

# Tree of Life

In August 2008 myself and 4 other friends went to Myanmar to run tree of life training to a group of people who had survived a cyclone that had happened in May. We would love to share our stories with you. Here they are...

## **Why**

“The Nargis” (as the locals called it) was a massive cyclone that killed more than 150 000 people in the delta region in the south of Burma/Myanmar. It was the worst natural disaster in the history of Burma and possibly the 8<sup>th</sup> deadliest cyclone of all time. The 150000 is not an accurate statistic. The reality is that the government stopped counting the number of missing people. So it is very likely that the figure is higher. The UN has suggested that a more realistic figure would be 300000-1 million people dead or missing. It is difficult to imagine the destruction of the Nargis. The main area that was affected is called the Irrawaddy division. This is a delta system on the southern coast of Myanmar. The Nargis brought with it a storm surge from the ocean that flooded much of the delta. In all of the villages we visited around 70% (a conservative estimate) of the coconut trees had been snapped in half. We could see water marks on the trees at around 5-8 meters high. Sometimes it was higher. The people from the delta have rich farmland and produce much of the country’s rice. Their water supply came from wells and coconut trees. So many are now left without an adequate water supply. On top of this the military actively hinders relief efforts. The people have experienced a lot of trauma.

Leah and Lincoln are a Burmese couple who run a bible college, a pre-school, a play group in a hospital for kids with terminal illnesses, and a shop that sells educational resources for children. When the Nargis happened they helped co-ordinate a relief effort for many of the people not getting help from the government. They are in regular contact with some friends of mine reported that many children had stopped talking and were rocking back and forth staring at walls all day because of the trauma caused by the cyclone. My friends wanted to help out and so they asked if I knew anything that might help children who have experienced trauma. I had used ‘tree of life’ in Newcastle, Australia, and thought it might be useful to the people there. So 3 weeks later we were on a plane to Myanmar to run tree of life training.

## **Who**

- Burma is made up of lots of ethnic groups including: Bamar, Karen, Chin, Kachin, Shan, amongst others. The Bamar people group forms the majority and most of the government/military (same thing) is comprised of Bamar people. The government is involved in genocide against the Karen (also Kayin, or Karin depending on who you talk to). After the Nargis the government was being very selective in who they helped. For example, in one village an American NGO built a water treatment plant. When they left the military took the plant over and were refusing to allow the local villagers the use of it.
- Lincoln and Leah: A super husband and wife combination. If the whole trip was a tree then they would be the roots and the trunk. The idea came from them and they organised everything. They translated for us during the training. They drove us everywhere. Without them we couldn’t have done what we did. They are from the Chin people but don’t seem to show partiality to any people group.

- Mulegae: Mulegae is from the Karen Baptist Convention and he visited hundreds of villages and helped organise over people from the delta to come to Yangon for the tree of life training.
- Naomi: Lincoln and Leah's niece translated for us not only during the training but throughout the whole trip.
- Karen people: The Karen people live mostly in the hilly eastern border region and Irrawaddy delta of Burma,<sup>[4]</sup> primarily in Karen State, and in western Thailand. As with many widely-used ethnonyms *Karen* was originally applied in a derogative manner by enemies. However, the term has since been claimed by the Karen themselves as a badge of pride. Over 50 community leaders from 35 villages that had survived the cyclone traveled to Yangon to be trained in tree of life.
- Ray and Alice Palmer: Ray fell in love with Burma on a random holiday in 2000. He met Lincoln amongst others but was impressed by his vision and integrity. So they set up Hope Myanmar Partnership ([www.hopemyanmar.org](http://www.hopemyanmar.org)). Alice and Ray help support the work of Lincoln and Leah in Myanmar. When Lincoln and Leah spoke to Ray and Alice for help working with traumatized kids, Alice phoned Dave, Jess and Andrew.
- Dave, Jess and Andrew: Dave has been to Myanmar before and was keen to go again. He has a heart for Myanmar. Jess is adventurous and understands tree of life and Narrative Therapy from various books. She is also my wife. I (Andrew) work in Newcastle, Australia and work with children that experience behavioural and emotional difficulties. The place I work is called Creative Times. I have been able to head to Adelaide 3 times for various Narrative Therapy training weeks. We were all keen to help so we trekked on over.



