# THOUGHTS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

By Adam & Lora Willard

# INTRODUCTION

The following stories and essays were written as "newsletters" by both of us, Adam and Lora Willard, throughout the duration of our service as Peace Corps Volunteers in South Africa, from July 17, 2008 until November 18, 2010. They were first sent by e-mail to a small list of friends and family, who mostly reside in the USA.

We lived in Dumphries village, a medium-sized rural community a good distance from any tar road, but only a few kilometers from the fence of the private portion of Kruger National Park, one of the most famous tourist destinations in South Africa. We lived in an average-size and typical-style house on the main road of the village and had a sizable host family that lived both across the street from us and scattered throughout the major cities of South Africa. We worked in two primary schools, one less than half a kilometer from our house and the other about five kilometers away in a neighboring village. In most aspects of our lives, we lived just as our neighboring villagers did, and we did our best to learn more about their way of life and the meaning it holds for them.

Rather than simply detailing every event that's happened to us and giving news updates to our friends and family that are strictly factual and potentially repetitive or uninteresting, we decided to take a different approach. Instead, we've attempted to detail life for us as Peace Corps Volunteers here in South Africa in such a way that our readers in other parts of the world may have the opportunity to get a "feel" for it, to understand a bit better what life in our shoes is like, though they may have never visited here or ever even left their own country. We want them to understand what kind of issues are pressing in our work and in our community, and the struggles and successes, the joys and sadness that are inherent in this lifestyle for us and for those around us.

In addition to simply helping our readers "feel" or understand our lives here, we also believe that we have learned a tremendous amount throughout this time, and we've attempted to share some of it. The experiences we've had here and the accompanying lessons learned may never be repeated for us or for anyone else who might care to write about them. So we've done our best to transmit these insights as clearly and persuasively as possible. As Christians, we can't help but see God and his work throughout much of what we've encountered and learned, oftentimes receiving what we believe is a deeper understanding of what it means to live our lives in pursuit of him. We've shared these things as well.

Every newsletter we've written during the time of our service is collected here, with only minor edits being made, and they've been compiled for anyone else who may be interested in reading and learning more about life and culture in South Africa or the types of issues that all sorts of development workers are confronted with in similar work. So, as you read the following stories and musings, I hope you have the chance to feel somewhat connected to our short-lived but very significant (to us) South African lives. And if we're lucky, you may also have the chance to learn something meaningful from our experiences, just as we were taught so much through them every day.

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# WELCOMING THE STRANGER

There are a number of obstacles to any kind of work here in South Africa, and only some of them have to do with physical resources. One of the biggest and most widespread challenges that we frequently encounter is racial or tribal prejudice. Sometimes it's based strictly on skin color; South Africa certainly has a bad history of breaking people of different shades into different categories for the purpose of oppression and control.

But sometimes prejudice here rears its ugly head as tribalism or xenophobia (fear of strangers). Many people in South Africa, including those who have historically been oppressed the most, are often themselves the main perpetrators of negative stereotypes about their closest neighbors, simply because they belong to a different tribal group, speak a different dialect, or come from a different, but neighboring African nation.

After our first week in South Africa, it was time for Lora and me to move to a temporary "homestay" for the two month duration of Peace Corps training. We were given no details about the family, location, living arrangements, or any of it until it was time to actually meet the new host family. He or she could be anybody, with any size family, living in any type of home, near or far from the campus we were training at, *anything* was possible. We had **no idea** who it was or what it would be like. But we were very excited at the chance of interacting on a much more personal level with the South Africans who lived around us, and we hoped for a nice family where we could learn a lot.

Well, as it turned out, we went to live with one widowed lady of the Tswana tribe who was in her 60s and she had a very nice house in a quiet rural area a little ways outside of the already-small training town. Her name is Ma (Mrs.) Mashishi. The first few days were awkward; I mean really, what was she to do with the strange white people who suddenly moved into her house?

But in a short time we all warmed up to each other, especially when she realized that we didn't want any special treatment and we simply wanted to enjoy life as she did. The fact that she spoke rough but good English certainly helped, even more so since we were spending most of our day learning xiTsonga and not seTswana (which was her language). We ate dinner with her every night, shared recipes, chatted from time to time, and hung around her house whenever we could. She wasn't a very talkative or emotional lady, but she liked having us around and she often worried if it started to get dark and we weren't back from the day's training yet.

A bit over a month later, the time came for us to visit our permanent site for a week, check it out, see how things were, and agree to stay there. In preparing to leave, Ma Mashishi started becoming increasingly more worried about whether or not we had everything we needed, especially food. She told us several times, and very emphatically, "you don't know what kind of people they are!"

We were both surprised that she didn't realize that "we didn't know what kind of people *they* were" the very same day we moved in with *her* and that our upcoming visit to our permanent site wasn't any different than that day was. But we just chuckled to ourselves every time she gave the warning.

Of course, we *were* going to visit the Shangaan people and since they were so far removed from the Tswana people, they might eat food from leaves, wear shoes on their hands, and live in trees for all she knew. She finally decided the only good way to make sure we were taken care of was to bake a big batch of scones and rolls and make sure we took a huge bucket full of food along with us.

Of course our site visit went just fine, the people were great, the food was great, and unfortunately many of Ma Mashishi's delicious rolls and scones spoiled before we had the chance to eat them. But with all the food that was being poured out to us left and right, we really didn't have a choice.

No one really lives in trees here, but the kids do enjoy climbing them and hanging out in them!

We only had a couple weeks left at Ma Mashishi's after site visit. At some point during those weeks, Peace Corps informed everyone's host families that they're hoping to do another training in the same location the following January. They asked the host families whether or not they'd be willing to host new Volunteers-in-training again. Ma Mashishi was quick to offer her house for a new one or two Volunteers to stay with her again.

We talked to her about it a couple of times, probing how she felt about the idea. We decided to make a joke out of her earlier fears about our site visit and told her, while laughing, "but you don't know what kind of people they are!" Instead of laughing back, she just said, "Mmm! Mmm!" ("Yes! Yes!") while nodding her head vigorously.

The thing is, until you meet someone, and take time to get to know them, you obviously "don't know what kind of people they are." With the history of racial oppression and inter-tribal conflict here in South Africa, that often translates into seclusion and xenophobia.

Just a few months before, there were massive xenophobic riots in the poorest areas surrounding South Africa's capital that left over 50 African immigrants dead and even more homes burned down. The second elected South African President got kicked out of office in 2008 because he and the aspiring president for 2009's election were locked in a political/legal battle that clearly divided their constituencies along tribal lines, the ousted President belonging to the smaller of the two tribes.

Almost any time (but not every time) we meet a white South African in town and talk a little about what we're doing and where we're staying, they express shock and often try to convince us we shouldn't be living in the village with "them". At the same time, I can't even tell you all the funny and clearly exaggerated stories we've heard from rural black South Africans about what the white Afrikaaner minority must still be doing to keep the black majority down.

All of these fears and misunderstandings about one another are surely based on some kernel of truth or some bit of history where one person of one tribe or race or nation did something despicable to someone of another. It happens. South Africa just happens to have a LOT of history of that sort of thing. And so the corresponding fears and misunderstandings are similarly extreme.

But South Africa is also a nation in transition. Things ARE changing. Racism, tribalism, and xenophobia are generally declining. There were several people in our training village who have taken in Zimbabwean refugees, sometimes whole families, who are fleeing from the current crisis there. Many of the people in our current Shangaan village, including our nearest neighbors, were

once refugees from a Mozambiquan crisis and many of the rest of the village helped to integrate them.

When we told Ma Mashishi, “you don’t know what kind of people they are!” she agreed with a hearty “Mmm! Mmm!”, but it didn’t change her mind about choosing to host them. She’ll bring one or two more into her home anyway, regardless of her fear of the unknown.

In the end, what else can you do? A shared history of conflict or personal experience with people who’ve treated you badly can leave you wary and skeptical. It’s easy to talk about that skepticism when you’re talking about people you don’t know and who you’ve never met.

But while acknowledging the possibility that anything could happen, even something bad, I suppose the best solution is to go through with it anyway. Meet the person. Take the time to get to know them. How else can South Africa overcome its past and achieve the reconciliation that is the goal of its new government? Let’s hope and pray that more people here in South Africa give other people a chance.

(First written by Adam Willard Sept. 28, 2008)

Standing with Ma Mashishi at the end of our Pre-Service Training.

# WATER

Adjusting is definitely more than just living arrangements. One of the first areas we've had to adjust to is the drastic difference in climate here... both in temperature and humidity. Though we've been here at our village for just over a month now, I can say it's only in the last week or two that the issue of water has really begun to sink into our psyches. What the water issue really comes down to is a huge shortage of it... this year especially. Living with such a scarcity of water, it really teaches us the value of something we've so often taken for granted - just like the air we breathe.

In our village, Dumphries, there is no water supply and tap system like we're used to in America. No one, including us, has running water inside their home. That means no sinks for washing vegetables or dishes. No showers or tubs. No flush toilets. Certainly no dishwashers or washing machines.

The only way to store and use water is with huge jugs and large bowls. That means that anyone who wants water has to go fetch it from a limited range of water supply choices and transport it back to their home. There are really only a few sources of water in the whole of Dumphries A and Dumphries B. Out of the three main options, most (because of lack of money) are dependent on just two: village wells or the river.

For those with enough money (what you might call the "elite" of the village – those few teachers and few others with jobs outside the community), they can hire someone with a pick-up truck to transport large jugs of water from a nearby town. In American terms, hiring someone like that is relatively inexpensive, but in Dumphries terms, the number of people who can afford it are very few.

So for the rest, there's the village wells and the river. There's maybe five to ten wells scattered throughout the village , fairly shallow but many of them are in easy-to-access locations. When rain is plentiful so is water in the wells. But during the rest of the year, especially by this time, they can dry up entirely. In general, the well water seems to be a bit cleaner than the river, but when they start getting low, the pollution and general dirtiness starts becoming obvious.

On the other hand, if we were to walk at a brisk pace straight to the river's water supply point from our part of the village, while carrying nothing, it would take a minimum of 30 minutes. With the unusual lack of rain this year, that area is also sometimes dry and then people have to either dig a deep hole into the river bed or search even further upstream or downstream.

The jugs for collecting water (usually 20-30 liters each) have to be carried completely on foot, including up and down a few somewhat steep hills. Many people have wheelbarrows so that they can bring a few at a time, but some people, especially women, carry the buckets on their head, which allows only one at a time. As you can imagine, this trip can require well over an hour of hard labor and it's something that has to be repeated every day or two since most people also have very large families and many children.

Since the river is rarely flowing rapidly and sometimes just dries up, the water that most people are using for drinking, bathing, cooking, etc. is also stagnant water. There's no way of knowing what pollutants may have entered the water upstream or from land run-off on the rare occasions that it does rain.

On Saturdays, people have the strenuous chore of transporting their clothes to and from the river for washing them – mixing laundry detergent into the river for anyone who might be fetching water downstream. Thankfully, they don't drink much water anyway and almost all food is prepared by boiling, so it's likely that the most harmful elements in the water are sterilized.

For Lora and me, we're not given enough money by the Peace Corps to pay someone to bring us water every time we need it. But the schools who are hosting us have allowed us to get water from their boreholes and water storage tanks. One of our schools is only about half a kilometer (maybe 1/3 of a mile) away and it's only a minor uphill slope on the return to our house.

So we take a wheelbarrow and fetch about 130 liters of water twice a week. It's definitely a workout, but it's much easier than most of our neighbors' only options. Because it comes from deep down and it's not open to the air, it's very clean water and has only a very small amount of sediment in it. We use the water for bathing, washing our hands, cooking, drinking, and washing our clothes. Peace Corps also provided us with Brita water filters, so everything we drink, we filter first.

You may ask why the schools don't allow the entire community to have access to such a ready supply of clean and nearby water. Well, that goes back to the lower-than-average rainfall this year and the fact that there really never is *much* rain in Dumphries.

It takes two trips to fill our water containers and push them all back to our house via wheelbarrow.

According to the old racially-segregated system of Apartheid, most black South Africans were forced to live in territories known as "Homelands", much like the original reservation system created for Native Americans. I'm told that these areas were often chosen because they were the areas that the ruling minority didn't want – especially because of lack of rainfall and other agricultural reasons. There certainly are parts of South Africa that receive quite a lot of annual rainfall and they can grow a wide variety of crops, but that's not our area.

Though the "Homelands" system was abolished nearly 15 years ago and black South Africans are free to move wherever they want today, many choose to remain at home near their families, in the only place they've known growing up: the "Homeland".

But this year, the rain is drastically low in what's an already dry part of the country. Some say the rain is usually supposed to start heavy around the end of August. But, the entire time we've been here, we've only seen a few light drops of rain and it usually only lasts a few minutes. Even when the rain clouds come in, they somehow miss Dumphries or just aren't full enough to dump much water anywhere.

Of course, no one here knows why the rain is so little and so late this year. One man from a major city blamed it on Global Warming. But most people in the village have never heard of global warming and their concerns are more immediate: drinking, cooking, and growing subsistence crops.

In most normal rainfall years Dumphries is apparently overloaded with mango and avocado harvests, and each person is able to grow a significant portion of their necessary maize and

vegetables. But because the rain is so late and so little this year, most people haven't even been able to sow their regular seeds yet and they say we may get only a few mangoes, if we're lucky. I've heard many related complaints about how skinny their cattle are becoming.

Most days I ask people what they think of the water situation and if rain will come anytime soon. I get a classical two-part African response: "Sure! Of course it will!" ... and, "If it doesn't come soon, we'll all die!" followed by a chuckle and a warm smile. I suppose many South Africans are used to living on the narrow edge of needed resources, right between just enough and a woefully short supply. And yet life goes on, and that kind of light-hearted look at it all is definitely reassuring to us as the dry weeks drag on.

So, this year especially, the water source where our schools' boreholes draw their water supply can get dreadfully low. Many children get their main meal of the day provided by the school. So the school needs quite a bit of water for their garden, for cooking all the learners' food, and to make sure the children also have something to drink during the day. Some days when the water table is too low for the schools' boreholes to pump enough water into their storage tanks, kids can go home hungry and thirsty.

If everyone in the village were allowed access to the schools' short supply of water, the children certainly wouldn't have enough. So, they have to draw a line somewhere and they decided to include us in it. Some days we feel bad for being part of the privileged few, but most days we're just glad to have water at all.

For our own part, we use as little water as we can, to make what we have go further and to spare us more frequent trips hauling water! We have a small bowl with a small amount of water that we wash our hands in all day. We try not to bathe every day (though we often have to wash our feet), and when we do, we use a small amount of water – just enough to get our bodies wet and to wash off the soap. We try not to use many dishes to avoid water use that way and we only wash our clothes every other week and even then, only the clothes that are noticeably dirty or smelly.

Then, when we're done with the water for each of these chores, we use it to water our small garden and some of our fruit-bearing trees. We're also trying to get some barrels for catching rain run-off from our roof during any occasion when there's even a few drops. Many other villagers also use this method as their principal source of water during the rainy season and it certainly saves them strenuous trips to the river. The only area we give ourselves freedom to splurge is drinking water. It's just too often too hot to cut that short!

The good thing is, there's good news for Dumphries on the horizon. The local municipality has been busy laying pipes to bring a water supply to the village – whereby people could access several taps throughout to have a closer, cleaner supply of water.

Some people say the municipal pipes are already finished and are complaining that the municipality simply hasn't turned it on yet. Many hope that the water will be turned on by December this year. With South African bureaucracy the way it is, no one really knows for sure when if ever it will happen. They also say that municipal water supplies in rural areas throughout South Africa are often turned off several times a week to conserve water. But it's certainly better than nothing and I think it must be better than what Dumphries has now. It's a definite hope.

I've been planning on writing this newsletter on Dumphries' water issues for several weeks now. And to top it all off, we had a very significant rainfall last night! It started yesterday afternoon like usual: just a few drops for a few minutes that left everyone disappointed and some very pessimistic. But by evening time, the clouds had returned and they were pouring down rain! It lasted well into the night and the sky was still overcast today, leaving the ground noticeably moist for quite some time. Everyone's been in obvious high spirits today and some of our neighbors are beginning to hoe their yards and plant their gardens.

So, things are looking up. Maybe the municipality will finish the pipes and turn on the water supply soon. Maybe the rain was just really late, but it'll continue strong from this point. We can only hope and pray!

(First written by Adam Willard, Oct. 18, 2008. NOTE: The municipal water supply for Dumphries wasn't completed until March 2010, but it's been a mostly consistent supply of good, clean water for the whole village since then.)

When the river has enough water, Lora often brings the laundry there to wash with the other women. It definitely saves us from making more trips to the school's borehole and we can swim at the same time!

# THIRD-WORLD CELEBRITIES

Lora and I have been living and working in our rural village here in South Africa for several months now. Before arriving, we were hoping that people would be glad we're here and available to help. We even expected a bit more attention than we were used to, for a variety of reasons. But we had no idea what it'd be like to be full-blown celebrities here.

We're not actually famous celebrities *everywhere* in South Africa, mainly just in our little portion of it. But here, we definitely are celebrities, whether we like it or not. I've never been a celebrity before, so I don't have a lot to compare it to, but it's definitely an interesting, sometimes funny, and sometimes disappointing situation to be in.

I'm serious though: *everyone* knows our names. I suppose it's only natural when we've met so many people in a short span of time and for each of them, they've only met two of us. It makes sense that in that situation there'd be people who know our names but we forgot theirs. But there are people we've *never* met who know our names. We meet them for the first time, tell them our names, they say, "I know", we tell them where we stay, they say, "I know", and it continues like that. It's true that they don't know *everything* about us, but they know about as much of us as you might expect someone to know about a celebrity.

Any time we step outside of our house, walk down the road, go to town, anywhere, we hear shouts of "Nyiko!" and "Tsakani!" (our Shangaan names given to us by our host family). We look left and right, up and down, sometimes the person may be a quarter of a mile off and they're shouting our names, just to say "hi".

It's more surprising in town. The nearest one, Thulamahashe, (still about 15km away) where we sometimes go to buy groceries, has at least 15,000 or more people in it. Yet every time we go, at least a few people who we don't recognize at all greet us by name. It's a shame we don't know their names, it makes us feel a little bit bad. But then again, it's kind of nice if everyone knows you and is happy to see you, right?

Other than just being famous, there are other rewards to being celebrities. Anytime there's a public gathering, there's food available. As celebrities, we receive one of two privileges: we're either sent straight to the front of the line or they have someone prepare a plate and serve it to us, even when everyone else is serving themselves. No matter how much we protest that we want to wait in line or serve ourselves (and therefore hopefully avoid being served too many chicken feet or hairy pieces of cow head), it's to no avail: we're *always* catered to.

Some activities even have a VIP eating area for the main speakers or government officials or family of those being married and we're *always* included in the VIP area, even when we've had *nothing* to do with the activity at all. And the food's usually a bit higher quality than everyone else's too. We can't complain about that.

If we arrive late at a funeral, in time to stand at the back with everyone else, we can usually stay in that position for no more than five minutes. People near us start whispering that we've arrived. They pass the news quickly through the ranks. Before we know it, a couple people seated near the front of the funeral gathering are getting out of their seats to offer them to us. Even if we refuse, they make a show out of bringing their seats back to where we are so that we can sit down and not "have to" stand.

All this is happening while some relative or loved one is giving a eulogy for the deceased. And we, the celebrities, are an unwilling distraction. I was almost asked to speak at a funeral once, a funeral of someone I'd never met. Thankfully we left just as the news of the impending request reached us and I was able to avoid it.

Being local celebrities often means that at least one of us has to be in every photo that's taken in our vicinity, even if we have nothing to do with the event or group in the photo.

But there's no avoiding it at church... any church. In our village, all of the churches are small, with anywhere from 20-80 people in regular attendance. We've made a point of trying to visit every one, both to experience the different church cultures and to get to know more people in the village. Also, to keep any one church from being jealous that the "village celebrities" go only to someone else's church. But *every* time we attend church, even if we've been there before, they ask us to go to the front and speak to them, preach to them, pray for them, something. There's no getting out of it.

Even though our xiTsonga isn't nearly good enough to say more than a few lines, and even when no one in attendance speaks good enough English to hope to understand us, even then they ask us to publicly address the entire church. It was surprising and really caught us off guard at first. That was a horrible speech! But thankfully, we're prepared for it now. Even though we say mostly the same things every time, it's something, and everyone's just happy that we spoke at *their* church.

At the request of one of our school's teachers, we agreed to visit her church in town (Thulamahashe) for their big 10-year celebration. We were very surprised when we arrived. It was the beginnings of a mega-church, at least a couple thousand people in attendance, elaborate and expensive architecture, a nice sound system, the whole works. And because it was a 10-year celebration, they had political leaders and guest speakers from all over the country come, with titles like "Apostle" and "Bishop", etc.

All the dignitaries were sitting in one two-row section at the front right and when we arrived, they escorted us over to the same seating, on the same row as the rest of them, even when we told the usher we weren't guest speakers. Thankfully, they didn't ask us to speak this time, but they did make a point of welcoming us from the stage, along with all the other guest speakers who had much more imposing titles than "Volunteer".

I was even made "principal-in-charge" during a school trip we went on one time, when the principal himself couldn't make it. Even though I have no school management experience, my xiTsonga skills are too rough to communicate adequately with either the teachers on the trip or their kindergarten-age students, and I didn't even know the schedule for the day; despite all that (and despite me clearly explaining all that), I was made "principal-in-charge" for the day.

But being a celebrity is more than just people knowing your name and asking you to speak at their public function. I imagine any celebrity experiences some of the other things we do. People not-infrequently ask us for money. Or they ask us for a job. They take pictures of us with their camera-

phones. Or they ask if we know the other celebrities in America (the ones they see on TV or whose albums they buy or listen to on the radio).

The funny thing is, a real celebrity, the richly famous Sir Richard Branson (of Virgin Records, Virgin Atlantic, Virgin Mobile, and even Virgin Galactic, among others), has his own private game lodge just a few kilometers away. I've heard he comes a few times a year and even visits our village sometimes. But in the minds of most people in our village – we're at the same level as him.

And it makes it hard to find a friend. People are happy to see us and be seen talking to us, but they're usually too nervous to approach us at our house, to enter into our yard – as if they're not good enough for us.

One of our school's staff explained that most people here are too embarrassed to invite us into their homes or even their yards, thinking that we'll see too much that isn't up to our "standards". Certainly when we *do* enter people's homes from time-to-time, the first thing they usually do is apologize about how small their house is or how they don't have nice things. The truth is, their homes are always bigger than the one we have now, and often bigger than our apartment was in America. And I can't tell you what I'd give if I could buy just one couch to have in our home here. Yet most of them have entire living room sets and kitchen sets, etc.

Our home in Dumphries, simply average by village standards, even a bit on the small side.

Maybe they don't believe our home and our living arrangements here in the village is our real home for the next two years. "Surely a celebrity doesn't really live like *that*, like *us*."

I suppose celebrity status is necessarily a confusing situation for most people around us. Other than greeting, they simply don't know what to make of us. They apparently don't believe us when we say we're "volunteers" and that we're working for free – usually one of the first conversations we have with people when we meet them.

Even the ones who've come to know us a bit better often ask why we don't buy this thing or that thing for our house, or why we ride bicycles instead of buying a car or at least taking the taxi. When we tell them it's too expensive, that we're volunteers, that we're only given enough money for our basic needs, they act like it's the first time they ever heard it. Then the whole conversation repeats itself a few days later, and they're just as surprised as they were the first time we told them.

If they see me hoeing our yard to plant some seedlings, they're sometimes surprised that I even know what a hoe is. Even though our house was there before we were and hasn't changed much since we've arrived, some people are even surprised that we don't have our own tap and magic water supply – that instead we have to haul our water in a wheelbarrow like everyone else.

I tried to explain to one young man, who seems more discerning than most, that we don't really like people to treat us "special" like they do and that when it comes down to it, we're just like everyone else. The only response he could come up with was, "but you *are* special!"

So, all this "celebrity distance" has made our desired level of integration into our village community more difficult than we expected. After being here for two now, it seems it may slowly be fading away, if not the celebrity status itself, maybe at least the safe distance associated with it.

The people we've already known best seem to be more comfortable coming over to our house from time to time and even a few new people have surprisingly stopped by unannounced in the last few days. We haven't heard as many requests for money or jobs lately and it seems like some people may be starting to realize that we'll *actually* be here in Dumphries for two years, and that we're not going to be jet-setting back and forth to America in the meantime.

We certainly haven't reached this more informal stage with everyone. Actually, it's only a few so far. But it's a start and we think it promises more natural relationships to come. We hope that we can each find a close friend (or even more than one) in the community, someone that we can each build a strong relationship with, with whom we can increase our language skills, learn more about the people here, and just relax with if we're feeling stressed.

Oh, and in case you're wondering what we did to become celebrities in our portion of third-world South Africa, the answer is simple: nothing. Our work is only just beginning and the few results have been nearly invisible to everyone outside our schools.

We didn't do anything to achieve this celebrity status, it's simply from being who we are: white Americans. But it's from being who we are *here* rather than *there* at home in America. The first aspect (that we're white) is of course the most noticeable. But the second is what really seals the deal - that we're all the way here from America (though most aren't really sure where that is), the land of Hollywood, of money and everything a person could ever want, the place where everyone's a celebrity.

If you ever have the chance to visit and spend some time in a third-world country, I hope you have the good luck to enjoy only the privileges of your new-found celebrity status, rather than its disappointments and obligations. In the meantime, we're simply trying to convince everyone here in Dumphries that we're normal just like they are. And we're also busy trying to avoid giving eulogies for people we've never met!

(First written by Adam Willard, Nov. 7, 2008)

# KU HISA NGOPFU!

We hear that almost 100 times a day. "It's very hot!" may sound like a boring conversation topic, but when it's actually this hot every day, there's really not much else worth saying.

At 24 degrees south of the equator, the tropical climate is really starting to heat up around here. As we hear reports of snow back home in the Northern Hemisphere, we're trying to survive blistering days of well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. It's amazing what a difference another 10 latitudinal degrees from the equator can make. The sun itself just *feels* hotter.

And when we think about how Christmas is just right around the corner, the time where everyone hopes for snow, the hot days here just seem that much hotter. South Africa's summer is supposed to be over by March, but according to everyone around here, we don't have much hope for cooler temperatures until around May or June... just in time for things to start heating up again back there in the United States.

In general, cross-cultural adaptation can be a topsy-turvy situation. So many of the common social rules we've grown to understand and apply are turned around and upside down. We have to develop a new understanding and a new way of life (if we want to be successful, that is). But few things have the immediate effect on our consciousness the way that reversing the seasons and experiencing total climate change have had. I imagine that if the climate was milder, then maybe it wouldn't stand out so much. But there's nothing mild about the heat here.

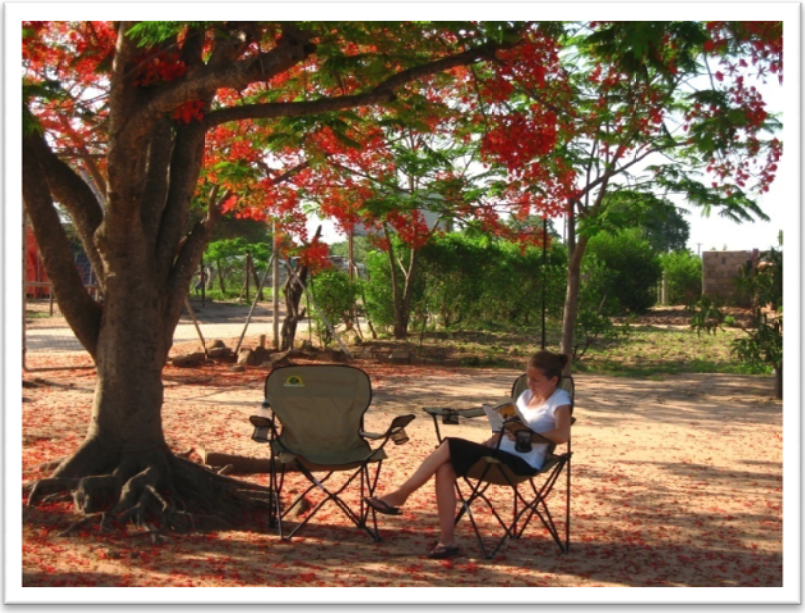
When we first arrived in Dumphries at our new home, I thought that for some odd reason the previous owners of our house had decided to cover half the yard with concrete. Odd as I first thought it was, the idea didn't seem so out of place after we got used to most yards being entirely dust, with grass existing only outside the yard. It's just part of the culture here. I even told some other Peace Corps Volunteers about the concrete covering our yard and they hypothesized that it acted as a sort of "fire barrier" to prevent the frequent wildfires from spreading to individual homes. That seemed plausible enough.

But it was all wrong. Our yard's not covered in concrete at all, but in baked sand and clay. No person intentionally did that, it's just the natural result of the ridiculously hot sun here. I wouldn't have been so surprised if the ground was simply sandy (like all the roads are). I just never expected that a bit of rain mixed with the soil the day before a typical scorcher would've created a sort of natural kiln and baked the surface of the ground nearly as hard as concrete.

When I decided to plant some herbs around our house, I had to use a pickaxe to get through the top layer. Thankfully, the earth was much softer underneath or I think it would've been an impossible endeavor.

The oppressive heat around here isn't merely a physical discomfort – it greatly affects the way people think and live. During the heat of the day, almost no one is moving anywhere, even on the main roads. It's as if it were a ghost town. And we live in a fairly large village, housing at least a few thousand people.

But if you look closely into the shade of any large tree or even the shade of a small house, you can see everyone there sitting, or more often laying, in a quiet stupor, not stirring at all. Only a few brave children (and recently arrived Peace Corps Volunteers) are foolish enough to leave the safety of the shade during the middle of the day.



By mid-summer, our shade trees are quite beautiful with red flowers.

You may think that everyone would stay in their houses during the heat, where they could have an electric fan to cool them down, but you'd be wrong. The homes here are almost always built of concrete brick walls with tin or zinc corrugated roofs. This acts as a sort of greenhouse, with all the heat coming inside the house but rarely escaping again.

An indoor thermometer we have has frequently recorded the temperature inside our house at over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, even until 6pm and later. We go to bed sweating uncomfortably, trying to fall asleep and forget the heat. For a few hours in the middle of the night it's sometimes blissfully cool enough (as long as we have two to three fans going in our bedroom) that we can fall into a deep sleep.

But the heat returns in the early morning and there's no chance of sleeping in past 7 am; it's just too hot. Not that anyone here but us ever tries to sleep that late. Everyone else wakes up around 4am or 5am and begins taking care of any household chores during the time of day when the temperature is still bearable enough to do so.

Around 10 AM (and sometimes by 9 AM), people start finding the biggest tree to sit under, or lacking a tree, the whole family squeezes into the couple feet of shade on one side of their house. From about that time until at least 2pm and sometimes as late as 4pm, most people just sit and wait for the heat to relax its overwhelming pressure. There's almost nothing to do. I've never seen a person reading and any physical activity would quickly become unbearable even in the shade.

If Lora and I happen to be out during this time of day, we hear shouts of "ku hisa ngopfu!" and sometimes receive some pretty incredulous looks from people wondering what might be passing through our minds to cause us to be moving around under such extreme conditions.

Well, as I said, Lora and I do sometimes move around during this time of day. Like almost any other American, we get restless when we're unable to stay inside (and that's definitely not an option – unless we've been wanting to sit in a sauna) and we look for something else useful to do. And until the rains of a month ago, none of the trees in our yard provided any shade at all. So, we'd sometimes roam around, trying to occupy ourselves while we also waited for the heat to dissipate.

Now, we've given up on all that. The villagers definitely have the right idea – find shade, wherever you can, and just wait it out. At least we have books to read. But when you're sweating even in the shade outside, books sometimes lose their enjoyment.

So, we're slowly adapting to the South African pace of life. We're learning to wait when there's simply nothing we can do to alleviate an uncomfortable situation. Waiting isn't something that comes easy to us Americans, but we really don't have much of a choice.

But it's a skill that applies to much more than just the heat here in South Africa. With a culture of waiting on the unrelenting heat comes a culture that's content to wait on *everything*. It's a culture where individuals also don't mind making people wait on them, with or without reason or notification. And so we're adjusting in more ways than one, with the difference in climate helping to affect a difference in our understanding.

One aspect of the heat that I might've never guessed if I hadn't experienced it first-hand is the way the oppressive heat affects the mind as well as the body. It seems that it actually slows down a person's ability to think and process thoughts.

The heat doesn't just take away a person's desire to be physically active; it even slows their ability to be mentally active. I know because it happens to us, most days from around noon to 2 PM. Thus the frequent difficulty of using our obligatory time in the shade for reading or as brainstorming sessions for project plans. There's definitely no brainstorming for us; the only weather in our brains is a heat wave – a mentally crippling one.

Even the wild animals of South Africa spend the middle-part of every summer day in the shelter of the shade.

But as the day cools down and we regain our mental faculties it's easier to appreciate them. We may have to give up several hours of each day to the heat, but we're slowly gaining a quiet patience that I think must be the foundation of the often remarkable resilience of South Africans.

