

April 10, 2010

T- Day 83

Saturday

‘It’s three a.m., I’m here again, I don’t know where to begin...’

Well, it’s not three a.m. But I am here again, and I really don’t know where to begin. Where is here? Well, here is two places. First, here is at my Godmother’s house in the Highlands south of Butte. I am here for the third night, having just moved out of my parents’ house to live with her. It’s been an exhausting day so far...so exhausting, in fact, that I’m not very tired. Julie (my Godmother), Mark (her ?boyfriend?), and I spent the day cutting firewood. After a day of learning how to use a chainsaw and helping limb and section a tree, haul and stack and rehaul firewood, and clean up the dead branches, I was tired. So tired that I fell asleep twice earlier, so I’m awake now that it is bedtime.

But where “here” is really is at the computer, trying to write. I’ve been through a lot of changes in the past few months. Along with some external changes, I’m having some very significant internal changes too – specifically, I’m having trouble doing things that I used to love doing and do all the time. Writing is one of those things, yet it is also, in some sense, my lifeblood. For the past two years, I have raised money to return to Africa by selling journal stories of my trip to Africa. Needless to say, it would be difficult to sell these journals without writing them.

Though I’ve only been to Africa twice, once for one month and once for three, it has become a part of me. I long every year for the time that I can return to Africa. My time there is more fulfilling and more powerful than the rest of my year combined. I know this isn’t a good thing in some ways; I would love to be living vibrantly year round instead of just on my summer mission trips. But it is a significant indicator for me that I want to change. And that, getting back to the Stellar Kart lyrics at the top of the page, is where I don’t know where to begin. I’m already having trouble adjusting to the small change of moving from my parents’ house to my Godmother’s house, yet someday I want to move from this country to Tanzania. I had trouble doing one day of lumber work, yet I want to live in a place where hard work is part of everyday life. Am I crazy? Can I do it?

With the changes I’ve been through early this year, I think this summer in Africa will be a crucial one. One that will answer a lot of questions, raise a lot of problems, and (I hope) shares with you something of what draws me halfway around the world.

April 13, 2010

T- Day 80

Tuesday

I am now twelve lessons away from speaking Swahili.

Well, not precisely. But I bought a Rosetta Stone Swahili program, and I am twelve lessons away from completing it. It's been a very helpful tool, but not a complete one. Nothing quite compares to experience. I remember my friend Daudi spending time with me my first summer in Tanzania practicing greeting people. In fact, he spent *a lot* of time with me practicing greetings because there are about twelve ways to greet someone politely, fifteen different ways to greet them in street slang, and about nine more greeting if you both happen to be from the Gogo tribe. Not to mention the fact that every greeting has a separate response. None of the greetings were like the American "hi," where you can just repeat "hi" back. Nope, all thousand sixty-whatever greetings are questions and replies.

So Daudi spent a lot of time with me working on this. Needless to say, we were both pretty embarrassed when he introduced me to his friends who promptly greeted me in a way I had never heard. Make that seventeen different street slang greetings.

"Oh, come on," Daudi said. "You don't know?" I felt like everything he had ever said to me had been a waste of time. The first time I heard a greeting in a real life situation, I had no idea how to respond.

I'm hoping that with my Rosetta Stone lessons, I can to prevent that from happening again. I've had Microsoft Excel generate random lesson assignments for me so that I can do a thorough review one lesson at a time. I won't have time to go back through them all before I go to Africa, but my goal is that a least a few Tanzanian conversations won't consist of me kicking myself in the butt afterward because I had learned those words, I just didn't know them well enough to use on the spot.

So with that, "Tarakimu ya kwanza ni moja," which (according to my Rosetta Stone), has something to do with a large, red "150" sitting out on a rainy sidewalk in some nondescript urban setting, looking like it is just waiting to get stolen by some shady-looking passerby.

Yeah...twelve lessons away from speaking Swahili...

April 16, 2010

T- Day 77

Friday

Toothbrushes.

