

This Child Here  
Oct 16, 2005  
Robert Gamble

I have been away ... most of you know... for a three month sabbatical. I did some writing. I visited family. I traveled in Germany and Austria and I made two trips Ukraine. Ukraine is a large country right under Russia. It borders the Black Sea. I picked Ukraine because there is a large population of orphans and children who live on the streets. I picked it because I wanted some sense of renewal and that usually requires that I do something new, something risky and something meaningful.

I met more people than I can remember. I have email addresses and phone numbers sometimes taken quickly in a cab or on the street, of contacts , of Americans, of aid workers from Non governmental Organizations NGO'S. Of travel agents and rental agencies and pastors. I have names in my notebook that I look at and say, Now who was that?

I met the desperate and the rich, the crazy and the beautiful. I saw sights that awed me and scenes that were ugly and cruel. I saw stuff too shocking for tears. I learned to care and not to care. I laughed till I hurt and I hurt so much at times that inside, at least, I cried.

Sometimes I drank too much wine, but most times too little. I spent like a poor man but lived life that was rich . I listened to idiots, to skeptics, to learned people and fools, I learned more from the suffering of children than from words of the wise.

I listened more than I talked. I walked more hours than I slept.

I doubted; I trusted. I gave away and I received. I used up 7 lives. I was robbed and I was restored, applauded and shunned. I had the luck of the Irish.

I saw churches that were void of any life and I sat through worship services with more life than my comfort zones can handle. I only gave one sermon, and it wasn't in a pulpit , and i didn't wear a robe . I stood on a rented stage an old movie auditorium and it hardly lasted 7 minutes, but I felt alive and honored as every word I spoke was repeated in Russian.

I never got bored, except for that 32 hour train ride from Kiev to Vienna. I stood

on the street and stuck my money out and rode in the cars of strangers. I spent as little as \$1.75 for a sit down meal and as much as \$40.00. I ate on street corners, in nice places and more than once (not of my own choosing) at Mc Donalds.

I felt the tingle of risk, the stab of danger, the warmth of doing a good thing and the presence of God in both good times and bad.

I learned my limits—how much i can do, how much i can feel. I learned to let go stuff lost and mistakes i made and ignore stupid people and keep hope alive even when i was very discouraged. I realized I cannot help every child, but I can help this child right here.

I am a different person.

I am sure I look the same. I may have lost a few pounds because of all the walking I did. I skipped some meals too... it's just not right to say excuse me while I go in this restaurant and eat a big meal when you are with street kids who forage for food in garbage cans. But I am different. Some things that once seemed important don't. I feel stronger.

I don't have anything theologically profound to say this morning.... I want to speak more from the heart—which is a dangerous thing to do.... It can get out of control, and God knows, we Presbyterians never want to lose control.....

But the heart is a source of raw truth sometimes. And I am going to give you some of that this morning, but by the end .... I want to say some things directly to you... some specific things about life and faith and what it means to hear and respond to the call of God.

Someone at breakfast asked me what was the most memorable moment. I will tell you a story and then why I tell it.

One night I took the train from Kiev to Odessa. Vanya, a college student who could speak English took me to the station at around eight thirty to catch a nine thirty train. It is a good idea to have someone who speaks English when you go to the station. No one, not even at the international counter at the station in Kiev, can speak English. So we got there, but the line was too long. We knew I would never get on.

But a man came up to us and began speaking rapidly to Vanya. He can get you on, she said, but it will cost thirty dollars instead of fifteen. Ok, no problem, thirty dollars for a eight hour train ride. I can do that.

We went down to the train. Vanya told me to say nothing and stand behind her. She did the talking. Only when I was on the train, did she let me pay. I watched the money go from me to Vanya to the train conductor.

The room they put me in was the conductor's stateroom. It was about seven foot by five; I had the top bunk of two. By eleven I was asleep. But I kept waking up. The conductor came in several times. The train was loud and it rocked constantly. At two in the morning I woke and in the dim light of the room, I could see the rack above me where I keep my camera. My camera bag was gone. I jumped out of bed, stepped into the hall and banged on the door where the conductor sat in a small office. "My camera is gone," I shouted over the sound of the train.

He looked through my room , then he spoke into his walkie talkie. He was shouting. Then he disappeared. In less than three minutes he returned , motioned for me to come, and opened the door to the toilet. In the corner was my camera bag.

