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# Snowflakes in Africa

Despite war horrors, orphans find pleasure in simple discoveries | *Susan D. Hill*



PHOTO BY ZACH JOHANESON

In 2001 a missionary spoke on her work with orphans, and my husband, Duncan, was wrecked for anything else. Within a year, he left the business world and founded Uganda Orphans Fund (UOF).

The following summer, I traveled with him to Africa to visit the first four UOF orphanages. Shy little girls in Westernized party dresses with missing buttons and shredded hems greeted us. The boys sported ill-fitting shirts and odd shoes. I held their small hands as they bowed on one knee and saw a mixture of hope and despair in their eyes. But after each stop, we piled into the van, disinfecting our hands with Purell, and shining black faces became tiny dots in the distance. Our visit seemed shallow in retrospect.

Even so, I was deeply affected. I wrote contemplatively and wept over the enormous needs. To say catastrophic is not an overstatement, and still, I did not yet know their stories.

ARTICLE CONTINUES BELOW

This summer I returned after six years. We maneuvered the potholed road to Kasozi Village, UOF's prototype orphan community. Orphans offered long hugs, melting into our bodies. I played I Spy and colored pictures. I learned their names, kissed their heads, and told them they have place in this world.

The best part was making paper snowflakes with Dennis, a former child soldier. We folded, cut, and opened beautiful patterns of paper symmetry. It was magical! This young teen—abducted at age 9 by the LRA rebel army and forced to kill 12 people—now found joy in such a simple thing. Kasozi Village has been a stable place for him to grieve, learn about forgiveness, and know that the past doesn't have to define his future.

On the last day, I asked some children to tell their stories. Doreen explained how the rebels seized her father and said, "Do you want to be happy?" If you said yes, they killed you, she explained. If you said no, they forced you into their army. Evidently, her father gave the wrong answer. She'd never seen a gun and remembered her body shaking violently. Some kids were so terrified, they defecated and wet themselves. Her family hid in tall grasses by a lake without food and water. When they returned, soldiers had executed her brother also. All of life felt scary.

James Okello's mother was mentally unstable and wandered from place to place. His father went missing and was deranged. The four children were left to care for themselves. I asked him about his life now. A big smile radiated across his face. He loves math and wants to be an engineer, and at 14, he's a preacher to the younger kids. He hugged me three times and then went outside to weep.

Gloria's village was barraged by rebels. They burned a house to the ground right next to where her family lay sleeping. All the people in that house died, and her mother was shot by rebels. Her family fled by boat, but in their haste, her little brother drowned. They buried his body downstream. Without food or money, they suffered greatly. But today, Gloria has a heart for street children because of what she went through.

Kasozi Village has 188 children, and these are just a few accounts.

Many Westerners go to the Dark Continent with big plans on how to fix Africa. They're quickly humbled. Most have no idea what they are up against. It requires perseverance, wisdom, ingenuity, financial shrewdness, spiritual awareness and maturity, and time to form trustworthy relationships. People betray you, selling orphan food for money. There are mortal risks of disease, car accidents, and traveling in lawless places. Translating an idea of compassion into reality is no small task.

I now look at my husband with new eyes. "I don't know how you make this trip four times a year," I said. But he's driven by love and called by God. "I've never felt more alive," he replied.

Duncan will carry on, giving a father's embrace to these children. UOF will continue to provide food, shelter, medicine, and education through donor support. And God does the far greater work of healing their souls. As a result, the message of their value and purpose will take hold.

—*Susan D. Hill is the author of Closer Than Your Skin: Unwrapping the Mystery of Intimacy with God (WaterBrook Press/Random House, 2008)*