

Part 1
Mathare Valley,
January 15, 2011
Rivers of children

For a moment I hesitate. Boards crisscross, nailed to supports on either side. Between the slats, the opaque brown sludge of the Mathare Valley River broils below. A misstep slip would be catastrophic by any Western hygienic sensibility. Before I calculate my first step, I glance downriver and try to comprehend a vignette of children kneeling at the river's edge, filling water bottles.

The descent down to the river snaking through the bowels of Mathare Valley is a slippery slimy slide. At first we wind along narrow paths between tall concrete buildings. From balconies high above, small bodies lean over railings with wildly waving arms, shrilling a high-pitched chorus of, "Hi, how are you? Fine!" With each step down there is a small grubby hand to grasp. The river of children in brightly colored rags flows freely on either side. Some boldly approach, some hang back, eyes cast shyly to the ground. "Sasa toto?" ("what's up, kid?") is certain to spark a smile. Eyes flash wide in surprise and delight when we bump fists with the slum slang greeting. Simultaneously, we furtively probe for solid ground for each next step. Everything around us sags and slithers down rutted grooves, down, down to the river.

Soon the surrounding structures transition to one story corrugated metal shacks, spilling more children into our path. For every child's hand I touch, yet another stretches out. *The Youth Fact Book* published by the Kenya Institute of Economic Affairs reports that 78% of Kenyans are under age 34. As I peer down narrowing mazes on either side, where little people dance and chant, "Wazungu!" ("white people!"), I realize I'm still searching for her. Somewhere, she is in the river of children.

Her name, at least as I knew her, was Emma. She was found abandoned in a field and taken to the Mother Teresa Home for Abandoned Children near Mathare Valley. I was shocked when I first saw her in her crib on my first day of three weeks of volunteering in the home. She was languid and emaciated. I was terrified that she would die in my arms as I sang and prayed over her for hours. I spent the bulk of every day with her and paid for treatment at a local hospital. As her health returned, her spirit blossomed. Her face lit up when I came in the room. I was captivated. We spent hours together playing baby games and quietly snuggling. She protested vehemently when I put her in her crib on my last day of volunteering. My own grief was tempered by hope. She was too young to understand, but I fully intended to complete the legal process so that we could belong to each other forever. I planned to return as soon as possible. I can still hear her wails as I turned and walked away. I never saw her again.

Less than a month after my return home, just as my husband and I mutually agreed to initiate adoption paperwork, I received a message from a friend in Kenya that Emma was gone. A woman claiming to be her mother came to the orphanage. The sisters did their best to verify the story, and were fearful about the situation; but in the end, they had to let Emma go.

The slums of Nairobi have never been the same for me. Somewhere, Emma roams their labyrinths. I am always searching for her, years older but still with the same gentle wise eyes, high cheekbones and narrow chin, sweet tranquil spirit. Beneath the sewage stench, the sodden rags, the grimy skin, for me every child is Emma.

We pick our way past the pay-for-use public restrooms. In a community where residents are lucky to eke out a dollar a day, it costs the equivalent of about 6 cents to use the restroom. The relentless rows of one room shacks lack electricity and running water. Hence the squalor of “flying toilets,” bags filled and thrown to carpet our mottled path.

Three children clamor to clutch my hand. We round the corner parallel to the river at the bottom of the valley. The children stop as if contained by an invisible boundary. I turn to wave good-bye and pause, pondering the panorama of smiling faces, pigs less than ten feet away snuffling through mounds of trash along the river bank, and the bloated carcass of a dog floating on its cesspool surface. I notice that the little girl is barefoot.

Wes Stafford, in his book “Too Small to Ignore,” writes, “No matter what the ill of society, it tends to spiral downward and eventually land with its cruelest and most smothering impact on our littlest citizens. Small, weak, helpless, innocent, vulnerable, and trusting, they are the waiting victims for our simple neglect and most evil abuse. No matter what goes wrong, the little ones pay the greatest price.”

