

Doing a **WORLD** of Good
One Person at a Time



AWAKE

Noel Brewer Yeatts

“Noel Yeatts’s life will awaken yours. Her personal witness to stories of triumph and tragedy will inspire Christians to get out of the pew and into the world.”

Gabe Lyons, author of *The Next Christians*
and founder of Q Ideas

“Noel saw a need and was willing to feel it and has written about it in this fabulous book. She realizes that it only takes one to reach one, and in this book you will find her story and others that can encourage you to make a difference to someone’s quality of liferight now. She also encourages you to find your passion and use it to launch the wellspring of generosity that is in your heart. Go see the need and help fill it. Everyone needs hope, and this is a book of hope for the hopeless, help for the helpless, and healing for those in despair. I’ve seen firsthand the work that Noel is doing. She isn’t a woman just ‘talking’—she walks the walk!”

Thelma Wells, author, speaker, teacher, A Woman
of God Ministries; www.ThelmaWells.com

“Noel Brewer Yeatts is a global leader. Her work in the world’s most difficult places is changing history right now, and after you read *Awake*, you’ll understand why. This isn’t just a book. It’s a provocation. By the time you’re finished, you’ll be making history too.”

Johnnie Moore, vice president, Liberty University;
author of *Honestly: Really Living What We Say We Believe*

“Sometimes the world’s problems feel too big, and we’re overwhelmed into apathy. In moments like that you need a clear prophetic voice to wake you from complacency, bringing clarity and focus. Noel is one such voice, speaking with every fiber of her life. She calls us from our preoccupied lives to see the world beyond our shores. It’s uncomfortable and challenging, but Noel is not trying to guilt us into action. Her stories remind us that the world is changed by everyday

people like us. This book remind us of what is possible for those who dare.”

Jo Saxton, 3 Dimension Ministries; speaker and author

“Noel Yeatts is a powerful voice for the forgotten. When God hears the cries of his children, he looks for a deliverer, and the deliverer he calls is you and me. The destiny of thousands is directly linked to our obedience and our willingness to take a risk so that others might live. *Awake* challenges us to take our eyes off self and to pursue the life we were chosen to live.”

Danita Estrella, founder/CEO of Danita’s Children and Hope for Haiti Children’s Center

“The heart cannot taste what the eyes have not seen. In *Awake*, Noel powerfully communicates her extraordinary encounters with extreme need and profound opportunity from all across the globe. As a result, this is a book from the heart and for every heart that truly wants to make a difference in today’s world.”

Daniel Henderson, author of *Transforming Prayer*

“Noel Brewer Yeatts is doing as much to ease the pain and heartache in our world today as anyone else I know. This book, *Awake*, is a wake-up call for the rest of us to step up and help make a difference. I encourage you to read this book and then make the commitment that you, like Noel, will be fully engaged in reaching out to help those in need. Please read this book today.”

Jonathan Falwell, pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church

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Introduction

You were born in the developed world. You have parents and a family. You have a place to live and call home. You have an education and endless opportunities. You have food, clothing, and access to healthcare. Okay, maybe you don't have everything you want, but if you are honest, you do have everything you need. Lucky you . . .

But let's burst that bubble you are living in for just a moment. Over one billion people in the world don't live like you do. And as Bono says, "Where you live should no longer determine *whether* you live!"¹

If you simply have some food in your fridge, a place to sleep, and some clothes to wear, you are already better off than 75 percent of the world.

Just drinking the water out of the faucet in your kitchen makes you better off than 1.5 billion people.

Having just a little bit of money makes you part of the top 8 percent of the world's wealthy.

While more than 3 million people around the world cannot freely attend religious or political events without fear of some kind of punishment or retaliation, you are free to do as you wish.

And just the fact that you picked up this book and are reading it makes you luckier than 2 billion people who simply cannot read.²

Are you beginning to wake up?

I wouldn't call this a problem—it is an all-out crisis of epic proportion. But what are we really doing about it?

