The Gospel of FATHER JOE

The Gospel of FATHER JOE

Revolutions and Revelations in the Slums of Bangkok

Greg Barrett

Foreword by

The Most Reverend Desmond M. Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus

JOSSEY-BASS
A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

Published by Jossey-Bass
A Wiley Imprint
989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741—www.josseybass.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Printed in the United States of America
FIRST EDITION
HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

PART III: THE LIGHT

To the name on my tattoo,

baby, oh baby,

there should be a book written about you.

FOREWORD

A Kindred World

The Most Reverend Desmond M. Tutu,

Archbishop Emeritus

Roused by compassion, we awake to life as God created it, as Jesus expressed it, as the Buddha and the Prophet Muhammad taught it. We see the holiness imbued in all humanity. It doesn't matter if you're African, Asian, Arab, European; Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, or something else. It doesn't matter the denomination you pledge or if you pledge. We are God-shaped and God-filled. Affluent, poor, American, Iranian, Somali, Ethiopian, Israeli, Palestinian. The Divine is our common bloodline and birthright. It's our bond in Goodness. We're kin in that way, but we often miss that part. We don't always view our shared space and shared responsibilities from the Divine's perspective.

We lose focus; attention wanes. Or we *forget,* as the Rev. Dr. Joe Maier reminds us in these pages, which draw attention to a perpetual blind spot. I suspect that some of us would prefer to keep this book closed, continue to feign ignorance, go on with our comfortable lives, and forget the uneducated, neglected children in our charge. They are difficult to see if you choose to never look.

Read on, however. Open your eyes; stare at reality. You will see possibilities realized and feel delightfully inspired by the power of

Goodness in a world pregnant with change. You may even be moved to join in.

The story of Father Joe and the Bangkok squatter land he calls holy is a critical chapter in the modern-day memoirs of humankind. His Mercy Centre is more than a refuge and grassroots education system for children caught in the bramble of our new prosperity; it's the vivid expression of God's will for how we are to treat family. In effect, it's the Bible for how best to lift families from the poverty that kills millions of children every year: you plow the ground with textbooks and local muscle.

I know of no aid dropped from a helicopter or dictated from afar that has ever taken root. Whenever Jesus entered the slums, he came on the back of a donkey and in a cloud of dust, face to face with poverty. Biblical scripture attempts to focus our attention on the poor and the downtrodden more than two thousand times. We're told explicitly how to treat them. No wiggle room is left for moral interpretations or federal treasuries stretched by war. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us, "As you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me."

How, then, can we *forget*?

In 1990, near the onset of the West's unprecedented economic growth, wealthy nations pledged that all poor children by the year 2000 would have access to at least a basic education. At the United Nations World Summit for Children in New York City, seventy-three governments signed a declaration that made the goal a global imperative. The Cold War had ended, and a new world order was looking toward greater cooperation and an abundant sharing of resources across international borders and economic lines. On the summit's final day in the General Assembly Hall, U.S. president George H. W. Bush told his fellow world leaders, "All children must be given the chance to lead happy, healthy, and productive lives."

He acted outraged that "education is a mystery for one hundred million children" in the poorest parts of the world.

"Saving one child is a miracle," he concluded. "As world leaders, we can realize such miracles, and then we can count them in the millions."

One hundred million children fell through the cracks of that broken pledge. The reasons and excuses are complicated. So in 2000, the pledge was renewed as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals. All UN member states signed a pledge declaring that by the year 2015, "children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling."

When Father Joe agreed to collaborate on this book in 2005, there were still one hundred million children with no access to a basic primary education. The UN had begun sounding alarms, calling the year a crossroads for the state of human development. Slight improvements have occurred in the years since, though not nearly enough.

The vast majority of our uneducated and neglected reside in the shacks of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, children like those in Father Joe's slums who miss school for lack of shoes and milk money. Because even as cheap airfare and broadband Internet erase borders and distance, our mightiest barrier is being reinforced. The ever-widening economic divide defines us as strangers.

