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TIME WITH MOTHER TERESA

Kathy Searcy

I have always described my life as the continual weaving of a tapestry— each person, experience or event bringing a new color and design to the weaving. Somehow this concept has helped me to understand Romans 8:28, God pulling everything together.

My time in India, working as a volunteer with Mother Teresa's work, has formed a design of both shimmering bright colors and dark, heavy hues within this tapestry. As I boarded the plane to leave India I was both glad to be rid of the rains, heat, humidity, and pressing humanity as well as saddened to leave a place where so many are in such obvious need.

The trip I took through Europe, the Middle East and India was a journey designed to better understand God's call in my life work. The push to be near Mother Teresa and her work was an attempt to understand the cost she had paid for her discipleship to Christ. I thought perhaps being near her would somehow make me more like her, that her faith which seemed so great would become my faith. What I found was that faith is an outworking of my devotion and obedience to God's calling in my life and not something vicariously experienced from another.

I lodged myself in the Salvation Army Guest House run by a delightful English couple. For a small fee one could get bed and breakfast and the companionship of many other travelers passing through Calcutta. Many of these were also volunteers in the various works that Mother Teresa has started in Calcutta. For most of us the days were filled working with children, the dying, lepers or the handicapped. The evenings often brought long discussions about the purpose of our work and its validity.

For those of us from a more fundamental, evangelical background there was the question that we were not trying to "convert the lost," but we were simply being present to a dying man or a sick child. Was this enough? Others felt strongly that Mother Teresa should be more politically oriented, trying to change the system that put so many people in a poverty cycle. What seemed to be the outcome of these discussions was that at least Mother Teresa was doing

something; she had decided on a path and was following it. And somehow each of us felt fortunate to be a small part of that greater whole.

It was the monsoon season which meant rain, heat and chest crushing humidity. The air seemed to distill into water as we breathed, and movement of any kind was a great effort. The streets often flooded with the rain, combining with sewer waste, human waste and all matter of debris. Throngs of people live, cook, and bathe on the streets. The acrid smoke of drugs filled the air. Dogs and people scavenged for food in the same garbage heaps. People living under nothing more than a piece of cardboard as a roof. How very hard for me to conceive of this existence as "living" in the same way that I knew it. What great lessons I was to learn from these people.

The days started early, around 4:00 A.M. with prayers at the motherhouse of the residence of the Sisters of Charity. Each morning repeatedly confirmed that only through the Spirit of Jesus were these women, the Sisters of Charity, able to do the work required of them — maintaining long hours, ministering to so many, doing what often seemed to be the impossible.

My days were mostly spent working at *Shishu Bavan*, a home for sick and orphaned children. The home was located in a slum area beyond the Howrah bridge. The bridge spanned the Hooghly river and served as a roof for many of Calcutta's homeless. The children were often left on the doorstep of the motherhouse, as well as brought by many of the Sisters from illegal "abortion clinics." Out of their despair it was not uncommon to have mothers attempt to abort their 6-8 month old fetus for a few rupees. The sisters made regular rounds to these "clinics" to collect living fetuses which had been left to die.

Other children had families that were unable to provide for them. The children were brought to the home on a temporary basis. Many of these parents visited their children each Sunday. What scenes of touching reunions I witnessed between these families and their children. How often I have thought, since the birth of my own son, about the great courage and agony

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of those women, experienced in even the temporary relinquishing of their children.

Some days were spent helping to prepare meals for the children; other days were spent cleaning floors and dirty diapers, basically assisting in whatever chores needed to be done. Most days I spent in care of sick infants. Due to the lack of space, often there were two or more infants per crib. Infants of six months old compare in size to a three or four month old Stateside baby. Many of these infants were malnourished upon arrival to the home and it was an ongoing battle for the Sisters to keep many of them alive. I spent several days sitting on the cool concrete floor singing and holding two or three feverish babies. How often I wondered what life would bring each of these children, if they made it past their first year of life. I remember commenting to a friend in the States upon my return about how large the babies in the States seemed in comparison to those that I held in India.

Everyday of my six months in India was colored by an overwhelming feeling, the feeling of living in the midst of greed. And, yet I knew that I could leave the stench, the debris, the throngs of people whenever I wanted; I had a ticket out. But what of those people and the Sisters that had devoted their lives to living and working with the poorest of the poor? Those around me had barely enough to sustain themselves through one day. I struggled deeply with the contradictions and great differences I saw in my life and the lives of those with whom I was working. I struggled with being such a small part of what is a never ending cycle of need—at least never ending until Jesus comes. I realized that I am only a small part of a greater whole and Jesus can empower one to be a part of the whole. Many days I struggled with the fact that some of these poorest of the poor were hard to love—at times I felt used and scorned by the very ones I wanted to help.

