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*Faith and Other Flat Tires*

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## Foreword

Writing this foreword for Andrea is like showing the house you grew up in to good friends. To them it is simply a house, beautiful and comfortable, perhaps, but little more. But to you it is full of memory and meaning, a living repository of past relationships and events that shaped your life into what it is today.

Andrea is like that old house to me. She and I “have history.” I have known her parents for more years than I dare count, and Andrea almost as long. My first clear recollection of her dates back to her senior year in high school, though I met her long before that. She enrolled in one of the classes I teach at Whitworth University. A year later, I asked her to serve as my part-time nanny to care for my children and to help with household responsibilities, which enabled me to stay on top of the challenges I faced as a widowed father of three. In this capacity, she also traveled with our family to Kenya during the summer of 2000. Later, at her wedding, I officiated and my children sang. Last year she read Scripture at my wedding. History indeed.

Still, I write this foreword not because we have history but because I want to introduce you to a promising young writer and her first book. It is a memoir, or what English departments these days call “creative nonfiction.” The

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memoir genre is fraught with peril. For every memoir that works, many more fail. The medium has become predictable: author tells a sad tale of family problems and personal suffering, which turns said author into a victim or a victor, depending on the response. The competition for “most horrible background” seems fierce, thus proving the adage that it is easier to write about evil than it is to write about good.

Andrea’s memoir is both different and as refreshing as her personality. She describes her background—family, mentors, church, relationships, experiences—with respect, affection, and realism, neither idealizing nor demonizing. As she makes plain, her background is not really the issue at all; as the word implies, it is like backdrop and props on a stage. Instead, she emphasizes what is in the foreground—her own struggle of faith, which she explores with honesty and wisdom. She is not a victim, but she is not always the victor, as you will see. She strikes a balance between telling a story that is both particular and universal, particular because it grew out of a set of circumstances unique to her, but also universal because it addresses what every human being on planet earth has to face sooner or later—the question of whether it is possible to believe in God while living in a very fallen, broken, confusing world.

She has done it well. She tells her story without becoming indulgent as a victim or preachy as the victor. She invites the reader in, saying, in effect, “This is my story. I present it to you as one person’s struggle for faith.” It is so carefully and seamlessly crafted that, though I began the book thinking about her story, I ended it thinking about my own. The

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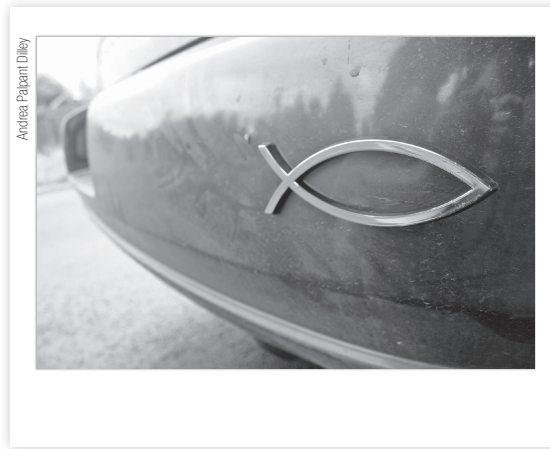
shift happened so subtly and mysteriously I hardly knew it happened at all, except that suddenly I found myself reflecting on what faith means in ordinary life, how faith is forged, why it comes so hard for so many of us. As this book illustrates, good stories start out as windows and end up as mirrors. That Andrea has an uncommonly gracious heart, a good eye and an ear for language, a mind for detail, and patience to find the right word and turn the right phrase has helped to make this a fine book. Still, her skill, however impressive, is not really the point. Her ability to reflect on the past, to find meaning, and to see grace in people and events that seemed anything but gracious is what won me over. I suspect that it will win you over too.

It is my privilege, therefore, to introduce Andrea Palpant Dilley, to celebrate her rare talent and good heart, and to commend her book to you, which I suspect will be the first of many.

