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Lyma Nguyen

By Oliver Pelling

"I've seen couples at restaurants on their phones rather than talking to each other," says Lyma Nguyen, a human rights lawyer based in Darwin. "People seem so wrapped up in sharing their lives on various forms of social media, that you wonder if they're really living in the moment. I feel that with all of the technology and information available these days, people tend to have less and less time for face-to-face contact and human interaction. There's too much emphasis on capturing the moment and reproducing it, rather than on relishing it and letting it go."

For the past six years Lyma has sought compensation for those targeted for extermination under Cambodia's Khmer Rouge. Seeing elderly, frail Khmer Rouge leaders stand before her in the courts raises a lot of ethical and moral questions. "Knowing that these people committed such methodical crimes against humanity and seeing them standing there, as a person, that fascinates me," she says.

"I was born in a refugee camp," she adds. "I don't know how much it has to do with my own background as a refugee - I don't have much memory of it - but having pondered a lot of things from a young age, I want to see things from other people's perspective."

While Lyma believes that we have the freedom to choose how we live our lives, she thinks that most people are in denial of this very freedom. "Freedom is a really scary thing and I think most people aren't comfortable coming face-to-face with their freedom," she says. "Until people come face-to-face with their own freedom and what they can do with it, their sense of identity is otherwise going to be shaped by mainstream society and what's around them. Freedom is something that comes from within."

Lyma regards mainstream consumer society as the path of least resistance. A life fuelled by a desire to acquire new things or accrue more money shouldn't be regarded as "normal", she thinks. She cites philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of 'being-toward-death', and believes that we can only be truly free by accepting that we can leave this world at any moment. "If you're conscious of 'being-toward-death', you can live a richer existence," she says.

"I find it strange that in our society death is a subject to be avoided or not to be talked about; but it's so real. And it's real every day. We must recognise that there's a limit to life - so what do we want to do with it? But it's a difficult thing to do when life is already on a path. You're progressing

in your career and you're happy with the pay. The wheels are in motion and it's hard to pull away from that and envisage something different, to start afresh. That's why I think it's important to have self-reflection and to question your decisions at all points in your life. This might seem a bit of a cliché, but if you were at your funeral, what would you want people to say about your existence?"



Lyma Nguyen is a Commonwealth prosecutor in Darwin. For the past six years she has sought moral and collective reparations for those targeted for extermination under Cambodia's Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979. Lyma works as a civil party lawyer before The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (The Khmer Rouge Tribunal) and represents ethnic Vietnamese victims who are still widely ostracised in Cambodian society to this day. She undertook her work, which is completely pro-bono, in light of the almost complete collapse of the Cambodian legal system towards the end of the 1970s. She represents those who have neither the money nor means to gain representation independently.