

*Nine Years in Bangkok represents the author's odyssey of workplace trials, personal struggles, and loss—culminating in a spiritual metamorphosis that changed the course of her life. This is a story of adversity, lessons learned and ultimate transformation.*

# **Nine Years in Bangkok: Lessons Learned**

by Sharon Bazant

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Nine  
Years  
in Bangkok:

LESSONS LEARNED

Sharon Bazant

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## Prologue

My family disinherited me—twice. Both sent a cruel message: “You don’t belong in this family.”

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I have such vivid memories of growing up on our prairie farm: the everyday chores, the special joys, sharing work with my mother and father and looking after my baby sister.

I remember waking up on early summer mornings to the bawling chorus of calves having been separated from their mothers for branding. Those days meant the arrival of a crew of men with calf-wrestling skills and women with pies and salads. The air would be filled with the raw burnt smell of branding irons hitting their mark. Jokes around the laden dinner table would be ribald with references to prairie oysters.

I remember following my father as he walked through the swaying golden stocks of wheat on a warm fall day, eating hot suppers straight out of the cooking pots in the field during harvest, rounding up cattle on horseback many crisp winter evenings, mowing hay in the far corner of the field and singing at the top of my lungs.

I loved that farm for its combination of excitement, camaraderie, and contentment and for all that I learned from my parents who had both grown up in farm families. My mother had been a teacher and she often told me that she hoped I would grow up to explore the world beyond

our little farm community tucked in a corner of Western Canada. So I read books about ancient times in India and China and about the lives of children in Germany and Mexico and South America. Such exotic places that I longed to see.

But those thoughts of travel became a distant memory when I started my own family and my heart expanded when my toddler son, Jason, began to follow his granddad around on his early morning chores during our frequent farm visits. My husband, Wayne, enjoyed these times at the farm as well. Even though he had grown up in a small town, he had spent a lot of time on the nearby farms of his uncles. Jason was the first grandchild—the next generation who could enjoy the rhythms of farm life.

Then, in 1978, everything changed. My Dad, only 63, died of cancer. It was an enormous shock to all of us. How could it be that I would never again see my father walking in the field, drinking his morning coffee out of a battered thermos or lifting Jason up to pet the horses? So much of our farm life had centered around Dad—there was a hole in our world with him gone.

At the time, I was 30 years old, married, with a four-year-old boy and a two-year-old girl. The only other heir to the farm, besides our mother, was my sister, Gail. She was 25 and married with no children. Our mother was still a youthful 56 years of age.

Despite her vitality, my mother knew it would be impossible for her to handle all aspects of the farm by herself and she'd been advised not to make any big decisions for a few years. So, she leased the farm for a

three-year term to a young couple she knew to be responsible. After that, a decision would be made as to the fate of the land and buildings that had been in her family, off and on since her grandfather (my great-grandfather) had pioneered the area in the early 1900s.

Two years after my father's passing, his mother died and left an inheritance to her children, the largest portion of which was **their** family farm. Dad had been the oldest of six and, had he still been alive, would have received a sixth of the farm inheritance. But, having predeceased his mother, his five brothers and sisters took advantage of a loophole clause in their late father's will that stated the property would be divided amongst his "surviving children." My aunts and uncles could have chosen to divide the inheritance six ways so that my sister and I would get our father's share. Instead, they chose to divide it five ways amongst themselves.

My mother was furious—not for herself as she had no stake in it—but for her children. Gail and I had been quickly and cleanly cut out of our father's rightful heritage. This, after Dad had given more time and care to his mother and other members of his family than all of his siblings combined. One of his sisters ultimately felt a bit guilty and gave us some token money. Other than that, everything our father had ever meant to his family was erased with this group decision. My mother severed ties with most of my father's family after this incident. Having no other choice, we choked back that indignity and life went on.

About a year later, on a sultry summer day, my mother called and asked if I would like to accompany her on a trip up to Peace River to visit some of her friends. I had never



been to that part of Alberta and it was said to boast stunning scenery. Besides, it would be an opportunity to spend time alone with Mom. We had a companionable road trip and I enjoyed meeting the down-to-earth people of that northern community. On our return home, we stopped at a restaurant and, just as I was about to make a comment regarding how relaxed and happy I felt, Mom lobbed the first grenade in her arsenal.

