From:	Steve Peifer
To:	Melissia Mason;
Subject:	Your Jokes are Not So Funny; Evidence of Change
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Your Jokes are Not So Funny; Evidence of Change

January 29, 2012

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So I am grilling chicken breasts, and the pan that was full of chicken breasts was not empty but full of juice and guts, so I think it will be smart for me to take that to the outside trash and dump it in there. I throw the juice in there, and a rather large monkey jumps straight up out of there, and gives me a look like `Do you MIND?'

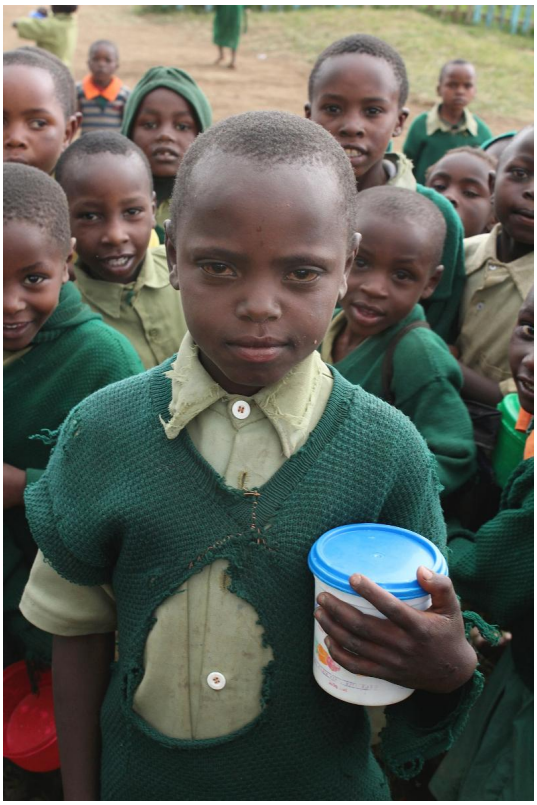
I'm pretty sure it was raining and that was the reason my pants were damp.

The second case of bronchitis in two months has me back down to the mission hospital. Although Dr. Taylor, my American doctor in Texas, is the greatest doctor in the world, the care at the hospital doesn't suffer much by comparison. One of the most humbling things you can do is be in the presence of a missionary doctor; they have sacrificed so much to be on the mission field, and although they are caring and fun, I always leave in awe.

The issue at the hospital isn't the care; it really is first rate. The issue comes when you go to pay your bill and get the drugs. The idea of an orderly line just hasn't made it to Kenya yet, and there are times when it has taken two hours to settle my account. It is only thirty minutes this time, and I sit on a bench with dozens of others waiting for my drugs to be ready.

I am sitting next to a Kenyan woman who I guess is near my age. She shows evidence of the hard life that most Kenyans have; her shoes are in tatters, her dress is neat but very worn, and her back curves from a lifetime of carrying firewood and water. We begin to talk, and I try out a joke. She tells me `Your jokes are not so funny' with such a merry laugh that I can't help but laugh along.

She tells me her story. Her son and his wife died of



AIDS, and she is raising her three grandchildren alone. Her husband died years ago. It is sad that I've heard this story so many times; I can take you to villages where there is nobody alive from 20-40; AIDS wiped them all out.

I look at her: she is a short woman who is as stout as she is tall, and she has the odor of someone who walked six miles in the African sun to come to the hospital. What strikes me is that when I look at her, my first thought is `She is so beautiful.' She has endured what most of us couldn't possibly imagine, and she still has joy. A few years ago, I would have seen that she was black, and not looked much beyond that. I walk home rejoicing in her beauty and think `How He has changed me because of Africa.'

I go to one of the schools we work with, and I see a young boy bleeding from his cheek. A teacher has beaten him with a stick, and although Kenyan teachers are taught not to hit someone on top of the head because it will damage hearing, there are other places that are fair game. He is filthy, with a torn sweater, no shoes, and no evidence he has been near water in a long period.