The history here is a really dirty thing. Though some with an unyielding Western perspective might argue that South Africa is effectively non-functioning, the truth is that it's actually remarkable how well they're currently functioning, in spite of their dirty past. The past atrocities committed against the black majority here are incredible to say the least – horrible is a huge understatement.

Every aspect of the government, education, even where people lived, was legislated so as to prevent black South Africans from succeeding and getting ahead. We're currently living in a former "Homelands" area of South Africa, akin to the "reservations" for Native Americans in the United States.

Though 90% of the population of South Africa is comprised of black South Africans, the former ruling minority chose a scant 10% of the land, specifically selecting the most arid and inhospitable areas, on which to contain and overcrowd the black majority. They had no choice but to try and eke out a living there. Believe it or not, there are many areas of South Africa where the heat is much more frequently balanced by rain or altitude. But the "Homelands Act" forced the majority of South Africans to quietly persist in the dryness and the heat.

Thankfully, something positive might've even come of that. The people here are used to sitting in the shade, making do with what they can, and quietly waiting out the uncomfortable times. It's that quiet patience and enduring resilience that I mentioned. When South Africa finally had the opportunity to right the wrongs of its past, it happened with almost no violence against the former oppressing group. Instead, there was reconciliation. It's by no means total and complete, it's certainly a long process and it hasn't even been 15 years yet, but reconciliation and not revenge is the choice that was made.

Today, we work with adults who were beaten by the police dozens of times, even while they were still children. But I've yet to meet any who harbor any desire for vengeance against their former oppressors. They say the system has gone, its time has passed, and now it's time to work forward again. Just like they know how to wait out the most oppressive hours of the hot days, they waited out their own oppressive political past. And when the oppressive sun relents, it's time to work again.

So, regardless of how hot it is here or how so many good hours of the day become useless as a result of the heat, there's something we can learn from it. If we're able to pick up just some of that quiet patience and enduring resilience that our neighboring South Africans have, it'll be worth it.

Even in our work, we're slowly learning what kind of effort is useful here and what kind falls flat. It's a long and trying process, but we're learning patience when there's really nothing else we can do. ;-)

(First written by Adam Willard, Dec. 3, 2008)

And if you *have* to go somewhere during the middle hours of the day, it's best to just bring some shade along with you; an umbrella does the trick well enough.

# WHEN TWO WORLDS COLLIDE

The doors opened and the kids poured in. The five and six-year olds stood there staring at the menacing metal jaws, grinding up and down. The crowd of kids behind them pushed them closer to the unknown danger. Their teachers grew impatient and urged them to move forward. The kids at the front started crying, turned around, and tried to run away.

It was quite a spectacle. What else could these kids do when faced with something so fiercely huge and monstrous, something so foreign and fearsome, something so innocent and efficient as an escalator at a shopping mall?

Last year when one of our schools took their "Foundation Phase" learners (students between kindergarten and third grade) to the "big city" just two hours away, it was the first time most of them had ever seen an escalator. It was the first time many of them had ever seen a flush toilet, and most still didn't get the chance to use it. It was probably the first time they'd seen automatic doors, but since young children are used to adults doing everything for them, they probably didn't even notice that the doors had opened on their own.

I can't remember the first time I saw or used an escalator, but I do remember playing on them as much as I could when I was a young kid. It was always a delightful occasion.

I'm not really sure what it must've felt like for these kids to be confronted by one as soon as they stepped into the mall, but it must've been terrifyingly bizarre and most of the kids weren't nearly brave enough to approach it. Most of these kids have probably never even seen a staircase leading up to a second-story, let alone a moving metal one. So, I don't blame them for crying or for being too scared to try it out.

Eventually, Lora and I, along with a few of the teachers, were able to get some of them to ride up the escalator holding our hands. But many were even too scared for that, and I guess the elevator seemed to be the lesser of two evils.

It was quite an experience accompanying children from our village on their first trip to the city, to see the prison, the hospital, and the shopping mall. The hospital tour wound up falling through, but the kids were very impressed at the large pieces of bread the prisoners received at every tea break and they were even more impressed at the water running through the toilets... some kids even got to try using them.

But the shopping mall was more of a sensory overload. The kids flowed through the mall, streaming past other mall-goers like a rushing river, excitedly filling up any open space in the hall while holding hands and always making sure not to fall away from the group in such a huge and unknown place. Their destination was the arcade, where they were each able to play a few fleeting games before returning to the bus and to the village.

The mall in Pretoria, South Africa's capital. It's the largest in the Southern Hemisphere.

The thing is, South Africa has two large extremes, both first-world development and luxury, and third-world subsistence and poverty. Both are often found in *very* close proximity to each other, sometimes mere minutes apart.

On the one hand, you can find some of the fanciest shopping malls I've ever visited, enjoy high-speed internet access in an air-conditioned room, or drink an expensive martini at a high-class bar overlooking the beachfront. You can even shop around for $4 million+ luxury beach condos and have plenty to choose from.

On the other hand, you have rural villages without plumbing or electricity where people rely on yearly maize harvests and $100 monthly government pensions to provide for families of children and their grandchildren. You have squatter camps of tens of thousands of filthy tin shacks crammed next to each other just thirty minutes away from the skyscrapers and beautiful landscaping of a well-developed downtown city center.

In our village, many of the kids' families can't afford to buy balls for their kids to play with. So the kids get creative and make their own toys out of leftover trash, like this soccer ball made from plastic bags.

I suppose it's both a blessing and a curse that South Africa has (in places) one of the most well-developed infrastructures in all of Africa. It's definitely a land of contrasts, economically more than anything else. And where contrast meets, you're sure to find conflict. Johannesburg, the country's capital, is said to have the highest crime rate of any city in the world. It's where hundreds of foreigners from other African countries were killed in riots last year because residents were afraid they were "taking" too many jobs.

The conflict is not only in crime and violence though; it weighs on people's hearts and minds. Everyone takes it differently. Some people's only goal is to get out of the village and rarely return. Even for weddings and funerals, many urban family members avoid coming back, and they never stay for long when they do.

Many rural South Africans see themselves as helpless victims of an unjust system. Some people resign themselves to the bottom of the social hierarchy, assuming there's only one way to get ahead and that that way is closed off to them. Some kids watch TV and dream of a nice job, but have no idea what are the steps in-between, or even where the nearest college is. Too many men, young and old, just spend their days drinking... a LOT. And many girls offer sex in exchange for a cell phone or some nice clothes. It may not be quite as crude as prostitution, usually they'll have the same "sugar daddy" for a while. But it works out about the same in the end.

Even as Peace Corps Volunteers, the two colliding worlds of South Africa can be difficult. We supposedly have one of the highest "early termination" rates of any Peace Corps post in the world. And yes, most of us, even those of us stationed in rural villages, can often take a few mini-bus taxis far enough to go to a movie theater and come back in the same day, or find a pizza restaurant or coffee shop. But we're always going and coming back; we're always seeing what some people have, what others want, and what most will never have.

Many South Africans thought that abolishing Apartheid would magically redistribute wealth, but it hasn't happened yet. The end of Apartheid has opened up previously unavailable opportunities for some, but the rural areas are still by far the furthest behind.

The main difference now is that if any person wants to, they can easily go and see what others have, what they'll probably never have. And because traditional African culture doesn't inspire much

long-term vision, many of them don't often think about creating opportunities for their children to have what they couldn't. As far as they're concerned, what happens this week, this month, and this year, is what'll happen every week, month, and year to come. And with that way of thinking, it's usually true.

That's why we're glad to be serving in the education projects here. Most international development groups have found that just giving money or food to people usually doesn't last long and sometimes they even stop their own farming or self-provision because of it. Sometimes even digging wells or building water pumps is a failure because of people's differing expectations compared with their existing methods of getting water.

But education, we teachers hope, is a way of laying opportunities before people, letting them know that they can do almost anything they're determined to do and that life is mostly what they make of it, not what it makes of them.

It's unfortunate that the rural areas of South Africa usually have the poorest educated people in the country, often even including many of the teachers and staff. It's hard for a teacher to pass on what they never had to begin with. Apartheid's legacy of mis-education will take at least a few generations to be erased in South Africa's rural areas. But it's also where we can be of the most service. Our project is to help build the capacity of teachers so they can do their jobs better, so their learners can benefit throughout the school, and so the teachers can (hopefully) continue doing a good job even after Lora and I are gone.

If South Africa has a hope of righting some of the wrongs of its past, of truly making its riches (economic and otherwise) available to all, it'll have to happen through education. So we're glad to be working here as we are, learning and teaching.

(First written by Adam Willard, Feb. 5, 2009)

In contrast to the Pretoria mall, our village has a market that comes through once a month and sells basic goods.

# IF A MAN STEALS YOUR CHICKEN

Our two chickens, one of which fell into our pit toilet.

One of the most frustrating and perplexing things since we've been here happened to us the other day. We were outside one night eating dinner with the Pakistani guys who run the shop across the street (they rent it from our host family), when one of our host brothers walked up to talk to them. When he saw us there, he casually informed us that he had just eaten one of our two chickens.

We thought maybe it was a joke. He was so nonchalant about it. He said he ate it because it was the one that fell into our pit toilet (which is another story altogether). I figured I might as well try to play along, so I asked him how he knew it was the same one. So, he shoved his hands up under my nose and said to smell, that he knew he got the right one because he could smell it (even though it had been out of the pit toilet for over a month).

He said we had mentioned how we weren't going to eat it since it had fallen into the toilet and that he was really hungry. I told him he owed us 35 rand (the price we paid for the chicken some months ago) and he looked a bit surprised. He didn't talk with the Pakistanis for long and wandered back over to his house.

This host brother of ours, Nkosinathi, has definitely been my best friend so far in the village. He's only 19, just finished high school over a year ago, but he's a great young man and has been a great friend. He's smart, he understands the concept of differing cultures, his English is very fluent (mainly from watching a lot of TV), he eats dinner with us often, he sometimes takes us around the village, he tutors us in xiTsonga twice a week, I've been helping him look for a job or a scholarship, and he came sightseeing with us one day when Lora's sister was visiting. In a country where we're told that anyone could turn criminal, Nkosinathi was the one guy I trusted outright.

Well, after the announcement he just made to us about stealing and slaughtering our chicken, we didn't know what to do. So, we went and checked first to see if it was the truth. Sure enough, only one chicken was left. So what was the next step? I was stunned that *he*, Nkosinathi, would steal one of our chickens.

We've been in our village long enough now that we're beginning to understand how the family structure works here. We knew the normal next step was to inform his grandmother (one of the three matriarchs in our host family) and possibly his uncle (the Vice Principal at our nearest school, the pastor of the family church, the man whose house we're living in, and also the one most responsible for Nkosinathi's general well-being).

The culturally-appropriate next step was definitely to tell a member of his family, particularly someone responsible for him. Because in traditional Shangaan culture, no one's completely autonomous, even young men who should be finding jobs and working. There's always someone you're accountable to and someone, or several, you're responsible for.

When something goes wrong, the whole line of responsibility is involved. If it's not fixed, the one who did the wrong thing brings shame on everyone around: those who he's accountable to and those who he's responsible for. So, to risk being redundant, the right thing for us to do was to tell the one who's responsible for the person who did the wrong thing, so that the one who's in charge can negotiate a solution and thus avoid shame.

So, we've been in the culture long enough now that we decided to go tell his grandmother, who was the only one responsible for him who was around at the time. His grandmother, who often has some bad mood swings, was furious. She sent some nearby grand-children or great grand-children (those two generations often blend together in our host family) to go fetch Nkosinathi so she could reckon with his recklessness.

Our pit toilet.

By the time he got back over to us, his eyes were already watering and he was clearly in a different mood. And this is in a culture that rarely cries, whether men or women. By the time he got within range of us to hear him, he was already in the middle of some profuse apologies and the apologies continued for several minutes.

And right after came the explanations and the excuses. He was hungry, he said. He needed to take care of his younger brothers. He has no job and no future, but no one in the family really helps him out any more. He even confessed, with some obvious hesitation, that his father sometimes sends money to his grandmother to take care of him and his brothers but she keeps it all for herself. He said it's hard to be so hungry so often.

The thing is, in traditional Shangaan culture, families are deeply connected. A HUGE part of our host family lives right across the street from us in one giant inter-connected compound (and a few more of them on either side of us on our side of the street). They've got three grandmothers, all married to one man who died a few years back. Also living there are MANY of those grandmothers' children. And with them they've got their children's children, and those children's children. And maybe a few of their children's children; I'm not totally sure. But they multiply fast here in South Africa.

The family members still living in the village, as many of them as there are, are mostly still following the old traditions. The way it works is that if any of them have a child, they're also considered the child of their mother's sisters and their father's brothers, calling those aunts and uncles also mothers and fathers. And those cousins of theirs are also considered (and called) brothers and sisters.

So, traditionally, they all live together in one giant inter-connected web and just like a mother and father is traditionally responsible for their child, so are these multiplied mothers and fathers also responsible for their "children". Basically, the responsibility for a child is spread out to the entire extended family, with no one person taking on all the responsibility by themselves.

I think that would be a good thing – in a society where money is hard to come by, where the weather's not always what's hoped for in terms of raising crops, and where death by disease is rampant. This should mean precious resources shared and spread more evenly and it should mean very few orphans. They call this way of living "ubuntu."

But in this culture's clash with Westernization and globalization, the same thing that would normally tie the families together is also starting to fragment them apart. Because what the traditional Shangaan system serves to do is take away individual responsibility (the type we're familiar with in America) and replace it with communal responsibility. Personally, I suppose it's OK not to have your own private responsibilities so long as others are responsible for you and you're still responsible for others.

But Westernization in developing countries such as South Africa often removes the concept of communal responsibility and replaces it with the idea of individual fulfillment. What's left is a certain number of people (always growing) who have no concept of either communal responsibility or individual responsibility, and they instead focus their efforts on individual fulfillment – after all, it's what they see on imported American TV shows, right?

So men and women are making babies left and right around here and most of them have almost no feeling of individual responsibility to care for them. After all, the grandmothers (who still feel the communal responsibility) are more than willing to look after the new generation. But many of the new generation, in their daily encounters with the Western world both on TV and in town, lose their concept of communal responsibility and leave the family compound far behind. Instead, they go out to find some way to make a lot of money and buy the things they'd like to have for themselves. And when they find out they're burdened by some recent offspring, they usually send them back home to the rest of the family to care for, sometimes sending money to help, sometimes not.

So while not technically "orphans", very few members of the last two generations here have had their actual fathers in their lives. Of the now-occurring generation, many of them don't even have their actual mothers. They're all off elsewhere too busy enjoying their own lives and don't want to bother concerning themselves with children that other people still see as part of their own communal responsibility. Whereas the grandparents and great-grandparents taking care of all their children are the ones who are still "traditional"; you may even say they're *unable* to confront the new way of life that the children themselves are constantly encountering.

So more than in any other instance I've heard of, you have a HUGE generational gap. Children are being parented by their grandparents and/or great-grandparents. They're being parented by people too old and "traditional" to offer a practical model for how to deal with the challenges and pressures of the new society that these same children will *have* to live in. And these children see their own parents avoiding them and the traditional communal responsibility in order to pursue personal gratification.

So what can they do? What are these left-behind kids supposed to make of their lives? Especially these young men, who are in a position that they're "traditionally" supposed to begin working and contributing to the rest of the family? And then the rest of the family often forgets to contribute to them when they're jobless, an all-too-common situation in today's South African economy.

My friend Nkosinathi is a good kid, smart too. In America, you'd say "he's got a bright future ahead of him!" But in rural South Africa, where he sees only a privileged few (now privileged more by money than by race) attain that future, it's easy to grow despondent and try not to think about it. But as a smart kid, Nkosinathi can't help but think about his future, about making something of himself. His dream is to learn about computers and get a job working with them, in any capacity.

So, when Nkosinathi realized that word of his chicken-stealing had gotten out to his family, when his grandmother threatened to tell his uncle, he really started to panic. The tears were really streaming down his cheeks. Nkosinathi's uncle, like me, has been trying to help find scholarship and work-study applications for him. So Nkosinathi was worried that his uncle's punishment to him would be to no longer help him apply for these scholarships and internships. And trust me, there's NO way for Nkosinathi, stuck as he is in a rural South African village, to find these things on his own. He was afraid his whole possibility of a future was being shot down right in front of him.

So, while we were trying to grapple with the idea that one of our chickens, an animal that Lora had come to affectionately consider as a pet, had been stolen and eaten by the one guy in the village we trusted most; that same guy's mind was racing with how one ill-considered mistake cost him his life's dreams. I asked him why he didn't buy food with the money we pay him for tutoring (which isn't much, but is all that Peace Corps allows us to offer), and he said he often buys treats for his brothers living with him (those he's responsible for) so that they'll have a snack after school. He said

he'd tutor us for free for a year, for two years, four times a week (twice what it is now), anything, just tell him what to do to make up for it so long as his uncle doesn't find out.

I didn't know what to do. Clearly we had different thoughts going through our heads. I told him we'd think about it that night and talk with him after church the next day. He said he probably wouldn't be there, he'd have to run away now. He said he might even commit suicide, he's been so depressed, he has no job, no future ahead of him. He was obviously distraught.

So I said whatever I could to convince him to stick around long enough to have a talk with us the next day. We even asked his grandmother not to tell his uncle, but she said there was no getting out of it for him. Thankfully, Nkosinathi said he'd stay long enough to talk to us the following afternoon. We all walked off in separate directions, with lots of different emotions.

We really didn't know what to do. I mean, we're beginning to understand the kind of social pressure and dysfunction that the young people here are living with. But Nkosinathi also stole our chicken when we trusted him, when we've fed him freely on plenty of occasions. I don't think there was any real excuse, cultural or otherwise, for him to take and eat another person's chicken without their permission. Other members of his family have confirmed this. If he took our chicken, what else might he take? We went to bed without any clear decisions on the matter.

Well, the next morning, we decided to take an altogether different approach than we'd been previously considering, than anything we'd ever done before. Jesus said in Luke 6:29, "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt."

At the end of ourselves with what to do, we decided to do that: to give him the other chicken also. Not ask for any repayment, not ask for any work done on our behalf to make up for it, continue to pay him as usual for tutoring sessions, continue to invite him over for dinner, and let him know the other chicken was his to eat at any time he wanted it.

It was definitely a tough decision. More for Lora than for me... she's really grown attached to those chickens, even though they haven't produced nearly as many eggs as we'd have liked. But honestly, it seemed to be the right decision. It was our first chance to make a choice like that and we decided to try it out.

So, Nkosinathi came over that afternoon, definitely more composed than the previous night and we talked about it. When we got around to telling him our decision, he was pretty surprised, "embarrassed", as he put it, saying that nothing like that's ever happened to him before. Later that evening, he ate the other chicken.

And that was pretty much that. We haven't seen any miracle take place. We don't know that he won't steal from us again. But, he's putting more work into preparing for our tutoring sessions. And although he hasn't started coming by again with the usual frequency that he used to, he still borrows books from me and we still invite him in for dinner. He's a pretty good kid, and rather than cripple him with a weight of guilt and shame from one mistake, we opted to restore him with grace. And it's a lot more comfortable for us to resume our friendship with him that way, too.

What else may come of our decision about "if a man takes away your chicken, give him the other also", well, I don't know. That's between Nkosinathi and God. We just hope we've given him something easy to work with. It's definitely the kind of grace God shows us on a regular basis.

As for Nkosinathi's uncle, he did find out. As far as I know, he still hasn't talked to Nkosinathi about it yet. He agreed that he definitely wasn't going to take away his help and support in scholarship and internship applications. He said if Nkosinathi doesn't make something of himself, that's also shame for him as his uncle, but that if he does well, that's also good for him as his uncle. It's that

"traditional" concept of communal responsibility again. Which side Nkosinathi will take in this culture change, I don't know. Hopefully he'll get one of these scholarships soon and will have the opportunity to make of himself anything he chooses.

(First written by Adam Willard, March 2, 2009)

My friend Nkosinathi

# RUNNING THE RACE

We started the race, a bit early, but with high expectations. There were probably two or three thousand people there running the marathon. We all had our temporary licenses safety-pinned to our backs (yes, in South Africa, you need an official license to run a race). We'd been training for over a month, maybe not enough, but with a lot of effort. We started high in the mountains, ran up a few hills, and spent most the time running down. When we finished the race, almost 22 km later, we were struggling, limping, and sore all over. We finished, but barely.

For over a month before the Longtom Marathon we ran to and from one of the schools we worked at. It was only about 5-6 km away, but we ran with backpacks on (carrying our change of clothes and things we needed for work). So, we thought that would make it significantly easier to run the real thing, without backpacks.

In a way it was true. The first 5-6 km of the marathon breezed by. We weren't at the front, but we certainly weren't at the back and things were going smoothly and the surroundings were beautiful. Every couple of kilometers, there were stands with people passing out bags of water and cups of powerade and little energy-providing snacks. It was a really nice atmosphere. It was almost hard to believe when we realized we'd already run 9 km – it seemed so quick.

But sometime after the 12 km mark we started having some serious problems. I'd been feeling the small rocks from the paved road through the soles of my shoes for a while, with increasing sensitivity. Lora's muscles were starting to stiffen quite a bit, so we stopped for a quick stretch. As I was shifting my balance on my feet, I realized that I had some very large liquid-filled blisters on the bottom front halves of both my feet. I was also chafing a bit on the inside of my leg. We were both only a little sensitive at this point, so we weren't overly concerned, but we had a bit less than half the race still to go, so we weren't sure how our pain would progress.

It progressed fast. The chafing got worse, I could barely put weight on the front of my feet, and Lora's muscles continued to stiffen. Her right leg was having trouble bending – a big trouble when you're in a marathon. By the time we got to the 5 km (remaining) mark, we decided to stop running altogether and walk the rest of the way. Since we ran 5-6 km every time to school, we thought that only 5 km left should go by fast. But it didn't.

There was no 4 km mark and we realized how much of a difference those marks made when we desperately needed motivation. I found a funny way to walk that didn't put too much pressure on the front of my feet or cause too much contact where I was chafing. And Lora was doing a bit of a robot walk to avoid the sharp pains when her leg would bend. We must have been a pretty funny looking pair, and we did receive a few comments along the way.

Overall, we had to slow our pace a LOT. My stopwatch had somehow stopped at some point that I didn't notice, so I had no idea how much time we had left to make it before the cut-off. It definitely didn't seem like it could be much.

To top it all off, the last 3-4 km brought us out of the mountains and into a busy town, with car exhaust everywhere and not much worth looking at – no positive distractions from our pain. Either we didn't notice the km markers towards the end or they simply weren't there. But those last few kilometers kept stretching on and on and on. Both of us were about as sore as we could've imagined, hurting in ways we'd never known. The finish line was nowhere in sight, even when we knew we had to be getting close. I seriously thought about giving up, but I thought more about how I'd like to get a wheelchair and simply push myself across the finish line.

But we pressed on. We saw some people who'd already finished, cheering us on near the end. Then we saw it: a big sports field, with a big blue arch that said "Finish Line." I talked to Lora, and we decided, limping and in pain or not, we were going to resume running and run across the finish line.

So, we started jogging again about 50 yards from the arch, but as we got closer we realized it was more of a mirage. The real finish line was still another 100 yards or so away. But we kept going, and as we got close to that one, we saw the big clock next to it: 3 hours and 16 minutes. We still had 45 minutes before the cut-off time. We'd finished, and we'd finished with plenty of time to spare.


As soon as we passed the line, people were standing there to put bronze medals around our necks. We limped over to the last water station to quench our thirsts. Professional leg massages were freely available for anyone who finished the race. We found some other Peace Corps Volunteers who'd already finished and plopped onto the ground next to them, ready for rest. I took off my shoes to relieve my blisters and didn't put them back on for a few hours.

It was the hardest physical thing either of us have ever done, but we did it, and we finished. Though we prepared for it, we really didn't prepare adequately. There wasn't a great selection of shoes in our nearby town and we didn't have a lot of spare money as Peace Corps Volunteers, so we settled on buying some running shoes that cost about $5 and $8 each. It was a bad decision.

After I took my shoes off, I looked at the bottoms and saw that a few chunks here and there had fallen off and other parts were worn down several layers. I pushed in on the middle to see how stiff they'd be and they bent in easily, as thin as a plastic water bottle. The masseuse condescendingly told Lora that her inflamed leg muscles were a result of bad support in her shoes. Those shoes were definitely a bad decision.

Being our first big race, I also didn't realize how important athletic shorts would be, and my regular canvas shorts were the cause of a lot of my pain. Five to six kilometers a few times a week were apparently enough to easily get us through the first 10 km of the race, but not enough to see us smoothly through the whole thing. We had trained and prepared, but we hadn't prepared well.

But the race was still a success. We finished, and with time to spare, and we won a couple of bronze medals. We personally raised over $800 for the scholarship and Peace Corps as a whole raised over $14,000 for the scholarship this year. That'll allow another deserving child from rural South Africa to receive a quality education at one of the highest-ranked private schools in the country.

And we learned something too: the importance of preparation, and maybe even more so, of perseverance. There were some things we didn't do right that we should have done better; we especially should've gotten better quality shoes. But other things, like buying athletic shorts, I simply had no idea and nobody had recommended it. It was our first time running a marathon and we gave it our best shot. We persevered and we finished.

As we struggled towards the end of that race, I was reminded several times of a few important Bible verses. Philippians 3:13-14 says, "...but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

The author of Hebrews says in 12:1-2, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." These verses encourage us to pay attention not to the struggles, no matter how severe they seem, but to the finish line, the prize, the purpose of the race.

Just as we struggled in that race for a few hours, we struggle in our work, daily. We're deep into it now, with projects running, some recently launched, some still beginning, and others just words spoken here and there, waiting until the community or the teachers catch the vision and decide to run with it. But at every stage we face obstacles: lack of concern, inadequate resources, communication barriers, absenteeism, even the death of colleagues. Sometimes we don't properly prepare for each venture we set out on, for multiple reasons, but most often just because we don't know all the factors involved. It's still new to us.

But we think that the work we're doing is important. We believe it has the possibility of making a significant and long-term difference in the lives of those we work with and in the community as a whole. So we press on, we meet the obstacles as they come, and we persevere.

And that's life. We're all working in different places, towards sometimes very broadly different goals. But those of us who are Christians know that our work, obstacles and all, is in just one direction: towards him, the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ. He's run the race before us, he's finished, and he's cheering us on towards the finish line. And when we get there, we can rest, be rewarded, and enjoy the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. So, we're encouraged not to lose heart, the finish line isn't much further away.

(First written by Adam Willard, April 7, 2009)

# ELECTIONS

Following South Africa's fourth democratic elections, they have a new leader today: Jacob Zuma, the head of the African National Congress (ANC). It hasn't really surprised anyone that he won and people have been predicting it for months, even with upheavals within the ANC and with the blemish of multiple criminal charges currently being pursued against Jacob Zuma. But, as everyone expected, he still won and his party just barely fell short of sweeping up two-thirds' majority vote again. However, to an outsider like us Americans, a lot of the election and political system in South Africa is significantly different.


People in Thulamahashe were singing and dancing with excitement on election day.

To start with, people only have the option to vote for a party, not a person like we do in America. Individuals have no real say in who their party chooses as its leader. South Africa's definitely more of a republic than a democracy. This is also why South Africa's ruling party, the ANC, was able to "recall" the former President (i.e. force him into early resignation) and replace him with Motlanthe, who wasn't the Vice President at the time, simply a high-ranking member within the ANC. The reason being, the people had voted for ANC in the national elections four years previous, so the ANC had the right to change the President any time they wanted.

So, when a South African votes on election day, as they did on Wednesday, they choose a party to represent them, not a person. South Africans make two votes: they have the option to choose one party to represent them in the national government, and one party for the provincial government (like our States). But they have no option to choose among candidates for those positions and they know that the current candidate for a particular party can be replaced at any time.

As far as democratic elections go, South Africa has an incredibly high percentage of eligible-voter turnout. This year they topped 80%, significantly more than the percentage of people who vote in the U.S. Part of the reason is that the majority of South African citizens are still very proud of their recently-won ability to vote. Until 1994, nearly 90% of South Africans weren't allowed to vote in any elections because of restrictions placed on them by the Apartheid government.

Now, fifteen years later, the majority of South Africans are still very proud to "exercise their democratic right to vote". The country as a whole appreciates this so much that schools are shut down and many businesses are closed, just to make sure people aren't too pre-occupied to vote.

On top of that, many South Africans are willing to wait in lines for three or four hours or more, just to get their vote in. In the nearby town of Thulamahashe, the line was about one to two hours long on average, but in our village where voting was held at the schools, the line usually wasn't more than fifteen or thirty minutes. Everywhere I went people were asking me if I was going to vote and when I told them I couldn't, they tried to convince me to find a way to vote anyway.

Overall, South Africa has more than twenty competing political parties, every one of them represented on the national ballot and more than half of them represented on the provincial ballot. Most parties are led by the majority population, black South Africans, and most of their platforms

are about the same with minor variations, sometimes running along tribal lines. But they also have parties specifically representing South Africa's significant Indian population, Muslims, mixed racial groups, and even parties that want a return to Apartheid-era ways (though of course they never gain much vote anymore).

So, leading up to the elections, campaigning was in full swing. ANC has ruled South African politics since 1994, but they always campaign hard anyway. Unfortunately this year, violent clashes between political parties arose again reminiscent of 1994, but it was mostly isolated to a province south of ours – Kwa-Zulu Natal. A few people were killed on both sides, but the incidents were supposedly not coordinated.

In our small village, there were weekly rallies for the ANC right in front of our house. They resembled parades that marched around the streets with people singing, dancing, and shouting slogans. Oftentimes the majority of the attendants were actually transported in from surrounding areas but it helped give ANC a show of strength. (That also happens to be one of their slogans: "Amandla!" – "Power/Strength!") The rallies would last two to three hours and then disperse. During the week right before the elections they held several rallies and the night before they had a big tent meeting with someone preaching late into the night about the merits of the ANC.

Not all ANC campaigning was honest though: apparently many ANC representatives told lots of villagers who were receiving welfare grants that if they didn't vote for the ANC they'd no longer receive their welfare grants. We also saw ANC party representatives taking the opportunity of the preaching pulpits at funerals to encourage everyone to vote for the ANC.

Also, South Africa's biggest labor unions, including the Teachers' Union, openly endorse the ANC. The South African Teachers' Union (SADTU) publishes a frequent and free newspaper for educators and the most recent headliner was "Why You Should Vote for the ANC". Even the comic inside wasn't funny at all, but was just a story about people voting for the ANC.

There were a few posters for other political parties hanging around in the village, but none of them were well represented like the ANC. Most people say the main reason they all vote for ANC is that they're committed to them as the "liberation party" that freed them from Apartheid. There is a lot of truth to that, but a few people are beginning to be disillusioned with the ANC's past failed promises and I heard many people saying they weren't sure if they'd still vote for them this year.

However, few of the people I spoke to said they were worried about the possibility of Jacob Zuma being found guilty of the multiple criminal charges against him. The idea of a South African President who's also a criminal doesn't seem to bother them. Maybe it's just because the majority of the "liberation party's" representatives in the past were at one point or another put in jail for defying Apartheid. Some, like Nelson Mandela, were in prison for decades before being released and resuming activity as politicians.

As I said, a person's right and ability to vote is still held very dear in South Africa. For the two days preceding the official election day, "special votes" were taken. These were from old and disabled people and anyone who registered saying the long lines of the official election day were too difficult for them to bear. And for those unable to walk to the voting station, some of the election officials actually went to their individual houses to help them vote.

Voting stations were in school classrooms and public government buildings. On the official election day, people lined up from 6 am, even though the voting didn't start until 7 am. The lines were actually the longest early in the morning and died down in the middle of the day, only to get much longer again close to the voting stations' closing time at 9 pm. In some areas, voting lasted well beyond midnight just because the lines were too long to close at 9 pm.

Once inside the voting station, a person's ID is first checked to verify their eligibility to vote. Then, a line is marked on their thumb with a permanent marker. That's the primary method to keep one person from voting more than once. It also doubles as a replacement for the "I Voted!" stickers we have in America, as many people showed me their marked thumbs to display their pride in having voted that day.

Voting in our village was held inside a school classroom.

After that, a person receives two stamped ballots and takes them over to a folded-cardboard voting booth. The ballots themselves had the names of each party, the name of the presidential candidate for that party, a picture of that party's logo, and a photo of that party's presidential candidate. All a voter had to do was mark an "X" in the box next to their choice.

Even still, "Party Agents" were available at every voting station to help make sure anyone with difficulties would make the right vote. The "Party Agents" actually *were* representatives of the different parties, and ANC had several representatives at each voting station. In smaller voting stations, like our village, multiple parties were represented by a single Party Agent. It's pretty interesting to me as an American how a representative of a political party is allowed to help people (who maybe have vision problems) make the "right vote". Finally, the voter places his/her ballot in a cardboard "ballot box".

As for party representation that near the voting station (and within it), there apparently are certain rules surrounding it similar to the USA. The major difference of course is that party representatives are allowed within the voting station and are allowed to interact with voters while they're voting. But, their purpose is supposed to be limited and outside the voting station campaigners are supposed to maintain a certain distance.

However, as I saw in Thulamahashe, most ANC supporters didn't regard the rule too closely and instead there were ANC campaign posters and t-shirts and singing and dancing on their behalf surrounding the voting station. And nearly every taxi or pick-up truck that passed by the road was plastered with ANC posters, so I suppose there wasn't much that could be done about that anyway.

