

# The Asian Rural Institute: Independence Through Food

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*Myar told me her story tonight beside the wood stove. Her, holding a guitar and with concerned looking eyes. Me, watching the flames and wondering how to respond. What do I have to share? An amazing and powerful story—such suffering...*

This is part of the story she shared with me that night, although I cannot capture all of it: Myar is a mother of three, the eldest about twelve and the youngest six. Her husband died of stomach cancer in 2002 at age 38. He, like she, was a Baptist minister and ran a program for youth and men. Myar leads a church based program for women and orphans. She teaches the women practical skills like sewing and the orphan children work the fields for their own food, (now, when she returns, they will use organic methods for this process). Myar also works with trying to stop human trafficking across the border of her home country Burma into Thailand. She tells me the government is corrupt and education is not affordable for everyone. Also in her area, she lives on a large lake where everyone gets their drinking water from, but chemicals from floating farms have polluted the water and the fish, causing cancer in humans—perhaps even her own husband. The 400,000 people down stream suffer too, but nobody really knows about the polluted water. Even if they did, they still have to drink it; there is no other choice. So her situation is hopeless in many ways, yet still she has hope and she does not want to leave her country. She wants to help her people, her tribe, for “who else will?” The government will not.

Myar became depressed after her husband’s death (he died quickly, within two months) for a few years, but still continued her social work. She decided to apply to ARI again to be a Training Assistant in 2007. She had been a participant before and missed it

even though she thought she'd never return. She was accepted and has been at ARI for almost a year now. Here she has gained renewed confidence and new ideas. She wants to expand her programs and build more shelters and a school for the orphaned children. "ARI is horrible," Myar told me to my surprise, "tough, difficult, wonderful, and horrible." Yet hope, faith, and confidence in creating good is what she found here. Pretty amazing stuff, huh? And imagine, 29 more people like her come here every year. It is mind opening. I think to myself, *she does all of that work with a family, as a "poor" woman, and what have I done?* For Myar, her religion, her faith, has played a crucial role. I asked her a few questions later, in a more formal interview about this and she said, "for me, without God we cannot—without love we cannot—do anything."

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"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." —Margaret Mead

The Asian Rural Institute in Nishinasuno, Japan is a special place to those who participate in the 9 month intensive Rural Leadership training course, and even to those who find themselves there as short-term volunteers or staff. The small campus is nestled on the edge of the town, built, like most Japanese farms, into the forest hillside. The "campus" is comprised of separate women and men's dormitories, two other buildings and then multiple garden plots, rice paddies, livestock facilities, and workshop facilities. It covers only around six hectares of land, which is roughly twelve acres. Yet on this land, enough food is grown to completely supply the entire campus with three square meals a day all year round, and even a surplus to sell. In fact, it is one of the principles of the institute that once the food is grown, it is eaten by the same people; providing a lesson

of self-sustainability and a living example that yes, organic farming *can* produce enough food for an entire community.

I entered this small community of fifteen winter staff and volunteers expecting to find a place of hard, serious workers and isolated members. Instead I was greeted with good-natured humor and kindness at every turn. The icy nights were spent huddled around the wooden stove in the main dining hall, joking around, checking email or reading *The Japan Times* and I felt free to be myself and relax. Though, I was told repeatedly that this was a very different atmosphere than when the participants are there. For nine months out of the year, 25-30 men and women from rural communities throughout Africa, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands call ARI home. As can be imagined, it is difficult to live together with such a variety of cultures, religions, languages, and temperaments. Hard work, communal farm work, brings the diverse community together, yet it is the vision of ARI that makes it a special place for all who join. This vision, phrased in their mission statement is as follows:

The mission of the Asian Rural Institute is to build an environmentally healthy, just, and peaceful world, in which each person can live to his or her fullest potential. This mission is rooted in the love of Jesus Christ. To carry out this mission, we train and nurture rural leaders for a life of sharing. Leaders, both women and men, who live and work in grassroots rural communities primarily in Asia, Africa and the Pacific form a community of learning each year together with staff and other residents. Through community-based learning we study the best ways for rural people to share and enhance local resources and abilities for the common good. We present a challenge to ourselves and the whole world in our approach to food and life.

With this mission as a guide, the participants strive towards the ideal of the “servant-leader” as given in the Book of Matthew in the Bible, where it is said, “If you want to be a leader, you must be the servant of the people.” I was able to formally interview five people; a volunteer, two staff members, and the two TA’s about this mission and the ARI

reverend....a participant in 1993 and he told me ARI would be the best place for me to get the answer to my question.”

