

KINDERGARTEN LESSONS I LEARNED IN AFRICA

By

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*Kindergarten Lessons I Learned in Africa*

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Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are taken from The King James Version.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Kindergarten Lessons I Learned in Africa* is a collection of short stories fashioned from Claudia Thomason's experiences while traveling in Africa. She participated in several short-term mission trips to Africa, experiencing sights and sounds bombarding her on a daily basis.

Short term missionaries experience huge slices of life packaged into short time frames. Perhaps that is why these stories are so memorable. They are vibrant snippets of cultural surprises inserted in the midst of seemingly "normal" days on the mission field.

God's presence is a factor in every story. Traveling to Africa to work with the people was God's gift to Claudia. Many times the events she experienced helped her see His hand in everyday life, both in Africa and at home. Every trip helped her see that she was stronger than she thought and could accomplish many things she didn't imagine were possible.

All the stories portray true events that happened to her as she traveled to or through Africa. Individual stories may contain ideas to move the reader smoothly to the heart of the story and may be combined with events from different annual trips. Children's names have been changed to protect them. Most adults' names are accurate.

Bible verses are not direct quotes but are comments based on the verse quoted. The reader is encouraged to look up the passages in the Bible and see how they speak to the individual reader.

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to the children of Africa. Your joy is contagious and your music is Heavenly. I am blessed to have met you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am excited about sharing the stories I love from the beautiful country of Africa. The reader will meet people who are living examples of finding laughter in the face of difficulties. Even the travel mishaps have become rich memories, adding depth to the stories. The Africans were amazing, and they made my journeys memorable. To them I owe a debt of gratitude. Thank you to my dear African friend Irene, who made my time there even more exciting.

My beautiful daughter Holly also is due my thanks. She was able to join me on my first trip to Africa. Now she is a busy mother of three sweet little children, wife to Pastor Derek, and is herself a talented designer. She was my biggest supporter each time I announced I would be returning to our beloved Africa. She stayed in touch with me through email while I was gone, passing along updates to my mom, not yet a member of the age of technology. Holly is exactly what a great daughter should be.

Thank you also to my son Aaron, who designed the cover and illustrated the titles for me. A talented graphic designer, he has always had an admirable work ethic, which is why I wanted him involved in this project. He and his wife Tracy are both multi-talented individuals. Having Aaron agree to do this project for me was indeed a gift.

One of the best examples of a Godly woman I know, Marjorie Field, appears in several stories in the book. She and I were traveling companions on a few trips. She has an amazing gift of organization and made sure we had everything we needed, right down to humidity-proof adhesive bandages and wax-covered dental floss. We have been friends for decades, and I can't imagine undertaking any project without her support.

There are others who helped with the creation and publication of this book by extending enthusiasm and encouragement. You know who you are, and I am thankful for you. Let's grab lunch together and giggle like school girls again. You enrich my life.

Finally, I am reminded that life is short, and the time to do what you are called to do is today. That lesson became even more real on June 30, 2013, through the deaths of nineteen Prescott Hot Shot Firefighters, part of an elite Wildland fire hotshot crew. All the men were from the same fire department in

my hometown of Prescott, Arizona. Each of them was an amazing person, as is the young man who is sole survivor of the team. It was the tragedy involving those brave men and their families that reminded me there is no time like the present to share God's love. If my book finds its way into the hands of a family member and brings a brief smile or a comforting word, I will be grateful. In our home, you will not be forgotten.

## Chapter One

### Share Your Toys

Metal jacks skipped across the concrete floor. African children gathered around me, laughing and clapping each time the jacks fell. The clicking sound of metal on concrete drew more curious faces into our circle. I was sitting on the floor, showing eight-year-old Isaaca how to play jacks. Tossing the ball into the air, I attempted to quickly gather jacks before it hit the ground. Like lightning, Isaaca lunged for the ball, catching it before it started its descent.

He shouted “Oooh!” and did a little victory dance. I resisted the urge to patiently explain the game of jacks and the purpose of tossing the ball into the air. I wanted to speak to him as I would speak to one of my own children, explaining the instructions again, asking, “Do you understand what I’m saying?” That type of communication isn’t effective with these children because I only speak English. They don’t speak any English.

I knew I needed to at least try. “No,” I said, “you let the ball go so you can pick up jacks before the ball falls to the ground. Wait, let me show you.” My explanation didn’t stop his wild grab for the ball as soon as it left my fingers each time. This silly game clearly made no sense to him. He was probably telling me that, but I couldn’t understand him.

Once again he shouted, “Oooh” and laughingly said a few more words I didn’t understand. Whatever he was saying evoked raucous laughter and exuberant back slapping from the children. They were having a great time with this game, which in no way resembled the game of jacks.

“He says that balls are for catching. To throw a ball and not catch it is like throwing a stick and not untying the dog to go get it,” Irene, our hostess, explained softly. I glanced up and saw a twinkle in her eye. Over the years, she had taken special delight in trying to train this clueless white woman how to think like an African.

Irene, our non-profit agency’s contact in East Africa, is responsible for getting donated funds to schools for these children’s fees and supplies. She also serves as their advocate. I was there to take pictures and gather stories about the students for their sponsors in America. On this trip, I brought each

child a backpack filled with school supplies and toys from sponsors. Isaaca's sponsor had sent jacks.

"I don't even remember how to play jacks," I had thought to myself a week earlier while packing backpacks before my trip. "Maybe it's time to learn how to play again." After a few tries, I got pretty good at this child's game. Armed with my new-found skill, I was determined to make this game popular enough to become the new phenomenon in Africa. I began to get excited thinking about the potential in this game.

An incurable optimist, I tend to think of everything as a grand, larger-than-life opportunity. This was no exception. "If the children like this game," I thought excitedly, "it would be a simple matter to send several cases of jacks to Irene. She could sell them and raise money for additional school fees. We could put dozens more children into schools."

I believed I had stumbled upon perhaps the best revenue-generating idea that ever hit Africa. Excited about the lucrative potential of this venture, I couldn't wait to teach eager masses gravitating toward the game by the hundreds, rejuvenating the economy in the process.

That was before I actually got to Africa.

"Isaaca, please don't catch the ball. Let me teach you." Again, I asked him not to interfere. He was determined to thwart my lofty financial plans by catching that darned ball every time it became airborne. I was becoming frustrated.

When I realized I was the only person in the room not having fun, I knew something had to be wrong. "What is going on?" I questioned myself. "I can't possibly be upset with this child, can I?" The thought that I was losing my patience in the midst of all this fun made me a little ashamed of myself.

Suddenly, I saw this scene from another perspective, a higher perspective. I was in the middle of a room full of happy children. They were having fun. Perhaps tomorrow they wouldn't have enough food to eat. Tomorrow may bring the death of a parent from AIDS. Tomorrow a baby in their home might succumb to malaria. However, right at this moment, they were permitted to be carefree children, laughing at their friend Isaaca as he teased this American about a game. How could I have been so blind as to miss the real reason I was there? Laughing and hugging Isaaca, I stood and moved to the table with the other adults, allowing him to play the game his way.

A few minutes later, a sound caught my attention. Turning toward the children, I witnessed something I will never forget. Isaaca was playing with the ball. He had given ten other children their own jacks. Those ten children were dropping their jacks on the floor, watching them spin like little tops. As they fell to the floor, I heard click, click, click, producing giggles from the children.

The idea was to see whose jack spun longer. Older children and younger children were enjoying playing with a single jack and were having more fun than simply playing a commonplace game of jacks by the rules.

I saw this game as a gigantic game-changer for this town in Africa, bringing in revenues to provide necessities to make the Africans' hearts lighter. Isaaca saw this game as an opportunity to share a blessing with others, immediately making the hearts of the children lighter. He had the grander vision by far.

I asked God to give me a heart as generous as Isaaca's with the ability to see His purpose in everything, no matter how small--even as small as a tiny jack.

That day I learned to share with others. If I share, maybe someone else can take my simple idea and use it to change his or her part of the world.

## Chapter Two

### Don't Throw Stones (You Might Disturb the Bats)

Headed out of Africa, our group was sad to be leaving. “There isn’t anything that compares to those kids when they start playing tricks on you!” Jim said, laughingly. “One of those little ones put rocks in my shoes when I took them off to play tag. He thought it was so funny that I couldn’t get my feet back in them!” Jim’s laugh was infectious. Soon more stories about the kids were being told with great enthusiasm, accompanied by belly laughs and knee slapping.

I added that when one of the kids said, “Hi, Claudia” in perfect English among a large group of chattering children speaking in Swahili and Lugandan, I was completely caught off guard. I turned and searched all the faces for an English-speaking person or a white face in the sea of beautiful brown and black ones. He let me search until he couldn’t stand it any longer. When he had his laugh, he said it again. I began talking with him in English, thinking he understood. It turned out that “hi” and my name were the only English words he knew. The laugh was on me.

The stories kept coming as we bounced along in the van. We even joked about the fact that the van was still running after a whole hour. At that moment, we heard “Boom! Boom!” The van came to a stop, spewing steam onto the hot pavement.

“How funny is that?” someone laughed. “We just mention it, and the van stops!” More laughter followed as passengers waited for someone to get the van running and back on the road. Those of us who had made this trip out of Africa in the past knew it wouldn’t be that simple. We instinctively knew this was the beginning of a long series of breakdowns and repairs. Even though we knew it was inevitable, it didn’t seem to dampen our appreciation for the trip.

When the driver added water to the hissing radiator, it came to life and rolled another few miles down the road before our next breakdown. Once again, water sizzled as it rushed into the steaming radiator. A repeat performance would carry the van a few more miles down the road until it stopped for good.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake!” Pastor Mike exclaimed. He said that a lot. He decided to send for another van to finish the trip. “This one isn’t going to get us to the airport on time,” he lamented. “so you might as well get out and walk around while we wait.”

Given the fact that the van was beginning to get stuffy, we were happy to hear those words. “Great idea!” someone said.

“Yay!” somebody else shouted. You would have thought we were kids, and someone just said we could go play outside. The hot air in the van reeked of sweat and perfume, a heady bouquet indeed. We happily tumbled out onto the highway.

The van hadn’t been air conditioned, but the open windows provided enough of a breeze when we were moving that I thought it might not be too hot outside. I was completely wrong about that. Instantly, perspiration trickled from every pore. Sweat dripped off my nose onto my damp shirt while rivulets ran down my back. The pavement beneath my feet burned through the thin soles of my shoes, making my feet sizzle like a steak on a hot grill. I was miserable. Quickly, I moved to the thick grass nearby.

To take our minds off the heat, we commented on our surroundings. Uganda is so green and lush that it has become known as “the pearl of Africa.” Winston Churchill was so taken with its beauty that he referred to its “exuberance of vegetation...scarcely describable.” Waterfalls dot the land. Banana and coffee plantations thrive in its climate. Huge amounts of rain are required to produce this beauty.

African rainfalls are nothing short of amazing. The rain falls very hard and very fast. More than once we were caught in a downpour since we were unable to read the skies as we do at home. As beautiful as they are, these storms make the Africans’ lives more difficult, washing away roads, creating mountain mud slides, and leaving standing water which breeds diseases. The rains also water their crops, producing a harvest that is critical to their economy. Once you have been in an African storm, however, you won’t forget its fury or its beauty.

“Will you look at that tree!” my daughter Holly said, pointing to a huge tree just beyond the van. Hanging over the road like a giant bell, it was easily the largest tree any of us had ever seen. The tightly woven leaves let no sunlight through to the street. Every branch was laden with birds, squawking and screeching.

“That has to be the biggest tree I have ever seen.” Jim said in awe. One fearless young man in our group had gotten bored with the delay and searched for an adventure to pass the time. He, too, spotted the tree.

As adults, we were content to admire the tree from a distance. This kid was very adventurous and would try anything once. He didn't seem to have the ability to simply observe without becoming a part of the action. Before we knew what was happening, he found a rock, and ran toward the tree. Turning to us, he shouted, "Dare me to throw this rock?" Of course, no one dared him to throw the rock. He really didn't want an answer because he had made up his mind. We watched the rock leave his fingertips, sail through air, then connect somewhere deep inside the tree.

The moment the rock hit the tree, hundreds of bats and other birds erupted from their leafy shelter, wildly careening in all directions. For a brief moment I pondered the phrase, "blind as a bat" wondering if they would try to avoid us. My answer came rather quickly as bats plummeted toward my head, clearly unhappy with the assault on their home.

"Run for the van!" someone shouted. Bats darted around us in zigzag patterns, frantically trying to get away from us, as we frantically tried to get away from them.

Getting into the van earlier that morning had required a certain finesse. People choose seat mates and arranged their luggage neatly around their feet. A sense of decorum prevailed. Lunging into the van to get away from the bats, we resembled eighth grade boys fighting for the front seat on a circus ride. Behaving shamefully, we adults pushed each other aside to find shelter.

Dodging bats, our driver poured the last of the water into the radiator. Upon starting the van, he managed to drive the length of a football field away from the swarming bats before the van died again.

We spent the next hour inside the van, smelly, thirsty, and sweaty and, for a while, most unhappy with the young man. He excitedly stated, "What a great adventure that was! Could anyone guess the number of bats? And how big was that tree anyway? It looked just like a huge bell!"

I almost said something to him about his astounding lack of foresight. Did he think his actions wouldn't have some consequence? Now, we were all stuck in the van, paying for his lapse in judgment. That was when I realized it was natural for a boy to pick up a rock and throw it toward an enticing target. I would hurt his feelings. What was to be gained by doing that? Instead of saying something to him, I listened to him express his excitement in the safety of the van. It was actually pretty funny.

To his credit, he could usually figure out a way to make the adults laugh at his antics. This wasn't one of his best efforts, but he was a funny kid who added a spark to the trip. He often lifted our spirits at the end of a difficult day of travel and ministry in jungle villages.

Eventually, a new van picked us up from alongside the highway, the bats went back to their sanctuary, and we had another interesting story to tell our families back home.

That day I learned not to throw stones, even verbal ones. Cruel, harsh words can sometimes cause more harm than throwing a rock at bats in a bell tree.

## Chapter Three

### If You Unlock It, Lock It Back Up (The Baboons Might Get It)

Packing for my third trip to Africa, I thought about a luggage company's television ad featuring a monkey. The monkey jumped on luggage and threw it around the room. The hinges didn't break. The top didn't come off. The contents didn't spill. I chuckled as I packed, knowing random monkeys throwing luggage around was not on my agenda for this trip. Later that night our team excitedly boarded a plane for two weeks in Uganda, East Africa.

The moment our feet hit the tarmac at the Entebbe Airport, we began to perspire. "Ewwww! What is that smell?" I asked before I realized it was me. The majority of us on this trip were from Arizona. There is so little humidity in Arizona that no one even talks about it. If it rises to ten percent, people are fanning themselves, and expressing bewilderment at "how people could even live in climates with humidity that got up past ten percent *every day!*" Instantly we knew that our time in Africa would be punctuated by efforts to stay cool, dry and smell decent.

Setting aside our discomfort, we had an amazing time working in the towns and village churches in Uganda. In every location, the children were excited to see us. Our schedule was packed with activities in schools, churches private homes, and open air street fairs. We worked from early morning to late evening. There was little time to rest between locations where we were scheduled. We loved the people and felt blessed to be able to teach them and become briefly involved in their lives.

All too quickly, our two weeks came to an end. An exhausted group of people sadly bid good bye to our wonderful African friends and left for the last few days of our adventure. As a way to rest and catch our breath, our trip ended with a brief stay at a game park in the Masai Mara Game Preserve in Kenya. We looked forward to enjoying the safari rides on the savannah where we could observe wild animals in their natural habitat.

Each lodge in the Masai Mara Game Preserve has a unique feature which draws people to them. This particular lodge was built to take advantage of the view afforded by the animals coming to the large natural watering hole down the cliff at the base of the facility. Depending on the time of day, one could see elephants, lions, monkeys, baboons, gazelles, hyenas, or giraffes stopping by to drink. It was breathtaking from up on the terrace.

Those people brave enough to venture down to the watering hole through a tube-like structure were treated to an entirely different view. The tube had a protective covering on the end, allowing safe, close-up views of the animals. Although fresh water ran into the watering hole, the smell of stale water mixed with urine was pungent. Even more pungent was the smell of the animal dung that each type of animal left as they drank. The mud created by the animals appeared to be a combination of stale water, mud and several varieties of animal droppings. I was continually fascinated by the animals. Nevertheless, I made a mental note to avoid that mud at all costs.

Our last morning there, during breakfast on the terrace, a buzz of excitement rose from the diners. "Did you see those baboons?"

"No, what's going on?" someone asked.

"They climbed right up the side of that building!"

People jumped up from their seats and ran to the railings, straining to see what was happening. My friend Marjorie and I didn't leave the table but continued to enjoy breakfast. We listened as we heard reports of baboons climbing three stories up the side of the log building housing the guest rooms. We laughed as we heard that the lead baboon found a window which was obviously unlocked. In short order, he had pried the window open. One by one baboons slipped into the room. These baboons were very large but amazingly agile. When they disappeared into the room, people drifted back to their tables, saying, "That was a great thing to watch! Glad I didn't miss it!"

No one was sure whose room it was, but someone thought it was a room shared by two women. Mike, our pastor, came to our table with his buddy Pastor Greg and chided us about the baboons in our room. "You girls really should have closed your windows. We understand the baboons are in your room right now, trying on your clothes!"

