

A BOY NAMED KANTWA

One Monday morning in the middle of March, 2003, I was invited to be a guest on a Canadian Christian television program called 100 Huntley Street. Apparently their Wednesday guest had cancelled unexpectedly, and they needed someone to enter a discussion on “tithing.” It was odd because I had only been on the program once before, but I was on the phone with the right person at the right time and the invitation was given. Tithing happened to be a favorite topic of mine, so I agreed. But a discussion on tithing was not to be the important part of that day, at least not to me.

During the program, I sat beside Reynold Mainse, the VP of Missions for Crossroads (the parent company of 100 Huntley Street). Reynold and I had gone to Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri, together in the early 80s, but had not kept in contact over the years, so I was so excited to hear about his adventures in missions around the world. I asked why he had never invited me to join him and his wife, Kathy, on a missions trip.

It was a ridiculous question coming from what I affectionately called myself (“the capitalist-pig”) to the missionary whom I hadn’t seen in eighteen years. He politely responded that he would never have guessed I would be interested in doing missions work. How wrong he was! I was looking for my purpose and surely God could use me in the mission field. After all, Matthew 28, “The Great Commission” tells us to

IT'S NOT OKAY WITH ME

go. And so I wanted to go, and told him so. Reynold said okay. Four weeks later I flew with his wife Kathy to Zambia, to meet Reynold who was just coming out of Southern Sudan. My journey had begun.

I knew that Africa was not a part of my purpose, but I was hoping I could clear my head there, gain perspective, and come back refreshed and ready to take on the challenges of the day. What was our mission? Reynold and Kathy were there to film the “street kids.” I had never heard of them. Apparently there are children, thousands of them, living on the streets in many African countries because their parents have died.

For the first time since I could remember, I had no official role. I wasn't leading the trip, so I wasn't responsible for anything (other than my malaria pills, tucking in my mosquito netting, and not drinking the water or eating anything that had touched the water). I wasn't very well qualified to do “nothing.” I hadn't done “nothing” since I was a very small child. However, as I sat quietly and observed all that was going on around me my life began to change forever.

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When we arrived in Lusaka, Zambia, we were transported to our hotel—an HIV/AIDS Testing Center. You must understand that I was used to staying at the Four Seasons Hotels. And to my knowledge there is no AIDS testing done at any of their fifty-five exclusive properties worldwide. We took our bags to our rooms and surveyed the premises. I stepped aside when the hotel officials came in, closed the window, wrapped my bed in mosquito netting (including tucking the

A BOY NAMED KANTWA

netting under the mattress so that “things” did not crawl up and in), and then sprayed my room with tons of bug spray. They asked me to leave the room with them so they could close the door and let things die. Hmmm.

After a delicious meal and a meeting with our host, Bishop Joshua Banda, we sat waiting for our driver. Chite was the young man who would safely take us out on the streets of Lusaka to meet the street kids. It was safe with him because the children knew his face and his heart (and his van that was clearly marked “Lazarus Project” on the side).

Lusaka is a city of two million people in a country of ten million. The streets of Lusaka are home to street kids—orphans and vulnerable children who roam the streets picking through garbage bins for the rotten leftovers from the poor in town. They have no access to a bathroom, a shower, fresh food, education, or parents. Many of them have been orphaned by the AIDS pandemic. Just as many have run away from home as young as six years old to avoid the daily beatings by their mother or one of her men callers.



That night was the first night of my life. I knew nothing before that night. I didn’t exist. We left late in the evening as the children do not “bunk down” until after 10:00 P.M. At every corner we saw large piles of garbage lying along the sidewalk in a strange yet orderly fashion. Chite pulled over and stopped beside one of the piles.

The night was very dark and I squinted to see what I was looking at. As we stepped out, my eyes focused and I saw the garbage move. It was just a rustle—a flash of motion and then it was gone. Were they rats? Was it a snake? And then at the other end of the pile, another movement. And then I saw it. A head. A tiny little jet black head poked

IT'S NOT OKAY WITH ME

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up from under the pile. This was not a pile of garbage. These were children, carefully wrapped in garbage to keep the cold away. They were lying closely together in a tight “spoon in the drawer” type formation to keep warm. The temperature was close to 50 degrees Fahrenheit that night and I was thankful for my jacket. I stared. I could not move. It must be a dream. This is not possible.

Immediately I thought, “Well, we will just have to get them to a home.

This can't go on like this. Surely I can raise the funds to take them in. Obviously, people do not know that these poor children are here. *That* must be why I am here. To arrange to have these children brought in off the street.” I did not know until later that night that it was estimated that there were 75,000 street children in Zambia alone.