A few yards further and I hesitate on the edge of the bridge. Gingerly I make my way across. We work our way up from the river. We get to leave. Within seconds, the little girl is reabsorbed into the flow of children.

Part 2
Mathare Valley,
January 18-20, 2011

Nightmare choices

Imagine for just a moment that you are a girl in Mathare Valley. You have completed four or five years of education, and now you are forced to drop out of school because your mother, a mere fourteen years older than yourself, cannot afford school fees. Her face is etched with premature lines of disease and anxiety. You know somehow that she loves you, but her emotional energy is exhausted in the daily stress of trying to provide the basics of subsistence: rent of \$20/month for your one room shack, tea for breakfast, and maybe ugali (thick cornmeal porridge) and sukumawiki (like collard greens) for your daily meal. You have never met your father and your mother never mentions him. After drinking morning tea, your mother locks your baby sister alone inside the shack, hardening her heart to the wails of protest. You and she both know that cries of starvation are even more unbearable. Without a word, eyes cast down, you part ways. You wander off to beg, bearing the scorn of those passing by, hoping for a moment of kindness. As a young girl, you are incredibly vulnerable. The myth that having sex with a virgin cures AIDS permeates the slums. A man offering the pretense of providing food and shelter subjugates your heart. Soon, you are a teenage mother. When you succumb to a sickness that refuses to heal, a test at a free government-sponsored Voluntary Counseling & Testing clinic confirms your worst fears. You’ve contracted the dreaded HIV virus. The man who once promised you protection, flees. Pregnant again, you know that breastfeeding the baby will transfer the HIV virus. But, what is your alternative?

Like a sinister “Choose Your Own Adventure,” our team wades into the labyrinth of nightmare choices that perpetrate the anarchy of Mathare Valley. Members of Mathare Worship Centre guide the team on multiple house-visits.

Wanja welcomes the visitors and gratefully accepts a food package of staples purchased by team members. She is tall and gorgeous, but her glittering personality seems frayed by recent bouts of sickness complicated by her HIV positive status. Wanja has found the hope of Jesus through Mathare Worship Centre, but struggles through the daily challenge of slum subsistence. Her husband abandoned the family when she was in the hospital delivering her fourth child, Morgan, by C-section. She had no money to pay the bills, so she fled the hospital. She also had no money for food, so she breastfed Morgan rather than watch him starve, infecting the baby with HIV. The team prays with Wanja for her older daughter, 15, who has run away and disappeared into the streets.

Another corrugated metal door opens into a similar story. Maria is also a single HIV positive mother. She was infected by her husband and unknowingly passed the virus to three of her four children because she lived in a rural area where testing was not available. Her first-born has already died of AIDS. Maria found out her status in time to choose not to breast-feed her youngest, Dorcas, and miraculously the thirteen month old is HIV negative. But Dorcas is starving. Maria is forced to lock the baby in the home alone while she searches for work. Her nine year old son, Michael, wanders the slum unaccompanied from the crack of dawn until long after dark. Lydia, age seven, is sent to beg. When the team asks Maria how they can pray for her, grief shadows her face and the tears overflow. She can only whisper, "My children." Team members offer Maria a food package and encourage her to take Dorcas to the daycare at Mathare Worship Centre; and the next day she comes, a glint of hope in her sad eyes.

On the way to a house-visit, team members, including my 13 year old son Jacob, pass by a one-year old baby sleeping face-down in the dirt. No adults are around. When they walk by again a half hour later, the baby is still there. Mama Karau returns the next day with team members to investigate. They discover that the child spends every day playing and sleeping in the dirt where his mother, Susan, can see him while she works in a bar across the way, and as a prostitute, risking HIV infection every day. Susan's own mother recently passed away, and she doesn't know how old she is, somewhere between fifteen and seventeen years old. Later that day, Jacob tries to process what he has witnessed. He concludes quietly, "It is not right that a one year old child has no one to pick him up out of the dirt and give him someplace to sleep."