Timothy Keller says, “Many people who are evidently genuine Christians do not demonstrate much concern for the poor. How do we account for that? I would like to believe that a heart for the poor ‘sleeps’ down in a Christian’s soul until it is awakened. . . . I believe, however, when justice for the poor is connected not to guilt but to grace and to the gospel, this ‘pushes the button’ down deep in believers’ souls, and they begin to wake up.”³

One of my favorite magazines is no longer in publication. It was called *Need*, and it focused on humanitarian efforts around the world. Its motto was this: “We are not out to save the world but to tell the stories of those who are.”

In some ways, that is how I feel about this book. Yes, you will see my story intertwined with others in the following pages, but my story is nothing more than the story of those who have touched my life, broken my heart, and restored my hope in humanity, justice, and God’s love.

Ultimately this is a story about change: the change that can take place both in your life and in the lives of people around the world once we are truly awake. I hope that you will find at least part of your life story in the lives of the poor and disenfranchised of our world.

May we all find ourselves awake and doing a world of good.

1

The Lucky One

Save one life. Save the world.

Talmud (Book of Jewish Law)¹

I left Virginia in February bundled up for winter and landed in Guatemala where it was over 100 degrees. The heat was absolutely stifling.

It didn't help that I was in a village with no shade, no trees, no buildings to go into—just a big dusty field. Floodwaters and mudslides had completely destroyed the village months earlier, leaving the people homeless. They had lost everything. The government relocated them but did little more than give them a piece of barren land. Makeshift shelters filled the village. Garbage bags held up by sticks were the housing of choice. Dilapidated shacks lined the dusty roads. Since the village had no electricity, no sewage system, and no access to clean water, disease and illness ran rampant there.

The recent storm that destroyed their village was the latest problem the people faced. Their other struggles went back as long as they could remember.

I've been told that 60 percent of Guatemalans drink contaminated water. Two-thirds of children live in poverty,² while 43 percent of children under five suffer from chronic malnutrition.³ Guatemala suffers in severe need.

I helped our team distribute packs of food—rice, beans, oil, and other staples to last a family for one month. Villagers lined up in the hot sun, eager to get their own bags. They knew that without the packages, feeding their families would be nearly impossible.

After the food distribution, I rode to the other side of the village to see some new homes that were under construction. It was only a couple, but that was true progress in a place with so little.

A truck carrying a big tank filled with water drove by. The driver went door to door selling buckets of water for about six *quetzales* a liter—the equivalent of about one dollar. That doesn't sound like much, but it's more than the average person there makes in a week, so it is a huge expense. Unfortunately, the water from the truck was contaminated. People used what little money they had to buy water that would most likely make them sick.

More than 2,500 people lived in this village, each one of them struggling to survive.

Everywhere I looked, I saw a need—the people needed homes, food, water, health care, a school—they needed everything! Their needs were not luxuries; they were necessities. It was a matter of life and death.

It was overwhelming.

A young girl and her mother walked toward me. I recognized them from earlier, when they'd been standing in line to receive food. I soon could tell that they were heading directly to me.

I am still not sure why they chose me, especially when so many other Americans were standing around that day, but

they walked right up to me. I knew immediately that something was terribly wrong. With a look of desperation, the mother was clenching a plastic bag of papers.

Shy, the little girl clung to her mother's side, obviously scared. She was beautiful. Her long, dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she wore a green skirt and orange top. She was nine years old, and her name was Margarita.

I wondered what they needed. Not all stories in life are pretty. Some, I would rather not hear—especially when the story involves a child. My heart can barely take it. I was afraid this might be one of those stories, but I was drawn to this little girl, and she was drawn to me.



He was only one among millions. Easily forgotten and too small to be noticed, he was just five years old.

He lived his days on the streets of one of the roughest cities in the world. His home was a cardboard box; he walked with no shoes, wore little clothing, and begged for any food he could get.