Overall, the main difference I noticed about elections here in South Africa, other than just the small details concerning the methods, was the high level of pure excitement people had about voting. Sure, lots of people wanted to make sure everyone else was voting for the ANC, but there were even more people who just wanted to make sure everyone else was voting. The singing and the dancing weren't just part of the campaigning, it was also people's overflowing excitement about taking part in democracy. It makes me glad to have seen and experienced it.

It's true that with Zuma as President of South Africa, things might not run as smoothly as they have in the past. And considering ANC's high number of admittedly failed promises, that's not saying a lot. Nonetheless, I think the average rural person here in South Africa is more concerned with the simple ability to vote than with the results of their voting. You may say it's typical of many traditional Africans' inability to look and plan ahead, but I'd venture to say it's better than foresight preventing someone from action as often happens to us Westerners when considering politics. For now we can just hope and pray for further democratic reforms in South Africa so that South Africans' love of democracy will be rewarded with good governance and development!

(First written by Adam Willard, April 22, 2009)

# DEATH REPORT

Every school here has a file folder labeled "Death Report." At one of our schools it's on the shelf right next to the "Leave Register", the file for keeping track of teachers' absences. At the other school, I've only ever seen it on the principal's desk, ready to be used.

The principal's desk is probably a good place for it: available for easy access. Deaths here happen often enough that there's not much good reason to put the folder back on the shelf. Right when we first arrived, one of the school's general workers had died and it was the first funeral we attended in our village.

Not long after, a grade R (Kindergarten) student died along with her cousin when a wall they were playing near collapsed on them. A few months ago, the second grade teacher at one of our schools died from some type of abdominal illness. A few weeks ago, a grade 3 student died from a persistent sickness. And it's a small school in a small village.

Our village's main cemetery.

Almost every Saturday there's a funeral in our village. Sometimes it's older people who've lived their lives, but just as often it's young men and women or even children. In less than a year we've already been to several times more funerals here than the combined number of all the funerals either of us have been to in our entire lives in America. Almost every week, at least one of our teachers has a few days off for bereavement leave for the funeral preparations of a family member.

Usually the most you hear about the cause of someone's death is that "they were sick for a while". Maybe that's why when I was sick and missed school earlier this week all the teachers became very concerned and offered to come by and visit. You never hear what someone's sickness was though, and I've never heard anyone ask. Sometimes, as in the case of our teacher that died, you hear that they were "sick in the stomach" for a vague period of time, but that's the most amount of details we've heard about anyone's death.

Some people say that AIDS and AIDS-related illnesses are one of the leading causes of death around here. That may be true. As an entire country, 20% of South Africans have HIV or AIDS. That would be one out of every five people that you know. It's hard to comprehend and I personally rarely think about it. That is, except at funerals for a recently deceased "sick" person.

Anyway, at funerals, they always just keep it simple, "He/she was sick." No one ever talks directly about AIDS, though sometimes people speculate generally about how many people around them probably have it. Our province has a slightly higher rate than the national average: 30% is what they've recorded.

But sometimes people die violently, especially involving cars and trucks. Road safety is rarely considered here and I don't know that I've ever seen a South African wear a seatbelt. They certainly should though, with the reckless way nearly everyone drives and the fact that most roads, paved or not, are full of potholes and blind corners. And full of pedestrians.

People like to walk slowly in the middle of the road here, whether the road is busy or not. Most of the time the pedestrians jump out of traffic's way, but all too often reckless drivers hit them, sometimes killing entire families or groups of friends as they walk along the road. One of our school's teachers was driving her truck and accidentally killed a lady walking along the side of the road with her child.

A common form of transport is to fit 15 to 20 people standing in the back of a standard-sized pick-up truck (called "bakkies" here). One time last December, two such bakkies collided head-on in a misty mountain pass near a local town. Twenty to thirty people were killed.

But people die in violent crimes too, too often. Some people say that South Africa has the highest crime rate in the world. It rarely affects our village life, but it does come close. Some high-ranking police officers in the nearest district died recently in some kind of shoot-out with each other. It's often that you hear of a jealous lover killing their significant other and all their children too.

A few months ago there was a police officer pursuing a young suspected thief in a classroom in one of the high schools in our district. The officer had his gun out and told all the children to stay low to the ground. The unarmed "thief" jumped out a window and another nearby student sat up to look just as the policeman fired his gun, accidentally shooting the innocent kid in the head, killing him instantly as his classmates watched.

There's no shortage of tragedy here. We used to be surprised each time we heard another shocking story like this. It's still unsettling, but we can hardly still be surprised, week after week as we hear more "death reports".

I suppose what's most surprising is the way people here handle it. Any of us would think they'd be persistently sad or mournful, depressed, and crying often, maybe some even hysterical. But I've never seen someone like that. People were silent for a short time when the news of our teacher's death spread throughout the school. But less than fifteen minutes later, they were calmly planning their part in the memorial service and funeral arrangements, as if it were a regular school function. (And I guess in some ways, it was.)

When the students died, the school staff only briefly met and even added on a few separate points to the meeting. School wasn't even ended early that day (though it's very frequently ended early for any number of other reasons).

People here definitely have a different response to death. It seems they have a different view of it as well. Outside of a few speeches at the funeral, I never really hear people talking of the recently deceased person, the way they would in the States. But I hear a lot of talking about the food that was served, about the family members or friends there whom they haven't seen in a while; I hear jovial greetings and not a little bit of laughter.

The older men gathered to talk around a fire before a funeral begins.

Rather than depression, there actually seems to be a little bit of excitement leading up to a funeral. Everyone's going to be there; it'll be cause for a big gathering of those still living. And I guess for people here, that's enough.

They speak about it that way too. There's two main types of social gatherings we've attended here: funerals are by far the most common, and occasionally there are weddings. But one time a man invited us to his 42nd birthday party. The proceedings were more or less the same as a funeral or a

wedding (it seems they only have one standard outline of events for any social gathering, and apparently that even includes birthdays), but it was on a smaller scale and had only a bit more laughter and merriment included.

At one point, the man who's birthday it was made an interesting statement. He said, "We should come together more often for happy reasons. Maybe God sees us living separately and thinks of how he can cause us to come together and so he has to kill someone so that we'll gather for a funeral. We should meet more often for happy reasons so we can have less funerals."

However a person looks at the issue, it seems to be very nonchalantly. One of our school's teachers was encouraging me one day to know where each of our teachers lived (only one of them now lives in our village, the rest are in town or in other villages a ways away). I wasn't exactly sure why he thought I should know where they all lived until he said, "you never know, any time we could die." He wanted to be sure I knew where each teacher lived so that I wouldn't get lost on the day of their funeral. But there wasn't anything sad in the way he said it. It was just a matter of fact.

And that's what death is to the South Africans we live among. It's a matter of fact, a regular part of life. None of the third-grade student's schoolmates seemed particularly sad that she died. But they enjoyed a good time while singing a song together for her funeral. They had already picked up their culture's values: life is for the living, so what is death? It's not worth spending too much thought on apparently; rather enjoy the company of those around you.

As I mentioned earlier, Lora and I have had a bit of a hard time coming to terms with this idea, and with death so rampant around us. But in some of the time I've spent thinking about it, I can't help but think maybe the Shangaan people have a healthier perspective on it than we do, than most people in the US.

Death *is* final, and it's unavoidable. None of us can escape it. And we can rarely lengthen our own lives by endlessly contemplating the deceased. Do we really believe we owe them a certain span of time spent in misery because of their departure? Or is our time and theirs better spent fully enjoying the company of those we're still with?

I don't know. Those are all tough questions and tough thoughts, ones I've had far more frequently since being here. I'm sure that the South Africans we live among would be nearly unable to live at all if they responded to death the way we as Americans do.

And I'm sure there's nothing wrong with anyone being sad at the absence of someone they deeply loved. I *have* seen a few South Africans cry at funerals. They've been whisked off by other family members to mourn alone, and I've only seen it twice, but even they can be made sad by the loss of someone else. I think there's quite a bit that's natural about that and quite a bit that some people here must be feeling sometimes that they simply keep under the surface.

But thank God the question of death isn't the end. We as Christians have less reason to be startled than any South African, no matter how frequently any of us experiences death nearby. Whether we choose to visibly mourn someone's absence or not to mourn at all, we know it's not the end. As Psalms 30:5 says, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning." Neither this world, a loved one's death, nor even our own is the end of things. That's just the nightfall. But the dawn is still coming.

(First written by Adam Willard, May 14, 2009)

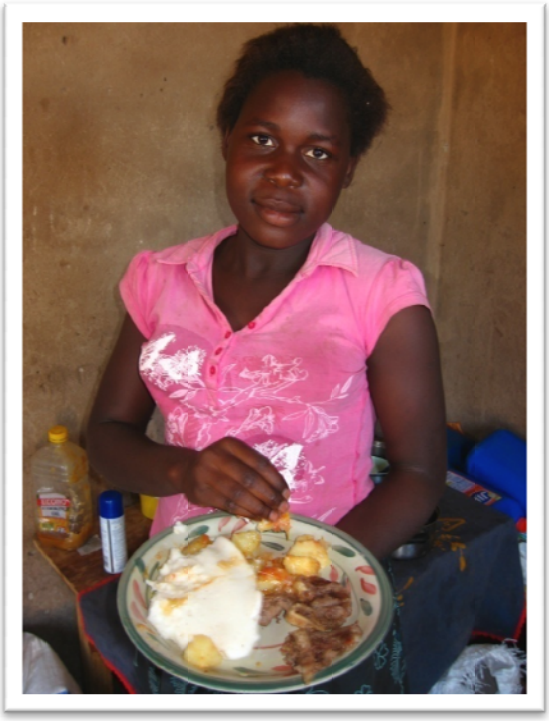
Everyone's heading back to the family's house for a big meal after the funeral.

# YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

I know they say, "You are what you eat." But if that saying were true, I'd have chicken legs and feet, the body of a locust, my brains would be made out of mopani worms, and my insides would be composed of mushy mealie pap and slimy green leaves and vines. Thankfully that saying isn't completely true and a person can eat some pretty bizarre things and still remain at least reasonably normal.

I've written a lot of serious newsletters lately, so I figured this time would be a little more light-hearted, but no less important to our daily lives and the lives of those around us. Let me tell you about the foods of South Africa, well, especially the foods eaten in and around our village.

All food is usually eaten with your hands, and it's perfectly acceptable to use both hands. However, most people in the village were under the false assumption that all white people eat *all* their food with a fork and a knife and that we consider it crude if we see them touch their food with their fingers. Thus, when we had a few people over for a pasta dinner one night, we never were able to convince our guests that they didn't need to cut up their toast with a fork and a knife, even when they saw us eat ours with our hands. Their racial assumptions are so deeply ingrained that they're sometimes unchangeable, and otherwise they simply need a *lot* of time to be convinced.



The white blob on the left is the "vuswa".

First, no meal here is a meal without "vuswa", also variously known as "pap" or sometimes just "porridge". It's a white creamy-looking substance that resembles mashed potatoes but turns out to be a lot stiffer than that. For a regular meal it's a small round mountain that usually takes up about 2/3 to 3/4 of the plate. It's made of a really finely ground maize flour (a rather tasteless variety of corn), which is also called "mealie meal", and it's cooked by simply boiling the mealie meal with water and stirring often.

When you eat vuswa, you pull a chunk of it off with your fingers and dip it in the rest of the food. It's a pretty messy process. It's often too hot to taste (and definitely burns your fingers), but when it's had the chance to cool down a bit it usually just tastes like a really bland and mostly flavorless starch. Being mostly flavorless, it's not that bad, but can get nauseating when you eat too much.

People eat vuswa with pretty much every meal and a slimier variety of it is often cooked for breakfast. To give you an idea of how often and how much is consumed, people often purchase the mealie meal in 70 kg bags (over 150 lbs.) and cart it to their houses by wheelbarrow. Even the women who regularly carry 25 liter buckets of water on their heads for miles have no hope of similarly transporting that much mealie meal.

So vuswa is always the staple food, but people also feel that they always have to eat something else with it. The "something else" ("xixevo") usually takes the form of a "gravy", and if it's a regular meal they only prepare one gravy to go with it. But "gravy" is just the word they use to describe any kind of slimy, saucy, soupy stuff, whether it's made with meat, beans, tomatoes, it doesn't matter. A pretty standard gravy is made with tomatoes, onions, bell peppers, and water. It's not too bad really, but since they rarely use spices it also comes off as bland, day after day after day.

South Africa is a very carnivorous country, so everyone feels that they should *always* eat some kind of meat with their vuswa. The thing is, definitions of "meat" vary from place to place and in my opinion, they use the term very loosely here. The regular meat eaten with vuswa, especially for those on a tight budget (most villagers) is chicken feet, heads, and intestines. Now, I wouldn't particularly call any of this meat, but since it comes from an animal on land they consider it meat here and it apparently satisfies their cravings pretty well. It's almost always cooked in the standard gravy of tomatoes, onions, bell peppers, and water.

You can buy a pre-packaged frozen bag of just these parts, but people eat them whether they bought them frozen or killed the chicken themselves. As for the chicken feet, you don't just chew the rubbery skin off the bones, like you might expect. You're supposed to pull the claws off the toes, to discard, and then crush the bones and skin and everything together in your teeth, and then swallow. It tastes about like what you'd expect... not much, but fairly unappetizing in thought and texture.

However, everyone here really believes that eating these chicken parts are much superior to eating any combination of vegetables alone. Often, when people find out we've had a meal without any meat, they say, "but aren't you still hungry?", or simply, "but what about the meat?" And this is from the same people eating the chicken feet, intestines, and heads.

It was formerly my belief that people ate these chicken parts just because they're cheaper than the more "legitimate" parts, which are also readily available for purchase. However, at special functions where they serve the best food, there's also often a healthy mix of feet and intestines and everything else thrown in with chicken breasts and chicken legs, etc. I've even seen the most honored guests, whether the chief of the village or the head of an organization or whatever, specifically select the feet and intestines along with chicken wings and breasts and everything else. I've seen other people select only feet and intestines out of bowls with everything available. So, regardless of how much I dislike those particular "meat" choices, many people legitimately enjoy them here.

Mopani worms fresh-caught from a tree at school.

However, the "xixevo", or side dish, varies from season to season. Meat (in any form) is always the preference. There's one season in which dried mopani worms are readily available. They're not really worms, more like fat caterpillars a few inches long and they actually become very pretty butterflies when allowed to survive. But that doesn't happen much; mopani worms are intensely enjoyed by nearly everyone here.

Mopani worms are usually boiled for a while first (since they're usually dried when purchased) and then cooked in the standard gravy. They don't taste as bad as you might expect when looking at them, but they don't taste that good either. In my opinion, they have a very earthy flavor, kind of like dirt, no matter what gravy they're cooked in. And they're always very chewy too, (Lora describes it as "prickly") so that each worm could require up to a minute of chewing. That leaves you plenty of time to think about what's in your mouth and plenty of time to begin feeling nauseous just thinking about it. But all in all the taste isn't really bad, just not good.

Another interesting seasonal "meat" is fried locusts. There's about two months out of the year when there's literally hundreds of locusts in everyone's yard every night and so people go around collecting them to be eaten. Since we obviously don't know the art of locust catching and cooking, some enterprising neighbors send their kids over from time to time to harvest them in our yard.

It turns out that after people catch the locusts, they pull of their wings and legs so that it's mainly just their body that's being eaten. Then they fry them in oil until they're a bit crispy. And once again, they're eaten with vuswa, the staple food. I had some of these fried locusts and they honestly weren't bad at all... reminded me quite a bit of over-barbecued chicken. I wouldn't mind eating them again sometime, but I still don't think I'll be going around harvesting them and cooking them myself.

A few other interesting meat choices are termites and these strange, huge, winged ant-things that come out for just a few days of the year and leave their thousands of wings all over our porch. I haven't eaten either of these, yet, so I can't tell you much about them.

One more interesting meat fact: fish isn't really considered a meat. A lot of people seem to like eating fish from time to time, but I guess because it comes from the water it's not considered meat.

But as I said, the "xixevo" (side dish) is usually seasonal. So during other parts of the year, especially the middle and end of summer, "miroho" is often eaten. "Miroho" is any kind of leafy green vegetable and everyone seems to have their own particular favorite.

Because miroho includes any kind of leafy green vegetable, some comes from regular leafy plants like we're used to such as cabbage and "spinach" (which is actually a type of chard), some comes from what looks like weeds that grow wild in people's yards and in the bush around the village, some comes from vines that grow on fences, and some comes from leaf stalks of much bushier plants.

Though miroho is usually a substitute for meat when eaten at a regular meal, most people seem to enjoy it enough that we don't hear the common complaints about lack of meat. All miroho is boiled and peanuts are often cooked into it, and less often, onions, tomatoes and/or chili peppers.

The two main crops that people grow, and only during the summer when there's enough rain, is maize and peanuts. The maize is basically just corn but with harder kernels and not nearly as sweet. The "peanuts" apparently aren't actually peanuts, but some kind of ground nut that's mostly like a peanut. So, around the end of summer when it's time to harvest these, they roast or boil the maize and they boil the peanuts and snack on them throughout the day. Sometimes, if they snack enough, they skip their regular meals and only eat a little vuswa during mealtimes to supplement their snacking.

And sometimes people eat beans with their vuswa. I don't think it's so much seasonal as it is the cheapest food option people have. It's what they almost always feed the kids at school since it's so cheap, while the teachers eat chicken feet, etc. When a family eats beans for dinner is when you hear the most complaints about lack of meat.

The only beans anyone really eats much are called "red speckled sugar beans"; they seem mostly like pinto beans to me. Usually they boil them for a long time with onions, green pepper, potatoes, and sometimes carrots. They also use quite a bit of cumin for seasoning them. In my opinion, it's one of the best xixevo's that they have, with a rich smoky flavor, but I guess most people here would rather gnaw on chicken feet most days so that they can get their share of "meat".

But those are all the options for regular day-to-day meals: a HUGE portion of vuswa (the mealie pap), with a small portion of xixevo (side dish) – usually meat in a gravy sauce. Kids will often snack in between meals on any fruit they can find. There's quite a variety of wild fruit, home-grown fruit, and store-bought fruit: anything from mangos, guava, oranges and apples to wild berries, grapes, plums, and "black monkey oranges" (a pulpy fruit that grows wild – nothing like an actual orange).

A boy climbing a tree to get some indigenous jackal-berry fruit, a favorite for many people.

Special occasions like funerals, weddings, organizational events, etc. call for special selections of food. For larger special occasions like funerals and weddings, people start cooking the night before. They have HUGE pots, usually about 3-4 feet tall, for cooking vuswa in and there's never any shortage of that. There's also usually a significant amount of steamed rice available.

Though most people prefer vuswa, rice is considered a starch for special occasions and so most people will also have a small portion of rice in addition to their vuswa. I think maybe they feel slightly higher-class to be eating rice, though if there were no vuswa present, most people would be grumbling.

The meat selection is usually very large and plentiful: battered and oil-fried chicken (including all parts), boiled chicken in gravy, and boiled beef in gravy. Cows are almost always slaughtered for big occasions, so there's usually plenty of that to go around.

The occasion and a person's relation to the principle members of the special occasion often affects what portion of the cow a person eats. For example, a bride's uncles share the head of the cow, with the brain being one of the most coveted portions. We participated in eating the head one time. I don't know if we also had some of the brain or not, but it was honestly pretty gross overall: bony, fatty, and greasy, and I don't think they did a good job of removing the hair from it first.

In addition to starches and meat, special occasions almost always have boiled cabbage, the regular tomato gravy by itself, boiled beets, and "pumpkin" (any kind of mashed orange squash). Depending on the time of the year, there may also be one or two miroho's. Since most people only ever have one xixevo to eat at regular meals, they usually eat a lot of everything during the special occasions.

A lot of people show up just for the food, and whoever's hosting the special occasion has the responsibility of feeding anyone who shows up, even packaging food for people to take away if they say they don't have time to remain and eat it. So, most people don't serve the food until after the occasion is over, to avoid people eating and leaving before the occasion has even begun. For possibly the same reason, most people show up late, not wanting to remain for the full meeting, but wanting to get there in time for the food.

Since the food is treated as the most important part (or even the only important part?) of any occasion, it's often the only way our schools get the kids' parents to participate in anything – by feeding them the food the kids would normally get for lunch that day. So on those days, which are few, the kids often don't get lunch.

There's not a regular drink here where we live. The truth is that most people don't drink anything while they're eating and don't drink much in general, but throughout the day they'll drink water from time to time. If it's a semi-special occasion, they'll buy "cold drinks" (the title for any type of soft drink here) to share.

But on the very special occasions, they'll brew what's called "mqomboti" – a fermented drink made out of mealie meal, water, and "brewer's yeast." Sometimes they only brew it for a few days, but supposedly the best stuff is brewed for a week. During the occasion, they'll fill up jugs (often made out of gourds) with the mqomboti and pass it around for each person to drink some. It's really sour and really strong – not very good overall.

January and February is ripe marula season – a kind of small yellow fruit that grows on some of the largest trees around. It has a slightly sour, slightly citrusy flavor and is squeezed to make marula juice. Then the juice is allowed to naturally ferment for a few days to make a strong "marula beer" and it's generously shared with anyone around, special occasion or not. It's actually pretty good, but still very sour.

Legend has it that elephants, who are known to be fond of marulas, would stockpile a lot of the fruit and let it naturally ferment on its own, then eat it and go on drunken rampages knocking down trees, peoples' houses, etc. However, it seems the truth is that elephants, who are fond of marulas, would smell the fermenting marula in pots behind peoples' houses, completely drink it all, get very drunk, and then go on drunken rampages knocking down trees, trampling peoples' houses, etc. So, the elephants apparently don't plan to get drunk, but it does actually happen and it's quite a dangerous situation.

Lora standing with the massive 80kg bags of mielie meal sold at the village store. Most families eat one of these bags every month!

One time while we were visiting my friend in Pretoria during Christmas break, they say an elephant broke through the Kruger National Park fence and was causing trouble in our village. So the villagers contacted the park rangers to come take the elephant out of there. However, because an elephant is so heavy and difficult to move and because they're overpopulating Kruger right now anyway, the rangers just shot and killed it in the village and let everyone take what they wanted. They say there was enough meat from it that every family in the whole village (some 2000 or more people) had a feast that night.

But that's basically it for food in South Africa, well, our portion of South Africa anyway. Though it turns out we don't appreciate the flavor / texture of a lot of the staple foods, we've definitely had our share of interesting experiences with the food here and have found a few that we really enjoy.

If you're interested, here's a short list of other meats I've eaten since I've been here, those not included in the above descriptions: impala, crocodile, kudu, African water buffalo, hippo, zebra, springbok, blesbok, warthog, eland, gemsbok, and wildebeest. As I said, South Africa is a very carnivorous country and nearly everything is eaten! They say that giraffe is actually very tasty and we hear that guinea fowl is delicious. We'll surely have a few more interesting food experiences here before we leave.

(First written by Adam Willard, June 20, 2009)

# HA VUYA SWESWI!

We've been in South Africa now for just over a year. It's crazy how time flies! I can still vividly recall our goodbyes at home, our initial training, our various expectations for what South Africa would be like, all our ideas of what we might do here. Our perspective has definitely changed in most of those regards, but it's hard to believe we've really been working here for more than a year already.

It's funny because there's not a lot that we can say we've "accomplished" already – that's one of the things that makes the one year mark seem unbelievable. But in some ways you may say time flows differently here. What may take 10 minutes in the US may take 1 hour here. Or what may normally be accomplished in a week there may take several months here. And what may take a year in America, well, that may not even happen within someone's lifetime in South Africa. But whether or not time really flows differently here, I can tell you that certainly it's perceived differently.

More loosely, you might say. Everyone here is very well aware of time, they have words in their language for referring to it and they understand you when you talk about it. But maybe they don't understand you quite the same, at least not the way us Americans talk about time: most Shangaan people here just don't put as much weight into it. I guess to them, time means *something*, just not *everything*.

Let's take this for example: if I told you something started at noon, you'd check your watch before arriving and make sure you came probably not more than 15 min. early (if it was very important), but probably not more than 15 min. late. Most likely you'd arrive within a few minutes of noon. If for some reason you didn't have a watch/clock with you (unlikely as it is), you'd make sure to ask someone, wherever you were, what time it was. That question, "what time is it?", is one of the first questions Westerners learn when learning a new language, right up there with "where's the bathroom?" But even the chance of you being caught without your own personal reference to time is very slim.

A contrasting example is when we recently started a program here whereby we set up some computers in our house (borrowed from one of the schools we work at) so that kids in the village could come over and learn to use them and also participate in some other activities at our house during the recent school holiday. We made sure all the kids knew that the program would be starting at twelve and continuing until four every weekday and we even had a translator with us just to be sure they understood.

So, a few days before it was supposed to start, we had some kids stopping by asking if it had already started. There weren't a lot of them, but a few throughout each day, and so we continued to remind them it didn't start until Monday and that it was going from noon to four.

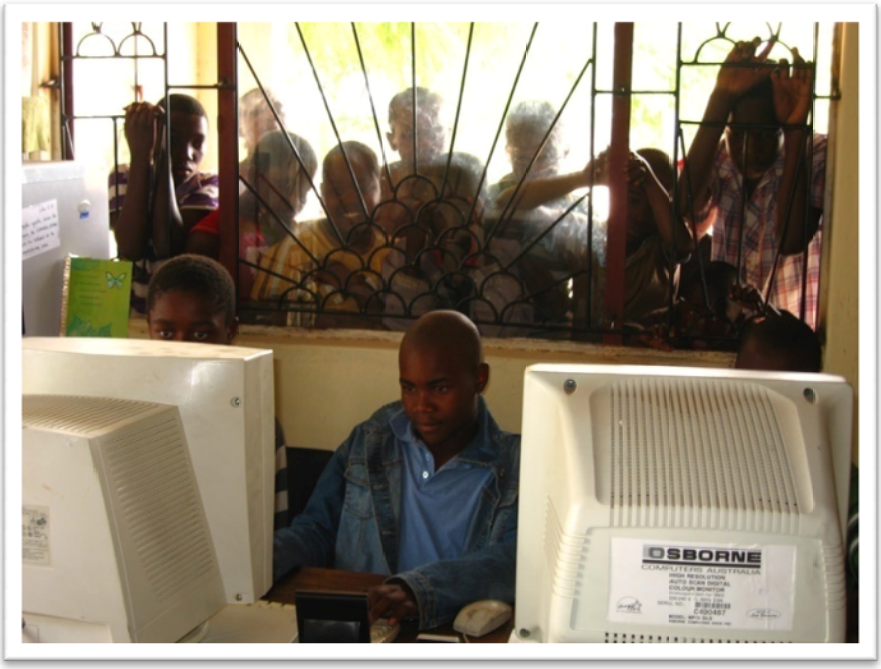
Well, on Monday we were glad to sleep in for once, but by the time we woke up just after eight, there were already several kids waiting outside for us. They actually assumed it was already starting and didn't even think to ask whether or not it really had started yet. So we reminded them again that it would be starting at noon and to come back in a few hours. About thirty minutes later, a different set of kids came by and we told them the same story.

Within another thirty minutes or so later, *both* of the first two groups of kids had returned and were ready to begin. We told them they still had to wait three more hours and most of them looked pretty surprised. This cycle continued every thirty minutes to an hour until it was close to twelve and we decided to go ahead and begin.

We thought for sure that because they had to wait so long the first day before we started, that they'd come back much closer to noon the next day. But it wasn't so – the kids kept coming anywhere from 2-3 hours early every day for weeks. They're not completely without clocks either – they could've

asked any teenager or adult what time it was, since almost all of them have cell phones. But they didn't just come early, a lot of the kids came late also – sometimes even after four, so we'd send them away saying we'd already finished for the day.

We only had two computers set up, so we had them all take turns. They knew that their turns were only 5 minutes long each. But, the first few days didn't have quite as many kids as we expected, so we gave them a bit over 10 minutes each. However, the kids always referred to their scheduled time as 5 minutes. Later, as we got more kids, I did reduce their time to five minutes, but no one seemed to notice the difference at all.




The computers at our house always attracted a big crowd of spectators at the window, just waiting their turn.

One day, for whatever reason, we only had 2 boys show up by noon. So, I didn't even set the timer, I just let them play games on the computers for about an hour and then told them their time was up when a couple other boys showed up. Because I never set the timer, it also never ringed when I told them they were finished. The boys looked at me almost stunned, like they couldn't believe their time was finished already. These kids apparently couldn't very well distinguish between 5 minutes and 1 hour... and these aren't little kids – most of them were around 12-14 years old.

But it's not just the kids. It was simply that activity with them that made me realize why people are always so late to events here, and it made me recall a lot of details that I'd previously overlooked.

It's true that people were always late to events, sometimes several hours late, sometimes arriving even long after the event is over. But it was also true that people were often very early, even several hours early. As an American, I simply barely noticed that people were early; I was only concerned if they were late, especially since most people were *never* on time when it involved us, like when we hold training sessions for the teachers. We were thinking maybe they were lazy or something, while for us, we were just trying to use our short time here wisely. But the reason they're late, or early, is because a unit of time has a much wider definition for them than it does with us.

A minute to an average Shangaan person is just a short unit of time, so short it's hardly even mentioned. A typical short unit of time might be anywhere from 5 minutes to 1 hour – that segment of time more or less blends together for them. A medium segment of time is anywhere from a few hours to half the day. And a long segment of time is something that takes up the full day, or maybe even multiple days. Within these few segments there's a LOT of leeway, not really observed by most rural Shangaan people; it's just short, medium, and long segments of time.

In sharp contrast is us Westerners, closely measuring our hours, our minutes, even our seconds. If we set a specific time to start something, then that's when we're going to start it and anyone showing up significantly early or late is disrespecting the time available to everyone involved. If we tell someone we'll do something within a certain span of time or be available at a specific time, it's considered a slight (or in some cases, major) offense to not be ready by that time.

But here, one commonly heard phrase is, "Na vuya sweswi!" – meaning literally, "I'm coming now!" The thing that quickly clued us in to its other-than-the-obvious meaning was that people always said this at the same moment that they were actually leaving. So, someone may be passing by the house, you engage them in customary greetings, tell them they should come in for a visit, and they tell you "I'm coming now!" just as they're walking off!

That person may show up a bit later, maybe a few hours later, maybe the next day, but oftentimes a person who says that will make an appearance at some time in the future. But, "now" definitely doesn't mean now. For them to shorten that period of time, they'll double it and say "sweswi sweswi!" or "now now!" which basically means "with some urgency". It still doesn't imply a strict time limit, but it does usually mean that coming back to you will be the next thing that person does. And that's certainly a lot quicker than it might be otherwise.

This vague reference to time isn't only applicable in the present. When we first arrived, many people told us of this guy named "Greg", apparently the only other white person to have spent much time talking to a lot of different people in the village. Everyone talked about him like we'd just missed him, like he'd just left the day before, and maybe we'd bumped into him on his way out. Even beginning to realize people's broad usage of units of time, we assumed he must've been there within the last year. But no; recently we learned that the last time Greg was really seen around here was 5 years ago!

It's the same with the patriarch of our host family. He's referred to in nearly the exact same way, as if he'd only passed away yesterday. But it was with the same result – he died almost 10 years ago! I guess for people who don't distinguish much between units of time in the present, neither does the past ever seem too far away.

It's also probably why most people don't know how old they are. Every time, they have to recall the specific year a person was born in and subtract from the current year. They simply don't regularly keep track of the passing time.

However, as might be expected, Shangaan people do seem to have at least a few mechanisms for remaining somewhat cohesive in such a loose time structure. One important method is that events are classified by type. Certain types of occasions all start at the "same time" regardless of who's holding the occasion or where it's located.

For example, all funerals start at "6 AM"; it's the exact same answer we get every time we ask, no matter who we ask. But that answer's not exactly accurate (in the American sense) and we can tell you from personal experience that they sometimes start a full hour or more after that. But sometimes they start an hour or more earlier. What we've realized people mean by "6 AM" is just some time corresponding with when the sun rises, or shortly after it.

Parties and other celebrations (like weddings) always start at "9 or 10 AM". Always. No one ever knows when they *actually* start, because that's when they "always" start. Apparently that's around the time most people finish their morning chores, so they begin showing up for the event. Sometimes a given event like that might actually be delayed until 1 or 2 pm, but no one ever seems to mind. As far as most people are concerned, it started around 9 or 10 am.

They take this same easy-going approach to time no matter what it is they're waiting on. Grocery store lines are rarely less than half an hour long, and if it's near the time of the month when most people are paid the lines are usually an hour long or more. The lines in banks here are ridiculous, almost always lasting a few hours.

But I've never really seen any Shangaan person in one of these lines, in either the grocery store or the bank, looking upset about waiting. They say the wait to get into the hospital is even worse. They say they have to show up at 6 AM on one day, wait most of the day to get an appointment, and then

show up again at 6 AM (noticing a trend?) the next day to wait for their turn in the appointment schedule. But they take it all in stride.