But I maintain great confidence in humanity. I see the Divine in its grand swells of compassion. I bear witness to its manifestation after aberrant hurricanes and tsunamis rip life and limb from the U.S. Gulf Coast to South Asia. I am encouraged by the grassroots activism that today draws millions of volunteers to the cause of global poverty. And I am delightfully inspired by the kindred spirits that endure the rubble of squatter land that Father Joe knows to be holy.

If you look, you will see what he sees: shared responsibility. Family.

Political bodies may be hampered by self-interest and wear blinders of bias, indebted as they are to districts, constituents, and lobbies. But what politicians cannot or will not achieve, I have faith that individuals can and will. God-shaped and God-filled.

PROLOGUE

Facing Poverty

. . . for those spirit/truth seeking friends
who long ago stopped trusting anything from a pulpit

—FATHER JOE MAIER'S PERSONAL DAILY JOURNAL

Father Joe's catwalk slum wasn't the first place I'd come face to face with what World Bank economists call "extreme poverty," a definition pegged in 1990 to the ambiguous threshold of "income equivalent to one U.S. dollar or less per day." I'd seen its face before, and I've seen it since, both as a reporter and as a spectator.

On the bumpy ninety-minute ride from the airport in Montego Bay, Jamaica, to my honeymoon suite in Ocho Rios in 1992, I stared at it like everyone else: from a Sandals Resort bus with an iced bottle of Red Stripe in my hand. If the reggae of Bobby McFerrin hadn't played nonstop in our air-conditioned tour bus, an otherwise perfect honeymoon might've felt like something less. "Don't Worry, Be Happy" became our lilting mantra.

On assignment in Egypt following 9/11, I saw it in the unfinished cinderblock apartment complex en route to the childhood home of American Airlines hijacker Mohamed Atta. Veering off the road leading into Giza, I discovered that the abandoned construction site was government housing, though some windows, doors, and plasterboard were missing. Children emerged from the slabs of concrete looking like they'd walked straight off the pages of

Dickens: little faces smudged dirty, grimy ankle-length abayas and thobes, and Western-styled shirts and jeans looking like hand-me-downs that had been handed down a great many times.

In Iraq, as war approached in February 2003, I saw it in a Baghdad garage where an Iraqi widow had fashioned a tidy two-room home for herself and her eight children. They shared an outhouse, a couch, and a single mattress on the floor. It wasn't a problem normally, the mother insisted, but as the Pentagon's threat of "Operation Shock and Awe" neared, one of her eleven-year-old twins had begun wetting the bed every night. A few days later in Basra, I watched school-age Iraqis play on a mountainous landfill reeking of raw sewage. Climbing down, I saw that their hands were flecked with a brown goo that someone told me later was the exact thing I had suspected. The same stuff I'd seen on the broken streets of Basra's al-Jummhurriya neighborhood, where children dashed in sandals through gullies and potholes filled with urine-yellow puddles—and knuckle-sized human feces. Crap floated in such overwhelming abundance that parents had apparently given up. Mothers sat calmly on cement stoops and watched the young play.

Father Joe's Bangkok was not much different. Different continent, different peoples, but the same culture of poverty.

"No one *chooses* to live in a slum," Father Joe told me in 2000, the first time I saw his shack in a Bangkok shantytown. Its catwalk was planted in a canal that looked like a Basra landfill and smelled like an al-Jummhurriya street. "You're never there by choice."

But he'd been living on that catwalk for three decades. *By choice.*

A squeaky-clean room in an air-conditioned Redemptorist monastery was his for the asking a few miles away on a shaded street across from a 7-Eleven. He never asked.

Leaving his slum in 2000, I couldn't decide if *choosing* to live in muck and sewage with the poorest of the poor made Father Joe a

madman or just madly devoted. But in the long run, perhaps it didn't matter—masochist, saint, or masochistic saint—because in a void notorious for starving one's spirit, he was feeding it. And in the act of feeding, he'd been fed. That much was obvious, because beyond the palm trees, rain trees, and indoor plumbing that made his Mercy Centre schools, hospice, and orphanages a shaded utopia in the middle of desperate poverty, there was something else. A palpable, powerful something else ran through the small campus, breathed a sense of joy into children dying. Although I couldn't fully capture and define it, I felt it. That ineffable *it*.