At this site, there were in total, a dozen boys lying together. They were so drowsy they could hardly wake up to speak to us. This journey has one of those “don't try this at home, folks” warnings attached to it. These boys are very dangerous. They steal, they stab, they kill, they rape, they destroy. But they are boys. They are children, few of them above the age of fifteen, some as young as seven.

As it turns out these boys could not wake up because they were in a drug-induced sleep. You see, the kids will eat from garbage bins and steal food to survive, but the money that they can beg from strangers is held exclusively for *bostik*, their warm blanket on a cold night. We were able to rouse a couple of them long enough for them to tell us who they were, how they came to the street, and what *bostik* was.

A BOY NAMED KANTWA

Bostik is a “wonderful” combination of gasoline (petrol) and glue. It is not as good with one ingredient and not the other, but one will suffice better than none at all. For a few Kwacha (just pennies) children can buy these ingredients and put them in a plastic PVC bottle (like our small water bottles) and this becomes their comfort for the night. In fact, they carry these bottles with them day and night, stuck in the cuff of their shirt sleeve or in a front pocket. Once they have mixed the magic together they will put their mouths over the mouth of the bottle and take a big deep breath. The fumes go straight to their lungs and then to their heads.

This magic potion is critical to their survival. (Sounds crazy doesn't it? But it is.) Bostik helps the children forget. They forget that they have not eaten in two days. They forget that they were raped twice yesterday and three times the day before. They forget that their skin is crawling with lice and fleas. They forget that the police caught them and beat them with sticks last time they got caught stealing an orange. They forget that their father died in front of them after their mother had sat and nursed him day and night. They forget when their mother was too weak to get up and go to the bathroom and when they had to fetch water and clean her private areas for months until she finally died. But that is not all. Bostik helps them forget the day their mom couldn't drink water anymore because the sores in her mouth (thrush) were bleeding and oozing out on to her face and she could not speak—not even to cry.

But bostik will never let them forget the day their mother finally died. She had been sick for many months and hadn't been up at all. She hadn't eaten real food in weeks and was in too much pain to drink. She was so thin and dehydrated that she had no tears to cry as they sat around and watched for every breath she took. No drug would ever let them forget the women who came howling and crying when they

IT'S NOT OKAY WITH ME

were called in with the news of her death. Nor could they forget being told that they had to go to a coffin maker and buy a coffin. With what money? Who knew? They placed her in the box and sat through the day-long funeral, but not even sleep could take away the memories of seven brothers and sisters huddling together on a mud floor, hungry that first night in the dark, wondering what tomorrow held. It wasn't as if they had a full refrigerator and after that when the food was gone they would have to find work. There were two or three cups of Nshima (mealie meal, a cornmeal porridge), enough for a few days if they didn't eat much. And then what would they do. Seven children under the age of ten. Alone. And two of the little ones had bad coughs and couldn't eat much.

Bostik was "good." It was a magic drug for these children. Even after we learned what it was, we wouldn't dare tell them to stop taking it, though we knew that it was frying their brains and killing their bodies. Who would be so cruel as to leave them alone on the street with their reality and their memories without a crutch? Not me.

We thanked the boys for sharing their lives with us and we shared bread and juice with them. They sat up and watched us drive away as if they had just had a really weird dream. We moved on and visited many "piles" of children that night, young and old (up to age eighteen), dirty and sick, wounded and bleeding. And then we turned the corner and saw him.

It was the last stop of the night for us. These boys had found a sheltered space with light to keep them safe (or safer). The wall was painted bright yellow and someone had painted all the grouting red. An exposed light bulb hanging above their heads illuminated the yellow and red brick and made it look like an animated cartoon drawing. The same pile of boys wrapped in garbage was lined up along the wall, but one boy sat up looking around. We got out of the van and locked it

A BOY NAMED KANTWA

up tightly. Then we approached this young boy. His name was Kantwa.

Kantwa was the saddest person I have ever seen in my life. He was a tiny boy for his age of nine years. He was quiet and timid, but seemingly unafraid of the strangers approaching him in the dead of night. His hands were tucked between his bare knees to keep them warm but his

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bare feet were exposed to the night air. Chite asked the boy to tell us his story. Over a period of an hour, this is what he told us about his life:

When I was only six years old both my parents died within months of each other. My older brother (aged eight) and I lived alone for a short while in our home until some relatives came along and told us we had to leave. They said they needed the home for their large family and that we must go to the city and find a relative or someone to care for us. They kicked us out right then and there with nothing but a few Kwacha to pay for the bus ride. My brother and I were afraid, but we got on the bus (for the first time ever) and got off when we arrived in the city (Lusaka). It was a cold, dark night as I held onto my brother's hand getting out of the bus. My eyes could not believe what they were seeing. I had never been in a town before. I had never seen so many people. I had never seen buildings like that. There were many people pushing and shoving us and my brother's hand slipped out of mine. That was the last time I saw him.

