

“Our lives begin to end
the day we become silent about things that matter”

Martin Luther King

Although it's been several months now, it seems like just yesterday that I returned from my latest trip to Africa. I had little time to think about my adventures in Uganda as I instantly began the business of re-immersing myself in the necessities of practical life. I am finding, however, that when asked the inevitable question, “How was Africa?” I am increasingly hard-pressed to describe my latest visit to this place that I have come to cherish so dearly. How does one adequately describe the beauty as well as the reality of a place so extraordinary? Africa has historically been challenged in so very many tragic ways, and I am privileged to have an opportunity to know, to love, and to be loved by my growing family of friends there who wage personal war daily just to survive, especially those who are affected by or infected with HIV/AIDS. It was during this last visit there that I had a particularly memorable few days with a special little boy that I would like to share...

The morning began in usual fashion as I awakened early to the crows of the roosters and carefully crawled from beneath the tangle of my mosquito net. I tried hard not to disturb the little lizard perched atop the pile of clothes sitting beside my bed. It was the rainy season and several of my friends had fallen sick with malaria. I was the lucky one because I had medication to protect me from the harmful bite of the mosquito. It's a blessing to have protection but painful to realize that not all enjoy such privileges. On this particular morning, as I stood gazing appreciatively toward the awakening day from the doorway of my hut, a favorite little friend named Dorcas ran excitedly toward me and thrust something unidentifiable into my hands. I peered at it closely and asked her, “Is this some kind of fruit?” She giggled and hopped about, shouting “No silly! IT'S A HEDGEHOG!!”

As I examined the small, curious ball of prickly needles nestled in my outstretched hands, I could see the creature's side move in barely perceptible breaths. He

was frightened and was trying futilely not to be noticed. A small crowd of orphaned children gathered about and one of them suggested we make the creature dance. A metal pot was chosen and overturned, a branch for a drumstick selected, and a rhythmic tapping begun. Soon the little hedgehog relaxed, uncurled, and began ‘dancing’ to the beat of the African rhythm. We all laughed hysterically as he clumsily lurched his way to the nearest bush, wobbled beneath, and disappeared. I wouldn’t have believed it had I not witnessed it myself!

Later that morning, I arranged to read a special book to some village children. The story is a favorite of mine because it tells of a little girl’s journey across the world in pursuit of a truth that reveals to people the value that should be placed on one another, regardless of their differences. The book is titled, Old Turtle and the Broken Truth, by Minnesota author, Doug Wood. The children lined up on a rock and listened in rapt attention while Big Ben, who is a loyal friend of Illume’s and a native of the village, translated in great detail with grandiose expression and expansive sweeps of his large, strong, hands. After hearing the story, the children and I flattened soda bottle caps and hung them around our necks with multi-colored leather cording. They spoke to the message in the book as on one side of our ‘medallion’ we penned, “You are loved” while on the other side was written, “and so are they.”

While placing the necklaces around the necks of the children, I noticed that the smallest child, Francis, appeared ill. I knew that, like Dorcas, he had become an orphan of AIDS when his mother died not long after he was born. His father, William, is also infected. I felt quite certain by the nature of Francis’ wounds that he might also be HIV positive. Francis is just four years old. Realizing that he was probably seriously ill, I announced that we would cancel the trip our group had planned to visit a waterfall on the following day, and announced that we would instead take Francis to see a doctor. After much discussion, everyone agreed and we began the arduous journey to Kumi to the clinic there that is known for treating leprosy as well as HIV.

We clambered into our hired Pajero, dropping Dorcas in her new blue dress at the Kumi boarding school along the way, where we took time to meet and visit with the 200 plus children that are housed and taught there. A tour of the facilities revealed that, although neatly organized, they were grossly inadequate in many ways, and we

discovered more needs that begged to be addressed. It would have to be at another time, however, as Francis was our priority on that particular day.

We arrived at the clinic and were quickly ushered in to see the clinical officer. He examined Francis and directed us to take him to be weighed. While we watched, the frightened little boy was suspended in a sling beneath a hanging scale whereupon his eyes widened and his face became frozen in a cry of terror. He looked so helpless and forlorn with his tiny, thin arms and legs dangling there. We next proceeded to the lab where Francis was stuck in the hand for a blood draw and his agony continued. It was heartbreaking to watch him suffer so and not be able to explain what was happening, as we did not share the same language. When finished, the lab tech informed us that it was too late to receive results of the tests that afternoon. Instead, we would have to return the following day to meet with the man who did voluntary counseling and testing (VCT). Worried and disappointed, we packed ourselves and a whimpering Francis into our vehicle and headed for home.