**Dear diary,**

*July 1981*

*I'm still shaken by the conversation I had with Mom at lunch yesterday before she dropped me off at home.*

*We ordered our food, she took a breath, looked off into the distance and said, "After a lot of thought and consideration, I've finally made a decision about the farm. I attended a conference about inheritance and legalities and one of the speakers told us that when we're deciding how to distribute an inheritance to family members, we have to be fair but not necessarily equal.*

*So, I've decided to give the farm to Gail. Everything else will go to you when I die. In doing this, I want you to know that what you'll be inheriting will never be close to the value of the farm that Gail will have. But Gail and Rob are interested in farming, the lease is soon to expire and I've decided this is the best way forward. I don't want you to dispute this. It's my final decision."*

*I was speechless. That cherished farm buried deep in my heart! It felt like someone had reached in and stolen it when I wasn't looking. I felt a gaping void. I had no words. I was numb. I said nothing and could barely eat my lunch. For the rest of the drive home, I stared out the car window. I was lost in memories—they were all I had left.*

So there it was. This had been the actual agenda for the mother-daughter road trip. What could I do? The farm belonged to my mother and she could do as she wished with it. Somehow, she'd convinced herself that this was 'fair.' There was no point in my arguing or causing a stir—as always, once my mother had made up her mind, that was it!

I was devastated, not because I wanted money, but because I felt like I didn't belong in the eyes of my family. First, my father's family had decided that Gail and I didn't deserve our share of his legacy and then my own mother had decided that I didn't merit receiving any portion of our family farm. I had a blood connection to that farm and now its heritage would be denied, not only to me but to my children and all the generations that came after them.

It felt like my childhood was slowly being erased and papered over with another narrative—one that went something like this: "Sharon never liked the farm, anyway. Gail was always outside with the animals. Sharon was more interested in intellectual pursuits. Sharon didn't marry a farmer, so obviously, the farm no longer interests her." And on and on. Much more was added over the years, perpetuating the family mythology.

For some reason, my family conveniently forgot about me riding horses, looking after my 4-H calf, doing chores, weeding the garden, building forts in the trees. I was five and a half years older than my sister and I had my own set of memories—suddenly deemed insignificant. But I swallowed my sadness and told myself that if I were to get upset over this, it would just mean that I was greedy. That's why the next grenade was an even heavier hit.

Gail and her husband, Rob, had no sooner gotten settled on the farm than they decided to purchase a property in Palm Springs, California. They asked Rob's mother and our Mom to contribute—so each of them (the two mothers plus Gail and Rob) would have a one-third share in the property. This was a beautiful home in the Rancho Mirage area with a swimming pool, backyard Jacuzzi and more—it wasn't cheap.

Mom's substantial contribution represented a part of the inheritance that she had promised to myself and my family plus it provided another home to Gail and her family. Did that make sense? This was the final affront to us. Wayne and I wrote a strong letter to my mother, Gail, and Rob regarding the unfairness of this arrangement. In the end, this accomplished nothing except to make long-term enemies of Gail and Rob and incur the wrath of my mother.

But, to us, it had just seemed like one insult on top of another. There was a family tug-of-war around this dispute for a long time. Eventually, as we had suspected would happen, Mom gave her share to Gail and Rob, they sold the property and reaped the profits. This decision was yet another blow to my battered heart—it felt like a third disinheritance.

\*\*\*\*\*

Fast forward to 1990—Wayne comes home from work and plops a piece of paper down on the kitchen counter. His boss had been to an international conference and someone had given him a job description for an opportunity with the United Nations—a posting in Pakistan. Wayne was to circulate it among those who worked under him to see if anyone was interested. He looked at me and said, “What do you think about me applying for this position? What about our family moving to Pakistan?” I hugged him and said, “Yes, yes, yes.”

