

COMMENTARY

A Tibetan tale

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Once upon a time, when Youdon Lamo was six years old, she and her parents were chased out of Tibet and into India by the Chinese army.

Earlier this week, 49 years later and only months shy of the summer Olympic games in Beijing, 100 Tibetans who have trained for the arduous six-month journey attempted to return on foot, Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. style, by setting out from an India hill-town called Dharamsala, toward Tibet, which is now defined by nearly everyone in the world of officialdom as part of China.

When they get there, if they get there, they will try to slip across the border and into their homeland, they say. (The Indians, wanting no part of a greater conflict with a country that may well become the ultimate economic and military superpower of the 21st century, halted the march at its beginning, on Monday, according to the BBC; what will happen now is anybody's guess.)

Youdon managed to survive the journey through the mountains with her mother and what remained of the Tibetan people in exile, including the Dalai Lama, who had a price on his head. Many didn't, or they didn't survive the Chinese occupation of Tibet, which began in 1951 during our Korean war, followed by the brutal put-down of the Tibetans' 1959 uprising. Youdon's father had begun the journey with the family, too, she said. He moved into the rugged terrain flanking the route of retreat for the Tibetans with some other young men, negotiating a mountainous landscape where

Chinese troops operated in proximity to armed bandits who had lost their religion and preyed on travelers.

Youdon told me all this when she and I were both about 27 years old, while we hung out together on the 8th floor of the Queen Charlotte Maternity Hospital in Chiswick, west London.

At the time and for years after, I thought the story had about as much relevance to me or to you as, say, a story out of Africa, or for that matter a story out of the past. (A Seminole story, for example. Like the Chinese, we chased the Seminoles out of their ancestral homelands and ran them into the swamp, killing as many as we could in the process, and discovering they were a lot tougher than even our most brutal 19th-century leaders such as Andrew Jackson had figured.)

But things have a funny way of becoming connected when you're not watching, or even if you are. My son, Evan, was born into Youdon's capable hands (literally) on April 3, 1980, on a sun-splashed afternoon when the Thames drifted through Chiswick — past the riverfront pubs, past the public and private gardens, past the Chiswick churchyard where William Hogarth and the American painter and ex-patriot James McNeill Whistler now reside — in its own lazy pilgrimage through London and east to the sea.

Evan now writes for Florida Weekly right here in Lee County, and even better, he breathes in and out energetically, a fact due in some small measure to a Tibetan woman persecuted and abused by the Chinese in 1959.

A trained midwife (an essential position in British natal care, since midwives, not doctors, usually deliver children from the womb), Youdon was dressed in white the first time I met her — a trim, dark bronze, brown-eyed woman with jet black hair, high cheekbones and a warmth and calm that seemed almost metaphysical. We became friends, since part of the midwife's job is to visit the homes of

newborns for six or eight weeks after their births, insuring that first-time parents can care for their children.

Recounting her childhood exodus, she said that one day, her father left the long line of refugees, and simply never came back. That, in itself, must have been devastating to the young girl. But Youdon also had to wonder, uncomfortably but honestly in later years, if perhaps he, too, had been a bandit, or merely a male victim scouring for food and trying to protect the line of march. The Chinese killed many of both persuasions, and as far as I know, she was never able to discover the truth about her dad.

In India, Youdon was selected for a program that moved Tibetan children out of the northern border camp where the Indians had placed them and where the Dalai Lama became the Tibetan leader in exile, and flew them permanently into Britain, for upbringing and education. It was considered a transformative act of British charity, and Youdon's mother seized the chance to release her daughter, and to give her a Western life.

So Youdon became an orphan and an exile in extremis, a girl who grew up to receive the citizenship of an empire (such as it was, post 1960) and to help bring my oldest son into the world. She was never entirely comfortable with Westerners, she told me, in part because they could not show the intense warmth and emotional favor she ascribed to the Tibetan culture.

This is where the story becomes mildly complicated, and where it might end — but it doesn't. Evan's mother and I brought him back to the states some months after his birth, landing near Charlottesville, Va., where I met Sidney Burris, who would become my closest friend.

A born and raised Virginian, Burris is now director of the Fulbright College Honors Program & Religious Studies at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, and a full professor of English. (See www.tibetspace.artibet.com.)

He is also, now, an ardent Buddhist who

has managed to create a formidable and open program of study run by in-resident Tibetan monks in Fayetteville, one of whom Geshe Thutpen Dorje, came out of Tibet as a toddler on the same march Youdon experienced.

Geshe does not know Youdon, he told me once, but he knew her experience — and now he knows mine, as well, or at least my cultural experience.

His cheer about this history is unassailable, flawless, impervious to the vagaries of his personal experience or that of the Tibetans — or, apparently, to tyranny. If I haven't misunderstood him (admittedly a distinct possibility), he views the Chinese only as individual souls who must live (someday again) with the consequences of their current actions — as we all must.

Remarkably to me, Tibetan Buddhists like Youdon Lama or Geshe or for that matter the Dalai Lama will never resist tyranny with weapons. They will never harness a Marine Corps, for example, or invade their own lost homes with the intention of avenging their murdered loved ones, or retaking what by rights is theirs, as I probably would.

Is it because they can't? Maybe, but I doubt it. The real reason, perhaps, is that they have a better weapon.

They simply do what they can do. They bring babies into the world, in any language or culture that presents itself. They travel and teach and sing and remember. Geshe himself told me, as he told my friend Burris, that we must do what we can and be what we can, and not try to do or be something else, which seems perfectly sensible to me.

In doing that, we are all tied together in some way, perhaps — as someone must have understood who passed anonymously through my Alva neighborhood not too long ago, affixing a sign to a corner of Tuckahoe Road: "Remember, We Are All One."

Perhaps that's true. So what can I do about it? I can tell you a story. ■

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