

March 24, 2007

Public Letter #7: "What Can I Send You?"

This letter is tough to write and maybe tough to read. It's my answer to your question, "What can I send you? What do you need?" Maybe you've asked it and maybe I've answered, "Soccer balls for children. Sports bras for teen girls on the track team. Easy-to-read books for students and 2007 calendars for schools. Hands-on activity books for teachers."

But these are not things that people in my village truly need. They are short-gap answers – things that you can send and I can give that make both of *us*, as Americans, feel good, feel like we've addressed, in some small way, the poverty that is Africa.

But poverty is huge, grinding, complex, layered. It has no easy solution. The soccer balls get confiscated by older kids or punctured on barbed wire fences. The girls' running team disbands because the teacher is "sick." Books are locked away in the principal's office. A teacher decides she has no time to do hands-on learning activities because she's pressured to keep up with the syllabus.

It's like giving a child candy – the pleasure is momentary, for the child and the giver. The candy solves no major problem, perhaps even creates one.

What Kids Need is Education

What the children need is education – school fees and school texts for secondary school, school shoes and school uniforms for standards (grades) 1-12. School uniforms cost \$10 - \$30; shoes cost \$10-\$30 and feet keep growing; a year of high school texts costs \$35; high school fees range from \$150 to \$800/year, depending on the school. These are huge amounts for a country whose people live on \$1 or \$2/day = just \$400-\$1000/year. I remember the Tibetan community trying to get us Madisonians each to support one child in Daramsala, northern India, for \$245/year. While it was an attractive idea for me, I never did it. I figured I was putting out thousands of dollars a year for "my own" Tibetan refugee family, and that was enough.

Like you, I also saw the "Adopt a Child" ads in the back of magazines. Now I'm at the other side of those glossy photos, and I see that "adopting a child" truly makes a difference in a child's life. Education is one answer. If you want to help one child, send money to Friends of Lesotho. They are helping us Peace Corps Volunteers provide high school scholarships – we can each nominate five village children, and I've already located my five. Each will receive 500 Rand (\$90) toward school fees – a great program. (www.friendsoflesotho.org) Mention my name. Maybe we can get 100 drop-outs and orphans back in school.

What Adults Need Are Jobs

But Lesotho doesn't need to save one child – it needs to support 100,000 orphans, and to give education to ALL its children. To do this, yes, it needs help from outside Lesotho. But the country needs jobs. Parents want to support and educate their OWN children and the nieces and

nephews of their sisters and brothers who've died, who've they promised, on deathbeds, in tears, that yes, they'd look after the children. So it's jobs we need, if we're to educate children.

And where are the jobs? For Basotho people, jobs are not in Lesotho. Just a few government jobs, which are shabby, which lack the infrastructure that makes government effective, and which invite "dipping into the till." Oh, one can be a driver of taxi's, or a farmer, or a shop keeper, but here we're talking about eeking by – taking the small, sweating coins of one's neighbors.

There *are* jobs in South Africa – grueling jobs in the diamond or copper mines or in textile factories owned by the Chinese. There *are* jobs in America – for doctors, scientists, professors. So Lesotho sends its strong and able men, its educated men and women, far away. Do they come back? Do they better Lesotho? They do, but it's not a viable solution. The men in South Africa come back shells of men, and they bring HIV/AIDS. The sisters and brothers in America help younger siblings come to America, leaving elderly mothers in the village, without help for everyday chores, without daughters and sons for everyday laughter.

The World Steals from Africa

Lesotho is a country / Africa is a continent stripped of resources, from its diamonds and spices and endangered species to its doctors and nurses and writers. The world has taken from Africa, but not given back. It's a continent of 52 countries, unconnected by highways, airports, trains or train tracks, ships or shipping companies. A company from China or Germany opens a factory here, creates "jobs" (cheap labor). The company does not build an Interstate highway. It builds a little highway or water way that is unashamedly direct – from the factory to the port, or from the factory to the airport. It must make a profit; it cannot afford to build a road for the "people."

It's easy for Americans to think of Africa being poor, a wasteland, a pit of problems. It's harder for us to acknowledge or research how much of our greatness, how much of our wealth came and continues to come from African mines, mountains, veldts. It's harder to count how many nurses and doctors in our hospitals and HMO's come from countries with African names, how many professors in our in our universities represent the best and brightest of their own countries. It's harder yet to see how inter-locking directorates of global corporations (South African Airlines / Shell Oil / KFC / banks) skim the cream off the continent. Africa staffs and supplies not just North America, but also South America, China, Europe.

So, yes, please keep sending the soccer balls and children's books. But know they are not really what my village needs.

What My Village Needs

It is hard for you to send initiative and problem solving skills. That's what my village needs. When you think how you yourself learned "initiative" and "problem solving", you'll think of a long line of experiences, tiny successes that came from kindergarten (which we don't have here), summer camp (which we don't have here), sports teams (which we don't have here), singing in a

musical or acting in a play (no after-school activities here), or the attention of a gifted teacher or doting relative (which hardly exist in this adult-impooverished society).