Wayne had hit a glass ceiling at his work and was looking to spread his wings. He, too, had issues with his family—primarily his parents’ alcoholism. I loved adventure (I would finally get a chance to see all those places I’d read about) and, well, I didn’t really belong in my family anymore. Wayne and I had been through a lot together at this point in our lives. We had married young, taken on demanding jobs up north right out of the starting gate, and never once asked for help from our families. We were a team—tightened our belts when the budget warranted it, sorted out childcare issues with both of us working, supported each other through good times and bad. We had already weathered many storms together. Now, it was time to shape our destiny and establish a heritage for our children. And that’s how it all began.

## Chapter 1—Changing Gears

*Wayne is cradling me in his arms as I lie back and give myself up to the warm blue waters of the Persian Gulf. The gentle waves provide buoyant support as we bob up and down, giddy with the joy of just being. Where to next?*

It was the late summer of 1994 and we had been living in Pakistan for over three years. Our children, Jason and Julie, had both graduated from the international school in Islamabad and were headed to post-secondary education back in North America. Wayne and I were ready to spread our wings as a couple. Summers in Pakistan were hot, hot, hot and we often took home leave to Canada during this time, but this particular year we had decided to stay. Our kids had both opted to spend time in Islamabad as well, working at the Satellite Center, a small expatriate run hang-out that included a restaurant.

It was to be the final few months as a family in Pakistan. At the time, none of us realized that this would be the end of our intimate ‘family-of-four’ life as we knew it. No matter how many breaks and holidays our adult children took from university and jobs to wing their way across the ocean to be with us, it would never be the same. No more bleary-eyed morning rides to school together, no more arguments about studying and homework, no more end-of-the-day dinners where we could air our frustrations and joys with work, school or each other. We would long for Julie’s smile that lit up the room and Jason’s unique brand of humour that often defused family tension. We were too

naïve to understand just how much we would miss each other.

The 80s in Canada had gone by in a blur and, by the end of that decade and the start of a new one, Wayne and I were both on the typical North American treadmill of work, paying the bills and doing the best we could for our family. Our teenage children were seeking their own independence and identity, creating emotional peaks and valleys that sometimes spilled over into family conflict. Wayne and I had created a cozy, secure life for the family but time for each other was often at a premium.

Life had been both bitter and sweet during our time in Pakistan beginning in 1991. It was a hardship posting and, since we had arrived during the first Gulf War, the environment was charged and hostile. Many embassy families had been sent back to their countries of origin and here we were—arriving! As a result, for quite some time, the four of us only had each other to lean on. That bonded us in ways that we had never imagined. We protected each other, talked about our fears and frustrations and our mutual support system allowed each of us to get up every morning and face the day. Our marriage was able to evolve into a stronger union as well. We were dealing with challenges we had never encountered before and it brought us closer together. Like all families living abroad, we had people helping us at home, giving Wayne and me more time to spend with each other. So we took long walks every weekend and gave each other time and space to talk about our ups and downs. Our new life was filled with the highest of highs and the lowest of lows and it created a

family and marriage ties that, we felt, could never be broken.

In need of a break and some time for reflection, towards the end of that long, hot summer of '94, Wayne and I retreated to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates and treated ourselves to a stay at the Chicago Beach hotel. This was an odd name for a Dubai hotel, we thought, but it turned out that the name had its origins with the Chicago Bridge and Iron Company which had floating oil storage tanks on-site along this beach long before the modernization of Dubai. We loved this hotel with its fusion of back-home comfort and Arabian chic.

The Chicago Beach on the Gulf was the perfect setting for the two of us to plan our future adventures. We were well-ensconced in our jobs—Wayne with the UN in Islamabad and myself at the international school. Almost four years on, we found ourselves swimming and relaxing on the Persian Gulf contemplating our next move. Where would it be? Wayne had heard that there was an opening in his field at the UN office in Bangkok, Thailand. Should he apply for it? Again my answer was: “Yes, yes, yes”. It sounded so exciting.

The first holiday we'd taken when we had come to live in Asia, after six months in Pakistan, was to Thailand and the four of us had loved it. We didn't mind the heat and humidity that caused our faces to glisten and the sweat to drip down our backs. We didn't even mind the five-hour journey squished up in a tiny car dodging its way through snarled traffic and mind-numbing commercial scenery on the way to our resort further south.