Every day was the same. He had one purpose—survival. Abandoned by his father and ignored by his mother, he had a slim chance of making it on the streets.

Hundreds of thousands of people passed by him every single day. Maybe they didn't notice the little boy wearing nothing but dirty underwear as he slept on a public bench. Maybe they didn't care.

At the time, Brazil was a country with millions of street children—some analysts estimate as many as seven million!⁴ No one could solve the massive problem, so people quit noticing, quit trying. They simply coexisted with these children they saw on the streets every day. “The problem with street children became so bad in the late 1980s that Brazil had ‘large-scale, deliberate, systematic killing of street children by death squads who enjoyed a high degree of impunity for their actions.’ . . .

‘Street execution’ was once listed by Amnesty International as the third leading cause of death for Brazilian children.”⁵

These streets were Nildo’s home.

No one showed concern for his deformed, shoeless feet. No one wondered what a wide-eyed five-year-old was doing wandering around alone. This helpless child was afraid and hungry with no one to protect him, no one to care for him. But Nildo captured my heart.

“I think the purpose of life is to be useful, to be responsible, to be honorable, to be compassionate. It is, after all, to matter: to count, to stand for something, to have made some difference that you lived at all.”

Leo C. Rosten⁶

I was fifteen years old when I met him. I traveled to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with my family. My dad is the founder and president of World Help, but at that time he was working at a Christian university. On this particular trip he led a large group of college students to work in children’s homes and present concerts in

public schools, churches, and outdoor plazas. We were told that more than 500,000 people traveled by boat every day to and from work across the bay from Rio. We got permission to set up our sound equipment and instruments on the back of a flatbed trailer and park it next to the boat docks. Every thirty minutes, twenty or more large ferries carrying more than 5,000 people pulled into the docks.

As the crowds made their way home from work, we blasted the sound as loud as it would go and performed music in Portuguese. At the end of each concert, my dad gave a short message. The entire concert and presentation lasted around 45 minutes. We took a short break and then, as more boats began to arrive, we started all over again.

During one of those concerts, my sister and I wandered through the crowd that gathered. And that was when it happened. That was when we first saw Nildo.

The first thing we noticed was his clothes, or lack thereof. He had no shoes, no shirt, and no pants; he wore a pair of

torn underwear. Through an interpreter, we found out that Nildo's father had abandoned him and his mother couldn't afford to take care of him. Nildo was a street child, left to fend for himself. He had no one.

Yet this little boy who had so little was full of personality. He warmed up to us right away, and even though we did not speak the same language, we made an instant connection.

I quickly looked for my dad. I had to tell him about this little boy. My sister said, "Dad, do you see that bench over there? That's where he sleeps, and he takes a shower underneath that drain pipe." I asked, "Do you think we could buy him some food and clothes?" My dad sent us off with little Nildo and one of our missionary friends, Donna, to go shopping.

We went to a nearby mall to get some lunch and clothes. We bought Nildo a Happy Meal at McDonald's. He devoured the food.

I still smile when I think about the bright yellow jogging suit he picked out and the new Nike shoes, so popular in the 1980s. We took him to the bathroom to clean him up a little before dressing him in his new clothes. As I washed his feet, I couldn't help but notice they were deformed, apparently from roaming the streets barefoot all of his life. When I slipped on his new Nikes, he kept saying "shoes" over and over in Portuguese—*sapatos, sapatos, sapatos*—as he pointed to his feet. He had never owned a pair of new shoes!

We brought Nildo back to the street where we had found him, and he didn't leave our side the whole afternoon. We never really thought about what we would do at the end of the day or where Nildo would go. We just enjoyed the moment, so happy to help him. He enjoyed all the attention.

When it started to get dark, the police rushed us to move the trailer and bus that our group performed on. Our vehicle blocked traffic, and everyone started yelling, so we packed up and left quickly.

It all happened so fast. I didn't have time to think about what to do with Nildo, but we knew we couldn't take him with

us. As we got on the bus to leave, I looked out the window and saw him in his bright yellow clothes, waving good-bye. My heart broke for him.