These men got a kick out of kidding around, so it wasn't hard to wave my hand and respectfully tell them to get lost. However, I was getting a little apprehensive, suspecting I hadn't bolted our window securely. On our way out of the room that morning, Marjorie had said, "Be sure to close and lock the window. I hear the baboons have been known to break into rooms with open windows." With that she turned and walked out the door. Marjorie is such a trusting soul.

“Of course I will lock the windows,” I laughed, “I know to be careful about that.” Sitting at our table, hearing about the baboons, I realized I had no memory of actually walking over to the window, closing it and locking it.

Throughout our stay there, guests were cautioned to avoid having confrontations with the baboons and other monkeys. The monkeys routinely sat by guests eating in the restaurant and were known to steal food right out of guests’ hands. Once we found ourselves joined by a large monkey sitting beside us at the table. She was looking back and forth at each of us, listening to our conversation as though she understood what we were saying. We quietly slid out of the bench seats and walked away, leaving our meal for the monkey until the wait staff caught her and chased her away. Those monkeys knew how to be polite.

Baboons, on the other hand, seemed to have no social graces. In fact, they could be downright dangerous. These clever baboons knew from years of careless visitors that there was food in the individual rooms. They merely had to find an unlocked window to get the party going. That morning, they were heard screeching to each other as they scaled the wall. I could envision the conversation.

One baboon started it all by shouting, "Hey, Big Harry. We found an open window. Bring the guys and meet us in Window 303." Before long, there were six very large baboons fighting over the contents of our room.

Lodge staff hurried to our table and excitedly said things like “Monkeys.” “Room.” “Don’t go.” “Wait.” I had no idea what they were talking about.

Pastors Mike and Greg translated: “The baboons are in your room, and they are fighting over your belongings.” Irritated that they had been right and a little upset that breakfast was being cut short, we left the table. We made the climb from the terrace up a hill to our room.

When Marjorie and I got there, lodge staff in white uniforms waved us off, speaking in Swahili to each other and us. These people were clearly frightened of what was going on in the room. We listened to shouts and screeches coming from behind the door. More than once we were warned to stay away until the staff chased out the intruders. A single baboon can be very dangerous, but baboons in packs are especially dangerous. I imagined the baboons would be really angry when the staff told them the party was over and they had to leave. They didn’t come out the door, so they must have gone back out through the window. The noise finally faded, and we were told we could go in. The last thing the staff said before they walked away was that they were sorry. We were not encouraged.

When we peeked into the room, our sense of smell engaged first. The air was pungent, as in watering-hole pungent. It was another hot African day, and

the stuffiness in the room amplified the odor. My eyes watered as they adjusted to the darkened room. I began to see the items strewn around. It was surprising how much damage the baboons had done in such a short period of time. On the floor were papers, make up cases, and items I didn't recognize. They weren't recognizable because they were either torn or muddied.

Some items of clothing were on the beds, some were over by the windows. Some hung from lamps. Sheets had been stripped from the beds and thrown on the floor. My small containers had been ransacked. My clothing was everywhere and was brown from the "mud" down at the watering hole which is comprised of so many gross things. Only one dress was still folded and laying on the floor as though it had been carefully lifted out of the suitcase and placed gingerly down. Beds and walls displayed brown hand (or foot?) prints.

"Oh, look," I said happily, "here are three clean tennis shoes, still in a plastic bag." The fourth one was found in a corner, thoroughly chewed.

The food stash, which I was responsible for keeping safe, was decimated. We had bags of treats, drinks, energy bars and some fruit in the snack tote. Baboons had probably first eaten everything not individually wrapped. Then they unwrapped and ate all the nuts, chips, trail mix, dried fruit and other bagged items.

We also had ten energy bars which I had been carrying around. One bar was partially unwrapped and one bite was taken out of it. It had been dropped to the floor beside the other nine untouched bars. "Really?" I asked under my breath, "Even baboons won't eat energy bars?"

Apparently one baboon took a special liking to my fake hairpiece. He or she dropped it on the way out the window. There it lay, smelly, muddy and destined not to come anywhere near my head ever again. Some items of my clothing, although muddy, were simply tossed around as though they had been twirled above the head of a fun-loving baboon. It must have been quite a party in the room that day.

We wondered aloud if any items of mine had actually gone out the window with the baboons. How many future travelers would look at a shirt of mine (or something more personal) being shown off by a baboon down by the watering hole? If that was the case, the baboon raid would become a legend to be told every time something of mine appeared at the watering hole. Or worse, if it were carried into the dining room!

"Wait! Wait just a minute here!" I said to Marjorie. "My shoes, my clothes, my dress, my shirts, my makeup? Just my stuff?" I asked. "Where's your stuff? Why isn't your stuff all over the place along with mine?"

We turned to look at my suitcases. They were clearly pried open and torn apart. Zippers were opened due to those God-given opposable thumbs the

baboons use so well. The wheels on my tote bag were splayed out as though baboons were giving each other rides on it. Both bags were empty and tossed aside. Then we looked at Marjorie's bags, still on the luggage holder provided by the lodge. They were zipped, locked and secure. Not a thing was missing from her luggage. It wasn't even muddy.

Two reasons might have existed for the difference in our luggage: Either the baboons went directly for my things and would have decimated hers when they were done; or, most likely, my luggage was not locked so it made for easy pickings. The light bulb came on when I realized I didn't lock the window, and I didn't lock my luggage. This was an expensive lesson on using locks.

We were scheduled to leave the lodge that day. There was no time to get my clothing in the lodge laundry and get it back before we left. I was faced with the dilemma of what to do with the odiferous clothing. Friends brought plastic bags to stuff the smelly clothing into for the trip to another location where I could access washing machines. The clothing I had on and the one dress that was virtually untouched were all I had to wear until I could connect with a laundromat in our next hotel on the way home.

The van trip out of the Great Rift Valley into Nairobi was long and hot. I was sure I could smell the clothing from my suitcases the entire trip. The first thing I did when checking into the hotel in Nairobi was to ask for laundry services. When the staff took my clothing, I told them what was on it. "You might not want to wash these things with the rest of the guests' laundry." I said being as helpful as possible. They assured me they would take care of it.

When the clothing came back, I was not sure whether they washed them alone or with laundry from everyone else. My clothes were no longer brown from mud, but gray as if they had soaked in dirty water. My white clothing was gray, permanently I might add. My pink clothing was ashen looking. Except for the black items, nothing was its original color. It all had a smoky hue to it. However, it smelled great. I was so thankful to get those clothes back. By this time I had used disinfectant on the inside and outside of my suitcases and felt comfortable using them again as well.

The lesson of the locks is something I haven't forgotten. I am not able to forget it because a few members of our team whom I see regularly insist on reminding me that the baboons are probably wearing my clothing right now down at the watering hole in Kenya.

That day I learned if you open it, close it; if you drop it, pick it up; if you unlock it, lock it. Being a good steward means taking care of the possessions you have. I had the muddy clothes to prove what can happen if you don't.

## Chapter Four

### It's Okay to be Afraid Sometimes

The horrific sound was one I had never heard before but will never forget. It was clearly an animal in extreme distress. When the cry pierced the quiet afternoon service, we were standing in a sweltering hot African church constructed of bricks containing mud and cow dung. I was already quite woozy from the smells, heat and humidity. Only our small group seemed disturbed by what we heard. Everyone else continued listening to the speaker without flinching.

Clearly startled, we looked at each other with questioning faces to see if anyone knew what that sound might have been. I expected to see people running to the doors and window openings to see what awful thing had happened in the street a moment ago. Instead, no one moved. One person in our group whispered to a church member, "What was that?"

"That was the cow we chose for our celebration meal," he said smiling, revealing several missing teeth. "We will have a grand meal today after the service!" He went on to say its throat was cut so they could prepare the meat for us, their special guests.

Reaching for the key on the ribbon around my neck, I noticed a few other women in our missionary group searching in pockets for their keys. Holding mine tightly, I recalled glancing out the open door a few minutes earlier, seeing villagers happily leading a painfully skinny cow down the road.

"Oh, no," I thought sadly, "they just slaughtered that poor cow." As I fingered the key, I forced myself to set aside my reaction to the cow's sacrifice and remember why we were there, which was to minister. I needed to dismiss everything else that might distract me and focus on that goal.

I don't normally wear a key around my neck. When we first arrived in Uganda, our team leader gave everyone a key. He said to keep it with us at all times because we never knew when we would need a tangible reminder of who we were and why God sent us there.

“You will see, hear, smell, taste and experience things that will take your attention away from your sole purpose for coming.” he said. He was right. As we frail Americans encountered the harshness of African life and customs, we needed something to pull us back into reality. Touching the key normally reminded me to turn my thoughts back to God, the Key, the Answer to mankind’s problems.

Unfortunately, today my key wasn’t as effective as it had been in the past. Concentrating on the message from the pulpit now proved to be very difficult. I was suddenly more aware of the heat and the smells and activity going on outside. My eyes wandered to the views out the window on the other side of the church. Perfectly framed in one window was an acacia tree on a small hill, standing as a sentinel over the church property.

Closer to the building women were washing brightly-colored clothing in a stream that flowed past the church. They worked feverishly in the hot African sun washing and rinsing each item. Clothing was hung on sticks and trees to dry before being folded and carried away, making room for another woman laden with dirty clothing. Surprisingly, when they were done, the white clothing was white and the colors appeared to be clean. It wasn’t the first time I had been impressed with how crisp and clean the African’s Sunday attire was when I knew it was all done by hand in local streams.

My mind drifted back to the cow being led into the village. She was so thin, her hip bones protruded on each side. Her ribs were visible. I wondered at the time if she might belong to one of the farmers bringing her into town to sell milk before taking her back out to pasture.

When I got to that point, I remembered her loud cry and grasped my key even tighter. I chastised myself silently for allowing my mind to wander, losing focus on my purpose. Knowing that I would have no words of comfort for people we were going to pray for if I allowed myself to be traumatized by cultural differences, it was clearly time for me to pray.

“Thank you, Father, for keeping my mind and heart on You. You truly are the answer. Help me get over myself and introduce them to You.”

The queasiness in my stomach began to subside as I thought of other times I had reached for my key:

Traveling up a muddy incline to a remote mountain village, our vehicle began sliding toward the edge of the cliff. One rear tire was already perched over the edge before the vehicle miraculously stopped sliding and gripped the road again.

On another occasion, while preaching in a village, three hostile men disrupted the service, threatening the “white intruders.” Our hosts invited them

to worship with us. Surprisingly, they stayed, but their demeanor remained menacing.

Then came the day when we ate our first meal in the jungle villages. "We prepared a feast for you." the woman said, offering me gray potatoes and green chicken. My fixation with cleanliness had to be set aside. Refusing food was out of the question, so I reached for my key.

Another time, I saw a child scooting along the ground, struggling to get close to me. She had no legs. She pulled herself along with her hands, using broken sandals on her hands for protection from the rocky ground. My heart broke. I reached for my key. Removing the ribbon from my neck, I placed it around hers. She beamed as though she had been given a treasure.

Subsequent trips revealed I had only seen bits and pieces of the struggles Africans in that area encounter on a daily basis. On my next trip, I brought a number of keys and ribbons. Placing them in the hands of children and adults, I explained the purpose of the key and let them know I would be praying for them. This insignificant item became a tool for God to use, reminding us to keep our eyes upon Him because His eyes are always upon us.

That day I learned it is okay to be afraid sometimes. I just can't let fear get in the way of what I am supposed to do.

## Chapter Five

### Don't Step on the Bugs (They Are God's Creatures Too)

As a kid growing up in Phoenix, Arizona, there were things to love and things to fear. On the "Love It" list were all the swimming pools available for kids. On the "Fear It" list were sidewalks so hot they would burn the skin right off your feet going to and from those great pools.

Also on the "Fear It" list were roaches. Not common kitchen roaches, but sewer roaches, known as water bugs: millions of brown, shiny, winged creatures that had a network of dwellings below the city. Typically, they were over two inches long. Their presence in a home said nothing about cleanliness or lack of it. I don't remember them being drawn to the kitchen especially, so we weren't sure what they ate. Some of us were convinced that they were meat eaters. We believed we were all in danger of awaking in the morning with fingers and toes nibbled by these creatures.

Roaches traveled the sewer lines and underground pipes, appearing in bathtubs, sinks and toilets at the appointed hour. Like the characters in monster movies, they came out only in the evenings. As kids, we sat with our feet under us on the couch watching evening TV, occasionally spotting a roach crawling up the opposite wall. They weren't hard to spot. Because of their size, one could catch your eye like a small dog hanging on the wall.

My sister Cathy was the only one brave enough to deal with them. We depended on her willingness to wage war with them night after night during TV time through our growing-up years. Then came the day when Cathy got older and was out with her friends in the evenings. The rest of us were left at the mercy of the brown creatures calling our place home. I still get chills thinking about it. Thankfully, we moved shortly after that.

With that background in place, fast forward twenty years into the future. I am now in Africa among a group of Americans traveling on a short term mission trip. One night we needed a place to stay after missing a flight. We

were hot and tired and desperately needed showers. We were told that a hotel just outside of town might be able to put all eighteen of us up for the night.

Even though it was dark when we pulled into the parking lot, we could tell this was an elegant place. The tall, carved wooden double doors slowly opened for us. Once inside our eyes were immediately drawn to a wide, winding red-carpeted staircase. It was magnificent. Deep brown wood banisters stood as sentinels on either side of the stairs and glistened from hand polishing. The ceilings were at least two stories high. Slowly rotating ceiling fans hung from long chains and moved the hot, sticky air imperceptibly, adding to the regal visual effect.

We stood like dazzled children, taking in our surroundings from the sparkling crystal chandeliers to the rest of the opulent but tasteful lobby. After an exciting week of dust and mud in the African bush, my friend Marjorie and I were not expecting this luxury. We were exhausted but excited to be able to sleep someplace elegant for the few hours until our flight. As a bonus, hanging on the walls were signed pictures of American presidents who had stayed there.

After checking in, we were anxious to see our rooms. We searched for the elevators. There were no elevators. We searched for the bellhops. There were no bellhops. However, simply climbing the beautiful red-carpeted staircase evoked images of plantation homes in the Deep South. Suddenly I was a southern belle ascending the stairs to a grand room on the third floor. Sweating profusely, I was giddy with excitement as I struggled to pull my luggage up the stairs.

Slightly out of breath, I put the old-fashioned metal key into the lock and went into the room, snapping on the light. Our large room seemed perfect. It had high ceilings and heavy hand-carved wood furniture. The beds appeared to be clean and comfortable. With an attached bathroom, it was almost like a hotel in America in 1950.

Preparing for bed, I thought about tomorrow's trip to Kenya. We would stay in a hotel where the water was treated. That meant we could brush our teeth with tap water. Tonight we would still use bottled water. As I pulled out my toothbrush and bottle of water, I saw something moving on the floor. It quickly disappeared under the bed. It appeared to be a large roach.

In that split second, I made a decision. The decision was that I didn't really see a roach. I had just imagined seeing something that simply wasn't there. To acknowledge it, meant I had to do something about it, and I was simply too tired. After the long day of travel and the last few hours of a van ride resembling the Tilt-A-Whirl ride at the fair, I was ready to shut out everything and drift off to sleep.

Then I saw it again. At least I hoped it was the same one. They all look alike. I was having difficulty maintaining my firm stance in Denial Land at that point.

As she set out her pajamas, my friend Marjorie spotted one and casually asked, "What is that?" She had no idea of the teeming masses of roaches probably nesting under the beds, out of sight, waiting until the lights went out.

I calmly said, "I don't know." That would be my position. I didn't know and I didn't see anything. Facing the mirror, I nervously poured water into the cup to brush my teeth when my eye caught movement in the mirror's reflection behind me on the wall above the beds. Slowly I turned around. As my eyes focused, they widened into huge bloodshot circles. I was looking at several roaches on the wall, running in different directions.

I finally managed to draw in enough air to whisper, "They are sewer roaches."

Images of roaches dropping from the ceiling into our laps or our beds as kids in Arizona rushed back into my mind's eye. I was sure I was going into a crisis moment. I needed a therapist. I needed my sister. Struggling to maintain my composure, I told Marjorie, "I am not staying in this room."

Never mind that all the doors had gaps under them so tall that roaches could come and go standing on their hind legs. I said, "I am going to the front desk to report it." In my sleep-deprived state, I thought a change of rooms would solve this problem. It never dawned on me that ours wasn't the only room with roaches. I noticed the roaches preceding me out the door into the hall. I shivered as I saw them slide under doors into other rooms. Down the amazing red-carpeted staircase I went, frantic but still feeling a bit buoyed by these beautiful surroundings.

The man at the front desk was sympathetic. He gently said, "There are few roaches, but they cause no harm. They avoid people." Clearly he hadn't met the roaches in our room. Before I left, one had just scooted over Marjorie's foot. It didn't appear to be avoiding people. Hotel personnel said they were sorry but we could sleep well and safe. Defeated, I headed back to the room.

Up the elegant red-carpeted staircase I went. The third floor seemed quite far away this time. On the way up, I breathlessly summoned some of the men traveling with us to help. Truthfully, I pounded on doors until two of them agreed to come to our room. Catching roaches is akin to herding chickens. Had I not been so tired, I would have been laughing as they chased the bugs around the room. It was hilarious!