As the car finally pulled into the hotel driveway we saw the baby elephant, the diminutive Thai hostess in her long silk skirt, the bubbling fountains, swaying palm trees and shimmering reflecting pools. Our hearts and minds melted with pleasure. Our eyes dazzled, our skin got brown, we girls went to dinner with frangipani flowers in our hair, the boys enjoyed the waves. Almost no one spoke English back then but the Thai resort staff was gracious and friendly.

When we returned to Bangkok, we were in shoppers' heaven. We were swept away by the stacks of sensuous silk cloth, intricate teak carvings, sparkling tapestries of ancient Siam, floating vegetable markets, the lights and the hustle and bustle. We had been living in Islamabad with no fast food, no bright lights, no shopping centers. We were like kids in a candy store. "Yes," we thought, "this seemed like just the place for our next adventure."

The image of moving to a colourful tropical paradise where people smiled and bowed was seductive. We had made a comfortable place for ourselves in Pakistan but the threat of danger was never far away. We always had to be aware of each other's whereabouts in case of an emergency. It was a country fraught with the tension that comes from the poverty of the masses, oppression by the rich ruling class, and extremism.

On any given day, I could be spit on, ogled or have to circumvent an angry mob on the road. As a woman, I had to cover myself, not make eye contact with men, and make sure I was escorted by my husband or driver outside of home or school. Don't get me wrong, we'd had a great life in Islamabad. It had afforded us the opportunity to travel to places we could never have gone from Canada. The



expatriate community was welcoming, we forged strong friendships with Pakistani families and co-workers, and we had a massive social life of dinner parties, balls and a variety of events. Our children did well in school and there was a strong network of protection surrounding us.

But we felt we needed a change and, as a woman, I really wanted more freedom. We longed for a new adventure. So, while still on our Arabian vacation, we walked through the *souks* of Dubai that were dripping with gold chains, fragrant with exotic perfumes, pungent with mounds of saffron and coral spices and we dreamed of the future in a lush, equatorial land that would fulfill all of our desires and expectations.

Just before Christmas of 1995, those dreams came true and, after some tearful farewells in Pakistan, we made our way to Thailand. At this point, we considered ourselves to be savvy in the ways of the world. After all, we had already worked for many years in Canada, experienced the ups and downs of family life, raised teenagers, and travelled extensively while living in Pakistan. But our nine years in Bangkok were to confront us with a whole new set of challenges as well as a doorway to spiritual discovery. We travelled in Southeast Asia and beyond, as the world witnessed tragic events such as never had been seen before. We made some forever friends but we were also subject to life-shattering betrayals.

While in Thailand, Wayne and I were at the height of our careers and produced some of our best work. But we were dogged by massive workloads, unsupportive work environments, inept administrations, health issues and deaths in the family. Our marriage suffered considerably as

a result. What were the lessons? How did we survive? Had my family farm betrayals prepared me for the betrayals that lay ahead?

Ultimately, I attempted to carve out a whole new life for myself and embarked on a journey of self-discovery. I made physical transformations, sought to help those less fortunate than myself, acquired new skills and met many characters along the way. I was learning every day. Then came a spiritual experience that was to forever alter me and the course of my life.

This story of my nine years in Bangkok reveals treacheries, challenges and the struggles of my soul. It also discloses how I was able to overcome adversity through transformation on many levels. My new-found inner strength ultimately empowered me to deal with painful, recurring family-of-origin issues and all that lay beyond.

We were irrevocably changed by our years in Thailand but, before we embarked on our new life in steamy Bangkok, I made an important entry in my diary as we were preparing to leave Pakistan. I was excited to start a new chapter in life but I wanted to record all the travel and adventure I was bringing into that new life as well:

**Dear diary,**

*December 1995*

*We have sailed in a felucca at sunset on the Nile and ridden camels around the dusty desert pyramids in Egypt. We have drunk a bitterly strong cocktail on the cliffs of Santorini in Greece amid the blinding white domes and deep blue waters. We have eaten*