By this time, the entire group knew Nildo, and we had all grown attached. Everyone on the bus cried at leaving him. One of the university students sitting in the back of our bus had been orphaned in Japan and raised by American parents. Watching as little Nildo waved while we drove away, he was overcome with emotion. For a few moments, no one spoke a word as his unrestrained sobbing carried to the front of the bus.

On our way back to the hotel, my sister and I launched a plan. We pleaded with my dad to do something to help Nildo. It just was not right. We couldn't leave him on the streets.

My dad made some phone calls and found a children's home close by that was willing to take him in. The cost was only about \$400 for an entire year.

When we arrived at the hotel, my dad called all the students together and described what we could do for Nildo. He took off his hat and passed it around. It was the end of the trip, and all anyone had left was a little money for snacks and souvenirs. Raising \$400 did not seem likely.

As we passed the hat, one of the Brazilian pastors who was helping us leaned over and said, "Why are you doing so much for this one child? Do you know how many orphaned children there are? There are thousands and thousands of homeless children on the streets of Brazil. There is no way you can help them all."

No way you can help them all—those words have played over and over in my head for years. To me, they were fighting words. A challenge. A dare that made me want to say, "Don't tell me what I can't do. Don't tell me I can't make a difference. Don't tell me I can't change the world."

Time and maturity have made me look differently at these words. Maybe the pastor was right. Perhaps one person can't save all the children in the world. But that was not what we were trying to do.

After the hat made its way around the group, we counted the money. There was more than \$800—enough to provide two years of care for Nildo!

Excited, we returned to find Nildo the next day. As soon as we arrived, my sister and I frantically looked for him to give him the wonderful news, but we couldn't find him anywhere. We searched and searched where we'd found him the day before. Finally, after nearly an hour, we found him several blocks away, but we were not prepared for what we would find. The older street children had beat him up, taking his clothes and new shoes. All he had left was his dirty pair of torn underwear.

"By compassion we make others' misery our own, and so, by relieving them, we relieve ourselves also."

Thomas Browne, Sr.⁷

I will never forget the feeling of absolute horror and despair, knowing what Nildo experienced the night before. We held that broken little boy in our arms and vowed that he would not spend another day on the streets.

We brought Nildo back to the docks, and everyone crowded around to comfort him. My sister asked, "Dad, can we buy him some more new clothes?" He immediately said, "Yes, just don't get bright yellow this time." So off we went and returned with another jogging suit—gray—with an identical pair of Nike shoes.

We knew it would take more than new clothes to make a real difference in Nildo's life. We asked him if he wanted to get off the streets and live in a children's home where he would receive the love and care he needed. Of course, he said yes.

That night, as we prepared to leave, Nildo sat on the bus with us! When we arrived at the hotel, he needed to take a shower and get cleaned up, but he refused to take off his new shoes. Dad tried for thirty minutes to explain that he only had to take them off for five minutes while he was in the shower and then he could put them back on. Nildo didn't buy it. Finally, Dad made a deal with him: we would put his shoes

where he could see them while he showered. This worked, and as soon as he was done and dried off, he put the shoes right back on. He even slept in them.

For the next year, we thought about Nildo often. We kept in touch and received reports that he was doing well in school, was attending church, and had even become a Christ follower. The following summer, my dad took another group of students back to Brazil. This time we could not join him, but we made him promise to visit Nildo and give him a picture of our family—and buy him some new shoes.

When my dad arrived in Brazil, he gave Nildo a Bible that all of us had signed and a framed photo of our family. He said that Nildo hugged and kissed the photo and told everyone around him in loud Portuguese, “These are my American sisters! They took me off the streets.”

Later, my dad told us, “Girls, if you never do another good deed in your life, you have done something incredible for this one little boy.”



Twenty years later and a world away, I stand in front of a few thousand women at a conference. It is early on a Saturday morning. The audience wakes up slowly, and I could really use another cup of coffee.