Not surprisingly, they couldn't catch a single one. My heart sank when they said they also had them in their rooms. "It will be okay. They won't bother you." Obviously they were co-conspirators with the desk clerk. What they didn't

understand was that these were not ordinary bugs. These bugs dropped down on your bed at night and crawled on your face.

Once the men left, I told Marjorie again I was not staying in this room. She asked, "Why?" Just at that moment, a long, shiny, brown, winged roach dropped from the ceiling onto her bed with a thud and headed for her pillow. We looked into each other's bloodshot eyes, and without another word, began frantically throwing things in our suitcases. We loaded everything we owned, opened the door, and began descending the elegant red-carpeted staircase, dragging our heavy suitcases behind us.

In the lobby, we dropped down onto one of the lovely leather couches. We planned to spend the balance of the night there safely dozing, away from the army of roaches. It was only four hours before we were to leave for the airport. Apparently, I had spent most of the night on the elegant red-carpeted staircase and only had a few hours left for sleep.

One young man from the front desk asked us what we were doing. I told him the room was lovely, but we couldn't stay there with all the roaches. I said we would just doze on the couch.

He said, "So sorry, but you cannot sleep there." Fair enough. I promised that we would not sleep. We would just sit. Very seriously he replied, "Oh, but it is not possible." When he saw we meant business, he got the manager involved. The manager graciously told us to go back to our room. I felt like a child who had been chastised. Poor Marjorie. Her fight was gone. She sat beside me with her hands in her lap, staring at something on the wall across the lobby. Our traveling companions were asleep with their own roach buddies. There was no one to come to our aid.

Exhausted, sweaty and near tears, I knew I needed to be polite. All I could think of to do was smile and say "No, thank you." We were not budging. At that point, the staff had an impromptu meeting by the beautifully appointed front desk.

In a few minutes the desk clerk approached us with a set of keys. He said, "This room, fifth floor, will be better. Our best room. Your Presidents stay there. There is a cat on that floor that chases the bugs away. You go."

Grateful for a solution to this looming international crisis, we picked up our luggage, bags and totes. We began the climb up five flights on the elegant red-carpeted staircase, which by this time simply represented a terrific nuisance.

Totally exhausted, I juggled suitcases and pulled myself up the stairs by grasping the glistening banisters. That is when I found out they were glistening because they were sticky, probably from the polishing product used on them.

Completely grossed out, sweaty, tired, out of breath, and now sticky at the top of the stairs, I hunted for the cat to close it in our room.

“Here, kitty, kitty. Here, nice rodent-catching kitty.” I called. That cat was nowhere to be seen. This room didn't seem to have roaches, but we knew better. Simply because one doesn't see roaches doesn't mean they aren't there. There was the familiar gap under the door where they could come and go at will.

Beyond that, what made us think that cat would stay on the fifth floor when all the roaches were on the other four floors? I told Marjorie, “We have been duped by a gracious desk clerk probably accustomed to dealing with fussy American women.”

We were out of options. We agreed to sleep with the light on all night to fool the roaches into thinking it was daylight. Falling onto our beds fully clothed, we slept for the few remaining hours before we had to leave. It may have been the power of suggestion, but I felt things crawling on me and slept fitfully.

After a short nap, we raced out of the room with our still-packed luggage, practically rolling down the five flights of elegant red-carpeted stairs into the lobby and out to the van. That trip down the stairs in the daylight revealed a graveyard of roaches on the now not-so-elegant red-carpeted staircase. They didn't make it out of the way fast enough to avoid travelers and luggage of days past.

As we rode to the airport, we passed a large city dump. I saw makeshift shelters where people lived throughout the dump. I realized that I should have been thankful for what I had, which was a safe, beautiful room with a comfortable bed. Many people in the area had none of those things.

That day I learned that it is kinder to step around bugs than it is to step on them—both for me and the bugs. I also learned to be grateful for my blessings which I often take for granted.

## Chapter Six

### I Think I Can, I Think I Can

“I can’t take another step.” I told myself sucking in another huge breath. I needed to stop and rest. My face was beet red. I was sweating like a marathon runner, and my shoes were caked with mud, making walking difficult. The temperature was high, and the air was heavy with moisture. As my heart pounded in my ears, I wondered if I might have a heart attack. This was getting serious. I wasn’t sure I would actually make it to the top of this mountain. Step, gasp, step, gasp.

Fighting for air, I continued to climb the muddy path, very much like climbing a very steep stairway, only without the stairs. Slipping on the slick mud, I lost my footing frequently. At one point I went down on one knee, getting stuck in the mud.

If there is something I am good at, it is falling gracefully. Ask my family. They will happily share their favorite story about when mom took a tumble and recovered as though nothing happened. I have an entire repertoire of graceful *trips and falls* in my history, starting with the trip (literally) down the aisle after my wedding ceremony.

However, this particular fall in the mud would be difficult to get out of on my own. The mud was like trying to stand on ice, making getting up from the ground difficult. Someone had to come and pull me up. How embarrassing.

“You can do this, sister; it is but a short mountain,” chided one of the young men traveling with us. “The children up top are waiting.” I loved this guy for his sense of humor, but I wasn’t laughing this time. I smiled sweetly, thanked him for pulling me from the mud and continued to march.

“Okay, sure, heap on the guilt.” I thought. That is always a good motivator. Up ahead of me were the young man and his brother, their sister-in-law Irene who was my good friend, another American woman who made the trip with us, and a gentleman helping to carry the items up the mountain. They represented all shapes, sizes and ages. I couldn’t keep up with a single one of them.

In my defense, I am an Arizona girl. The dry air and flat terrain in our neighborhoods provides little challenge. If I wanted to, I could walk forever

under those conditions. Stick me half way up a mountain in humid, hot air, with slippery mud, and it is a different story.

Although a good excuse, it didn't explain my bad attitude. Still struggling to breathe, I began to think of what I might do to avoid having to continue climbing. "How can I get out of this?" I pondered.

My alternative was to simply stop. I could let the Africans who brought me finish the trip up the mountain and give away the gifts we had brought for the children. That meant I would either have to sit down right here in the mud and wait or walk alone back down the slippery, muddy path to the car at the base of the mountain. It would be hours before they returned for me. I was not so brave as to attempt that today. I might still have a heart attack as I slid down the mountain. No one would find me for hours.

I imagined the headlines in our newspaper: "Out of shape local woman dies on muddy mountain in Uganda, unable to keep up with her team." Of course, I knew that wasn't realistic, but neither was "I will start working out when I get home." Neither thought changed my present circumstances.

Pulling in what had to be my last breath on earth, I paused in the trek. Looking up to the top of the mountain I could see a tiny white building barely visible at the very top, almost in the clouds. Wait! It was in the clouds. Where was this place? Mount Kilimanjaro? Mount Rainer? "What have I gotten myself into here?" I questioned as I took another step. Gasp. Step. Gasp. Step.

"When will this end?" I said out loud. "I don't think I can go on." Everyone was ahead of me laughing and enjoying the climb. I hung back, feeling sorry for myself. Then I realized I was walking alone because they were probably tired of listening to me. I was also getting sick of hearing myself complain.

My mind wandered to the Bible's Old Testament passage in Numbers 9 containing God's instructions to the Israelites to pack up and move to the next location in the wilderness when His cloud lifted off their camp. They might have been there one or two days, a month or a couple years. They may have just gotten their household tents in order, finally, after their last move, when the cloud lifted again. Packing everything up, they began to march to their new destination. That life couldn't have been easy for them, but they did as the Lord commanded.

I had recently read that passage and marveled that there wasn't mention of grumbling in that chapter. They simply obeyed and continued to pack up and move time after time. There was plenty of grumbling in later chapters about many things, but in Numbers 9, not a mention of a complaint. Putting myself in the shoes of a wife and mother charged with household organization facing a move at any day, I wondered if I would have been the sole complainer as I was now. Nowhere in that passage did it say, "And behold, they

complained all the day long from sun up until nightfall.” It just wasn’t in Numbers 9.

“Did I ask you to move your entire household today?” I could almost hear God ask.

“No,” I answered. “You asked me to march up this mountain and hopefully brighten the lives of children isolated from the rest of the world. But it’s such a high mountain!”

“What right do you have to complain? Why don’t you just do what I am asking?” I could hear myself asking my own kids that same question. It wasn’t unreasonable.

This conversation was getting uncomfortable. The obvious answer was that I was simply being a brat. Of course, the climb was difficult. It was a mountain, after all. Sure, the heat and humidity were oppressive. It was Africa. What did I expect?

“Do you think I will transport you up to the top of the mountain with no effort on your part?” Sufficiently chastised, I was done complaining for the day.

I raised my eyes up from the muddy path to the surrounding area. The group was well ahead of me. On both sides of me I saw lush, vibrant green jungle vegetation, buzzing with little winged creatures doing whatever winged creatures do. The scenery was quite beautiful. I kept climbing.

At one point, I realized I was surrounded by trees with green seeds hanging from the branches. They were coffee beans. I was walking in a coffee grove in the clouds. Overwhelmed with the immense beauty, I paused to thank God for this opportunity. Negotiating the last few hundred feet, I crested the top of the mountain and happily saw my team and dozens of children.

The entire mountain top wasn’t as large as half a football field. A small, old school building sat to my right at the edge of a cliff on the far end of the flat area. The rocky school yard was in front of me. On all sides, the land simply ended in a sheer drop down the mountainside. There was no gentle slope, except for the path we had just come up, and that was far from a gentle slope. There was no visible village from this location. I guessed that the children in the low lying areas made the trek to school up the mountain every day.

“And here is our friend.” I heard the translator say. “She came here from America to meet the student whose fees are being covered. She is here to greet you from America!” Suddenly, the discomfort of sweaty clothing, stringy wet hair, difficulty breathing, and muddy feet seemed to melt away. These children were precious. Unlike the children in the valley villages, they didn’t wear school uniforms but wore old clothing, sadly in need of repair. School uniforms were probably too costly.

Small faces surrounded me. Both fascinated and afraid of me, I gestured to them to come close. "It's okay. Let's shake hands." I said to them. They crowded forward. I knew they wanted to touch my white skin. I held out my hand. Little ones touched my arm quickly with one fingertip then ran away laughing. The older ones actually shook my hand.

Someone began to sing, and the top of the mountain rang with laughter and song. We had brought a soccer ball for each of the schools we visited that year. One of the men pulled the ball out of a bag. The children laughed and clapped, jumping around from sheer joy. Their school had a ball! It was very exciting.

They began a game of catch, rotating children into the circle because there were too many to play at once. Many times the ball headed for the cliff before being rescued by a quick child so the ball didn't disappear down the mountain.

I asked one of the men if I could meet the little girl whom we sponsored from this school. One little girl from this village was able to attend school free because an American provided her with school fees. We had trekked up the mountain for this one little girl. Her head teacher found her in an empty classroom, hiding from us. She was sitting in a corner against the back wall when we went in. I looked at her and fell in love instantly.

This one little girl was the reason for the trip that took a whole day. This one little girl was the reason two Americans and four Africans climbed a mountain, past a coffee grove, high up into the clouds. This one little girl was worth more than a priceless treasure when it came to the Kingdom of Heaven. At that moment, I knew that this one little girl was worth anything we had to endure to let her know God loved her.

"Hi. I came to tell you that your sponsor loves you and is so happy to help you go to school." I sat in a small desk near her and gave her a doll I had brought for her. She didn't lift her head, but looked up with her big brown eyes. "God loves you too and sent us here to tell you that." The translator told her what I said. She simply stared, trying to be brave.

"Could I shake your hand?" I asked, really wanting to hug her instead. Knowing she would never allow that, I reached out my hand. She touched it and quickly pulled her hand back. It appeared to me that she wanted to crawl out of her skin to get away from us, so we said goodbye and left the room. Turning to wave at her as we left, I mentioned to my friend Irene that it was all worth it to get to see her. Irene agreed.

Outside a storm was building up over the mountains. The wind began to blow and rain began to fall. If this turned into a huge rainfall, we would have to postpone going back to the car and might not make it down the mountain before nightfall. We decided it was time to leave. Thankfully, we simply walked

and slid down in a gentle rain which kept us cool but didn't hamper our descent.

As we pulled away, I looked up toward the top of the mountain, marveling at its beauty and thanked God for the experience of meeting those children who seemed to live at the top of the world. I got a glimpse of how important that one little girl was to God. The truth is that each of us is equally important to Him.

That day I learned that no matter how difficult something seems, if I just take one step at a time, I can do far more than I think I can. I also learned that each person walking the earth is as precious to God as that one little girl, hiding in a classroom high on a mountain top.

## Chapter Seven

### Hang on to Your Seat on Field Trips

Vans are the preferred way to travel in Africa for tourist groups with modest means. They were perfect for our small group of missionaries. Several people can fit in them comfortably. Called “cabs,” they are very old mini vans that tend to billow smoke as they chug along the roads. They have very little padding in the seats and about the same amount of tread left on the tires. Windows are always open, rain or shine. On this particular day, our group was taking a van to the airport for our flight to Nairobi, Kenya, and eventually home.

The van was packed with people and luggage. We sat on our suitcases or had them at our feet or both. There were sixteen of us in an eleven passenger van. Crowded in together, people sat sideways in the seats and others had to have their hands on the ceiling just to keep their balance. We had become accustomed to the air being heavy with humidity and perspiration. Not a single one of us smelled like we had showered in a week. Open windows were a necessity.

As we laughed and shared stories, the driver was busy trying to start the van. His frustration increased with every attempt. One by one conversations died away as passengers’ attention was drawn to the clanking sound of the engine straining to start. A common characteristic of these vans was that if they started, they didn’t run long before they backfired, billowed smoke and died.

A woman giggled as she said, “Hopefully we will be able to have a less eventful trip out of the country than we had coming in.” We all agreed as our minds drifted to the late night trip into the country. We recalled the chilling experience of the after-midnight breakdown on a desolate, black-as-pitch highway. Being stranded was bad enough. Then someone made the mistake of turning on a flashlight. Every mosquito within miles was drawn to the open windows and succulent passengers. It was the stuff of which nightmares are made.

Reading our minds, another passenger happily said, "This is early in the morning, and we are not in danger of breaking down along a darkened highway." As if on cue, the van started, and passengers heaved a collective sigh of relief.

Soon we were chugging down the road, smoking and backfiring loudly enough to startle the birds roosting in the trees along the highway. Before we got out of town we watched in amazement as the driver stopped to pick up several more passengers. They squeezed in the front or sat on the floor. Packed in even more tightly, the discomfort level increased with each newcomer.

Because we were late leaving for the airport, we simply didn't have time for the van to break down. It happened anyway. On two occasions that day, we sat beside a hot African highway, swatting bugs, praying we wouldn't miss our plane. Everyone worked at maintaining a cheerful attitude.

The cheerful attitude slipped slightly as we realized we were losing precious time with this van. The decision was made to dispatch another van from the closest city to pick us up for the balance of the journey. That meant waiting an hour for a different van. We were hot and uncomfortable, but we interacted with people from the surrounding homes, and the time passed quickly. Eventually, a new (as in different) van came screeching around a corner and stopped by our disabled vehicle.

The driver was energetic and animated. "*Jambo!* I am very happy to see you!" he shouted as he began transferring our luggage. The feeling was mutual. After switching people and luggage to the new van, we resumed our journey.

"I will deliver you to the airport in plenty of time." he said proudly. We learned he had a bit of a reputation for on-time deliveries.

I paused for a moment to take in the sights on this road. Beautiful lush, green countryside was everywhere, punctuated with sounds of exotic birds and children's laughter. This road was well traveled by trucks and crowded flatbeds loaded with people hanging on for dear life. Interspersed throughout the traffic were dozens of bicycles carrying live chickens, bound at the feet, hanging upside down, squawking as they passed. The road had ruts from skinny tires and was full of deep pot holes. Dust billowed with every vehicle that passed. Dozens of people walked on both sides of this highway.

The women were dressed in long skirts which swept the ground as they walked. Turban-type cloths adorned their heads and matched their dresses. Their clothing was bright yellow, deep red, rich royal blue and vibrant green. They had a slow, laid-back lifestyle that allowed them to saunter peacefully along the roadway. Men were walking beside over-laden carts that seemed as though they might tip in any direction at any time. They used sticks to tap belligerent donkeys, urging them to keep going with their precious cargo of

fruit, sticks, onions or charcoal. Some people had large bowls of multi-colored fruit or sugar cane stacked high on their heads. Holding them with one hand as they walked gracefully like giraffes along the highway, they talked of the day's events in hushed voices. These are a gentle people, living a quiet life.

Enter our on-time driver, barreling through this scene, blowing his horn every three seconds. The vehicle backfired repeatedly and belched smoke. Our driver continually shouted, "Move! Move! Get out of the way!" through his open window. Dust and smoke hung in the air behind us like a bad memory. As we passed, pedestrians were startled and some became angry. Donkeys barked as the peaceful countryside was assaulted by this intrusion.

Some in our group shouted, "We're sorry!" as we passed these people. They couldn't hear us because the horn continued to blow and the vehicle continued to backfire.

Inside the van, we grabbed anything fastened down to keep from being tossed from our seats onto the strangers sitting on the floor. We were bumping heads, sliding off luggage, and becoming uncomfortably familiar with our seat mates. This van didn't break down the entire way to the airport. More than once I had to remind myself that this was better than being stranded along the highway.

