the community to help other people out of poverty and give them the power to survive. I hope that I will have more time to visit Tu, so I can learn more valuable lessons from him.

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