—Jerry Sittser  
Spokane, Washington

## Introduction

# STRIPPING OFF THE ICHTHUS



During my junior year in college, I took a butter knife from my mother's kitchen one afternoon and scraped the Christian fish decal off the back bumper of my Plymouth hatchback. The car was a tin can on wheels. The outside door handle on the driver's side came off in your hand sometimes, and the engine reeked of sulfur when you drove uphill. My older brother, Ben, had the car for a few years

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and drove his first girlfriend around in it. After he graduated from college, the car became mine.

On the back bumper, Ben had stuck one of those faux-chrome Ichthus decals that you can buy at Christian bookstores. I don't know what exactly prompted me to scrape it off, but I can still remember the series of steps I took in doing it. I pulled open the kitchen drawer, lifted a butter knife from the silverware tray, and then walked out into the street where the car was parked. Squatting near the tailpipe, I scratched off the fish decal and with relief watched it fall away in small flakes. I wanted the car as neutral space. I wanted an unmarked car as a symbol of an unmarked heart.

The reasons for my discontent were complicated. I wasn't raised by zealous, overbearing parents, and I didn't grow up in a hyper-conservative church. Roughly the first six years of my life were spent in East Africa, where my parents worked as Quaker medical missionaries. When I was seven, we moved to the Pacific Northwest and started attending a Presbyterian church that over the years gave me hymns and mission trips and potluck dinners. I grew up in a healthy Christian home and a healthy Christian community. And yet, beginning in adolescence, I started questioning everything I'd been raised to believe.

One of the stories of my Christian childhood was *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the allegory of faith written in 1678 by John Bunyan. In the story, Pilgrim (or "Christian") leaves behind his family and goes on a lifelong pilgrimage in search of heaven, the Celestial City. The characters—like Mr. Great Heart, Mr. Worldly Wiseman, and Obstinate—symbolize



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different qualities that either bolster or weaken a person's faith. The places—like Doubting Castle, the Slough of Despond, and the Hill of Difficulty—symbolize different episodes in a person's spiritual journey. My parents read *The Pilgrim's Progress* to my brothers and me when we were growing up. Sprawled out on my mother's lap, I would listen to her voice carry across countries of myth and imagination while Pilgrim went on his epic journey, slaying dragons and getting sucked into mud pits.

The story of *The Pilgrim's Progress* had a campy, otherworldly quality that I loved as a kid. But once I became a young adult, my own life more and more started to resemble Pilgrim's. I passed through episodes of doubt, faith, and despondency. Different people traveled with me along the various stretches of my journey. Never as straightforward as the characters in an allegory—conveniently named Charity and Help or Lord Hate-good and Beelzebub—the people in my life were less caricatured and more complex. Some of them turned me toward faith, some turned me away from faith, and some did both. Some traveled with me for discreet episodes and some for decades.

The most unsettling part of my pilgrimage took place during my early twenties, right after college. When people muse to me about how fondly they remember that era of their lives, I want to say, "What were you smoking back then, and what are you smoking now?" My twenties were marked mostly by disillusionment. After graduating, I worked four part-time jobs to pay the bills and lived alone for a time in an old apartment. I fell in love with complicated men—including someone twice my age who had a messy marriage

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history—and found myself perpetually brokenhearted. And I indulged the cliché rebellions of a Christian girl, experimenting with cigarettes, hanging out in bars, and drinking hard alcohol.

If I follow the standard testimonial conversion narrative for Christians, what I'm supposed to say next is that all of this “secularity” I experienced led me to question my faith. The script goes something like this:

Step 1: Grow up in a Christian church.

Step 2: Go off to college away from said church.

Step 3: Be exposed to the enticements of secular life.

Step 4: Try drugs and cigarettes and Pearl Jam.

Step 5: Leave the church because of so-called worldly enticements.

Step 6: Experience epiphany; realize vapidness of said secular things.