--*Bernard Timoty Appau, 47, Ghana participant 2001, Training Assistant 2007-8.*

“I’ve learned how to take care of nature.” --*Timoty*

“Everybody sit down together [in Chapel] as brother and sister regardless of other religions. They can find one of the model ‘to live together’ in diversity. So some of their countries they have conflict between the religions. But here at ARI we can sit together in chapel and we can share whatever we feel even about other religions and they start to listen from other religions. So that is a very important core for us and our motto ‘that we may live together.’” --*Yukiko Oyanagi*

“If not the whole idea of spirituality, ARI would not exist up to this time. Because the spiritual aspect of this institution shaped people to become more compassionate and learn what Christ said, ‘to serve others’, and I think that part is the part that help support ARI so much so that we cannot ignore the spiritual aspect.” --*Timoty*

“Some people have a real image change; about themselves and what they are capable of doing. I believe a person who is trained here will pass that through [to their people].”

--*Steven Cutting, 38, Ecumenical Relations staff since 2004*

“Once Takami sensei, our founder, say that ‘we believe that someday no hunger in the world’, people say it’s too difficult. But simply we believe. We can change the world from here...I can change the world from here.” --*Yukiko*

“Even though ARI is small I think it can change the world in the end, and the developing world. And I think ARI succeeds in that, even though it is a really slow process.”

—*Dennis*

“Yes. I think now there are over 1,000 graduates over the world, if all 1,000 people are working, than we can turn the world around. Because for me, 11 disciples of Christ turned this world upside-down and their work is still going on, then 1,000 people can do much to promote ARI. And that is why I say ARI succeed in what the founder is trying to do to is to teach people to go back to their grassroots area and help them. ...even when it comes to my personal life, I could see that ARI is a great institution, because it has a lot of influence on my life.” --*Timoty*

“I feel confident. I can say that if I go back, I can share and I can practice, but I can do my projects. We share many things from our friends and the staff...I learn simple life, sharing life.” --*Myar*

“I am here because I think that before I can develop others I have to develop myself. Because a blind man cannot direct a blind person. So I have to develop myself first. ...As Martin Luther King Jr. said, everybody needs to have a dream, and my dream is that one day my continent Africa, my country Ghana, will be herself. Without depending on others. Because in our continent Africa, we almost one of the richest continents in the world, God has endowed us with all kinds of mineral resources, but how come people discover and develop these resources? That is my big concern. I think I have something to share with my people. ... I have to go back by March and I’m going back now with another big vision...” --*Timoty*

“I tried a lot to explain ARI when I came back from ARI in Europe...I think you can’t understand ARI unless you’re here. Whoever wants to understand ARI needs to come here and experience a wonderful but difficult life.” --*Dennis*

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### *Final Thoughts*

The early morning sun rose through the space in between my heavy curtains. As usual, I had slept in most of my clothing beneath the four layers of blankets in order to stay warm. I heard the ducks chattering together outside—*time to get up*, I think.

Outside, a high-pitched, excited Japanese woman’s voice greets me from the exercise radio broadcast as I and a few others emerge from the morning fog into the open square. I do a couple funny little stretches and then off to feed the chickens. Noisy chickens, warm eggs, cold hands and smelly boots. This is my daily routine.

On my last morning, I led Chapel, or “morning gathering.” I spoke about my spiritual experiences in nature and moments that have lead me to be at ARI. Now I can complete my sojourn with thoughts on what I learned from my brief time there. Clearly, I came in order to learn about the program, organic farming, and religion. But these are questions I ask in order to learn about myself. I was inspired by the people I found

working there. Courageous, intelligent people working in a unique place, though of course not perfect. I did come to understand that Christianity seems to form the basic template for the most treasured ideals; leadership, love, faith, and belief that these enormous issues can be solved, someday. Faith is a powerful force and it has directed the lives of these people, many of whom are not Christian. Sharing in this way, during Morning Gathering, of one's faith or beliefs and to be supported in return is also crucial to building self-confidence. For organic farming, they focus not first on environmental protection, like here, but on economic viability. Organic farming allows for greater financial freedom for the rural villagers within these countries and it truly becomes one greater step towards self-sufficiency and community development. It is independence gained through food, or in the ARI way, through understanding "foodlife."

*\*\*\*\*Please note, if you would like additional information about the specific organic practices or other tasks I was involved with, please let me know and I can send that along. Thank you--*