

Youngsfield Refugee camp  
Cape Town, South Africa  
July 31, 2008

An update from South Africa, going out to all of you...some of whom I have not talked to in a very long time. Be in touch someday.

My life has been changed forever by South Africa. In the past ten years, I have traveled to fifty states, five continents and over thirty countries. I have talked to people all over the world about their lives, their history, and their hopes for a future. But South Africa leaves me speechless. Something about South Africa has burned a hole directly into my heart. There is too much to type.

We spent yesterday and today in the refugee camps, doing exactly what I came half a world to do. We spent two days face to face with refugees from all over Africa. Men, women, and children from Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, Congo, Somalia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, who were homeless as a result of the recent attacks here on foreigners. These are people who had fled wars, torture, murderous gangs and beatings in their homelands to come to South Africa in hopes of having half a chance at freedom, only to be attacked here as well and end up in refugee camps with no future and no hope.

Forgive the lack of clarity in my writing. I am exhausted and am not thinking clearly.

Yesterday, we'd gone to the camps to play with the children there, because we'd heard that the children in the camps are losing their minds with boredom, as weeks of hunger, cold, rain, and no toys and nothing to do take effect. We were told that the South African Army, who is housing this particular camp, allowed absolutely no filming whatsoever and that we stood no chance of getting permission to film. This was a huge disappointment for us.

Needless to say, driving up to rows of army tents, people wandering and shouting out to one another, and seeming anarchy in the midst of a military environment didnt leave us feeling particularly safe or comfortable, but that is largely the challenge of this trip. Feeling comfortable means that nothing is changing. Comfortable is what you get from inaction.

We got out of the car and the trauma center director gave us the toys which had been donated for the children. I walked into the main tent where 70 children were waiting and scrambling to get access to the 20 or so crayons that had been



supplied to them by donations from the outside, and said to the woman who was in charge, "Who can I talk to about filming here?" She looked at me in despair and replied "How should I know...I have only been here for an hour". In that moment I realized that my group, having just arrived into the chaos, was second in command already, by only 59 minutes.

We'd been given "toys" to distribute yesterday to the children by a local NGO, but the toys turned out to be garbage. Literally. The toys we'd been given were the garbage of Cape Town: broken pieces of plastic that kids in Cape Town had thrown away that we had to give out anyway to the refugee children because they'd been promised toys and we had nothing else to give. Kids were clamoring for these broken pieces of plastic. It broke my heart. I watched a little boy of about five hold a broken piece of plastic in his hands trying to figure out how to play with it. Another, about six years old, held just the wings to a model airplane. Another the remote to a remote control car but no car. He asked me "Is there car?" I had to reply that there wasn't. He looked so sad. I felt entirely helpless.

I sought out the military commander of the base and asked for permission to film interviews with the people there. To our surprise, he granted permission, telling me that he'd been ordered by his commander to let in all press who asked. He'd been advised of our presence as well by the director of the Trauma Center for Survivors of Violence and Torture, who we'd interviewed two days ago along with a man named Muhammad who had been imprisoned by the South African government for fighting against apartheid, and placed into solitary confinement and sensory deprivation for months. The granting of permission was a huge surprise. It was a turn of events that completely inspired us. We left heartbroken about the children and the broken toys, but inspired to come back today with new purpose.

We left the camp and went out last night and bought toys. A hundred tennis balls. A dozen packages of soap bubbles. Crayons and pens and paper, and coloring books. And today we went back, armed with those toys, our film cameras, and entirely open hearts.

We walked into the camp today, presented ourselves to the military, and walked past the gates. We gave out all the toys. We juggled for the kids, taught them to draw, learned to draw from them, laughed and played with them. We took hundreds of photos. And then we interviewed them. And their older brothers and sisters. And their parents. And this is when the bottom dropped out of the world.

Everyone has a story. Not everyone gets to tell their story. Today we listened, filmed, and felt the depths of many people who would never have been heard from otherwise. People who have seen things no one should ever see.

