

Peace and Grace

“What is it that you are looking for?” my mother implored. Once again she was expressing concern with the frustration that threatened to morph me into a chronic malcontent. “I’m not sure,” I replied. “I just know that there is something more out there that I should be doing.” I thought for a moment and then woefully added, “Mom, I just want to find peace and grace.”

Not long afterwards, I had the opportunity to hear Dr. Timothy Schacker, HIV program director from the University of Minnesota, address an audience of local nurses who specialize in the treatment of HIV/AIDS. Even though I was immersed in the HIV treating community with my work as a pharmaceutical representative selling drugs for HIV/AIDS, I was shocked and horrified to hear him say at that time that there were 8.2 million orphans worldwide from AIDS, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa. I was well versed on what was occurring locally due to the devastating effects of the HIV virus, but had no idea of the losses so many children worldwide have had to endure. Since then, the number of children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS, and are thus considered orphans, has doubled. It is projected that by 2010 there may be as many as 25 to 40 million orphaned children who will have to fight for survival without benefit of having parents to raise them as a result of death due to AIDS.

Quite by chance, seven years ago, I committed to parenting four teenage boys from Africa. They had been visiting from Uganda and had simply approached me and asked me to take them home. They told me of losses they had suffered in their homeland and, upon hearing their stories, I could not think of a viable reason to say no. If they had the courage to approach a stranger and ask such a thing, I imagined their need must have been great. I felt I was being challenged at that moment to live by my truths and the teachings of my parents and faith. I mustered up courage to match theirs and said “yes” and, amazingly, in the chaos of the demands of parenting four adolescent, basketball-playing, teenage, African boys, my journey toward peace began.

Having the boys in my household and facing the challenges we had to overcome to get what we needed to survive, I learned much about the dignity and resiliency of people whose experiences have been so very unlike my own. I was given the opportunity to deviate from my myopic existence and examine my life and world from a perspective that I had not been afforded before ‘momming’ the boys. I found there were teachings and aspects of my life that I had comfortably accepted that all of a sudden didn’t feel quite ‘right’. I also learned, by comparison, that there are many things that we do well and can be very proud of in this blessed country of ours.

Knowing the boys and the world’s orphan situation has prompted me to climb mountains and volunteer time in orphanages in South Africa, twice ride my bicycle from Minneapolis to Chicago, travel to Uganda five times in as many years, visit refugee camps in a war zone, and form the non-profit organization, Illume International. It is Illume’s mission to raise awareness of the plight of the currently 16

million children who have suffered the loss of their parents to AIDS, and also raise funds to help them grow to be strong, capable adults within their own communities.

I found an experience over the holiday season on my second visit to Uganda to be particularly impactful. Deep in the village of Ngero, on Christmas day, I walked into the yard of a rural home and gazed into the face of a most beautiful young girl. Her clothing was worn and a bit tattered, her expression loving and sweet. I came to realize that in the yard were buried members of her family as her parents, Moses and Rose, had both succumbed to AIDS. I was immediately taken with the child and instantly felt a protective attachment. Since leaving Uganda, I find the child crowds my mind often as I go about my daily 'have to's' at home, and I long to return to make sure she is safe and to see how she is doing. To me, she represents the millions of children left behind by this terrible disease and furthers my desire to inform others through Illume.

I believe now that I am closer to finding that which I am seeking. It feels as though I am nearing that place where I have truly found that "something I should be doing". With the help of those who know and care, we can all work together to lessen the effects of the scourge of HIV/AIDS on the lives of children around the world. I have started with Uganda because the need is so great with 2.3 million children already orphaned there, but also because when I asked this beautiful child on Christmas day to tell me her name...she looked at me, smiled through her heartache, and sweetly replied, "*my name is Grace.*"

Peace and Grace,

Jeri