As we entered the city, we began to encounter the roundabouts. Roundabouts are like your algebra teachers--you either love them or you hate them. Roundabouts are circles in the center of intersections that move traffic smoothly through the area as long as everyone understands the rules. Basically, the person already in the roundabout has the right of way. The rules may be a bit different in Africa. Four or five vehicles can ride through a two-lane roundabout side by side because they create their own lanes. Additionally, there seemed to be an unspoken rule that vehicles must drive as fast as possible through the roundabout. Getting into the roundabout is as exciting as getting out of one. We drove around the circle multiple times to work our way into a lane that allowed us to exit. It was a dizzying ride. Our passengers were reaching across to the vans next to us, a mere foot away, shaking hands with other passengers. We laughed. We cried. We prayed. We screamed. It was just like a ride at an amusement park.

Finally, we screeched into the airport and slid to a stop. Someone ran in to ask them to hold the plane. All of the hair-raising travel on the open highway and through the roundabouts was about to pay off.

What was that someone had said? We missed the plane? Impossible! We watched the plane taxi down the runway and lift into the sky without us. That meant many things but ultimately it dawned on each of us that we would need to get back in the van with the on-time driver, leaving the airport to wait

somewhere for the next flight the following morning. Exhausted and disappointed, we climbed into the van, a bit worried about our next adventure with our driver.

Ask any missionary about their experiences, and you will hear amazing stories of wonderful breakthroughs as they toiled in the field of their assignment. Keep asking, and you will hear rich, funny or tragic stories tucked away in their memories. Those are the ones that wear them out or buoy them up as they work tirelessly following Jesus' mandate to spread the Gospel to the nations. Your missionaries need your prayers. They are on very long field trips and surely could use your help along the way.

That day I learned that some field trips are just better than others. Enjoying the journey is half the fun--as long as you hold onto your seat.

## Chapter Eight

### Sing, Sing, Sing

The pastor in the village church asked, “Who would like to lead out in worship this morning?” I immediately looked down at my shoes like a third grader, hoping he wouldn’t see me.

“Please, please, please don’t call on me,” I silently pleaded. In this village church with standing room only, I couldn’t imagine anything worse than starting the song service in front of all these beautiful Africans and my peers.

On second thought, there were worse things. I could be the chicken hobbled in the corner, waiting to be sent home with me as a thank you gift for helping village students with school fees. It was given to me with pomp and circumstance by a young man, and I knew I was honored to have been given that gift. That poor chicken squawked on and off during the whole service.

In response to the pastor’s question, a woman in the back began to sing. She had a beautiful voice. I assumed she was the worship leader. The congregation joined her. Voices blended and became stronger as they sang a hand-clapping song which I didn’t understand. As the rest of the people began to sing, I realized they all sang that well.

“These people sound like the choir.” I thought to myself. There was not one person hitting different notes from the others. There was not one person louder than the others. The men’s and women’s voices blended with the children’s voices making a beautiful sound almost beyond words. I could hear three-part harmony from people whom I was sure had no formal music training. The music swept me up and encouraged me to sing with them. The chicken even appeared to be singing.

They moved from song to song effortlessly because when one song ended, someone would start another song, and they all joined in. The music of Africa, particularly in the churches and schools, is simply a gift from God. They don’t even know how good they are. If I could sing like that, I would be insufferable, making sure I got to sing a solo at every gathering I attended. Perhaps that is why I don’t have the gift of a great voice.

The church service was to start at nine o'clock that morning, but we didn't reach the church until ten thirty. Having started late, I assumed the worship part of the service would be cut short to allow the speakers to finish in time to avoid interfering with the lunch hour. That is how it is frequently done in my country. Getting out of church on Sunday morning in time to beat the other Christians to the best seats in the restaurants has developed into an art form in some communities. That is not how it is done in Africa. They sing until they feel they have connected with God before they move on to the teaching. Everything about churches in Africa amazes me. They are probably very close to how the New Testament churches operated back in Apostle Paul's day.

The music died down, and the pastor came to the podium. His wife interpreted for us as he spoke. He thanked everyone for coming and promised a treat since "our friends from America" have joined us this morning. "Our sister Claudia and our sister Marjorie are here again to bring us a word from God." Many people in the congregation recognized us because we had been there before. We had a number of friends in that village, which made the public speaking part easier.

Just then, the chicken started squawking. Too easily distracted by things like tethered chickens, I tried not to turn and look at it. I kept telling myself, "Focus. You have to focus." Again the chicken let out a very loud screech that almost made me go over and untie it. That would have been a very grievous mistake since the chicken was a gift from people who could not afford to be giving away their chickens.

It was a great honor to receive a chicken. I needed to be respectful about it. By this time, the chicken had tumbled over on its side and couldn't get up because its feet were still tethered. It squawked even louder.

"Would you go over and set the chicken up on its feet?" I whispered to one of the African English-speaking pastors who had joined us.

With a question on his face, he asked, "What?"

I repeated my request. "Would you go over there and set the chicken up on his feet? He tumbled over and he can't get up." He looked at me as though I had worms crawling out of my ears. He simply laughed, thinking I was joking.

Clearly, he didn't understand that chicken was my pet. Pets are a luxury most Africans can't afford. One didn't pick up tethered chickens and set them on their feet because they were uncomfortable. Ultimately, one of the men picked up the chicken and put it outside the mud walls of the church. It squawked now and then, but I couldn't see it.

Standing at the podium, I greeted everyone. My talk was interpreted into Lugandan and Swahili by two interpreters. My message that day, from Acts 3,

was about the lame man begging for offerings at the gate of the temple called the Gate Beautiful.

“He had been there for years and probably had established himself as somewhat of a leader among his comrades.” I told them. “He certainly had a choice location since the people had to pass directly by him to get into the temple. He had been there forty years. His friends carried him there each morning and carried him home each evening.”

Continuing my thought, “He might have accepted the fact that he would live and die there, begging at the gate of the temple. It was a decent life. It could have been better, but he knew what to expect each day, and he was comfortable in that prestigious spot.”

That was before he asked for alms from the Apostles Peter and John, going into the temple one day. In response they told him they had no money but they would gladly share what they had. Peter told him to rise up and walk, extending his hand toward the beggar to help him up.

Wondering what might have gone through the beggar’s mind when Peter first offered a hand to help him, I said, “Maybe he hesitated, thinking he had it pretty good there in his important spot at the Gate Beautiful. It had taken many years to work up to that ideal location. He would be giving up that perfect place to take a chance on being healed. This was the only life he had ever known. Did he think about it for a moment, weighing the pros and cons? The Bible doesn’t address that. I am only guessing about that part, but I know he took the help Peter offered and jumped up.”

Imagining the sights and sounds at that moment, I said, “As the beggar leapt up, the coins fell from his lap, clinking on the bricks and rolling away. They got picked up by other beggars. He didn’t care. He had been healed! The Bible says he was leaping around, walking, and praising God.”

“Sometimes we become comfortable with our circumstances. We may not be lame, begging at the Gate Beautiful; but we may be satisfied with our own routines, going daily to the shop downtown, or sitting in the fourth row on the left at church. I’m like that. When I get comfortable, my attitude is one of ‘leave me alone, I’m fine.’ ”

I challenged them to question if they were comfortable with the way things were in their lives or if they might want to trust God to move them to a higher place spiritually.

“Maybe He wants you to teach a class or go to a foreign land. Maybe He wants you to go to a Bible study each week—or start a Bible study. Maybe he simply wants to have you increase your Bible reading and prayer time. Be brave. It takes faith to reach for His hand and trust Him. He has great plans for your life. Take that first step to trust Him.” Of course, I was speaking to myself

as well as the congregation. I led the people in a prayer that we might all find the boldness to do what Jesus asked when he said that we were to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, starting with surrendering our lives and trusting God to lead us in this new adventure. “Amen” rang out throughout the little building. We ended with another song.

Just about that time, the chicken seemed to become unhappy with his position outside the church and began to squawk loudly. I whispered to one of the children that the chicken was tired of waiting and must be complaining. The child said, “He is not complaining.” I wondered how she knew that.

“Someone set him free! He is leaping and walking and praising God!” she shouted, dancing around, pointing and laughing. I glanced up and saw my chicken scooting off toward the other chickens scratching around in the dirt, “singing” as it went. Leave it to a little child to grasp what it means to be set free and be grateful for it.

On our way back to town, I asked my African friend Irene if she would have kept the chicken for me. I had already named it Harvey. “Would you be willing to let Harvey live in your front yard?”

“Oh, yes, Sister, I would take care of it for you.” She smiled, patting my arm. “I would have cleaned it all up and made you a fine dinner as a going away gift.” I was glad Harvey got away, although that didn’t mean someone else didn’t have him for dinner that week. Food is scarce in the villages. Chickens are saved for special occasions.

A bit troubled about Harvey’s fate, I was reminded that sometimes all you can do, when you don’t know what to do, is sing. I began to hum one of the songs from church. Everyone joined in, and we sang as though we meant it, bouncing along the highway on the way to the motel.

That day I learned to look for reasons to be joyful. The beggar’s reason was his healing. Just waking up in the morning can be a good reason to leap around and praise God.

## Chapter Nine

### Cover Your Mouth When You Cough (The Lions Might Hear You)

On my most recent trip to Africa, after spending a week working with children and teaching in villages, our missionary group packed our luggage and left for the wildlife reserve known as the Masai Mara. Getting there from Nairobi involved a six-hour drive over rutted roads in blistering heat.

As we sped along the highway through the sweltering, drought-stricken Great Rift Valley, the passengers were commenting about how uncomfortable they were. The windows were open and a hot breeze blew in to temporarily dry perspiration running down red faces.

Our guide Charlie said, "It has been a very long time since the Valley had enough rain to make a difference in the drought conditions." He pointed out skeletons of cattle which had succumbed to the lack of water. The land was parched and dry. The only visible signs of life were scavenging birds.

Even though the rest of my traveling companions were uncomfortably hot, I was freezing. I had contracted a virus carried into our camp by a fellow traveler. One by one, team members came down with a cough that lasted a few days, then went away. It appeared that no one would become really ill from this disease, except the young man who brought it in. When I started to cough, I thought "This will go away in three days, just as it did with everyone else." I was now on my fifth day of coughing and had a high fever. I lay in the back seat of the van, covered in discarded jackets and still couldn't get warm. When we reached camp and got our tent assignments, I told the group, "I'm going to go lay down for a few minutes" and dragged my luggage to my tent where I immediately collapsed on one of the cots. Later I made it to dinner but couldn't eat. I walked slowly back to my tent, not realizing I wouldn't emerge from that tent for thirty-six hours.

The rest of that day, night and the following day are a blur. I remember coughing, showering frequently, fully clothed, to bring down my fever, and falling back onto the cot. We didn't know what the disease was, but we knew I was quite ill.

I was grateful when my roommate gave me some antibiotics she had brought with her. They were to be taken twice a day. Looking forward to the next dose kept me semi-conscious. I didn't want to fall asleep and miss a dose.

As I lay there vague images drifted in front of me--my roommate coming in and going to bed; people coming in to check my temperature and talking to me. I couldn't understand them. I heard daytime sounds and nighttime sounds mixed together. Still not comprehending time, I took a pill every time the clock read eight. While I can usually find humor in almost anything, there was nothing funny about my situation.

Burning with fever, still coughing, lying in my cot as darkness fell, I drifted in and out of sleep. Suddenly I thought I heard something unusual outside my tent. The sound jerked me into consciousness and made my heart pound. I held my breath, straining to hear it again. It sounded like a growl, but I couldn't be sure. Struggling to stop coughing, I realized I was hearing the low, rolling growl of a very large cat. I froze. I was inches away from the source of the terrifying sound since the canvas wall of the tent was by my head. The sound was so close; it felt as though he were whispering in my ear.

The only explanation for that sound was that a lion had gotten into the camp and was outside my tent! All that separated us was a thick canvas wall of the tent structure. Even as sick as I was, I knew canvas couldn't withstand a lion's huge claws.

Other camps where we had stayed over the years were protected by electrical fences to keep large wildlife away from campers. The selling point here was that this camp was a natural environment. Instead of electrically charged fences, Masai warriors from the nearby tribe provided security for the tourists. They were hiding in strategic places throughout the camp to catch unwanted intruders. When I walked to my tent the first day, I was startled to see three Masai warriors crouched down behind some low shrubbery along the pathway. Frankly, their appearance frightened me, but I found out later they were doing their job.

Apparently tonight they had missed the entrance of this particular lion. I held my breath as long as I could but then resumed the relentless coughing. With each cough, I felt as though I were saying, "Here big kitty, kitty. I'm in here. Come and get dinner." As I coughed, his growl got closer. I could literally hear him breathing on the other side of the canvas. I must have appeared to be wounded prey to him. Who was I kidding? I was wounded prey.

I recalled our guide Charlie mentioning one old, fearless lion who insisted on creating new ways to sneak into the camp. It would appear that tonight he was successful in slipping past the Masai warriors. I feared that my coughing was drowning out the sound of the low growl from the lion, masking the danger

lurking in the shadows. Perhaps I could call for help. While the lion would hear me clearly, would the warriors hear me in time? I was pretty certain they couldn't get to me as quickly as the lion could.

In that moment it appeared that my life might hang upon the capriciousness of one African lion. People say when one faces death, their life passes in front of them. Nothing like that happened on this still African night. Instead I listened to the sounds of tree frogs and monkeys, and the lion's low growl. Counting my blessings, I prayed.

The strangest thing happened next. I experienced an unusual quietness within me. Even if I succumbed to whatever this disease was or if the lion came through the wall and carried me off, it would be okay. I didn't want either to happen especially, but if it did, it would be okay somehow. I can't explain it, but it was real. I was no longer terrified of the lion or this disease. Realizing I had no control over either, and knowing God *was* in control, eliminated the anxiousness I had experienced for several days.

This reverie was shattered when I heard a loud "ROAR" from the lion. I expected to see a huge paw and sharp claws ripping through the canvas. Instead, I heard shouts and chants from the Masai warriors coming to rescue me. They had detected the lion as he allowed himself the pleasure of licking his lips over his good fortune.

The agile warriors were behind him before he realized it. They were armed only with lion clubs (no pun intended) but no other weapons except their ability to shout fiercely. I listened as their shouts came closer to my tent and then faded farther and farther away toward the outskirts of the camp. I dropped into a fever induced sleep. It was indeed a good day. I was still sick but alive.

The following day the team left camp. My fever had broken overnight, and I was slightly better. At breakfast, I overheard talk that they had considered airlifting me out to a Kenyan hospital. Thankfully, they decided to get me back to the States instead.

As we were leaving, we did one more game drive. Out on the savannah, underneath an acacia tree we encountered that old lion. Our guide told me he was the one in the camp the night before. Our eyes met briefly as we drove by. I got the distinct impression that he was sorry to see me leave.

That day I learned that covering my mouth when I coughed didn't keep the lion away. Knowing God could cover the lion's mouth, like He did when Daniel was in the lion's den, was much better anyway.

## Chapter Ten

### *You Can Do Great Things*

Standing in the small village church in Uganda, East Africa, with my eyes closed, I could have easily mistaken my surroundings for a church in America. Behind me, the parishioners exuberantly sang an American worship song. They engaged in three-part harmony that sounded like I imagined the music of Heaven must sound. In front of me, the instruments resonated as though professionals stroked the strings on guitars. I stopped singing and simply listened, lost in the message of the song.

Overcome by sheer joy, memories of the people who had a part in this moment began flooding through my mind. I sat down as young men and women continued to play, and people continued to sing. My mind quickly traced the steps that led us to this point.

It began when I was standing in front of my home town church in Arizona, excitedly talking. “The people we met were unbelievably kind and gracious,” I reported. “It appeared to me that they would do anything we asked of them during our stay. Their love toward us was almost tangible.”

My friend Marjorie and I had recently returned from a trip to Africa, and Pastor Dwight had given us some time in the evening service at church to talk about missions. I showed pictures, spoke about the Heavenly-sounding music, and talked about the dire need to send kids to school.

Marjorie spoke next. “Our kids want hand-held games and high-tech toys. African kids just want the chance to go to school. To kids standing outside school grounds there, school was a treasure only available to wealthy families.” Marjorie explained, “In reality, school is the only way to assure that some of them will have a future.” Then she talked about surprises we encountered and tragedies we witnessed while there. We shared some of the funny events that always seemed to happen on mission trips and were ready to end on a light note.

Then I remembered the request from a village pastor that we bring his church a guitar for worship when we returned to Africa again. I had told him we would talk to the people about it. Frankly, I didn’t expect to get much

response, but I would mention the need. Not that it wasn't important. Certainly it was a reasonable request. I thought about the fact that people have their own children to feed and house and send to school. Instruments might sound like a frivolous thing to already-financially strapped folks.

True to my word, I brought it up that night as the service ended. "At the village churches, worship instruments consist of hollowed out logs played by hitting them with sticks." I stated. "They also have small, handmade drums played by people sitting on the floor. While I find the instruments enchanting in village churches, they do not have access to instruments that actually produce music. Theirs only keep the beat."

Now for the big question, "We have had a request from a pastor for someone to give their church a guitar to use in worship. He has a Master guitarist in his congregation, but there is no guitar to play."

Ignorantly I said, "If anyone is interested in providing a guitar for this village church, a donation of thirty dollars will enable me to purchase one. I will figure out how to get it to Africa." Then we ended the service.

As people filed out of church, two men approached us. Bob and Bill had been friends for years and frequently got together with their wives, spending an evening with other musicians, playing guitars. These men knew their way around guitars.

"Where are you going to get a guitar for thirty dollars?" Bob asked.