We met Musa, age 31 from Rwanda, who had fled the genocide in the mid 90's to South Africa, only to be attacked here for being a foreigner. He told me that

the gangs tricked him. They spoke to him on the street in Xhosa, one of the native South African languages. When he couldn't reply, because he didn't understand, they stabbed him in the face, and in the back.

We met Danny, from the Congo, who at age eleven offered one of the most profound interviews I have ever had the chance to be a part of. I say that without reservation. Danny told me at one point before the interview: "In Congo, the people were shooting, killing and burning us. Here in South Africa, they are killing and shooting and burning us. Nothing is changed. I do not know why." No eleven year old in the world should know of such things. Danny dreams of becoming the president of the United States someday. His interview might very well be at the core of what gets edited from this trip. We can hardly wait to get started with all the projects we have in mind.

We met Owen from Zimbabwe. Owen has advanced degrees in chemistry and molecular biology. He is 29. He fled Zimbabwe because of threats of violence and because the economy there has collapsed. A bottle of cooking oil costs \$300 billion Zimbabwean dollars there now. That is not a typo. It costs that much if you can find a bottle of oil on the black market. Most people can't and the store shelves are empty. He told me that Coke is more common than bread, but no one can afford Coke. With his advanced degrees, Owen still struggles to maintain hope. He is in the camp because his neighbors in Cape Town threatened his life for being Zimbabwean.

We met a man from Congo who is in the camp alone because his wife and children were killed before he left his native country.

We met a refugee who told us "I have no hope." We met a refugee from Zimbabwe who after the cameras stopped, said to me sadly "We will die in here." Dozens of other people stopped us to talk and tell their stories. We did interviews nonstop for nine hours. As we talked to these people we realized again and again that these were not Congolese, or Rwandans, or Somalis. They were people. Like you and me. People with loves and desires and fears and families. We tend to think of people as different because of their skin color, their poor English, their nationality. We grew up watching tv commercials for the starving Ethiopians and Africans and had ingrained the idea that these weren't people, but rather things to pity, to send change to and then to forget, having done our work. If it hadn't occurred to me before, today it finally did: these are people.

We took photos and listened deeply, and connectedly, trading contact information, and planning for revolution in the hearts and souls and lives of these people. The followup is already underway and is very real. Some of the people we met did not go to bed hungry tonight.

Today was the beginning of communication, transformation, discovery. I am not the person I was when I woke up this morning. Neither are the students we

brought with us. We had a discussion tonight with the students and shared reflections on the day. In 90 minutes of talking we barely scratched the surface of what we'd felt.

As I type, I am sitting on the floor of the hostel in which our group is staying. Everyone in my group has gone to bed. It is 2:15 in the morning and we need to be up in a few hours to go and visit with and interview a group who is doing AIDS outreach in rural areas.

The only people awake right now are this group of tourists who are staying here who just stumbled drunk into the hostel after a long night of partying. They are talking loud, looking for cigarettes, disconnected. They are talking about things which do not exist to me. These people do not live in my world anymore, or rather I do not live in theirs. My world is and will be the world in which Musa lives. And Danny. And Owen. And the boy who yesterday had only a remote control for a car which would never come, but who fell asleep tonight having laughed and played all day with a new tennis ball.

This is a world not made of us and them. It is made of us and us, with the us other than ourselves just existing with different faces...with different names, different languages. We live on a planet with 5 billion other ourselves. And they are waiting, for you, for me, to tell their stories to in hopes of being heard. They are waiting for help from those who have the ability to help them, because they have been attacked and hurt in body and mind and can no longer help themselves. The world they live in is very real, inescapable.

In the words of Muhammad who we interviewed here, "I can not sit still while there are those who sleep on the streets tonight with a sheet of cardboard for a blanket and a brick for a pillow".

There is only an offering of the self. There is the intersection of compassion and creativity and inspiration and direction and focus and intensity and courage. Everything else is lifelessness and the void.

I love you all.

Greg

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