After all, if you don't easily distinguish between five minutes and one hour, what's a simple wait in line? But for us Westerners, who are acutely aware of each second and minute passing, those kind of waits can be grueling. For Lora and I here, we've had to adapt, at least somewhat, to this new perspective on time. It means things go slower, or at least are "accomplished" more slowly.

But it's also very liberating in many ways. We can occupy our minds with other concerns, rather than worrying about minutes lost here and there. Certainly a preoccupation with time won't affect the actual speed at which time passes, nor will it bring back any given minute just because we've realized it was "wasted".

The truth is, I think our Western obsession with constantly monitoring the passing of minute quantities of time can be damaging to relationships and even contribute to over-inflated self-esteems. It makes us easily offended when people don't respect *our* time, and thus we're quick to offend in return. We often value available quantities of time more than the people who might otherwise occupy them. And we're so used to watching the minutes and the hours that belong to our own lifetimes that we easily forget what a vast quantity of time has passed before us and how much will likely pass after us. We begin to believe the only thing that matters is the infinitesimally small amount of time which affects us because with our attention so narrowed, it's often the only thing we see. We tend to miss the big picture.

It's probably also why we have so much trouble relating to that Bible verse about God, the one in 2 Peter 3:8 that says, "...with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." We usually only hear about that verse preached or sung in regards to the concept of "eternity" especially an eternity in heaven, and even then most of us are generally baffled and quickly move on to another topic of thought. It's also why if we get to thinking about Jesus's return, we may easily wonder exactly what it is that's taking him so long to come back. He did say he'd be returning soon, right? So doubt begins.

But that verse doesn't seem to be so much a reference to eternity in heaven as it is an explanation of the looser view of time that God takes, maybe in some ways similar to the culture that Lora and I are living in now. It's obviously not a reference to our American culture or we wouldn't have such a hard time relating to that verse. No... that verse is definitely more an explanation of God's own unique perspective on time, a reminder even.

The slightly larger context for that verse reads like this: "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."

It's a particularly good reminder for us living here and adapting to this new culture, a place where we tend to think people are "slow" or even worse, "lazy", because of their perspective on and use of time. Now, our situation helps brings a much clearer meaning to these verses. If translated to vernacular xiTsonga, Jesus's promise of return might have been, "Na vuya sweswi!" He's coming now, or soon. But then again, what is soon really? According to Peter, God takes a much looser view of time, much more broad even than the Shangaan people that Lora and I are living among.

What Jesus is saying is that there's a few things he's taking care of first. One of those things is bringing about the redemption of more people. Another he mentioned is preparing a place for us in his Father's house. But he said he'll be back soon. He hasn't forgotten, he hasn't delayed, and he's not slow about it, at least not as we're used to thinking about slow.

Maybe we should try to adapt to that broader view of time that he has and stop trying to count the minutes and seconds... then when Jesus returns, we'll be ready for him, not impatient and not with bad attitudes or false expectations. We're very thankful that the Shangaan people and their culture have helped us to better understand that.

(First written by Adam Willard, July 27, 2009)

# ACTION PACKED!

I set out early last Saturday morning to gather up some 7th grade boys and wander around our village to take more pictures for the Yearbook project that I'm working on with them. We made it all the way back to the back of the village and were approaching the area where most of the village on that side does their washing in the river. Then we heard three gunshots.

We did some questioning and found out that some people were there at the river shooting a hippo. So, we went looking for it and only a few hundred feet upstream from where everyone does their washing, we found it. We were some of the first people there after it was shot. At first it was just a small hump in the water and none of the people right by us were sure if it was dead yet.

But someone must've known because pretty soon a couple of guys got in the water to retrieve the dead hippo. They attached a long rope to the hippo's leg and guided it through the water as people on the shore pulled on another rope to drag it down-river to a more shallow area.

More and more people started arriving and they formed a big crew for chopping down the bush on the bank of the river in order to clear a space for dragging the hippo up on land. Other people formed a crew for pulling on the massive hippo. They eventually dragged the hippo to the area where they wanted to haul it up onto dry land. The plan was to use the strength of a farming tractor to get the hippo up.

Around that time, I met the guy who had shot the hippo. He said he was from Nelspruit (the nearest city - a couple hours away) and he said that someone in the village had called him because they'd spotted the hippo. So his job was just to come out and shoot it.

The reason is, hippos are the #1 deadliest animal in the whole continent of Africa. Even though they're herbivores, they're very aggressive when they're trying to either return to water, or when something they don't like is approaching their territory. They've got HUGE mouths and HUGE teeth for defense, so if they want to, they can just bite a person right in half. And since so many people in Africa wash their clothes and bathe and do other work in and near rivers, it often conflicts. So, when hippos are spotted, at least in our area, they have someone come to kill the hippo and then the meat is distributed among the nearby villagers.

So, I talked for a short while to the guy who shot it, but he was pretty busy trying to help coordinate the efforts to get the dead hippo out of the water. The tractor came, but when it tried to pull the hippo *out* of the water, the hippo's massive weight was just pulling the tractor down *into* the water instead. They also tried attaching the tractor to half the hippo and having a line of about 30-40 men pull on the other half, but it was still no luck. The hippo was just too big and heavy.

So, they decided to cut the head off first to remove some weight. It took about 20 people to pull the head up the river bank and it still took about 10-15 women pulling just to drag the hippo head across the flat ground. The head alone was *that* heavy.

Then they tried the tractor and the people again with the rest of the hippo, but it was still much too heavy. So, they gave up altogether on trying to pull the hippo's body out of the river and decided instead to simply butcher it in the water and pull up big chunks of it one at a time.

At one point, they cut into the hippo's stomach and it was incredible to see how full of grass it was. I'd guess that at least half of the hippo's mass was comprised only of grass... Unfortunately, it stunk REALLY bad when they got to that point - it was like the collected and focused stench of twenty cows defecating all at once. So I had to get away from it for a while.

The crew of about 10 guys worked on butchering the hippo in the river for about four hours, mostly chopping at it with an axe, but sometimes with machetes. In that time, the onlooking crowd of villagers kept growing until it reached about 200-300 people, including people from the village on the other side of the river (Dumphries C). Lora also came to meet up with me and see what was happening.

The hippo meat filled up an entire pickup truck ("bakkie"), and that was *after* someone hauled off the head and a few other large chunks of meat. It was also excluding all the intestines, which were put directly on the ground, and all the skin, which they never bothered pulling out of the river. It was a BIG animal, and the quantity of meat was plentiful to say the least.

So, once they were finished with all the basic butchering, it was time to distribute the meat. At first they made pretenses of making a couple lines - one side for Dumphries C, the other side for Dumphries B (our village). So we stood in the line on our side waiting for our own share as they unloaded a couple big pieces of meat onto the ground. The ground itself was first covered in tree branches and leaves to keep it "clean".

Things seemed orderly for the first few minutes, but then all of a sudden something happened, I'm not sure what. Men and women everywhere (mostly women though) just started diving en masse onto the meat and hacking away with their knives and machetes. Within a few seconds the truck tires spun out and it took off into the bush, all the while people were grabbing onto it and trying to pull more meat out of the back. Chaos began.

At the pile on the ground, it reminded me of vultures at a kill, only much more crazy and energetic. They were surrounding it from every possible side and angle, both high and low. Arms and machetes were flying everywhere just hacking away at it, even as more people were trying to squeeze in from the side, machetes already swinging up and down before even reaching the pile. I don't know yet, but if no one got cut badly, it'd be a miracle.

After a minute or so of this, a few people who were apparently working together picked up a whole huge piece of meat and started trying to run into the bush with it. The others were trying to pull it back and were still swinging machetes at the meat even as they ran. It was seriously very crazy.

The surge came in our direction a couple times and we had to quickly jump out of the way so as not to get struck by one of the machetes flying everywhere. Eventually the first group, the ones who had initially fled with the meat, won and they made it a hundred feet or so before they stopped running.

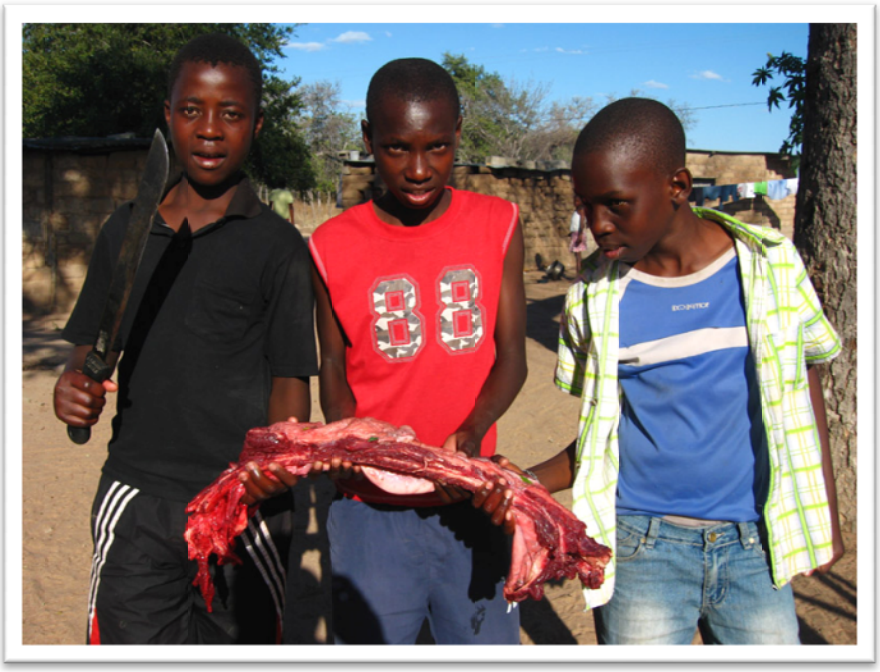
They set the meat down again and were busy trying to divvy it up amongst themselves when the second group caught up again and the machete tug-of-war continued. It continued back into the

river, then onto the other side of the river, still fighting for the meat until we couldn't see them any more. It honestly seemed a *lot* more wild than any of the animals we've seen here, and we've seen quite a *lot* of wild animals doing some crazy stuff.

After a quick recognition of the chaos of the scene, we decided to just stay out of the whole mess and we didn't pursue the meat at all. One of the boys I was with really wanted some for his family, so he chased after the fighting groups. After watching for a bit to see if we could make out what was happening with everyone, and failing to do that, we started heading home. I arrived in the early morning and it was now the late afternoon.

Along the way, I met a few guys with a really big chunk of hippo meat and we asked them for a small piece. They gladly cut off for us about a pound or two of really high-quality looking hippo meat. Then, as we were crossing the river to return back home, we encountered some others who wanted to just give us a piece of theirs, without us so much as mentioning their quantity of meat. So they gave us another pound or two.

We then washed the meat off some in the river. It had quite a bit of grass and some sand and stuff stuck to it, since most of the meat was laid on the ground or chopped on the ground at some point. I was carrying it in my hands up to that point, but one of the ladies who was washing her clothes at the river gave me a plastic bread sack to carry it home in, so that helped keep the flies away from it and we were very thankful.



On the way back we stopped to talk to quite a few people and eventually the first boy who accompanied me caught back up with us. Someone had gotten angry with the truck driver and made him come back with some of the meat and then the boy had grabbed a pretty big piece of rib and rib-meat and ran off with it. He was really proud of his well-won hippo meat and he got a lot of compliments on it as we walked home.

When we got home, I cleaned off our meat a lot better and cut away the fat. It was pretty tough meat. I marinated some of it in a cajun blackening seasoning, and the rest I just cooked in a little bit of water and oil. It turned out to be *very* delicious, with an excellent flavor, even the un-marinated one. But the blackening seasoning went really well with it and was even better.

Unfortunately, the meat was pretty tough and hard to chew. So maybe I should've cooked it medium rare instead of well done, but I don't have much experience with fresh killed game that's been in the river and on the ground, so I didn't really want to take any chances with food poisoning. At least it tasted excellent, and our share of meat was way more than enough for the both of us. We're going to thin slice our left-overs for some hippo steak sandwiches tonight.

It was quite an exciting event, with a happy ending for many - lots of free meat! It's incredible how some people can be so excitably dangerous and greedy (like those in the hippo meat tug-of-war) and others can be so generous and self-giving (like those who gave us the extra portions of meat without us even asking and then also the bag for transporting it home).

Unfortunately, the action didn't stop with the hippo last weekend. Just yesterday, a gang of four showed up at the store directly across the street from our house. They had a shootout with the store's gunman as they were robbing the store.

I was inside our house when it started. At first, myself and one of the guys I was with thought that maybe a child had a balloon that had popped. Then when the second shot was fired, we thought maybe they were trying to shoot a snake. I hurried out of the house in the direction of the store because I wanted to see the snake before it was completely destroyed.

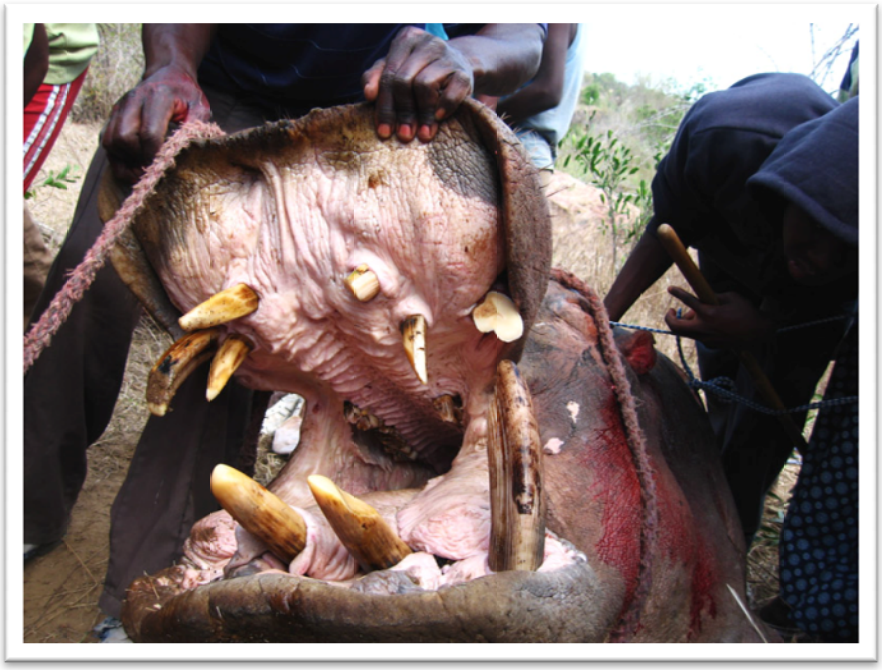
Then we heard the gunshots coming from two different directions and saw dust fly off the ground and off the wall of the store from stray bullets striking. Old ladies selling vegetables and would-be shoppers were fleeing the area of the store with their hands covering their heads. We ran back inside my house and waited it out. There were probably 10-15 gunshots total before the criminals sped down the dirt road in their vehicle.

Thankfully, everyone was such a bad aim (and poorly supplied with bullets) that no one was shot. It was a close call though and the criminals apparently intended to kill. The store's guard was simply lucky that when they were only 10 feet from him and pulled the trigger they were already out of bullets.

The police didn't arrive until about 2 hours later and apparently the same criminals have been making a string of robberies on Pakistani-owned stores in our area over the last week or so.

South Africa never ceases to be a land of excitement and adventure! It certainly has more than its share of tragedy, but thankfully no one was hurt in the events of our last few weeks.

(First written by Adam Willard, Aug. 29, 2009)



# ...KNOWING TOO WELL

We've spent over a year now living in a village among the Shangaan (or vaTsonga) people in the former Gazankulu area of South Africa. Most of what perplexed or surprised us during the first few weeks and months and which sometimes caused considerable amounts of anxiety for us and the Shangaan people we lived closest to has now simply become a comfortably expected routine way of life.

During our first two months of Peace Corps training, we lived with one older Tswana lady in a small mostly Tswana village. She definitely treated us with deference, but we chalked it up to decades of working as a "domestic servant" (i.e. maid) in a white household in nearby Pretoria. Especially as she quickly opened up to us in the ensuing weeks and with the broadly warm welcome we immediately received from everyone else in the village. We soon came to expect the open friendliness of the Tswana people, their love of partying for any occasion, their quickness to strike up a conversation (regardless of the difficulties of communicating past our language barrier), frequent visits to other households, etc.

So, when we arrived in our permanent Shangaan village where we're now living, we very taken aback by the variety of careful measures widely used to keep us at a "social distance". It's true that the Shangaan people appeared friendly and smiles weren't uncommon (as long as we displayed a smile first), but we could feel something hanging in the air, affecting their every action and word (or lack thereof) that kept *them* at a distance from *us*. And it wasn't from lack of effort on our part; we knew this is where we'd be living for the next two years and we believed (and rightly so) that integration into this community would be essential for both our work and our own psychological well-being.

So we tried whatever we could to bridge that gap: we greeted *everyone* we passed, we attended every funeral and any other public event that we knew of, we invited lots of people to our house, we eagerly hoped for invitations to other people's houses, we baked things for our neighbors, we spent dinners with our host family, hoping to get to know them better and then somehow extend that into a chain of relationships with the rest of the village. We put a LOT of thought into how to make this social and cultural integration happen and we were willing to try anything we could think of or anything that came up. But to our surprise, nothing ever worked to really lower that social distance; our expectations were never satisfied.

That kind of concerted and continuous effort with no apparent results can really take a toll on people and people deal with it in different ways. I'd been surprised by culture a few times before, so while the new surprise of this exasperating "social distance" continued to annoy me, I was willing to wait it out and see what happened. Lora, on the other hand, was sure the "problem" originated with her and was almost equally sure that if she just discovered the right solution, it would go away. Needless to say, our months and months of effort caused her considerable stress and anxiety.

Other Volunteers, with the same or different "problems" that they're confronting, sometimes just decide to go home, and with the individual emotional turmoil involved, you can't really blame them. But the solution is something that kind of just arrives with time, probably inevitable in many ways: our expectations change. They change to more accurately fit the reality we find ourselves in.

Slowly and gradually we learned, the way any Shangaan child growing up in our village does, that "social distance" is just part of "the way it is". As we were able to think less of ourselves and spend more time observing the Shangaan people around us, their interactions with each other, and hear their responses to some fortunately-phrased questions, we learned that keeping people at a certain distance socially was their habit long before we arrived.

Maybe the revelation culminated for us when one of our schools' principals one day remarked that now he's "knowing us too well" and "that's not good." We were perplexed at that statement and

asked him to explain. The best answer he gave us was that people say someone "is knowing someone else too well" in a negative sense, because if they know a person too well they may ask for too many favors or try to take advantage of you.

In fact, when most people in our village applied their same standards of "social distance" to us, it was actually a sign of community inclusion rather than exclusion. They were treating us the way they treated everyone else. But it took us a LONG time to recognize that. And contrary to our initial reactions, the few who spoke directly to us and confronted us directly weren't the few who valued us more, they were the few who valued us less and chose to violate their cultural norms because they saw us as existing entirely outside its boundaries.

So now our expectations are changed. We know that people don't look us in the face because they don't want to disrespect us and they'll only steal quick glances at our faces when we're not looking at them. We know that conversations among most Shangaan people in our village rarely extends beyond the same small talk of formalized greetings and responses. They mention whether it's hot or cold and include greetings to any family members not immediately present. To repeat the exact same greeting or response several times in the same short conversation is normal and not a sign of awkwardness.

We know that any question is usually answered with the vaguest and least-detailed possible response with more details only slowly becoming available as the same question is repeated multiple times. Close friends or family members more often sit for long times in silence than in conversation.

We know that almost no one will ever visit our house as a result of an invitation by us, at least not at the time for which the invitation was intended. And when unexpected visits happen, they often won't last more than a few minutes because anything longer would be imposing.

It's good for us to know because we're expected to visit others occasionally, without invitation or announcement, but we shouldn't stay for more than a few minutes. And when we arrive, we can expect to be quickly seated at a distance of fifteen feet or more (depending on how large the yard is) from the ones we've come to visit, as their way of showing us maximum respect. We'll be offered something to drink or eat and if accepted, we'll have to eat and drink mostly in isolation. We then need to leave rather quickly, without any reason being given except a simple announcement that we're leaving.

In the time we've been here, we've come to expect these and even more subtle details and we've grown comfortable with it. It's definitely different from the Tswana people of our training village, and it's different from some Zulus we've encountered and it's different from stories we've heard from other Volunteers working with different people groups. But for the Shangaan people of our area, this is the way it is, and now that we know and expect it, we're comfortable with it and the large portion of anxiety it originally caused for us is now gone.

Though it would be a huge exaggeration at this point to say that we completely understand the Shangaan people in our village and their culture, I think we *can* safely say that we have successfully adapted to most of the broad aspects of our local Shangaan culture and we generally know what to expect in everyday situations. So, when we left a bit over a week ago to spend a relaxing vacation in

nearby Mozambique among a significantly larger group of Shangaan people, we didn't expect that there'd be many surprises in store for us. Especially because a large portion of our own village's inhabitants immigrated to our village from Mozambique in the 80s. But another surprise was in store. In Mozambique, many of the Shangaan people are different in different ways.

For example, in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, many people we passed looked directly into my face, and even if I looked back at them, they didn't divert their gaze quickly to the ground as I've grown accustomed to. I haven't passed nearly so many people outside of Maputo, but it seems to be similarly true further north and towards the coast: there's no taboo towards looking a person in the face, even if they're looking at you. For myself, I was simply no longer accustomed to looking people in the eye and having them return their gaze. So it surprised me.

But the biggest surprise for us has been the varying reactions of us speaking Shangaan (xiTsonga) with them. In Maputo and several small towns we stopped in on our way to the beaches, people aren't at all shy to speak Shangaan with us, as we're used to. They're excited and surprised to find that we speak Shangaan, but they soon start speaking it back to us just like a normal conversation. Unfortunately, in Maputo, it's nearly unintelligible for us because it seems to be primarily Portuguese with a decent bit of Shangaan thrown in just for good measure. Outside of Maputo it's much more like the Shangaan we're used to, so the conversations work out pretty well and move along mostly just like we're used to in our village.

The big surprise is the way our Shangaan has been received in the beach towns/villages. People can clearly understand us, and we can hear them speaking to each other in the Shangaan that we're used to, but they almost never replied directly to us in Shangaan. They invariably began speaking to us in Portuguese, but even after that failed, they seemed intent to speak to us in broken English (or continued Portuguese) rather than in the Shangaan which we'd already demonstrated to them that we were able to speak and understand.

A fresh fish market in Mozambique.

At first, it was just frustrating because it made communication more difficult than usual, but it was definitely something we noticed with the majority of people we tried to speak to in the beach towns. And the funny thing was that their Shangaan, as we heard them speaking to each other, was the most "pure" (not mixed with Portuguese) and thus the easiest for us to understand, if only they'd use it when speaking directly to us. But unfortunately, most people just wouldn't.

We didn't spend enough time in Mozambique to say that we could've noticed any other distinct differences in those aspects of "social distance" (or any other cultural aspect) which I've just described. But those two differences: of looking a person in the face, and of people in some areas being shy to respond to us in Shangaan, made me realize just how strongly a thing like colonialism or other types of cultural domination can distinctly affect the culture of a group of people and cause it to develop in different ways.

South Africa was variously colonized by the Dutch, who after time developed their own identity as "Afrikaners", and then by the British. Parallel to that, the Zulu people spent a long time subjecting

other tribes, including the Shangaans, to their own rule or they simply chased the other tribes out. Governmental ruling power alternated between the British and the Afrikaaners but it was always a rule of hierarchy, distinguishing different people of varying levels on a social scale, culminating with what's called "Apartheid" and finally ending in 1994.

It's easy to see Apartheid's continued effects in South Africa today, anything like that is definitely slow to change, and we've long since realized that it also affects the hierarchies by which the Shangaan people we live among view themselves and by which they structure their own form of "social distance".

To most Shangaan people in our village, Shangaan people from Mozambique are actually at the bottom of the hierarchy. People with nicer jobs (like teachers) are a step up, and tribes of significantly larger populations like Zulus are next up the ladder, and the steps continue up the rest of the way mostly the way Apartheid was structured. I hadn't realized it before we encountered Shangaan people living in Mozambique, but it may be that this directly identifiable hierarchy is also the cause of increased social distance, such as not being able to look a person in the face.

In Mozambique, though I don't know its history so well, there was never a directly legislated hierarchy like Apartheid in South Africa and it seems that the Portuguese colonizers there were never quite so prevalent as the British and Afrikaners in South Africa. And the Shangaan people in Mozambique also never lived directly under the rule of Zulus or even in close proximity to too many other tribes as they do in South Africa.

It may be that "social distance" among Shangaan people here was never increased to the point of not being able to look a person in the face simply because they never lived under the direct hierarchy that South African Shangaans have lived through. In contrast, the beach towns we visited while on vacation had many Portuguese vacationers, many apparently intent to display their machismo or their wealth, and the Shangaan people there may have developed an inferior attitude about their own language in regards to outsiders. Thus their frequent refusal to respond to us in Shangaan even when we spoke to them in Shangaan and heard them speaking to each other in Shangaan.

It's a simple explanation for a few simple observations, and I may be incorrect in making these connections. Nonetheless, I find it remarkable to note how essentially the same group of people (Shangaans) can differ in distinctly noticeable cultural ways in different countries and even in different but nearby towns within the same country. A group of people's cultural norms is a dynamic landscape influenced by many factors, including a history of the people who've dominated them either by legislative or economic means and the proximity of other people groups.

While it may be impossible to take all these factors into consideration at the same time, I think it's important to remember or at least be aware of how cultural influence is continuing around the world. Many are aware of what's called "globalization" - of how many aspects of the dominant Western culture, even specifically the American culture, are being adopted in governments and urban/semi-urban centers around the world.

As a result of our large volume of media output which makes its way all around the world, American culture does more giving than taking. Consequently, many people in developing nations now feel the need to buy a large stereo system so they can loudly blast the latest rap or house music singles before they feel the need to take care of other more basic needs; we simply don't often cover those other more vital subjects in American media.

But cultural influence isn't a one-way street. You should take a look around America and see if you can figure out just what exactly has been recently borrowed from somewhere else. The most obvious of course is our taste for "international" foods. You wouldn't have to explain to anyone in America what "salsa" or a "tortilla" is and most people quite enjoy Mexican food, cooking some form of it regularly even in homes with no other relation to Mexico or Mexicans.

It's a bit further in the past, but most Americans are entirely unaware that a large portion of our language is derived from French. I think that most Americans by now know that "gracias" is Spanish for "thank you" and the majority of American students are now learning Spanish from an early age, rather than French or German. How long will it be before Spanish words make up a significant portion of the American language?

Many, maybe even all, "new age" religions have their fundamental thought processes borrowed from Eastern mysticism, and more and more Westerners are subscribing to these types of beliefs.

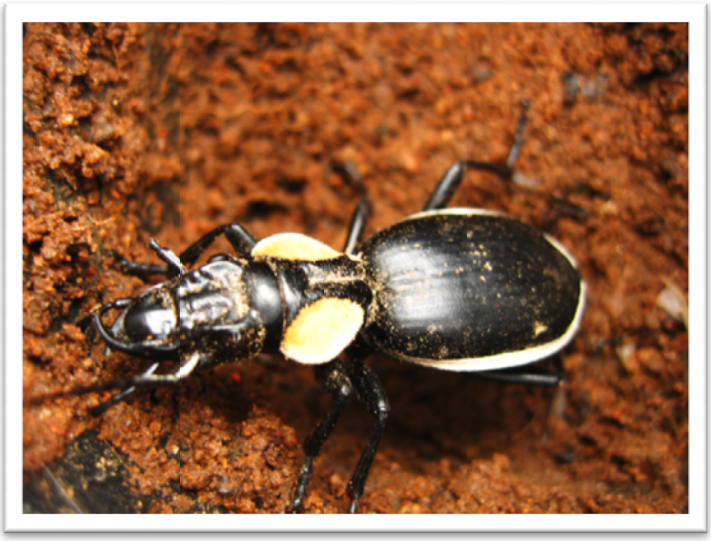
Cultural influence never ends as long as different cultures are coming into some form of proximity. So when you come into proximity with someone from another culture, I guess the question to ask yourself is: are you sharing cultural traits that can help to build that person up or will it only tear them down, making them feel inferior or relegated to the bottom rung of a hierarchy? I think that deserves a lot of careful thought, all the more so with the work that Lora and I are doing.

"Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another... Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building." Romans 14:13,19 Even the early Christian church had troubles sorting out the colliding cultural influences of its recent converts, but Paul's instructions on handling them are clear. Go ahead and read that whole chapter, it's a good one.

(First Written by Adam Willard, Sept. 29, 2009)

# EVERYTHING IN ITS SEASON

For the past six months or so, we've been able to go to bed with relatively few disruptions. Few noises outside, and nothing inside the house but us and our two cats.



About a week or two ago, I stepped outside the house at night and saw one particularly large beetle scurrying across the ground, very distinct because of two large round and bright yellow spots just behind its head. I was a bit surprised because I hadn't seen this type of beetle, hadn't seen much of any bugs, for the last six months. But here's one, obviously a resident of our yard, who re-surfaced after a long absence. In particular, it reminded me that the seasons are changing.

In America we know the seasons change in a few primary ways: holidays, cold vs. hot weather, and plants blooming. Some even keep track of the changing seasons by the changing school calendar.

But here in South Africa, in the whole Southern Hemisphere, the seasons are pretty much backwards, and are different in other ways as well. So since arriving, and until now, we've been working to re-orient ourselves, to come up with a new grasp of the seasons of the year and of life in general.

That's not always easy when we left the US (in July) and the weather was over 90 degrees there, but less than 40 the next day when we arrived in South Africa. It gets particularly confusing when you know it's Christmas-time (from looking at the calendar) but the temperature both outside and inside is pushing past 100. Even the school year ends in December and a new one begins in January.

But we've been here in one place well over a year now and have been able to make quite a lot of sense of the different seasons. In many ways, the signs of the changing seasons here are more obvious than the ones we remember from the States.

After all, in the States, we often only directly experience the seasons for a few minutes each day, on our way to and from our car, and to and from our work or homes. If the weather is in a perfect balance, we may spend more time relaxing outdoors, but generally we stay inside places where the climate is perfectly conditioned to be the way that we like it - and so the seasons can often pass without us noticing them too strongly.

But in South Africa, not only can we not avoid the changing seasons so easily, they also seem to come with quite a few more indicators of various types. For example, that big beetle with yellow spots reminded me that our nights of un-disrupted sleep have come to an end; when I saw it, I knew what to expect next.

And sure enough, over the last couple weeks we've had a plague of annoying "stupid bugs" - some kind of small round generic beetle that likes to fly all around inside our house with apparently no sense of direction and no collision detection. There are dozens of them and they run into the curtains, the walls, our food, us. They land on our seats if we stand up for a split second and then are immediately squashed when we sit back down. They fly directly under our feet as we're walking.

They fly into the oven if we open the door to it. They fly straight into our cats' mouths (who apparently enjoy them quite a lot). They fly right into our foreheads just as we lie down to sleep.

They're really "stupid bugs." Few of them seem to survive each night and Lora sweeps them up each morning, but there's always plenty more to replace them the next evening. Yet they've got their season... they'll probably only be around to annoy us for another month or so and then they won't be seen again until this time next year.

But that's certainly not going to be the end of the bugs. The large yellow-spotted beetle is simply the herald for about six months of this kind of large-scale creepy-crawly activity.

There's a large variety of cool beetles, large spiders, intricately-patterned moths, and others that hang around for the duration of this time. Of the beetles, there are some dung beetles, some hissing beetles, some rhino beetles, many of them with cool shapes and designs and limited enough in number so as to be more fascinating than annoying.

But many other bugs come in waves. The next large wave is going to be some sort of flying ant/termite sort of thing that's even more disgusting than the "stupid bugs" and they swarm in the thousands for about a week, discarding their wings (and many of them, even their bodies) all over our porch, to be swept off and blown about like chaff in the wind.

Then after that will come a month or two of locusts - providing a supplemental food source to many in our village. It's also the emerging "mopani worm" season right now, a sort of caterpillar delicacy that can be easily found on large trees, and either some love to eat them or others hate them. (Personally, I just think they're bland and the texture's disagreeable.)

And all during this time, beginning just last week, the frogs come out at night. They're usually out every night, croaking loudly, but they're loudest immediately after rains have come. Though their ruckus can be annoying, we generally appreciate them - after all, what else is going to put a dent in the hordes of bugs during this time? Not only that, but one type that likes to live around here, called a "rain frog" (but which we refer to as "marshmallow frogs") is pretty cute - it's a small fat marshmallow-y ball of a frog with short stubby hind legs, so that it waddles across the ground instead of hops.

There's no way we could deny that winter is over here and summer is quickly upon us. And no doubt summer's constituency will progress through their phases this year just like we saw them do last year.

But the bugs and other animals aren't the only signs of the times. Of course it's getting hotter FAST! That's another thing that can make it more difficult to sleep at night and more difficult to stay awake during the day. Another Volunteer likes referring to the "heat-induced narcolepsy" of this time of year.

But other seasonal signs are more obvious in how they impact the community as a whole. This is the time of year when the river's becoming dry, the wells are empty, and even our school's deep borehole is pumping only dust. Last year, we thought we were at the edge of a crisis, but now we know it's common to run into this dry spell at the end of winter and the beginning of summer while we wait for the rains to come and for the water table to be replenished.