*the largest prawns of our lives with the toddy-palm-drinking Sri Lankans in Hikkaduwa. We have ridden painted elephants past the dusty gnarled saddhu on our way up to the Amber Palace in India and experienced the initial breathtaking sight of the shimmering Taj Mahal.*

*We have walked through stands of marijuana, poppy fields, spice markets, steep mountain trails and fierce tribal deserts in Pakistan. We have left our hearts in San Francisco and our money in the Theater District of London. We have danced down Orchard Road on New Year's Eve with the citizens of Singapore and tasted their world-famous chili crab.*

*We have swum the waters of the Maldives to view their spectacular coral and colourful fish of every shape and size. We have seen the gigantic glittering gems in Topkapi Palace in Istanbul along with the hookahs, spices, samovars, and upscale European shops. We have lit candles in the gothic, cavernous St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. We have whizzed around in taxis and rushed to the top of the World Trade Center in New York. We have picnicked at a desert oasis and salivated among a thousand shimmering strands of gold in the souks of Dubai.*

*I have ridden a motorcycle at midnight through the winding streets and gilded temples of Kathmandu, Nepal. Wayne has seen the game preserves of Kenya, the chokingly crowded streets of Dhaka in Bangladesh and some of the most talented entertainers in the world in Manila. Now, we are going to live in Thailand! I hope life will be just as*

*Sharon Bazant*

*exciting in our new home. Another adventure coming up.*

## Chapter 2—The Beginning

The first thing I remember is the softness—the softness of the breeze on my skin, wafting through my skirt, lifting wisps of my hair, the softness of the voices, the softness of the night air, the softness of the sea lapping against the sand, the softness of the hands in massage treatments. This was a place where the heat enveloped you like a blanket, where the palm trees whispered your name as you passed by, where people smiled in acknowledgment of your presence, where monks in their saffron robes slipped along in quiet contemplation.

But this soft and gentle introduction to our new country would prove to be in sharp contrast to our grueling work schedules, our frustrations with incompetent administrators, and our exposure to a long list of scandals. We had no idea what was in store for us!

Yes, we'd been transported to the 'land of smiles'. It was almost 1996 and, after five years in Pakistan, Wayne and I found ourselves in Thailand. We were already seasoned to the rigors of Asia and were well-traveled. We were in our late forties and ready for a change. Pakistan held many memories and friendships for us, but it was time to move on out of the restrictions of traditional Muslim culture. Wayne had secured a position with the United Nations in Bangkok and I was to begin working for one of the top international schools in Thailand (subsequently referred to as CA—Central Academy).

Because we'd arrived in Bangkok half-way through the school year, I was hired to teach English as a Second Language to young children. This wasn't my main area of expertise, but it would do for the time being. We were looking forward to a very positive experience for maybe four or five years. Then, we reasoned, it would be time to move on again.

So, coming up to Christmas of '95, with great anticipation, we relocated to the Sukhumvit Road area of Bangkok near my school. We had acquired a massive beauty of an apartment with teakwood floors and sliding glass doors opening onto balconies on both sides. There were carved teakwood accents, lots of windows, spacious bedrooms and more bathrooms than we knew what to do with.

Jason arrived there from Canada before us and bought toilet paper and sprayed 'Merry Christmas' on the windows in foamy snow. The apartment was an empty, lifeless space until our shipment came and until we found Lek, who was to be our housekeeper and cook for eight years. She became another member of our family and, in the beginning, our lifeline to understanding Thai ways. She introduced us to new concoctions of spicy food, all kinds of exotic orchids to grace our tables and methods of shopping that only a local can manage in the markets of Bangkok. Our fair skin and awkward attempts to pronounce the names of Thai fruits and vegetables would only get us *farang* (foreigner) prices.

Our lives in the Kingdom of Thailand got off to a great start. We floated above the cares of the world by holidaying on the enchanting island of Samui. Ahhh, *Koh* (the Thai word for island) Samui—butterflies as big as

hummingbirds, the powdery sand beaches where one went simply catatonic lying in the tropical sun, Thai massages on the beach, weathered vendors in straw hats who sold everything from beach wraps to watches to roasted corn and chilled beverages, beachside Cheers bar after five, main street Thai food and night markets after six, nightclubs, sex shows, transvestites and drunken New Year's Eve where people took off their clothes and frolicked in the darkened sea. It was the full experience of Thailand. We made some good friends here on the beach—the Meyers (Michelle, Steve, and family) who would see us through many Thailand transitions. Our children became buddies as well and most of our beach vacations in Thailand were celebrated with them. As long term residents of Thailand, Michelle and Steve introduced us to the tropical lifestyle during those first heady days on the island.