A visit to Jane's home defies the most miserable nightmare. Located on a peninsula marooned by rivers of sewage on three sides, the shack borders a construction area belching black fumes directly into the front door. Jane, HIV positive, and her five children, ranging in age from one to nine, are racked with deep chest coughs. Jane's husband left her when he found out her positive status. Sometimes Jane earns income washing clothes, but she is often too sick to work. If she is unable to pay rent, her landlord beats her and throws her belongings in the sewage outside. Team members and the Kenyan guide share Christ with Jane, and she is ready to receive Him. They invite her to visit the church and access its resources. Mama Karau tells us later that she will use some money donated by the team to pay Jane's rent for several months.

In Mathare Valley, our team collides with the vile roots of the Kenyan orphan crisis –AIDS, disease, neglect, and starvation. With alarming clarity, each of the three million Kenyan orphans takes on the face of a nightmare choice.

(With special thanks to Holly Leonard for providing case notes from the team's house-visits.)

Part 3

Mother Teresa's Home for Abandoned Children, Jan 15 & 18-20, 2011

Lies and Truth

Pios lies on a bean bag, intermittently wailing. I can't decipher if it is a sad or happy cry, or simply an affirmation to the world and to himself that he exists. I kneel down next to him. He is lost in a parallel reality. Every few seconds, his body convulses involuntarily; his right arm jerks to the left side of his head. Over and over, Pios rhythmically beats his own ear. I look closer; his ear is bruised and swollen. Last time I was here, this methodical motion was not part of his repertoire. I engage him in eye contact and begin to mimic his babble, "ma ma ma." His eyes flood with delight as he changes to another non-sensical phrase, which again I imitate. I can't find any rhyme or reason in our simple game, but he is no longer beating his ear. I hold his hands and pull his body up and down. Somewhere buried below the disturbing disabilities, an enchanting soul cries out, "I am here!" He is happy, and so am I. But, I have to leave. He protests for a few minutes, and then settles back into his habitual routine of wailing and hammering his own head. No one even seems to notice. It is simply a familiar accent in the regular cacophony of the Crippled Children's Ward.

Make no mistake. Mother Teresa's Home for Abandoned Children is a sacred, holy sanctuary where every child is considered to be, as Mother Teresa phrased it, "Jesus, in His distressing disguise." If not for the whole-hearted, utterly sacrificial service of the sisters to the poorest of the poor, if not for these women who follow Jesus into the harshest, most desolate recesses of the world, most of these children would not even be alive. When other orphanages are too full to accept even one more child, the sisters joyfully meet the police at the gate to receive yet another cast-off bundle, baptizing, naming, and nurturing each precious creation of God. It's just that in a home of 125 residents and 16 sisters, with the help of a smattering of hired local workers, there are not enough caregivers to go around. It's just that God never intended for children to be ware-housed.

After the grime and filth of the slums, the cribs, brightly colored mobiles, and sparkling clean tiles feel like a welcome paradise as we slip off our street shoes and trade them in for rubber flip-flops provided by the sisters. But below the surface and beyond the visible, it is also an insidious snake pit of lies that rear their hooded heads when our team visits at the beginning of nap time. The children are settled in their cribs, and we are enraptured as we absorb the sweet innocence of one tiny being after the other. As we move through the room, a baby begins to whimper, another joins in, and soon there is a mighty chorus. We are only passing through today, returning later in the week to serve. Helplessly, we leave the room, trailed by the swelling lament to be held, to belong.