A glimpse into some of the damage that the Nargis caused



The group of community leaders that came to the tree of life training.



A man who lost his whole family in the Nargis leading everyone in song.

## The Training

The training went over 2 days in the capital Yangon. When we arrived they were singing. As we climbed the dark staircase to the training room we heard these harmonies growing. By the time we entered the room some of us were in tears, it was that beautiful. It was a powerful start.

We had a big room with many tables in it. This meant that we had around 6 people per table. I got up and gave welcome and shared my hopes for what the training would look like. It was translated by Lincoln to the rest of the people. Then they sang a song about trees. It was a children's song that they all knew and they taught us the actions and some of the words. Much laughter was had at our expense. We then had a question time for them to get to know us a little. An old man stood up and pointed at Ray and Alice saying in Burmese "one pair" then pointed at Jess and I saying "one pair" and then pointed at Dave and said "How do you feel, you have no one!" Dave answered "how about you help me out". Another man around 68 years old said, "you don't want him helping you, he can't even find himself a wife". Much laughter followed.

After the introduction we split into groups of 6 and talked about trees that have been special to us at some stage in our life. I joined a group with an 85-year-old man (Lincoln's father), a woman in her 70's, 2 men around 60 and a 30-year-old man. As I joined the group there were fits of giggles all round. When I asked to hear the story more giggles ensued. Lincoln's father said that one man had a naughty story. Apparently it is socially unacceptable to be seen going to the toilet. One man's special tree, which was more like a bush, was at school and him and his friend would sit in it at the breaks and go to the toilet in it. However, one day they got caught and got in heaps of trouble, more laughter followed.

We then drew our trees. I had my tree on display and told them my story through the tree and then invited them to draw their own. After a short time of walking around and talking to people I realized that they were copying my tree. I didn't realize that I had said to them to draw a tree just like mine. So I clarified that there this was an opportunity to make a tree the way they would like it to be. By the end of the day there was a huge variety of trees...none looking like mine.

At the re-telling we hit what I thought was a snag. While I was joining groups and hearing their tree of life stories, most groups said we don't want to re-tell our tree, we want to talk about what we have lost. I got really worried about the people getting re-traumatized and so continually was asking questions to try and promote an alternative story. However, after a while they explained to me that this is what they needed. I found this to be a challenging moment for me because things were not going to the script I had in my head. It turned out that they found the experience of talking about the trauma they experienced really valuable. It was a good lesson for me to let go of control of the conversation and be lead in conversation by the Burmese people, to be de-centered.

In the storms of life section we decided to change the name of it because we were keen to hear about the skills that people used to get through many of the different challenges that life presents. We were concerned that if we called it storms we would hear difficult stories about the Nargis and no others. We called this section "dangers". We asked them what dangers forests go through. They came up with many different things that forests go through. Obviously, the Nargis featured prominently but so did drought, fire, and people cutting them down. We then talked about the difficulties that they face. There was much conversation about the effect that the Nargis had. However, there was also many stories about how the military oppresses them, about losing loved ones at other times, and about drought and fires.

The group really liked this section. Unfortunately (but also fortunately) the conversation was really vibrant and fast moving which meant that not much of it was translated for us. At the end of the

danger section many people said that singing, laughter, and community were what helped them get through the dangers of life. One of them said that “we are a forest of trees and when a forest loses leaves it turns to mulch and helps the other trees to grow. In the same way they could remember loved ones lost and look after who is left and grow stronger.”

Many of the people at the training identified as Christians. Throughout there was much talking about God and how their faith helped them deal with not only the results of the Nargis but also at other times. Prayer to God and their faith was a very common way of dealing with tough times. They said that their faith is what gives them hope to get through the dangers of life.

There were many tears as people shared their stories of loss. There was also much laughter. The Burmese people seem to have a similar sense of humour to Australians in that they rip each other off. They also like puns. They teased us and each other a lot. It really helped us feel comfortable with them and we all found it amazing that another culture so different to our own had this sense of humour in common. I often try to make puns, I find myself quite funny sometimes (other people in Australia don't). After a couple of hours of training everyone (Burmese and Australian) was laughing at me trying and failing to be funny.