"I don't know. I think I saw one on line for thirty dollars." I couldn't remember exactly where. "I don't know." I repeated.

Bill was next. "How good was it?"

"I don't know."

They might as well have asked me which club to use on the ninth tee at the local golf course, or how to increase the gigs on a hard drive. There are many things I don't understand, but tonight's ignorance involved guitars. After a lengthy conversation in which we established that I knew even less than nothing about guitars, the men left, plotting their next move, determined to get a guitar to Africa.

They were driven in their quest to find the highest quality guitar for God's people. They factored in how well it would travel and what the tropical climate would do to it once it had been subjected to the unrelenting humidity.

Two weeks later, Bob stopped me in church one morning and said, "You will be surprised at what we are thinking of doing." I was sure I would be. I was still surprised that these two amazing guys got so excited about the idea of sending a guitar to Africa.

Later Bill reported back that they had raised almost enough money for a guitar and only needed to raise \$200 more. I assumed they were in pursuit of a

gold-plated instrument for that kind of money. I might have settled for one for thirty dollars somewhere, although I still couldn't remember where I saw that.

When the men committed to finding a guitar, they had asked me to find out from my pastor friend in Africa who the recipient was. I was able to tell them he was a former professional entertainer who performed throughout Africa, playing and singing for huge crowds. He was referred to as a Master. Having tasted all the world had to offer, he now had no wealth, and his health was failing. He had returned to his home to be with the people he loved.

He had retired near the small village where we ministered and longed to have a guitar to use in church worship services. He had prayed for years for just the right guitar which would help people draw closer to Jesus in song.

It was the second part of his prayer that that still bears fruit in Africa today. He told God that if he got a guitar, he would teach as many people as possible how to play. He was determined to spend the rest of his life giving away the gift of his incredible talent. Now he knew God had given him the gift in the first place. He was grateful when he heard that two gentlemen in Arizona were working on a guitar for him. He continued to pray for just the right guitar.

A few weeks later, Bob and Bill approached me. Bob started by saying, "We have our guitar. It is a high-quality guitar. Only the best musicians in America can afford these. You know ones like..." and he listed names of well-known singers who had that brand of guitar. He was right. I was surprised. It was a very high-end, very expensive guitar. Nothing but the best would do for them, and they didn't stop until they had found the perfect guitar.

Bill talked about the problems they had envisioned when they discussed getting it to Africa. "A lightweight case isn't going to withstand the handling nor will it withstand the climate changes." They had thought of everything. He went on, "We have been talking with the man at the Music Store downtown, and he is as excited about this project as we are. He offered to help." I was amazed at what I heard next.

Apparently this gentleman formerly traveled with a well-known singing group. I was thrilled to even think a member of that group lived in our town. Because he traveled around the world, he had to have a case that would withstand traveling mishaps and every type of climate change. His was a professional case specifically engineered to protect instruments from the elements. He said he would like to send the guitar to Africa in his professional case!

By this time, I was already astounded that Bob and Bill had found the perfect guitar. I was speechless to learn it would be going to Africa in a case that had toured the world with one of my favorite groups. I thought about the

African's prayer that God would send just the right guitar to use in ministry. Then it hit me.

God chose Bill and Bob and the man at the Music Store to put together the perfect gift. He knew these particular men wouldn't be satisfied with mediocre or mundane items to be used in His service. He knew they wouldn't settle for a thirty dollar guitar found at a pawn shop. God must have hand-picked these gentlemen for a specific purpose--to bring worship music to an entire section of the country of Uganda!

What I thought was an afterthought to our service when I asked for a donation for a guitar, was apparently a part of a grand plan already formed in the mind of God. He had heard the fervent prayer of the sincere man in a small village in Africa and answered it by putting wings to the feet of three gentlemen in Arizona. He used each of them to bring about the answer to that prayer. What an incredible thought!

The guitar did indeed make it to Africa into the hands of the Master guitarist. I heard that when he opened the case and saw the guitar, he was so overcome with emotion that he dropped to his knees, unable to speak. He treated that guitar as though it were a priceless treasure, which of course it was. Only a Master guitarist would recognize the depth of wonder in that guitar.

As he promised, he taught many youth and adults to play. Bill and Bob even sent a second, less fancy guitar so the students could learn from the Master as he played and demonstrated for them.

From the time the Master received the guitar until his death, he made sure he was at the churches' services throughout the area. People living in villages so far back in the bush that they might never have heard such angelic sounds were blessed by music from the fingers of the Master as he played the priceless gift.

He taught as many students as possible with his time left on this earth. Those students taught other students, who taught others. The river of music from the Master continues to flow through Uganda today.

As I stood in the village church that Sunday morning, far back in the tangles of trees and bushes in the jungle, I thought of Bob and Bill and the man at the Music Store. I thought of the Master guitarist, now buried outside this very church, and his plea to God for the perfect guitar. I thought of how God's ways and thoughts are higher than our thoughts. I marveled at how something tossed out as an afterthought in a church in Arizona had the potential to become a blessing to thousands of people in a country half way around the world.

And I am still speechless.

That day I learned that God hears the prayers of His people and is willing to use us to help answer them. What a concept—teaming up with our God to bring His answers to the prayers of His people!

*Note from the author: As I write this story today, I am writing with a heavy heart. My friend Bill in this story died this week. We rejoice that he is in Heaven, but those of us here still grieve. I pray that Bill's family is comforted somewhat by knowing that his life touched so many others as Bill, Bob and the man from the Music Store gave this gift of love to bless Africa.*

## Chapter Eleven

### Take Your Medicine

#### (Part I)

“One shirt only, please,” Marjorie told the children, “so everyone gets one.” She had been surrounded by dozens of pushing, shoving children as she handed out new tee shirts to these inhabitants of a mountaintop village. She had noticed some of them putting the shirts on wrong side out and backwards to hide the print on the front. They thought they could fool her. As children pushed and shoved to get close to her, one of them bumped into her. She fell to the ground, hitting her back on a rock.

The narrow road she had been standing on was flanked on one side by a cliff that dropped straight down to the valley floor. From my vantage point, I thought she might tumble down the mountainside.

“Oh no!” I shouted as she slipped and fell on wet mud on the road.

“Are you okay?” someone else called out to her.

Typical of Marjorie, she worried that the shirts she was holding would get muddy. She struggled to hand them off to another adult. We were more concerned about her quick descent down the mountainside, out of our reach. “I’m okay,” she assured us, “just take the shirts before they get trampled.”

Someone grabbed the shirts and someone helped her up. She couldn’t straighten up fully. Watching her, I knew she was clearly in pain.

“I will give you an aspirin when we got back to the room.” I promised.

She knew how badly she had injured her back. “That isn’t going to help. I really landed hard. I didn’t pack the last of the pain pills from my doctor either.” she whispered, trying not to breathe deeply. Apparently even breathing was painful. She has had frequent problems with her back, and her doctor had given her some pills to take after a back injury until she could get in to see him.

The bumpy ride down the mountain was a painful experience. With every rut in the road, her back went into a spasm. She clearly needed to lie down as soon as we got to the hotel. Our shared room was on the second floor. Climbing

stairs caused excruciating pain. There was nothing anyone could do for her except, of course, pray that her back would heal. Pray we did, individually and as a group. We prayed that night and the next day and night. We prayed the following morning.

I began to feel as though I needed to do something else to help, something tangible. I asked everyone on our team if they had brought any pain relievers they might be able to share. No one brought anything but the mild over-the-counter pain relievers I had.

“What can I do to help you?” I asked her when I saw her stir, knowing she was awake.

“The muscles in my back have to relax,” she mumbled, “or I am not going to be able to get out of bed.” Simply talking was painful.

“How about if I find a doctor and take you there? You could get something stronger than the over-the-counter stuff. Would that help?”

“I can’t move enough to get out of bed. I know I can’t get down the stairs.” she told me through her pain.

Oh, yes, the stairs. Constructed of marble, there was something about those stairs. I had made many trips up and down them since we arrived. Several times I slipped and fell as I went up. My shins were so bruised they were black and blue and various shades of green. Going down those stairs was not a good idea in her condition.

I found one of our African friends and explained the situation. He said he wasn’t sure what to do but he would “inquire of his friends for a solution.” Later that day he asked me if I would be willing to go with him into town to a pharmacy to see if someone there might help.

“Yes, of course. When can we go?” We left immediately. His car was in the motel parking lot. As we drove through the gate onto the street, I noticed the armed guard at the entrance. As usual, his rifle was in his hands, ready for trouble. We showed my motel key as identification to leave and were on our way. Thus began another adventure which was about to take a couple turns I hadn’t expected.

This was not my first trip to Africa, but on each trip, I marveled at how everyone seemed to know everyone else. Our first stop was along the road to talk with people walking beside our car. After speaking with three groups of people, my friend reported, “There is a pharmacy in town near the coffee exchange where we might find help.”

“Oh, good!” I exclaimed. This was going to be easier than I thought. Driving on the wrong side of the road, he parked beside the coffee exchange. Without a word, my friend jumped out and disappeared into a nearby doorway. Unsure whether or not I should follow him, I sat in the car waiting.

Never having been separated from my group before, I was a bit uncomfortable. This daring stop in town in a foreign country, where I couldn't speak the language, did hold an element of intrigue. The men at the coffee exchange looked at me as though I were out of place, which I was. I was fascinated by the trucks hauling huge cloth bags of coffee beans. The long, heavy bags were taken off the trucks by two men and hung on a large hook to be weighed. In dire need of repair, the bags leaked coffee beans into the truck, onto the ground and below the scales as they were weighed. The entire place smelled wonderful, like the comforting scent at our little coffee shop in my home town.

By the time I became comfortable with my surroundings, my friend returned. Greeting his friends at the coffee exchange, he drove to a building two doors away. This time we both got out. "Follow me."

He led me into a very small room with a long counter. Florescent lights flickered in the ceiling. Behind the counter were multiple shelves with bottles of medicines, much like those seen in pharmacies in the U.S. English was the predominant language on the bottles. People crowded close to the counters, waving scraps of paper and shouting. The scene resembled pictures I have seen of the stock exchange when the morning bell sounded.

After pulling me up to the counter, my friend spoke quickly to the pharmacist who listened then shook his head "No. No." The long pause that followed as they looked into each other's eyes was just strange. I don't know if my friend thought he could change the pharmacist's mind with a look, but it wasn't working.

They both turned to me and waited. Sensing I needed to say something important, I talked about my friend who just needed a muscle relaxant so she could get up and walk around. After eloquently stating my case, interpreted by my friend, I finished with "thank you," and smiled at the man behind the counter.

"No." the pharmacist said emphatically. I didn't expect that. On the other hand, did we just ask him to give us a prescription drug without a prescription? If so, I understood his reaction.

Pushing our way through the crowd back out the door, I asked, "What just happened? Does this mean we won't get any medicine for Marjorie?"

In an effort to reassure me, he said, "No, don't worry, sister. We will find just the right thing to help our friend."

"Should we go someplace else? Can we only get medicine at a pharmacy? Shouldn't there be a doctor involved in this process?" I asked him, trying not to sound pushy. Deep in thought, he didn't answer.

We got back in the car and drove to another part of town, far away from the comforting scent of coffee. This section of town had a completely different atmosphere. This street had goats being loaded into trucks. The animals were loud, aggressive and smelly. Driving past them slowly, my friend appeared to be looking for an address.

Satisfied that he had found it, he parked the car close to the goats. "Follow me." he said, waving his hands toward a small doorway. Inside the dark doorway I saw a flight of stairs going straight up.

"These people must have really small feet," I commented as we hiked the stairs. Narrow and steep, they were difficult to navigate. Happy to reach a landing and rest, I was dismayed that he turned the corner and continued to climb. Half way up this flight, I saw people sitting on the stairs. They were wrapped in blankets, held napkins over their mouths, coughed and cried. Clearly they were sick, and I felt instantly sorry for them. I started to pray for the people on the stairs. We came to another landing, turned the corner to continue to climb and found more people sitting on the stairs. These people were also ill. I silently prayed for each of them as I walked by them.

Arriving at the final landing, I caught my breath as we entered a small room. This was a doctor's office waiting room, full of people. The people on the stairs must have been in line waiting to see the doctor. Instantly, I was ashamed that we had walked past all these seriously ill people and would get in to see the doctor first. What nerve we had as Americans!

We were shown into a small office with a desk and an examining table. The doctor sat behind the desk, giving instructions to a man with hands crippled from arthritis.

He turned to look at us as we came in. Although I didn't know why, I got the impression he was expecting us.

"What is your ailment?" he asked in broken English, heavily accentuated with Lugandan.

"Oh, it's not me." I said quickly, trying to avoid being told to climb up on the table. "It is my friend."

"Where is your friend?"

"She is in the hotel, unable to move or get out of bed."

"Why is this?" he asked, still not understanding my purpose for being there.

"Two days ago, she slipped and fell, hurting her back. She has serious back problems several times a year if she falls or twists her back."

"Is it broken?" he asked.

"No, she has problems with the muscles in her back, which get bad if she falls."

He asked the important question next. “And what do you wish me to do about this?”

In America, this request would have been forbidden, but I pictured Marjorie in the dark room, in bed, in pain and blurted out my request. “I would like to have a muscle relaxant that will help her become mobile again. None of the aspirin we brought from America works for her.”

“I must see her first.”

“I understand, Doctor, and I am honored that you even consider my request. However, Marjorie can’t get out of bed and down the stairs to the car. She is in too much pain.” Giving him an option, I went on to say, “If you could prescribe medicine for her so she can get out of bed and come to see you in two days, would that be something you would be able to do?”

He looked into my eyes for an uncomfortable moment. Then he consulted with the person who was in the front office. After more thought, he asked, “How is she built?”

“I’m sorry. ‘How is she built?’ I’m afraid I don’t understand.” All I could think of was that God built her. That’s how she was built.

“Built. Built. What is her build?”

Oh, I got it. “She is built like me, around the same weight, but a little taller.”

“And what do you weigh?”

For a moment I wondered if I should give him my true weight or the weight on my driver’s license. They rarely matched. I went with the truth because I realized he was trying to put together the proper dose for Marjorie’s build. Then, out of nervousness, I began to ramble. “Marjorie and I look almost the same. In fact, people often get us mixed up.” I thought that was a funny anecdote because it was true. He wasn’t amused.

He scribbled on a prescription pad and handed it to me. “Two days. Your friend will return to my office.”

“Yes, Doctor, I will see that she is here.” I couldn’t see her sitting in that line on those stairs in two days. However, a promise is a promise; and if she could move, I would have her there. We went back through the office and down the stairs. I felt such pity for the people on the stairs and asked God to heal each of them before they ever got to the top step into the doctor’s office.

Back at the car, my friend said, “We will go to the pharmacy now.” We went back to the original pharmacy. My friend became one of the people waving a paper in the air. After paying for the prescription, we left, overjoyed that Marjorie would be feeling better soon. We drove back to the motel to give her the good news.

Pulling into the gated parking area, we were stopped by a guard. I showed him my motel key to identify us. He wouldn't let us in the gate. I became aware of a buzz of activity all around. Scanning the parking lot, I saw at least twenty guards with large rifles, milling around the entrance to the property. Twenty more guarded the main doors and were posted throughout the compound. For some reason, I thought it wise to slip the medicine into my purse so it wasn't seen. It occurred to me that we had done something wrong and had been caught. This many guards were truly overkill for a prescription violation.

The guards ordered us out of the car and began a thorough search of the interior. One searched my friend, but no one searched me. One guard took my purse and opened it, rummaging around in it, clearly looking for something. Thankfully, it wasn't the medicine because he handed the purse back intact.

"What is going on?" I asked my friend.

"It is best not to talk." he whispered.

I began to get really nervous. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead. My mouth went dry. I averted my eyes from the guards as though I were guilty of something. I didn't know what we did and couldn't understand why all the guards were here now when only one was in the guard house this morning. After hushed conversations among the guards, we were permitted to enter the gate. The vehicle had to be parked on the road.

Adrenalin flowing and out of breath, I ran up the steps to our second floor room. Halted by a brief slide down three steps on my shins, I regained my composure and burst into the darkened room. Giddy with excitement, I breathlessly started filling Marjorie in on my latest adventure.

"...and the pharmacy said no, so we went to a doctor's office. It was full of people, and we walked right in. It was shameful really, then he asked me questions, and..." I went on and on, not stopping to find out if she was even awake. I finished with the story of the guards and how I was worried they might take the medicine from me after the experiences at the coffee exchange and the goats and the pharmacy.

"Here is the medicine. It is a pain killer, muscle relaxant, and it will make you feel better!" I announced proudly. "Do you want me to get you a bottle of water?"

"I'm not taking that." Marjorie said.

(Continued in Take Your Medicine, Part II)

## Chapter Twelve

### Take Your Medicine

#### (Part II)

I had just finished telling my friend Marjorie the steps it took me to actually get her a prescription. She had been bedridden for several days after injuring her back in a fall. Separated from her usual solutions at home, our only option for treatment was for me to track down a muscle relaxant in a strange town, in a strange country. My quest involved goats, a coffee exchange, a pharmacy, the most crowded doctor's office imaginable, and a confrontation with African armed guards.

Finishing my story and happily presenting her with the bottle of pills, she said, "I'm not taking that."

"What?" Confused and certain I didn't hear her correctly, I said, "I thought you said you aren't going to take this."

"You did. I'm not taking that. You know I hardly ever take medicine."