And some seasons are just for that: waiting. But a person can wait expectantly, and everyone eagerly states that the heavy rains are coming soon. We've been lucky to have a few light rains in the last week already and some (including us) have collected the water run-off from our roofs while we wait for the rest of the water to trickle down into the earth and refill the wells and boreholes. Even as I type this, I can hear thunder in the distance, so maybe today's the day for the start of heavy rains here.

Even in our work, we're going through the seasons. The recently finished Term 3 at our schools was very productive for both of us - in some ways the culmination of many of our efforts, and also the beginning of some new ones.

But from last year, Lora and I have known that this term, Term 4 – the last of the school year, is a term of almost zero productivity. When we've gone through cycles of "uselessness" (or at least, inability to work as we wish) in the past, it's been easy to be disappointed. But we've come into this term expecting disruptions to our work and neither us nor our expectations have been disappointed.

Instead, we've found other things to do: I've been busy preparing a garden based on new methods I've recently learned, and Lora's been finding time to try to integrate better into the community by washing our clothes down at the river with the rest of the ladies. (That one's kind of a necessity since it's the only place remaining with much water anyway.)

It's also the same time the rest of the community is beginning to hoe the ground, preparing it for the rains that will surely come any time now. And in a week or two, maize seeds and peanuts will be sown into the ground. A few weeks after that should see their sprouts sticking an inch or two above the fresh soil. And a few months after that, they should be ripe for the harvest. Everything has its season.

I think the author of Ecclesiastes must've lived in a situation more like this one, one where the passing of seasons and their accompanying signs is more direct and life-affecting than we're used to experiencing in America. Certainly what's written in Ecclesiastes 3 : 1 – 8 rings all the more true to us with our experiences here. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."

Because of course, there are other seasons too, many of them much less tangible. Initially, we were pretty clueless and lost when we showed up here - completely out of our comfort zones, very few accurate expectations of life here or the people around us. It was a season of new beginnings and fledgling starts, of mistakes and lessons learned.

But right now we're feeling pretty well adjusted culturally. We're comfortable with things here, we have a good idea of what to expect in many areas, we're becoming better at our work, knowing how to navigate the systems here that before were only obstacles. Soon, it feels too soon really, will be a season for good-byes and leaving.

But like all seasons, even these will continue to be repeated year after year. After our season of good-byes will be a season of readjustment to living in the US. That one may not last long though, followed by a totally new season of adaptation to life in Madagascar. And at some point there in Madagascar we should expect to enter the same season of cultural well-adjustment that we're in now. And then no doubt at least some aspect of our work will change, we'll find ourselves in some new community, and the cycles of seasons will start all over again.

I think there's some reassurance in the repetition of these seasons. Maybe the main reassurance is that we know what to expect. It's true that not every season is a pleasurable one. There's a time to laugh, but also a time to cry. There's a time for mourning, a time we've surely experienced often here, deaths and funerals never decrease in frequency.

But there's also a time for dancing, plenty of it here, and maybe the dancing is all the more energetic and enjoyed because it follows so closely upon the time of mourning. A person mourning the death of an immediate family member traditionally "wears the black clothes" for a full year. At the end of the year, a celebration is held for "taking off" the black clothes and the celebration is usually highlighted by a day full of traditional dancing.

The same way there's usually a funeral every Saturday somewhere in the village, there's also usually a "taking off" celebration with mchongolo dancing every Sunday somewhere in the area. So while mourning may be all that's visible one day, another day of dancing and celebration can surely be expected to return.

With every time for being born, there also follows a time to die, to be expected and not to be escaped. But for every time of breaking down, there follows a time for building up. Even as the ground is broken and smashed by the hoe before the rains come, a seed is dropped in which then springs to life, rises quickly and multiplies, and spreads new life to those around. And with the seasons, both those we desire and those we don't, we can see the signs of their coming.

So bad times are followed by good times. And with a good God, can we not surely expect that the good times, when they come, will be so much better than the bad times are bad?

In Romans, this applies to the whole of Creation: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God... in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." (8:18-19,21)

In Revelation, there's a long description of breaking down and destruction of everything, of entirely putting an end to the seasons we know. But this is their end: "Behold, I am making all things new!" (21:5)

So the seasons themselves are a reminder to us that after the winter destroys, the spring arrives and brings life. And one day a final winter will bring an ultimate and eternal spring. Jesus on the cross took death to its grave and then rose again to bring final life to us all. I'm thankful that little yellow-spotted beetle reminded me of this.

(First written by Adam Willard, Nov. 7, 2009)

# WHETHER HUNGRY OR WELL-FED

There's one thing always confronted here in South Africa: the tension between too little and too much. Any small amount of movement from place to place takes a person from one side to the other, in a very short amount of time. The movement takes you through the severe tension at the edges and indeed, even through a strong tension within, just for having the mobility to pass from one side to the other.

I think this ability to move from poverty to riches, and from riches to poverty, to drive from a well-appointed mansion to a tiny tin shack within less than five minutes is one of the biggest strains on South African life today. But it may not be a strain for everyone... maybe mostly just for those people with the mobility to move from one side to the other. Those people in the deepest forms of poverty here, people that are lacking all mobility, may not suffer from that sort of tension at all, but of course, they suffer from entirely different stresses instead.

But most people in South Africa do have that mobility to move from one side to the other, from riches to poverty and back again. Even if most don't have the means to remain in the place they'd desire most, they can still pass by or even linger. And that produces a very strong tension.

Our bathing room at home in our village.

Certainly for us Peace Corps Volunteers, I think it often hits hard. We spend most of our year, most of our daily lives, living in villages without running water, without clinics or hospitals or any modern medicine, without the ability to purchase more than a very limited variety of food, sometimes even without electricity. Most people's houses are small and built from bricks they made themselves out of river sand and they have a slat of corrugated iron for a roof as well as a stinky pit toilet somewhere in the yard. The common mode of transportation is walking. But if we ride a taxi for just an hour or two we can buy organic soy milk, eat at McDonald's, watch a movie, or even go to the car dealership and check out the newest Porsche.

Oftentimes, the contrast here between village life and vacation time for Peace Corps Volunteers is even more significant. If a Volunteer has visiting family, they may stay in a condo overlooking a pristine coastline and eat at fine restaurants every day of the week. They may not even see a single "African" for days at a time (unlike village life where most Volunteers are the only white or foreign person seen for weeks or months or years).

Several other Peace Corps Volunteers have stressed to me just how much these drastic switches mess with their perception of reality. We can have a hard time understanding our own "lot in life": is it to work through hardships with the same people we're working for, or should we be able to enjoy comforts and luxuries when we know that the money spent on them for a week could feed our whole school for a month? Shouldn't we feel guilty? Some certainly do. Another sentiment I've heard expressed is that a Volunteer's time serving in a village is in effect "paying rent" for enjoying some of life's luxuries from that point on. Personally, I don't think either the feelings of guilt or the idea of being "paid up" is quite right.

There are some verses in Philippians that I've thought about in different ways for a long time: "I've learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to

have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need" (4:11-12)

I think in the past I've tended to look on those verses from only one angle. I grew up in a family that always had plenty, more than enough. We weren't rich by American standards, but we were certainly never hungry and we had the freedom to indulge in a lot of our desires. I think that's true for almost all of us who've grown up in America. It's even enshrined in our declaration of independence: we have a right to "the pursuit of happiness", not just the right to "try to survive."

So to me, and maybe to many of you, the parts that stood out in those verses were: "to have little... going hungry... being in need." It seemed to me that I already knew the other parts, so this is what I had to learn. So as a teenager I sometimes practiced fasting, in part just to understand those same verses. I think I did learn something from those times. And I think my few months visiting rural areas in Madagascar in 2002 and our year and a half here have taught me something more about "having little, going hungry, and being in need."

But our time here has also taught us something about "having plenty and being well-fed." Now, I think that part is just as important, just like it was written in those verses, and that it even can seem like a "secret" to be acquired, or an art to be mastered.

Living on our Peace Corps budget really is enough. When we're in the village, that is. But to live that other kind of life here: the city life, the vacation life, the life of plenty, well, then our Peace Corps budget falls pretty short. Then it doesn't seem like we have plenty, nor does it seem like we're being well-fed... not when we're vacationing together with others and we can't afford to eat out often like they want to, nor when we can't afford even the simple accommodation at the places with the tourist attractions, not to mention trying to find transport to those types of places – that can be impossible. That kind of second life requires something more than our Peace Corps budget: either dipping into precious savings from back home, or relying on the pure generosity of others.

Our bathroom at Ulusaba, the private game lodge just 2 km from our village, where they invited us to stay one night free.

That's what we've been learning about "having plenty and being well-fed." We've encountered that generosity. We have some great friends in Pretoria (one of South Africa's capital cities) that have treated us like family throughout our time in the Peace Corps, and especially during the holidays. They've taken us on vacations, treated us to vacations just for us, and didn't spare any expenses along the way. And they have friends and family (who barely know us or who only just met us) who've shown a lot of generosity as well. Some people, the very same day we met them, graciously provided free transport to our recent hiking trip and plenty of free meals (at good restaurants) along the way. Not to mention the many from back home who've sent care packages, kind letters, financial gifts and other things that have helped us during our time here.

But they don't owe us anything. No one does. Some of these people don't even know us at all. We can't ever pay any of them back, certainly not financially, but not even usually with services of equal

value, and often with absolutely nothing at all. And yet they give, and if we want to know what it's like to "have plenty and be well-fed", we have to accept. That's what we're learning. To accept.

Because in America, our culture is one that often makes it hard to accept a gift; I mean a *pure* gift. Sure, if it's reciprocal, it's OK. If it's something that we could, in effect, just buy for ourselves without any trouble, then we'll accept it, as long as we also have a plan for repaying the favor pretty soon. I think that's generally true of most of us Americans. And it's so engrained into our understanding of "gifts" that we sometimes even begrudge receiving too many gifts at Christmas, because then that just means we have to go and get *another* gift in return. We sometimes mentally add up the probable value of gifts received and weigh that against gifts given, to make sure we've come out pretty even. If our math brings us up short on gift-giving, then we might feel guilty or embarrassed or obligated towards some last-minute gift runs with a sorry excuse about having forgotten "just one more" in another location.

It could be American culture – that spirit of "rugged individualism" that saw us through our independence from Britain, through the Wild West, through a mostly unfettered capitalism today. That thing in our American culture that believes the only way to survive and prosper is on our own individual merit. Or it could just be part of human nature... thinking that we somehow have the ability to earn whatever we need or want, that we ourselves (or even our group) are good enough and that we don't need, and thus don't need to accept, anything from anyone else. But do those ideas reflect truth?

Well, now that we're living the village life, and are budgeted for the village life, we *have* to accept gifts, without calculating or expecting to repay those giving them, if we also want to participate in other parts of life. And we do; it's basically just the same life-style we grew up with and earned for ourselves when we were working back in the States, so why should we refuse to participate if someone's making the means available? It's a bit tough being so often on the receiving end like that, but there's simply no other way. And so we not only learn about "having little, going hungry, and being in need", but we're also starting to learn what it *really* means to "have plenty and be well-fed."

Because when it comes down to it, I don't think any of us, no matter the circumstances of our birth, can really *earn* all the things that we need most, nor can we *repay* the things that go into us throughout the course of our lives. Education is generally free, but even its financial costs don't account for everything that's gone into it. All the thoughts that have gone into our present education have generally taken thousands of years to develop. Doing our schoolwork certainly doesn't repay our education, it simply helps us receive it. Our tuition and tax bills are only enough to cover the costs for those who pass the accumulated knowledge along. Even if we become teachers ourselves and worked for free for the rest of our lives, we'd barely approach repayment of one small bit.

And then there's our food – we may nurture it, cause it to grow nearer to us, make it more readily available to us, even bio-engineer it to produce more, but it's the sun's energy that actually makes it grow. And we can't add anything to that, nor put the energy back. And we had nothing to do with the existence of our food in the first place. And there are so many more examples, too many to even approach. No, when it comes down to it, I think we neither earn what makes us live, nor come close to repaying it before we die. We don't even earn enough to "pay rent" on it.

So we might as well start learning to accept it, to accept gifts, pure, un-repayable gifts. Our lives are a gift to us. We can re-gift our lives to others, even to those who can't re-pay us, but that doesn't actually pay the bill on our own lives.

I think there *is* a secret to being content with being well-fed *and* with going hungry, of having plenty *and* of being in need. I think they're two sides to the same coin.

Being hungry and having little reminds us that we *do* need, that what we have isn't nearly enough. It keeps us looking for more, needing more. And if we also know what it *really* means to have plenty

and be well-fed, then it means we know how to accept gifts and simply be thankful for them, even those un-repayable pure gifts that we actually need the most. Without this double-sided "secret", how can any of us recognize our need for redemption, for someone to save us? And how else can we get past thinking we can earn we need, and simply accept him, Jesus.

"I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress." Philippians 4:11-14

(First written by Adam Willard, Jan. 10, 2010)

We had the chance to enjoy Capetown, one of the nicest cities in South Africa, thanks to the great generosity of our South African friends in Pretoria.

# ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD

Hi everybody. I thought that I, Lora, would try my hand at writing one of these newsletters. I found it quite difficult to put into words how my experience in South Africa has affected and changed me.

I was at the river one Saturday doing my washing, and when I finished I went for a swim with all the children who were already playing in the water. This side of the river had a different atmosphere. It is nearer to the side of the village we stay in, so many of these children are over at our house daily and their families are now used to having white people near them; we attend their church and stay right across from the main store in the village.

Seeing me come towards them in the water with my blinding white skin, more exposed than usual, was no problem for them, and they were happy to have me. It was quite a contrast from the other side of the river. There the children stared at us in wonder and kept their distance even though they see us every day at school.

On this side of the river, I get out of the water and lay there with two of the girls. I lay belly down on a sand bed (as in the old days of laying poolside on a lawn chair, basking in the sun). But even here, the stark difference between our skin colors is unavoidable, bringing out the musings of one boy: "black and white, black and white," he said. "White is nice. White people are very beautiful. But us black people, we're like monkeys."

Being moved by this observation (it is not the first time I've heard black people here compared to monkeys), I explained in the best Shangaan that I could conjure up, that "it doesn't matter what color you are. We are all people and black people are very beautiful." *We are all people.* The longer I'm here, the more of what's being impressed on my heart is not our differences, but our similarities. In the words of Pat Cook, a former theatre teacher at Baylor University, I have been "...awakened to the many-colored coat of our sameness." Reaching this point in my Peace Corps service (it has been over a year and a half) and having gone through the different stages of cultural adjustment, I can now say this is my home.

However, in the first stage of adjustment, all I noticed were the differences. It made me anxious because I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know the protocol. When things didn't go as I desired, I often became frustrated and blamed myself. I thought I was the cause of these alleged problems. Inevitably, I often escaped into thoughts of home. I felt much like Frodo Baggins in *The Hobbit* (aside from just the short stature) of whom was written: "He was thinking once again of his comfortable chair before the fire in his favourite sitting-room in his hobbit-hole, and of the kettle singing. Not for the last time!" But my thoughts of home in the beginning of this journey were, as I mentioned, an escape. They were a way of trying to cope with the differences around me.

Yet slowly and gradually, I began to see patterns in the differences and to understand people's actions, and even some of their thoughts.

One of the biggest things that bothered me when I first came to the village was the lack of curiosity. I was so excited to share myself with others, but they never seemed that interested when we talked of home. Nobody seemed to ever ask me questions about myself or my family. I was even astounded that they wouldn't be amazed at how outstandingly delicious our food is. I mean, they eat mostly the same food day in and day out. There was no doubt our food would give them a high they never had before, right? It was not the case.

I thought, *I am a connection to the outside world that they never get. Why are they not jumping on this opportunity?*

Then you go to the schools. As you walk by the classrooms you hear the students repeating over and over exactly what the teacher says. Although the current education system is trying to move away from rote memorization, this is the predominant method of teaching and learning in the rural schools. Why? Because that is how the teachers learned when they were in school. They know nothing else. Most of them don't know what it means to ask questions and to gain further knowledge. Their knowledge was always limited and kept at a minimum.

So can you blame the teachers when you receive fabulous new storybooks and they're not interested? They never had books like that to read when they were kids. They never grew up with stories being read to them as we do. It's an unexplored world. I began to understand. Through my efforts over time, I am understanding that many learn through observation and imitation.

Another thing that bothered me when I first came was the loneliness and alienation I felt. I longed for relationships with people in the village, but nobody came to the house. Nobody volunteered to show me around the village or even show me how to learn to do certain things. I was dying to learn about anything and everything, but it seemed nobody cared to teach me.

So, not knowing the rules of the game, I ventured out of my house to make visits. I found that sitting with someone in silence was very awkward for me. My language skills were minimal and there was nothing to do but sit. Yet, over time I realized how those visits made a difference to people. They would say they missed me if I hadn't visited in a while. Some would even say that I was "scarce" or "running away."

So, I started looking around and observing people together. Often they just sit, not saying anything. Or they walk slowly down the road together not saying much at all. It's not that they don't share news. They just obviously don't feel the need to talk like we do. I began to understand.

I can sit with my grandma for an hour without saying much of anything, and her face lights up with gratitude that I visited her. Even a short visit of 10-15 minutes means that you value the person and want to have a relationship with them. It's in your presence that they find joy. If a person works too much, it can be seen as a sickness. Here in the village, one must stop and be near the ones they love. You must keep your family close. You must keep your neighbors close.

Those were the two greatest causes of unrest in me at the beginning of my experience. And it was observation over time that brought me understanding. It was time that helped the people open their hearts to me in their own way. It was time that brought the exchange of two cultures, of two worlds.

Once I understood, it culminated in the conclusion I come to today: at the very core, we are all the same. We all learn from what's available and make the best with what we know. We all desire relationships with other people. We're all just people making it through life the best way we know how. And the best way we know how usually looks different. But it's when we focus on the

differences, that we risk thinking our ways superior. It's then we risk conflict. It's then that people put a value on skin color.

With that realization has come a release and freedom to be me, with all my Americanisms at the core of who I am. At the same time, I adopt as many wonderful aspects of South Africa as I am able. Each day I am becoming more of a complete person as I embrace the best of both worlds, whether it be in relationships, work, or day to day activities.

An even now, as I continue on this adventurous journey, I still have fleeting thoughts of home and of the people I know and love. When people here mention how our time is up this year and how we must be happy, I say that yes, I am eager to see family and friends. Not only that, but having this experience has made me appreciate my home culture and country in ways I never have before.

Yet herein lies the paradox: I tell them that I miss home, but as soon as I get home I will miss South Africa. When our time is up, South Africa will always have a piece of my heart. I am torn between two worlds. So all I can do is strive to be a person who is willing to learn and adjust to all situations, lands, and peoples.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:22, "...I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some." To become *all things to all people*, I must work to understand the people with whom I live life, both here in South Africa and in my home culture in America. Only then can I be a vessel for the love of Christ and His peace.

And so I leave you with a poem, a poem that seeks to bring two worlds together as felt in my heart.

On the other side of the world,
I once built a life,
Of which I now sit and dream
On the other side of the world.

On the other side of the world,
Where friends talk, friends do,
Here friendship is just sitting in someone's presence,
On the other side of the world.

On the other side of the world,
Chores are dull and alone, and finished quickly,
But I do my laundry at the river while I swim with my family,
On the other side of the world.

On the other side of the world,
The monotony of traffic is braved in the comfort of my car,
But on my bicycle I brave the cattle, the children, and the strength of the sun,
On the other side of the world.

On the other side of the world,
Church is big, with lights and sound, stimulating the senses,
Or just one small room with only the sound of voices around you,
On the other side of the world.

On the other side of the world,
A coffee shop is a place of stimulation or relaxation,
a place to plan and mingle, or of quiet reflection,
And it can be under a tree watching the children play,
as I hear people greet me as sister, mother, or “Happiness”,
On the other side of the world.

On the other side of the world,
I am going to sleep.
I am just awakening to life complete,
On the other side of the world.

And to the other side of the world,
I will go and come back again.

(First written by Lora Willard, Feb. 7, 2010)

# IT TAKES A VILLAGE

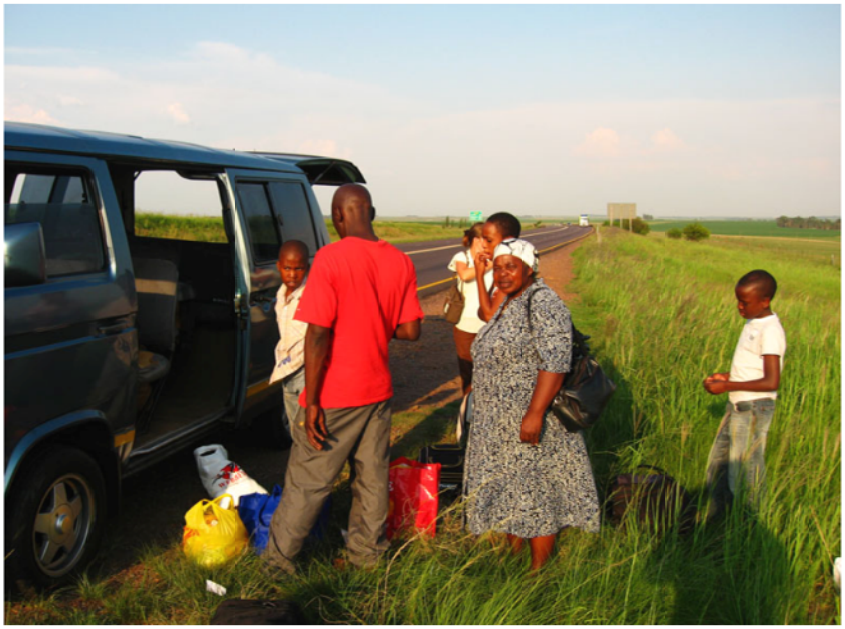
A while back, we were at the taxi rank in Pretoria, which is where all the mini-buses for long-distance transport gather, waiting to fill up with people and leave for their destinations. It's a lot like a bus station, but instead it's full of white vans (taxis) filling every available space, whether paved or not, and passengers and vendors filling whatever space the taxis aren't.

The vendors are always walking around selling food for the road and other snacks and drinks and often even some bizarre items like toothbrushes, feather dusters, and belts, as if those were potential last-minute impulse purchases for the taxis' passengers. And sometimes they are; it's a funny system.

Taxi ranks are interesting places, always busy, full of people coming and going, usually excited people. The drivers are almost always young men, usually with an attitude as if they own the world. And I guess the freedom to drive on South Africa's open highways from one province to another, with your own choice of house music thumping loudly the whole way, and being able to pocket several hundred rand (South Africa's currency) while you're at it can really feel like owning the world.

So the drivers are milling around in their little groups, acting cool, waiting for passengers to squeeze into the taxi and fill up every last inch of space with their bodies and their luggage. And usually a few passengers have a friend or family member waiting anxiously by the windows, talking to them, buying them any last minute items and waiting to say their goodbyes. And sometimes a woman (young or old) has a small child that she's putting on the taxi, unaccompanied, and is asking around to find out which passenger is going to the same destination as their child, or at least a nearby destination.

We were sitting in the taxi for Bushbuckridge: it's a pretty large region, probably several hundred thousand people or more, and with lots of smaller destinations to go to after you get there. After Bushbuckridge, we were going to Thulamahashe, and from there, home to our village – Dumphries B. The trip, including time spent waiting for the taxis to fill up, usually takes around 8 hours, sometimes an hour more or less. This time, there was an unaccompanied child and it turned out that we were the only ones going to a nearby destination.



One of the first times we took a taxi from our village to Pretoria, it broke down on the side of the road.

The child was a cute little girl, about 4 or 5 years old, and acted very shy. She was also going to Thulamahashe, and from there to another small village in the area. She had been in the Pretoria area visiting her mother, a visit that probably only happens a few times a year at the most, or possibly even just once every few years. We weren't familiar with the village where the girl was going nor had we ever before seen the girl or the woman who was putting her on the taxi. But of course we knew Thulamahashe pretty well and since we were the only ones going there, the woman put us in charge of her child. She sat her on the seat next to us, gave us her small bag, asked my

name and phone number, gave us 20 rand for the girl's connecting taxi to Thulamahashe, and that was it. Shortly after, the taxi finished filling up with people and luggage and we were off!

Of course, the girl didn't speak any English and by that time, our ability to speak Shangaan was a lot more limited than it is today. We greeted her, introduced ourselves, and asked her name, but the girl was so shy and (perhaps) our ability to speak Shangaan so limited that conversation never progressed beyond that. When we had our single stop along the way for a bathroom break and for food, Lora took her into the girls' room and we shared some snacks with her. She smiled, but was still too shy to speak. After about 4 hours, her mother called me to ask if we'd arrived yet and I told her we would probably arrive in a couple more hours. Even the girl's mom didn't speak that much English (or wasn't comfortable with it), so it was difficult communicating with her on the phone in Shangaan only.

When we did arrive in Thulamahashe, we hadn't heard back from her mother yet and we really didn't know what to do with her since we didn't even know where the village was that was her ultimate destination. For ourselves, we were anxious to get on our own taxi and get home.

So, we asked around, tried to explain the situation, and tried to figure out which taxi to put her on. Thankfully, one lady who's usually selling snacks near the Dumphries taxi is always very friendly to us. We called the girl's mom and she seemed to be asking me to get on another taxi and take her home myself. Of course, I wasn't too keen on this idea since I didn't even know where I'd be going and I really didn't want to go out of my way. So, we put the other lady on the phone with her in order to figure out better exactly what was going on. Then, she directed us to another taxi that was supposed to be the right one for the girl.

To our dismay, the other taxi was full. That meant we were going to have to wait for it to leave and for another one to arrive and start filling up. As I said, we were anxious to get on our own taxi and get home after a long day's travel. But, as we poked our head in and inspected the taxi to see if there was any inch of space left, one older lady saw the little girl who was with us and promptly reached down, picked her up, and put her on her lap.

The old lady certainly seemed to recognize the girl. When we asked, she said she was the girl's "mother" and she also said she knew where the girl lived. Of course, she looked too old to be the girl's actual mother, and we were also pretty sure we had just been speaking to the girl's actual mother on the phone. But she could've been any relative, like an aunt, grandmother, or someone like that who in this culture could also take the title of "mother" for the child. Since she's more of a relation than us who first received the girl at the beginning of the trip, we decided we'd fulfilled our duty, gave the old lady the little girl's bag and the remainder of her 20 rand and that was it. We called the girl's mother back to try to explain to her what happened (even though we didn't even know the old lady's name) and she seemed pleased enough. It was the last we saw or heard from any of them again.

If you think about it, if *we* think about it, it was a strange situation. Certainly, you'd never hear of anything like that in America. For starters, our public transportation system isn't nearly as robust or frequently used; most people take themselves wherever they want to go by driving their own cars. But when a person *is* on public transportation, they're usually not packed in so tight and usually don't feel much of any connection to the people sharing the transport with them, physical proximity or otherwise.

And really, in any public situation, a child, especially a small child, is almost never unattended. Couldn't a person be charged for neglect for something like that? We even teach children not to "take candy from strangers." So to send a four- or five-year-old girl across the country in the care of a couple of adults you'd never seen before and who aren't in any way officially connected to the person/company providing the transport, well, that would be unheard of. To us Americans, this taxi situation would be an impossible one.

I'm sure you've all heard, "it takes a village to raise a child." When we hear that in America, sometimes we can be simply perplexed because it's only "I", the direct parent, who's raising the child and who's entirely responsible for him/her. Or if not caught off-guard by the statement, it might cause us to think of our societal structures like police and fire department and public education, or we think of it in the larger sense of globalization and an internationalized economy.

But in this culture here, the one shared by most South Africans and probably most Africans in general, it really *does* take a village to raise a child. It just so happened that on that particular taxi ride, Lora and I were essentially the child's only fellow villagers. Most children here don't live with their direct parents. Instead, their parents (by function and by title, "mhaki" and "bava") are their aunts and (less often) uncles and especially their grandparents (often only their grandmothers). I could count on one hand the number of children I know here who have anything like an appropriately-aged father figure in their lives. And although there are quite a few aunts and especially grandmothers, there are so many more children that it's just too much work for the few adults to be responsible for everything they need.

The reason is, most fathers are either completely absent from the lives of their children or they're just physically absent because they've moved away somewhere to either work or look for work. But that doesn't stop anyone from having children. So when it's time to raise a child, it takes a whole village. Usually a child's older siblings, even if only older by a few years, are the ones most responsible for watching after them and their general well-being. But any time a child is somewhere else in the village and needs or wants something, whoever's around will usually give it to them, whether it's water, fresh fruit, or whatever, they usually get what they ask for from whomever they ask it.

A couple of young girls from our host family, neither of them have their own mother around often. One of them is already practicing taking care of a baby, by tying her toy doll to her back.

So for Lora and me to be involved in a similar exchange of childcare on a taxi actually wasn't abnormal at all. It's really quite common, even if it was the first time for us. Chances are good that if we left our own child in a similar situation, our kid would arrive safely at his/her destination just like everyone else.

But when living in a village in Africa, in a community-oriented culture, childcare isn't the only thing the village works together on. In general, any time somebody needs something and somebody else has the skills or the resources to give it to them, they usually do give it to them and they're even expected to. Of course it's reciprocal; eventually the one doing the giving now may be the one needing later, and when he or she needs something, they'll receive it from someone else who has it.

This works out mostly the same whether it's something large or small. When it's harvest time, if someone has specialized in growing peanuts, they give lots of peanuts to most everyone they know. If someone else has had a really good harvest of mielies (maize/corn), they give lots of them to most everyone they know. If someone makes a big pot of leafy vegetables, they often send a bowl of it over to another part of their extended family.

If a young man is finally ready to propose to his future wife (or more accurately, her family), he asks all of his family, his uncles, etc., to give him some money to help pay the lebola (bride price) to her family. And they do, always, without fail, even though the total sum is usually several thousand dollars or more. But that's why he needs his extended family to help.

It's also the same with most skills that anyone has: fixing bikes, construction, any bit of knowledge or a helping hand that someone can share with someone else who needs it, they do so freely, especially if it's a member of their HUGE extended family.

Of course, sometimes people need more money for one-time expenses than most people have lying around to give them. But they've worked out a system for that too. There are funeral societies and women's societies that work pretty well. Basically, a group of women, usually anywhere from 10 to 30 of them, join a "society", either a general one for women (since they're usually the acting heads of households), or a specific one for funerals. Every month, they meet together to socialize and pay their dues, which is usually a small enough amount for each individual woman, but a rather large amount when taken together.

If it's a funeral society, the money collected is given to any woman who's in charge of a funeral that month, or divided among them if it's more than one, sometimes even going beyond the standard monthly amount if that month has extra need. If there are no funerals that month, the money stays in storage until it's needed for a funeral. It's basically a community-run life insurance.

If it's a regular society, then every woman is scheduled to have "her own month" at a regular interval, usually once every year or two years. Every month is one of the women's turn. On her turn, the other women throw a party for her and either give her all the money gathered that month (especially if she has bills to pay), or buy gifts for her (usually large household items) with the money from that month. It essentially works out to be a community savings account, preventing the women from spending their money in the meantime and eliminating their need to keep track of it, but still giving payouts to each woman at scheduled intervals. It's the same idea as the rest of the community-focused helping each other out, only scheduled and organized so as to work for larger sums of money. And all of these things seem to be very effective here. I've never heard anyone complain about the results.

Some of the many gifts being given at a woman's society function.

Of course, we have similar situations in the USA, right? We have insurances and charities and welfare and savings accounts and all the rest, to provide for people's needs and security. And I think those are similarly community-focused ideas, just like here in South Africa. Only they don't usually work the same way. They're usually institutionalized, or capitalized, or riddled with bureaucracy, and at the end of the day, people rarely seem to benefit the same way.

The community-focused ideas that started these things seems to be taken up by individually-focused people and exploited for quick profit (like insurance and savings/investment accounts), or they become so legislated and controlled by a few (the few that are directly involved) that special allowance can never be made for special circumstances. A lot of the resources collected are often wasted just because one actually unnecessary instance fits the profile and the one giving the "help" doesn't know the recipient well enough to know they don't need it. Or maybe sometimes people just give money to a charity and assume they've "done their part" for their community without putting any time or other thought into it, thereby placing the burden of a lot of work on the shoulders of just a few.

But when it's all said and done, most people are just looking at what's in it for themselves. And they forget that they're part of a community and that these structures they're a part of financially (welfare, investment, insurance, charity, and the rest) are the result of joint effort and combined resources and that they certainly can't be effective when the community focus that inspired them is forgotten in the interest of the individuals controlling them and supporting them.

And so they're usually very ineffective – I think health insurance is the best example of that. It started off essentially the same way funeral societies work here: everyone pooled their money each month and whoever had need of it for healthcare bills received as much as they needed. But eventually it lost connection with the people who comprised it and now it only exists to help its money-makers at the top profit off of society's fear of rising healthcare costs, and a person rarely receives what they actually need from it.

In the end, people feel like, "the only one I can really trust and rely upon is myself," and that correspondingly, "no one else should be relying on me, but instead they should also be relying upon their own selves." It's a vicious cycle and eventually any community-centered motivations get distorted grossly or neglected entirely.