The hardest time of day for me here is 4 pm in the afternoon. I usually need to walk uptown to buy some tomatoes or to go to the post office. Schools are out, and the road is lined with kids, still in their school uniforms, with NOTHING to do. They just "hang." Well, teens everywhere like to hang, talk to best friends, call out and tease classmates, flirt with the older boys (taxi drivers), smoke their first cigarettes. But teens in many other countries have *options* – they can work on a computer; play on a soccer team; do homework using charts, graphs, calculators, magic markers, glitter; go to a mall; read a magazine in a library. They can take ballet or piano lessons or play in a garage band. They might own or be able to use a camera, an i-pod, a CD player, a camera phone. All these create early experiences with initiative and problem solving.

My high school teacher Volunteer friend Sara up the hill says that when she gives her kids an assignment to compose, "How I'd solve Lesotho's problems if I were Prime Minister," they all write, "I'd ask America for more money."

In Lesotho, problem solving and funding and new projects come from the Outside. Someone like me turns up (virtually unsolicited), in a village so people ask, "What can you give us?" That was what I encountered my first day here (Public Letter #4 – One Day Down, 724 to Go). It's what I meet daily, in various forms. Kids say, "Give me money?" "Give me candy?" Adults say, "When are you going to invite me to dinner?" "When are you going to do a workshop at my school?"

What White People Are Good For

White people are people who are here briefly, who go away, who somehow have access to resources that the village doesn't. Get what you can, while you can.

Peace Corps asks us to create SUSTAINABLE projects. The country is a skeleton of past projects brought by various NGO's (non-governmental organizations like Red Cross or World Vision, etc.) Clinics unstaffed; empty teacher resource centers used as a place to urinate; shells of buildings with peeling signs in front of them, like "GDZ Germany Seedling Center" or "Community Sewing School." The volunteer leaves, the project collapses.

It's not because people are lazy – it's because they are not skilled, not confident, not persistent, don't have telephone networks and acquaintance networks and computer networks to put them in touch with real help. Volunteers can start a project; we can seldom stick around to maintain it.

What I call "initiative" and "problem solving skills" are in reality skills built on huge, interlinked infrastructure systems. Infrastructure – it's a boring word – but it's what my village needs. Roads that lead somewhere; a public official who can get you a service you need; a service that is hooked to other services.

The idea that a Peace Corps Volunteer can do anything more than be friendly to neighborhood kids and teach a few people a few things is pretty ridiculous. Do we need 10,000 computers – which I might write a grant for? No – we need 10,000,000 computers. Do we need 2,000 trees planted – which I might help with? No – we need 2,000,000,000 trees planted. Do we need South Africa to complete Phase II of the Katze Dam and pay us \$2.65 million Rand a year for the water? No – we need South Africa to help us train a generation of hydro-engineers, so we can manage our *own* damn dam, and by the way, the price should be \$2.65 million Rand per day, not per year.

That's what we need. Some hard negotiators who quit giving away the continent.

And Now for The Good News

To end on a positive note – two items:

I recently sent a set of 90 slides on a CD for a PowerPoint presentation for the Wisconsin Council for the Social Studies conference. We did a "live by telephone" interconnect, with me yakking in the background on a speaker phone, while the slides cycled through. What I tried to show in the slides was the absolute, stark beauty of this country, and the joy and resourcefulness of children. Children here, without "options" or "infrastructure" and with few adults in their lives, create volumes of laughter, joy, fun, games. They are strong, lovely, imaginative. The slides show them building clay animals with mud from the river, playing games with old wheel rims, playing dolls and house with scraps from the trash heap. They are merry and strong. I think many American kids would love their freedom to roam, and their dawn-to-dusk days outdoors amidst majestic mountains and bleating baby goats and meandering river gullies.

With a bit of inquiry (initiative, problem solving), I think you can get your hands on a copy of the CD, if you'd like to see it or to show it to *your* kids.

The second positive thought I have about what you can "do" for Africa is what you are already doing – loving children and giving them genuine attention, building stronger local communities with community planning and recycling, teaching problem solving and initiative, being empathetic, working to end the wars in Iraq and in the Sudan, writing me letters to reflect on our shared lives on this planet. These are the things that matter, that in the long run help Africa and help America. Africa's problems will be solved by a world of educated and empathetic people, by a planet not racked by global warming, by governments not at war, by a sense that we are a global community and must reprioritize resources for "people."

What can I send YOU? I send you love from Lesotho. Autumn is on its way. The mornings are now often chilly. Inside my rondavel the candle is burning; the two teen boys who live with 'M'e Mabokang in the big(ger) house are laughing, bringing buckets of water. Our rooster is crowing. A new day dawns.

Madeline / Sesotho name "M'e Lerato" (Lerato = Love)