

Saturday, February 9, 2013

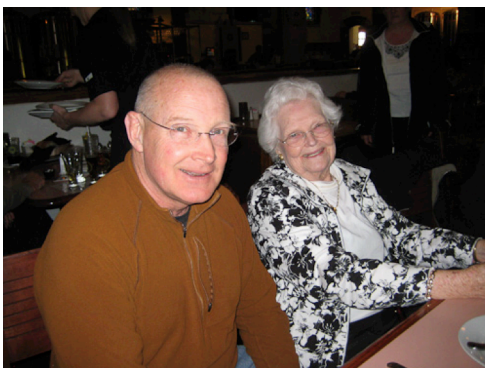
I promised myself that I would update my journal this weekend so I've added it to my list of things to do and will start it now. It's been a busy two or three weeks and I am still trying to get ready for the new term. (It started last Monday.) I have 12 contact hours with students – not many – because I am going to concentrate on teachers' workshops and trainings and conversation groups this spring. Unofficially, I will be doing English Clubs for students and some remedial English classes for some of the struggling learners in the second and third years. I'm also helping one of the instructors with a weekly writing club for students so they can get more practice writing in English.

While I was at the English Language Fellow Mid-Year conference in Macao, China in mid-January, my boss promised to send some other Fellows from China to help with a conference in Khovd. (Those fellows also will get to see Mongolia!) So, I've been working with the Ministry of Education staff to coordinate a conference for secondary school English teachers from Khovd and the countryside. There are about 50 teachers in small villages and towns in our aimag (state) and an equal number here in Khovd city. The conference will also include teachers from the University, and other interested folks from the Polytechnic Institution. So, I've started the planning and discussions with all of these individuals.



I'm also hopeful that the fellows will be involved in a conference in UlaanBaater (UB) at the same time so coordinating their flights and travel arrangement in UB is another concern. The Fellow who was in UB had a collapsed lung last fall and was medi-vaced to Singapore and then his insurance was canceled so he had to go back to the US. So, there hasn't been any presence in the Mongolian University of Science and Technology since October. They are anxious to enjoy the advantages of the American fellows from China. (Me, too!) My contact in UB has promised to cover their lodging and meals as well as their travel arrangements inside UB. So, the difficult part is trying to get the fellows from UB to Khovd. Flights are not daily and haven't been scheduled for the later part of the spring yet, so a travel agent is working on it for me. She has been the one to handle all of our traveling this winter so I'm certain she'll find the best schedule when it becomes available.

Speaking of traveling, Woody returned to Pittsburgh in mid January to see his mom. She had been struggling with a cough and some breathing difficulties and had been in the hospital. She moved to do physical therapy in a nursing home. It was determined that she needed radiation to shrink a tumor in her lung and she was getting ready to take care of that. Unfortunately, her body didn't agree and she took a turn for the worse and then passed away one week ago (Saturday, February 2). Her daughters, Jan and Kathy, were with her, as well as, Woody.



Hope was an amazing, quick-witted, fun-loving, well-read woman. We will miss her 89 year old energy and wisdom, although her passion, quilts that surround us, remind us of her generosity to others. Woody worked on a book with her a few years ago. (see: <http://www.woodypackard.com/hope/>) She and I had always agreed that the two Packard men that we ended up with (Fred, d.2004 and Woody) were like gifts. Somehow they knew and know how to listen and comfort, argue and apologize, laugh and cry, read and explain, explore and share with their respective partners. I hope my sons have some of these wonderful qualities to share with their partners. Woody is one of

Hope's legacies. He has her eternal optimism and a sense of humor which I love!

