

Letter to a Volunteer

Last Updated Thursday, 21 January 2010

by Ian Pounds

I sit in a chair at my kitchen table sipping green tea and listening to the many stringed rabab and timpanic tabla consort together in a Pashto Ghazal. There is something scandalous about this music because it tells of secrets, some of which many people would rather live without.

The sun is rising above my New England hills, as I know it is presently settling into the dusty mountains west of Kabul. Before I left Sitara I asked the children to think of me whenever the sun went down, that I was somewhere in that moment watching it climb above the horizon, and that one day I would follow it all the way back to the steps of their beloved orphanage.

On the surface I should not miss being there. Little privacy can be found in a house of sixty children, even with a locked bedroom door. And there is no escape, no wandering out the gates for fear of kidnapping or worse. It is not a good idea to hang out on the roof, either. Someone will see, and the neighbors will feel their privacy invaded. There are the insults to the American lifestyle, eating simple food, rice and beans, meat once a week. No liquor, no coffee, no milk shakes, no snacks between meals. Eating off a matt on the floor takes getting used to, and the power going out every day, and bathing from a bucket; the dogs barking, the children squabbling, the constant knocking on the door, the broadcasting of prayers at all hours. And then there is the Kabul dust that penetrates as if the air itself, through the slimmest crack between a window and its sash.

I should not miss the work, either. Three different orphanages full of children who can't get enough of what it is they wish to learn. An hour with the beginners, the next with those who know the alphabet, then so on up the ladder to the ones who can read a simple text, ten different groups of students that arrive early and need a push to leave. Each class requires its own lesson plan; all the while is the nagging necessity to learn Dari.

This speaks nothing of the intangibles, constantly called upon are consistent parenting skills while being able to individualize for 180 kids, each not only unique in personality but coming from completely different cultures within Afghanistan; Pashto, Hazara, Uzbek, Kabulese, Nuristani, and Tajik. The atmosphere of work sharing makes it difficult to stand by and play the guest when there is a wheelbarrow that needs moving, water hauling, laundry hanging, a hinge fixed or fifty pound sacks of flour that need hauling up from the cellar. There is too much to do and not enough hours in the day, while back home the family hearts ache, the bank account shrinks, and somewhere there is a voice asking what difference can one person possibly make, what about helping your own people, and is it true you're doing this for free?

Beneath these superficialities was the fact I knew I was going to leave. Whether in one month or twelve, I always knew home awaited me; a home bursting with the elements of what America calls the Good Life. It is simple to bear just about anything if the end is known. This got me through the difficult times. In fact somewhere in July I counted for the first time the days until I was scheduled to leave. What I didn't anticipate, what crept up on me like the warmth of the day after a cold night was my desire to return to the good life dissipating as my desire to stay forever in the lives of those children grew.

For what is the good life?

Fatima now sees an end to being enslaved by poverty. Ulfat sees an end to feeling powerless, illiterate, useless to his village. Leema is no longer resigned to growing old at the feet of a man, and Omid will never feel it his privilege to lift his hand against a woman. It is the same for Alina, Farzana, Farid Gul, Razia and Poiveston. Shall I list them all, as we do the names of those who have fallen in war? These are compelling reasons to re-examine what it means to lead a good life, but even there I stop short of the mark. What lingers in my spirit sitting here sipping my tea safe and sound in my New England house is not remotely akin to self-satisfaction. I feel the pain of having had the good life in the palm of my hand and letting it go. I feel powerless, illiterate, useless. I feel the love of those children beating in my pulse, and I can only look at the rising sun and imagine where at this very moment it sets.

To volunteer is not something noble. It is a desire for whatever reason to be humbled, humbled in the face of those who know true adversity. It comes from a place that asks the question, if family is something so broad and deep as to reach into the past and the future as it breathes in this very moment, why then this limitation of blood? Imagine it hurting, the

news from Afghanistan, as much as it hurts to hear the voice of your daughter in her first semester of college, crying over the phone a thousand miles away. Imagine an orphanage as a place in your memory that brings comfort, like the bedroom where you read to your four year old son the trials and tribulations of a yellow teddy bear, his faithful friend Christopher Robin and their never ending search for something sweet. Mehan is a place where rosebuds grow the size of a child's fist, and blossom into flowers the size of pink moons and red suns facing one another off like monarchs sitting upon parapets of earth, daring, yearning, one beaming, one reflecting, alone and yet taken together each in the corner of the eye, good enough reason to be alive.

If you wish to volunteer, especially in that island of hope amidst insanity, if you wish to sponsor a child, or spread the word, if you in any way want to be a part of this family, you are eternally welcome. There are such important needs; we desperately want to own our own home, to build a school and health clinic. Year to year we just don't know how we will make ends meet. And if you do get involved, please take care of the little things, will you? Keep an eye on Sunbola, she is terribly smart but quiet and can be lost in the crowd. Make sure Dariush doesn't sell himself short. He can achieve anything he sets his mind to but will sacrifice it all for his devoted friends. Find a way to get Shogofa to ease up on teasing Mastura, and please see if you can get Razia to believe in the power of words. Get Omid to dance for you, but don't let him play the clown. Saddam is just one step away from making a leap towards maturity so when she comes into your room or writes you a letter, try and give her just one more reason to leap. And every chance you get, tell Sosan just how beautiful she is, because she thinks she is getting fat. There are a hundred others and I can't go through them all; that will be something more for you to discover. There is, however, one last thing. If you could, once in a while sit beside Farzana and after reading her a poem ask her to read it back to you. Don't tell her what you think it means. Ask her, and keep asking her until she tells you. She already knows what it means, the point is for her to awaken to her own wisdom, so she might at the end of the day believe in her own dreams.

Sincerely,

Ian