"Today, I went back to Mother Teresa's. I spent the whole day with the babies. There are four wards. There are the babies, the kids older than 2, the Crippled Children's Ward, and the Disabled Women's Ward. For the duration of the morning, I was with Mrs. Susan, a member from my team. We began by walking around and saying 'hi' to all of the babies. When Mrs. Susan began dancing with one of the babies named Cigi, she was having the time of her life. But when Mrs. Susan set little Cigi down, she looked like what I can only describe as 'scarred for life.' She would just shy away whenever Mrs. Susan reached for her. Thinking about it, I realize that the children there are used to it. When you set down a baby at home, they may cry for an hour. But the babies there, they only cry for a minute BECAUSE THEY ARE USED TO IT. It's just mind blowing. THEY ARE USED TO IT. It happens all of the time. Everyday. That's all." Jacob Briggs, age 13

When they cry, and no one responds, the enemy is ready and waiting to pounce like a lion tracking the weakest member of the pack. "You don't matter. No one cares. Just give up. You aren't worth loving," are the seeds he maliciously tosses, seeds that grow festering roots that entwine and suffocate the heart. I know. Because we adopted two of our children from this Mother Teresa home, and we are tenaciously uprooting from the soil of their hearts these lies that shaped their struggling self worth, even before conscious memory.

Make no mistake, the enemy has no mercy. Babies without parents are easy prey.

Part 4

Selah

Selah: "a word frequently found in the Book of Psalms, and also in Hab. 3:9, 13, about seventy-four times in all in Scripture. Its meaning is doubtful. Some interpret it as meaning 'silence' or '**pause**;' others, 'end,' '**a louder strain**,' 'piano,' etc." (*Easton's Bible Dictionary*, emphasis mine)

Below the surface and beyond the visible, deeper even than the onslaught of the enemy, if you have eyes to see and ears to hear, you will find an unbearable searing grief and an unsearchable fierce, passionate claiming. For every orphan abandoned and assaulted, there is One who knows his name, there is One who has numbered the very hairs on her head.

Jacob and I are sitting at our dining room table, morning sun streaming through the windows. We are warm and dry, despite the frigid Colorado chill hovering just beyond the glass. The equatorial warmth of Kenyan summer seems a hazy, distant memory. But as we remember together, as we process mental images of children who cry for only a few moments and then give up, because they are used to it, I suddenly remember Jacob on the floor of Mathare Worship Centre, buried in piles of children. They are gleefully stealing his baseball hat, and he is unsuccessfully lunging after them, laughing, trapped by myriad little arms and legs. Later, one of our team members recalls that the room radiated with the stench of pipes when he is doing a plumbing job. And my son is joyfully ensconced in the source of the smell, the children. I suddenly feel the poignancy of the choice he made that day, to see, and to act upon, an alternate reality. Let the youngest among us be our teachers...

I have looked into the eyes of many orphans, and in each, I have discovered a holy mystery. Why does the enemy hate them so? Why is the enemy so determined to destroy them? Because God loves them so. He knows each of them by name, He feels every wound of their betrayal, His heart pulses raw and real for each and every single one of them. "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palm of my hands; your walls are ever before me." (Isaiah 49:15-16). To look into the eyes of an orphan is to be very near to the heart of God. "No one has ever seen God," (Jn. 1:18a); but Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40). In touching them, we touch God.

Part 5
Sanctuary of Hope
January 16 & 22, 2011

“God counts in ones.” *Mother Teresa.*

Getting on or off our bus in Mathare Valley is the closest experience to being a rock star that I will ever have. Children swarm visitors in a mad frenzy. High fives, fist bumps, enthusiastic greetings or farewells, one child held here and another hoisted there, are the only way to progress through the paparazzi. On another day in a different place, our team boards the same bus with a different crowd of children nearby. They stand at a distance waving, friendly but cautious. We’ve just met the SoH children for the first time after a church service. A team member notes the contrast of their demeanor to that of the Mathare Valley kids. I reply with the first thought that comes to mind, “I think it’s because they are healthier.” These children are no longer starved for love and attention. They are interested in us, but they don’t need us. Certainly they still carry the heart wounds of their earlier experiences of neglect, abuse, and deprivation; but they are healing. As our bus rambles away, they are embraced in the arms of caregivers or clustered close to family members.