"Yes, I know that, but this is different. You need this to be able to get out of bed. It will help you. You haven't gone to any of the villages or attended church services since we got here." I was doing my best to sell her on the six priceless capsules I was holding in my hand.

"I have no idea what is in there and how my body will react to it. I'm not taking it." She was pretty adamant.

In the darkened room, I tried reading the label, hoping to see exactly where it was made; praying for an English word assuring me it was made in the USA. Nothing. It simply had her name, the date, the dosage and a word I didn't recognize, which I assumed was the name of the drug.

I didn't blame her for being cautious about taking something in a foreign country. However, I was pretty sure this came from a big pharmaceutical house in a developed nation, so I gave it one more shot. "I will take one first if you want and we can see if it does anything to me. If it doesn't, maybe you will think about taking one." Actually, the thought of getting rid of the pain in my shins from the motel stairs sounded awfully tempting.

“It won’t matter. I won’t take it.” That was the last word.

“Okay. I will just leave the bottle here in case you change your mind.”

I left the room to see if anyone was in the coffee shop downstairs. Several folks from our group of missionaries were sipping coffee, enjoying the late afternoon breezes in the restaurant. They were talking about the guards.

“Can you believe it? We might get to meet him!” one woman said. After asking questions, I found out that a very high ranking official was coming to stay at the motel for a meeting with leaders from other countries in Africa.

“No wonder security is so high.” I told them the story about being stopped at the gate. “I thought we weren’t going to be let back into the compound when we came back from the doctor’s office.”

When I finished my story, one of the wait staff approached our table and asked us to go to the front desk for a message. Curious, we followed his instructions immediately.

“Thank you so very much for staying with us,” the gracious desk clerk began, “but we do have a request of you.”

“Sure, anything.” We answered almost in unison.

“Those of you with rooms on the first or second floor will need to move to higher floors so those two lower floors are completely vacant for our visiting dignitaries.” Even though the request was a bit of a shock, we were happy to comply. It wouldn’t be much of a problem to move our things since we hadn’t completely unpacked. We asked him if we might move after dinner.

“We would like you to move right away. We have a chart here,” he said pointing to a piece of paper scribbled with names and rooms, “and this will tell you where your new rooms are.”

Not a problem, I thought, as I saw our new room on the third floor. “The third floor?! Oh, no, Marjorie can’t even get out of bed to cross the room. How is she going to get up a flight of stairs?”

Advocating for Marjorie, I asked, “Do you suppose we could keep our room just for today? My friend is quite ill and unable to move.” What I didn’t say was that if she didn’t start taking those pills, the motel would be lucky to get that room back at all. She would be in there, unable to move, until we carried her out to the van for our trip home. My plea to the desk clerk hung in the air over the counter like a cloud.

With a sympathetic smile, the clerk said, “Sorry, no exceptions. The two lower floors must be vacated immediately.” My friends said they would help after they got their own rooms moved. Thanking them, I left to tell Marjorie the bad news.

Marjorie's response was simply, "I'm not moving." I understood. Still in a great deal of pain, she knew she would further injure her back if she had to move now.

"Well, I don't think we have much of a choice, given the number of armed guards milling around the grounds and the rooms. They are on this floor, waiting for us to get out of our rooms." I continued, "I don't know what to tell you, but I will pack everything up and move it all upstairs. You may want to think about taking one of those pain pills before you move too much."

I threw things in suitcases and gathered up the toiletries scattered about the bathroom. Hauling bags up the stairs to our new room gave me another opportunity to slip on the steps and scrape my shins. Back down to the second floor room I went, hoping to help Marjorie to her feet.

To my delight, she was up and appeared to have taken one of the pain pills. I gathered up the water bottle and the prescription bottle and helped her to the door. I don't know how she tolerated the climb up the stairs because she was still suffering, but she managed to do it. She lay down on the bed and rested while I went down to the coffee shop to see if anyone else needed help moving. Apparently, everyone was moved and anxious to see the dignitaries.

I'm not too clear about what happened next, but within four hours, the guards disappeared. The lower two floors were still empty. We were told we could move back down to our original rooms. By that time Marjorie began feeling better and could move around enough to go down for the evening meal. We had heard that the high-level meeting had been moved to another location or that this location was simply a decoy.

Either way, it took the threat of armed guards to get Marjorie to take that first pill. As extreme as that was, I am grateful for the set of circumstances that came together, allowing her to enjoy the rest of the trip with less pain.

That day I learned that I may have to take medicine I don't like. I will remember my brave friend Marjorie and take it anyway. I will also remember how God orchestrated my steps to lead me to just the right people willing to help her recover and be about His work.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Be Thankful for School

“I am no longer sad. I have a smile on my face because I have a hope for a future!” The young African boy had just found out that we had been able to match him with an American sponsor to cover his school fees. “I prayed each night when I went to sleep that I could go to school, but when I woke, I couldn’t go. So I would pray the next night. I trusted God to answer my prayer!”

He was twelve and would be beginning school in the second grade. As happens often in African families, parents may be able to afford to send their first child to school for a few early grades. When other children are born into the family, schooling fees must go to other expenses. The oldest child drops out, and typically none of the other children start school--without a miracle.

This young boy had been handed his miracle. Irene, our African contact, sent me an email saying, “I know of a child who is very needy and who would not attend school without financial assistance.” She went on to say, “He is getting older and is losing any hope of being able to go to school to avoid begging for a living.”

Filling in the details, she continued, “He attended one year but when he went back the next year, because there were no fees, he was ‘chased’ by the staff.” Being “chased” from the grounds is a common thing for students who show up at school without school fees. Sometimes the chasing involves using brooms. Beyond being a disappointment, this is very humiliating for the students.

In this part of Africa, public school is not free. Fees are charged to cover teachers’ salaries, supplies, and a host of other expenses to run a school. A child simply cannot show up at school and expect to be assigned a classroom. In contrast, American governments provide money to schools for each student enrolled in kindergarten, elementary school and high school. Parents are required to purchase supplies at the beginning of each year such as notebooks, pencils, markers, erasers, paper and three-ring binders. However, the cost of attending is not charged to the parents. Private schools do charge families who want their children to attend such schools. Sometimes scholarships are

available to cover partial fees, but for the most part public school is free even in the poorest parts of America.

It is the dream of every African child to attend school. On more than one occasion while putting on programs in huge public schools there, we saw children of all ages hanging on fence rails in tattered clothing, wishing for a chance to become a part of the school community. They had nothing to do all day but sit by school fences, watching other children in crisp, clean uniforms playing on the ball fields or coming and going from classrooms. Their futures were grim. Statistically, without education to change their lives, many would be unemployable, unable to support themselves and their future families.

After receiving Irene's email, I thought about how I could get him in school. As School Program Director of Reaching Kids International, there should be some way to gather the amount to get him in school. School is in session from the end of January or early February through December each year. If I didn't act quickly, he wouldn't be enrolled for this school year and would have to work too hard to catch up, even with second grade work. He needed every chance to succeed. Getting him into school as quickly as possible was the way to do that.

It isn't my nature to ask people for money. I would rather pay all the children's fees each year myself than ask people for money or ask current sponsors to sign up for another year. Clearly, that is a very bad plan. I worked part time and couldn't sponsor every child whose story touched my heart. We were sponsoring eighty-four African children with school fees, and they depended heavily on their sponsors to continue giving. Each year they stayed in school added more hope that they may be employable and may eventually be able to help their younger siblings attend school as well. The whole idea of the program was that we help one child, and they help one.

I took a deep breath and began contacting church friends and my family for donations of \$175 just for his tuition. I was thrilled when someone stepped forward with a \$450 check for his school fees and supplies for the *entire* year, including his annual boarding fees. The advantage for a student being boarded at school is tremendous. Boarding students get their meals and a safe place to sleep, avoiding long walks to and from school in the dark. It also frees them up from nightly chores at home, sometimes working for several families in their villages, making homework completion almost impossible. They also are able to be tutored after dinner, assuring that they will do their best in school.

I was excited to email Irene. "Take him to the local primary school and get him enrolled as soon as you can. I will wire the funds within two days." Schools in that area are very willing to enroll students as long as they know that

Reaching Kids International will be covering the fees. Years of working with the schools have helped us establish a good reputation with educators in the area.

This young man couldn't wait to start school. He was very tall, certainly much taller than any of the other second grade students. He didn't fit in the desks. He was too big for the activities on the ball field with other second graders. The children's small craft activities were a bit too delicate for his larger hands. However, nothing could quell his enthusiasm.

Visiting with him one year, listening to my translator tell me his Lugandan words, I was struck by how very different African students are from American students when they talk about school. "I will be the best student the school has ever seen. I will work harder than anyone. I will not take for granted that I get to go to school!"

As a therapeutic foster parent for a number of years, I can attest to the fact that students in my household are also very excited about the first day of school. After that, it may be difficult to get them up in time to catch busses, to pack lunches, or to do homework. I have been called to schools a number of times to pick up students who either got into fights or who just refused to work. They could do the work; most of these kids are very intelligent. Despite their behaviors, they preferred being at school with their friends to being at home with me. The principal's threat to call me was often enough to turn them around. Only love, time and patience made a significant difference in their attitudes. By the time most of them left my home, they had developed better study habits and better communication skills, which made the following school years easier for them. I must admit, though, I never had a child as enthusiastic about school as this young boy.

As time went by, he sent letters to me and his sponsor, continuing to thank us for this opportunity of a lifetime. Over the years I got reports that he had done well in school. By the time he moved from primary school to high school, he had become a teacher's aide, working with his classmates as they needed help. He shone like a star when he was at school, and it didn't go unnoticed by his classmates and teachers.

He was very aware of who gave him the gift of school. He was grateful to his sponsor and to Reaching Kids International, but he clearly stated, "God has blessed me beyond words to allow me to continue in school each year. I will honor Him in everything I do."

My favorite part about my trips to Africa was seeing the children who were in school due to the generosity of their sponsors. Most sponsors would never be able to meet their sponsored child personally. Occasionally, students and sponsors would exchange letters, but the real perk for sponsors was that they simply knew they were changing a child's life.

Equally as important as individual sponsoring, some donors preferred to give an amount that might make up part of a child's fees that were lacking. Called "undesigned" African donations, it was those people who kept students in school when many sponsors had to discontinue their gifts during the recent recession. They simply wanted to help, and their gifts brought thanksgiving and praise to God for their generosity. Some sponsors provided libraries for a school, and some provided school uniforms.

This child and I spent some time visiting each time I went to Africa. I could tell he was confident and would be a leader in his community. When visiting his school one year, I was struck by the large number of students in his medium-size classroom. In secondary school, which is called high school in America, the classes can be as large as one hundred students in one room with one teacher and one aide. The classrooms were packed with children sitting on hard benches with long, skinny tables in front of them to hold their books. They were shoulder-to-shoulder, yet it was rare to see one student push or torment another.

The most astounding thing I noticed was that they don't talk unless the teacher calls on them. Imagine a room, packed with over one hundred children, all fascinated by the lesson, not saying a word. Quiet classrooms in America are relics from the past. I could tell these students respected their teachers and wanted to learn. Talking meant they might miss something, and no one wanted to miss anything. One day when I visited, they were having a math lesson on geometric equations. The teacher had placed a bicycle upside down on the front table and was giving an object lesson. He spun the wheels as he talked about the circumference of a circle.

High school in Uganda consists of eight years. This young man is now in Senior Five, or the fifth year of high school. He has excelled all the way through school and holds great promise that he will continue to do well. His sponsor has said that she wants to continue with him through Senior Eight so he may be graduated with the best foundation she can provide.

It is her prayer that he continues on to a trade or technical school, teacher's college or nursing school. He could choose business school or catering school. Whatever he does, he will be a success because he has no question about Who is his source. "God has given me a gift. I will work hard and give back to Him my life to use where He sends me." With few exceptions, all the children sponsored through this organization have the same attitude.

We have lost some children to the culture. One girl chose to leave school and get married, raising a family in a village far away from our base. Another precious child died from disease recently. One woman, Junic, the first student I sponsored at the start of the school sponsorship program, went on to finish

high school. She finished teacher's college, married and had two babies. She oversaw the education of her five siblings as she worked, fulfilling her personal dream and furthering the goal of Reaching Kids International. Sadly, she fell ill and suddenly died. That was a dark time for me personally and for the program. Junic was a classic example of the purpose for this program. She put her five brothers and sisters in school with her teacher's pay to give them every opportunity to succeed.

On each of my visits to Africa, all the sponsored students were gathered together in one place to greet me and celebrate their successes. Junic spoke to all the students each year. She talked about the wonderful gift of education they were given and urged them not to waste it. She planted seeds that will live through the years as those children grow up and help other children.

That day I learned to be thankful for school, teachers and mentors who have helped me along my life's path.

*Author's Note: Reaching Kids International is a 501(C)(3) non-profit organization working in cities, towns and villages in foreign countries to improve the lives of children. To find out more or to donate to children in Africa, go to [www.reachingkids.org/Africa](http://www.reachingkids.org/Africa). When donating, indicate "Africa" on the credit/debit card memo line or PayPal memo line. To mail a donation, the address is Reaching Kids International/Africa, PO Box 1591, Prescott, AZ 86302. Contribution statements are mailed in time to be included on your tax return. God bless you.*

## Chapter Fourteen

### Be Nice to the Babies

“He’ll be dead by morning” our driver Charlie said casually. All four men in the van nodded their heads knowingly, accepting the inevitable. The van’s three women gasped in unison.

“He can’t die. He’s a baby. Can’t we help him?” Mandy was almost pleading. Judy whispered that if she had to sit out all night beside him, she would keep him safe.

They were talking about a baby giraffe, tucked away in the shadows of acacia trees, alone and frightened. We knew his mother wasn’t close because as we drove around the game preserve after dinner, we hadn’t seen any adult giraffes. Charlie thought the baby was about two weeks old. He was six feet tall, and from inside our modified van, we looked almost directly into his huge brown eyes.

The men knew better than to respond to Judy. Their position sounded insensitive, even to them. Any further discussion couldn’t possibly end well. “Clearly,” Judy said authoritatively, “he will survive if we help him. We are duty bound to intervene.” No one was quite sure what made us duty bound, but we women agreed with her immediately. Charlie listened to the conversation, not wanting to drive away and risk incurring the full wrath of three mothers trying to come up with ideas to save the little one.

The small clump of acacia trees barely provided enough shelter to hide the giraffe. Thankfully, he knew enough to back into the leafy trees and be still. Judy was absolutely right. Those big brown eyes were practically begging us to do something for him. In reality, he was probably wishing we would go away because he was afraid of us. We were the least of his worries.

I glanced toward the horizon. The setting sun gave the savannah an orange hue. Acacia trees stood as silhouettes on the surrounding hills. Dusk descended over the Masai Mara Game Preserve, throwing shadows that could hold nothing good for this baby. In the stillness we could hear elephants trumpeting. Occasionally a roar from a large cat would roll through the hills somewhere far away. Night was approaching, and the predators would start

their hunt for food. Scanning the savannah, we hoped to see his mother coming for him.

“Has the mother been killed, Charlie?” Mandy asked as static crackled over two-way radios used by the tour guides to stay connected with each other. Conversing with other van drivers in Swahili, Charlie asked if they had seen any giraffe carcasses today.

“No giraffes killed today.” he replied. It was the drivers’ consensus of opinion that the mother simply wandered away from him.

Judy said, “I wandered away from my son once in a grocery store and was frantic with worry until I found him. I just can’t understand a mother wandering away from her baby in the African bush for any reason.” Setting aside for a moment that giraffe mothers and human mothers are vastly different in their thought processes, we pondered what she had just shared with us. Defying all the rules of safety, she finished with, “I think one of us should stay with him tonight.”

Her heart was in the right place, but her logic was a bit flawed. While I thought that was a nice idea, I had seen the lions and leopards and decided I would not be volunteering for night duty. Charlie tried to hide his amusement, but he seemed to get a kick out of the conversation. A seasoned game park guide, he had seen this scenario many times. He knew how his missionary passengers would respond to that baby. We didn’t surprise him.

Charlie finally laughed out loud as the women tried to interrupt a survival ritual common among predators and victims for centuries. Wisely he said, “If you get out of the van, you be killed by a lion. The lion will then kill him. You can do more for him by leaving him alone.” Charlie was right. It was probable the baby would die through the night from an attack by a lion, leopard or even hyenas as they foraged for sustenance for their own babies. The baby giraffe didn’t have much of a chance.

Silence fell over the passengers. The men hadn’t said anything for several minutes. I suspected they were muffling laughter as they listened to the tender-hearted women wrestle with a seemingly impossible situation.

“Wait!” Judy shouted. “What’s wrong with us? We are missionaries! We just came from several African villages where we had enough faith to pray for the sick to be healed and for the poor to have their needs met.” Talking quickly, she barely stopped for a breath. “We believe for rain in a drought, and we believe for safety in storms. We believe that nothing is impossible with God, right?”

“Right.” we answered with slightly less enthusiasm. Then she gave everyone instructions.

“Tonight, we will pray he is hidden from predators’ eyes, that his mother finds him quickly, and that tomorrow we will see them together! Do we all agree on that?” Knowing there was nothing else to do, we agreed. The van slowly turned away from the baby and headed toward the lodge.

Up early the next day we were anxious to reach the open savannah, not knowing what to expect. Soon Charlie’s radio began crackling with static again as excited Swahili voices talked in staccato phrases. In response, he turned the van around and drove quickly to a watering hole. Without warning, he hit the brakes, propelling us forward in our seats.