But I was watching his face as he spoke, I watched his face as he shouted into the walkie talkie. I never heard anyone answer on the other end. I had the feeling he was lying. I wonder it was all staged. Perhaps at the next stop someone would have gotten on and taken the camera bag out of the toilet. Perhaps it was in the conductors office and he put it in the toilet when I raised the alarm. I will never know. But the rest of that night the door was locked and he never entered.

I like this story. These are my reasons for telling it: I don't know who to trust. Something is lost and then found. There are unanswered questions. I felt helpless and at the mercy of others. In five minutes I went through the whole range of emotions from disappointment to trust and gratitude to fear, to anger, to frustration, to helplessness, to gratitude and finally caution. And because every day is a day like that for children who live on the streets of Ukraine. Finding, losing, living at the mercy of others, never knowing who to trust. Every day they hit the highs and lows of emotion.... It is too much for them, so they take drugs, drink and sniff glue--to relieve the pain.

One truth we get from the Bible, comes from the book of James. James says be doers of the word and not hearers only. He says hearers are like people who go look in a mirror and walk away and forget what they look like.

I never favored the book of James, you don't find much grace in it. Faith without works is dead, he says. But he also says, religion that is pure and undefiled before God is to visit orphans and widows in their affliction....

Jesus , you remember, took time for children. When his disciples were trying to shoo them away, Jesus took them in his arms and blessed them. He laid hands upon them.

Jesus said, we have to enter the Reign of God as children. That means innocence, it means playfulness, it means eagerness..... it means you don't have to understand everything to get in.... you might not understand anything. **It also means you can get damaged along the way.** There are a lot of damaged children in Ukraine.

He said those who would harm children would be better off with a millstone tied around their necks and tossed into the sea.

And there's a lot of adults that need to be throw into the sea with a millstone around their necks. There are a lot of damaged children. Most of these children ended up on the streets because they were beaten or abused.

And why is that? Ukraine was once part of the Soviet Union. Under communism, of course, everyone lacked personal liberty, but everyone had job and food on the table. Every child went to school, .....they didn't have a population of kids living on the streets. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, most people in Ukraine stopped getting a paycheck. Teachers, doctors, nurses, shipyard workers, factory workers, accountants, you name it. Since the government ran everything, everything ended. In the scramble that followed, a few made loads of money but most were immediately poor. Families broke up; alcohol took over. You have three children, one man said to me, you must be a rich man.

You don't have foster families in Ukraine. You have foster parents here in the US. No one can afford another child over there. That's why children live on the streets; that is why they have these massive orphanages.

Another truth comes from Jesus. Not long before he left, he said, "I will not leave you orphaned." I will not leave you without a father or mother. I will not leave you alone. Because loneliness is a terrible thing. No one wants to be completely alone.... So in our loneliness, we have been given another Counselor, the Spirit of truth.

"I am in God and you in me and I in you."

We have the luxury of understanding that in a spiritual sense... in our families, with our friends and associates at work, in that our alone moments there and they can be plenty, we can remember we are not orphaned...

But here is a child who can say it like we never can.

### **I AM orphaned.**

Then there are these last words of Jesus on the cross, before his death, "My God my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Don't be thinking Jesus just pretended to say that.... Oh he can't feel that way, he's God. Yes, God felt forsaken.... believe it....

Be glad he felt forsaken.... That is how God knows what we feel at times.

But here is a child who doesn't know who to say these words to, be it God or society or parents who are drunk or abusive or dead.... but this child says it in a way we cannot in our comfortable lives, speak or understand:

### **I AM forsaken.**

When you get hit with forsakenness at this level, it changes you.

I am a different person.

And there is no way I can communicate to you the whole of what I felt. That's not my intent. My intention is to say God is calling you.

It is through the pain of a thing that you begin to hear God's call.

If you don't feel you won't hear.

You never get to the doer part; you haven't even been a hearer.

We each have a calling.

That pain you feel about something and for someone; pay attention to that.

That cry you hear from some place; pay attention to that.

That awkwardness you feel when you look at the way things are; pay attention to that.

In these things, God is speaking.

We are not here to feel good about ourselves. We are here to answer with hope.

I can't help every child, but I can help this child here.