Returning five years later to investigate what it was that I couldn't put into words, I narrowed my inquiry to one or two questions. Each, of course, came layered with more.

Why didn't the children in my affluent Washington, D.C., area cul-de-sac or in my own comfortable home hop and skip at the same excited clip as the sick, dying, orphaned, abandoned, abused, neglected, or otherwise broken children of the Mercy Centre? What in God's name did Father Joe know that I didn't?

In my quest to know what he knew (as much as one could without living it), I visited the Mercy Centre with his blessings three times between 2005 and 2007. For a total of four weeks, I shadowed Father Joe, occasionally ate with him, consumed pots of coffee while sitting across from him, and just hung around his odd slice of heaven until I'd made a nuisance of myself. Our most fruitful discussions, however, occurred away from Mercy and the distractions that pull Father Joe this way or that way, often in midsentence.

In Bangkok's blazing sunrises, we walked broad loops on weekday mornings in the city's finest park. We talked God and politics, wealth and poverty, and matters of the East and matters of the West in my plodding effort to understand the magnanimous *it*—whatever it was that crackled through Mercy—and Father Joe's

effort to bridge our world of differences and similarities—economic and cultural, secular and religious.

All told, I would record nineteen hours of interviews with him in Bangkok's Lumpini Park, a few dozen more outside it, and many more with just pen, paper, or Microsoft Word. These were bolstered by thirty-one hours of phone calls from my home to his in Bangkok and 641 e-mails (at last count) sent or forwarded from Father Joe to me. I met with his relatives twice in their blue-collar Washington State hometown and interviewed his former Bangkok Holy Redeemer Parish rector, who had retired to Seattle. When Father Joe's mother passed away in the fall of 2006, I attended the funeral in her conservative hometown parish and went to the family party afterward; Kentucky Fried Chicken, cold beer, wine coolers, and lots of family history and laughter were shared. The morning following the burial of Helen Mary Maier in Longview, Washington, Father Joe and I met for our usual walk—this time in his hometown's finest city park.

Our last face-to-face meeting for this book took place in Vancouver, British Columbia, one day after we'd flown to Vancouver Island to visit a Mercy child who is set to graduate in 2008 from Lester B. Pearson United World College of the Pacific.

We reviewed draft chapters in various states of repair on the afternoon of November 1, 2007. Father Joe had just returned to his hotel energized by a speech given hours earlier by former president Bill Clinton at Vancouver's Pacific Economic Forum. Clinton had spoken of the "godsend" of business opportunity available in the work that will be required to curb greenhouse gas emissions. He'd also warned of the dangers inherent in allowing our status quo to continue unchecked. If current trends in economic inequality and depletion of natural resources continue until 2060, when the world's population is expected to hit nine billion people, there could be hell to pay. Terrorism, AIDS, Iraq, Iran, all the front-page

worry that consumes federal budgets today, would be white noise compared to the Darwinian struggle that could ensue. Echoing world leaders secular and religious, Clinton stressed to a sold-out crowd of eighteen hundred that it was high time for nations, cultures, political parties, churches, temples, mosques—the whole of civilization—to start working *together* to safeguard our children's futures.

"A herd of elephants is in the yard, and we're sitting on the stoop counting ants," Father Joe said, summarizing the message.