I tell the story of Nildo. I try to talk as animatedly as I can, hoping to hold the attention of at least a couple of people. A few minutes into the story, I am amazed. I have the crowd in the palm of my hand. They ooh and ahh at the photos of Nildo I show on the screens. One photo shows him the day we met, when he wore his torn underpants. His feet are bare. He is so cute, and everyone gets a good laugh at my 1980s big hair. (If you lived through that era, you know what I mean. And if you didn't—be glad!)

They see another photo of Nildo, all cleaned up in his new clothes, laughing and happy. And then they see my favorite

photo—one of him and me together from just a few years ago when he came to visit in the States.

As I wrap up the story and tell what Nildo is doing today, I notice how quiet the room has become. Every time I tell his story, the reaction is the same. People listen intently, some tear up, and even years later if I see them again, they remember the story of the little boy in Brazil . . . our Nildo.



The Blind Side, based on a true story and starring Sandra Bullock, is a feel-good movie if there ever was one. Sandra's character, Leigh Anne Tuohy, rescued a virtually homeless boy, Michael Oher, off the streets of Memphis and brought him into her home with her husband and two children.

After a couple hours of twists and turns in the story, the movie reveals how much Michael's life changed. His new family hired him a tutor, worked hard to develop his interest in football, and gave him all the love, care, and support he never had before. As the story closes, Michael has made it all the way to college and then to professional football, playing for the Baltimore Ravens.

When people hear a story of a life changed, they are drawn to it, perhaps desperate to be a part of something like that. I believe this is something we *all* desire. We deeply want to make a difference in someone's life. We want to leave our mark and know that our life has counted for something. We want to do something bigger than ourselves.

We want to change the world.

At the movies we hear the story, feel good about it, maybe have a little cry, and then leave the theater and return to our normal lives—often lives that leave little room for making a difference in anything important at all. The problem is, we

"I know that God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish that he didn't trust me so much."

Mother Teresa[®]

don't see the connection to what really has to happen to make a difference in someone's life. I am not sure if we really are *willing*, when push comes to shove, to do what is needed to change the world.

In *The Blind Side*, Michael's life did not magically change. He did not simply end up in the Tuohys' home or appear on that football field. He didn't just turn up at college one day. In order for Michael's life to truly change, someone had to take action, to step beyond a comfort zone and into another world. Someone had to take a risk. And someone had to have compassion.

To change a life, paths must cross and worlds must collide.



It was Christmas 1988. As my family sat in our living room, the phone rang. On the other end was our friend Donna, who lived in Brazil, working with orphaned and disadvantaged children. She was with us the day we found Nildo. Donna told us that someone special wanted to say hello.

A few moments later, Nildo wished us a merry Christmas and a happy new year. That was all his broken English allowed, so he quickly got off the phone and Donna got back on. She explained how she was visiting Rio de Janeiro for Christmas and visited one of our church partners there. When the pastor saw Donna, he asked her to come and greet the congregation.

After Donna walked onstage, she heard some commotion coming from the balcony. She looked up just in time to see a boy jump from the balcony to the main stage and charge toward her. It was Nildo.

When she reached down to give him a hug, she noticed that in one hand he had our family photo, and in the other hand he had the Bible we had all signed.

She paused, then told us, "He didn't know I was going to be there that day. He must carry those with him everywhere he goes!"

Nildo's story continues, and we share it often. As an adult, he lives in Brazil and works to help orphaned and abandoned children—children just like him. He is a living reminder of the words that well-meaning Brazilian pastor spoke so many years ago. I now know that I can't save them all . . . but *I can make a difference for one.*

Mother Teresa once said, "If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will."⁹

Nildo is a now a grown man, but when I look at his face today, I still see the face of that little five-year-old boy. I can't help but wonder what his life would have been like if we had not met that day.

What I think about even more is how different *my* life would have been if we had not met that day. Maybe I am the lucky one.