When Woody returns to Khovd next week he will be bringing many items back to our friends. From a laptop computer to cinnamon to hundreds of pounds of books. Actually, thanks to his continued wisdom, the books (textbooks and methodology books) are in the mail. The Russian-English Department ordered new textbooks and student books for the first and second year University students. The Cambridge University Press representative for the University of Montana (Mike Bennett) took care of getting us a great deal. He also provided teachers' manuals, CDs, and other resource material. (Amazon doesn't ship to Khovd...despite our requests!) The books I've been using were published in 1991 and have pages missing, duct taped binding, and of course, student writing in them. I'm hopeful the University processing won't take all semester so we can use them as soon as they arrive.

The payment for the books came from the University and once the books were ordered, the head of my department wanted to insure that the money was in our hands. Within days, I had a stamped receipt from the University indicating that almost two million tugriks had been deposited in Woody's account. Woody works for the University so when he arrived, the University accountants wanted him to set up a different account than the one we opened together. (Your's not to reason why....) So, he opened an account in the same bank as the University's accounts. Although he has had this account since October, his supervisor, Dawaa, in the Chinese English Department has been paying him in cash twice a month. Dawaa had indicated that the money was not being directly deposited and he had to give Woody cash. So, when the book money was 'said to be' deposited, we were surprised. Woody went to the bank to check but the account was empty. As it turned out, the University had been depositing Woody's paycheck into Dawaa's account and so that's where the book money went. An hour before our trip to the airport, one of the teacher's from my department arrived at our door to go with Woody to transfer the money from his account where another 2 million tugriks had been deposited by the University, to Woody's account. Dawaa wasn't involved because he had already left for UlaanBaater to spend three weeks in his PhD. classes. (We met up with him there that same night to tease him about his full bank account!)



Since returning to Khovd I've had the opportunity to have lunch with four students who are from "Inner Mongolia." The region in northwest China bordering on Mongolia, that has many Mongolian families. These students attend Khovd University to become teachers. They speak Mongolian but usually do not write it. They have been raised in China and attended Chinese schools so their second language is Chinese (Mandarin). Now they are taking Russian and English courses. Two of the four students are in my second/sophomore class. The other two are first year/freshmen. Their homes are too far away for them to travel (by bus or car) so they stayed in the dorm during the January break.

They prepared an amazing feast of spicy Chinese food last weekend for two other teachers and me. In the foreign student area of the dorm, they are provided with a kitchen where they can prepare their food. They have individual rooms and share a toilet with one other student. They also live with the three foreign teachers who are at the University (from China). Their accommodations seem cushy compared to the Mongolian students who share the same-sized room with two or three others and one/two bathroom(s) for a hall. However, these students still don't have much heat or hot water so that discomfort is shared by all.



In addition, we celebrated Teacher's Day with a ceremony at the local theater where the presentation of certificates for academic excellence and ribbons for sports competition winners were given equal weight

and attention. Following the ceremony was singing and dancing on the stage of professional artists and University staff. It was lovely – a combination of traditional and modern music. After the celebration we walked to a local restaurant for dinner, dancing, games, and more singing. I left after the dinner, vodka toasts, beer drinking, and a few rounds of dancing. Unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to practice my waltzing because my main waltz teacher is 7 months pregnant and didn't think it would be good for the baby. (She was also careful with the vodka!)

Another circle of people that we've gotten to know here are the Peace Corp volunteers (PCVs) and the equivalent to PCVs from Korea, KOICA volunteers. There are five PC volunteers in Khovd working in different capacities (social workers, teachers, business advisers) and there are four KOICA volunteers working as social workers and teachers. This week Sangchul, KOICA volunteer, invited us all to dinner at his home for a Korean meal. We enjoyed kimchee sent from home and chicken stew plus rolled eggs (similar to rolled crepes). Most of these volunteers are in the under 30 crowd so it was fun to hear their stories and drink beer with them. They spend some time together every week so their banter is entertaining. (This photo is another KOICA volunteer, Sangfun, who works at the University. He's also a social worker here and in Korea where he specializes in elder abuse.)



Sangchul will be returning home next week so his apartment was crowded with boxes and all his trappings from two years in Mongolia. Two of the PCVs will leave in June and may be replaced by others.