But it wasn't long after our serene holiday in Samui, that the stress of real life in Bangkok began to rear its head. We breathed the air thick with pollution and dripped with sweat in the heat and humidity. We were late by an hour or more every time we ventured out in the car because of the heavy stillness of traffic jams everywhere, and we began to see that the famous smiles could be an opaque screen for all well-hidden Thai emotions.

And the noise—banging, pounding, screeching, roaring construction intermingled with the cacophonous sounds of traffic including the ubiquitous *tuk-tuks* (three-wheeled motorized taxis), thousands upon thousands of motorbikes, nine million or so human beings making their way through the crowded chaotic streets, night market

vendors hawking their wares, and the clubs and bars pumping music and booze through city veins from morning until night and back again.

And the smells—smoky spices of outdoor grills, rotting food and excrement wafting up from the sewers and the incessant garlic and beer coursing through the blood and out into the air. Not to mention those first whiffs of durian, the fruit that many people in the region consider a delicacy—a special treat. Unfortunately, it gives off fumes reminiscent of something that has been rotting under the front porch for many months.

And the sights—only in Bangkok could you see a 75-year-old man in bare feet and a bandana sporting petite Thai hookers on both arms. Only in Bangkok could you see the luxurious, manicured Sheraton and Marriott hotel grounds juxtaposed with begging lepers and street children with tragic eyes selling garlands at the traffic lights. Only in Bangkok could you see the rich man in his Mercedes drunkenly weaving down the road to his private sex club while the heroin addict coated with filth and grime wrapped himself around the nearest doorway. Humanity, feral dogs, rats, and several species of snakes all shared the same space. Sometimes the rats and snakes were preferable to the people who came to Bangkok to feed their addictions. We learned so many lessons. Where did they start...



## Chapter 3—A Solstice

**Dear diary,**

*April 1996*

*In Thailand for four months now and the relentless heat is sapping our energy. The excitement of the beach and Christmas is over. Wayne's father is dying. Must try to book the first available flight to Canada.*

In early 1996, our transition to Thailand was also a time fraught with death, loss, and finality. It was the end of our family of four, our first home without our children. The years in Pakistan had brought us all closer together. In Bangkok, a massive city full of anonymous faces, Jason and Julie were with us for the holidays and then returned to Canada and the U.S. For a while, I went to work with that sinking homesick feeling in the pit of my stomach. There was a wrenching pain like something deep inside had been severed with my children living across the ocean. I wanted them with me, I wanted them little again, I wanted to keep them close forever. Time burst and bled forward and I couldn't staunch the flow.

It was the end of a balanced life in the subcontinent. Wayne's job was consuming, covering seven countries and regional responsibilities. He had so much to learn. He climbed a mountain every night in his sleep, jumped five feet whenever I called his name and had the demeanour of elastic stretched to its maximum over taut wire. In Pakistan, he'd worked very hard as well but he and his

staff had their own office quarters in a separate house. He'd had a lot more independence with far less supervisory and head office pressure and his focus was primarily Pakistan, therefore, he wasn't spread so thin. Wayne and I both had challenging jobs in Islamabad but still had quality time to spend with each other and our children. Bangkok and Southeast Asia were a whole new ballgame for Wayne—a large office shared with other divisions under the same umbrella, diverse projects to oversee, lots of pressure from above, more hours demanded at work and meager time for family.