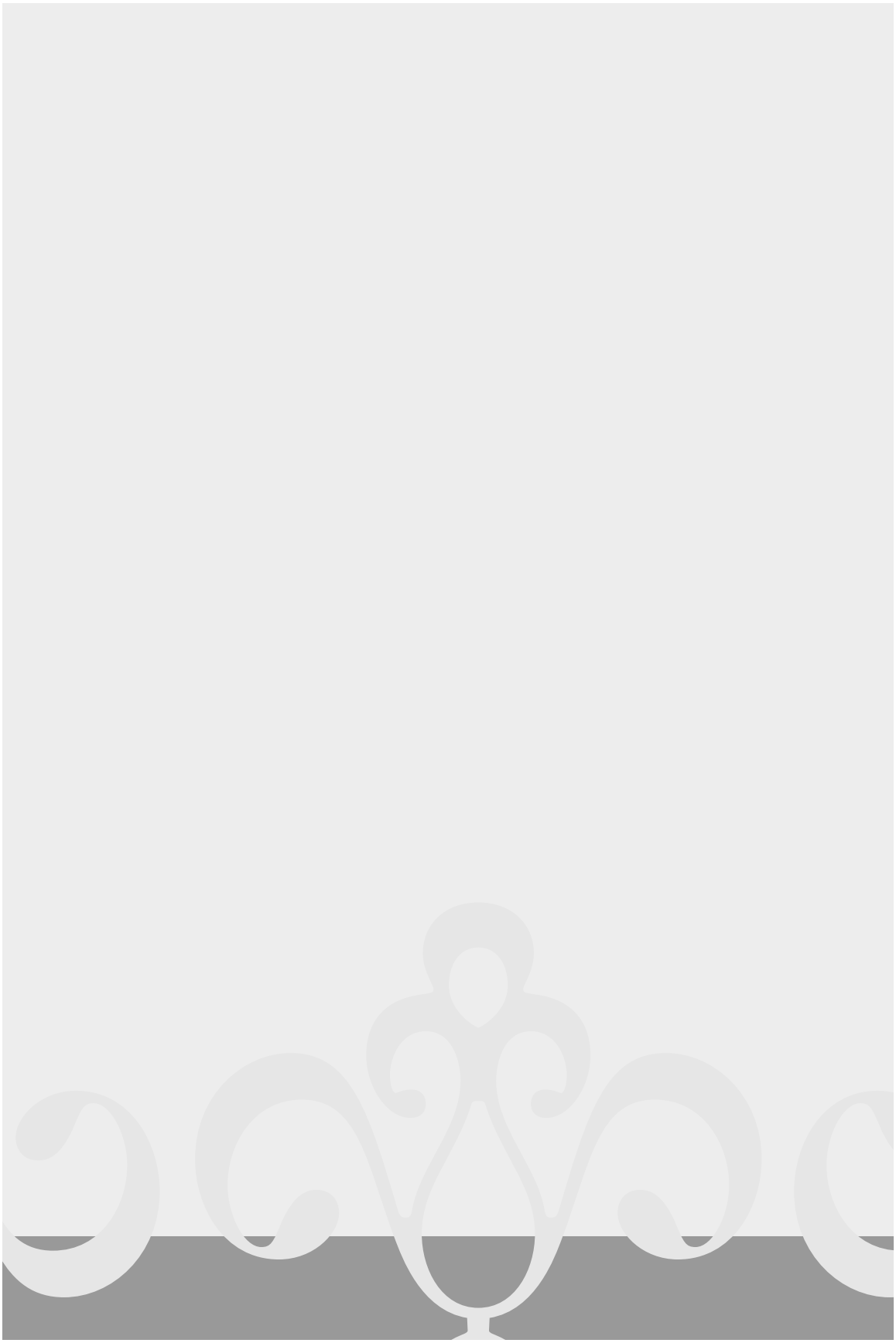
There was an urgency in Father Joe that afternoon as he paced in his hotel room listening to me read from a book that would bear his name. He seldom interrupted, and when he did, it was only to correct Thai translations or add details to anecdotes. A couple of times, I quit reading to ask if he would like to save himself unnecessary trouble, maybe soften some of the sharpest criticism he'd leveled at the pope or the Vatican or some other authority with an element of control over him. He's an Old Testament Amos in his rebuke of the heresy he sees in greed and pious self-righteousness or in any religion that dares to invoke Christ while placing service of its own cause above serving the poor. He'd never asked me to go "off the record," a request commonly made and granted on Washington's Capitol Hill.