2

Comfortably Numb

*You can't comfort the afflicted without
afflicting the comfortable.*

Princess Diana¹

I sway back and forth. It is a beautiful summer day with a nice breeze. I look out over the water as I lie in a hammock a few feet away and rock back and forth . . . back and forth.

My eyes slowly close and my surroundings and thoughts start to fade as I watch boats cut through the water. The repetitive sound of the wake hitting the shore helps me slowly drift away as I continue to sway back and forth . . . back and forth.

I am lulled into a deep, peaceful sleep, and it feels wonderful.

For a few moments, I forget and escape everything—my problems, my anxiety, and all of my fears. I dream about only good things and forget the bad.

I become numb . . . comfortably numb.



Margarita and her mother stood in front of me with desperation in their eyes. Her mother held a plastic bag filled with some kind of paperwork.

I took years of Spanish in high school, but on that day I wish I had paid more attention and taken it more seriously, because I couldn't understand a word they said.

Cheryl, the wife of our partner in Guatemala, was with us, and I called her over to help me. She listened intently to the mother, and as she did, I saw the expression on her face drop. After years of living in Guatemala, Cheryl had seen more than her fair share of needs, but when I saw her tear up, I knew this was something more.

Cheryl explained that little Margarita had been raped. My heart sank. It's not that I don't know that things like this happen, but when the child is standing right in front of you, it takes on a whole new meaning. She was so little, so fragile, so innocent, and so pure. And she was only nine years old!

I was outraged. But there was more to the story.

Cheryl explained that the rape severely injured Margarita. She suffered major intestinal damage and had already undergone two surgeries to try to repair the injuries. My eyes began to well up with tears.

Margarita's mother gently pulled down her daughter's skirt, just enough for us to see the bandages on her stomach and the attached drainage bag. Her mother showed us the paperwork and medical records in the plastic bag she carried. She wanted us to know that she had done everything she could for her daughter. She wanted us to think she was a good mother. But she was out of money and resources, and she begged us for help.

Some might say this woman saw an opportunity. She knew Americans were coming to her village that day, and she took advantage of the situation. I say she did what any mother

would do—what I would do—in that situation. She did everything in her power to make sure her little girl got the help she needed.

Think about the lengths you would go to get your child desperately needed help. I know that I wouldn't stop until I found help.

As I looked at the bandages on Margarita, I glanced around at the dirty, dusty village where she lived. She really didn't have a home at all. There were no walls for protection—only a tarp held up by a few sticks. Her village lacked access to running water or clean water of any kind. I wondered, “How does she keep her wounds clean? How does she avoid infection? How in the world has she survived—first the trauma of the rape and then two surgeries?”

Unfortunately, Margarita's story is not unique. It is retold around the world in vast numbers. The suffering is an epidemic.

It is a story I have heard many times.



“There are three [children] in all,” the woman said. “They are all infected. The mother is infected. These kids are suffering. There's nothing at all. They've got no clothing. They've got no food. There's no income at home, because the mother is sick. No one is helping them.” As I listened, I almost felt guilty for my life, my own health, and my family's health.

Because the traumatized little girl didn't talk much, the kind lady who found Jamira told me her story. The little girl walked up shyly and never looked me in the eyes. A quiet ten-year-old, Jamira was one of hundreds of children we met in a rural village of South Africa. All of the women and children who crowded in and around the small, dust-filled, concrete compound were affected by AIDS. All were extremely poor, and most had been abandoned.

As we talked with Jamira and the others, I thought about how foreign it all seemed to me. These children knew nothing

but extreme poverty. Every meal was a struggle. Attending school was a privilege, not an assumption. Suffering was a daily part of life. Many of them had never lived a day without the effects of AIDS.

I soon discovered the reason for Jamira's withdrawn disposition—this little girl had been raped by her mother's boyfriend. The monster had infected her with HIV!

Jamira's spirit was crushed.