Step 7: Return to church with penitent heart.

Step 8: Reestablish faith, discover good living.

The pilgrimage is never that straightforward, at least not for most of us. The path I took both paralleled and deviated from this script and was motivated less by external influences and more by my own spiritual unrest.

During college, I thought of my struggle in terms of the literature I was reading. I discovered the southern Catholic writer Walker Percy and read his novel *The Moviegoer*, a less explicitly Christian, more contemporary version of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In *The Moviegoer*, the main character, Binx Bolling, goes on what he calls “the search,” roaming around

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the streets of New Orleans trying to find God and meaning in the modern malaise. He feels lost, listless, and alone.

Turn-of-the-century German poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote too about “the search,” but in different terms. During my senior year, one of my English professors read me a poem from Rilke’s *Das Stundenbuch* (*A Book for the Hours of Prayer*). While I was sitting in the English lounge one afternoon, he came into the room carrying a book in that priestly way that professors do. He stood opposite me and began to read aloud:

Sometimes a man stands up during supper  
and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking,  
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.

And his children say blessings on him as if he were dead.

And another man, who remains inside his own house,  
stays there, inside the dishes and in the glasses,  
so that his children have to go far out into the world  
toward that same church, which he forgot.

I won’t attempt to interpret the whole poem here. But in the first stanza, the man who walks out of the house seems to be going on a spiritual journey in search of God, just as Bunyan’s Pilgrim does. I see my own story too as a pilgrimage. For me, though, the end point was always unclear. I didn’t know whether I was leaving the church to find God or leaving my Christian childhood for a different kind of faith or something else entirely. Mostly I just felt confused. I progressed, regressed, retraced my steps, and got lost. If I were a Christian at all, then I was an Old Testament Christian prone

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to David's longing, Ruth's homelessness, and Solomon's love of beauty and dominion.

As a coming-of-age experience, my pilgrimage was motivated by three separate but concurrent desires for faith, love, and meaning. I was trying to find purpose in my work, a partner on my journey, and a worldview I could believe in. I felt compelled to search for God at the same time that I harbored serious doubts and questions: why does God seem distant? Why do people suffer? Why does the church seem dysfunctional? The questions started weighing down my heart like stones and eventually became too much for me to handle. At age twenty-three, I stepped over the threshold of the church and walked away. I had no idea if I would come back.

This book tells the story of what came of my search. It is written for people who, like me, find themselves driven by doubt and wandering the margins in search of a place to call home.



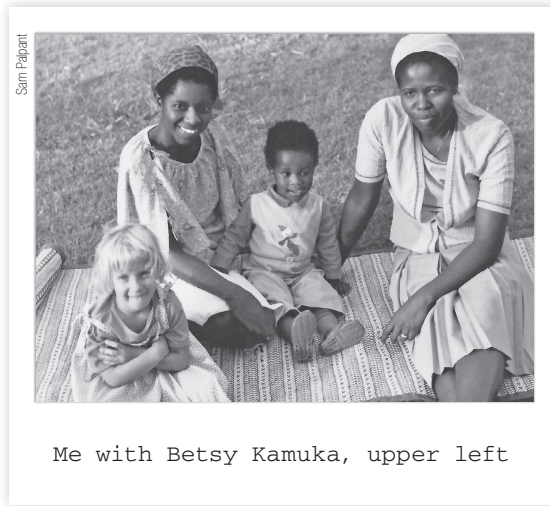
## **THE HOUSE OF THE INTERPRETER**

### **A CHILDHOOD RETROSPECTIVE**

The House of the Interpreter is a rest stop along the way, a type of spiritual museum providing guidance to Pilgrim and his companions on the road. It contains pictures and dioramas that portray aspects of the Christian faith and lessons on how to live the Christian life.

