

The Mystery of Mission: A Letter to a Future Missioner

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Dear friend,

Relax. Breathe. Welcome to your new life as a lay missioner. If you are anything like I am, you may be experiencing heaps of excitement with a dash of panic and a good dose of "Good Lord, what did I just get myself into?" Prepare to be enveloped in a cloud, or perhaps even a storm, of unknowing. Things you thought you knew – what is considered edible, how you cross a street, how you wash a mango – well, friend, those days are gone. Never fear, you will learn because you will have people walking alongside you who will show you how to get the dead gecko out of the water tank and how to negotiate the correct price on a minibus.

You will see the silky comfort of wealth juxtaposed next to the crushing reality of poverty. In fact, you will probably live in the safety and comfort of this wealth, or at the very least, you will dabble in it from time to time when going to restaurants with exotic fare or on safaris to see living national treasures, but your work will likely be with the 99%, those who do not have running water or electricity in their mud and stick homes. And you will feel guilt. Lots of it. While as missioners, we're called to walk with those on the margins, the truth is that we can easily leave those margins whenever we choose. As a missioner and a teacher, I often ask myself why I have twelve pairs of shoes at home under my bed while my student has only one pair of broken flip-flops; why I can gleefully spend \$4 on a Frappuccino when that will pay for three months of my student's feeding program. If you are like I am, you will toe that thin and almost invisible line between self-care and being part of the machine that imprisons people in poverty.



Many visitors are impressed by how people can live in such dire circumstances and yet seem so outwardly joyful. But please, dear friend, do not idealize their poverty. Do not deny them their complexity and humanity. If you are able to meet them as they are with all of their contradictions and imperfections, you might be able to start sitting in the midst of the questions and the mystery that connects us all.

This is what mission is all about. It's about serving others and wrestling with the questions surfacing that you didn't even know were inside you. It is the ability to look in the mirror and see yourself with stark and almost terrifying clarity because the truth is, when you pluck yourself from your everyday familiar and intentionally put yourself into what is uncomfortable and foreign, the landscapes of your soul begin to rumble and shift. And you begin to realize that these questions, no matter how painful to hold, are a gift. Your soul, though it may fall into temporary darkness, will bloom and your heart will expand because you had the courage to allow the tragedy around you to shatter it. You had the courage to stand with your hands open and empty, waiting for God to fill them.

The reality, dear friend, is that you will need God more here. When you're in a western country, you can rely on the doctor when you're sick, go to a friend's house when you need comfort, escape distress with a good movie. Here, hospitals do not have enough blood and people frequently die of preventable diseases. You can go to a friend's house here, but that friend might not speak English, may have different boundaries

about crying or expressing emotions. And watching a movie would be great...if you have electricity that night. These are the adventures, the challenges, and the gifts of everyday mission. You will see just how simply you can live, just what food you can stomach, just how much your culture has shaped your version of reality. And believe it or not, you will be surprised by how a place so foreign to you can feel so much like home.

So often, we go into mission with plans about how we are going to transform lives, not realizing that in the messy process of learning how to serve, we ourselves will be transformed. You will be evangelized by the tragic beauty of the place you're in, the struggles and the heartbreaks of the people you are accompanying, and the hope that is held anyway. And you will be evangelized by your own doubt, made to feel the breadth of your humanity and the fear and wonder of your unique journey. By putting yourself in such a vulnerable place, by allowing yourself to be broken and blessed, you nourish not only others, but yourself. So be gentle with yourself; you will learn the language and the culture and the customs with time. But for now, just thank God for the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of another and to draw just a little bit closer to the person you're meant to be.

With love,
Teresa

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