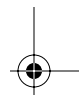
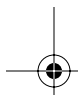


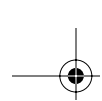
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The Risky Adventure



I SAT ON A ROUGH WOODEN STOOL AT A RICKETY TABLE EATING UGALI and sukumawiki¹ somewhere between Mombasa and Nairobi with my Masai friend, Philip Kishoyian. We had stopped at the Kenyan trucker's restaurant of choice because it served Kishoyian's favorite: goat stew. Blue paint chips from the furniture mixed with the red clay on the ground. The cashier sat on a stool too, but he was surrounded by a mesh wire cage. His need for protection didn't dawn on me until after the meal. As we began to eat, a large Kenyan truck driver approached me from behind and greeted me gruffly in Swahili. Kishoyian's eyes grew large with fear as the cafeteria went quiet. But when I answered with a polite greeting in Swahili, two things happened: Kishoyian's eyes went from fear to shock, and the truck driver slapped





me on the back. Miraculously, I had spoken the few Swahili phrases Kishoyian taught me as if I was a native speaker. As I finished off Kishoyian's delicious goat stew (he had lost his appetite), we were able to share with our new friend the love of God.

Ah, life is sweetest when one brushes death. (Leeann suggested that it was only teeth I was going to miss brushing.) At any rate my encounter still reminds me of Paul's words:

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. (2 Cor 4:10-11)

It was not the last time that I thought about that passage.

In the Middle East it seems that much of the view of America is shaped by Hollywood. Hatem, a Middle Eastern University student, told me in all seriousness that he thought most American men were like Rambo and most American women were like Madonna. (Do we export our best or what?) Furthermore, it was Hatem's view, until he befriended our group that summer, that most Americans would happily kill Arabs. I loved Hatem, and had no desire to do him in, but Hatem, a practical joker, had pulled stunts on some of our short termers that did produce a desire for friendly revenge.

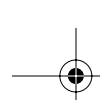
Midway through our program Hatem introduced us to a beach where Muslim families could cavort without dealing with the decadence of European tourists.

"Come on, Hatem. Let's swim out to the sand bar," I said.

"No, I must take a cigarette. I will come as soon as I finish," he replied.

I leisurely swam toward the sand bar in the crystal-clear water while Hatem eased his nicotine fit. But in a few moments I





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spied Hatem swimming with broad strokes in the water underneath me. *He's trying to beat me to the sand bar, I thought. This is my chance!*

Before he broke the water's surface, I grabbed him from behind in a perfect chokehold. He sputtered and yelped, but I dunked him under. He thrashed about helplessly as I dunked him a second time. Laughing, I thrust him under a third time then spun him around by the shoulders.

Now it was my time to sputter—it wasn't Hatem! "Oh my," I stammered. "I'm so sorry. I thought you were someone else . . ."

He didn't speak English.

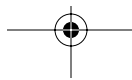
It didn't matter. My intentions and identity were clear enough: I was Rambo who came from America to his country to kill him personally. Coughing, he paddled backwards, never taking his eyes off me. I splashed after him continuing my moronic apologies "Dear me, you see . . . I'm so sorry," I repeated, but my attempts only seemed to cause more panic. Then I noticed his family gathering on the shore, thirty or forty strong.

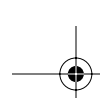
Headlines passed before my eyes: "Arab Mob Kills American Terrorist!" But before I was *done in*, the real Hatem intervened. Slowly I realized that the family was not leering at me with bloodlust but laughing over our case of mistaken identity. Though the young man I dunked slipped off the premises never to be seen by me again, most of his family wanted to meet me. There are actual advantages to looking foolish rather than like Sylvester Stallone.

I can say, along with Paul:

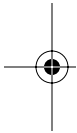
If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. (1 Cor 3:18-19)

