Lizarding, i

It didn't take me long to find a hobby. The first time I walked out of the Amani guest house, I was startled by something scampering across the front wall. Excluding Discovery Channel documentaries, it was the biggest lizard I'd seen in my life. About a foot long from tip to tip, the lizard had dark scales with a few yellow spots along its back. The next evening, I found dozens of them. Most of them were small versions of the dark lizard I had first seen, generally about six inches long. But in addition to the larger dark lizards, there was an equally big lizard with a pale green body and a scarlet head.

"There not poisonous, are they?" I asked Rev. John. It was a good thing the answer was no. I had already started chasing them. I at least had the sense to go for the smaller ones instead of the larger ones because they were more timid. I reasoned that nothing that timid could be poisonous…I'm sure *that* was a good idea.

For the most part, my efforts were fruitless. I realized quickly that I would need more than just my bare hands to catch the quick little reptiles. I still had fun chasing them and thought that with a stroke of luck, I might accidentally grab one if it got confused and ran right into my hand. That stroke of luck came on my third day of lizarding. I was chasing three or four different lizards across the garden, and they all ran to the guest house and onto the wall. (There was a space between the wall and the roof that they could crawl through for safety; when we were sitting in the common room after dinner, we would often hear the scampering of lizard feet overhead.) I stretched over the flower bushes growing alongside the house to cut off the lizards' escape. One of them spun away from my hand and ran downward – into a plastic watering can.

No way; that was too easy. I stuffed an empty potato sack into the top of the can to trap the lizard, then I ran back to my room to get a pair of gloves. I returned to the water can, half expecting the lizard to have slipped out around the potato sack while I'd been gone. I pulled out the fabric and looked in. There was no lizard. I was disappointed but not surprised. But before I set the can down, I thought about the size of the lizard and looked into the narrow spigot. He could have squeezed. I tipped the can back and shook it. I heard the scratching sound of claws and scales sliding across plastic. My lizard was there.

Even trapped inside the water can, it took me several tries before I actually grabbed the lizard and pulled him out. When I finally grabbed hold of him, I was amazed how calm he was. I took him back to my doorway to get a few pictures. Then, I let him go on my leg to see how long he would stay there. He sat calmly for several seconds before crawling away…right into my room.

Whoops – should have closed the door before I let him go. He was actually much easier to catch the second time. He realized pretty quickly that his concrete surroundings were not the kind of habitat he could survive in.

I thought that I would be happy with one lizard catch. But each day that I saw the scarlet-headed lizards around the Center, I wanted more and more to catch one of the larger, more colorful animals. One day, I chased one up the side of the wall. Gideon was watching and gave me a long stick to block his way into his hole. I could block the lizard's path easily enough, but I couldn't scare him back down toward me. In fact, after being chased by the stick a few times, the lizard decided that it was harmless and didn't even move when I poked and prodded him. Inspiration hit me. I hurried back to my room and gathered everything I would need: my Swiss Army knife, an old pen, dental floss, and the stick Gideon had given me. When I returned to the wall, my quarry was gone. But he wasn't going to get away again: now I had a lizarding stick!

Nightmare…

"Kiandika ndomi ya daftari chako. Kiandika ndomi ya daftari chako.." I repeated the phrase to myself for what felt like the thousandth time as I copied it back into my notebook. I went back over the text I had written, highlighting the phrases I would say. The words left outside the yellow would be what (I hoped) the kids would say in response. The top of the page read "July 10, (in an ideal world)." I remained foolishly oblivious to how ideal my world *wasn't*.

Bibi and I had been working at the Ingadola school for a week now. Before that first week of school, I had been waiting for Rev. John to give me something to do. I had come to the Center expecting to do farm work just like one of his employees. The problem was that providing jobs to the local people is a huge part of the ministry itself, so it would have been a drawback for me to do the jobs that they wanted to get paid for. The large project that Rev. John had anticipated to have going (construction of a primary school facility in the neighboring village of Makulu) had been delayed because of building permit restrictions. So when Bibi asked if I would like to come help her at Ingadola, I said, "Sure. I guess that's why I'm here."

It was an unnerving thought for me. I have been subbing in the Butte school district for two and a half years now. I love working with young children on a hockey team because I can play with them, model skating skills, and make them skate off whenever they get too energetic. Take that same group of kids and throw them into a classroom with me, and all that energy that I enjoy on the rink turns against me. The children's only outlet is to run around and yell in the classroom, which comes into direct conflict with *all* of my classroom rules. After two multiple week stints at the start of last school year, I began listing my teaching preferences as "Anything but kindergarten." Yet

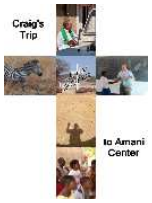
here I was, 10,000 miles from home and right back in the frying pot. But I had come to Tanzania to help. If that meant helping with kindergarten, I would do that.