There's no way that South Africa, or our village here in South Africa, is perfect in these regards either. It used to be that when marulas (an indigenous fruit) were plentiful and ripe, everyone would gather them and make their own batch of marula beer ("vukanyi") and then invite all their friends and neighbors over to celebrate and share it with them. But that rarely happens anymore. Now, most people don't share vukanyi for free, instead they send someone to go sell it by the roadside. And because South Africa's current legislation gives social grants (i.e. welfare) pretty indiscriminately, there are plenty of out-of-work alcoholics with a little bit of money to buy some cheap traditional beer.

Nowadays, many of the elected officials and contractors in South Africa have developed such a distance from their home communities that they don't mind exploiting public budgets intended for development work and they use the money to line their own pockets instead. Unfortunately, much of South Africa's traditional community-focused approach is giving way to a much more globalized individualistic approach.

But that community-centered focus is still far from gone in areas like ours. Wherever people still feel like they belong to their community, they still treat their community like it's part of them, giving and taking when there's need and respecting their own community enough not to exploit them or be exploited by them. There's all the examples I mentioned, but there's also many more. I remember one time when a family from our church here had a son that died. That Sunday the whole church moved the service to that family's house rather than leave the family alone or make them move around too much during their time of grieving. I think that was a great demonstration of community.

However, it's true that being more community-focused or more individually-focused is mostly just an aspect of culture. Emphasizing one over the other isn't necessarily the "right" thing to do and Americans aren't necessarily wrong because they prefer to focus on the individual rather than the

community. But losing one or the other entirely can be very damaging to societies and to individuals. Both focuses have their place.

Personally, I think we've lost too much of our community-focus in America, and I think it's seriously damaging many aspects of our society that were founded on that, as I've already mentioned. But I think one place we should really be able to re-gain community focus in America is in the church. Members of churches should be part of their own community. Within that community, they should be more than willing to help each other out with funerals, healthcare costs, weddings, food supply, and anything else really.

Unfortunately, it seems that churches in America are rarely like that. Instead, our churches often reflect our society. We show up, we watch someone talking, just like we do with politicians on TV, or if entertainment's our thing, we show up to watch someone make jokes or to hear good music, maybe we vote on some issues some times, and then we go home, rarely communicating much with the other members throughout the week.

If someone at church needs something, maybe we'll give some money; certainly many pay their taxes/tithes to the church. But few church-goers are actively involved with a significant amount of their time or skills and few church leaders make serious attempts to involve them. Instead, it seems most people are content with the spectator / speaker format, or what you might call the "media format" (since it works the same way as the rest of the media we consume on a regular basis) and few are involved in anything like a community.

So then, where's the opportunity for the church in America to re-gain a community focus that's been lost? Well, I think it can easily work the same way as communities do here. Though I'm not at all related to anyone here by blood, they can still call me "bava" (father) or "bhuti" (brother) because they know I'm part of their community. Not that the titles themselves are what's important, but it's the recognition of relation. A church doesn't have to be built on blood-related family members (though it can be), but an even stronger relation: we're all adopted sons and daughters of Jesus. The blood that we share is his, it's his Holy Spirit.

As a member of a community here, if someone needs my services, I give to them. Whether it's pumping soccer balls and bicycle tires 20 or 30 times a day (because we're apparently the only ones with a pump), or whether it's fixing decades-old computers as well as I can, or whether it's giving chili peppers from my garden to anyone who wants them, I offer my time and skills and resources to anyone in my community that has need.

Why shouldn't the American church be like that? We're all supposed to be brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers of each other. And we all have our own skills and services, our own resources. So why can't we offer them freely to those in our community who need them? It's probably because we don't know them and we don't know if we'll be exploited by them. But what's preventing us from coming to know them? Why can't we trust them the same way God has entrusted us with everything we have and everything we are?

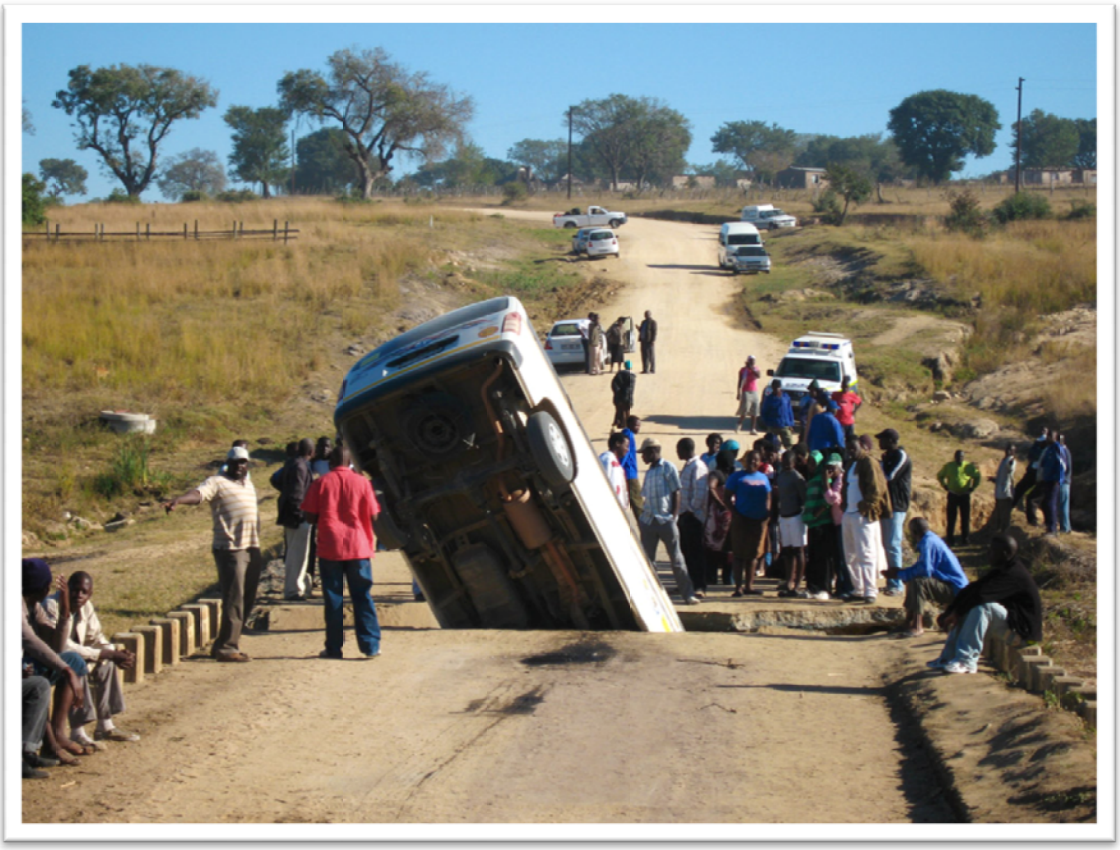
I don't think the "media format" version of church has much to do with the real church, at least no more than a separated windpipe, tongue and lips, with a huge crowd of separated ears for hearing, has to do with a real whole human. As it's written in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, we're all members of one body. And as members of the same body, we should all be different functioning parts. No function of the body is simply spectating only, and a head has only two eyes and only two ears. We should ALL function. Every one of us – and that means time and skills and relationship, in addition to resources.

Our gathering together should be to know each other, and to use our differentiated skills and resources wherever they're needed. And they're all needed: "the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have

no need of you'". Instead, "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

So as a community, as adopted brothers and sisters, as members of the same body, we should all be working together for the greatest honor of every member, and for the greatest honor of the head, Jesus. If we're not working together, then what are we really a part of? It takes a village. That village should be us.

(First written by Adam Willard, March 6, 2010)



Taxis don't always get to where they're going. The bridge between our village and the other village where we work collapsed one morning and this taxi fell in. Thankfully no one was hurt.

# THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

When you go to another country, especially a hard-to-reach and mostly undeveloped one like Madagascar, you sometimes expect everything to be different. And so when you find a few things that are similar to what you already know, it can sometimes be comforting, even things as simple as the availability of Coca-Cola (for Lora) or French pastries (for me). Some things, like Coca-Cola, are apparently pretty much universal no matter where you are on earth.

When we go to different churches in different towns and villages in Madagascar and they all have many similarities with churches we already know and understand, it can be very reassuring. It's nice to recognize the church buildings, the praise and worship time, the preaching time, the testimony time, the offering time, the pastor, the choirs, etc. Inside these churches, it's really only a few minor things that are different from what we're used to; sometimes the only real difference is the language the service and songs are conducted in.

It's easy to identify the church in this picture of a rural village in Madagascar.

To be able to immediately recognize all these things as "church", as a gathering of Christians for worship and learning, can be refreshing in a place where so many other things are drastically different. Even a short-term visitor can be quickly reminded that we're all part of a "universal Church" that stretches past national, ethnic, and language boundaries. And that's a nice reminder.

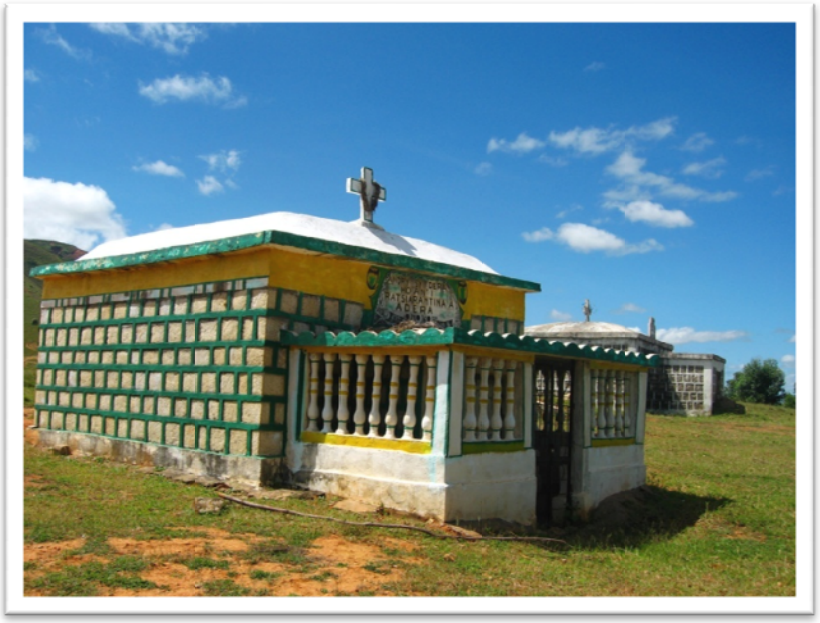
After all, in John's Revelation, he saw as part of the church "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." (7:9) And when we visit different countries and are able to quickly recognize other churches, even in a different language and with people of a different ethnicity, aren't we seeing the same thing John saw?

I don't know... maybe. But really, I don't think so. As I said, pretty much everything else in the culture is drastically different from the Western world, so why should their churches look and act the same as ours?

And it's not as simple as appearances either. The thing is, Malagasy churches look good on the outside, especially to visiting Westerners like us: their buildings are usually some of the nicest buildings around (and always are if it's a rural area), they have several services throughout the week and membership is generally very high and consistent. The major denominations in Madagascar are even highly influential in government and politics.

But most Malagasy churches are rotting on the inside. The most immediate and obvious example is the denominational bickering and fighting. Church denominations in Madagascar are used to perpetuate ancient class differences and oppressive systems that consider some groups of people as "nobility" and others as "slaves", and they also strengthen tribal and political differences that often result in blackmail and even sabotage of church property and property of church members. And it's not one-sided: nearly all Malagasy denominations participate in these very un-Christ-like behaviors and attitudes.

When you look even deeper though, you find something else, just as bad or worse. Traditionally, most Malagasy people have feared and worshipped their ancestors, relying on them as intermediaries between themselves and God the Creator, believing their ancestors to be the primary rulers of all things spiritual and physical, attempting to please or appease them throughout their everyday lives, and with great fear of a dangerous or even lethal reprisal if even a very minor (and possibly unknown) taboo is trespassed. At scheduled intervals, ancestors are even dug up from their graves and elaborate celebrations are held in their honor, with time being taken to share any news with them and show them any expansions of the village or town.



A typical family grave in Madagascar, more sturdily built, more costly and more decorated than their own homes – all to be sure their ancestors are pleased and don't curse them.

But for most Malagasy, ancestor worship isn't just tradition; it's just as much a part of their lives now that they're "Christians" as it ever was before. That's what's called "syncretism": an un-critical and often contradictory combination of former religious beliefs and practices with newer "Christian" ones. Many Malagasy people attend church because they believe their ancestors want them to, and if they disobey, then they risk punishments such as illness or infertility or crop failures. It's even the same motivation for many Malagasy church leaders. Deceased ancestors run the show for most Malagasy people in Madagascar, including Malagasy "Christians". And that's obviously not Christianity, no matter what the outside looks like to a passing Western visitor.

I don't think these internal problems of Malagasy churches are entirely their fault either. I guess it'd be nice and easy to blame them (after all, none of us Westerners worship our ancestors, right?), but I don't think that's where the blame lies. I think the problem is that most, maybe all, early missions efforts in Madagascar focused on bringing the "church" to the Malagasy people. Since they were Westerners (mostly French, Dutch, and British) bringing the church, they brought a Western-style church. And really, they were pretty successful at what they did.

All towns and cities in Madagascar and most of the villages in a decent radius around the towns have churches, usually of multiple denominations (generally representing the different nationalities of early missions efforts). And the churches have been pretty well maintained, even enlarged in physical size and membership. And as I mentioned, they're still very much recognizable as churches to us Westerners and probably to anyone from anywhere in the world. So I think early missions efforts, inasmuch as they attempted to bring the "church" to Madagascar, were very successful.

But the problem is that "church" doesn't save anyone. And when what people need is liberation from a fearful bondage to ever-present ancestors that can curse or bless them at a moment's notice depending on well-followed or accidentally overlooked taboos that are based entirely on their ancestors' unforeseeable personal whims, well, in that situation, a Western-style church doesn't even have that much to say. As I said, we don't deal with that. And so when a Western-style church is what's brought and emphasized, it just makes sense that the result would be some weird mix of outward Western style and structure and an underlying or untouched core of oppressive traditional beliefs and practices.

The church doesn't save anyone. Jesus does. If our missions or ministry efforts are to bring our own cultural style and structure of church to people of a different culture, then we're not only neglecting to meet the people where they're at, but we're also subjugating them to a new form of colonialism (a.k.a. "cultural imperialism"). Church as an institution or organization isn't the "good news" that Malagasy people would like to hear, but instead they need some way to be free of ancestors and spirits and their accompanying taboos, something to liberate them from a limited life and release them to an abundant one. Only Jesus can do that.

So I think missions efforts should be focused on the core of the "Good News": Jesus crucified and resurrected to establish our reunion with God and each other. And the forms and structures that have developed around that in our own cultures should be left in our own places of worship back home. The Malagasy church should be free to develop something more appropriate to their own way of life, their own cultural structures and forms of worship and expression and teaching, something that speaks to every aspect of their lives; something that's not just an outward Western addition.

I don't know what that would look like in the Malagasy church. I imagine there will still be some strong similarities to some of the most positive parts of our own churches; the results of Jesus's commandments to love our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves will probably be noticeable no matter what cultural forms they take. But some things will probably look significantly different. After all, many cultures organize themselves and their communities in very different ways than we do, worship in very different ways than we do, and teach and share thoughts and information in very different ways than we do.

If a church, a group of people attempting to follow Jesus, isn't allowed to do these things in accordance with their natural cultural forms, then they're likely to be pushed into syncretism or completely unreached altogether. During our time in Madagascar, we met one man who's been leading some church-planting efforts in rural areas of eastern Madagascar for about ten years now. He told us that most of the churches they've started have no buildings at all. And he said, "why should they? People don't worship their ancestors in buildings or do their rituals for possession or sacrifices in buildings, so how can the church affect that area of their lives if it's centered around services inside a building?"

Many, maybe even most, people in Madagascar have never heard about Jesus in a way that speaks to the most important areas of their lives. Recent reports suggest that as much as 55% of the population (or about 11 million Malagasy people) still haven't heard the good news. There are very many, mostly in villages that can only be reached by walking and not by any kind of road, who've never heard the name of Jesus at all. It's our desire and our hope that we can return to Madagascar next year and be part of God's work to reach these people. We want to help lay the foundation for a Malagasy church that's centered firmly on Jesus and that naturally develops its own cultural forms of worship, structure and doctrine that can speak to every aspect of Malagasy life.

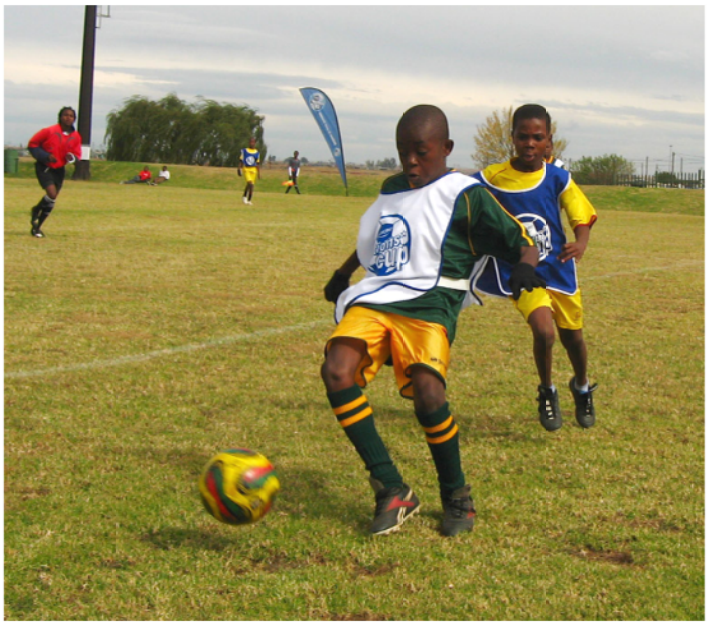
I don't think this can be quick, and it won't be easy. I don't think it would even be possible if we were relying on ourselves as Westerners to do it. Our own culture is too much a part of us. But if we rely on the Holy Spirit to draw people to Jesus, to liberate and establish them in his work, and to give them the freedom to worship and follow him in culturally meaningful ways, then it can be possible. And then we can see the same church that John saw in his Revelation: "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages."

(First written by Adam Willard, April 21, 2010)

# THE BEST CHEATER WINS

Early last winter, we accompanied one of our primary schools to a far-off township as their "Under 12" boys' soccer team competed for the title of provincial soccer champions. It was an exciting time for us, to take an all-day trip with some of our school's students and almost all the staff to a place we'd never been before and see what the larger sports competitions were like.

We hadn't even realized that our small rural school's soccer team was performing so well that they could compete at the provincial level, that they had first beat all the other schools in the circuit, then everyone in the region, and were only a few more games away from representing our province in the competition for the entire national championship.



So, we found some seats (or made some), endured the cold (yes, South Africa can get cold in the winter, not every day, but some days), and watched our school's team beat the other regions' teams one after the other. It was impressive; many of the games were won without the other teams even scoring a single point against ours. And this wasn't regular little kids' soccer games; African kids are GOOD at soccer. When they have a ball, or anything like a ball, they'll play all day every day. Still, our team seemed to be smoking the competition.

So, I expressed my surprise at the quality of our boys' soccer team to their coach, one of the teachers with whom I'd been developing a good friendship. He started pointing out which of their players were the best, saying they were "new players". I asked their names and grades and said that I didn't remember seeing them in our Grade 6 or Grade 7 classes at our school. He said, "no, they're from Mawewe." Mawewe is the name of the high school for both our village and the neighboring village; it starts from Grade 8. Many kids in our Grade 7 class are 15 or 16, some even 18, so I didn't see any way that some of the kids from Mawewe could be "under 12".

Their coach smiled and told me simply, "we have a saying here: 'the best cheater wins'". That caught me off guard. I mean, by then we'd seen some people cutting corners, we knew of some large-scale government corruption and things like that, but we never expected anyone to flat-out tell us that they approved of cheating. That statement was so much the opposite of our American phrase: "cheaters never prosper."

Their coach went on to explain (on that occasion and in subsequent conversations) that without any regard to age, they pick from among the best players they want to be on their soccer team that are also still small and young-looking enough. Because the teams have to present birth certificates and photo IDs to the competition, the kids that are over 12 simply borrow birth certificates from younger kids, attach their own photos, and also memorize their "new" name and birth-date, in case they're questioned by the tournament officials.

It works out easily enough because birth certificates don't automatically include photos (for obvious reasons) and the younger kids' parents don't mind loaning them to the older kids on the team because they also know the same maxim: "the best cheater wins." Besides, even some of the

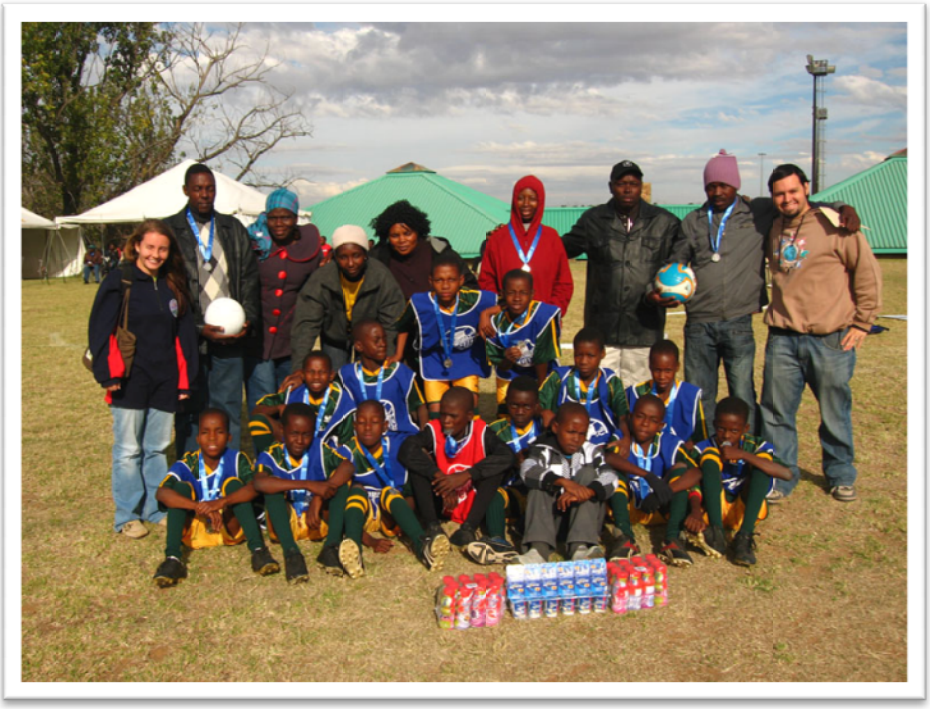
legitimately under 12 soccer players don't have birth certificates because they or their parents are refugees from nearby Mozambique. Borrowing birth certificates is "necessary" in any case, so they figure they might as well also use it to the advantage of their team.

This coach and several other teachers and sports lovers told me that in Africa, everyone has two ages: their real age and their "soccer age" (the soccer age being significantly lower). Soccer is such a widely-loved sport in Africa and there are plenty of teams and tournaments for specific age ranges, that cheating on a person's age to give a younger team an advantage is supposedly as equally widespread as the sport itself.

They even told me that the national "under 20" team for another African country north of us was recently in a big scandal. A new system for identifying the approximate age (give or take a few years) was developed that somehow measures an aspect of the bones in the forearm. Because it's approximate, anything registering up to 25 years old still has to be accepted. Even still, nearly half of the 20 or so players from this national team were disqualified by this testing method. This means that many of their tests registered *above* 25, for a team that was supposed to be composed of all "under 20s". How many of the remaining players are still cheating and still fit the narrow margin of test acceptability?

It was an interesting concept for me. The coach told me that "the best cheater wins" just a few games before our school's team played the finals and I figured I'd pay attention and see if I could recognize any cheating myself. One regional team was disqualified along the way, because their soccer players forgot what the names on their birth certificates were supposed to be.

And sure enough, the other team in the final play-offs against our school's team was composed of quite a few boys that looked quite a LOT older than 12. No facial hair yet, but almost. Or just well-shaved. Our coaches and teachers started complaining that the other team was "obviously" cheating and should be disqualified. But nothing could be done because they had younger birth certificates and had memorized their names and birthdates well enough to pass the test.



The end of that story: our team lost. They weren't the best cheaters in the province that year, only the second-best. Truly the team that won were the best cheaters. Those kids were definitely way too old and everyone agreed. But our teachers and staff begrudgingly admitted that the winners deserved the win; they had outsmarted everyone and had managed to get the oldest possible kids on their "under 12" team.

So far, we've only heard that saying, "the best cheater wins," applied to sports. But I have a feeling that it extends to a lot more of everyday life than just that. Certainly we notice its effects all the time. When people are involved in a transaction and have the chance to set the price for something, they usually add 10 or 20% to the original, nothing specific, but enough that they can take some real benefit from it. Everyone seems to know and expect that too.

If kids are in line to receive some sort of handout (like fruit or candy or pencils or anything a kid would want) they fight for the front of the line and then after they have their turn, they almost always try to quickly sneak in again at the back of the line, hoping the adult won't notice. When they're caught they sometimes first try to argue a bit and convince you they've received nothing or that some tragedy has befallen their first portion. But in the end, when they see it's really not going to work, they just smile and shrug their shoulders. Sometimes a teacher or other adult will also smile and point out that the kid is "clever", whether they catch him/her in the act or even if they don't realize it until sometime later.

Most of the time that someone thinks we (or any foreigner, but especially white people) don't know the correct price of something, they'll jack it up a bit, maybe adding as much as 50 or 100% of the original price, or try to charge us extra for something like luggage (though they don't charge for anyone else) and they try to pass that one by on us. Then if we demonstrate that we know the actual expected price and refuse to pay anything above it, they often laugh or smirk and sometimes even say, "well, I had to try!"

Really, I've seen taxi drivers try the same sort of trick on out-of-towners who are from the same ethnic group as themselves and speak the same home language. The trick may be less likely to work, but they still make an effort.

The smiles and the overall friendliness involved when someone tries to dupe you is nice enough, but it can still be very frustrating. Especially when you see those things as symptomatic of the whole culture. Especially when you see that your schools aren't getting their allocated funding or improvements to infrastructure or new learning resources because some guy at the top "got away with" millions of the government's rands.

A lot of externally funded and managed development agencies and their foreign workers simply refuse to work in that type of system at all, either completely closing up shop or only attempting efforts that don't involve any money or responsibilities passing through local hands. This often continues to hurt local economies that are already hurt by frequent corruption, while perpetuating the same kind of unequal relationships that characterized the colonial era.

Other development groups and workers seem to simply ignore the likelihood of corruption entirely, not attempting to find any method of avoiding any of it and not notifying any of their donors that it's a likely obstacle to achieving their stated developmental goals. They're basically willing to blindly face the high chance that all their efforts will be wasted, which are the only real reason for trying to raise money in the first place. Maybe they're worried their funding and/or their job will be cut out if the likelihood of corruption affecting their projects is known about. And maybe they're right.

For us, being confronted with these issues has been difficult for other reasons. Thankfully we don't really have any money and almost none of the work we do involves us in financial transactions or "valuable" resources at all, certainly not in a local scale that would attract much shady dealing. But when we find out that people we've come to know and trust and respect *are* sometimes involved in these types of dealings and that they do sometimes delay or hinder our own projects to help our schools, well, that's just difficult. Sometimes it makes you wonder who you can trust at all.

But then again, this *is* where we are. Peace Corps placed us here. Unlike other development agencies, we don't have much choice about where we work and who we work with. So even with the knowledge that someone we formerly trusted and respected was involved in something we'd consider improper, we're still around that person often, sometimes every day, talking to them, trying to work with them, etc. And we get to know them even better. And we regain trust and respect for them. That person may even be the best and most responsible worker we know here. And they're *still* involved in those sorts of dealings that we consider "improper." But so is everyone else, usually.

When we take a poll of everyone we know and trust here, and we ask them about certain types of transactions that seem shady to us, we find out that no one really considers most of them improper at all. They're normal and quite expected. And this is from people we know and trust, from *all* of the people we know and trust here.

If you think about it harder, a lot of the "shadiness" of these transactions results in them being informal and non-universally applied, changing from person to person and from time to time. Otherwise they're essentially the same thing we know of as "service fees" and "interest rates" in our own country and that are usually part of most transactions there. All of our trusted friends here *do* agree that the same basic practice of taking extra for oneself, but expanded on the much larger provincial and national scale (where they already have service fees, etc.) *is* deplorable and is keeping the country down.

However, it still leaves the question: why is it that "the best cheater wins" here in South Africa and "cheaters never prosper" in America? I think it has a lot to do with our respective histories.

In America, we've been lucky enough to establish our own government, "by the people, for the people." It's our own society, our own banking systems, our own work ethics, created by us and for us, to help us to live long and prosper. To maintain it, to make it successful, pretty much everyone needs to work within the system and its guidelines. A "cheater" is violating that and threatening the stability of the system for everyone. But, because we know the system, if we're determined enough, we can work within it and usually get ahead just fine.

In Africa, the history is quite different. They did have their own systems, ones that worked quite well for them. They were much more informal though and of a much smaller scale. Most of them were systems where "one good turn deserves another"; basically everyone was supposed to help each other out when they could and where they could and they also received help in return and it all worked mostly fine.

But then France and Holland and Portugal and England and other colonial powers showed up and set up their own system. The African system and the African guidelines were completely disregarded and overlooked as if they'd never existed at all. Quite the contrary, the new systems were being set up to exploit material resources as quickly as possible, and for the benefit not of the country they were located in, but instead for the benefit of people and places much further removed.

Other than some scattered early missions efforts (which really focused almost entirely on Western enculturation, not necessarily a good thing), you can't really say there was anything in the whole setup that was good at all for Africans. Repeat this story around most of the world and you can quickly account for several hundred years of world history during the age of colonialism.

So what kind of response do you think Africans really had available to them? If a person doesn't know or understand a system, or if the system is designed to abuse and not benefit him/her, what can they do but try to work outside the system, find some loophole or local knowledge that helps and doesn't hurt them? And that's called "cheating."

In that case – a situation where the entire system is constructed and maintained without your input, either personally or culturally, a system that takes advantage of you and your land and all your resources – at that point, really only "the best cheater wins." A lot of Africans had to cheat the system to survive. Many still do.

And all this thinking about cheating and shady dealing reminds me of the parable that Jesus told at the beginning of Luke chapter 16. It's a parable that always just seemed strange and didn't really seem to fit with everything else in our belief systems.

In this story, there's a dishonest manager (essentially a personal financer) gets caught by his master and will soon be fired. So, he goes and lowers the debts of most of his master's biggest debtors, lowering them by huge sums as big as annual salaries for wealthy business-people. His idea is that if he does this for them, then later on when he's out of a job and threatened with living on the streets, they'll put him up in their homes for a while and then he can move on to the next "friend" he made from cancelling lots of their debt.

It's a shady deal that he quickly performed when he knew he was going to lose his job for being a dishonest manager in the first place, but it's also a decent solution for a soon-to-be-unemployed man with nothing saved up for a rainy day. Certainly the story seems more familiar to me now that I've lived in South Africa for a couple of years.

But the finale of the story is the big surprise: the master who was firing this dishonest manager (and presumably still will) actually *commends* him for acting so shrewdly! Translate that as "wise", "clever", whatever you want, but he tricked his master one last time, losing LOTS of his masters' profits, and gained some security for himself. And for that, his master apparently had to admit that he did well, begrudgingly or not. And this is a story being told by Jesus.

In our system where "cheaters never prosper," this story is bizarre in the least, especially when we consider it comes from a book of moral and religious instruction. But in South Africa where "the best cheater wins," it actually makes perfect sense. He "had to try", and he was "clever" and succeeded, and therefore worthy of commendation (even if not worthy of continuing to manage anyone's personal finances).

I think it also makes a bit more sense if you consider that Israel at that time was being colonized by Rome mostly the same way many African countries were colonized in their past. Jesus himself, always one to cause a stir, wasn't just standing against the Roman system though. He even stood against the Jewish system of his day, a situation that had become so perverted and heavily institutionalized that it subjected most of its constituents to all sorts of abuses simply in the interest of the social and financial gain of the elite few.

The history of that time actually sounds a LOT like Africa and all other sorts of colonial and abusive systems, situations where "cheating the system" is the only way to get ahead or even survive. And it sounds like Jesus himself may be commending that sort of solution.

It may be a little different though too. Part of verse 8, right after the master commended his dishonest manager for acting shrewdly, says that "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of the light." Some other statements by Jesus and another parable (about Lazarus and the Rich Man) seem to follow it up with less "dishonest" dealings and for less selfish motivations. But I think the point is still basically the same: some situations require a person to deal wisely, within or even outside the established systems of the time, using resources to benefit people but not to be pursued as an end in itself or for selfish gain.

