

Kelly Roper
South Africa, ETW
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Walking the Line

South Africa is walking a fine line. It is an amazingly modern, international, and progressive country, while still containing some issues typical of the poorest nations. Obviously this is partly a result of Apartheid: the previously white parts of South Africa are very similar to the United States, whereas the previously black parts of South Africa still face extraordinary crime, terrible living conditions, and very few resources. There is still barbed wire and intense security around every house. Yet considering the disparity that existed before, during, and as a result of Apartheid, it is amazing how well South Africa is doing.

To be fair, I worked at an orphanage six days a week and rarely went anywhere more exciting than a mall. And while a mall is still a mall in any town, city, or country, I was happy to see how much diversity there was in each mall I visited. None of the malls were purely white, black, or colored (a racial category in South Africa). In fact, I never visibly noticed racism or intense racial tension, which I considered to be amazing progress for a country only fifteen years away from brutally harsh and legally instituted racism.

But, considering that I worked in an orphanage for abandoned children, I also saw the other side of the country. While I'm sure there are a number of social workers in South Africa performing their job admirably, I also knew of former volunteers who were not allowed to adopt children because the social workers assigned to their case were upset over a legally avoided fee. Indeed, they accused Thea Jarvis (the incredible woman who started The Love of Christ Ministries--the home I worked at) of arranging backdoor foreign adoptions to avoid such costs. Having met these former volunteers, and knowing Thea quite well, this accusation is preposterous and appalling. I still cannot easily reconcile the fact that those whose job it is to

find homes for the children I came to love are the same people who would be so concerned about monetary gain.

And while the horror of realizing that abandonment must be moderately acceptable in South Africa for there to be ever more children coming to The Love of Christ Ministries (TLC), the knowledge of the conditions these parents (and often especially the mothers) had to look forward to raising their children in made their decision a bit more understandable. Although still a terrible act, it is clear that they saw no other option. What was truly inexcusable to me were those parents and families, who, after abandoning their child, still refused to allow their child to be adopted. They refused to care for their child either presently or in the future, but also refused to let their children have a forever family. These children were and are still left in a limbo with no permanent stability or family. It is heartbreaking.

The children at TLC are amazingly angelic. Yes, they are still children ages three and younger, but they could not be a sweeter or more well behaved group. Often I wished I could just hold one for hours and give him the love and affection he deserved. That was one of the toughest challenges I faced at TLC. On the one hand, so much needs to be done in such a short amount of time, that it is hard to see bath-time as anything other than something to check off of a to-do list. On the other hand, if I did cuddle and hold the children as much as each warranted, then not all forty of them would have been bathed, fed, changed, and cared for as much as needed.

Probably the hardest challenges I faced at TLC were all of the questions that arose. Little questions like, “Where does this go?” “Who do we feed now?” and “Why won’t he fall asleep?” There were also other, harder questions that came up. I found myself asking why such tragedies would happen to a child, if God had some purpose for it, if it was just bad luck, or if I could really continue to believe that God is compassionate and merciful. I also found myself

asking more personal questions: What is my own personal conception of fate? of family? of love? of destiny? of sin? Could I believe that these things were somehow intended and necessary? Finally, I questioned my own situation. Why was I so fortunate to have a loving family? Why did I get the opportunity to study what I want? Why did I get to go work in South Africa? Why did God grant me with so many blessings, when I am in no way better or more special than these indescribably beautiful children? Is every opportunity I have had due to a specific intended purpose for my life, or did I just win the statistical jackpot?

In the breaks I would get during our long days I reflected. I thought and thought and thought. Despite racking my brain for hours, I only discovered more questions. Yet, slowly, although I never really discovered my answers, I did reach a few decisions. One, that I would push myself and my available resources further and harder than I ever had before. Two, I would work off of the premise that the universe is benevolent. And three, that I owed it to those lives that touched me, and whatever force or reason that has blessed me, to do something in my life that would make this world better. I know that these are lofty goals and conclusions for a girl of nineteen who just completed her freshmen year. I understand that I may not accomplish all that I want to and all that I think I should. But these wonderful children will be with me every step of the way, with their smiles, their laughter, and their enduring hope despite shocking circumstance.

I believe that South Africa, a country that is still split in two in so many ways, has the beauty and the perseverance to reach its goals as well. Yes, it is a country on the edge, but it is as much on the edge of falling backwards as it is of standing as a bastion of strength, as proof that understanding and dedication can overcome any struggle.