The success of these volunteers depends heavily on their local supervisor and their own personalities. One volunteer was doing personal ironing this week for her supervisor. (Not exactly what the PC has in mind.) One of the others is working with businesses in the local chamber of commerce and may have a greater impact on his circle. Another is teaching 5th graders and also working with the staff at the Ministry of Education to record English conversations for use in secondary classrooms. Another presents a program for secondary school students every Monday about the Arts at the American Center, a small part of the local library with English materials, computers, and publications. Each one has a primary job and then works on other things, such as boy scouts, disabled children, movie night. The PCV program has been here for twenty years and generally speaking, the program is working well, although some volunteers believe the Mongolians are so accustomed to outsiders being here that it is easy for them to turn over their jobs to others. I think the mission of the PCVs and my program, English Language Fellows is basically the same; ambassadorship on a personal level (one-to-one) with an emphasis on increasing the capacity of local citizenry to improve education, healthcare, and democracy opportunities. As in my case, the local groups request help and create the programs for the foreign visitors. We're here because they requested us.



Four other foreigners that are here (besides the other Americans and Norwegians doing missionary work, some of whom we have met) include a young Russian couple, Tanya and Andrei, who work in the Art Department of the University. Andrei is a landscape painter and instructor. Woody has found him sitting out on the frozen riverbank painting. Tanya is writing about a Mongolian artist for her PhD and is also a painter, graphic designer, and instructor. Sasha is the Russian teacher for the same students that I teach and is from the same University as Tanya and Andrei and friends with them. In addition, she also teaches Russian for geology students. Tanya

and Andrei both have some English so we can communicate with words. Since I don't speak Russian and Sasha doesn't speak English we communicate through smiles, hugs, and other people. Our students have



great fun watching us speak to (and understand) each other in our own language. Sometimes we can talk about the students!

I've learned that ALL freshmen students and senior students (non-language majors) at the University take English. ALL sophomore and junior students (non-language majors) take Russian. The rationale for this, besides increasing their Russian and English skills, is that so much of the written work in their majors is in English and Russian that the students must have some working knowledge of these languages in order to do well in their respective fields. Five of the instructors in my department of twelve, teach non-majors.

And last week, a woman from Switzerland arrived. Cosima is teaching English in Woody's department and I believe comes from a University in Switzerland that accepts one University instructor as an exchange? from Khovd semi-regularly. She is here to teach and to work on her Master's thesis of a French poet, Jules Laforgue, who influenced T.S. Elliott in the early 1900s. Cosima speaks Italian, French, English, Nepalese, and soon Mongolian. I will have dinner with her this weekend. (I think she recognized the longing in me for a delicious, non-burnt, home-cooked meal!) I'm looking forward to getting to know her better.

The White Moon or White Month holiday begins Monday. The timing of this holiday is based on the Lunar calendar (similar to Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese New Year). Everyone has been preparing for it. Even the University students have been making food and cleaning up the University grounds. Family members must travel to each other's homes and the traditional food of buuz (mutton dumplings) will be served. Most Kazaks in Mongolia do not celebrate this holiday. Although like me, they will partake in any offerings of buuz and bainsh (miniature dumpling served in milk tea) that are offered. (I've heard that a family will use about 50 pounds of flour to make their dumplings (2000?) for this holiday. We have two days off from school and almost everything has been postponed due to White Month. Domestic airline flights are cancelled on Monday for the holiday, so Woody won't be arriving until Wednesday. However, teachers have already invited us to their homes later next week after he arrives. Spring will be coming after White Month so partly it is a holiday in preparation for spring. (But...I think we still have 3.5 nine-day cycles in winter?????) So partly, it is to reassure us that we can all make it through the winter.



So much of this wonderful adventure includes the cultural questioning and the astonishment of what happens each day. Is it my language deficit? Is it my cultural ignorance? Or... is this just Mongolia!