

Calico's Little African Adventure: Part II

B. Calico-Hickey, DC

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Oh my ... what an adventure of my mind, heart and soul. It's Sunday morning, my day off and unfortunately my eyes opened early. I'm exhausted yet my mind is on auto pilot. I have the whole day to contemplate the past days. A day off here can be a curse at times: too much time to think.

I walk the camp daily, visiting the community health workers. My body sweats constantly, and with the blowing sand, I get little muddy rivers running down my legs. I quit backpacking 10 years ago because of my "hygiene" issues. Here we are lucky to be able to shower if the water system is accommodating. One of God's little cosmic jokes.

April 4, 1993 -- Donated blood this afternoon for a woman who is dying, but the blood will make her more comfortable. I was amazed at the reaction to giving blood, even the Kenyan nurses were surprised to see that I donated. They treated me like an invalid for a couple of days. They were shocked to hear that Americans donate blood on a regular basis. Their culture believes that a piece of you is lost forever through your blood (although educated as nurses).

I am getting to know the people and have fallen in love with many of them. One refugee I have a particular fondness for is Misrek. She has the most beautiful smile with glue gums. She says that Ethiopian women color their gums to attract men. I must admit it is beautiful. Misrek and her 19-year-old sister left Ethiopia because of the revolution there and are now living in a 10 x 10 hut wrapped in plastic. Misrek is one of the lucky ones. She got a job making the equivalent of \$10 a month working with the pregnant women. I want to help her out of her circumstances, yet I know I can't, and it's very frustrating. I have the privilege of leaving come August, yet she lives here with no foreseeable future of ever going home. My mind can't fathom that.

Met an old man who has been treating himself by burning his skin along acupuncture meridians. I taught him how to hold the coals above his skin instead of burning himself (his body is full of scars). My young translator was laughing at this old man for his silly ways. I told him that the treatment was very good only his methods needed refinement. My translator was surprised to think that this was a form of medicine used in the states. So we are all learning something.

April 2, 1993 -- I also went to the hospital and adjusted a back patient. He was beaten up by soldiers of the Sudanese army. There was also an old woman who'd been shot around T3/4 and is having neurological problems. I wonder why. So my days are full. How these people have the strength and spirit to endure, without any hope of change, is beyond my comprehension. Seeing their determination keeps me going beyond limits that I never knew I had.

April 7, 1993 -- I was on my rounds in the camp when a little orphan came up to me with tears in his eyes and his pet chicken in a box. The kuku was dying and he knew I was a doctor and wanted me to fix it. The kuku was starving to death. My heart bled for the hundredth time that day as I held his hand and said I couldn't do anything. I came to realize that most of the health problems here are a result of malnutrition. For the past nine months these people have been living on one-

half gallon of wheat flour per person per week, one-half cup of beans per person per week, and one cabbage for five persons per week -- that's it. My powerlessness over their plight hit home. If starvation doesn't get them, malaria, typhoid, hepatitis, meningitis, and a host of other health problems will. I came back to the compound with tears in my eyes and my co-workers started laughing at me. I felt this was an interesting, although inappropriate reaction. Later they explained to me that they all go through this, and although they have breakdowns, there really is nothing we can do other than what we are doing. So I decided that my gifts to these people will be on the level of holding the hand of a little boy while he watches his chicken die. Perhaps that is all any of us can do for each other. Being present with each other as we go down our individual paths, tripping over boulders, stubbing our toes and knowing that ultimately our lives are between us and God.

On a sad note for me -- discrimination against chiropractors is alive and well in Africa. I have been working with two Sudanese, teaching them some physical therapy skills and adjusting several refugees. However, yesterday I got word from "the powers that be" in the International Rescue Committee that I had to "cease and desist" my little programs. I am not recognized (as a chiropractor) to perform any physical treatment or training on these people. These are to be provided by physical therapists only. So I have had to explain to all those I was teaching and working with that "politics" once again interferes with our lives. Very hard to see somebody you could help and not be able to do anything. My lessons -- humility and acceptance -- such a life. Note: I continue to adjust several of the other relief workers on the sly. My rebellious nature is alive and well.