By this time Francis was exhausted and began to fall asleep as we bumped our way beneath a crisp, expansive, glorious African sky and over terra cotta roads back to the little village of Ngora. Francis was seated on the floor of the back of the vehicle with his sister, Helen, who would occasionally reach out to tenderly re-arrange his arms and legs so as to make him more comfortable. Helen serves as surrogate mother and her love is so very apparent. She cares for Francis at home while their two sisters attend school, a circumstance all too common to the countless children of Africa who are forced to become caregivers and child-parents because of HIV/AIDS. The ride was so rough that it became impossible to make Francis comfortable, so I reached down and gathered him into my arms. He laid his weary head on my chest and promptly fell asleep.

I cannot describe what it felt like to hold this vulnerable, suffering child in my arms knowing that he was most probably infected and doomed to languish and die so young. His wounds were weeping, there was blood on his shirt, and the largest lesion on the side of his neck was positioned on my chest where his dear little head rested. I was torn between the 'science' and the 'mother' instincts in me, and I found myself silently praying to God to please protect Francis and please protect me. However, at that moment, I found it more important to nurture the child than to be fearful of lesions that

might be weeping the HIV virus, so cradled him protectively yet carefully as we bounced and jostled our way toward home. We eventually arrived and dropped the children at their homestead, explaining to their father that we would return the following day to collect Helen and Francis for the repeat visit to Kumi and the dreaded visit with the VTC.

The next morning, we again climbed into the Pajero, drove to pick up the two children, and headed toward the hospital to receive the diagnosis. Francis was freshly scrubbed and dressed in a little two-piece sports outfit that one could expect to see on any healthy, privileged child in America. He looked adorable. Helen was wearing a blouse that I had left behind in the village the previous year. It was one that I thought wildly unattractive on me, but she shone beautifully in it with her lovely, dark skin contrasting with its bright, tropical flowers. It reminded me of the saying, ‘one man’s trash is another man’s treasure’, and how we all place such different value on the things in our lives. My friends in Africa are so grateful for the gifts they receive. Small gestures mean so very much to them. Their obvious appreciation motivates me to continue to try on their behalf.

We arrived at the clinic in the early morning glow of a beautiful day. There we were greeted by a lab tech in a starched, white coat who handed me a slip of paper that was pink and spattered with blood. The hand that presented it to me was covered with a soiled latex glove that had obviously served as protection for an entire day. Again, the science in me questioned the adequacy of his protective precautions, but also recognized the tragic lack of resources clinicians face as they continue their valiant daily struggles to self-protect against a deadly virus while providing the best possible care within circumstances that dictate such compromising limitations.

The long, hand hewn benches in the waiting area were extremely crowded and appeared terribly uncomfortable to sit upon. Francis and I were ushered away from the hundreds of waiting sick to sit by ourselves on a small, three-legged stool beneath the shade of a massive, lush mango tree which stood sentry behind the clinic. I cradled dear Francis in my lap and we sat, just the two of us, in the dappled light of a most beautiful day and awaited the results of his tests. It wasn’t long, however seemed like an eternity, when the man who did the clinic’s counseling finally appeared, took a seat beside us, and

simply said, “The test was reactive”. I asked, “You mean he is positive?” “Yes”, was his reply. I had no further words.

The ride back was silent. Francis didn’t understand. Helen had not been told. Their father awaited the news. There is nothing I can possibly say to help one comprehend what it felt like to release that beautiful, precious little boy into the world that awaited him. Orphaned. Impoverished. Severely disadvantaged due to circumstances beyond his control. I left Francis with his father, siblings, and an interpreter who would try to explain. I implored a friend from the village to find life-saving drugs for Francis, leaving funds to pay for the clinic visit and HIV treating medications before climbing back into the Pajero and making the inevitable trip back to the capitol city of Kampala.

The plan was to visit Kenya a week later to check on my ‘chosen’ son, Ken, himself an orphan of AIDS whom I’d parented back home in Minnesota, and who was expected to begin attending college in Nairobi that fall. Time was short before my scheduled return to the States and I still worried about Francis so again re-organized our travel plans and pointed the car toward a return trip to the village. Four dusty hours and miles of bumpy road later we arrived and went immediately to see Francis at his home. There in the sunshine, on a small log outside his hut, squatted my tiny friend. His clothes were torn and soiled, the little bit of baby chub that still remained on his inner legs peaked from beneath his floppy, oversized shorts. Upon seeing me, and much like the little hedgehog I’d played with on my previous visit, Francis drew himself into a little, self-protective bundle as I stepped toward him. It was clear that my presence was grim reminder of the pain he’d suffered, pain that he associated with me. Seeing him react in such a manner brought tears to my eyes. I slowly approached him and held out my hand.