## Chapter 1

# MUNGU YU MWEMA



One winter afternoon when I was twelve years old, my father picked up a hitchhiker. My two brothers were sitting with me in the back seat of our Plymouth Voyager van, which my grandfather had hauled off the junkyard and rebuilt. The cars we drove were all orphans that had been rolled or flooded or wrecked. The Voyager had a big dent in the sliding door from a downhill tumble.

The hitchhiker looked sixteen or seventeen, a tall Scandinavian wearing blue jeans with big holes in the knees. It

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was thirty-five degrees out. He ducked his head and climbed into the van with us, and then my dad drove on. The ensuing conversation, which I will never forget, went something like this:

“These are my kids, Andrea, Ben, and Nate. My name’s Sam. What’s your name?”

“Donovan,” the hitchhiker said.

“Oh, that’s a good name.” My father paused. “Have you ever heard of Amy Carmichael?”

“Um, no . . .”

“She was a Christian missionary to India who worked to save young girls from sex trade enslavement. The place where she worked was called Dohnavur, which is kind of close to your name, Donovan. So you have a good name, a name with Christian purpose.”

“Oh.”

In the hitchhiker’s long pause that followed, I remember thinking, My father is out of his mind, preying on this young hitchhiker who wanted a ride and instead got a church sermon on Christian missionary history. I felt embarrassed in the same way I did when my dad prayed over our food in a restaurant and the waiter brought the ketchup while he was still praying.

Donovan rode with us for several miles until we reached the cut-off road to our house. After pulling the van onto the shoulder to let him out, my dad turned to my older brother, who was about the same size as the hitchhiker, and said, “Ben, why don’t you give Donovan your jeans. It’s cold out.”

In the back seat of the van, Ben took off his pants and gave them to the hitchhiker while my little brother and I

looked sideways at each other. Proverbial Christian wisdom says you give away the coat off your back, not the pants off your backside. In exchange for my brother's jeans, the hitchhiker handed over his own—the jeans with big holes in the knees—and my brother wrestled them on. Then Donovan got out. He was headed farther north toward Canada. I watched from the back seat as he diminished into the distance, a tall, lean figure standing on the side of a long winter road.

These years later, I remember the whole exchange as a small act of goodness. My father, the funny priest, blessed a hitchhiker not with holy water but with jeans. I can see this only in retrospect, though. Then, in my early teens, my mom and dad seemed painfully Christian and parental. After supper every night we had what was called “family time.” We sometimes took walks in the woods or played card games, but more often than not, my dad directed us in an intellectual exercise of some kind. He would stride over to the living room bookshelves to find a book like *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, then read a passage aloud and try to engage us in dialogue. On occasion, he slid out one of the burgundy volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which my mom had bought from a door-to-door salesman in the mid-1980s. Family time turned into the *Jeopardy* game show, except that we didn't win any money and Dad got to pick the categories: French Huguenot history for 200. Invertebrate biology for 300.

“Dad, I have no idea,” I said in response to one of his trivia questions. “You *know* I don't know. Cut me a break.”

My father's most notorious family time activities weren't



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academic or literary; they were spiritual. He would ask us questions like, “How did you see the presence of God in your day today?” Or, as a way to bring together humor, metaphor, and my mother’s dinner menu, he would ask, “How is the Christian life like a plate full of spaghetti?” My brothers and I had to ponder the analogy—maybe grace is a good meatball?—and then after a while, one of us would hold up our shackled wrists and ask to be excused.

My mother too had intense parenting tics. As an ex-hippy who didn’t want her kids to end up brainwashed by mainstream America, she initiated a loosely mandated ban against instruments of pop and consumer culture. On her list of taboos:

TV = lazy bones

Video games = bad reader

Headphones = bad listener

Sunglasses = bad eye contact

“You can’t trust a person who hides his eyes,” she would say. “You look a person right in the eye; that’s what you do.”