During the training some people understood tree of life straight away, others took some time to get it and others still probably still hadn't understood it by the end of the training. Not everything went to plan and some conversations were very tough going both for us as listeners and especially for the Karen people telling their stories. All of us at some stage didn't know what to say when people told us their stories of loss. Some people had lost their partners, children and grandchildren and were the only ones left. There is probably nothing you can say to that.



People drawing their trees and sharing stories...



Some of the forest of trees on the wall...

## Stories and Quotes

I thought I would include some stories and comments from the people so you can get a feel of what it was like. Not all the stories are “good” or “successes”. It is hard to define what a success is in this situation. There was so much suffering that people had experienced in such a short period of time. I thought I would include a cross section of stories. Ones that gave us a feeling of satisfaction that we helped, some funny stories and others that make me feel uncomfortable and a bit powerless. Here they are...

At the end of the first day Leah asked what it was like drawing the trees and re-telling them. These are written how we heard them...even if they don't have perfect grammar;

- “I liked sharing my life, it felt very good”
- “I can learn about 60 people in 1 day, we have 1 dream, we turn only to God”
- “Talking about my life and childhood...I'm 68 but I feel 16 again”
- “By seeing these trees, they look like, remind me of Labutta trees, some look very bad and dry” (*Labutta was one of the areas affected. This comment was followed by fits of laughter all round as he was teasing them about their trees being ugly.*) “But I am still encouraged because nobody is giving up”
- “By drawing the picture the lesson was more clear. I want to imitate this teaching technique because in Burma we just tell, tell, tell. This was different”
- “I drew a banana tree. A banana tree dies when the banana's are picked. When banana's are picked it dies but another grows in its place. Just like my grandparents and parents died and future generations grow up. I drew a banana tree and I was reminded of love everywhere”
- “There were 6 steps, each step has a purpose. When I look at all of the steps I see love. That's why I drew 2 trees, like 2 people looking at each other full of love”
- “After this training I can now thank God for the Nargis, otherwise I would not have meet these people from Australia. I also got to try new food supplied from other countries” (talking about aid rations)
- “You are like the gardener. You planted and watered and now beautiful flowers have grown”
- “Forest will withstand strong wind. If we live together we will be strong”
- Some people asked us how we were going to support them. I didn't have an answer. They wanted our help for the future but I didn't know how to answer. One person said “Trees need fertilizer to grow tall, where are we going to get our fertilizer from. Our government won't support us. What will you do to fertilize us?”

After the training they gave us gifts of traditional Karen clothing. They sang songs with a joy that was difficult to understand. The harmonies were stunning! We played chin lun (hakky sak with a cane ball) and chatted for around 4 hours until 9 o'clock as they didn't want our time together to end.

All of them said that they would not use tree of life just with children, which is why the training was set up, but with all people. Lincoln and Leah translated the English training manual into Burmese and they each have a copy.

Most of them said that it was so simple and yet so effective and that's what they liked about it.

Leah asked if anyone was interested in writing down their story and experience of the training. Some did and by the next day she had compiled a book of stories and had it bound. It is in Burmese and they are going to translate it into English and send it to us. If you would like a copy, let me know.

We all wore Longyi's, which are essentially waist to ankle skirts. They really appreciated the gesture and complimented us on how handsome and beautiful we all were the whole time.

One last story...as we were playing chin lun I had my longyi hitched up in the traditional way and was puzzled at the sudden laughs (hysterical laughing mind you) directed at me. Upon looking down I realised that the knot keeping the longyi up had loosened and I was now longyi-less. This became a long standing joke with the locals for the rest of the trip.

Overall, the experience was a privilege to be a part of. The Karen people welcomed us openly and we shared lots of laughs, tears, and meaningful stories. It was a positive experience for most people. Leah and Lincoln said that we can't understand the impact it will have on people. Most of the credit should go to Leah and Lincoln, I cannot speak highly enough of them.

After the training we traveled by bus and then boat to drop many of them home to their villages in the Delta. We were invited into their homes and they fed us very generously, probably more generously than they could afford.

One thing they said continuously was that they wanted us to tell their stories. They want people to know what they go through. Here is just a tiny amount of their story.