



I felt like this was the Thanksgiving that passed me by.
Steve Vinton, November 23, 2007

It has truly been one of the busiest weeks of our lives, but even busy weeks mercifully have to come to an end, and this one has finally come to an end. It's 6:00 pm on a Friday here in Dar es Salaam, the shops are all closing, the government offices have called it quits, and there's literally no more that has to be done because there simply is no more that can be done. I felt like this was the Thanksgiving that passed me by.

With Susan and the boys back home in the village and me and Godfrey and Emmanueli stuck down here in Dar with car troubles and a to-do list that would never end, Thursday came and went. I wondered at times how much three people could cram into a single week and I was beginning to despair of it all.

Coaxing residency permits for our missionary teachers out of the Immigration office.

Buying books and books and more books for our schools.

Hunting everywhere for all Susan had on her long shopping list of things she wanted us to get for Christmas for all of the widows and the orphans and those of her friends who have AIDS. Susan's list is long and she never wants less than 500 of anything that wife of mine! At least the frenzy of it all was tempered with the thought that Christmas this year will be special for a lot of people as a result.

Taking care of Susan's friends who she sent down here to the cancer hospital.

Trying to arrange heart surgeries for the two little girls from our village who need them soon.

Looking for a bus to buy. Knowing that Fenet can't keep up much longer the pace of two and sometimes three trips a day from our village all the way to the Lugoda Hospital with the car jammed full of sick people. His day can't keep starting at 7am and ending with him getting home at 8pm all the time.

Standing in line in banks to send money here and there and everywhere to pay supplies for boards and desks and cement and everything else that we've got to have to build all of the classrooms we're building.

And then coming back to the guest house each day and working late into the night on budgets and plans and that kind of stuff.

I'm not saying there were no bright spots this week. There were. The wonderfully unhurried conversation with the wife of the Minister of the Interior who I ran into in the bank. The little text message jokes that Emmanueli would send me during the day. A few brief conversations with Susan on the phone. Relaxing dinners filled with laughter. But mostly it was just work.

And today was really work. And I've just come, hot and sweaty from wandering all over the town and tired and hungry from eating nothing all day, and I'm back at the guest house and I've sent and received emails. Everyone in America is still asleep now, this Friday after Thanksgiving, and so there are no emails from America, only one email and it's from Tanzania, from one of our missionary teachers who is leaving us in three weeks after spending a year in the little village of Sawala. I'm still hot and sweaty and I'm still hungry and tired, but after reading her email I'm all different

inside. Steve Vinton is different. Finally. The Thanksgiving that I thought I had missed

finally came for me. So let me share Tamara's letter with you:

None of you know Janeth. I wish you could meet her. She is the kind of person who lights up a room, the kind of person who stays with you long after she has gone. When she giggles, you can't help but giggle with her, and her 4'10" frame shakes with laughter. She is in the eighth grade, and she is easily the most intelligent student in her class. Janeth is always polite, and she is so generous, she would give you her very last cup of tea. I know from experience.

Six months ago, Janeth's father died, leaving behind her mother and Janeth and her two younger sisters. About a week after his death, Janeth came to school and tearfully told one of the other teachers that she had to quit; her mother couldn't afford the school fees, let alone the money needed to buy exercise books and pens. Janeth's mother farms a piece of land here in Sawala, but the food the land produces is so minimal that it is just barely enough to feed the family. Maggie and I decided right away that we wanted to help Janeth, and since then, she has been working at our house, and we have been paying her school fees and giving her some money to take home to her mother. She's become like a little sister, and Maggie and I both care for her deeply.

For the last six weeks, though, Janeth has been different, almost the complete opposite of the sunny 16-year-old who used to sit in my classroom. She never raises her hand anymore, she has stopped doing her homework, and no matter how hard Maggie and I try, we couldn't even get her to crack a smile. There were days in class when she would doze off, and it seemed like she could care less about her studies. Yet every time Maggie or I asked her, she insisted there was nothing wrong. We knew it wasn't the truth, but we had no idea how to help.

Then, yesterday, we discovered what the problem was. Janeth's family had no food. They had no money. Their harvest of beans had been bad this year, and the only thing they could scrape together to eat was ugali, a mixture of corn flour and water. When we learned all this, I felt my stomach sink. This bright, beautiful, hard-working girl had been running on empty for weeks and she had never once asked for help.

So, Maggie and I spent our Thanksgiving with Janeth and her mother. We bought cooking oil, salt, fish, sugar and soap and took it to Janeth's house. You would have thought we had written her mother a check for a thousand dollars. She got down on one knee to thank us and shake our hands. I had to look away because I had tears in my eyes.

Janeth immediately began preparing tea for her guests, and Maggie and I both noticed when she emptied the tiny bag that contained the only tea leaves in the house into the kettle of boiling water she was making especially for us. The generosity of the poor. It takes your breath away.

In my wildest dreams, I couldn't have come up with a better way to spend Thanksgiving. I'm thankful for Janeth, and I'm so thankful that we finally know why she has been different lately. I'm thankful that God put us in a position to help her. And most of all, I'm thankful that I've learned, from the poorest of the poor, what it is to be truly generous.

As I'm typing these last lines, I realize that this is probably the last email I'll send before I leave. I want you all to know how much I appreciate your support and your prayers. You probably will never know what it has meant to me ...

How silly Steve Vinton can be sometimes. I didn't miss Thanksgiving this year. It just came a day late for me, that's all.