My parents never bought a TV. Instead of watching cartoons, we read comic books, kids books, and biographies of Christian history. My mother read us stories about Amy Carmichael, the missionary to India, and George Washington Carver, the African-American botanist who in the 1920s helped alleviate poverty in the South. After dinner every night, my parents took turns reading aloud to the whole family from books like the Lord of the Rings series and the Narnia series.

Along with the taboos and the TV alternatives, my parents developed an arsenal of Christian character-forming mantras that were meant to counter the excesses of Western individualism (like selfishness) and teach us how to be strong, brave, and good.

Mantra 1: “Love is a choice, not a feeling.”

This phrase was meant to help us overcome the weak, bleeding-heart melodrama of teen and preteen behavior. Before I was even old enough to have a crush on the kid next door, I knew love and marriage were not about romance but about choice, commitment, and endurance. Heavy stuff for a ten-year-old. I tease my parents now for laying on their kids such crushing truths of life, but they were honest, at least, doing their best to abolish the delusions of childhood.

Mantra 2: “Happiness is a choice.”

As a sibling mantra to “Love is a choice,” this phrase meant “Quit your bellyaching. Check your attitude.”

Mantra 3: “It’s good missionary training.”

My parents used this phrase when my brothers and I complained about doing things we didn’t like. It became the catch-all call for “Buck up and deal with it” and sometimes involved leaning over our dinner plates to shovel in the beans that we didn’t want to eat.

Mantra 4: “Choices have consequences.”

This phrase usually came before a spank to the backside and was another way of saying, “You chose this, not me. Try door number two next time.”

Mantra 5: “Go M.A.D.”

M.A.D. was an acronym for “make a difference.” After

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hearing the phrase from Christian radio host Ron Hutchcraft, my mother started using it every day as my brothers and I walked out the door to catch the school bus. Kids, not just adults, were responsible to help alleviate the burden of the human condition by making the world a better place to live.

Going M.A.D. took various forms. When I was eight, my parents signed up to be foster parents with a humanitarian organization called Healing the Children, which brought patients from all over the world for medical treatment in the US. My brothers and I became temporary siblings to kids with brittle bone disease and Down syndrome who came for months or sometimes years to live with us. We pushed them around in their wheelchairs, played with them, and shared our bedrooms with them.

As if being a foster family wasn't enough, after school once a week my mom took us to visit elderly widows from the church who were cooped up at home watching TV and reading large-print copies of *Reader's Digest*. "You're ambassadors for the family," my mother said as we walked up to the front door of a widow's house. That was another one of her parenting mantras. In other words: Be good. Do good.

In so many ways, it humors me to remember the intensity of how I was raised. As the architects of my childhood, my parents mixed hippy social-justice values and Christian values to reinforce one overarching principle: anything that distracts you from a fierce focus on God, meaning, and the amelioration of suffering is not worth a cat sniff. Life was all about the big stuff—reaping wisdom from epic allegories like *The Pilgrim's Progress* and saving girls from sex exploitation.

Even now, I can still picture my mom holding up books at the dining room table and reading to us from those stories of hope and humanity. I can still remember my father saying in so many words to a hitchhiker, “Your name means something. Your life means something too.” A Christian, moral, and philanthropic imperative motivated my mom and dad. It drove them as parents. It also drove them in their decision to go to Africa as missionaries.



When my parents were first married back in the early '70s, they spent five years in Tucson while my dad did his internal medicine residency at the University of Arizona. At a church potluck sometime at the end of his residency, my parents heard about a Quaker organization called Friends United Meeting that was looking for medical missionary volunteers. My parents applied and then accepted an invitation to go to Africa. In July of 1979, we flew to England so my dad could attend tropical medicine school for three months. Then we moved to East Africa, where we lived for almost six years.

The Quakers commissioned my parents to the Lugulu Friends Hospital in a rural agrarian area of western Kenya. The town of Lugulu had a quarter-mile strip of *dukas*, small storefronts made of mud thatch with corrugated tin pinned down for roofs. In the farm fields outside town, women worked by hand with their babies tied on their backs, tilling their way across the wide countryside of the western highlands. It was an eight-hour drive from Lugulu to Nairobi.

