
JUSTICE

*Justice is possible only when everyone has a
realistic opportunity to meet their basic needs*

MY JOURNEY TO THE TAJ MAHAL BEGINS with a two-mile cab ride that ends a mile short of the stunning monument. Motorized vehicles are banned beyond that point to protect the white marble “jewel of Muslim art” from their defacing smog. Elaborately decorated rickshaws transport streams of tourists from the designated boundary to our final destination. Mine is a standard black bicycle with a frame that has been lengthened a couple feet—a bicycle “stretch-limo”—with a padded vinyl rear seat rising high above the operator’s shoulders. The single-gear vehicle weighs well over a hundred pounds, including the retractable canopy that shields passengers while leaving the operator exposed. Painted bright yellow and crimson and dotted with garish illustrations, this common mode of transportation looks intrinsically connected to the colorful urban Indian landscape.

I gladly board the exotic machine, along with Achir, my interpreter, eager to experience the Taj Mahal at sunrise. Through my companion I talk to the driver during our fifteen minute ride to the entrance gate. He had been waiting at the depot for almost an hour, determined to earn enough money to feed his family for the day. At five o’clock, I am his first customer, and he hopes to make about ten dollars by the time the Taj closes at sunset.

Like me, he has three children, but our similarities end there. His family belongs to the layer near the base of the world’s poverty-pyramid, where

nearly three billion humans live on about two dollars per day. He works seven days a week—if he misses a day, his family doesn't eat that day. He doesn't own the rickshaw, but leases it at usurious rates, forfeiting much of the profits that would eventually enable him to purchase it. Industrious and hard-working, he nonetheless is locked into a never-ending grind of poverty.

Hundreds of thousands of Indian men are doomed from birth by their families' caste to pursue this brutal vocation. Born on this eternal treadmill they have no alternatives, make no progress, and forfeit hope of ever getting off.

We approach the Taj Mahal, the early morning air thick and humid. Our driver is sweating already, causing me to wonder what it will be like for him as the sun climbs overhead. Why am I perched comfortably here on the back and he peddling me along? I wonder about other things. Like, what has he done to deserve his life of drudgery while I enjoy mine of luxury? It is not an easy question to answer, and what happens next is even more unsettling.

I reach in my pocket to pay him, but he raises his hand, saying something to my translator who then explains: "He would rather wait to take you back, and then you can pay him."

I look briefly at the operator and then respond to Achir, "But I'll be a while and he could collect another fare from someone else."

My native companion interprets his words as well as the cultural context, "Yes, but work is scarce, you see," Achir explains. "At least if he waits, he knows he has another job."

The Mughal emperor Shah Jahan created the Taj Mahal, one of the eight wonders of the world, out of deep devotion to his wife whom he passionately loved through their eighteen years together. She died in 1631 while giving birth to their fourteenth child, after which construction took place on the majestic monument every day for the next twenty-two years, engaging 20,000 workers. Shah Jahan erected the memorial on a raised marble platform 186 feet by 186 feet, with a central dome of equal height, deploying a fleet of ten thousand elephants to transport the rock many miles.

I arrive before dawn to bask in its beauty, looking on as the sun rises over the matchless shrine. Though the tranquil mausoleum flanks what has become a murky cesspool today, the Taj Mahal lives up to its reputation. As the sun comes up, thousands of hand-cut and meticulously inlaid semiprecious stones gradually appear like stars, responding to nature's rising light. I stand in awe as the sun's rays illuminate this wonder, beginning on the

east and gracefully dancing westward. Within an hour the entire edifice glistens from its reflection, bringing colors to radiant life, and casting shadows as only sunlight can at this sacred time of day. Pristine marble that glows pink at night dons again its brilliant white.

I return to the entrance where I find the rickshaw operator chatting patiently with one of the dozens of other drivers. After a brief word with my interpreter, I learn of a new wrinkle.

“He says he can return us to your hotel, rather than merely back to the depot,” Achir explains.

“Does he know how far that is?” I wonder out loud. “We’re talking three miles!”

Another exchange between Achir and the driver. Obviously the rickshaw driver is aware and pleased, as he beams and shakes his head strongly from side to side – the Indian equivalent of our Western affirmative up-and-down nod.

Not in any great rush, I agree, and we set off. Still only mid-morning, the air is noticeably hotter, and dense traffic congests the narrow streets. In no time, the beads on the operator’s neck drip down his back. We pass beggars too maimed to walk, scavengers sorting through last night’s garbage in hope of finding something to eat or sell, street vendors carrying their entire inventory in overloaded hands, and an unending swarm of bicycles and rickshaws, all trying to earn sufficient money to buy a handful of rice before the end of the day.