The Ingadola school is actually a nursery school, which is a combination of our preschool and kindergarten. We got to school on the first day to find 65 three-through-six year olds playing outside the church. It was a long time before a Swahili-speaking teacher showed up, and even longer before one of the regular teachers brought keys to the building. Bibi hurried inside to sweep the floor and set up mats for the children to sit on. The kids and I were looking at each other nervously while we waited outside, both mutually afraid of one another.

The first teacher to arrive was a young man named Ndilito. Like me, he was going to college to get an education degree. He was relatively bilingual, and we talked for a while about the Ingadola school. It turned out that the school only had two teachers (he was visiting from the primary school), and one of them would be gone the next Thursday. And there would be no sub.

So there it was: I had found without question the reason God had brought me to this school at this time. I was supposed to teach the kindergarten class while their teacher was away. I started paying attention to everything the regular teacher said and did, writing down things she said and asking Ndilito what they meant.

By recess (and largely because of it), the children and I had broken the ice. They were fascinated by me and gathered around in large groups. I, in turn, found out that they didn't want to get too close because they were still a little nervous. I spent the next several recesses chasing them across the "playground," a bare dirt road that separated the two school buildings with construction in progress on either side. By the time Thursday rolled around, I thought I was up to the task of running kindergarten for one day. I had Albert translate the things I wanted to say for the lessons I had planned. I was still feeling a bit nervous Wednesday night, so I stayed up later than usual reviewing my notes: "Kiandika ndomi ya daftari chako…"



…Come True

Bibi asked if I was coming. "I'll be a minute," I said. Actually, I had already been alone in the school building for several minutes. And I knew that a few more weren't going to help.

I had three goals when I came into the classroom that day. I had my script from Albert, my substitute teaching experience, white skin (which alone was enough to captivate a group of Tanzanian kindergarteners)…and I had no idea what I had gotten myself into. Five minutes into the class, the kids were up and wandering around. I repeated "Kaa chini" every ten seconds ("Sit down"), but the effects were short-lived. Whether because Albert had translated incorrectly or because I was slaughtering the pronunciation, the kids weren't getting anything out of the two lessons I had prepared. Plan B: I sat down in a chair and waited for the room to lapse into (relative) quiet. I called up a girl from the front row whom I had already been introduced to.

I asked the girl what her name was, and she mumbled into her feet. I asked her again and (very *in*distinctly) heard the name I was expecting. "Ah, Lucia!" I said, writing it down on a nametag and tucking it into her collar. "Asante!" ("Thank you!")

Bibi and I needed nametags for all the children. In addition to the challenge of learning 80 school children's names (many of which were Swahili), Bibi and I had a particularly hard time because all of the children looked the same. It was a fact Bibi often lamented: "If they weren't wearing uniforms, I couldn't even tell which ones are girls or boys."

The U.S. is blessed with diversity. Even among people of the same race, ancestral lines vary enough that when people look different, they look *different*. In Tanzania, everyone comes from the same ethnic line. In a small village, the variability is even less

because the same tribe of people has lived in that area for millennia. Being in a room of children was like meeting identical twins. It took a lot of exposure to them before I could recognize the differences well. So, my nametag project would be a huge help: it would be useful for the teachers, I could turn it into a mini language lesson, and (if I were lucky) it would take all day.

The children were very timid about answering questions and would mumble their names. After Lucia, I didn't have the advantage of already knowing what they were going to say, so I asked each child several times and still ended up guessing. I also tried having them write their names on the board, forgetting that they were kindergarteners. While a few of the students wrote legibly what appeared to be their name, others copied down a jumble of letters that couldn't have possibly made coherent sounds, with occasional numbers mixed in.

I resigned to making incorrect nametags and letting Mrs. Pendo fix them later, but the day still deteriorated. After a few kids received nametags, the rest of the class became anxious to get their own and crowded around the board. I told them to sit down if they wanted a nametag, which (of course) they didn't understand. Even after I got the message across, they sat on top of each other, squeezed against the board, and shouted, "Mwalimu, mwalimu, mimi!" ("Teacher, teacher, me!"). At some point during this chaos, Bibi came in and suggested I hand out books to keep the students busy while they were waiting for their nametags: Disaster #3.

The kids were even more desperate for books than nametags, and they climbed on top of each other for them. Every time I tried to hand a book to a student who was sitting, eight or nine other hands would snap out and grab the book along the way. Often times, the child sitting quietly would get physically pushed to the side, and I would have to pull the other kids away to give the book to the now crying child it had been intended for. It was all I could do the rest of the day to keep the kids from hurting each other. I can't remember how long I stayed in that school room after Bibi left, but I remember it being a long, miserable walk home.