Another exhausting day. So much to do. One volunteer left and as a result, I've been given her project. Several bolts of flannel and a pair of scissors -- the "sanitary napkin project." I found a guy that is only up here for a week and I've started him cutting up flannel. Something new every day.

April 13, 1993 -- The current "big deal" is a cerebral meningitis epidemic. New cases daily. There was a young woman who gave birth to twin girls last month and she died on Monday. Another woman from her tribe came in to care for the twins and then she contracted meningitis and died. Now the twins are not being taken care of. Several of us are going to their hut daily to try and fill in until another woman can be found to feed them. Unfortunately, the father has really lost his mind and is unable to care for the twins or the other three small children in the family. The other members of the tribe see the twins as cursed and don't want anything to do with them. A sad situation at best. Just one of the many ongoing stories going on in the camp.

Again it's the children that keep me going. I enjoy playing with the young ones in the camp. I was walking the other day and passed by a group of teenage Sudanese boys ... the longest legs in the world. I refer to their walk as the Sudanese strut. So I started "strutting" with them and we just laughed at each other. A good time had by all.

April 12, 1993 -- I am receiving many lessons in boundary setting. They need so much and they know it. They always want more than I have to give. I understand this and I have had to be firm in so many cases. Telling them it is ultimately their responsibility to take their dying or ill friends and family to the clinic on stretchers as there aren't enough vehicles to carry them. They need to pull together as human beings, not always relying on outside help. Development in Africa has meant dependence.

April 12, 1993 -- I have become friends with a Ugandan man named Vincent Yawe. He is about 28. A beautiful man and spirit. I walk through the Ugandan camp on my way to the hospital each day. He walks along with me and shares stories about his life in Uganda before the war. We joke around a lot and he has offered me 40 acres of his land in Uganda. He will feed me bananas, cassava, and sweet potatoes. He wants to make me a happy, fat woman and then he will marry me. This is the

gentle, sweet side to my daily life, without it I would probably lose more of my mind than I have already.

May 26, 1994 -- I've been very sick. I had two bouts with a resistant form of malaria and one hell of a case of dysentery. My body doesn't know what has hit it. The rains have hit this area and disease is running rampant. We think our water supply has been contaminated with all the flooding, and mosquitoes are out in full force. Of the thirsty five relief workers, at least half of us are sick with something at one time or another. My mind is scrambled eggs and my gut is ground beef.

When I came back from R & R, I brought some tea and candy for the community health workers that I spend most of my time with. I passed out the gifts and was humbled when everybody wanted the old, tattered plastic bag that they came in. I would have done better to buy them all plastic bags. Nothing is wasted in the camp; make's my humble recycling efforts in Santa Fe seem ludicrous and decadent. Human excrement is the only waste in camp to be found on the ground (unfortunately for our sanitation efforts). There is a lot of it and it does present some major health problems for us all.

June 6, 1993 -- I found myself woken up by my crying this morning. Dreaming of the two little girls I met in a Red Cross war hospital. They were hugging me and smiling at me with their limbs in various stages of healing and abstenia. I woke sobbing, crying over their plight and embarrassed that they were the ones giving me strength and hope with their smiles and caresses. The children give me my greatest joy and my greatest heartache. War does such horrible things to the human body, yet the spirits in so many rise far above their physical scars.

The other day I drove with a baby to the hospital. It was convulsing. Her tiny little body heaving and eyes rolling around inside of her head. She was only bones and skin. As I massaged her heart, I kept thinking that I have never felt a living being with skin so cold. I kept looking at her and just kept saying over and over to myself that she was in the arms of her God. Somehow I felt that she would be more joyous if she just let go completely. She eventually did. Gita said to me that she was one of the lucky ones. At least she is in a more peaceful place.

This was the end of my little odyssey in Africa. I am grateful to God to have allowed me the opportunity to find the courage to undertake this journey. A journey that took me to places within and outside of myself that have changed me forever. It has given me an opportunity to see areas of my life that need further attention and parts of myself that are just fine exactly as they are.

B. Calico-Hickey, DC
Sante Fe, New Mexico

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