

Snowflakes in Africa

By Susan D. Hill

Thin arms around your waist, embracing you until you move away...
Brown eyes reflecting deep pools of unspeakable sorrow...
A small hand in mine, willing, yielded, waiting for wherever I might lead...
Quiet words about life when they knew mama, and sometimes baba, or father...
Some turn away to hide tears, shame rippling across their faces...
Others are afraid to remember because the sadness feels bottomless ...
Children who have seen far more trauma than most of us will ever know

Six years ago, in the second year of UOF's inception, I traveled to Uganda with my husband and our three children. We agreed to spend the money because Duncan had received a passionate call to orphans, and I felt deeply unsettled with the sudden change in our life. I needed to see things face-to-face.

For my comfort level, we stayed at a nice resort in Jinja, a tropical paradise on the headwaters of the Nile River and sipped orange Fanta through straws. Hired men stood all day in the hot sun at various places in the courtyards surrounding the hotel, quietly guarding us. This did not help my peace of mind. Meanwhile, housekeeping staff mopped up thousands of tiny ants who made their trail through the center of our room. The insect army was just passing through and our particular bungalow happened to be in their way. They didn't know it was a four-star hotel.

After the 36 hour journey, we gathered a sense of equilibrium the first morning with an elegant English breakfast of eggs, bacon, and baked tomatoes. On the veranda, at café tables with pressed white tablecloths, we marveled at the magnificent Nile River below. A hundred years ago, very few white people had seen this part of the world. We lingered over cups of rich dark coffee with steaming milk before leaving to visit the first orphan home.

Lurching onto the main road, we stopped for petrol at stations with armed guards carrying AK-47s. Our driver then maneuvered in traffic with no margin for error, swerving to miss the potholes yet barely missing a woman carrying a load of bananas. I had to shut my eyes. Finally, we pulled up to a UOF home.

Upon arrival, orphans took our hands and bowed down on one knee saying "Oly Otea" to greet us and we exchanged our hello. Young girls wore westernized party dresses far too fancy for the occasion until I saw all the missing buttons or jagged tears in their skirts. Boys sported ill-fitting shirts and pants and many wore odd, oversized shoes. Their demeanor reflected a mixture of hope and despair. Some had prepared songs and dances. Their caregivers and project directors fawned over us, the *muzungu* (whites) hoping to seal the deal for continued financial support. Our visits were short and shallow in retrospect. Piling into the van, we drove to the next building project to meet another pastor and disinfected our hands with Purell. Orphans with shining black faces became tiny dots in the distance.

Even so, I was not unaffected by this first trip. I wrote contemplatively about it in my journal, and wept in the hotel room over the enormity of the needs. It is not an overstatement to use the word catastrophic, and still, I did not yet know their stories.

In the years that followed, Duncan made over 20 trips to Uganda. UOF has built 26 orphan homes and rescued over 1,000 kids. Much has happened. After six years, it was time for me to return--in fact, it was long overdue. I needed to meet new staff, see building projects and support my husband's vision. But this trip would be vastly different.

Maybe you're like me. I'm not really wired for Third World travel and adventure. In fact, like many writers, I'm kind of an introverted homebody. I did not look forward to the grueling aspects of getting halfway around the world. We encountered some violent turbulence crossing the Atlantic, and had long layovers in airports. If I didn't understand jetlag, I'd have thought I was severely depressed. Once in Africa, the drive on congested roads from Entebbe to Jinja was hair-raising and the stress turned my stomach into knots. When we arrived at the hotel, I dissolved in tears, wondering if I had the gumption to survive the next two weeks.

During the several days that followed, I felt dirty, sweaty and dehydrated, and I experienced the full range of intestinal disturbances. I was asked by the staff and many of the children to stay in the village overnight, but couldn't face the 7 x 10 inch latrine hole, not to mention the swarm of flies around it. To my amazement, Laura Mathis, a friend and psychologist from Chicago who joined us on this trip, jumped at the chance to stay in the village. She later told me it was the most primitive experience of her life. But I felt relieved, returning to our modest hotel. I showered and crawled into bed like a recluse.

In clean pajamas and fresh sheets, I pored over Heidi Baker's book, *Compelled by Love*, a story about her work with orphans in Mozambique. In the mid-90s, Rolland and Heidi Baker came to help some of the poorest, most grief-stricken people on earth, in an atmosphere of floods, famine, disease and war. Their orphan homes were commandeered by men with guns, and suddenly they were homeless themselves, trying to care for 320 children. Heidi was diagnosed with M.S. and Rolland took ill with a severe case of cerebral malaria. Though overwhelmed and beaten down, they didn't give up.

She asked God to help her understand the poor. He impressed on her to spend time with children. She reminded God that she had a PhD in Systematic Theology and said, "I don't do children." But she knew He was saying, "You do children *now*." She continued, saying that we can see the face of God in the poor, especially poor children. As Jesus said, "Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for Me." God is asking--who will go to the dark corners of the world, to the forgotten places to find the outcast, the sick, the broken, the dying, the lonely, the orphan and invite them to God's wedding feast? (Luke 14) Heidi answered God's call. She sat with poor children, sharing their world, and sometimes their lice and scabies, and learned more about God's love from them.

Lying in bed, I felt profoundly ashamed of my need for comfort, cleanliness, and safety. Though my husband felt called to Africa, I did not. Yet here I was in Africa, under pressure to be part of his passion. I feared God's disappointment, as if I had failed some test and was unable to love like Jesus.

