

From Pity to Peace: Saying Yes When It's Painful

November, 2019. Tears carved tiny streams down my cheeks as I stood at the kitchen sink, hands plunged into hot water. My thoughts screamed out in anguish. *"I can't DO this God! How can I live so far from my babies?"* my heart cried. *"God, how do I do this letting go thing? How can I serve You here in Kenya when my young men need me in the States? I can't do this missionary life without them!"* Minutes ticked by as I wrestled there at the sink. My soapy hand whisked tears away as I continued washing dishes and kept on praying and pleading for God to help me make sense out of this new season of life. We had just launched our oldest two sons in January 2019, leaving them in the U.S. (one in the workforce and one a freshman in college) while we returned to Kenya with our youngest two. Our third son only had six more months with us before he too launched into the world of college and apartments. Having three sons close together was hard in the early years, but OH so much harder now. What a whirlwind year of change and transition for our family! Only our youngest, age 12, remained at home. And now, just weeks after returning to our place of ministry, I was not ok. *Pity slinked its sneaky way into my thoughts.*

So I cried.

I thought about all the little things I was missing out on in their young adult lives. Things like a surprise visit to take them to lunch on campus; a phone call without wondering if they were sleeping or in class due to time zone differences (Kenya is 8 hours ahead of them); popping a letter in the mail anytime I wanted to instead of coordinating with people crossing the Atlantic pond or waiting on international mail delivery; doing their laundry on the weekends or on breaks; and a host of other little things that suddenly I felt robbed of.

Kids going off to college is not unusual by any means, and I knew I wasn't the only mom who struggled. In fact, there was a whole parent session at my second son's university about parents letting go. But what WAS unusual is that I live on another continent, a missionary in Africa, where an airplane flight is expensive and takes 18 hours or more. This is the season of life when many missionary families leave the mission field. I could understand why. Yet we had barely begun our missionary journey, just passing the four year mark. I felt my heart breaking into a million pieces as I stood there by the sink. I felt alone in my grief. *Pity grows well in isolation.*

So I cried.

Having to entrust the welfare of my boys into the hands of other people felt like a double edged sword: relief that we had other people to entrust them to and grief that we weren't available in the same way. So. Many. Emotions. Questions plagued me. *"Have I done enough to prepare them? Would our homeschooling efforts pay off? Will they be ok? Will they make the right decisions? Will they tell me if they aren't ok? When will we see them again? Can we afford to bring them back to Kenya, and do they even want to come?"* Tears fell again as I longed to have them all under my own roof one more time. But my roof is in Africa. Their roof is not. Our family of six was now split into two equal pieces – 3 here and 3 there. Life as we had always known it was forever altered, forever changed. There was no going back to what was before. Grief hit hard in that moment in the kitchen. *Pity tends to dwell on what is lost.*

So I cried.

I recognized this sudden change in our family. Having three children leave the nest in one year's time brought about sharp and overwhelming loss. I needed to identify and validate this loss in order to move forward. Loss of the intense role of motherhood, loss of siblings for my youngest, loss of homeschooling high school that had been part of our routine for six years, loss of how we do life in our place of ministry, loss of seeing my sons on a regular basis, and even loss of protection as my three big teenagers provided a sense of security for me.

So I cried.

Paused in this daily task. Wrestling. Fighting for Truth. My head knew I'd be going through all these lessons and losses no matter where we lived. Parents have been doing this for ages. But I hadn't. This was new for me. The reality was that if we were in the States, the letting go process would have been more gradual and subtle. Not so sudden and abrupt. *Pity slips easily down the depression road.*

So I cried.

I dried my hands off, unsure of what to do. God hadn't answered my questions yet. I picked up my phone, just needing someone to pray, understand and let me know that it was going to be ok. My husband wouldn't be home for hours. I slumped into a chair unable to even stand. "God! This is the hardest 'Yes' You have ever asked of me! Give me Peace – give me strength," I whispered. "Show me why I'm here; why You want us here in Kenya. Why are You asking this of me?" In a moment of vulnerability, I sent off a quick text message to my teammate, also with kids in college. "Missing my kids so much and the tears are just coming. Can't talk. Just pray for my heart." I felt something release, just a little, by admitting to someone I was struggling. Her short response back let me know she was praying and that I wasn't alone. *Pity can't stand up to prayer.*

I wiped my tears.

My heart still ached for purpose. By habit I clicked on Facebook, knowing that comfort would not come from that realm. My heart would not be able to handle seeing smiling faces preparing for fall break activities and holidays. Oh, how I was dreading those holidays without my boys for the very first time. No, Facebook would NOT bring me comfort. But for some reason, I clicked anyway. I scrolled through trivial posts quickly, and then my eye caught a picture from a missionary pilot friend, one of our own pilots from our mission agency AIM AIR. My breath caught as I stopped scrolling to look at this photo. My husband's role as a mechanic specialist with AIM AIR didn't capture photos like this. I don't often get to see the people our pilots fly. I don't often see what's happening "out there" in the bush. I lingered on this picture, drawn to the significance of what it represented. The burning in my heart started to ease. *Pity loosens its grip with truthful Perspective.*

Tears streamed again, but for a different reason.



Boxes of Bibles sat in the hard-packed dirt beside a Cessna Caravan preparing to go to Central Africa Republic. CAR, a country of constant turmoil and war, hardship and despair. A place where many brave missionaries endeavor to share the Gospel. Missionaries and nationals we support with aviation. These Zande Bibles headed to refugee camps spoke to my aching heart. Suddenly, my spiritual eyes were able to see beyond the physical realm – beyond my personal grief and sense of loss. Oh, Jesus! I am part of something so much bigger than myself. We bring the Word of God to dark places – this is why!

This is why we are here, this is why I said “yes” to begin with: to bring Light and Hope to those who have never heard, to those who have never had the Bible in their own language before (can you even imagine?), to be feet on the ground – this African ground. It was as if God was asking me again, “EJ, will you say yes? Will you trust Me with your children? Will you continue to do what I’ve called you to do?” Holy Spirit was not harsh or demanding. He was gentle. Kind. Compassionate even. As if He knew exactly what He was asking. With that simple photo, His peace descended upon my aching heart like a blanket. *Pity succumbs to Peace.*

So I cried as I surrendered my grief.

“I say yes. Give me grace for this journey,” I prayed. Tears of release replaced the tears of grief and anguish. The words of my own children came back to my memory. “Mom,” son #3’s voice trembled with emotion as we were able to leave him on a strange campus, “Mom, I KNOW this is where God wants me to be. It’s ok.” My 2nd son’s arm wrapped around me as he said with a grin, “Mom, I’ve got bragging rights on you guys!” And my oldest, who assured us that his place was there in the U.S., turned to his youngest brother and admonished, “Watch out for Mom.” Somehow, knowing that this missionary life went way beyond my own self changed my perspective.

Don’t get me wrong. I still miss my kids! Some days are harder than others. But I choose not to give in to pity anymore. In that moment, the bigger picture enveloped me and God’s eternal perspective swept in to remind me of His purpose. It gave me another opportunity to say yes to God and His Kingdom work.

Pity releases its hold when subjected to Truth.

Little did I know that the next opportunity was only a few months away when Kenya would close international travel due to Covid-19. The wrestling match in my heart on that November day prepared me for what was to come, allowing me to say yes to staying in Kenya in a world gone crazy. All six of us, each in our specific place, move forward in confidence knowing that we are exactly where we are supposed to be. *Peace always reigns over pity.*

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Missionary with Africa Inland Mission’s aviation branch AIM AIR. July 2020

Photo credit: Elisha Stock, AIM AIR pilot