

## Small Successes and Prenatal Vitamins

By Chris Tavares

*Always kneel before your elders. Downcast eyes. Showings of gratitude are a must.*

It is easy to learn to respect a culture when respect is its bottom line. It is simple to laugh wholeheartedly when laughter is the language of the soul of a place.

And so it is in Africa. A place that I have discovered to be full of both the formalities of respect and the freedom of laughter that follows. I have found people in need of the basic stuff of life – education, nutrition, money, hope. But, I have also found a culture overflowing with the stuff that makes life worthwhile. The happiness and generosity that enfolds me here is beyond comprehension and, honestly, without justification or explanation.

I am a teacher. Three days a week I rise to the calls of roosters and grace the concrete floors of an aging secondary school. I sweat as I scribble notes on the chalkboard with debatable legibility. The students, dressed in proper school uniform of white collared shirts, dark slacks, closed toe shoes and an invisible tie, hastily copy down my every slanted letter. I am their only resource. Textbooks are rare treasures – almost as rare as toilet paper. All too tragically, the two are often interchangeable. As students pose difficult questions, I become a human thesaurus and, with a touch of clever cultural engineering, fight to bridge the inevitable gaps in communication. Sometimes I succeed. Sometimes I do not. But it's the small successes that truly matter. The wink of an eye. The subtle smirk. The flash of a lightbulb above an adolescent brain. These small things keep me going.

Hardships are here. Electricity is available but hardly reliable. Water is clean but also comes and goes. Healthcare is free but mediocre at best, if they can find the vein. Food is sufficient but occasionally causes gastric discomfort. By no means have I suffered. I only chuckle. Most things that happen here are perfectly ridiculous and laughable. Transportation is the greatest example of this. Never before have I been fortunate enough to participate in an attempt at doubling the capacity of a minivan. If only the Guinness World Record authorities were there to record the effort. Nor have I ever had the pleasure of mistaking sticks of dirt (Malawian prenatal vitamins) for an edible type of vegetable. And nothing quite tops off a six-hour hike to the top of a tropical peak like a dozen midnight visits to the *chimubuzi*, or toilet, to deposit the results of a roadside meal. But, like

I said, this is all rather amusing and part of the complete experience. I have witnessed a chicken running with its head off. I have befriended a cow that I later consumed. For all of this, I am grateful.

God is working everywhere. In Malawi and in my heart. As tangible assets decline, spirituality grows. It is as if God is a great spirit in the sky and, in order to be close to Him, one must shed all weighty earthly burdens and float up like a great balloon. Material wealth is replaced with rich social interaction and familial closeness. Simple living is the way to go. The cargo we accumulate becomes sadly stacked about us, skyscrapers blocking out the divine light that gives life to the ground beneath us. Life uncluttered is beautiful. Fires cook food especially well. Hands make fine washing machines. Buckets provide refreshing baths. Every comfort of home can be replaced with the comfort of self-sufficiency. God is the only thing that is irreplaceable, without substitute. I have traveled thousands of miles away from everything familiar and God is still here. God is still needed. God is still an important part of life. For many, God is all there is, all there is to be had. And God is still God.

I wish I could satisfactorily describe my experience here. I cannot. But maybe I have succeeded a little. And, after all, it's the small successes that truly matter. To succeed here, to succeed anywhere, one needs the following: a tough mind, a tender heart, a strong stomach and a bad memory. This is what I have learned. You have to be willing to adapt and change. You also have to be willing to accept the things you cannot change and respect traditions you cannot manage to adapt to. Bro. Mike O'Grady gave me the best advice I have ever received. "In a foreign country, you cannot try to fit in; this will only exhaust you and your inevitable failure will only serve to frustrate you. All you can do is be yourself and hope that it's enough."