Interestingly, an email came from a woman named Desiree whom I had met last summer. She did not know I was in Africa, yet the timing of her message was uncanny... "Hey Susan ~ I was in church yesterday morning and I kept hearing your name in my head. I only can assume that it was from the Lord! I just wanted to let you know how much the Lord loves you. If you are fearing anything I wanted to let you know that 1 John 4:18 states: There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment."

God has a way of meeting me in my weakness.

The next morning as I dressed for the day, I shook off fear and self-pity, and asked God to give me new eyes to see what He was doing. We drove the potholed road to Kasozi Village and again, were greeted by children who gave us long hugs and melted into our bodies. I found myself wanting to learn and remember their names, get down on their level, look them in the eyes and speak kind and encouraging words. Laura was reading stories with some of the small ones. I grabbed a book and soon there were five kids surrounding me. We played *I Spy* and some counting games, and then I pulled out a blank notebook I had brought for a journal. Paper is a valuable commodity and many wanted to color pictures. I showed others how to do origami cranes and paper boats.

But the best part was sitting down with Dennis, a former child soldier, to show him how to cut paper snowflakes. We folded paper, made cuts, and opened up beautiful patterns of symmetry. It was magic! Here was a 13 year-old boy, abducted at nine by the Lord's Resistance Army, forced to kill twelve people--now finding joy in such a simple thing. Kasozi Village has been a stable, safe place for him to grieve, learn about forgiveness, and know that the past doesn't have to define his young life. Around 40 kids mingled in that small room--coloring, reading, cutting up paper--and demonstrating to me, that UOF with God's help is giving them a future and a hope.

On the last day, I asked some kids if they would tell me stories of what their life was like before coming to the orphan home. Some could not speak about their past.

Doreen, a girl in her mid-teens now, has so much gratitude about her life in Kasozi Village, she had no problem sharing. On a Sunday the rebel army came and took her father. They said "Do you want to be happy?" If you said yes, they killed you. Then they asked, "Do you want to be sad?" If you said yes, then they locked you up and forced you to be in their army. Evidently, her father gave the wrong answer. It was the first time Doreen had ever seen a gun, and she remembered her body just shaking. Some kids were so frightened that they defecated and urinated themselves. She went on the run with her mother and two brothers about eight miles from their home and hid in tall grasses by a lake with no food or water. Later they returned, and one of her brothers was killed by the rebels. All of life felt scary to her until she came to UOF's home. Now with an education, she would like to be a lawyer when she grows up.

Vena lived with her mom and never knew her father. She has two younger brothers. One day her mother went to the Red Cross hospital and said she would come back, but never returned. An older lady went to check on their mom but she was not at the hospital. Vena and her brothers were abandoned just like that. Tears gathered in her eyes as she thought about her mama. It took her a long time to tell me her story. Vena is now a worship leader, and she would like to be a singer and play the guitar.

James Okello had a mother who was mentally unstable and wandered from place to place. There were four children in his family left to care for themselves. James never knew his father, but his grandmother said he was also deranged. When I asked him about his life now, a big smile broke out on his face. He loves math and would like to be

an engineer. Currently he is a preacher to the younger kids in the village. He hugged me three times before leaving the room and then went outside to weep.

Gloria grew up in Pader. The rebels came to her village and started killing people. Her family escaped by boat but her little brother fell in the river and drowned. They found his body and buried him downstream. The family continued on their journey but the rebels were still in the area. At night, the rebels burned a house to the ground right next to where her family was sleeping. All the people in that house died. Her uncle came and picked them up, but her mother was shot by the rebels. She lived with her grandmother for a time but there was no food, no school fees and they suffered greatly. Gloria feels she is in the right place at Kasozi Village as she has come to know God. She wants to be a pastor and a teacher and has a big heart for street children because of what she's gone through.

Kasozi Village now has 188 children and these are only a few of the stories. I was undone.

As I left the village for home, a small girl named Mary Catherine kept appearing in front of me for a hug. I embraced her thin body and kissed her head. She said, "I want to be your friend," and handed me a note that someone else had written to her. Folded up in her pocket, it was old and creased and obviously something she valued. She gave it to me, pointing to her name. She wanted me to remember her. I stuffed it in my backpack.

The trip home was 45 hours from the hotel lobby to our front door. After another week of jetlag and gastrointestinal problems, I unpacked my bag and came across Mary Catherine's note. It said:

"Dear Mary Catherine, YOU ARE GOD'S CHILD!

I pray you had a great day! I thought about you all day. I missed you very much. How was your day? Here is a verse for you: 1 John 3:1 + 3... 'See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of GOD...AND SO WE ARE.'"

The note was colored with red hearts, a tulip and a daisy. She had scratched out the name at the bottom probably so I would remember her name. It might have been her most precious possession: A simple message from another orphan, telling her that she was valued and loved, and had place in this world.

I long to give the same message to her and every child I met on this trip. But I live thousands of miles away and that alone presents many challenges. When I spend time with God, I find myself weeping for these children. Perhaps it is a form of intercession.

Many westerners go to the Dark Continent with big ideas on how to fix Africa. They are quickly humbled. Most have no idea what they are up against. It requires perseverance, wisdom, ingenuity, financial shrewdness, spiritual awareness and maturity, and much time to build relationships of trust with those on site. There are mortal risks of disease, car accidents, and traveling in lawless places. There are betrayals, and people who will sell the orphan's food for money. To translate an idea of compassion into the reality of an orphan home 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 is driven by love and called by God to do it. He replied, "I've never felt more alive." Duncan will continue his work, and many will join him, including me on future trips. He will give a father's embrace and kiss, and tell these children that they matter. UOF will continue to provide food, shelter, medicine and education because of your 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.

In fact, it *has* taken hold. I've seen it with my own eyes.