It was the end of our innocence, our naiveté. Everywhere we went outside of our Bangkok home it felt like we were faced with prostitution, pornography, drugs, and booze. There was also a huge underground of both gay and straight pedophilia and aberrations one could never even imagine. Taxi drivers sold sex, hotels and massage shops sold sex, sex came through the telephone to your hotel room. There was an irony in all of this. Generally, Thais considered themselves to be very conservative. They carefully covered their bodies, except for the women's very short skirts, and they censored all that might be provocative in movies, radio, tv, and magazines. They were publicly prudish about displays of affection. I was confused! In Pakistan, a very conservative Muslim culture, both women and men dressed modestly and open sexuality, drugs, and booze were taboo. Of course, there was hypocrisy—prostitution, alcohol consumption and drug use existed (secretive and hidden) despite the restrictions of religion. But we had never witnessed such an open invitation to partake in all forms of debauchery as we did in Bangkok.

It was the end of our financial isolation and the beginning of our social isolation. In Pakistan, we saved our money. There was no shopping center stocked with goodies. In Bangkok, there was opulent, tempting abundance. When it came time to furnish and decorate our home we were bedazzled by porcelain and celadon dishes, fascinating bases for lamps in the shape of elephants, vases glazed with scenes of old Siam, bedding in lush tropical colours and designs, rosewood and teakwood furnishings designed and crafted by true artisans. None of this was expensive, some of it was downright cheap and we didn't seem to have much control over ourselves.

Pakistan had provided us with a large group of friends and a varied social life. In contrast, it was so difficult to connect with others in Bangkok, a city teeming with people who were all going their own separate ways. Age, status, drinking habits, and looks all seemed to play a part in cliques and this had never been the case in Pakistan. It was also hard to get around because of the traffic and pollution so we indulged our longing for human connection by shopping. I often felt drained emotionally and financially.

In addition to the challenges of our jobs and cultural adjustments, we also had to deal with the tensions surrounding the death of Wayne's father—a final loss. In June of 1996 another school year had come and gone and the funeral for Wayne's father in Alberta, Canada had also passed. Wayne had spent most of the time in Alberta sleeping (sitting up, lying down, publicly, privately) partly from jet lag, partly from overwork and stress and partly to escape the finality of his father's death. We didn't make it to Canada before his Dad died and Wayne never did sort

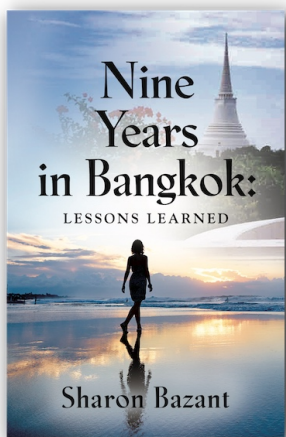
out the complicated web of emotions between himself and his father who had died of throat cancer likely brought on by the heavy smoking and drinking he'd done much of his life.

Wayne bemoaned the family's dishonesty about his Dad after the funeral. They talked about him as if he were a pillar of the community. Wayne said it would have been more honest to bury his father with a bottle of whiskey and the works of Shakespeare—his two greatest loves. Wayne had spent most of his own life trying to find ways to heal the trauma of alcoholism in his family. This karma of family dysfunction had followed us everywhere we went. It was still with us in Bangkok.

But there was hope on the horizon. After months of multiple reconciliations to a new culture, family changes, new workplace and the loss of my father-in-law, I was ecstatic to be offered a great position for the coming school year—the head of the school drama department. Teaching ESL (English as a Second Language) to young children had been fun but I was secretly longing for the challenge and inspiration of teaching drama and directing plays—my true calling. Nevertheless, I was a little daunted by my responsibilities. This was a new department with only one person having filled the position in the previous year so there was much to do. The former teacher had left the job unhappy with the lack of support from the administration. I hoped that I'd have a better experience.

In the meantime, the languid months of tropical torpor unfolded before me. There were brilliant blooms arranged in vases around our apartment, a wealth of new, exotic fruits and vegetables to try (maybe this would help to slow

down my spiraling weight-gain), ruins and temples to explore and the promise of yet more adventures to come. I could do this.



*Nine Years in Bangkok represents the author's odyssey of workplace trials, personal struggles, and loss—culminating in a spiritual metamorphosis that changed the course of her life. This is a story of adversity, lessons learned and ultimate transformation.*

# **Nine Years in Bangkok: Lessons Learned**

by Sharon Bazant

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