

JOURNEYS

THIS ESSAY IS DEDICATED TO DR. IVAN HEAD

JOURNEYS

Sometimes the trip on this ribbon of highway seems endless. But today it isn't. Winter is here in all its glory. Conifers seem to brush a cloudless blue sky, deciduous trees, their leaves vanquished by cold stand defiant in the wind, a soft mist lingers over semi-frozen lakes and rivers, farmers' fields lie barren under a blanket of snow. The sounds of summer are all but a distant memory, winter has bestowed a silence to the land, a silence broken now and then by the occasional truck stop, gas station and friendly small town. I am en route from Southern to Eastern Ontario to visit family and friends - it is December, and a few days before Christmas.

In Canada our lives are about journeys. Nine million square kilometres of land gives us the distinction of being the second largest country in the world, a country dominated by forests, rivers and lakes. Thirty one million people are thinly spread across ten provinces and three territories - there are just three of us for every square kilometre.^{1,2,3} Not surprisingly, with such overwhelming geography, we commute vast distances to visit one another, particularly at this time of year. For those of us who work in international development, we venture even further - beyond Canada's seas to distant corners of the globe, to some of the most captivating, and at the same time, some of the most hauntingly poor places in the world.

On a winter's day, a few years ago, I left Canada behind, travelling 8,000 kilometres to reach Africa's shores. I was privileged to be part of an international health team that visited a West African country. Our itinerary was a busy one, and it included a visit to a small rural village not far from the nation's capital.

There is a simple beauty to Africa. Against the backdrop of an immense cloud filled sky, and in the intense heat of an African sun, we drove on a narrow, unpaved and well travelled road. No sidewalks here - men, women and children, many of them carrying local produce, shared the road with us. The road took us through countryside interspersed with humble dwellings and wonderful tropical trees: coconut, mango, banana and baobab among them. We soon arrived at a settlement of small clay houses with thatched roofs. The houses had no running water or latrines.

People in Africa are known for their warm hospitality and this visit was no exception. It seemed as if everyone in the village had come out to meet us. Our hosts showed us around the village and took us to the village's vegetable garden. This garden was special, for with the assistance of public health staff, the women here had grown a variety of vegetables to provide much need micronutrients for their children's diet.

Unfamiliar with the local dialect, we talked via an interpreter with the women of the village about the challenges of cultivating vegetables in laterite clay, and preparing them for their children. It was during the course of our conversations that I suddenly

became aware that I was being scrutinized by a small child who I guessed was about two and a half years old.

She was standing next to me, dressed in her finest - a striking red and blue creation, that judging by the way she was tugging at it, she would have preferred not to wear. Her dark brown eyes met mine and she made a face at me. Not to be outdone, I reciprocated, and was rewarded with a toothy grin. She stayed by my side keenly observing us all. Then, worn out with listening to the grown-ups, she found a distinctly more pleasurable task - untying the laces in my shoes.

Mission accomplished, boredom quickly set in and so she decided to move on. I must admit that the prospect of the entire delegation eventually having to retie their shoe laces appealed to me, but I figured that for the sake of international relations it might be best to halt the chain of activities. I picked her up. Displeased at the unnecessary diversion, she took a swipe at my face successfully knocking my glasses to the ground. Her mother hurried forward to pull her away - disciplinary measures were about to ensue. But she wasn't quite fast enough, as a last hurrah my little friend reached up and yanked a fistful of hair from my head. With a great smile, she left us.

Poverty is the face of a child in many countries of the world. 1.2 billion of the 6.2 billion people on this earth live on less than \$1.00 a day. Of the 1.2 billion over half a billion are children the majority of them living in developing countries.⁴ Six million children under the age of five die every year as a result of hunger.⁵ Worldwide an estimated 840 million people are malnourished, 799 million from the developing world, 153 million of them children under the age of five.⁵

Preventable diseases such as diarrhea, acute respiratory infections, measles and malaria kill 30,000 children each day in the developing world.⁶ Those that survive have limited horizons - more than 130 million children in the developing world are without access to basic education, 73 million of them are girls.⁷ Armed conflict takes its toll on many children in the world. Worldwide, 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 work - many of them in dangerous environments.⁴ They are also exploited - 30 million children are trafficked for commercial prostitution and as child slaves.⁴ Many children are sexually abused. AIDS poses an additional challenge. Of the 42 million people living with HIV/AIDs, 39 million are in developing countries with 75% percent of them in sub-Saharan Africa.⁶ Worldwide, there are 2.9 million children under the age of 15 with HIV/AIDS, the majority living in sub-Saharan Africa.⁸

Over a decade has now elapsed since 71 world leaders (Canada's among them) and 88 other senior officials attended the World Summit for Children in New York. The 1990 Summit was convened with a singular aim : how to give the world's children a better

future. Commitments were made - every country agreed that the interests of children should be first and foremost, and furthermore, 27 specific goals related to child survival, protection, health, nutrition and education were to be attained by the year 2000.⁴

Sadly, the world has not kept many of those commitments. However, some progress has been made - more has been done for children in the decade between 1990 and 2000, than in any other 10 year period. Sixty three countries in the world have managed to achieve the Summit goal of reducing deaths amongst children under five by one third. The number of children under five dying from diarrhoeal disease has been reduced by half. A greater global awareness exists on issues such as hazardous and exploitative child labour; trafficking, sexual abuse and exploitation of children; and the effect that armed conflict and other forms of violence have on youngsters. There are now more children in school.⁴

But as the statistics show, there is still much more to be done.

My travels never took me back to that village, but years later I still remember her. She would be about thirteen by now. Was she in good health? Had she been exposed to malaria? What about HIV? Was her family well? Could she read and write?

A winter's night sky is upon me, the light from a glorious sunset now gone. In the darkness, the houses in these towns merrily light my way. Festive wreaths proudly hang on front doors, christmas lights sparkle on snow laden evergreens, smoke from log fires fills the night air, elegant christmas trees, their branches laden with tinsel and beautiful decorations, grace living room windows. In a short while, these houses will be filled with the sounds of family and friends. Little ones will be anxiously counting the days until Christmas Eve. They will hang stockings over the fireplace - Santa will be visiting - the magic of the season is here!

A gentle snow is falling, adding an enchanting touch of glitter to this winter scene. I have been travelling now for seven hours, soon, I will be at my final destination.

Christmas is a season of peace and goodwill, and one lovingly centred around children. It is an occasion to celebrate how the young enrich our lives wherever we live, and it is an opportunity for us adults - all of us children once, to reaffirm a commitment to guide, nurture, and to protect them; to free them from illness, want and fear, so that childhood remains a wonderful part of life's journey.

And, it is a time to remember.

In the coming days, choirs will sing and church bells will ring out in towns and cities across Canada and in lands afar. Joyful and triumphant, they will celebrate the birth of

a child. Born in poverty, in a manger in Bethlehem, over two thousand years ago, this infant showed us what all children are.

They are the promise of the future, and the chance for a better world.

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