India is a land of great contrast and beauty; a land that I grew to love and also hate. It was the desert for the purging of my heart, the refining of my gold. It was the seeing with the eyes of my heart rather than with the eyes of my mind. What would be the final lesson learned in this land?

I truly feel that Jesus calls us to a life of servanthood, a life of washing the feet of others. He calls us to a life that seeks to understand the need and

is willing to minister to that need. In physical poverty we feed, clothe, and dress wounds. In spiritual poverty we present the living Christ.

My feeling upon returning from Calcutta to the affluence of Dallas was great anger. How could people not know of the terrible human plight that I witnessed in India? How could I pass on what I had learned and seen? With time I have been able to tame the anger and redirect my feelings in more appropriate channels of communication, channels to educate.

Perhaps the greatest lesson I learned was humility. This I learned from the Sisters. These were women who were tireless in their devotion to minister, devout in their dependance on Christ who gives them strength to confront each new day, willing in body and spirit to do whatever was required of them, boundless in energy for the never-ending tasks. And, finally they so very willing to work with the rush of young and old volunteers from all over the world, each coming to learn that none of us can do great things for God, but that we can do small things with a great love.

The days passed quickly. There did not seem to be enough time to make a difference to the people of Calcutta, but certainly enough time to change me. Several days were spent working at *Kalighat*, the home for the destitute and dying, and visiting *Shanti Nagar*, a village of lepers. *Khaligat*, a former temple to the goddess Kali, housed the many dying found in the streets by the Sisters. Mother Teresa's hope was that each of these could be given a chance to die with a loving, smiling face. And so often that was all one could do for these people, present them a smile.

One particular day I ministered to a young woman my age. Her head had been shaved, as were most of those brought to *Kalighat*, due to lice. She was emaciated, literally a bag of bones covered by a thin layer of skin. Her large dark eyes were sunken into her head and yet bright and inquisitive. She knew little English, but I spoke to her softly of Jesus and his love for her. As I sat by her side I was reminded of the expression, "There but by the grace of God go I." How unfair life seemed for her and how much I had been given simply due

Mother Teresa

I searched and searched and searched for some pithy quote from Mother Teresa to put in this box. I read a biography and scoured magazine articles. Just one provocative anecdote would have satisfied my quest. But, I guess my failure is credit to her mission. Her life's work does not find its motivation in the eloquence of the pen, or in some sophisticated theological idea. Her life and calling is straightforward: to minister to the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters. It is that simple -- and that powerful.

Editor

to my place and family of birth.

Although the purpose of my journey to Calcutta was to give, I received back a hundred fold. As I attempted to wash the feet of others, my feet were washed by children I cuddled each day, by the Sisters that smilingly attended to things that repel most people, and by the remembrance of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.

At the motherhouse of the Sister of Charity there was a sign over the steps that read, "What I do, you cannot do. What you do, I cannot do. But together we are doing something beautiful for God." Something beautiful for God, both in the lives of those we serve and in our own lives. We step out in faith, because we hear a call—a call to the obedience of God in our life. Our faith is renewed daily in order to surmount the difficulties of the task before us, and in this case, to minister to the wounds of others in the midst of deplorable conditions, to minister in the midst of great agony with a smile on our lips and a light that shines forth from our eyes; a light that shines forth because we have given entrance into our hearts to the living Christ as we minister to the dying flesh.

It was in faith that I journeyed to India to learn, and learn I did. The lessons I learned were often of God's planning rather than my own. I left India with a greater sense of the need of Christ in my life and with a prayer that the time in India would be forever woven

into the tapestry of my life; that the eyes of my heart would remain open to the needs of those around me. I left India with so many "whys" and no answers. I realized once again that living with the poor is not an easy task, as so often glamorized in our minds. Living with the poor is a real life situation full of oppression, immobilizing religious caste, disease, filth and helplessness. Yet, these same poor oftentimes taught me greater dimensions of joy.

As I walked through the muddy streets of the Howrah slum, I imagined Christ along side of me. What would he see that I was missing? How would he respond to the dying man on the streets? What would he say to this man? To comfort the dying, to bandage the wounds of the sick, to hold the hurting, to talk of the grace and salvation of Jesus, these are the things that Christ asks of me. And, yet I struggle with the working-out of this call in everyday life as I live in Calcutta, Dallas, and Belize.

As the door of the plane closed I began to cry. I was relieved to be away from so much I did not understand, but also sad to leave the community of people that taught me so much about faith, humility, work, and prayer. I was left with the ever conflicting feelings that someday I would return to this land. Silently I marveled at the new colors and design in my tapestry of life.