While traveling to the village I had stopped at one of the small merchants and purchased a bit of candy as well as some biscuits for the kids, and I handed the package to Francis. He surprised me with his spunky response as he clutched the biscuits tightly to himself and glowered at the other children seated near him who threatened to take his coveted prize. Francis gave the impression that he felt he had earned the treats in return for all he’d endured and, although his lesions appeared a bit more swollen, Francis seemed to be doing okay.

Francis' father, William, hurried in to greet us from the field he was tending, and I asked him if Francis had received medicine. William indicated that he had and I asked to see it. The father ducked into a large, brick hut with a thatched grass roof that housed a bicycle and some watering cans. He explained to me that it was where he slept. He soon emerged with a box and held it up for me to see. I found myself a bit startled when I realized I was staring at the label of a box of D4T/3TC, medications I was familiar with due to my work back home. It seemed so incongruous a setting when compared to those I frequent as a pharmaceutical representative in Midwestern America. I am accustomed to associating antiretroviral (ARV) medication for HIV with environments that have 'western' sophistication and clinical sterility, not the African bush. I found myself a bit taken aback! Moments later I realized, however, that something was probably missing as most regimens to treat HIV are comprised of additional combination medications. I then proceeded to ask William if there was anything more. He re-entered the hut and returned this time with a small, worn plastic bag.

I didn't pay much attention to the look of the pills inside as I struggled to read what was lightly penned on the outside. It read "½ x 1" followed faintly by barely decipherable letters. I could make out about every other one and slowly recognized: "e..a..i..e..z". Efavirenz! I stared incredulously as it dawned on me that what was being held before me was the drug that had been approved on my forty-third birthday a decade ago, and that has since become a cornerstone lifesaving agent for countless HIV positive people worldwide. I remember saying at the time of its approval by the FDA that it felt like a gift to me as I had friends back then who were in need of the drug. Little did I realize that I would eventually witness its impact on people in a place as remote as Ngora, Uganda!

I have spoken with individuals at my company about their efforts to get ARV's into places like Africa, but on that day, deep in the bush, hours and miles from the capitol city, not far from the rebel war in the north, amidst the enormous, picturesque rock formations and tropical plants, the red clay dust and the stark beauty of rural Uganda, I held in my hands the very medications that I work to promote back here in America. I was stunned to realize the connection between the countless individuals I have come to know who work tirelessly around the world in research and medicine on behalf of those

infected and affected with HIV/AIDS, and the effect their dedication would hopefully have in a far away land on my precious little friend, Francis.

I next asked William to show me where Francis slept. He ushered me to a second, smaller shelter. He seemed ashamed or embarrassed and I assured him that it was okay. I stepped over the stoop and swung open a tattered, corrugated metal door, finding myself gazing skyward through a rotted, grass-thatched roof. I realized with heart-sinking dismay that Francis and his siblings slept huddled and unprotected in their hut, oftentimes with the rain on their faces, with no protection from malaria-laden mosquitoes. There were a few reeds and green beans scattered about with no evidence of blankets, pillows, mats or mattresses upon which to lay their heads or protect them from the hard-packed mud floor. Not ideal circumstances, by any means, for a child to be expected to heal and thrive. I determined to do what I could to remedy the situation. In the meantime, Francis had medications and he knew that someone cared.

As we go about our lives in our 'developed' part of the world, we oftentimes make note, in many different ways, of the measures of our success. Personally, those desired points of reference may be the achievements of our children, the size of our homes, the clothes in our closets or the funds in our accounts. In my workplace, those necessary measures are such things as an effective sales call, a promising study analysis, desirable data reports, or receipt of a performance award. In a place like Africa, in a village like Ngora, I find the measures of success to be so dramatically different. Simple things like a brightly colored blouse reborn, a hungry child with a biscuit, rapt faces when a story is read, all mean so very much. On that particular day, in my chosen village, I learned I could make a hedgehog dance and found life-extending care for a sick child.

It's tough to walk away. I dread returning home, not because I don't love being there, but because I feel so unable to help when so far away. One of my dear friends in Uganda cautions me not to turn around when I leave. When asked why, he told me that if I do, I will see him cry. On the day I left Francis, I ignored that advice and I turned around for one last look. I am so very glad I did. Sitting there with his biscuits on his lap and a sucker in his mouth, the beautiful little boy with the virus, the wounds and the fears, tipped his face shyly toward me, handed me two stones, and gave me a smile. That was my achievement, my golden measure of success. It meant the world to me. It did so

for I believe that in the grander scheme of things, and our usual priorities aside, when all is said and done, it's most important to remember that what it's really all about is that...little Francis matters.

Peace and Grace,

Jeri