I went into my parents' bathroom and rooted through the top left drawer. This one looked too old, that one looked too new. It took me a couple minutes, but I finally decided on the two perfect toothbrushes for my trip. I hurried back to my room and crammed them into the sock-filled compartment of my hockey bag, alongside a few other last minute items.

“Last minute” here meaning “77 days before I leave.”

I'm usually a last minute, pull-an-all-nighter packer, but for some reason, I got myself packed months in advance for this trip. Maybe it's because I've been ready to leave since January.

I had a disappointing job this fall. Well, actually, it wasn't disappointing until about winter time, when I really started having some problems in the school where I worked. In January, after a week-long stay in the hospital, I decided to quit my job. It was my first job out of college, and quitting has laid a heavy burden on me that I've had a lot of trouble shaking off.

Yet when I get to Africa, I know I will be welcomed with open arms. People celebrate my coming and going as if I were some sort of celebrity, not just an American kid, scrapping his way through life and hoping it makes a difference to somebody. So, starting perhaps as early as January, I started writing out my packing list. I had already been planning what to bring since I got home last summer, reflecting on what I had brought last time and deciding what was helpful and what was not; brainstorming what could be more useful. So even though this is early to be packing, I'm still months behind my *brain's* schedule.

I realize also that I have already packed a lot of my emotional baggage for this trip. The frustration of leaving a job, the fear of not getting another one...it's as if I've tried to stuff these feelings in a bag and just tuck them away until Africa, not thinking about them again until I feel better. But I wonder what sort of consequences all this baggage will have on my trip. I packed my bag full of things that will be useful – I'm concerned that my heart is not as well packed...

May 10, 2010

T- Day 53

Monday

Stephanie was surprised that I was only staying for three months. Stephanie is a young woman from upstate New York who will be coming to Amani Center with me this year. I met her family when I attended Cornell University seven years ago. She was looking for a place to do a year of mission work, I was looking for another person to share my African experience with – it was perfect. So we made an connected with each other and John at the Amani Center and began to plan away. We scheduled our travel together: same dates, same airline, same flight. But it never occurred to me that she didn't realize I was planning to return at the end of the summer.

Were you hoping I would stay longer? I typed over our online chat. But that wasn't what I meant. What I meant was: "I've been wanting to go to Africa permanently but haven't been able to because of finances. But all I need is one good reason, and I'll put finances aside and make a year-long commitment."

One year doesn't seem like big deal in the span of a lifetime, but imagine if you missed the year you graduated from high school or college and were suddenly without a diploma. Imagine if you missed the year you met your spouse and suddenly didn't have that companionship. Imagine if you missed the year you were born. One year can change a lifetime. So can one instant message.

Well, she typed back, if you stayed, it would really help my Steph Safety Plan.

So that's it. I won't be looking for a job to come back to at the end of the summer. I won't be coming back at the end of the summer. I honestly don't know when I'll be coming back. Maybe I'll be able to spend the full year abroad, but I may have to come back early to look for a teaching job. Or maybe...

I've been toying with the idea of trying to find a teaching job in Tanzania. I've just been assuming that a job there wouldn't pay well enough that I could pay off my student loans. But I've never actually looked into it. What if there was a way? I would probably have to move to a city instead of continuing in the rural area, but Dodoma is only an hour bus ride away, and lots of people commute back and forth on the weekends. Maybe...maybe this year will change *everything*.

May 20, 2010

T- Day 43

Thursday

Eleven days: Three working days. Two doctor's appointments. Two counseling appointments. One wedding, and I'm gone. It's another 43 days before I'll be in Africa, but I leave Butte (Montana) in eleven days. Before I'm going to New York, I'm going to visit my brother, my sister, and my grandmother. I'm getting excited. Although...

I woke up one day last week just scared to go to Africa. I don't know what I was thinking about. All I know is that for the first time since my first trip overseas, I was scared to go.

The feeling went away, but it's still a little unnerving to think about. Was I afraid that I wouldn't be able to handle a year? Was I scared that I would make some kind of major mistake while I'm over there? Was I thinking about not coming home? I guess any and all of those are possible. Anything is possible. Sometimes I have to remind myself that good things are possible too.

