

Africa is Calling

By Mary Chilcote

Sleeping awake I hear the desperate cries of the lonely and forgotten children of Old Mutare Mission. The pungent smell of sadza, sweat, and dust returns. I feel the warmth of the scorching sun ablaze in the vast sky. The acacia trees whisper softly in the twilight as antelope graze peacefully in the plains. The drums of the Maasai warriors pound in my heart and their rich voices ring in my ears. I see the women carrying firewood on their heads and buckets of water from the stream in their rough hands, and a sleeping baby on their back. Destruction and pain have entangled the helpless children and people of this land. I see the ebony faces of beautiful children—frail, hopeless, afraid, tragic, staring longingly into my eyes searching for refuge. Africa is calling me.

I hated the orphanage, everything about it; the noise, the smells, the chaos, everything. We had moved to Zimbabwe to be missionaries, a term which I hardly understood at the age of four. All I knew was that we were in a strange place filled with strange and unfamiliar people. I grasped my mother's hand as we slowly walked toward the mission, the African sun glaring down on us. Because I was too young to go to school with my three older sisters, who always had exciting adventures without me, I was on the way to work with my mom at an orphanage. She told me that I would enjoy making new friends; however, I strongly disliked the idea of sharing my mom with twenty other children who weren't even hers. We finally arrived at the small, rundown, red brick building called Nherera or the Baby Fold. A small brick wall with an iron gate enclosed a courtyard in the center of the building. Clutching the hem of my mother's long cotton skirt I entered the orphanage unsure of what I would find.

Chaos greeted me. The laughter of older children playing soccer with a ball made from plastic bags, the agonizing screams of HIV-positive babies longing for comfort and food, the angry cries of two children fighting over a stuffed animal that was tattered and torn, the smell of sweat, and the foreign sounds of a new language, “Ndipe mvura! Ndipe mvura!”—“We want water!”—all swirling around in the dusty air. In a matter of seconds we were surrounded by swarms of children yelling, “Murungu! Murungu!”—“White people!” The rare and unexpected sight of a white person brought excitement and wonder to their faces. I was terrified. I clutched my mother’s skirt tighter as the children approached me. Their small dusty fingers grasped at the tendrils of my long golden-blond hair and touched my fair white skin. Others stood, frozen, in awe and confusion at the strange sight. I didn’t understand why they would do such a thing. Why were they filled with such zeal and fascination by my appearance? In the midst of the chaos I heard my mother’s calm and reassuring voice saying, “Mary, it’s okay. I’m right here sweetheart. Take my hand and follow me.” She led me to a corner of the courtyard away from the swarm of children and told me that she would be right back. There I stood, alone and helpless. With my hands over my ears to muffle the screams and shouts, I closed my eyes and imagined myself faraway from this horrible place.

The soft touch of a small, warm, and gentle hand broke my dream. I opened my eyes to see the deep, kind, dark eyes of a little girl who was about my age staring back at me. Her faded pink dress was tattered and her bare feet were rough and scratched. She stretched out her empty hand toward mine and smiled. Hesitantly, I took hold of her hand and followed her as she pulled me toward a rugged swing set. Her sweet songlike voice chattered away like a robin’s in spring. Even though I did not understand what she said, her voice brought me comfort and security. Her name was Beauty, and she was my first friend in Zimbabwe.

I left the orphanage that day with a new understanding of true compassion for others. The unexpected smile of an African child opened my eyes to the gift of friendship and love. The orphanage, once a place of fear and annoyance became a place of joy and familiarity, and I became a part of the chaos that I first despised. The deafening cries of hungry babies, the laughter of children playing in the sun, the voices of the many workers telling the impatient children to wait their turn for food, the pitter patter of bare feet running in the courtyard- all of this became a beautiful and unforgettable song; the song of Africa.

It had not rained in nearly two years. Severe drought ruled the land and all who lived under its malicious tyranny. My family, crammed into a rickety old truck, careened down the treacherous dirt road toward the home of a woman who lived about an hour away. We were going there to distribute bags of cornmeal, a staple food in Zimbabwe, to a family who had no food due to crop failure and lack of money. As we neared the small hut, made from the red African soil, no bigger than a single room, I saw the skeleton figures of children, barely clothed, playing in the dusty earth. We got out of the truck and began unloading the large bags of cornmeal. My sisters and I carried the gifts of food on top of our heads, like the many African women we had seen in the past few months, giggling as we clumsily tottered into the dim hut. The children saw us, and at once welcomed us into their home, beaming with joy, for their prayers had been answered, they would get to eat today.

Inside I was shocked to find only a few pots and pans for cooking, a pantry almost completely empty, and an elderly woman scooting toward us on an ancient rug. We learned that she had been crippled from birth, which to many Africans was a sign of God's punishment for evil deeds. Thus the old woman lived as an outcast unable to find a husband to support her and too poor to acquire medical help. Unable to have children of her own, the woman decided to

adopt two orphans who needed a kind and loving mother. To support herself, the woman made rugs out of scraps of rags that she found. Their only source of food was two scrawny chickens that provided them with eggs.

The ancient face marked with years of sorrow and despair glowed with joy at the sight of our gift and her loving eyes glistened with tears. Speechless and overwhelmed the woman embraced each of us as if we were one of her beloved children. As we turned to leave she told us to wait, for she had something to give us. She went into the empty pantry and brought out a bowl. She held it out to me with a smile and said in Swahili, "Take it. You have given my family hope and we must give you a gift in return." It was simply a bowl with five eggs inside, yet it was so much more than that. That bowl of eggs was all that this woman had left in the world and she wanted to give it to me. This great act of gratitude and humility pierced my heart. Although she had nothing, this woman gave me one of her most precious possessions simply because we brought her cornmeal. Her gift seemed much greater in value than ours. I will never forget the look of utter bliss on her face as she handed me those eggs. Through giving she received a gift as well; the gift of true joy and fulfillment in life.

The warmth of the African sun lingers on my skin. The smell of sweat and dust drifts back into my senses. The face of the ancient woman creeps into my mind, and the cries of the helpless children fill the crisp night air. Fifteen years ago Africa changed me. My experience there touched my heart and had a great impact on the person I am today. I want to live like the African people; with thankfulness for a new day to live, with contentment in all that I have, with simplicity, *generosity*, compassion, love, and hope. I hear the rhythmic beat of the deep drums and the powerful echoing voices ringing in song. Africa is calling me home.