Kantwa spoke in such soft tones that it was amazing Chite could even hear him to translate this story to us. I felt as if

IT'S NOT OKAY WITH ME

I was in a dream. This was Hollywood. No truth could be stranger than this fiction I was hearing. The boy continued:

I found a bench near a wall and sat on it. I waited there for my brother to come back. I waited all night and then all day and then the second night. My brother never came back. But some other boys did. They invited me to come with them, to join them on the street in their family. I said "No, I must wait for my brother," and they told me he would not be coming for me. That was the night I became a street boy.

We later found out that this was also the night that Kantwa was raped repeatedly by the older boys as he became their sex slave. He would be the one stuffed through small broken windows to let the older boys in the front doors to rob the houses. He would be the one forced to pick through the worst of the garbage bins when there was no food for the family. By the time we met Kantwa he had been living this life for three years.

I wanted to throw up. What could we do? I touched his legs and they were freezing cold. His knees were calloused and thick like an elephant's skin. I did not know what to do. I couldn't think or process what I was seeing and hearing. I could only be there in the present with him. I held his hand so he could feel the touch of a mother's hand on his if only for a moment. I wanted to look into his eyes and tell him that everything would be okay, but I knew my eyes would deceive me, so I just looked at him with love. I tried to give a sense of hopefulness, even when there was none evident to any of us. He smiled. I couldn't believe it. His little eyes brightened for a moment, and he smiled. It was time to leave and I didn't know what to do. I went to the van and quickly took off my shoes and socks and went back to him, putting

A BOY NAMED KANTWA

the socks on his frigid feet. He smiled and then looked down the pile with concern to where the older boys were sleeping. I knew instinctively what the problem was. The boys would beat him for those socks. Was it worth putting him in more risk for this small gift? We spoke to Chite and he went down to the end and spoke to two of the older boys who had awakened while we were there. He asked them to protect Kantwa and the socks and not to let anyone else steal them or hurt him for them. They assured Chite that they would fulfill his wishes. I do not know if they did, but my heart tells me he was in jeopardy for my actions. Then we left.

We just left. We left all those boys lying on the concrete, wrapped in shreds of garbage and went back to our palace to sleep. But sleep never came.



What kind of God allows this to happen? What kind of God sits back and lets his kids be treated worse than animals? I couldn't sleep. I couldn't think. I couldn't breath. I couldn't listen to music. The next morning I told my hosts that we must go and get Kantwa and bring him in off the street. I could not leave Zambia without at least one child saved.

The answer, sadly, was no. There was no room in the home. The Lazarus Project was home to fifty-five boys with space for only thirty-five. They simply could not take another one. There was no space.

I went crazy. How can there not be space for just one more. But I knew they spoke the truth. Some of the boys slept two to a bed, some on the floor, and it was true, there was no

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IT'S NOT OKAY WITH ME

space to move about. But Kantwa was little, he wouldn't take much room. Reynold and Kathy had been equally struck by Kantwa and wanted to do something, but what? I don't know what we did that day or the next. I have no recollection of doing anything but think about Kantwa. I tried to write in my journal, but there were no words to express my anguish, my shock, my horror at what I was seeing. I was so used to being in control of things. I was so used to making things happen at work and in life. If I can have four million packs of Trident gum hand-packed into little plastic sleeves in a week to hang on two-litre bottles of 7UP, *surely* I could figure out a way to get this child off the street.

It was hopeless. I was hopeless. And yet Kantwa didn't appear hopeless. Was I feeling sorrier for me than for him? Was my rage and anger targeted at my inability to "fix it" rather than at the fact that he was left as garbage on the street? I sat down and tried to write again and a poem came out. (I have only written one poem in my life before this time and that was in the second grade. It was called "Maurice the Bron-tosaurus" because I was mad at my friend named Maurice. I got in so much trouble for writing it that I gave up poetry for good. This one just seemed to slip out onto the page.)

Hope for the Hopeless

*What happens to the human soul
when there is no hope?
Does it fight to find light?
Does it settle for a life of darkness and fear?*

*In Zambia, the street boys find hope
even when there is no hope.*

A BOY NAMED KANTWA

*The yellow streetlight provides
a wonderfully illuminated safe haven.
The smell of urine and filth is as
comforting and familiar as the smell of freshly-baked bread.
The daily beatings and sexual abuse
ensure that there is regular human touch.
The garbage cans guarantee that
no one will go to sleep hungry.*

*You see?
There is hope for the hopeless.*

Two days later (it seemed like two years) we were told that the Lazarus Project was going to make space for Kantwa. I don't know how they did it, but they did, and our next challenge would begin that night. Now we had to go back to the street and try to find this one boy.