I'm really excited about teaching. Ideas for what and how to teach have been rumbling around my head, a lot of it inspired by my Rosetta Stone program.. Stephanie and I decided we would try to team teach English in the local schools. I have never tried teaching in the grade schools because I would have needed a translator. But with two of us volunteering, one can be the teacher and the other can be the mock student, showing the kids how to respond until they are comfortable enough to do so independently. I want the kids to have a really functional knowledge of the English language. It's a strange system of education because the students there learn about grammar and mechanics, but they don't ever learn how to *speak* and *understand* English. They can answer test questions about the language, but they can't hold a conversation in it. I think the end goal of multilingual education is communication, not knowledge, and I hope the school administrators will let me teach like that.

It would be so exciting to get the kids to the point where I could have conversations with them, learn things about them, tell them things I know. Maybe one of those good things that could happen this year is getting a few of the students to that point in their English skill.

May 23, 2010

T- Day 40

Sunday

I received money for five Bibles today. That was an unexpected blessing, which puts me at only...let's see...32,667 Bibles behind my goal.

Last year, I found out that none of the people in my choir had their own Bibles – not unusual at all, I found out, even for many pastors. I used my spending money to buy Bibles for my 20-something member choir. And from that point on, I didn't go a week without a request from some person – often a stranger – for a Bible of their own. I made it my goal to return with more Bibles on my next visit.

I was praying one night and distracted by thoughts of how many Bibles a couple hundred dollars would buy if I could raise that much extra. As I was praying and thinking, I felt God impress the words on my heart, "That isn't enough." A bit nervously, I scribbled in my prayer journal: *How much is enough?*

The answer came to me in the same clear thought impressed in my mind that had spoken to me initially. "One for every person in Butte." I found out one of the better ways to distinguish whether a thought is from God or simply the regular neural synapses of a regular human brain: if you can't even believe the thought, it probably wasn't yours. And, trust me, I didn't believe it. How on earth was I going to raise money for that many Bibles? I didn't even know exactly how many Bibles that was. I hopped online to the Census Bureau's website, pulled out my dad's Almanac, and got a couple different estimates. With the 2010 Census coming up, I decided to just wait for the most recent data. But I had a good estimate: 33,000.

Intimidated by the task, I began in a few of the churches that I had connections to here in Butte. As I tried to reach out into other churches, I ran into a few roadblocks. Those roadblocks cause me to stumble and fall flat on my fundraising face. So I'll be heading to Africa this year with only enough money for 300 some Bibles, keeping a pace that will take only another hundred years to complete my goal.

But the thirty-five dollars I received today from a church I had never visited before reminded me that each Bible is full of the powerful and effective word of God. Three hundred lives will be changed this coming year, and (I hope) many, many more to come.

May 26, 2010

T- Day 37

Wednesday

The complexities of this trip always start out so innocently.

Stephanie: How do I get money to John? Do I have to carry it over with me?

Me: No, I'm pretty sure we can just write checks when we get there.

Stephanie. Great! And how much money will I need?

Me: uh...

So it begins. I have to admit that I didn't keep careful track of how much money I spent the last two years. But in order to give Stephanie a good answer, I had to figure out how much I *probably* spend every month at Amani. This spurred a late night Microsoft Excel flurry that ended with me having a complete year's budget, with spots for any expenditure so I can know whether or not I'm staying on track as the month goes on. The real hang up about staying on track, though, is that I'd have to *get* on track to begin with.

My total year's budget put me at \$3,110. I have in my account enough money for a plane ticket home (I only purchased a one-way there) and \$200. While logical, rational thinking would tell me that I should be panicked and desperate right now, I'm actually pretty excited about this three thousand dollar budgeting shortfall. I am still hoping for donations to come in from family and friends who want to support my work, but at the same, I know that God will use my financial situation as a blessing either way. Last year, when I had plenty of money to spend, I could buy the more expensive bus tickets that guaranteed a seat, and I would give them to the first pregnant woman who came on with a standing-only ticket. I could take kids from my choir on a one-day trip to the city so they could see (for the first time) some of the wild animals that live in their own country, just like my aunt and uncle would do for me every time I visited them – taking me to some museum and making me feel like a king because they could. (And just like my aunt and uncle did with me, I treated my kids to ice cream along the way.) I could buy Bibles for an entire church choir and several others who needed them. But what if I can't? You see, my budget was based on living like an American during my year in Tanzania. What if I have to live like the people there, doing only what they do, affording only what they afford? It could be an incredible blessing disguised as a complete financial disaster. My only regret is that it would limit the ways I could bless the people of Tanzania.