There was a time when John was just another bedraggled kid mobbing a visitor’s bus. His origins wound through a familiar plot. John’s mother’s first husband died from AIDS in a rural village, and she was chased away. She ended up in Mathare Valley with a man who promised her shelter, until she became pregnant with John. As an HIV positive single mother, she faced nightmare choices. At the time, the Mathare Worship Centre daycare was not even able to provide food for the babies; but at least a caregiver watched over the children. John wiled away his early childhood in the daycare with the constant companions of hunger, thirst, and sickness. His mother desperately searched for income, her strength failing. John’s experiences mimic that of millions of other orphans around the world. But there was a God who was about to twist this story on a wildly different trajectory.

When the Sanctuary of Hope dream coalesced into reality in 2006, Pastor and Mama Karau coaxed four year old John into their car. He had never before ridden in a vehicle. But he was well acquainted with the Karaus from the church, and they laughed together all the way home that he was their “first-born child.” He recalls now that upon arrival at SoH, he knew immediately that there was nowhere else he wanted to be. His new family delighted in his inquisitive nature, and wondered at his natural music abilities.

It’s hard to believe John’s story started in Mathare Valley, as our team boards a bus with the 22 SoH kids and the staff members, bound for an excursion of fun and togetherness. We take the opportunity throughout the long drive to interview the SoH kids. A quick peek into the notes from John’s reads:

- What have you learned about God at SoH? *How he loves me and how God loves the whole world*
- What do you want to be when you grow up? *A doctor*
- Who is your favorite Bible character and why? *Jesus, because he changes people...*

After hanging out at SoH a few times during the previous week, we are no longer strangers. The afternoon is a sweet medley at Mamba Village of good food, exploring the beautiful grounds, face-painting, bubble-blowing, baseball, jump roping, Duck Duck Goose, and Keep Away.

At the end of the day, we sink gratefully back into the bus seats. We are tired, but our hearts are full. The ride home is tranquil, with many of the kids nodding off to sleep on the shoulders of adults. Except for the back row of the bus. What is it about the back seats of a bus? My son is definitely the instigator. John is squashed in amongst the howling pack of hyenas, and his chortle seems to surge above the others. Intermittently he shouts, "Jacob, this is your last warning!" and the entire back row dissolves in a new fit of hilarity. I turn in my seat to watch, soaking in the merriment, fully present to the wonder of it all. John is happy. John wants to be a doctor. John is loved. John knows that God loves him and that God loves the world.

The bus pulls into the place where our team is staying, and reluctantly we say our good-byes, one by one down the aisle of the bus. We stand in the brilliant wash of late afternoon African color – red dirt, verdant swaying grasses, rust-tiled roofs, limitless cerulean sky, vivid prints on the women passing by. Arms raised high, we are waving good-bye. The opened bus windows are a hurricane of wildly waving arms.

I swear that if there was any more joy, any more love, any more hope in that bus, it would sprout wings and fly.

* * * * *

Jacob wrote this email to our team after we returned. Please take a moment to accept his invitation:

"Before the trip I listened to a song by the name of 'Beautiful' by Mercy Me. I was already thinking about Africa, and this song stood out:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0jvQAorTw&feature=related>

"Think about all that we experienced together. Pay attention to some phrases such as:

*And all you hear is you're not worth anything
You were made for so much more than all of this
You are treasured, you are sacred, you are His
You are more than what is hurting you tonight
For all the lies you've held inside so long. They are nothing in the shadow of the cross'
He loved us enough to die
You're beautiful in His eyes
You were meant for so much more than all of this
You're beautiful*

"I hope this touched your heart, because it did mine."

For all the beautiful children who "were meant for so much more than this,"

Colleen Briggs

Hope's Promise
Director of Orphan Care