When I heard about the torture this child endured in her own home, I wanted to put my arms around her to protect her. I knew this child's pain ran deeper than the disease that invaded her little body, and I wanted to take that all away.

Brokenhearted, I could only imagine how Jamira must live in fear and shame. How was she supposed to trust anyone? Her violation was not by a stranger but by someone her own mother had allowed into her life.

I fought back the tears, then hugged Jamira. How I wished I could take her pain away. I knew I would never forget her.



Jamira and her family are among millions who live with the pain and impact of AIDS and its daily, never-ending toll.

I remember when AIDS first moved into the global spotlight. I wrote a speech on AIDS for a competition in high school. It was the new, hot topic, and we knew so little about it. I researched and wrote down words that I would say, but they were just words. I never realized that years later I would come face-to-face with AIDS.

No one could have imagined what a short time it would take for AIDS to have a devastating impact on people across the globe. The most obvious impact of this plague is the death count. Now as AIDS hits thirty years, an estimated 30 million people worldwide have already died.² Unbelievable! I can hardly fathom that staggering number. Deaths in sub-Saharan Africa alone are expected to reach 55 million by 2020.³

Those of us who are fortunate to live in a nation that is not completely engulfed by AIDS sometimes have a hard time relating to those who live in such a desperate state. After meeting child after child like Jamira, I began to think, “What a different world from mine.” But then something happened that changed my mind and heart.

A railroad track ran near the building where we met in South Africa. Right in the middle of our visit, we heard the deep rumble and piercing horn of an approaching train. Boys from across the compound ran to the chain-link fence, lined up with excitement, and hooked their fingers into the fence as they watched the mighty train rush past. They laughed and gestured with glee as it roared by. Their excitement made me smile, because I remembered the same reaction to trains from my own children. Boys will be boys no matter whether they are born in Virginia or South Africa. Boys just like trains.

As I watched, I saw those children for who they were—children just like my own, boys and girls like those we love. They feel, they love, they hurt, just like you and me. The only difference is that their families and communities live with a plague that devours all they hold dear.

Coming home from Africa, I sat on the plane pondering all I had seen. I wondered how I could ever explain the sights, smells, and stories. It was all too much. While in Africa doing research for a book on children affected by AIDS, I spent every day interviewing women and children whose lives had been torn apart, but I had no idea how I could really explain what I had seen. A book would be difficult enough to write, but in that moment, I wondered how I could explain it even to my friends and family. It is not the kind of topic one brings up at lunch with girlfriends.

Over the years, when I have tried to talk to people about the incredible needs around the world, too often I’ve seen

“I would rather feel compassion than know the meaning of it.”

Thomas Aquinas⁴

their eyes glaze over. They can't take it all in, so it's easier to ignore. Sometimes I feel like Charlie Brown's teacher. I feel like all they hear me saying is "Wa-wa, wa-wa, wa-wa."

Unfortunately, many times this causes me to say nothing at all. There's so much to say, but I can't speak. My heart is heavy; the situations are just too hard to explain.

People talk about culture shock. I have never experienced that when going on such trips, but I always experience it coming home. It is called "reentry." "Over there" things are simple and clear. The needs are great and at times overwhelming, but the big, hard questions become easy to answer. What is crucial in life—what matters and what doesn't—becomes clear when you deal with life and death issues.

But in America, things are less than clear, at best. CNN news anchor Anderson Cooper said it this way:

Coming home meant coming down. It was easier to stay up. I'd return home to piles of bills and an empty refrigerator. Buying groceries, I'd get lost—too many aisles, too many choices; cool mist blowing over fresh fruit; paper or plastic; cash back in return? I wanted emotion but couldn't find it here. . . . I'd come back and couldn't speak the language. Out there the pain is palpable; you breathed it in the air. Back here, no one talked about life and death. No one seemed to understand.⁵

The day I returned from that trip to Africa, I went to a baseball game with my family. I know part of my emotions was jet lag, but I remember sitting there thinking about all I had just seen in Africa, everything I experienced. I looked around and wondered, "Why doesn't anyone feel like I feel?"