The last thing I wanted was to stir up trouble for a revolutionary Catholic who has no problem stirring up his own.

C'mon, I offered, let me redact some of the record.

He looked at me like I was a Washington bureaucrat or a Vatican robe.

"No," he growled. "Print it."



The Gospel of FATHER JOE

WHATEVER *thoughts you have about God, who He is or if He exists, most will agree that if there is a God, He has a special place for the poor. In fact, the poor are where God lives.*

Check Judaism. Check Islam. Check pretty much anyone. . . . God may well be with us in our mansions on the hill. I hope so. . . . But the one thing we can all agree on, all faiths and ideologies, is that God is with the vulnerable and poor. God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them.

—U2's Bono speaking to members of the United States Congress and President George W. Bush during a national prayer breakfast, February 2, 2006, in Washington, D.C.

Bangkok preschool students en route to class on the main campus of the Mercy Centre

PART I
The Crucible

The Human Development Foundation/Mercy Centre graduates several hundred slum children every year from its three-year preschool program.

ONE
Mustard Seeds

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

—Father Joe's daily journal, quoting a saying attributed to the British statesman Edmund Burke

The story begins like the parable it's become, in a no-man's-land with the seed of dreams strewn in the most foolish of places: slum rubbish. This was the 1970s when few people believed anything good could grow from the backwater of the undeveloped world. There were no official addresses or property deeds in the cordoned-off corners of Bangkok, nothing much for the municipal books, just putrid ground so primal and bleak that land was free for the staking. It's where squatters pretended to own real houses and children made do with make-believe.

But these seeds were sown by an angry young Catholic chased from finer society. A priest, stubborn and cursing. The local Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians nurtured that seed, and in time the people and the priest, the abbot and the imam, worked together, as though the Buddha, Muhammad, and Jesus Christ were brothers and best friends. No doctrine, dogma, or creed was lorded. No growth tethered chapter to verse. The only belief that mattered was the one they shared. In the children. That was common, sacred ground.

Nourished like this, the seeds exploded with growth. There was a harvest, then another and another. The seeds grow still today, more than three decades later, a genus of hope thriving in the muck, as if it had been indigenous to the slums all along.

Tales of it grow too, spreading from those roots in Thailand to the media of North America and Europe, and in the retelling, it can begin to sound legendary. How in Gideon's name does something grow from nothing and multiply like New Testament fishes and loaves? But nothing about it is myth. Every tale is true.

You can see for yourself when a new crop is gathered each year just before the yearly monsoons. For two, three, and often four days, a cordoned-off corner of the world blossoms in a brilliant hue of graduation gowns.

So it was on the sunstruck first week of March 2007—thirty-three years after the first seeds were planted.

The Mercy Centre preschool graduation was standing-room-only; moms, dads, aunties, uncles, siblings, cousins, the neighbor next door and next door to that one. Seven commencements stretched half the week and through a half dozen slums in celebration of seven hundred graduates from thirty-two schools built "officially illegally," as the priest says, on the Thai government's squatter land. Children six and seven years old accustomed to flip-flops and hand-me-downs strutted around in black mortarboard caps and matching silk gowns trimmed in a shade of blue my folk back home call Carolina. And while girls and their mothers and aunts fussed with lipstick and rouge, the boys did what boys do: swirl their heads until the tassels on their caps whir like the blades of a helicopter. Dizzy, they fall to the ground.

The priest was there, of course, more bald with each and every harvest. He conferred the diplomas and delivered the commencement address wearing the black and burgundy of Thailand's revered Thammasat University. Draped across his left shoulder was a velvet sash with white stripes of cotton, thick enough to brush and braid: three stripes in front, three in front, three in back representing the honorary rank of a Thammasat Ph.D. If you were new to the slums or to their graduation rituals, a sash like that in a place like that might stop you. It might even if you weren't.