* * *





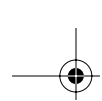
The conditions of the rundown trailer park for migrant workers outside Tampa, Florida, seemed worse than the slums we visit in Guatemala. Our job was to go door to door distributing food and clothing, and telling people about the services of the Good Samaritan Mission. My ten-year-old son and I knocked on the dilapidated trailer door. I didn't notice the spray paint on the outside walls with the words "Latin Kings" until four muscular guys answered the door with scowls and suspicious looks, holding objects behind their backs. "Hola," I said, at precisely the same moment I realized this was the Latin King gang's headquarters. Tristan stood in front of me. My hands on his shoulders tensed; I wanted to pull him back and run. But Tristan, unaware, began telling them in Spanish why we were there. They brightened and smiled at the sound of his sweet natural Spanish (it was not the last time I felt thankful for Maxwell Elementary Spanish Immersion School). One gang member came outside with us. I had Tristan ask if he would like for us to read to him the gospel presentation we had brought with us. "Sí," he said, and he sat down in the dust. I speak little Spanish, but as I heard the gospel presented with a child's cadence to a Latin King gang member, apparently illiterate, I listened to a bigger thing going on: Tristan looked so small and impotent next to the large gang member; but "a little child shall lead them" was God's wisdom, not mine. When one of our group, Allen Bonnell, picked up this man that night and brought him to our church service, I was not surprised when he gave his life to Christ. Not surprised because I've found over time that when we risk—our pride, our time, our money, even our very lives—God works, no matter how childlike we look.



* * *

These experiences—from Africa to the inner city of Amer-





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ica—help me say confidently today that short-term missions take us to places where risks for the gospel are rewarded with opportunities to build the kingdom—a world where those small risky steps of faith in God’s hands become giant leaps of learning, growth and glory to God. After all, if God can use Tristan to bring a Latin King gang member to himself, he can use you and me.

I confess. We didn’t start on short terms with such confidence. In fact, when Leeann and I agreed to direct an African short-term missions program years ago, it felt as if we risked everything for that trip: our careers, our lives and the safety of our new baby, Tristan. And the glare from this risk hid the joy and wonder God had in store for us.

The fact is we started ingloriously.

Leeann called me from the bathroom. (She was six months pregnant with Tristan and spent lots of time there.)

“Mack.”

“Uh-huh,” I responded from the just-awake-but-still-in-bed stage. I wasn’t recovering from late nights of college ministry as quickly as I used to now that I was fifteen years older than the first-year students.

“I think the Lord really does want us to go.”

“Really,” I said. She didn’t need to tell me what she was talking about. I knew.

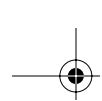
“Yeah, I guess so,” she said.

I leaned out of the bed to see her in the bathroom.

Tears dripped off her nose onto her opened Bible on the floor.

Events of the two previous weeks would prove to change our lives in undreamed of ways. We struggled during those weeks. We felt fear, forbidding and a bit of excitement. But our hearts knew. This was like the God we read about in Scripture. It was





like him to “rudely” interrupt our plans and ideas about how we ran our lives. So without saying another word, I rolled over and punched the numbers on the phone.

“Good morning . . . Yes, John Kyle, please. Yes, I’ll just wait.”

John, the director of the Urbana Student Mission Convention, had happened to town and while there asked Leeann and me to pray about directing a short-term missions program in Kenya.

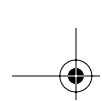
My first response was more a snort than a laugh. John couldn’t be serious, and certainly there was no need to pray. Oh, I could quote Matthew 28:18 with the best of them, but to actually go . . . well, that was another thing. Not only were we going to have our first baby (didn’t that disqualify us from taking radical steps for Jesus?), we didn’t know a thing about Africa. How could I ask my pregnant wife to deliver our first-born, then a few weeks later travel three thousand miles to a land neither of us had seen, to a people we did not know, who spoke a language we did not speak, to direct twenty students more frightened than we were?

But John was serious, and worse, the Holy Spirit seemed serious too. As unique as my objections felt, I knew we didn’t have to travel far in the Scriptures to see we were on familiar territory with God.

The call from God to Abram was to “leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you” (Gen 12:1).

Abram left behind his native land, his culture and his family to go to a land they knew little about, a land of different values and culture and language. Yet Abram obeyed. In fact, his obedience is so simply stated that sometimes we skip over the costs, but they are just as real as ours when God calls us to go to other places today.





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“Yes, hello John. It’s Mack here. Well, I’ve got to admit that I’m surprised to be telling you that we would like to take you up on the offer to direct the short-term program to Kenya if the offer is still open . . .”

Leeann’s tears ran down her cheeks.

“Yes, the baby is due in January, and . . . uh-huh . . .”

I paused to look up at Leeann.

“Yes, you told me before that our baby will do better in Africa than the students will . . . uh-huh.”

I didn’t mention to him that worrying about our students hadn’t even started. I was unashamedly worried about us.

“Yes, God is faithful . . . Okay, John, thanks.”

When I hung up the phone, Leeann said, “Well, we’re in.”

Boy, were we in. Of course, what we thought we were into and what we actually were into turned out to be very, very different. We thought that we had signed up to do missions work for God in Africa. And that was true, but God had some very different ideas about what that meant. That’s the story of the following chapter.