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International mail took weeks and often months to reach us. Phone calls cost a fortune. We lived out in the bush, as people called it. The US was so far away that in 1981 when we got a package from Uncle John in Chicago containing an audiocassette of the ethereal music to *Chariots of Fire*, my parents thought the film was about aliens.

The story of my parents' first year as missionaries is part of family lore. When we first arrived, Ben at age five learned from his new Kenyan friends how to swear in Bukusu, the local tribal language. One of the neighbors came to my mother and said, "Do you know what your son's saying?" My mom was appalled. Ben was sitting at the top of a guava tree cussing. Not long afterward, he threw a stick at our next-door neighbor, a woman named Florah. Throwing sticks at the neighbor doesn't usually come recommended in the manual on how to start missionary life. Swearing from the top of a tree doesn't come recommended either.

As the child of my missionary parents, I have my own memories, one of which is captured in a photograph that I've kept all these years. My brothers and I are sitting with our dad in a dead baobab tree. We're crouched together in the heart of the tree where the branches depart from the trunk, looking small in the great expanse around us and yet safe in our father's arms. The picture is framed in a wide panorama. Mount Kilimanjaro rises behind us. The Rift Valley savanna spreads out to the east and west, part of a three-thousand-mile basin that cuts a long swathe from Syria all the way south to Mozambique.

Historically, the Rift is purported to be the origin of all humanity. To me, it represents the origin of my childhood

not just geographically—I grew up on the high plains that run west of the Rift—but spiritually. I came to faith in that place. The trajectory of my spiritual history began there. My relationship with the church began there too.

Every Sunday in Lugulu, we attended a nondenominational church that met in an A-frame auditorium. I liked church as a kid. For most of the service, we stood singing, almost seven hundred people clapping and shaking our tambourines as mourning doves hovered and cooed in the rafters above. The auditorium had tall windows that were almost always left open. Walking across the compound toward the church, you could hear the sound of the congregation swelling and lifting in song. I’ve never heard anything like it again.

As a multilingual church, we sang both in English and in Swahili. One of the hymns was called “Mungu Yu Mwema”:

Mungu yu mwema (God is so good),  
Mungu yu mwema (God is so good),  
Mungu yu mwema (God is so good),  
Yu mwema kwangu (He is so good to me).

That hymn reminds me of my childhood in Kenya the way sugar cane and hibiscus flowers remind me of that time. It conjures up, too, a whole community of people who raised me to believe in God and in God’s goodness.

Over the fence behind our house lived Florah Ashene, the woman Ben threw a stick at when we first arrived. She taught home economics at the local high school and took part in a weekly Bible study with my parents and other neighbors in Lugulu. All the kids in the study memorized

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Bible verses and then recited them to parents in the fellowship. When it was Florah's turn to be my "Scripture auntie," I walked over to her house, stood in her kitchen, and said my passage by heart. She hugged me and sent me home with bananas.

Down the road lived Elijah Malenji, a man who became like an uncle to the kids in the community. He loved on us and prayed for us. As an evangelist with Trinity Fellowship, he owned an old reel-to-reel film projector and used to show Christian films like *The Pilgrim's Progress* at the high school auditorium where we met for church or on the hospital wards where my dad worked. We watched the '70s version with bad actors wearing fake, pointy beards and black Puritan hats. I remember sitting in the dark on the hospital's cold cement floor, listening to the sound of filmstrip ticking through the film reel as moths crossed the projector beam and Pilgrim trudged through the Slough of Despond.