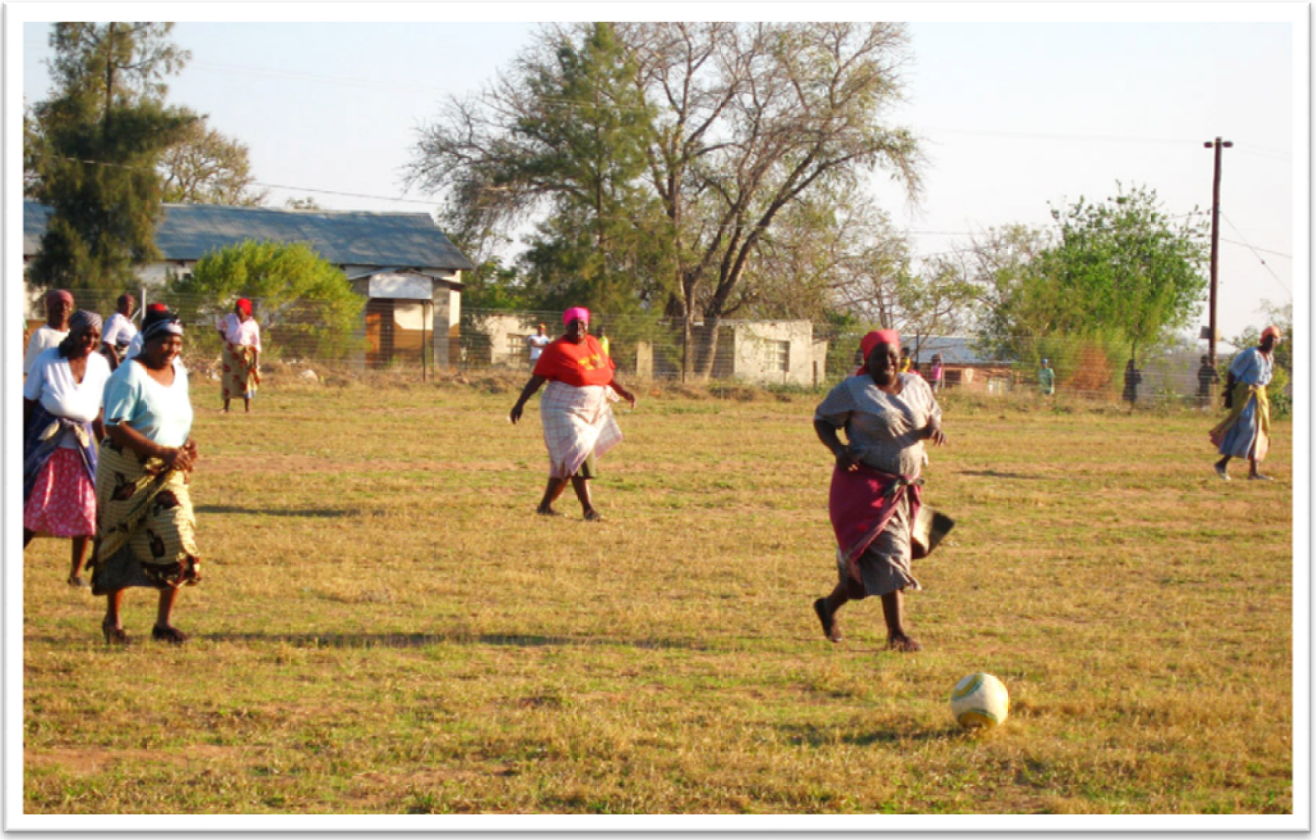
The Word Biblical Commentary makes a good point about this passage, saying: "the law of the Old Testament and the gospel of the New Testament speak with a united voice about the need for a *practical* moral response to be lived out in the human interactions of life."

I think the point isn't that we should engage in corruption or dishonest dealings for personal gain. But we do need to be shrewd, we need to be clever. We need to recognize the systems we're working in, both where they promote abundant life (the very thing Jesus came to offer) and where they hinder it. And we need to recognize and understand the people we're living among and dealing with, whether they're "dishonest" or not. Neither ignoring the systems and the corruption they breed nor refusing to work with them is the right answer.

I think the right answer is to know who and what we're dealing with so that we can find creative solutions both within available systems and outside oppressive ones. Our solutions need to take into account any accepted cultural practices of deal-making and find ways to minimize loss and waste along the way. And all along, the solutions need to be geared towards offering Jesus' abundant life to everyone. Either withdrawing from or ignoring obstacles cannot offer that.

So the "children of the light" need to be just as shrewd or even more so than the "children of this age." But rather than for selfish motivations, it's to help establish the kingdom of God and abundant life for everyone.

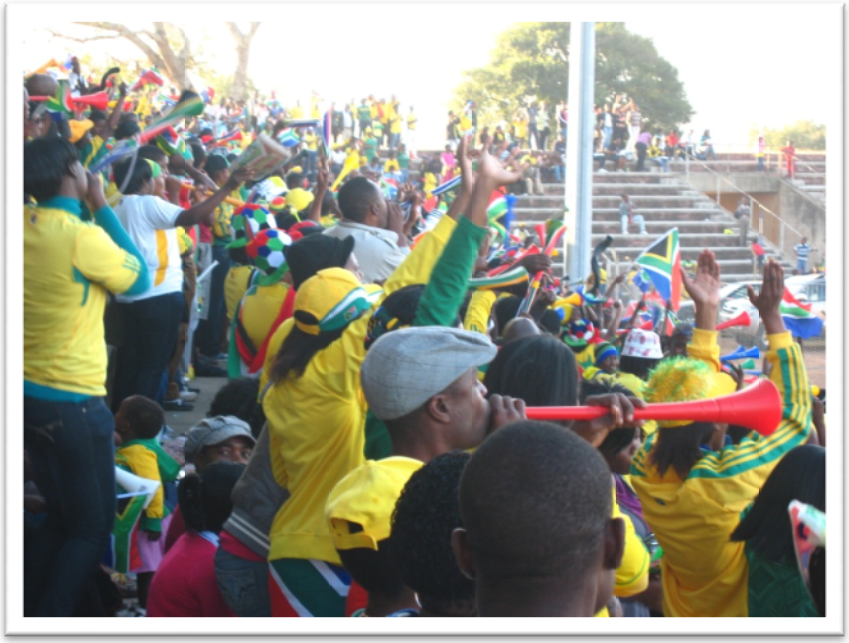
(First written by Adam Willard, May 18, 2010)



They even have a soccer league for "grandmothers" here. But is their "soccer age" actually older than their real age?

# LADUMA!

"Laduuuuma!" The crowd went wild! Everyone in their yellow and green (and some also in red and blue and black and white) jumped up and down, screaming, flailing their arms, waving their flags, blowing as hard and as loud as they could on their vuvuzelas. Many were hugging, many more were dancing where they stood. Some ran down to the front and started a running parade that quickly grew in number. One man had brought the back side of a toilet and its attached pipe and did his best to make horn sounds with it. This went on for a good 20 to 30 minutes, regardless of what else was happening. Bafana Bafana, the South African team, had scored the first goal of the World Cup!



The kind of atmosphere and excitement here right now is incredible. It builds into a sort of wild fervor when South Africa is playing a game, and boils right over when they score, but even when no team is currently playing, the tingling excitement is nearly tangible. And it's everywhere. Vuvuzelas (the traditional South African soccer horn) can be heard at all hours of the day or night, even one or two still tooting in the distance here in our remote village at 3 am and 4 am.

This is the first time the World Cup has ever been held anywhere in Africa, though various African teams have regularly competed in the World Cup for quite some time now. As the most widely viewed sporting event in the world, this is BIG news for Africa, and of course, even bigger for South Africa!

The thing is, the African continent is sort of the neglected step-child left over from colonial times. And whether this apparent post-colonial failure is simply because of cultural, environmental, or other factors, the truth is that Africa as a whole is still far behind the rest of the world in most developmental standards. And most people are more or less aware of something like that.

I think a common idea is that Africa is still completely full of people in grass skirts or animal-skin loincloths and with little to no education. And yes, that's still true in a few of the most remote areas throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, but it's not widely true. Africa and Africans have a lot to offer, despite any challenges and difficulties throughout the continent. And I think those types of common misconceptions have often prevented people from noticing some of the broader good qualities within Africa, which has further contributed to keeping Africa behind.

So, as I said, the World Cup here in South Africa is HUGE news! The entire time we've been here with the Peace Corps (since July 2008), people everywhere have been eagerly expecting this moment. They've placed *so* many hopes on this time and what it can do for their country and their continent. Some people have had fears that the whole proposition would be a failure somewhere along the way. But it's here now. It's happening. And I think many of the people's hopes were well-founded.

To start with, the World Cup in South Africa gives many people the chance to see Africa in a different light, while watching safely on their TVs on the other side of the world. And of course, there are hundreds of thousands of tourists already here visiting just during the time of the World Cup, and the games aren't the only thing they're going to be seeing. No doubt this will provide a permanent boost to tourism, thus boosting the economy, of South Africa and neighboring African countries. If any of you are wondering, South Africa is a really cool place even just for a visit; there's tons of great stuff to see and do here.

Our school celebrating the opening of the World Cup in front of a soccer-themed mural we painted with the Art Club.

But the World Cup also gives people the chance to rub shoulders with millions of average Africans. Though we don't currently have access to a TV, I have no doubt that many regular people here are being interviewed about different topics and their responses are being broadcast and printed around the world. And of course, many South Africans are attending the World Cup games in large numbers, and well, they live and work here! Anyone visiting for the World Cup can't help but meet them. And many Africans are really cool people!

This gives the chance to counterbalance much of the negative media and ideas about Africa that often only focus on starvation, child soldiers, and corrupt politics. And those things are true in some parts of Africa and from time to time, but it's not the full story here, not even the major story for most Africans in most of Africa.

The World Cup also gives the chance to display South Africa's wide diversity. Not everyone who's an African is black. Here in South Africa there are many people of European ancestry, of Indian and Malaysian ancestry, and from other places. And they're all just as much Africans as everyone else, and just as much an important part of life here in South Africa and throughout the continent. Though of course, with South Africa's wide diversity of ethnic backgrounds (probably the widest on the African continent), comes a history of racism and racial oppression as well as tribalism and tribal oppression. And in South Africa, as I've said before, a lot of that is still fresh and impacting daily life here.

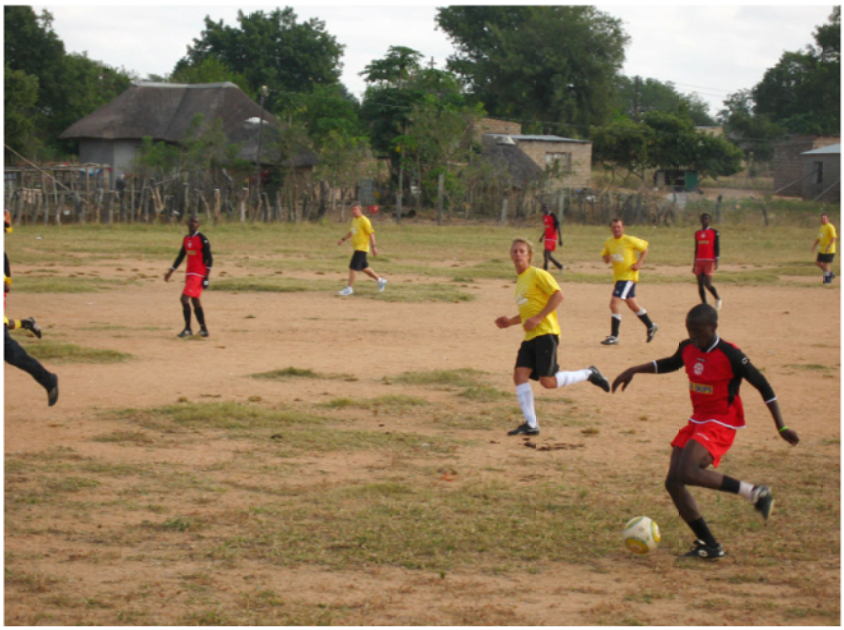
And that's where my biggest hope for the impact of the 2010 World Cup lies: reconciliation. South Africa has come a long way throughout the decades and even just in the short 16 years since legislated racism here has ended. But the effects of the past are still very much in the present and South Africa still has quite a way to go. Divisions based on past racial and ethnic lines still exist and affect people's thoughts and feelings toward one another. A fuller reconciliation is still very much needed here. And the World Cup offers a unique opportunity to provide it.

One slogan throughout South Africa during this time is "United for Bafana Bafana!" And it's true, it really has brought a lot of people together. In South Africa, the major sports have traditionally been divided into rugby and cricket for white people and soccer for black people. But because this is such a major event, everyone's getting in on it. Soccer fans in stadiums, pictures, even just on the streets,

are now much more representative of the country's diverse population. They're sitting next to each other in the stadiums, cheering for the same team.

The World Cup is even bringing people into previously-segregated areas that have still been considered off-limits by many white people in South Africa today. The largest stadium, used for both the opening and closing of the World Cup, is located in Soweto, the same location as the most famous of riots and rebellions against the former Apartheid era, a place that many white South Africans have still misbelieved to be run-down and overly dangerous.

On top of that, a recent rugby final game in May was also held at another stadium right in the middle of Soweto, because the normal stadium was being prepared for World Cup use. That brought plenty of white fans into the streets of Soweto to enjoy a rugby match and support the teams along with their fellow black South Africans from the area. Many Sowetan residents opened their homes nearby for the rugby supporters to braai (barbecue) and have drinks.



In celebration of the World Cup, a local game lodge brought some of their staff and tourists out to play a soccer game against our village's team.

All of these occasions are giving the chance for all South Africans to reconsider their country, their boundary lines, and their common goals, something that would not be happening if it weren't for the World Cup. So while I think the World Cup will certainly be good for South Africa's economy (and correspondingly for the economy of the whole African continent), and it will be good for South Africa and Africa's global image, the most important thing we have to win here is further reconciliation.

2 Corinthians chapter 5 encourages us that we've been given a ministry of reconciliation. First and foremost, we all need to be reconciled to God, the work that has already been completed in Jesus and is available for anyone who wants it. But secondly, and just as importantly, is our relationship to one another. We have to be reconciled and in the process of reconciliation, setting aside wrongs of the past, on all sides, and join together. We need to be able to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." (Romans 12:15) And though I myself have never been a big sports fan, there's no doubt that the World Cup here is providing an awesome opportunity for exactly that type of reconciliation.

Sitting in a stadium or fanpark, standing around and watching a TV at a gas station or bar, everyone's there, people from every corner of the country and the world. And the excitement is there. And the goal is the same: for their chosen team to win. It's really bringing people together, uniting over something good. And even when the games are over, when the winner is decided, whoever it may be, I don't think people will too quickly forget who was standing or sitting next to them, at times celebrating and at times facing defeat, but doing it together. Laduma! South Africa wins!

(First written by Adam Willard, June 18, 2010)

# ASKING . . .

"Mabiriviri! Mabiriviri! Kombela mabiriviri!" The kids continued to insist! "Chili peppers! Chili peppers! I'm asking for chili peppers!" Some kids do appreciate spicy foods (I think I was one of those kids), but if you've got a group of 5 or 10, some of them only 4 or 5 years old, do you really think they all want chili peppers? "Kombela mabiriviri!" in a big chorus. But they all persisted! "Ma rhandza mabiriviri?" – "You all like chili peppers?" I asked skeptically. "Ee!" they all agreed strongly.

I took several of the older ones over to the part of my garden where I've got a long row and a large variety of different types of chili peppers, all the way from somewhat mild to very hot (habaneros, the hottest chili peppers in the world). Lora and I eat them all frequently, but we still have a surplus and I definitely don't mind sharing an appreciation for chili peppers.

But I was skeptical of all these kids. "Bava ngopfu, kumbe bava leyi tsongo?" "Very spicy or a little spicy?" I asked. "Bava ngopfu!" – "Very spicy!" they all said in unison! I was very very skeptical. My habaneros are probably at least 100 times spicier than any other chili peppers available in the area. I decided to compromise with my skepticism and these kids' insistence by giving them an "average" spicy chili pepper, but one that's still at least as spicy or a bit spicier than the ones available locally.

"Mangaki?" – "How many?" I asked. "Ma ku tala!" – "A lot!" they all said. I eyed them up and down, they were all very eager and grinning widely. I decided to give them 5 each, just to see. They held them in their hands or put them in their pockets and went back over to playing marbles or soccer or with other toys there on our porch and in our yard. I went back inside and continued with whatever I was working on.

Later in the afternoon, after the kids had left, I went outside to put the toys back in the box. And there were chili peppers all over the ground, around the yard! Some were in fine condition and could still be used, others had been stepped on and crushed. They were obviously thrown carelessly around, at least 10 or 15 of them, probably all that I'd given away!

It *really* disappointed me. I do have a surplus of chili peppers, but I've spent a long time and a lot of hard work cultivating them. The soil here isn't rich at all and water is hard to come by. The surplus could've been turned into hot sauce for later if/when the plants die. And I really love my chili peppers. I hate to see them wasted like that.

But the truth is, I definitely could've seen it coming. It's actually fairly typical around here. Not asking for chili peppers, that's not what's typical, as most people don't have any chili peppers to give away. But asking for something. Something that a person doesn't particularly need, or doesn't even really want, or maybe doesn't even know what it is, but asking for it anyway.

Most all Peace Corps Volunteers in South Africa are very accustomed to people asking them for

stuff. Walking through the local town, you might be stopped several times and asked for five rand (the largest coin here, worth almost $1). If you're a woman, you'll be asked for marriage at least a few times every time you go somewhere new. At home in your village, you might be asked for bread, cell phone airtime, a job, a cold drink, money to build someone's house, more marriage proposals, a trip to America, a bag of chips, a car, a computer, or even chili peppers. Anything they can think of really.

Some of that makes sense and can be freely given: bread for hungry people (though are they really as hungry and short on money as often as they say they are?) or a drink to share. Though somehow the more you give, the more people seem to come and ask. Some of those things, of course, are out of our reach or unreasonable. And when people realize you have skills to share but not necessarily physical resources, they'll ask you for those, which is fine, I mean, that's what we're here for.

But it can all get pretty old. Yeah, I can train you to use computers, or I can teach you to speak English, but do you really want to use computers or speak English? It takes a lot of work and a long time! Are you willing to practice? Yeah, we painted a world map on the wall of this school, with the help of Art Club students who've been training for over a year, but I've never met you and I have no idea where your school is nor whether the learners there know how to help, so how can I paint one there?

And yes, we helped this school arrange with a local donor to build a new room for a computer class and library to supplement the programs we've been working on here for almost two years. But no, we won't do the same for you because you already have plenty of empty rooms at your school and no, money doesn't grow on trees where we're from in America just like it doesn't grow on trees here in South Africa.

At this stage, I think you're all probably agreeing with me whole-heartedly, agreeing with my frustration and disagreement that is. Of course the truth is, asking for stuff, especially asking for stuff you don't really need or maybe even want, is VERY contrary to American (and generally Western) culture. It's just not right. And it's not just wrong practically; to us it's morally wrong. Pretty much every example I've given so far is definably immoral, to us that is. But I think the reality is a lot more complicated than that.

Historically, most Africans have lived in an environment that's been less than kind to them. Weather's unpredictable, harvests couldn't always be assured, and tribal allegiances changed frequently. Africans are tough, they survive, and they often do it through surviving mechanisms built into their culture. Asking for things, even when they weren't needed, could be a way of saving up potential necessities for a time when they might very well be needed. And when they ask, they generally expect something to be given. Because giving things to a neighbor or community member can help store up social credit for a time when they also need to ask for things in return.

So all in all, it's probably a survival tactic that's seen them well enough through the centuries and millennia. Even with the arrival of colonizing Europeans, though many Africans had no idea what sort of technology they brought with them or what its use was, still a lot of it turned out to be beneficial, so why not ask? So the whole culture of asking for whatever might be given still exists today, even when the environment for many Africans has changed considerably.

Conversely for us Americans, and most Westerners, our history comes from a much more temperate climate and environment. We've had more freedom to create our own food storages, or experiment to increase crop productivity, even to specialize and create technologies which have made it even easier than ever before. For the most part, our future and especially our immediate future is secure; and we believe that each one of us individually can secure our own futures individually.

For Americans to ask too much for things, especially when not in dire need, is a shameful act, placing burden on others who are shouldering their own burdens as it is. Each person is expected to

have developed their own independently secure future, and someone simply asking for something for nothing is obviously mal-adapted to our society and culture. Even when a person is actually in need, we have organizations and charities that they can go to so they don't have to commit the shameful act of personally requesting something of another person.

But back to the culture in our area here in South Africa: even if we could ignore the obvious moral connotations, something that's not easy as Americans, there's still a lot of practical challenges. This situation here, of tending to ask for anything that can be given, makes development work *very* difficult. The thing is, with modern development work, you don't really want to force or push something on people that they don't want for themselves, because that's obviously not "sustainable" and you'll be pushing it for the rest of your life or it'll just collapse. So you need to hear their ideas first, about where and how they want to develop, what kind of assistance they're asking for, etc. The trouble is that here, people ask for <u>everything</u>.

Schools are asked to list areas of development or skills that they prioritize the most when requesting Peace Corps Volunteers. Out of a list of 50 or more options, *every* school still prioritizes *everything* with the highest rating. Even after being here for two years and our schools absolutely know that we have a limited set of skills and that the next Volunteer will also have a limited set of skills, they still have to be coached through the idea of picking the skills they want/need the most, and giving lower priorities (at least by 1 point) to the other things they desire less. They really feel like they need to ask for everything that can possibly be given to them.

On top of that, the ideas that people here have for their own development are nearly always based on someone else's, regardless of whether or not the situations are the same. For example, if one school gets something new (like a small guard-house building next to the entrance gate, or covered parking for the teachers), then *every* school makes it their top priority to get one too.

Even if they're short of classrooms, even if the budget could be better spent on office supplies or learners' desks, their top priority becomes whatever's most obvious that their school is lacking and another school has. So if they make a "wishlist" of whatever they want, they'll put the guardroom or the covered parking or something realistically unnecessary on the top of the list. And even after you see that list, if you offer office supplies or learners' desks, something you've noticed is a need but they haven't prioritized, they'll still say "yes, give it to us."

And that's true even if you've "noticed" wrongly. An outsider might see 5 kids crammed at one small classroom desk and assume the school is lacking an adequate number of desks. The school may realistically have 30 or 40 perfectly good desks locked in a storage room somewhere that's not easy to notice. But if you offer them more desks, they'll say, "yes, we need it." And when the new ones arrive, they'll probably get transferred to the storage room along with the rest of the surplus.

One great example of how this increases development difficulty is a recent water issue (and "solution") that one of our schools had. They have a borehole (essentially a well made for a pipe and a pump) that often pumped only sporadically around September through November, the same time the rest of the wells in the village were getting low and drying out. The school always assumed they needed a bigger or better pump, especially since they couldn't see down the hole to how much water might or might not be available down there.

An organization called "Water For All" was contacted for free assistance. Water For All determined that the borehole was simply of limited water capacity and subsequently installed a new pump of a more adequate size for the water capacity as well as a solar panel and a merry-go-round (for kids) that powered it; a great solution for the sometimes unreliable electricity of the school and village. And it was all completely free for the school.

However, the water supply isn't enough for all the school's needs. Also, the new pump isn't strong enough to pump the water half-way across the school yard to another water tank, unlike the old

pump which ran off electricity and would pump across the yard just fine when there was plenty of water down below. The school felt disappointed by the results and asked for another pump that was stronger. Water For All said they installed the right pump for the water supply and couldn't offer a bigger one.

The school officials themselves told me they couldn't ask Water For All to take the new pump back and re-install their old pump because the school had already requested Water For All's help, no matter what kind of help it was. And in the end, they're still happy to have more equipment and supplies, even if it's not all working or can't work the way they'd envisioned it. Essentially, they were willing to ask for, and receive, whatever it was that could be offered, even if they didn't really believe it was good for them.

The problem is, I don't think there's any great solution to these situations. There's no one-stop fix-all. I think in each situation, the person attempting to "help" needs to know as much about the situation as possible, as much about the people involved (and their true desires and motives) as possible, and needs to be creative (and often make their own judgment) about a way to get to the heart of it all.

For my own part, I've developed a system of dealing with the kids asking for chili peppers. I can't really change their culture of asking for something they don't really want, that's practically impossible in a short time like this. So, I go through essentially the same process that I first described, but when I get to the point of giving them chili peppers, I first give them only one. I tell them they have to eat it right then and there in front of me so that I can see that they really like spicy chili peppers.

Usually the kids try to avoid eating it in front of me and say they'll eat it at home and that I should give them more right away. Or some of the more practical ones change their mind and say they want the less spicy ones. But whatever they say they want to end up with, I don't give them any more until I watch them eat one right in front of me.

It's usually quite entertaining. Some kids will cough and spit it out right away, realizing they've lost and they won't be getting any more. Others will try and try and try as hard as they can to keep a straight face, but you can see they're squirming, they start breathing heavily, panting, sometimes eyes watering and then they give up. Even then, they'll try to spit it out where I can't see them and say they really like it and they want more!

As before, the goal for them is to ask for and receive whatever can be given to them, whether they really need it or want to use it or not, and many people will even go through great lengths and a decent amount of pain to get it. Usually, if a kid has kept a fairly spicy chili pepper in his mouth for a while and then still asks for more, I'll send him away with a few of the milder ones. Maybe this kid

will really eat them and enjoy them, or maybe he won't, but he did work hard for it and he entertained me at the same time! ;-)

Even still, I don't think these explanations of their cultural background and our attempts to work within it as it is will satisfy most of you Americans and Westerners. It's not all that satisfying to us either. When you grow up with the idea that asking for things, especially things you really don't need, should have a certain amount of shame attached to it, then you encounter so many people and organizations asking shamelessly for so much stuff, stuff they often don't need at all, it's still tough to swallow.

But after thinking long and hard about it, I've come to the conclusion that people here might be onto something, with this system of asking for anything that might possibly be given. No, I can't say I appreciate it, especially not when I know they're asking for something they won't use or don't at all need. I still believe that overall resources are limited and that it's better for everyone if the people who need or will best use or even just desire certain resources most are the ones who get them. But I think the overall philosophy behind asking for anything that might be given has something we Westerners can learn from.

Whereas we tend to think we're individually responsible and that our futures are secure (and predictable) enough, I don't think that's entirely accurate. Even when we're offered something, if we don't think we desperately need it (and sometimes when we do), we tend to reject it in order to re-assert our own self-reliance. We sometimes even carry that idea into thinking that we're "good enough on our own" and that what anyone else offers is not necessary to us.

That's a major part of what I don't think is accurate: I think we really aren't good enough all on our own, but that we really and truly *do* need other people, and that other people often have something to offer to us that may be invaluable in the future, even if we can't recognize it now. So a pre-emptive rejection based on the fear of becoming inter-dependant can actually hurt us more than we'd ever realize.

And I don't think our futures are all that secure and predictable. Sometimes they really do fall right in line with our expectations. But isn't life also filled to the brim with the unexpected? An African knows that asking and receiving what's offered is one way of being prepared for life's unexpected events and situations.

But what I'm really taking from this "asking for what might be given" idea is something even deeper, not so much related to physical resources. In our Christian churches, we tend to suggest caution when asking for things from God. We may say, "be careful when you ask for patience, because God will put you in a situation that requires you to have it!" Or even just as simple as, "be careful what you ask for, because you might get it!" Always worried about the side effects of asking for something more than we have now, especially in regards to character.

I'm not advocating some sort of "name it and claim it" where we ask God for every sort of luxurious desire we can think of; that's a different discussion. But I do think we don't need any reservations when we ask for something from God. We can't see or know it all the way he can. Who are we to say what we do or don't lack? What we will or won't need in the future? Especially as it regards our personal character, that part of us that's supposed to truly be in God's image, what can we ask of him that we don't truly need?

Instead, God holds all that we need, even the fulfillments of all our deepest desires, so why not freely ask now, trusting that what he gives *will* be good for us, no matter what it feels like or seems like during the process of receiving it. Maybe that damage to our own feelings of self-reliance, the belittling of our own ideas of self-secured and predicted futures, maybe that's one of his greatest gifts to give, something given even through the process of us asking for what we need. So we should ask, shamelessly and without reservation.

“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. Everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if a child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:7-11)

We have no idea what God really has in store for us. So we should freely and shamelessly ask him for everything he can give us. Jesus promises us, it will be good.

(First written by Adam Willard, Aug. 26, 2010)

Lora distributed knitted teddy bears from a US organization called “Mother Bear Project” to a lot of orphans at an orphan home in our village sponsored by Ulusaba, a nearby game lodge.

# THE WORLD IS CHANGING

Nothing is static with us. Everything is moving and changing, transforming from one thing to another, or even just developing subtle variations, but nothing is still. Blaise Pascal, the famous French mathematician and theologian, wrote: "Our nature is in movement, complete rest is death."

In the same way, Dumphries, our village where we've lived and done development work over the last two years, is changing. It can't help but change. The Shangaan people, the people of Dumphries, are just one small group of people in a large country and in a larger world. People born and raised in Dumphries are moving to and from the major cities of South Africa. A large group of people born and raised in Mozambique have moved to Dumphries.

Nearby private game lodges bring guests from all over the world and quite a few of them visit our little village for a few hours at a time. Many Dumphries residents work at those same game lodges, adapting to the work environment and to the multitude of cultural idiosyncrasies of their various guests, who come from such far-flung places as India, Australia, Singapore, England, and the US, often all in attendance on the same day. Dumphries can't help but change; and its residents aren't always in control of their own change.

Without a doubt, Lora and I, living here in Dumphries, are a part of the change. Our personalities, our words, and our actions all influence the thoughts and opinions of Dumphries residents about Americans, about all people of our same skin color, and about the nature of life in general. The work we do and have done in our two primary schools influences people's thoughts and beliefs about education.

Not only that, through our presence and interaction we've also influenced an entire generation of Dumphries kids who will one day spread across this country, this world, or stay at home in Dumphries and see this little village into the future. But they'll all be changed, and are already changing, as a result of our presence and the lives we've lived here.

On a recent field trip to Pretoria, we also had the chance to take the kids to a movie theater for their first time ever.

Typically according to anthropological studies, the person visiting and observing the new culture isn't supposed to be changing or influencing it at all. You can think of it as similar to an endangered species, something that's supposed to be protected from outside influences and dangers which threaten its existence. Traditional cultures are like that: fragile and close to extinction because of modern globalization. And anthropological studies generally seek to preserve them as they are, attempting not to influence them at all.

Whether it's at all possible to live in a foreign culture and community without influencing it can be debated, but it's certainly not possible in our positions. The major part of our work as Peace Corps Volunteers, and more generally as development workers, is to oversee the change in a society and a culture and to try to help direct it towards positive ends.

That's quite a lofty position to be in. Being an outsider, overseeing a societal and cultural change is one thing; directing it towards something "positive" is quite another. Anything traditional in the culture of the people we're living among has been that way for centuries or even millennia. It's developed as a way of coping with their own environment and their own society and surviving at least at a minimal level. Essentially, it has proven to work, and work well enough, for a very long time.

Now, their environment and their society is changing rapidly, and with it is also coming rapid cultural change. In some of the changes, there is no choice available; it must be a certain way for the people to continue to survive. But in plenty of the other changes where there is a choice, no one has any real idea what the changes should look like, what directions they should choose, or even what vast range of directions are available. For a person to search out all these things and choose from among them the one that is most "positive" is very difficult, to say the least.

As outsiders with only a faint glimpse at where the people are coming from, and an even dimmer view of where they're going, what ability do we truly have at all to choose the best change for them? And this is all beside the question of the challenges and obstacles we face along the way in the process of directing and implementing whatever change we've chosen.

Nonetheless, here we are living in Dumphries, working in the village and in two primary schools, and making significant changes that will impact many of these people and their lives forever. We often have to question ourselves about whether the change we're making can truly be considered to be "positive", and we often fall short of any solid answers.

This culture is traditionally so much more community-centered. When kids are testing in school, it's culturally accepted, and expected, to copy off the other kids and share answers freely so that everyone "does well". But the school system itself is the product of a very individualistic culture, one not their own.

This form of education, with classrooms and professional teachers and textbooks and assignments and tests, was all introduced by the Western world. And now it's a requirement for all South African kids to attend school up until a certain age. And it's a requirement for them to adjust to the Western-based educational system and even succeed within it if they want to succeed in life in their new society, if they want to pursue the goals the new society offers them. And they do want that, the vast majority of them.

So they can't cheat on tests or freely share answers; it's not allowed in the Western world that's growing ever stronger and more influential around them, changing their own culture even from within. So we try to help the students learn how to turn in their own work, write their own answers, and think for themselves; we even try to help the teachers understand that and how to teach it.

In their educational system, Western-based as it is, it's a big priority that the kids be literate, that they can read and write and understand and interact with printed information. Maybe because it's so new to their culture or maybe because of the deliberately dumbed-down education they received in the past, but whatever the reason, basic literacy is still a huge struggle in our community and in plenty of rural communities like it throughout South Africa.

So we've both tried (but Lora especially) to address that issue, to improve literacy through a large variety of programs, from basic alphabet teaching, to the process of reading stories, enjoying books, and writing letters. We've even started a library at each school, something they've never had before and with which even their teachers have never had much of any experience. We've had mixed success in some of the efforts, but overall they've worked. Literacy is beginning to improve in our schools and an excitement for the written word is quickly developing.