“Look!” he shouted. Standing among a small group of adult giraffes was the baby giraffe, easily identified by his markings as “our” baby. He was safe with his mother. He made it through the night against all earthly odds. We were convinced the baby was divinely protected. His safety became the last amazing event of this trip, already full of amazing events.

I have to admit, I was very surprised. Also, I was surprised at my lack of faith because I expected the worst. I knew God *could* keep the baby safe. I just didn’t know if He *would* keep the baby safe. Countless other baby giraffes met deadly fates throughout the years on the savannah. I was delighted to realize that what happened in the past doesn’t necessarily predict what will happen in the present when God is involved.

That incident took place a number of years ago. Even now when two or three from our group get together, we reminisce about that story. We comment again on God’s goodness, answering prayers for a frightened baby giraffe lost in the darkness that African night.

That day I learned to be kind to one another, especially the little ones. God is watching over them.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Never, Never Play with Guns

In the darkness, bullets ricocheted off buildings. As if in response, more shots were fired in quick bursts. This sequence repeated itself. One or two gun shots were followed by rapidly returned fire. Our driver stopped the car rather than take the chance of driving directly into the melee. He had difficulty determining just where this gunfight was and hesitated to move the car until he was sure. The four of us in the car sat in silence, straining to hear where the shots originated. Suddenly, a man appeared from the shadows running toward our vehicle. I could clearly see the silhouette of a rifle in his hand.

“Lie down on the floor” our driver shouted, “Don’t get up!” My first instinct was not to lie down and wait for danger to overtake me. I wanted to get out and run for cover. The driver turned to look at me and snapped, “Get down!” He was angry. I ducked down in the seat and joined my friend who had obeyed immediately.

Frustrated, I realized that once again our safety was compromised. It amazed me how often a similar scenario repeated itself during our trips to Africa. As short term missionaries, we only went to safe places. Yet on every trip, we had been confronted by danger, illness or fear. Once a lion targeted me for dinner. He would have succeeded except for alert guards and fervent prayer. Another time we were on a flight forbidden to land on any soil in the world due to a terrorist threat. There was always a story. I was getting weary of repeated crises on these trips. Tonight, again, we were facing grave danger in the darkness on this African street.

“We shouldn’t be here,” I whispered to my friend. Far more spiritual than I, she was on the floor praying. “I mean it.” I said, “It is beyond me how we find ourselves in these situations so often on these trips. No one else seems to have these things happen to them!” I wondered what the rest of our group was doing at the moment. They were probably sleeping.

On this trip, nine of us traveled into Africa together. Six people went to the western part of Uganda, and three of us separated and went to the eastern side. We had been there before, had friends there, and were expecting to visit

schools and churches we had ministered in on previous trips. The three of us who broke off from the group were women. I remembered thinking during the planning stages how very brave that was of us. I also remembered thinking that we needed to cover everything we did in prayer. With that in mind, I thought perhaps I should quit complaining and join my friend on the floor already in prayer.

As I prayed, I reflected on the series of events leading to this situation, beginning with a phone call that evening. "A friend with a radio show reaching East Africa wants to know if you would be willing to speak on his program tonight," our old friend said. "The potential audience is in the millions."

Those are enticing words to a missionary. The thought of reaching that many people with news of God's love was enough to quell any reservations. We would be with old friends, two brothers who had been our guides on several trips. What could possibly go wrong?

We gave the idea some thought, factoring in the safety issue. We weighed that against the opportunity presented by the offer. Both of us responded excitedly, "Yes, of course!"

He added, "The program starts at eleven o'clock, very late to be out in the city." After another moment's hesitation, we affirmed our willingness to go with them. Once the decision was made, we prayed.

"God, please give us the right words to speak to listening hearts. Help us make a difference in lives so they are encouraged to follow Jesus. Give us the boldness to speak your words. We give the entire experience to you and ask you to orchestrate it for your praise. We thank you in Jesus' name."

That prayer echoed in my mind as I huddled on the floor of the back seat, trying to hear over the deafening sound of my own heartbeat. I was very frightened as one of the men commented on how close we were to the shooting. Ignoring the driver's instructions, I rose up just enough to see out the front window. As if in slow motion, I saw the gunman approaching our car. I saw people chasing him and heard repeated gun shots. According to the driver, the local police were pursuing the first man. The officers each pointed and shot in our direction.

Our driver shouted, "We need to get out of here!" He put the car in reverse and sped backward down the darkened road. Then the car spun around and traveled forward for a short period of time. For several minutes we were tossed around in the back seat like a couple of watermelons. Suddenly, we stopped.

"Get out of the car," someone barked. We had no idea what would happen next. Was that the voice of the local police stopping us to question our involvement in the crime? Was it the original gunman, high jacking the car?

When we raised our heads, we were delighted to discover it was our driver, indicating that we had arrived at the radio station. We must have driven in reverse most of the way to the studio.

My friend and I crawled out of the back seat, straightened our clothing, and looked at each other with wide eyes. We were led into the radio station, which seemed very small to be so powerful. The emcee was talking about the schooling program which we were representing and asked questions to start the conversation. My friend regained her composure before I did and began talking with authority and conviction.

Clearly fear hadn't overcome us and danger hadn't diminished our excitement. The whole experience gave us a new boldness to share God's love and protection. The women talking that night were stronger than the women who prayed a few hours earlier in the room. Between the prayer at the hotel and the radio program, we had lived through a situation requiring God's protection. We believed God orchestrated every minute of that evening to bring about a clear message: No matter what is going on in life, the circumstances haven't taken God by surprise. He is already there, waiting to bring about a victory.

We never heard what became of the men involved in the shooting, but we prayed for them. That evening reminded me that trials would follow me as I followed God. Who am I to resent hardships? Those hardships make me strong and maybe even courageous. My mandate is to share the Word and share the victories with those God places in my path.

That day I learned to never, never play with guns. And if someone is shooting, get away from them as quickly as possible. It would also be good to pray.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Speak Clearly

“You can do it!” my teammates shouted. “We know you can do it!” We were in a field next to a large elementary school in Uganda. The sun was hot, and the drenching African rain that moved through earlier in the day left the air heavy with moisture. Standing on the field felt like standing in a shower--a very hot shower. For a person from southwestern United States, accustomed to extremely dry air, simply swinging the stick-like bat was an effort. Sweat dripped down my forehead and stung my eyes.

“Please little pitcher, mercifully strike me out.” I whispered quietly. The sweet child pitching was determined to throw the ball until I hit it. I preferred to strike out, but they would not do that to such an “honored guest” (as they called us) at their school.

Another pitch and a miss. Then another. In my haste to end this painfully embarrassing exercise, I closed my eyes and took a wild swing at the next projectile hurling toward me. I did it! The stick bat connected, and the ragged ball went flying. Unfortunately, that was the extent of my knowledge of this child’s game. Consequently, I just stood there. Excited African children began shouting at me to do something, but I couldn’t understand what they were telling me to do.

Their voices, mixed with wild hand gestures, seemed to indicate I was to run somewhere. Because their arms were swinging in all directions, it was difficult to determine where to run. This was neither baseball nor soccer. This was a made-up game played by children at the African school we were visiting that day. Apparently I had not been paying attention to the batters before me and didn’t know where they had run. I had nothing to draw on for an example.

“*Kimbia, kimbia!*” children shouted in Swahili. “*Taharuki!*” “Run, run!” they were saying. “Hurry!” It didn’t matter how excited they were to have me run, listening to them gave me no hint of which direction to go.

The fact that I was playing this game was a miracle. I was only playing because I was busy talking when they divided up into teams. I would have stepped out of the game if I had been paying attention.

The sports I enjoyed playing in school were soccer and volleyball because I was reasonably good at them. As for basketball, I never really understood the rules. In high school, I was only chosen to be the team manager of a co-ed basketball scrimmage my senior year because everyone knew I couldn't play. I was a great manager. My sole job was to pass out oranges to the players as they ran by me.

My boyfriend was on the football team, so I made a point to figure out the rules. Baseball was on the bottom of my list of fun stuff to do. My dad once took me to a Cleveland Indians game to watch a famous ball player. I knew I should have been excited because he certainly was. Still, baseball didn't click with me. I couldn't hit, couldn't run fast, couldn't catch, and couldn't pitch. Yet, here I was, playing a sport on a field where I was required to do all those things. As dozens of children shouted directions at me, I just didn't get it.

These children also knew (and were shouting) English, but it was what I called "high English" or the "King's English." Their accents were very difficult for me to understand. Even when speaking with my adult African friends in a quiet room one on one, I strained to understand them. Many times I had to settle for extracting a word here and a word there, mentally stringing together the logical meaning from what I heard. It was indeed English but with accents on syllables that didn't match words I recognized.

They laughingly told me, "You are the one with the accent. Speak slowly so we can understand, please." That beautiful language added to the Africans' overall gentility and grace. However, gentility and grace were not what I needed at that point in the game. I needed someone to shout out "go this way" so I could understand and respond. The longer I stood there, the more exuberant the crowd became, to the point that I knew I had to do something.

I finally heard, "Run toward the child in the right part of the field!" There it was—clear direction in a language I understood. Responding to the voice speaking words I recognized was easy. Unfortunately, it was too late, and I may have lost the game for my team. The children roared with laughter as I tripped over the child in right field, and we both landed on the ground laughing.

As I pondered this event later, I realized I am often like those children shouting directions in a language that can't be understood. How many times have I gotten excited about sharing a story of what God has done for me with words difficult to grasp? How many times have people looked at me questioningly as I pontificated in lofty language, using "religious" words not even remotely recognizable to them? In my zeal to share God's love, were my words accentuated with unnecessary fluff, or perhaps were they a bit stuffy? The thought that I may have done more harm than good saddened me.

“Forgive me for trying to elevate your message through impressive speech.” I prayed. “Your message already resides at the pinnacle of perfection. How could I think polishing up the words explaining God’s love would improve the story?”

I still don’t know the name of that game nor did I figure out the rules on how to play it. However, I learned a lesson from the children that day. It is a message about simplicity. Since then, I carry it with me on every playing field where God sends me.

That day I learned to speak clearly. I might have something monumental to say, but if I use fancy words, the meaning might be lost.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Be Thankful for Your Food (Eat Your Gray Potatoes and Green Chicken)

“You will never believe the things we got to eat there!” I was talking to Aaron and Tracy, my son and daughter-in-law who met me at the airport. The long intercontinental flight had left me exhausted and excited all at the same time. I bubbled with excitement, “We ate green chicken! I’m not kidding! It was green chicken!”

This was the second time they picked me up at the airport after a trip to Africa. They were prepared for my excited prattling as I tried to tell them everything that happened over the course of the last two weeks. We were at a restaurant in Arizona. I talked fast because after dinner they would take me to my car, and I would then drive the last two hours to my home in the mountains. Trying to keep my voice down, I was telling them about the food.

“At the places we stayed, the food was geared toward the American tastes because so many Americans stayed there. However, in the villages, we were treated to new fun food I have never seen before!”

As we talked, my mind drifted to the beautiful country of Uganda. I could almost hear the laughter of the children and the soft, gentle conversational tone of the adults. No matter what we were discussing, the adults used a soft voice, devoid of sharp or loud tones. They could be having a heated conversation about politics, but to the outsider, it would appear that they were simply discussing today’s weather. Conversations included lots of smiles and low chuckles. I loved these people and missed them already.

Drawing my thoughts back to the table with my family, I described a typical village meal to them as they ate their American cuisine. “We had gray potatoes, green chicken, plantains, pineapple, rice, a sticky substance like poi, which we ate with our fingers, and beef strips.” It sounded a lot like American food, but was not spiced or buried in sauces.

I ran out of things to talk about due to fatigue, and told them I should be headed home before it got too late. We said our goodbyes, and I started the

drive home. To keep myself awake as I drove, I thought about my first trip there a year before. My reaction to the people the first time I encountered them in Africa was much different than the recollection I now had about this second trip. Instead, on that initial trip, I was terrified of them.

“Okay, today’s assignments are as follows: John’s team goes to this village; Mitch’s team goes to that one; Ruth’s team goes to the one outside of town.” Pastor Mike continued handing out assignments. I was on Mitch’s team going to Pastor Amos’ church. My daughter Holly was on John’s team going to Pastor Leonard’s church. She was traveling with her friend Jeni, but I was a little apprehensive about getting separated from them. I had already met Pastor Amos and was excited to be going to his village church and hoped the girls could stay with me. Perhaps tomorrow we could work together, but today it was out of the question. They would travel in our van until we got off, and they would go on to another village.

We left the motel and drove through town, then onto the highway toward a city about thirty miles away. Passing through the city, we turned onto a dirt road. That road soon turned into two narrow tire paths. The tire paths became a bicycle path. Tall grasses and plants beat against the sides of the van, sometimes snapping off and flying into windows. We were taking picture after picture of this adventure. Adding to the excitement, we were headed into a lush jungle-type area—the African bush country-- for the first time.

After several minutes on the narrow path, our van came to an opening in the trees. The first thing I saw from the van was a small mud building with a thatched roof. This was the church. The roof was raised up and didn’t meet the walls, so there was an opening all the way around the building. I found out later this type of construction provides shade and allows the breezes to circulate. Beyond that building were other smaller buildings, probably homes.

Children played in the area between the church and homes. As usual, the trees were spectacularly large and green. In the center of the open area was a large mango tree. Children were in the tree, dropping fruit down to their friends. The van pulled to a slow stop.

Suddenly, the air was pierced by high- pitched sounds which I couldn’t identify. I had heard that sound before somewhere but was having difficulty figuring out where I had heard it. To me it was chilling. Then I realized I heard it many years ago on television when I was a child. It was the terrifying sound of African tribal people dancing around a fire, preparing to raid white villages or preparing to burn someone tied to a stake close by. (While I loved popcorn and television night on Fridays as a child, I formed many of my opinions of other nations by what I saw on television. Most of it was inaccurate.) There were no words to the sound, but it was made by the tongue, almost making a

high-pitched sound of “lulululu.” I froze. Before I realized what I was doing, I was standing up and backing up slowly, trying to get away from the frightening sound. The people weren’t frightening, but the sound terrorized me.

The rest of my team was making their own noises, clapping and singing, overjoyed to be in this village. They commented on the beautiful children and the colorful clothing. They pushed forward, climbing around me to get out of the van and greet these people. My daughter stopped my backward motion and said I needed to get out because the driver wanted to continue on to the next village. Seeing her and listening to her talk brought me back from a frightening childhood memory to the present moment.

“But that sound, that sound.” I kept repeating.

Drawn back to the present as Holly spoke, I looked at the faces of the women making the sounds. I saw smiles, laughter and love. These were not the people portrayed on television so many years ago. I had no reason to fear them. I would hear that sound dozens of times on this trip. I began to realize it was the sound of joy—much like us shouting, “Yay!” or “Hooray!” It was an expression of excitement.

I began moving toward the door. Someone reached in, pulling me out. It was one of the women, greeting me with a hug and a kiss. She took my hand and walked with me to the church building. Even now I am a bit ashamed of my reaction when we entered the village that day. However, I didn’t anticipate a trip down early television’s memory lane and certainly wasn’t prepared for it. I couldn’t have been more wrong about these people. They were amazing!

Church started immediately, lasting two hours. Afterward, people streamed out of the church building. As guests, we were seated on benches under the mango tree. A woman came around with a basin of water, a pitcher, a towel and a bar of soap. She went to the pastors first out of respect. They washed and dried their hands. She moved on to us. I reached in the bowl of water, picked up the rough feeling soap and washed. She then poured clean water over my hands to rinse, and I dried on the towel. It struck me that this ritual was a sweet service that she carried out with joy.

Food was brought out of various homes and placed on a table in front of us. I recognized watermelon, beans and rice, but that was it. There was some greenish meat, a banana-looking food, perhaps strips of beef, and other items that were foreign to me. I asked about the banana and learned it was a plantain. It was like a banana, but not as sweet. It had been boiled and peeled.

Gray potatoes were near the plantains. They were not a color I was accustomed to, but they tasted like potatoes, which are one of my favorite foods. The green meat was chicken, a treat for the guests. The chicken was boiled until it fell off the bones. The green color probably had to do with what

the chickens ate and the spices in the water it was boiled in. After we were served, the other adults filled their plates. Then the children came forward for their meal. There was enough food to feed everyone. We ate until we were full, grateful for the work the women did to prepare this meal for us.

Under normal circumstances, I would not have eaten green chicken and gray potatoes, but here I did. In some countries, missionaries are served beetles and spiders and are expected to enjoy them. To refuse food in most cultures is very thoughtless. Remembering that, I became even more grateful for the colorful food, even if it wasn't a familiar color.

This food was prepared with love, and the cooks were delighted when we commented on how flavorful it was. Watching their responses, I was reminded how we all crave compliments and positive interactions. It was easy to be kind and bring joy to the faces of the villagers.

The women in the church were living out the Bible mandate to take care of one another, preferring others above themselves. Their servant's attitude taught us about taking care of each other as we continued ministering in the villages of Uganda.

As a testament to their great cooking, for two weeks after returning home, I found myself wandering around the kitchen in the middle of the night. Dealing with jet lag, I realized it was close to lunch time in Africa. Since I was up, I put on a pot of beans and one of rice to quench my craving for African food. My family got accustomed to waking to beans and rice on the stove.

