



I tried to avoid making eye contact with her by blending in with the crowd, but my attempts had failed. I had been spotted. Her eyes bore a hole deep through mine, not with anger, but with a clear message of intent. She was a small child—maybe 10 years old—dressed in a green and white thin-striped school uniform. It was no different from the dirty, well-used, clothes her classmates, who were seated all around me at the Compassion Child Development Center, wore. But she seemed to be set apart by the broad white collar around her neck. It lifted her pleasant face, complementing her neat, yet dusty, appearance with distinction. Her bright blue rubber boots added a touch of brilliance, and they matched the plastic food bowl she ate from.

Just moments before, the sun had peaked above our heads, and the faint smells of cooked food circulated around our noses. The aroma sent a clear signal to everyone that lunch was ready. The children scurried into place, forming long lines across the courtyard. Several project workers gathered around large bowls of rice, beans and huge chunks of pineapple, ready to serve a warm meal to these hungry tummies. Each child, without pushing or shoving, courteously took a plate full of food and sat down in groups to eat. There was very little talking, but a whole lot of chewing going on.

The children had faces that gleamed of gratefulness, knowing this might be the only meal they would eat all week. Nothing went to waste, not a stranded bean or a discarded grain of rice. I walked among them, lending a smile whenever possible and rubbing a few heads of the more bashful ones. That's when she caught my eye. Her actions immediately grabbed my attention.

She sat and ate alone on the steps of the front patio. Her cheeks and chin showed wet traces of her half-eaten meal, but her hands worked meticulously on remnants of a black plastic bag in which she was storing the other half. As she gathered the corners together and tied them tightly to form a bundle, it suddenly dawned on me. She was taking the rest home, an act that I mistakenly assumed was for another family member who needed a meal too. One last piece of juicy pineapple remained in her bowl, perhaps to serve as a well-deserved reward for her awe-inspiring actions.

I was so intensely moved by her act of kindness that my emotions stirred. That's when she noticed me watching her. Her gaze sent conviction through my core as she stared back at me. Literally, I felt the need to reach down and pick my heart up out of the dirt. My selfishness had been exposed, and this child had given me a lesson in real compassion. Why? I would later learn, through a teammate and the project workers, that she was saving it to take home and share with a neighborhood friend, a child who wasn't in the program, who wasn't given the hope for a better tomorrow.



After lunch several of the children surrounded our team to celebrate our visit. Some clung tightly to my hands, some swung from the bookbag hung over my shoulder, and one rubbed the hair on my right arm over and over with innocent curiosity. Huge white smiles pushed aside their dirty cheeks, illuminating their beautiful dark-skinned faces. Their enthusiasm was understood. How often do they see a peculiar-looking white dude hanging around? It might have been the first time for some of them.

The red dirt playground had more trash on it than it had play equipment, and the latter consisted of random rusted pipes welded together with no intentionality. Discarded chips of paint from the rusted pipes mingled with paper littered across the ground, a mixture that occasionally lifted in the wind and circled around our ankles. Signs of poverty were everywhere—except for in the children's enthusiastic demeanor.

These African children came to the program every Saturday, more than two hundred girls and boys from the nearby slums in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. It was a rare ray of hope for all of them, a short retreat from the poorest of conditions. The well-used uniforms they wore united them all, but it remained to be seen whether or not they would find their individuality in such a brutal life. This center created an environment of love and offered them a chance for a brighter future.

We spent the afternoon throwing Frisbees, kicking up dust, chasing after soccer balls, and passing footballs around to one another. Then our time together was over. I left with a greater appreciation for a plethora of things I selfishly take for granted every day, and I knew I would never forget that little girl with the bright blue rubber boots who forever changed my life.

These are the times we truly savor in life. A small collection of rare images, stories, and experiences we store away in our mental hard drives. They surface from time to time during conversations over lattés, and we reflect on the visuals from these panoramic journeys during the duller times in our lives. The in-between stuff casually disappears—rhetorical and uneventful routine that simply has little or no relevance. Some of my 10-day trek in Africa was that way. It was filled with long exhausting days and short dismal nights spent sleeping in mosquito nets. Over time I'll forget about trying to remember to take my Malaria pills or having to drink only bottled water, but between these minor inconveniences are some priceless, unforgettable memories.

It can be a scary thing to be in an unknown place. I was completely surrounded by uncertainty—a stranger in a foreign land. The things I was accustomed to—the sights, smells, and sounds of everyday life—were momentarily replaced with the unfamiliar. I was more than eight thousand miles away from home and meeting Africa for the very first time. It embraced me with open arms, but my excitement and expectancy were challenged by anxiety and pretense. For me to completely engage the moment would require a purposed fixation on trust.