The day passed and evening came. Filled with great anticipation, we piled into the car. We were warned that it was highly unlikely we would find Kantwa again in a city with so many kids just like him, but we would try. I was so hopeful. He was ours! We went to the city center and turned onto the street where Kantwa had last been seen. As we approached the yellow and red wall, my breathing stopped again. As we pulled up and stopped the van, we knew we needed to pray. When we finished our prayer, we left the van to find Kantwa. I hopefully scanned the familiar place where I had last seen him.

There he was! He was sitting just where we left him, leaning against the wall while all the others slept. He seemed to recognize us, but was not surprised, alarmed, or happy that we had come back. Chite bent down and asked him if he knew about the Lazarus Project Home for Boys. He said he did. Chite asked if he wanted to come and live at that

IT'S NOT OKAY WITH ME

home where he would be safe, get clean food, clean clothes, sleep in a bed, and get an education. Somewhat hesitantly he said he did. Chite then told him that he could choose two friends to come with him.

We couldn't believe our ears! We were bringing in three little boys from the street. They would be safe and saved! He smiled and went to make his choice from his sleeping friends. He carefully chose two and tried to shake them awake. They would not stir. They were so drugged with the bostik they had inhaled that he was unable to wake them. Chite reached into the pile and pulled them out by their jackets.

Finally, the boys roused to hear the news. It was unbelievable. A miracle had happened. Although it was irrelevant to what was happening, I couldn't help but notice that Kantwa's new socks were gone.

I asked Chite to ask him where they had gone. Had they been stolen? Had he been hurt? Had the boys raped him as punishment for his treasure? It was then I saw into Kantwa's heart. He looked at me and grinned from ear to ear and said, "Oh, don't worry. They didn't get the socks. I hid them far from here in a safe place where no one will ever find them." He was proud. He was smart. I went blank.

The socks that I gave him to keep him warm from the cold night air were tucked safely away in a special place where only he could go and look at them. They were his hidden treasure. Never to be worn, except in secret. Never to be seen by anyone but him. Never to be stolen by anyone . . . ever. It just didn't make sense that he would do this, but then a still, small voice asked me how many treasures I had been

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A BOY NAMED KANTWA

given that I had hidden away. Not only the “good china” that sat unused for fear of being broken, the good wine that was kept for a “special occasion,” or the good gifts that I had been given from above that I was not using for their correct purpose. Kantwa was, in fact, using the socks for encouragement. He had a secret that could spur him on when times were really tough. He could sneak off to find the socks, and he could hold them and admire them and smell them (they were reasonably clean when they were given to him), and he could even try them on from time to time if he dared. But he would never use them for the purpose for which they were intended.

I sat and wondered. How many gifts does God give us that we keep tucked away as our little secret? Do you have the gift of singing, but only do it in the shower? Do you have the gift of wisdom, but assuredly keep that wisdom to yourself? Do you have the gift of discernment, but save it for you and your business? Are you like Kantwa and his socks?

We loaded the three boys into the van and wrapped them in brand new wool blankets that had been purchased just for that special night. I crawled into the back seat and reached out to receive each little boy onto the seat beside me. Reynold was capturing the whole story on video camera. Kathy was trying to maintain control as she told the story on film. I was in my glory with Kantwa on my lap and the other two bundled on either side of me.

The night was very dark as it always is in Africa. We drove through the streets and out into the country for our journey to safety. An occasional street light illuminated the inside of the van as we drove, and I did not miss the silhouette of many “creatures” jumping for joy and jumping off the boys heads onto the nice clean blanket. I held my breath, held them tighter, and held back the tears. We drove in silence and disbelief at what we were witnessing. After many min-

IT'S NOT OKAY WITH ME

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utes the silence was broken with a simple question asked by Kathy.

“What day is it?” she asked. The answer was Sunday morning at 12:20 A.M.

She said, “It’s Easter morning.” The dam broke and the tears poured. It was resurrection morning and these boys had just been raised from the dead. I had been there. I had been a witness to the greatness of God and His mercy. But we only

had three. What about the rest? I settled into the darkness with my boys. The rest would have to wait, for now was the time for rejoicing.



We later learned that children are often plucked off the street and sold or given to brothels (or simply to bad people) to use, abuse, and discard. Kantwa’s initial hesitancy was that he really did not know where we were taking him. When he saw that we had told the truth, he was not only relieved, but he was speechless.