I go to talk to him, and discover that he is an orphan, and that he sleeps on the front porch of his cousin's house. His crime has been that he has snuck into the classroom but he has not paid his school fees. For that, he has been beaten by two different teachers in two different classes. He stays on campus for the lunch and the computer class. I talk to the headmaster and he agrees that he will let him stay on, although he tells me there are dozens of students in his situation, and he cannot do it for all of them.

I look at Timothy, and I become aware of something: a few years ago I could not looked beyond his hygiene; now I look at him with awe because he is so brave and he hasn't given up. God has taken my judgmental critical heart and allowed me to go deeper; I walk away thinking I was not worthy to

wash his feet.

I wasn't at RVA last year, and there are several students who had their first year as juniors, and I don't know them at all. The problem is that now that they are seniors, I need to write letters of recommendations for them, and I don't have a clue. I ask Karol* to come in so I can interview her and compose a recommendation.

Karol looks like you might think a missionary kid would look. She is beautiful, with blonde hair and a sweet smile. I've listened to her lead worship, and as she plays the guitar and sings I think that this is the poster child of a missionary kid.

It takes Karol a while to warm up to me, and know whether she can trust me. She begins to tell her story; she has attended 7 schools in the past 9 years. Because of family health issues and unrest in the area her parents work, she has gone from one school to the next. She feels like she never fits in, and as she begins to make friends, she has had to leave again.

I labor over my recommendation, and I fearfully send it to colleges. I've tried to be honest; there are educational gaps, and because she is relatively new, she hasn't been involved with much. I tell them that college can be a time of healing for her; four years in one place will do wonders for her. I tell them that she is a treasure, and the wise college that will nourish her will reap a wonderful young woman.

The college contacts me, and I have a sense of dread when I open the email. Instead, I am blessed and humbled by the news: the vice president has read my recommendation to the entire admissions staff, and they have cried and pledged to be a safe place for her. She is accepted to her first choice school.

She comes in to talk, and I tell her that college is going to be a place of rest and refreshment for her, and that if she will seek counseling while she is there, the wounds from her past can be healed. She begins to weep, and she tells me that she is so proud of her parents and the amazing work they do. She knows that it wasn't their fault, and she sits and cries and cries.

I don't know what to do for the longest time, and I pray and He gives me a word for her: `Karol, it isn't disloyal to honestly deal with legitimate hurts.' She cries harder, but this time there is hope in her tears. In the next few weeks, I see a more confident person beginning to peek her head out. It strikes me that I have usually settled for the surface, but the real beauty of Karol is below the surface, and I'm so grateful that He has let me see deeper.

Jun* is another senior, a Korean, who comes in to talk. It is an awkward conversation; his English isn't very good, and he is defers to me so much it is hard to have anything but a surface conversation. I pray and I probe, and it comes out that when he came to our American school, he didn't know a word of English. Staffing is always problematic at RVA, and we rarely have a teacher who is trained in ES

L (teaching English as a Second Language)
He tells me that he was always outgoing until he came to RVA; now he retreats into himself.

I sit there and I am convicted. I tell him that I have been at RVA for 13 years, that Koreans make up 15% of our student body, and I haven't bothered to learn how to even say hello in his language. I tell him I have disrespected his culture and I have dishonored him because I was oblivious to his struggles. He looks up and sees my shame and my tears.

I tell him how courageous he is, and that having endured something so hard has given him the tools to overcome many hard things. I tell him that he has inspired me; I know I could not have done what he has done. He is silent, and his eyes glisten. I tell him that if he gives himself to ESL in college, there will be no stopping him. He leaves grateful. I marvel that in all my weakness, that God has somehow been strong.

I pray over my recommendation letter, and try to show someone who against all odds, has somehow managed to succeed. I get a call from a college; they tell me they would be honored if he came to their school. I put my head in my hands and weep; I have seen God overcome all my errors, and in the process provide a good college for a student and teach me about becoming more culturally sensitive.

I walk home and am so grateful for evidence of change. With no good reason except His love for me, He hasn't given up on me yet.

Your pal
Steve

*Names have been changed

The Peifer's Quick Links…

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