The beer and peanuts flowed that day at America's favorite pastime. People yelled and screamed at the players and umpire. The mascot danced on top of the dugout, people fought over foul balls, and the crowd sang "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

It was a normal day at the park, but that day, it just hit me.

Do these people not know that 42 million people are suffering with AIDS and that 70 percent of them are in Africa?⁶ Do they not know that 16.6 million children have been orphaned by AIDS?⁷ Do they not know that an entire continent is wasting away while we are playing baseball?

Don't they know? Don't they care? Have we become comfortably numb?

Please don't misunderstand me here. There is nothing wrong with baseball; my boys would strongly object to me saying otherwise. I have nine- and thirteen-year-old sons, so baseball is a big part of my life right now, and I would have it no other way.

Baseball is not my point. The point is, our lives are filled with so many distractions—some good and some bad, but distractions just the same. If we choose, we can live our whole life so filled with these distractions that we never have to face—or be confronted with—real, desperate needs.

Maybe the question is, can we even comprehend issues like AIDS and poverty? Do we fully grasp that more than one billion people in the world don't live like we do? Is our Starbucks, iPhone, Twitter, Facebook, flat-screen TV, and all-you-can-eat buffet lifestyle just too far removed from the lives of the poor?

Can we even begin to understand what it would be like to helplessly watch a child die? To watch your own child die because you don't have any food or you can't afford to visit the doctor or there is no doctor? Do we really get that?

The pain, poverty, sickness, and hunger that I have witnessed around the world is almost too much to bear. I have talked to women abandoned by husbands who left them infected with HIV. I have hugged children who lost both parents and are now all alone. I have cried with young girls who were raped, their innocence lost. Extreme hunger, poverty, and disease—it is devastating.

Sometimes I can't wait to get home, back to my life, family, and world—the real world.

But the world we live in is not the real world. We live in a bubble, a world more like Disneyland. The rest of the world is reality.

It's said that the first step toward battling addiction is admitting you have a problem. In the same way, I say the first step toward changing the world is admitting there is a problem. We may do that briefly, but we are quickly convinced we can't do anything about it.

We have been lulled into a deep sleep, and we need to wake up.

Bill Hybels writes in his book *Holy Discontent* that we need to figure out what we can't stand. Most people try to avoid this process, but the truth is, there is something in the world that bothers you. There's something you can't stand. Is it the issue of poverty, injustice, prejudice, the homeless, or abandoned children?

"The poor do not need our sympathy and our pity, the poor need our love and compassion."

Mother Teresa⁸

Once you find what you can't stand—what disturbs you—you have to feed it. In other words, increase your exposure to it. If you are not careful, you will fill your life with other things so that you don't have to pay attention to what wrecks you. You will medicate your discontent.⁹

Most likely, you will be perfectly content to stay numb. Our society as a whole is numb, and we are pathetically comfortable. John Stott puts it this way:

The horror of the situation is that our affluent culture has drugged us; we no longer feel the pain of other people's deprivations. Yet the first step toward the recovery of our Christian integrity is to be aware that our culture blinds, deafens and dopes us. Then we shall begin to cry to God to open our eyes, unstop our ears and stab our dull consciences awake, until we see, hear and feel what through his Word he has been saying to us all the time. Then we shall take action.¹⁰



Margarita is now thriving. My family helped provide the last surgery she needed. It was extensive. The doctors said they had to completely reconstruct her internally. That is hard for me to even comprehend, but I am so grateful she now has a chance to lead a normal life.

Through the help of some others who met her on that same trip, she now has a new home to live in with her family. A home to feel safe and protected in.

One life . . . completely changed. One life . . . saved.

I know what wrecks me, and I can't be numb to it anymore. It is just too hard. I want to see the needs. I want to feel the needs. I want to touch them.

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The author's proceeds from this book
will benefit the global initiatives
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