That day I learned to be grateful, even for gray potatoes and green chicken. I also learned that everyone needs to know their efforts are appreciated. Proverbs 11 illustrates that the right word spoken at the right time resembles apples of gold in pictures of silver. Compliments are the sparkling golden apples that can brighten a person's day. Give them away freely.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Have a Happy Heart (Even on the Long Trip Home) (Part I)

Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam is a well planned airport. It is spacious, open, and has great amenities for travelers. Smoking is permitted throughout the airport except at the gates. Normally, I would not have minded this too much, but the day our team was there, I was recovering from a respiratory disease I caught traveling in villages throughout Uganda.

Happy to be feeling marginally better, I walked slowly through the airport prior to boarding our flight to the U.S. Suddenly, I found myself gasping for breath. It wasn't long before I realized that I had diminished lung capacity from the illness I picked up in Africa. Cigarette smoke was taking up space in my lungs which should have been filled with oxygen-rich air. My lungs were burning, not like they burn when running a race or being physically active. This was an actual searing feeling from smoke inhalation. Difficulty getting enough air into my lungs also made talking almost impossible. Although I was hungry and wanted to sit with my group to eat, I whispered to them, "I am going to the gate to wait."

With no idea where I was going, and now beginning to cough relentlessly, I stumbled through the airport, leaning on walls to keep my balance. Checking my ticket and looking at maps with "YOU ARE HERE" signs, I tried to determine which gate was mine.

Part way through the airport wilderness, I realized I was hungry. Checking the nearest map for restaurants on my level, I saw the only places to eat were back up on the floor I had just left. Knowing I couldn't go back into the smoke-filled areas, I kept going forward. All the snacks packed prior to this trip were gone. There was nothing to calm my hunger before the flight.

It isn't often that I get depressed. However, as a human living in a world sometimes full of disappointments, occasionally it happens. Once I identify those feelings, I can deal with them quickly by praying. Then I count my

blessings. Having survived cancer a couple times and thinking about how grateful I am, I can quickly defeat depression as it begins to settle over my mind like a dark cloud. It's a simple plan which won't work for everyone, but it works for me.

While hunting for the gate that day, I began to feel sorry for myself. I was alone in an airport in a foreign country and was sick, lost, hungry and couldn't breathe. This wasn't depression; this was a full-blown pity party. I was simply behaving like a child. I dropped down onto a bench in a concourse filled with people.

"Get a grip, for Heaven's sake," I told myself, "You are not supposed to be pouting in a dark corner. Your problem is that you have started depending on yourself for strength, when the Bible says that the joy of the Lord should be your strength."

Okay, I got that message. For the next few hours on the plane, I could choose to either slide from self-pity into depression or pray and make the most of the trip. I chose to pray specifically for peace of mind. Gradually I began to feel a little better about my circumstances.

I found the gate and sat down to wait for our departure in two hours. Apparently concerned that my coughing might be contagious, people sitting close to me slowly got up and moved away. Ultimately, I had a small section of unoccupied seats all around me at a standing-room only gate. When we finally boarded, my fellow travelers caught up with me. We realized none of us had seats together. This was clearly their lucky day.

Sitting on the plane, I decided to make the best of a bad situation. Between coughing jags, I started a conversation with my seat mate, hoping that when we became airborne, I could go to sleep. "Please excuse my coughing," I said to her as we settled into our seats. "I am sure I am not contagious, but I am unable to stop. I will not cough in your direction." I knew how miserable this flight would be for her. I wanted to get ahead of any hard feelings that might develop later.

"It's okay. I've traveled enough to have caught something in third world countries that I had to deal with on my flight home. Don't worry about it." She was very polite, but she had no idea what was in store on this flight. Neither did I. This became the flight that would never end.

Thankfully, this was a very large airplane which had eight seats in the middle and two seats by the windows on each side. I was in one of the seats on the outside by the windows. Later as I reminisced about that trip, I realized the only thing that might have made it worse would have been to be sitting for the eight hour flight in one of the eight seats in the middle. Seven other people

would be angry with me by the time the flight was half over. “Are you from the U.S.?” I asked her.

“Yes. I am going home for a break between business trips.” Single and probably fifteen years younger than I was, she was a representative of a major technology company traveling to the company’s installations all over the world. She was coming from Spain.

“Wow,” I thought. “What a capable woman.” I liked her and hoped she would understand about my coughing. Again she reassured me not to worry about it.

We sat on the tarmac a very long time before we were cleared for takeoff. I heard that there was a problem with the luggage. No one knew any more than that about the delay. Coughing every minute or so, I was convinced that once the plane started, the engines would drown me out, and I wouldn’t be so irritating to everyone. Clearly, I could do nothing about the cough. Water didn’t help. Cola products didn’t help. What would have helped was if I had not inhaled a lungful of smoke in the airport.

Finally cleared for takeoff, our cumbersome plane taxied down the runway and slowly lifted off. With engines roaring and cabin air swooshing around, I was sure no one would hear my incessant coughing. I was wrong. It wasn’t long before I had clearly irritated a number of people around me. Probably worried that I was filling the air with a deadly virus, people leaned away from me and put handkerchiefs over their mouths. I also had one over my mouth, so we were doubly protected as we flew through the night skies.

I quickly became the seatmate from everyone’s worst nightmare. I was becoming more annoying than crying babies, folks with too much alcohol in them and loud, rude people all rolled into one.

This plane had an in-flight screen which allowed us to watch movies or watch the plane’s route. I enjoyed watching the plane’s progress on these flights. Tonight we seemed to be crawling at a snail’s pace. We were over water, and that made it appear that we weren’t making progress.

To pass the time, I began asking for water every half hour as I got thirsty. Flight attendants really dislike it when people do that, but they gave me water each time as though it were my first request. Overly concerned about what people thought, I did this to show them that I really was trying to stop coughing. No matter what I did, people were getting aggravated with me.

“Is there anywhere I could go to get away from people so I would stop bothering them?” I asked a flight attendant. Maybe they had a special place tucked away that they put people who were causing trouble--like prisoners. I wouldn’t even mind being locked in somewhere, just so I wasn’t around other people. I had already made several trips to the bathroom to splash water on my

face, killing time before rejoining the unhappy passengers around me. That clearly was not working.

“There really isn’t anywhere for you to go.” she responded sympathetically. “I’m sorry you don’t feel well, but you can walk around when the seat belt signs aren’t lit.” Walking around was very taxing on my breathing. That was not the best solution. There were really no solutions except counting the minutes until we landed in Detroit, Michigan.

Our path took us to the top curve of the world past Iceland to Greenland. Overcome with joy, I saw Iceland and then Greenland come into view on the TV screen. “Thank you, God that this ordeal is nearly over!” We had been in the air about four hours. We were half way home. Soon the plane would bank to the left and start flying south over Canada and the United States. I was tired and still coughing but overjoyed nevertheless.

I felt the plane begin to make a slow turn to the left and felt my heart beat faster. Soon excitement filled the cabin. I watched two dads in front of me with two little boys. They had struck up a conversation early in the flight and chatted on and off the last few hours. Across the aisle from them was another family who occasionally entered into the dads’ conversation. I couldn’t tell if they had known each other before, but they seemed to get along well. Occasionally they would laugh at a joke or funny story. People seemed to visibly relax as they felt the plane banking.

Watching the screen, I was fascinated with the different picture I was seeing. We were going south now instead of west, as we had for so many hours. I noticed that the plane continued to complete its slow turn to the left until it was actually going east, in the direction from which we had just come. I was only slightly apprehensive when I noticed we were no longer headed for Canadian air space. Bone weary from coughing for hours, I didn’t care how we got there. I just wanted to get home.

The captain came over the public address system. He cleared his throat. “Good morning passengers. We appreciate your attention for an important announcement.”

My heart sank. “This cannot possibly be good news.” I thought.

Continued in Have A Happy Heart, Part II.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Have a Happy Heart (Even on the Long Trip Home) (Part II)

After a difficult four hour flight, our plane from Amsterdam was turning south from Greenland toward Canadian and then U.S. air space on our way to Detroit, Michigan. Quite ill, I had coughed almost constantly from beginning to end of this flight, aggravating my fellow travelers in the process.

We had noticed the plane begin a left turn, headed southwest, indicating we were more than halfway through our trip. On the screen in front of me, I watched as the image of the plane continued to turn, eventually pointing back toward the direction of Amsterdam. The captain asked for our attention over the public address system. He had a serious tone to his voice.

The flight attendants had disappeared. We were left alone in the cabin. I tried not to cough so we could hear the whole important announcement.

“We have discovered a problem with the luggage. There is one piece of luggage which does not correspond with a passenger on our list. We are not permitted to land in any airport in Canada or the United States unless this problem is solved. We regret to tell you that we will need to turn around and go back to Amsterdam Schiphol Airport to leave the luggage there.”

The atmosphere in the plane changed from lighthearted banter to shock to anger. Apparently there was luggage on our plane that didn't match any of us passengers. I have heard of bombs in luggage set to detonate when a certain altitude was reached, generally less than 5,000 feet. This was a credible threat.

No other country would take the chance that the rogue suitcase wasn't a bomb. It took us several minutes to recover from the shock of the announcement. Not as critical, but nevertheless important, I was devastated, knowing that I had another four hours of coughing all the way back to Amsterdam, and then another eight hours as we made our way back to Detroit. That would be twelve more hours of flight time.

Exhausted and cranky, I was shocked that the baggage handlers were so careless as to put a suitcase on our plane not belonging to any one of us. In reality, I had no idea whose fault this was. I only knew I was very sick and getting sicker. Now I was facing twelve more hours of flying, not to mention what kind of time we would lose on the ground in Amsterdam.

A few minutes into our flight back to Amsterdam, the two dads in front of me and their two boys began to get on each other's nerves. Some harsh words were exchanged, and one of them asked the flight attendant for another seat. The little family across the aisle huddled among themselves, not willing to continue conversations with the gentlemen. The sixteen hour flight was causing additional problems for families traveling with children. Mothers worried that they only packed enough food and diapers for an eight hour flight for their babies.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am that you are stuck in this seat with me, still coughing. If I could change anything about this, I would." I told the girl beside me. She had been quite nice the whole flight and continued to be so, although I could sense she was getting tired of me. If I wasn't coughing, I was trying to stifle a cough, or gasping for breath.

"It's okay." she replied, with a lot less enthusiasm than before.

After landing in Amsterdam, we were told to stay on the plane. We didn't taxi to the gates but stayed at the end of the runway. It was at that point that I realized if there were a bomb on the plane, we had just flown over the ocean in complete peril. I was pretty happy I didn't think of that two hours into the return flight, giving me something to worry about as we flew back to Amsterdam.

The systems were shut down, and the air conditioning went off. Trucks drove out to us on the tarmac and refueled the plane. Another truck was assigned to the luggage area. We were on the ground over an hour. The offending suitcase was identified and removed from the cargo hold. The crew boarded the plane, engines roared, and we were cleared for takeoff.

I would like to say that the remaining eight hours in the sky were better than the earlier hours. That is not the case. People continued to get on each others' nerves; I was on everyone's nerves. The flight was just unpleasant. However, we were safe, and therefore had many things to be thankful for during that portion of the flight.

To pass the time, I had to get my mind off this flight. Recalling my prayer in the airport concourse, I remembered asking God for peace during this flight. I didn't know how difficult the flight would be, but He did. He prepared me for this delay by calming my anxiety. Grateful, my thoughts turned to the African children we had just left behind. I wondered when we would be going back to

see them again, visiting their schools and churches. No longer focusing on my circumstances, I was actually able to sleep a few minutes. The sun came up, lightening the mood in the cabin. We were told to prepare for landing shortly after that.

I was thankful that I had that talk with God in the airport concourse before I boarded the plane. Getting my self-pity under control before we started our first flight helped me prepare myself for what was ahead-- without even knowing tough times were ahead.

I am saddened now to realize the trip to Africa that year was my last one. I haven't been back to see the children recently. When I think of that trip, the Amsterdam flight isn't the first thing I remember. I think about the children, their laughter, and their music. We had an incredible time with them and made astounding memories to cherish. Even after that unpleasant flight, I hope to go back to Africa to see the children soon, knowing there will be difficulties interspersed throughout another trip. Life can throw crises our way. The secret is looking beyond them to the garden of happy memories waiting to be explored.

That day I learned that sometimes things will not go my way. A good attitude, a conversation with God, and a happy heart will help me get through those tough times.

## Chapter Twenty

### Oh, I Just Remembered...

#### (Little Slices of Life Add Excitement to the Day)

While waiting for my clothes to be cleaned after the baboon episode, I purchased several animal print scarves. An African friend fashioned them into a top and a skirt. They looked better than my American clothing.

After our time in the very upscale hotel with the red staircase, we stayed in individual tree houses. We literally had to climb trees to get into our rooms high up in the air. Thankfully, they had no bugs. Unfortunately, they had no bathrooms either. Tree climbing became an art that night. Only after my third trip up the tree in the dark, did I begin to miss that elegant red-carpeted staircase.

Upon leaving a restaurant in one of the game parks, a woman was walking ahead of me. She was holding a banana. In a rapid blur, a monkey came from behind me, pushed me out of the way, raced over to her, grabbed her banana, and ran away, twisting her hand in the process. He was so fast, I barely saw him.

Staying in London, working our way home, we planned to take a trip on the underwater Chunnel from London to Paris. I couldn't talk myself into traveling between England and France under water. I'm glad I hesitated. That year, the worst storm to hit England in decades caused passengers on the Chunnel to be stuck under the water for hours.

On my first trip to Africa, I packed one very large suitcase and one carry on. I couldn't lift the large suitcase and had to depend on others to help me get it from place to place. After that, I packed a smaller one and two small carry-ons. I never had what I needed, but no one had to help me with the bags. I still haven't decided which is the better solution.

After the church service on my first trip to Africa, when the cow was killed for our lunch, a beautiful girl approached me. She was one of the interpreters and someone whom I had prayed with after the service. She and I developed an instant bond. She handed me a gift wrapped in a napkin and said she loved

me. The gift is our secret. Suffice it to say it was a sacrifice for her to share with me. Esther and I have been friends since that day. She has worked hard to complete nursing school, despite many health problems. God has used her testimony to encourage others as she worked with the sick. She has become my African sister. I look forward to seeing her again.

When I went to Africa one year, I forgot to tell anyone at home not to open the dining room curtains because the sun shone right into the fish tank. When I returned, there was so much algae in the water I couldn't see the fish. I thought they were dead.

Speaking of bad water, one member of our team accidentally got a little water in his mouth in the shower in Africa. Poor guy. He spent the next week in bed battling a dastardly intestinal disease. Ultimately he went to the hospital for medicine and recovered in a few days. The rest of us were very, very careful after that.

My job in one village on Sunday morning was to teach the children. There were approximately 50 children in the village. I excitedly set up the felt board and used the colorful figures to tell the story about the little children coming to Jesus and how He loved them. After the morning service and a lunch shared with everyone in the village, I set my colorful felt people back up under the mango tree to teach another lesson to those 50 children. When I got all set up and turned around to sit down on a bench, I saw that there were now about 150 children sitting quietly in rows in front of me. Apparently word had spread to the surrounding villages that it was story time, and all the children came. That is one of my favorite memories of Africa.

On our first trip, my daughter Holly, her friend Jeni and I shared a room. Holly spotted a spider web under her bed in the motel where we stayed. She has spider radar. She can find a spider in a room within ten seconds of entering. She was so creeped out by the spider that she had difficulty sleeping. None of the staff would kill it and get rid of the web. We were certainly not going to touch it. She and the spider co-existed for a week, a true test of Holly's ability to adapt.

My friend Irene, appearing in some of the stories, is an amazing woman. She handles all the finances for Reaching Kids International in Africa. She keeps track of what the children require to succeed. She gets all the children together once or twice a year to write letters to America. Irene is a great advocate for the children. I consider her my African sister whom I look forward to seeing again.

Sister Beth, the wife of one of the pastors in one story, worked several years to get her university degree. Upon being graduated, she set up a community development network among villages wherein the women in one

village grow potatoes. Women in another village grow peanuts. Women in another village grow rice. (I'm not sure of the crops, but I am sure of the concept.) At harvest time, each village shares with the others. The village growing rice, shares 2/3 of their crop with the other two villages growing peanuts and potatoes. Each village shares their food so the children always have a variety of food to eat. This cooperative effort has assured the villagers that they will have adequate food supplies.

Sister Beth also started an Early Childhood Development Program wherein the children are taught many things, including hygiene, relationships, and other important topics not typically covered at home or in school. Reaching Kids International had a small part in helping her with her tuition. She gives God all the credit for her success as she is working tirelessly, making a tremendous difference in her part of the world.

When hearing about child soldiers forced to kill their own families by the notorious rebel leaders in the Sudan, I prayed for some way to help them. As Reaching Kids International School Program was formed, we found we were able to help by getting kids in school. Giving them normal routines is a step toward helping them recover from trauma.

Thank you for letting me share my stories with you. I hope you enjoyed them. This book is intended to let readers know they can make a difference in other people's lives. Everyone has a gift or talent to share. Discover yours and begin to give it away as the Master guitarist did when he was presented with the one-of-a-kind guitar. Teach, train, serve, donate, love, go, help, comfort, pray—just a few of the ways you can share your talents.

You will learn, as I have, that your gift can be held in your hand and protected, or it can be released, multiplied and returned to you in the form of even greater, more diverse blessings to share.