May 28, 2010

T- Day 35

Friday

There's nothing quite like a meal of Mountain Dew and iced animal crackers.

I just made a post-midnight drive back from Missoula (two hours away from my home town of Butte and two-and-a-half from my Godmother's house – it's currently just after 4:45am, and I'm debating whether to try to sleep before work tomorrow) so I thought it'd be a good idea to have a little caffeine to help keep me awake and something to munch on to help keep me focused. My stomach thought otherwise. *But*, it had a chance for a real meal earlier, so my stomach really doesn't have room to complain.

A friend and I went out to eat at 9:30 pm because I had just left my friend Caenan's house having only eaten one hamburger and six oatmeal cookies. So naturally, I was still hungry. My friend and I drove around town for a good half hour, arguing about who had to decide where we were eating. Finally, we pulled up to Hoagieville (Missoula sandwich shop), ordered our meals, and proceeded to stare at them blankly. It turned out neither of us were really hungry.

Officially, I was in Missoula for a final appointment with my psychiatrist to discuss the medication I'll be taking for the year that I'm away. But the more important business of my trip was saying goodbye to my friends in Missoula before I leave Montana on Monday morning. The night reminded me of how things are certain to be different when I come back – new apartments, new favorite activities, maybe even new cities for my friends who are graduating and getting jobs. The goodbye at Hoagieville was particularly hard because my friend there isn't a Christian.

"I want you to do something for me," I said. "If anything happens to me in Africa, and...and I don't come back...I want you to talk to someone about Jesus."

I had been trying to prepare myself for saying that all week long, and I had hoped it would come out more eloquently than that. But despite stumbling over my own tongue, the request was sincere.

My friend asked me to promise something in return: that I would come back from Africa so that I could talk about Jesus myself.

It was a promise that I desperately wanted to make. I've missed many opportunities over the years to share the reality of who Jesus is. The opportunities I regret the most are when I

haven't shared with the people closest to me, the people who I don't want to spend eternity without. So I promised that I would try.

That answer wasn't good enough. My friend told me several times to promise to come back, but I couldn't promise something I can't control. "*In his heart, a man plans his course,*" says Proverbs 16:9, "*but the Lord determines his steps.*"

I promised that I would do everything I could to make it back from Africa safely, but that it wasn't up to me. And if something does happen, I don't want there to be a doubt in anyone's mind who it was that I gave my life for: my Savior and King, Jesus.

But even so, I am afraid of something happening to me overseas. I am afraid of never seeing my family again, afraid of leaving behind this life and everything I know, and afraid (for the first time in my life) of snakes.

My friend Dinna killed a snake last year, and I wanted to know whether it had been poisonous or if we could have let it live. My research led me to a list of all the local snakes that *were* poisonous, and after looking through the list, I could hardly blame Dinna for killing first and not bothering to ask questions later. Dinna knows about the dangers of snakes better than most: her brother has an eight inch long scar running up his arm from an incident where he was bitten on the hand by a cobra. John was able to get him to the tribal doctors in time for them to save his life, but the treatment left its mark.

Each time I think about the danger of snakes, I am amazed at the faith of Paul in the face of death. The story of Acts (28:3-5) tells us that *after* surviving a fourteen-day storm on the sea that capped off with a shipwreck, "*Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, 'This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live'. But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects.*"

Did Paul *know* that he wasn't going to die when the snake bit him? Or did he know that it didn't matter if he died or not, that Jesus had promised him eternal life and would be faithful to that promise. When I'm facing death – whether it's a snake bite in Africa or a car wreck in America or cancer years down the road – will I be able to shake the viper off into the fire?

Will you?