Next door to us lived a Ugandan refugee named Betsy Kamuka, who worked with my dad at the hospital as head nurse and director of the medical student program. She was a smart, tough woman whose husband had left her to raise their son, Ivan, alone. We called her "Auntie Betsy." If other people in Lugulu were like backup singers for my spiritual formation, then Auntie Betsy was the lead gospel singer. She was the one who led me to faith. I was converted to Christianity not by my religious parents, strangely, but by an African Christian living in Lugulu.

On the day of my conversion, I had gone over to Betsy's house to cook with her, something I did often. Her kitchen

was the size of a closet with a small window facing south into the sun. That afternoon, while she and I sat beside a Kenyan jiko stove stirring a pot of frying onions, she asked me questions in the style of an informal catechism.

Do you know that God made you and loves you?

Do you believe that Jesus died for your sins?

Do you want to follow Jesus?

I don't remember what I said, exactly. But I remember insignificant details, those fragmented snapshots of a child's memory, like the can of Blue Band margarine sitting on the ground beside us as we talked and cooked. I remember, too, the feel of the cold iron frame of Betsy's bed after she invited me back into her room to ask Jesus into my heart. I held onto it while kneeling down in the dim light and leaning my head against the mattress to pray. There was no fanfare and no emotional frenzy. The experience seemed almost matter-of-fact. In the Lugulu community, learning about God was tantamount to learning about gravity. You had to understand it to make sense of things. Simple as that. After we prayed, Betsy said "Amen," and then we went back to her kitchen to cook.

As I look back now, I see my child self as another person, the kid I once was kneeling by a bed and making a significant existential decision. I'm not sure I had full awareness of what it meant. But what stands out more than the moment of my conversion are the years surrounding it, the larger religious context that set the course for the rest of my life. I grew up in a cross-cultural Christian community driven by an intense sense of ultimate purpose. Everything mattered. Every person mattered. Every moment mattered.



## FAITH AND OTHER FLAT TIRES

As a kid, I felt carried by the stability of that community and by the strength of its purpose. I remember many evenings falling asleep on my mother's lap in a living room full of neighbors. Listening at first to conversation about East African politics or child rearing or church building, I would slip into a state of oblivion as their voices became a soft, collective murmur carrying me into the night, like ocean waves taking me out on the tide. The adults made sense of the world while I drifted off to sleep.



Not everything, though, seemed harbored to safety in the hands of a good community and a good God. Six months before we arrived in Africa and one year after I was born, Uganda's dictator Idi Amin went into exile and left behind one of the century's most horrific genocides, a reign of darkness and bloodletting that threw its shadow over all of East Africa and over the community of Lugulu. Located only hours from the Ugandan border, Lugulu was flooded with refugees who lived through Amin's regime. They were doctors and nurses at the hospital where my dad worked, teachers at the nearby high school, kids next door. Down the road from us lived a family who had fled Amin's soldiers, forded a river with their five children, the youngest ones riding piggyback, and found shelter in a room behind a bar just inside the Kenyan border.

I grew up in this setting. Mortality and instability were almost mundane. On any given day in Lugulu, my dad was diagnosing sickle-cell at the hospital. My mom was praying

the last prayer on someone's deathbed and then pinching ants off her son's pants after he'd climbed an infested hibiscus tree in the front yard. When the Kenyan military tried to overthrow the president, I overheard my parents talking with neighbors about *coup d'état*, and when Obote took over Uganda after Amin, I heard them talk about guerilla armies. I pictured men crouched in the back of army trucks, passing under trees where black, hairy gorillas waited to leap down and ambush them in the dark.

Rather than shelter their kids, my mom and dad brought us alongside. Although I didn't know it at the time, that decision had a lot to do with how my faith was formed. My parents said in so many words, Hey, this is the way it is. This is life in the world you live in. Sometimes things get messy. Sometimes God's a mystery. My dad, for example, took my older brother to Uganda during government unrest. During drought, we hauled water from the cistern along with our neighbors. We attended funerals for my dad's patients and helped paint the casket for a stillborn baby. When my mom visited people on the hospital wards every week, my brothers and I went with her.

