



Teetering on the Brink  
Steve Vinton, June 21, 2007

Sometimes I find myself asking favors from God because I just want something so desperately.

It was Godfrey who first came running up the hill phone in hand with the news that one of our teachers Matt was lost. The missionaries who come to serve with us don't get to go much on vacation while they're here. They spend almost the whole time that they are in Tanzania living in the village with their students and their families. It's on a very rare occasion that they even make a trip into the city even for a day and there's never time to go on a vacation or visit a game park or go to the beach or anything like that. After all, we're here to work, we're here to interweave our lives so closely with the people in these villages that we become a part of these communities, we're here not to be served but to serve, not for our pleasure as if this were a cruise but to empty out ourselves into the lives of others. Our hope for our missionaries is that they will serve with the attitude that unless it's something that all of their fellow Tanzanian teachers can enjoy with them then they really deep down don't want to do it. And we want them not just to stay in the village because of the signals that it sends to their students, but because really, truly, in their hearts they can't think of anything better to do. But after serving with us, on the way out of the country, after they've said their goodbyes to their students and left the village, we hope our missionaries will take a day or two to relax, enjoy having electricity and hot showers and nice restaurant food with all of the preservatives and additives and do something finally a little touristy before they leave the country. And so Matt on the day before his flight back to America had a day in Dar to enjoy himself. He took a boat out into

the Indian Ocean to a little island and began wandering around. And by dark when Matt had not come back Godfrey got the message on the phone that something was very seriously wrong. Between the phone calls until way after midnight and the decision to get up at 3am and head for town at 4am I didn't get a ton of sleep. You pray a lot of prayers some that are so begging that you wouldn't want to say them aloud because you wouldn't want anyone else to hear the sound of them except God and your very own soul. And you project calm when you're not calm because you have to be calm because you have to think and you have to do what is right because that's what is has to be when you're a leader.

It wasn't until the next morning a couple of hours after the sun came up that we had the good news that Matt was ok and all was well.

Now that it's over I have time to reflect and wonder about it all. If you never teeter on the brink, can you really appreciate the relief that runs through your body when you are granted a gracious favor? If you've never been hungry, can you really be thankful for the food you have or does the prayer before the meal become a ritual stripped of its meaning? If you don't struggle to get the Sawala school registered so the kids can take the exams, do you miss seeing how God is at work because the movie plays by so fast and you move on to the next thing that you miss how it is indeed true that He is at work in all things? If Emmanuel never goes on vacation, can you fully appreciate the excellence of his work when he's here?

Is it only when you almost lose a treasure of great value that you fully appreciate the wonder of the treasure?

Some people will miss it of course. All of their thoughts will be on the last day of Matt's stay here in Tanzania – the drama of him spending the night lost on that island with everyone frantic and frightened – and they will miss focusing on the treasure. The six months of wonderful service that Matt did, not just teaching his students, not just the volunteering to teach at the primary school in the next village, not just the trips to the homes of his students, but the way he loved people and let them love him back. Matt came to Tanzania barely knowing what he had gotten himself into. Arriving that first day in the village and being told that there was no nice guest house that he was staying at, no chocolates on the pillow at night (no pillow actually!), but that it was off to the village to make his home with a student – no warning, no preparation for it, as if it was just the most normal thing in the world to arrive in Tanzania and go to live in a little house in the village and sleep on a mat and bathe in a bucket and learn to eat not when you're hungry but when the food is ready. To

see death enough to realize that life is a privilege. To reach that point that you stop seeing your students as objects who need to be taught or to be helped or to be pitied, but instead to see them as people who care about you and that you care about. To get to that point in less than six months you have to be a pretty remarkable human being. Matt was. And the great thing is that Matt is. A treasure.

Susan got out of bed this morning and before she headed off to Mkonge to visit her friends she made the long list of "concerns" that we have, everything from Sawala not being registered yet, to a huge thorn in our flesh that has given Susan sleepless nights and that robbed her of a lot of joy and caused her a lot of heartache lately. And then she said simply, "Matt is alive. I can handle the rest."

And that, my friends, was Matt's final gift to us here before he left.

A very significant gift indeed.