It's a big change, but is it actually positive? After all, reading and writing is almost inherently a very individualistic thing. The person usually sits alone to read a book and praise is given when kids learn to read silently. The person writing a letter is alone and rarely in the presence of the person reading it. The more a person excels at and enjoys reading and writing, the more they learn to think for themselves and succeed in those systems that promote individual thought, sure, but do they not also start to forget the community that's fostered their development?

Kids reading books at our home, definitely *not* reading alone! ;-)

The whole manner of thinking about the importance of stories and narrative changes. In non-literate and community-focused societies, it was a very social event, everyone gathering together to share in story. And the story itself was flexible and changeable depending on the narrator. But the narrator would make the changes based on the particular audience or the history of the community or even based on recent events which call for one conclusion or another to reinforce the society's values.

But literacy tends to take that away. Reading and writing become a very individually-based experience. Stories become unchanging and community-specific or event-specific variations become difficult or discouraged. The narrative and the values it promoted become static, almost set in stone.

With increased individualism like this, a society becomes free to be more pluralistic, with people diverging more individually, and accepting others' divergence more readily. This is often a positive thing when our world expands like it has to include so many people who are already different. But it can also cause a society to run the risk of altogether losing its shared direction. I think that's happening in many parts of the world, including South Africa.

A lot of these ideas really came to the surface for us after a conversation with one of our Principals one day. He's a very intelligent man, well-spoken, friendly and outgoing, loves his family deeply, and he has many of his own thoughts and opinions, something often rare here. And he really enjoys reading, when he has time for it. So, we've loaned him some of our books from time to time and I often ask him his thoughts as he's reading them.

The conversation came up when our Principal said he hadn't had the opportunity to read for quite some time. His wife doesn't like him to read. That surprised me. Reading, of course, is so highly valued in our own culture that even when people don't take the time for it themselves they usually appreciate and praise people who do take the time. So I was surprised that his wife doesn't like him to read.

Our principal said that when his wife is around, she doesn't want him to be keeping to himself with his nose in a book. She thinks it's like ignoring her and instead she wants him to be able to simply "look at her face." She doesn't want to sit next to him while they both read. She doesn't want him to sit next to her while he reads. She doesn't even necessarily want him to engage her in conversation.

She wants him to simply just be there with her, doing nothing except maybe "looking her in the face."

On the one hand, it's an example of traditional cultural values becoming directly threatened by newer ones, and reacting to the threat. But on the other hand, it's an example of a situation that us Americans are rarely likely to encounter. And I think it says something about the nature of relationships and time spent with each other, something that may no longer be heard once literacy really fully takes hold in our community here and in South Africa as a whole.

Life and culture for most people here in South Africa has historically been free from many kinds of distractions. There are lots of chores to do and some very hard work from time to time. But in the past there wasn't much of any media to be consumed, and what there was – story-telling traditions – was available to the whole group at once and was very much interactive and socially constructive. But many things now imported from the Western world, literacy included, is changing that life and culture drastically.

In a few generations, who will still be able to tell the story of his attempts at reading and his wife's resistance so that her husband can simply sit there and "look in her face"? Maybe no one. Won't everyone here in South Africa be so busy, so individually engrossed in the media available, with an accompanying culture to promote that lifestyle, that it would be considered ridiculous to spend time simply sitting and looking at someone's face and doing nothing else? And who would understand his wife if she asked that of him and who would then be in the right state of mind to give that to her? I barely understand the idea myself and I've spent a lot of time thinking about it within its cultural context – a cultural context that I've had the chance to live immersed in for the last two years.

That culturally-founded message of silent love and existence, of proximity and relationship, and many of the other messages we've learned in our time here, may no longer exist in the near future. Like an endangered species on the brink of extinction.

But we're not strictly anthropologists. And even if we ourselves could somehow avoid influencing the culture and society we're observing and living in, they themselves can't avoid the influence and the change that comes from the vast multitude of other encounters they have with the rest of the world. It's impossible. As they say, no man is an island. I think in the present globalizing world, no one community is an island either.

The world is changing. No one knows for sure into what or even exactly what it *should* change into. But that it's changing, no one can doubt and no one can successfully resist. Maybe as some of these old messages disappear, some new and just as valuable ones will be heard more clearly.

The kids of Dumphries need literacy to succeed in the modern world. Their world is now much bigger than Dumphries whether they like it or not and whether we like it or not. So our attempts at "positive" change are hopefully enough to somewhat prepare them for what they'll likely face in the future. We hope it will give them some say in the change that's happening to them and to Dumphries, even though at the same time it takes away some choices in other areas. After all, once a kid finds himself individually engrossed in a great book, and then one after another, he's forever severed some small connection to that community story-telling past.

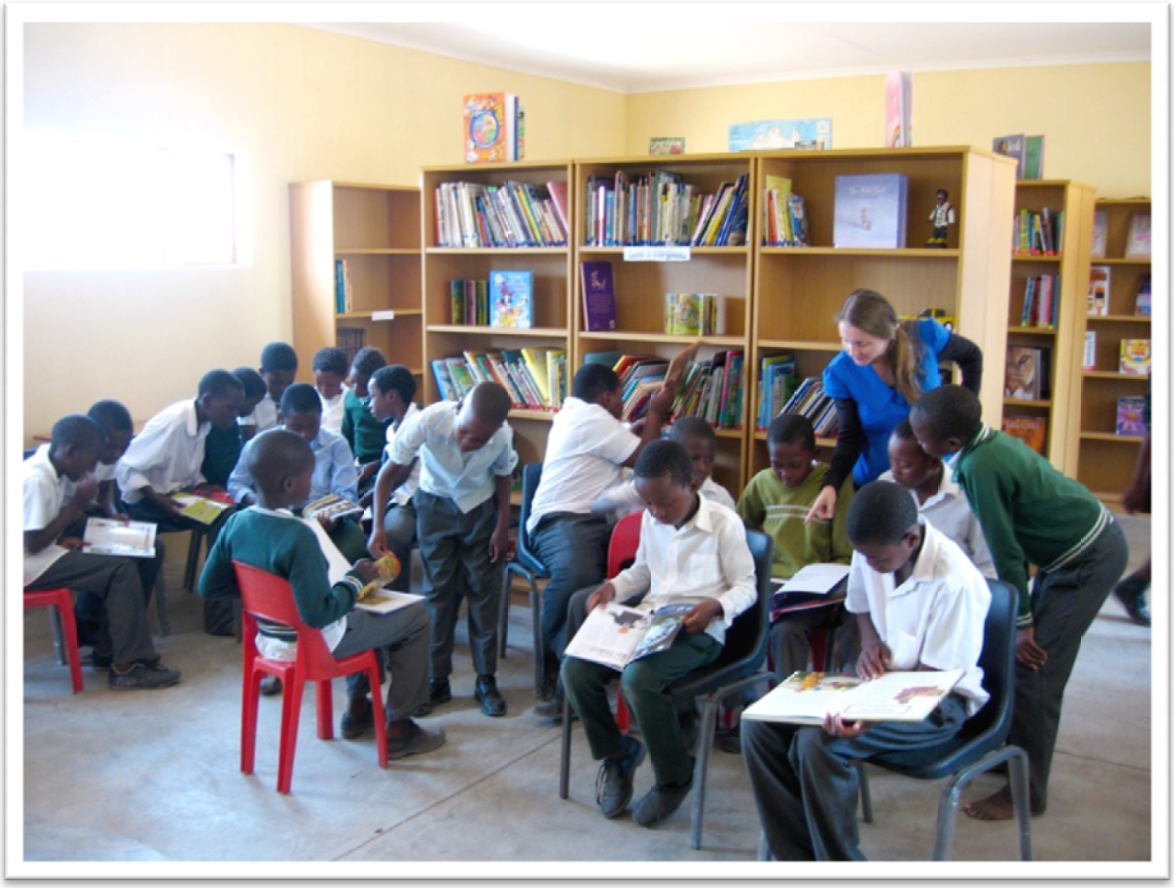
And keeping all this in mind helps keep us humble, and listening. Those are traits we need. Whatever we think is "positive" for someone else and for their culture, is not always so. It's best to listen to their own stories, of their fears and hopes for their own future and the changes occurring. We then offer whatever we can to bring them to their hopes. And we know that we might still mess up along the way, or that they may never arrive there but branch down a different path sometime later. But we can listen to their stories and the messages they hold. If the stories won't still exist in a few generations, then at least we can keep them in mind now.

I like what our Principal's wife is saying. Sometimes we should stop doing. We should come back out of our own world and our own activities. Even words and speech often aren't enough. Literacy can be a help for many things, but it can also be a distraction from what's unable to be contained in words. It reminds me of the ending of one of C.S. Lewis's greatest books, "Till We Have Faces", where the main character says:

"I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice?"

Or as said in Psalms 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God!" It's a message worth remembering.

(First written by Adam Willard, Sept. 27, 2010)



The opening day of the new Mahlahluvana Primary School Library. There were so many kids wanting to enter that they were limited to 10 minutes at a time each!

# MOVING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK

We arrived in South Africa on July 17, 2008 knowing we had committed ourselves to a two-year volunteer service with the United States Peace Corps. Emotions were high as we left everyone and everything we knew back home and embarked on a new way of life. We had no idea all the challenges and joys that South Africa had in store for us. Now we are preparing ourselves to leave, having completed a few months past our two-year term.

Over the course of our service, you have read many stories about our experiences here. You've read about what it's like living between and constantly adapting to the clash between the first and third world, remembering how the children from our rural village clung to each other in fear as they tried to gain the courage to get on an escalator at the city mall. Then, of course, there were the animal stories of our chicken falling down our pit toilet and then getting stolen. There was the big day when a hippo was shot in our river and the chaos that ensued as machetes flew around, people grasping for pieces of the meat. And who can forget experiencing the excitement in South Africa for the Soccer World Cup as flags from all over the world waved proudly and the sound of vuvuzelas could be heard from miles away.

We will forever have great stories to tell of South Africa, but at the end of our service, it is time to stop and reflect on the work we've done. Our primary area we were assigned to is the School and Community Resources Project. As both of us came with teaching experience, we were placed in two primary schools from Kindergarten to Grade 7. Our mission: to help develop the schools in any way needed.

Although that mission is very broad, Adam and I worked our way through the new culture, tried many things, had many failures, and finally came out with many successes. As Peace Corps Volunteers, most of us hope to have developed sustainable projects after living and working amongst the people for two years. However, it is a long process. A lot of what we do is through trial and error as we adapt to the new work environment and navigate our way through the culture in which it functions.

For those of you wondering what work we actually did on top of all our adventures, here are just a few things that we can smile about, knowing that we have left our schools with skills they can and are willing to replicate.

After working on several other projects, I realized that one of my real passions matched one of the schools' top priorities. So I began my work with literacy. Dumphries as a whole is essentially non-literate; parents do not read to their children and books are not found in homes. Textbooks are in abundance at both schools, provided by the national government. But they're rarely ever brought out for the learners to use as many of the educators themselves have little idea of how to practically use them. I was faced with a very challenging and often daunting task.

So I started small to see the reaction I would get and with the hopes of working up to a greater long-term literacy scheme. I created a small mobile outdoor library and for weeks it was swarmed by learners during lunch and recess. On several occasions, the learners were so engrossed in looking at the books that they forgot to eat their school lunch.

From this stemmed the idea to have an after-school Book Club where learners had story time and fun activities to help them remember and interact with the story. Activities have included dramas, games, and even making their own book! After a year, the kids are still going strong.

To most people here, a library means a storage room for books, particularly stockpiles of textbooks, where most never get used. After a year of sorting, organizing, and preparing a room, I finally had a chance to open a library at one primary school. Learners were wide-eyed when they realized that they could actually handle the books and the educators were equally impressed to learn how to use the library. They were especially amazed to see how easy it was to find a book on a certain topic.

After my orientation lessons, I had the pleasure of watching one of the educators give a lesson in the library: "If you want to learn about Michael Jackson, where would you find the book?" she asked. Hands all over the room shot up and snapped to get her attention. "People," one boy said with a grin. That was when I knew they were really getting it! It eventually led to a full year's curriculum I developed where educators bring their learners to the library every week to practice reading in groups and independently.

There was so much excitement that once we opened the library after school, we had over 60 learners just waiting to get in! Since we can only allow 20 learners at a time in the library due to space, several of my library helpers had to be bouncers, letting more learners in as some came out while the rest pushed each other to move forward in the line. The other educators and I just sit back and relax as the library helpers run the library all by themselves. I've made it a point to simply observe during these after school library times, and have watched as my library helpers chose books for the little ones and read to them. Sometimes they even do miniature lessons with learners to see if they comprehend the books they are reading.

After a while, the desire to step back into the classroom returned, and I started teaching English literacy lessons to Grades 2 and 3. Beginning with the alphabet as a review, I learned that most of the learners in Grades 2 and 3 did not know the alphabet and at least half of them could not write their names!

My explanation on starting with the alphabet was just as much for the educators as it was for the learners: "You see, if you know the sounds of the letters, you can make those sounds to read basic words." In response, one educator told me that they never knew they were supposed to start with the alphabet. Another educator has told me she's already seeing improvement. Over the course of a year, I taught, trained, and observed the educators as they followed the full year's daily curriculum that I created for English literacy in these two grades.

While I focused primarily in literacy, approaching it with every method and from every angle I could think of, Adam dabbled in many different areas.

Through the letter correspondence he directed between the Grade 7 learners in Dumphries and the Grade 7 learners in Broken Arrow, OK, sprang the idea to make a yearbook. No school in our area had ever made one or knew what it was. It turned out to be a picture of the learners' lives in and out of school, with each topic written by a Grade 7 learner in English. Adam must have trekked over 30 miles following the kids to their houses, the river, and the bush to take pictures of every topic covered!

Fortunately, upon completion, a local game lodge (Ulusaba) decided to print the books for free to distribute to each Grade 7 learner at their farewell function (Grade 7 is their last year before high school). Adam and I will never forget watching as the 1,000 villagers who showed up to the function stood in large family groups, enthralled as they passed around and pored over the 62 copies of yearbooks given to the learners.

We could immediately feel the sense of community pride. When we first arrived in Dumphries, many people would ask, "How can you live here?" Now people were seeing their community in a new and positive way. Since that day in November last year, thousands more have seen the book and many people still talk about how wonderful it is. On a larger scale, the local game lodge has decided to sell the book to their tourists, with all profits going towards projects in the schools!

Then being the art enthusiast that he is, Adam decided to start something that would help him share his love for art. So he created an after school Art Club at one primary school that meets every week. It's a pretty informal setting where learners can practice art in different mediums while learning some basic techniques.

Through several school art competitions and assemblies to recognize the learners' work, the environment at school has begun to change. Educators are seeing the value of recognizing learners and encouraging them in their abilities and interests. A good example of this was when Adam had a few of his top Art Club learners help him with a big World Cup mural on one of the walls at the school. The school management had doubts when he said he wanted to use the learners, but when it was finished, they were amazed. They told him that the Art Club must do a mural on every wall! Well, they did one more at least: a large South Africa and world map!

The peak of the Art Club experience was when the top 17 learners from the last art competition were able to go on a two day trip to Pretoria, the nation's capital, with all expenses paid by Ulusaba (the local game lodge). A whole new world was opened to them as many of them had never been to the big city. They went from one art museum to another, met sculptors and observed them in their work, went to the movie theater, visited the zoo, and many ate pizza for the first time. The trip motivated them so much that some learners bring artwork to Adam daily in the hopes that they can create something good enough to sell to the tourists at the game lodge. Not knowing the word for artist, they refer to themselves as Art Men!

Finally, a large part of Adam's work has involved computers, from training people on how to use them, to fixing all sorts of problems. Frequently people from the community and surrounding villages bring computers to our house to be fixed. Sometimes they show up unannounced, don't tell us their names or the problem with the computer (likely because of the language barrier), and just show up several days later to see if it's fixed.

From the beginning of our service 2 years ago, Adam began one-on-one training with educators at both schools, many of whom started from the very beginning: learning how to turn on a computer and move the mouse. Through his training at several schools, he was able to show the educators

how to quickly and efficiently enter their grades, have the computer calculate it for them, and print their grade reports. This solved the problem of educators spending days out of class entering and calculating their grades by hand and also boosted morale at the same time.

Over the course of time he was able to see which few educators were the most dedicated and took extra time to practice. It is these few educators with whom he has been able to continue more advanced work.

It has been Adam's long-term goal from the beginning to create a computer class for the learners. He now has one educator at each school who has proven to be dedicated and able to teach these classes. Our church back home has recently shipped computers here to South Africa for the purpose of fulfilling this goal. Unfortunately due to timing and delays, we will not be able to see this project through to its completion. However, there are two new wonderful Peace Corps Volunteers replacing us in the Dumphries community. They are more than willing to follow this project through to its intended goal.

When we joined the Peace Corps back in 2008, we committed to its three goals: to help the people of interested countries in meeting their needs for trained men and women; to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served; and to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of all Americans. In reflection, Adam and I feel that we have served Peace Corps and our country by fulfilling all three of these goals. Of course, the last goal will only continue when we get home, as you will no doubt hear us talk about the people and the country we have grown to love.

Coming as a married couple was a big part of what made us productive and effective. In the community they see us as a family unit, which automatically puts us on a higher level with more respect and trust. On Father's Day in church Adam was told to stand with the rest of the fathers. He exclaimed that he didn't have any children, but they said that it didn't matter because he was married and therefore a father to everybody.

Because the family structure in South Africa has been falling apart for decades now, seeing us together for two years has been different and sometimes strange to many people. It's a society where most of the men have moved to the city to find jobs, leaving their family (including wife and children) behind while they often start another family in the city. In sharp contrast, Adam and I are always together. They have seen that we truly enjoy each other's company, which is unusual in a culture that is so gender separated.

Some have learned about our non-boundaries with gender roles when they find out that Adam cooks and enjoys it. Although some of these things may be oddities in this culture, it's wonderful when a person can get a new perspective. This gives us great opportunities to explain that many people do the things we do because they are American and it's the Western culture that has influenced us.

Finally, we believe that being a married couple has given us huge advantages in our work. We come as two different people with different skills and desires. I have focused mainly on teaching practices because it's what I enjoy and feel passionate about. Unfortunately, this sort of work usually stays behind the scenes and often goes unnoticed. Through many of his more visually-stimulating projects Adam has done a lot to make the schools proud of their work and their beautiful school and community.

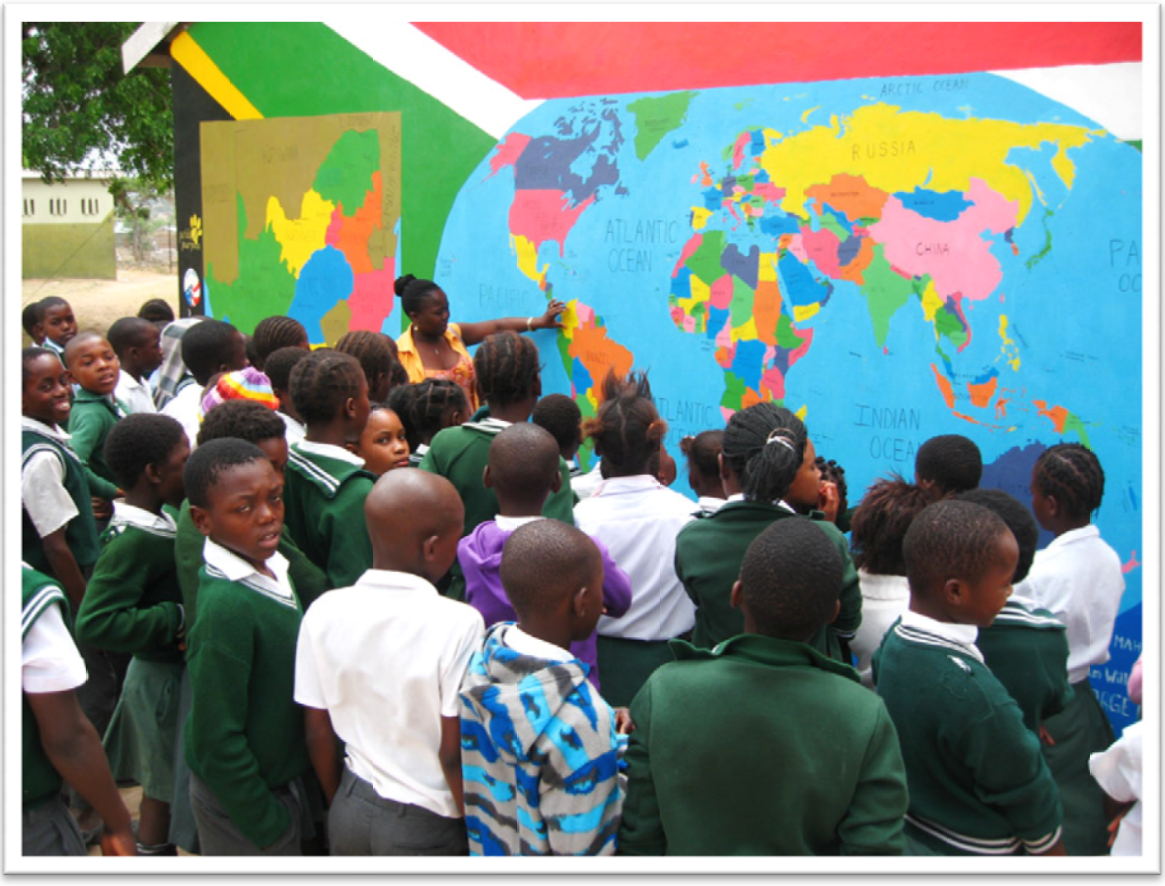
In my point of view we have worked out to be the perfect team. Adam gains credibility with the school for both of us through his computer and mural work, while I work on improving the issues closer to the core of education and development for both the educators and the learners.

As Americans, our work here has often been at the forefront of our minds and we've always tried to keep ourselves busy. We know the people are overwhelmingly appreciative of what we've done. However, work is not the end-all be-all here and we wouldn't have been able to work effectively without first building relationships. Because ideas of gender inequality are still widespread, being a married couple here has again been a benefit to us. I've been able to develop positive and trusting working relationships with the women and Adam has been able to form a bond and friendship with many of the men we work with, including those in management.

The key that held it all together was simply this: we opened ourselves up to the people, and although timid with us at first, they finally opened their hearts to us. Years later, some will remember what we did, but most will remember who we are. In spite of their racially charged past, they once had white people from America stay with them, people who were not scared of them, who learned their language, who went to funerals with them, who ate their food, and who had the courage to live and "suffer" with them. This is what Peace Corps does. It breaks down racial and economic barriers and brings peace.

Although this is the time to reflect on what we've done in our community, thoughts inevitably turn to what's been done within us. There are so many things that we are taking away from this experience that have changed us so deeply. We will not be the same people when we return home. We've been forever altered.

(First written by Lora Willard, Oct. 26, 2010)




A Grade 4 teacher is using the World Map Mural painted by the Art Club to teach geography to her learners.

# KU TSUNDZUKA

Our time is up. We extended a couple of months, but those are finished now too. After nearly two and a half years here in South Africa, it's time to call it quits and head back home to America. We'll be there to see all of you (or at least most of you) any day now.

But we're not coming back with all of us. There's quite a lot we're leaving behind. We don't have a choice really. In order to be successful, like we have, in order to enjoy our last 2+ years, which we have immensely, we've had to make this place our home, to sink in and set roots here. And it is our home now, but it won't be, not really, for much longer.

We're very happy to be coming back soon, to see all of you, to see the home we've left behind, and to fall back in to an environment and culture that we know intrinsically, without challenge and without question. But it's coming at a big price to us. A loss even. There's a lot we're leaving behind. And we'll never be coming back here, not to live, only to visit at best.

There's so much we're going to miss about this place. We've tried for a long time now to tell people that we're going to miss them, and how much, but there's no direct translation. Maybe that's true for any language. Most people here have just been telling us "swa vava" – "it hurts." Certainly that's true. Recently a couple of our teacher friends told us that the best translation is "ku tsundzuka", which generally means "to remember." I suppose if there wasn't so much to remember, there wouldn't be so much to hurt either? So, in Shangaan anyway, that's what it means for us to miss this place.

We're going to miss, above and beyond everything, the people here. They're at the heart of everything we've experienced and everything we've done in our time here. There are far too many to name, and they include both of our incredible principals, all of the teachers and other school staff we've worked with, everyone in our host family, and all our neighbors; they've all befriended us and taught us so much. We're going to miss our wonderful network of friends and "family" in Pretoria, who've been so gracious and generous to us through the years. We're going to miss our fellow Peace Corps Volunteers, who've shared so much of this with us.

We're going to miss the kids in our Art Club and Book Club and the Library Helpers; they're really special kids. We're going to miss the kids who come to our house every day and the kids who only show up once in a blue moon, the kids who are always polite and even the kids who closely inspect everything through our windows and ask for everything they see. They're all an important part of our daily lives. We're going to miss the people we walk or ride our bikes past on our way to and from work, the taxi drivers and fellow passengers when on longer journeys, and so many random people even the first time we meet them.

Lora with her Library Helpers at one of our schools.

The people are incredible. It can take some time to get to know them for who they are, but when you do you can't forget. If it weren't for the people, nothing else about this time would've mattered at all. Some teachers are already talking about visiting us in the States or later when we're in Madagascar. Though that's a slim chance for most of them, we may be lucky enough to welcome some of them. We hope. And for others, I've been anxiously

pushing them to get on the internet, get an e-mail address, and find a way to stay in touch. Some have been asking about how to call us while we're in the US, no matter the cost. We've become a part of their family and they've become a part of ours; that's something time and distance won't change.

We're going to miss the culture. That's not an easy statement; there are so many things about life and culture here that we still don't understand. But culture has been a part of our whole lives here, like the air we breathe, so that even if we don't know its constituent parts, we know it's there, it gives a certain flavor to the day, a flavor that's part of our lives now. So that even those aspects we don't yet understand, we'll still miss. Even if we can't place a finger on that particular thing that we wish was still with us back in the States, we'll know something's missing.

But what we do know of the culture, we also know we'll miss. The proximity of people, whether squeezing onto every inch of space on a bench at home or chairs at church, crowding each other in a line, or cramming more people into less space on a taxi than you'd think was possible – we're always rubbing shoulders with everyone around us. Life back home may now seem like more of a cold distance to us. Here, there are people around you and they can't be denied. It's a loud and vibrant life.

We'll miss the mchongolo dances in our village, even as few and far-apart as they were, they were always such happy times. We'll even miss the frequent funerals, that a time of sadness can be such an occasion for people, for the whole village, to be happy in each other's company and in the food to be shared. We won't miss how early we have to wake up to get to the funerals on time; some things never change. ;-) We'll miss our church here, that adopted us, was proud to have us, and always made us aware of their welcoming.

We're going to miss the way everyone's a part of everyone else's family. I'll miss being "father" and "brother" and Lora's going to miss being "mother" and "sister" to everyone who greets us. Maybe we won't miss the occasional feeling that someone's trying to take too much advantage of our generosity, but who will even believe in personal generosity back home? What neighbor or friend will ask us for anything? People here don't just take, they give too. So much more is shared.

We're going to miss the work. It's much different here than it is in the States, much different. It goes at a different pace, one that's intensely frustrating when we first arrived, and one in which two years isn't nearly long enough, but a pace that seems to fit the human spirit a little more snugly. It's not so frenzied, not so self-aware, and not so likely to take the people managing it captive to its own passing. Time passes, people work, and life goes on.

Our work has had an incredible array of challenges too. Even when we think we've well-guessed the problems we'll face, even then a few new ones always pop up to surprise us. But sometimes, rarely, we have correctly predicted the obstacles we'll encounter, even the ones that still seem so bizarrely ridiculous to us, but there they are just like we expected, and our plan for overcoming them went like clockwork. That's so satisfying. The work almost never becomes tedious. In some ways, work back in America's too easy, in other ways it takes too much out of us. Our work seems to have been very well balanced here, and very rewarding, and we'll miss it.

You know, we're basically rock-stars here. Everyone knows us, including tons of people we ourselves don't even know; everyone's happy we're here and basically everything we do is appreciated. This whole "celebrity status" was a burden at first, I suppose it's still a burden in some ways, but we're used to it now. Back home we're mostly nobodies. I mean, yeah, we're somebody special to most of you, but in the larger community, the larger sphere of our influence, well, we don't have much influence. We're normal just like everyone else. So with both its burdens and its privileges, we'll miss a bit of our celebrity status here.

And we're going to miss the environment. There's not too many cars going by, almost never do you hear the sounds of heavy machinery or honking of horns. There are roosters crowing in the morning, and throughout the day. (Though I can't say I'll miss at all the "free-range" chickens that roam straight into our yard every day and scratch up my garden. Nothing to miss there, good riddance to them!) There are goats roaming the village, and herds of cattle moving through, usually in the early morning or early evening hours, tinkling their cowbells pleasantly.

We're going to miss the bugs and creepy-crawlies, at least some of them. Others, like the "stupid bugs" that seem to have no sense of direction (and thus crash into people all the time) won't be missed at all. But the ones that are big and strange, brightly-colored, or observably funny in their behavior (that don't interfere too much with my own personal space), we're going to miss those. Each summer brings a new discovery, or several, for us, some bizarre or mutated creature that we simply won't find in the US. And we'll miss the "marshmallow frogs", some obscenely fat and stubby-legged guys that waddle instead of hop. They come out after the rain and try to help clean up the less-satisfying bugs that plague us throughout the summer. They first appeared a few nights ago, to wish us goodbye. We'll miss them.

We'll miss our proximity to Kruger, and to all the crazy wildlife there. During our two years, we've had the chance to see, up close and personal, some incredible stuff that you'd think only exists on nature documentaries. We've seen some of the largest animals still on earth, have watched them do their thing, mostly oblivious to us. It feels like Jurassic Park, but with no fence in-between. We've even had a few close calls, some very scary situations (scary to us at least), and one time a giant baboon even jumped in our car grabbing for whatever he could take while Lora and another Peace Corps friend were screaming wildly, trying to get away. We're going to miss Kruger for sure.

Even the plants, the "bush", so different than everything back home. At least to me, the native plant life is so much a part of the overall environment, whether it encroaches directly up to your home or you only see it when going outside the city, it's a part of the feeling of the place. And it's so different here. In the early summer, there's usually so many beautifully-blooming trees, very vibrant and welcoming. There's so much indigenous fruit, most of it not as pleasant as the commercially-grown stuff, but still a part of the place. During most of the year, all the plants' seeds are thorny and tend to stick and scratch all over a person. They're very hardy and spread and grow exactly where you don't want them. I can't say I'll directly miss that. But it's all a part of the place here, part of the entire environment. And we will miss it. It will take time to get used to the environment back home again.

In some sense, we'll even miss the seasons. The weather here in winter is nearly perfect, almost never too cold and never too hot. On the other hand, we're leaving just in time to avoid several more months of long, drawn-out, blistering heat. You can't really miss that, not when there's absolutely no climate-control anywhere you go. But as we avoid the heat, we'll also miss the heavy summer storms, the clashes of lightning. The way the rains pound on our tin roof, making a ruckus unlike anything else. The way it momentarily floods our yard and is directed to my garden by a series of ditches, where it can collect and sink in. In a way, we'll miss how much our lives are dependent on the weather; it makes us so much more a part of this place. We'll miss going to the river on hot summer Saturdays, to wash clothes and swim with the kids in our host family, trying to beat the heat and simply enjoy ourselves.

And we'll miss our home here. It's small, it doesn't keep out the hot or the cold, it's always dirty from dead bugs or the ever-present dust. But it's our home now. Or it was. We had everything set up the way we wanted it, to make use of all the available space. We had our little routines. We had a few decorations on the walls. I've done some landscaping during our time here, making a food garden, and more recently a decorative garden around our house. We even recently received a clean water supply pipe right in our own yard and my gardening has been going wonderfully ever since, our mango trees are going to have a great harvest this year.

We'll miss our pet cat, "Rat". We only have one left, now that our other, "Cat", disappeared about a month ago. I guess she just couldn't stand the good-byes; she was always pretty emotionally dependant. Thankfully, the two new Peace Corps Volunteers replacing us here are taking Rat as their own pet. They're taking over our work too, that which needed some extra help or which we had to leave unfinished. And they'll have the chance to expand into areas we only hoped for, and build on their own skills and talents in ways that Lora and I couldn't. We're glad that they're coming as we're going, and thankful for the couple of months we had to get to know them. We'll miss them too.

But that's it for us. Our time is finished, and all that's left is "ku tsundzuka", to remember, to miss, "swa vava", it hurts. The people the most; there are so many wonderful people here. We hope to see many of them again, on our way to and from Madagascar, but we'll never have a chance to live with them again and share our lives so deeply.

There's a famous quote by a person named Miriam Adeney that says, "You will never be completely at home again, because part of your heart always will be elsewhere. That is the price you pay for the richness of loving and knowing people in more than one place."

So, if by the time you do see us, and we get the chance to spend some time together, if it happens that we don't seem to be 100% there, or if one of us is looking off into the distance when there's nothing really to be seen, or maybe we're not responding quite the way we used to; well, please be patient with us. We're now living in more than one place. We've left a lot behind in order to return to you. But we're glad we have, that we've had so much to leave. It's a price to pay, a burden to shoulder, but also an incredible joy. Our lives are rich.

(First written by Adam Willard, Nov. 8, 2010)

Us with our host family, or at least most of them, in our village in South Africa.