While most American kids my age were playing Pac-Man or watching cartoons, I was spending time in a rural Quaker hospital in western Kenya. To this day, I can still picture the inpatient wards and the white-smocked nurses scurrying around the stations at the far end of the room. I can see the worn iron bed frames lined up in symmetrical rows, the gray wool blankets on each bed, the cold cement floors. I remember what it was like walking into the ward every week and being overwhelmed by the stench of

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urine and antiseptic. We learned how to pinch our noses and breathe through our mouths. On every visit, my mom and I sat next to one hospital bed after another. We talked with each patient. We prayed with them and brought them books to read. To the kids on the ward, we brought our basket of Legos.

On one of our hospital rounds, we met a twelve-year-old boy named Losokwoi. He had come from the nomadic Pokot tribe in northern Kenya to be treated for severe tuberculosis of the brain and weighed about forty pounds from malnourishment. The nurses flipped him from side to side, trying to take care of his constant bedsores. He couldn't walk. He couldn't speak Swahili. But every week, Ben played Legos with him, spreading the pieces out on the blanket in between Losokwoi's legs.

Losokwoi stayed in Lugulu for about two months. It was long enough for us to get to know him well. Somewhere toward the end of that time, the missionary pastor who had come with him to Lugulu baptized him in our bathroom tub. One afternoon, my dad brought Losokwoi from the hospital and pushed his wheelchair through our living room and down the hallway to the bathroom. Then he and the pastor together lifted the boy's frail body out of the chair and lowered him into the tub. I stood out in the hallway with my mom and brothers, watching as the pastor bent him back into the tub water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Losokwoi died two weeks later. My father came home from the hospital one morning before the sun rose and told us. "The nurses haven't removed his body from the ward,"

he said to my mother. “None of the night staff want to go to the morgue. They’re leaving it for a day worker. But I don’t want to wait. I need Ben.”

My mom consented, and I watched my nine-year-old brother head out in the early morning dark to go see his dead friend—one boy preparing another boy for burial. My dad carried the body, and Ben carried the keys. They walked from the hospital to the morgue, a mud hut building that sat forty feet from the front door of our house. My brother waited outside while my father went in and laid Losokwoi’s body in the morgue. They came home just as the sun was beginning to rise.

As we sat at the dining room table that morning, my dad bowed his head to say a blessing. Halfway through the prayer, he covered his face with his hands and started sobbing. We had guests visiting from Scandinavia. Everyone sat quietly for a moment, wondering what to do with a grown man and his grief. Then my mom took over saying the prayer. I kept my eyes open the whole time, watching my dad weep with a kind of transparency that shocked me. I had never seen him cry before.

Two days later, my mom drove my brothers and me to the funeral in a small town called Kitale. Dad couldn’t go; he had to stay and work at the hospital. During the ceremony, we stood by the hole and helped throw dirt onto the wood coffin. A small frog jumped in. A pastor said a prayer. Some kids stood up and sang a song called “Jesus, I Heard You Have a Big House” as cemetery workers shoveled the remaining dirt.

Driving home, my mom talked to us about death.

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“Losokwoi’s body is like a tent that he lived in here on earth,” she said. “Just like in camping, he’s done with his tent now. It’s been folded up and put away. But the real Losokwoi is with Jesus in heaven.” We were riding in the old ’67 Ford Escort that we inherited as the Quaker missionary family. Along with my brothers, I sat on the ripped leather seats in the back and watched trees pass by outside the windows. None of us said anything.

Right then, all I knew was that a little boy had died and that I felt upset by it in a strange, inarticulate way. Years later, though, Losokwoi’s death meant something more to me. It became part of my pilgrim burden, one of those small stones in my heart that I carried around for years before I felt its full weight and before it gave heft to my struggle with the so-called problem of evil. Something was profoundly wrong with the world. God allowed suffering. God let a good kid die.