There were moments when it seemed surreal. A genuine sense of awe came over me when I realized I was actually standing on the enchanting continent. From the small monkeys hanging in the trees at the *Speke Resort*, where I was staying, to the

tropical banana trees growing in every available patch of crimson earth throughout the city. In fact, I think I ate bananas fried, steamed, baked, and peeled more than a dozen times. Along with plantains they are the side dish accompanying every meal. Bananas, bananas, and more bananas!

Kampala has a population of 1.5 million people crammed into a space of 80 square miles. The continual congested traffic keeps the air reeking of exhaust fumes and the tourists hearing the rhythmic sound of beeping horns. White and blue taxi vans, small cars, and motorcycles fill the red-stained, pothole-infested roadways.

My next takeaway was the frenzied motorcyclist and a strange one, I know:

There were a gazillion motorcycles everywhere; they were obviously the least expensive means of motored transportation. They were my greatest source of entertainment on the long bus rides across the city. They zoomed wildly through narrow spaces between vehicles, coming dangerously close to ongoing traffic and certain death! Mounting their multi-colored custom vinyl seats were not just one, but sometimes two, three and even *four* riders!! Some straddled over each other, some sat side-saddled or backwards, but all hung on for dear life. Better than that were the riders using the bikes for more than transporting people; they hauled goods of every shape and size.

Near downtown there were two men on a small scooter. One sat squished up on the gas tank, driving at a turtle's pace while the other man sat behind him holding a large television set. It was at least a 30-inch tube! He couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds, and the TV was at least equal to his weight. It looked more like something you would see at the circus rather than in a chaotic traffic scene.

On Sunday morning we attended a Bible study held in a small 12' X 12' room in the front of the church. Sunlight filtered through the front cinderblock walls, illuminating the faces of 15 bright university students. I sat among them. Everything about the group embodied college students—a group of young men and ladies who were eager, confident, and highly opinionated.



They started on time as if the school bell had sounded and stragglers would be penalized for their tardiness. A young man opened with prayer. His gold-rimmed glasses completed his bookish look, but his soft-spoken voice could barely be heard above the noisy city traffic outside. Each student held a well-worn Bible in one hand and a photocopied outline in the other. The discussion began after a quick verse-by-verse reading from the third chapter of the book of Ephesians.

One moderator sat with arms folded and legs crossed as if he were an adored professor. He led them by facilitating a list of questions and the debate was on. Everyone was raring to share their views and interpretation of the Scriptures. It was fascinating to watch. I sat quietly and listened as they went back and forth across the room. I observed and took notes. They expressed varied thoughts and disagreements, yet the students were polite and respectful to one another. I thought to myself, *"This must have been what it was like to be in the room with C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien during an intellectual conversation over hot tea and crumpets."* You could feel the greatness in the air, and I

was confident that I was sitting among the future spiritual leaders of Uganda. They challenged me and renewed my passion for studying God’s Word.

There is quite a contrast from the city to the countryside. The couple of drives we took outside the city were my favorites on the trip. The rigid roadways were lined with thriving sugarcane fields,



converging with endless sections of jungle. We passed through random villages on our routes, villages composed of mud huts with thatch roofs. They were scattered between dense, green vegetation and more flats of red earth. The plants came in every shape, size, and array. Some of them so unique they looked like images taken from a Dr. Seuss book. I managed to capture a shot from our bus window of a fisherman canoeing in a remote pond (*pictured here*). I like to call it my *National Geographic*-

worthy photograph, although it will probably never grace the pages of the popular global magazine.

My final days in Africa, like the concluding chapters of an epic novel, brought closure to a stellar experience. My team took expeditions to the source of the Nile River in Jinja—where it begins flowing to the Mediterranean Sea from Lake Victoria—and to beautiful Bujagali Falls. Local swimmers there risked their lives to pummel through the raging waters. Then they returned to the banks, soaking wet, and begged for money.

But none of these experiences were more rewarding than meeting my Compassion International\* sponsored child, Stephen. Meeting him face-to-face for the first time was an unbelievable opportunity for me. To understand in a deeper way that I was making a difference in the life of a child in poverty, and to see this reflected in his countenance, is beyond description. In the words of Canadian journalist Stephen Lewis, “...I was shaken to my core.”

\*For more information on releasing children from poverty visit [www.compassion.com](http://www.compassion.com) and start sponsoring a child today.



Written by Jim Ed Hardaway June 2009

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