Arriving at each school, the American known by tens of thousands of Thai as simply Khun Phaw Joe ("Mister Father Joe") would park down a ways and out of sight. He'd pull on the gown, fix the sash just so, and then begin "the Walk"—a purposeful stride intended to put education on parade. Each route was different but familiar: past walls of plywood, lopsided floors, rusty tin roofs, and bare-bottomed babies; through humidity flavored by garbage and a

subsistence watched over by sun-wrinkled village matriarchs who smiled even as they spit pinpoint tobacco-brown streams of betel nut juice. Heads turned to watch. Motorbikes slowed in deference. Cars stopped to let him pass. Old and young joined in, falling in behind or alongside, knowing full well where he was headed, knowing it was time.

In a backwater where nothing good was supposed to grow, graduation today is a rite of passage.

Some of the hardiest seed will scatter and continue maturing. There are graduates thriving now in the high school and college classrooms of North America with majors in economics, business, biology, computer science, and neuroscience. It's why Khun Phaw Joe gave the Class of '07 the same speech he has given every class since the Class of '95, the same he will give the Class of '08. Something about it seems to work.

As the Walk approached the first podium, the room fell silent. Pigeons gurgled their Rs, a mobile phone tweeted, somewhere a baby shrieked. Khun Phaw Joe waited. A small, heavy statue of the Virgin Mary sat in a May altar (on cloth surrounded by flowers) next to a Buddhist shrine of joss sticks and a portrait of the Thai monarch, Massachusetts native King Bhumibol Adulyadej, framed in gold leaf.

Fitted for kid-sized attention spans but fired like buckshot, the commencement address was aimed at everyone crowded into the ceremony.

Khun Phaw cleared his throat.

"If you don't have anything to eat in the morning," he began, speaking Thai and scanning his attentive audience of children, "then go to school!"

Most of the students sat erect or leaned slightly forward on the edge of their benches or chairs.

"If you don't have any shoes to wear. . .," he continued, pausing for effect, "go to school!"

"If Mommy or Daddy says you can stay home . . . go to school!

"If your friends want you to sell drugs . . . go to school!

"If Mommy gambles and Daddy's a drunk . . . go to school!

"If all the money is gone and you can't buy lunch . . . go to school!

"If your house burns down and you don't have anything or anywhere to sleep . . . go to school!

"Go to school! Go to school! Go to school!"

Children joined in, louder and louder, chanting what sounded to me like "Tong by wrong rain high die!"

Go to school! *Dhong bai rong rien hai dai! Dhong bai rong rien hai dai! Dhong bai rong rien hai dai!*

Moms, dads, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, the neighbor next door joined in. Khun Phaw Joe directed the burgeoning chorus, his Thammasat gown waving until the bell sleeves billowed.

Dhong bai rong rien hai dai! Dhong bai rong rien hai dai! Dhong bai rong rien hai dai!

And that's the sprint from beginning to now, three decades of harvests. But in the journey, as in the parable, lie the lessons and wisdom of a social revolutionary who bucks convention, the law, and what the rest of us might consider common sense or self preservation.

The Reverend Joseph H. Maier, the eldest child of a philandering Lutheran father and pious Catholic mother, survived his own poverty and dysfunction to become a throwback of sorts: the

durable, American-made export. It should be no surprise, then, that he settled on the wrong side of our economic divide and discovered a comfortable fit. The neglected children of Klong Toey (three hard syllables sounding like a curse but meaning "canal of the pandanus," a plant growing near the water and cultivated for its flavorful leaves) would put a nice sheen of perspective on his own welfare beginnings.

Today, whenever Khun Phaw Joe feels a pang of self-pity, and often when he sees it rising in others, he quashes it with self-mockery and echoes of an earlier time: "Yeah, yeah, everybody hates me, nobody loves me, all I'm ever fed is worms. That's my life story. Blah, blah, blah. . . . Well, guess what? The sun is rising, the rooster is calling, and another day is here. I guess ol' Joe better get his ass out of bed and get going."