Though I have visited India twice before and the economy is growing, the intense poverty shocks me anew. I am jarred even more this time by the incredible volume of poor people. Crushing throngs move about everywhere like a school of minnows in a shallow pool.

Coming to a slight incline, we gradually slow down despite the driver standing, his full weight on the pedals. His is no mountain-bike with fifteen gears to choose from like the one I use for pleasure. Our rickshaw operator is strong, but his single-gear bicycle is no match for our combined 350 pounds and the small hill. We grind to a halt. Without any hesitation he steps to the ground, leans firmly into the handle bars, and one slow step after the other, this Indian man pushes us up the hill. Why that humble act penetrates so deeply I do not fully understand, but I find myself in tears.

The distance between my cushioned seat and his immobile pedals, sets up an epiphany, symbolic of the unjust gap between the rich and the poor.

What is justice in this age of globalization? What does kindness look like in today's interconnected place called Earth? Well over two thousand years ago, a Hebrew prophet proposed a similar challenge, asking a rhetorical question which he quickly went on to answer concerning the meaning of life. What does our Creator expect of us? Does it take sacrificing our first-born child to please God? Absolutely not, he tells us. Micah distills all of life down to one simple all-encompassing query about what the creator wants from those He created:

“He has showed you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God.”

—MICAH 6:8

At the end of my ride I smile and hand the rickshaw operator \$2.50, about a fourth of what he hopes to earn during the entire day. He holds out his hand asking for more. It would be just as easy to give him \$25.00 or even \$250.00. I feel I should pay more. To this day I am mortified that I did not, but instead obeyed my translator who insisted I not give the driver any more. Wouldn't a tip of twenty dollars tip the scales of justice in the right direction? What should I have done based on Jesus' mission articulated in the synagogue as he read from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah?

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To set free the oppressed.” (Luke 4:18)

Seeking to follow his example, how do I bring good news to the poor and set free the oppressed? How do I do justice this day in India or next week in Chicago?

INJUSTICE UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Even as a child, I could not escape questions of justice. From the time I was one year old until I returned to the United States in 1970 to attend college, I lived with my missionary parents in South Africa, under a political system where 75 percent of the population was classified non-white, allowing only a fraction of them to reach economic prosperity. My mother and father worked every day in Soweto, the acronym for the “southwest township”

where blacks who labored in Johannesburg were forced to live. Under apartheid law my parents were required to return to our all-white community every night. Given a choice, we would have lived among those my parents came to serve, but injustice ultimately restricts everyone.

Without breaking the strict laws enforcing apartheid, which would have resulted in deportation, my parents bent as many rules as they dared. To the disdain of our white neighbors we regularly held gatherings and served meals in our home for blacks who had never entered a white person's house as a guest. Yet even though we welcomed blacks into our home, they were still inhibited by the all pervasive atmosphere and rules of apartheid. On one occasion, my father happened upon a black guest urinating in our garden because he did not believe white people would allow a black man to use their bathroom.

During the summer of 2003, after twenty-five years of marriage, my wife and I visited my roots in Johannesburg—Lise's debut in Africa. With the apartheid system abolished nine years previously, much had changed since my childhood. We drove to the suburb where I grew up on the outskirts of what was then an eight-mile buffer-zone, separating the whites from Soweto. I showed her our house, which seemed to have shrunk to half the size of my childhood recollection. I pointed out the detached servants' quarters at the back of each house, for even in this blue-collar community most families could afford a full-time maid. I noted how the drab unkempt yards of today contrasted with the lawns and gardens that had been immaculately manicured by black gardeners and houseboys.

We visited my public high school, reserved for white children, approximately twenty-five to a class. The black children attended government schools in Soweto, where the class size would be three times as large, rooms unheated, teachers poorly paid and educated, books inferior if available at all, and almost no money spent on athletics and other after-school activities. There was virtually no university education available in the country for the non-white population, which accounted for three out of four people. Very few families managed to scrape and sacrifice enough to pay the school fees and buy the books so that even one of their children could continue past the tenth grade. And only one in ten of the smattering who eventually did make it to the end, passed the final matriculation exam. The exam, required for graduation, written and graded by the all-white establishment,

was identical for all ethnic groups: Afrikaans, English, Black, Colored, and Indian. This insidious tactic, instigated by the ruling white government, assured them that non-whites would never become educated and threaten their control.

I took Lise down the path where I remember riding my bicycle with my high school mates. One good friend in particular would make sport of riding past black pedestrians, reaching out his hand and knocking the hats off the heads of elderly men, shouting, "Watch out, kaffir!" the ultimate derogatory insult, our version of the N-word. From infancy he had been indoctrinated to believe that blacks were mentally handicapped, culturally destitute, and morally bankrupt. White children accepted the propaganda from their parents, teachers and religious leaders, and believed they were genetically superior in every way to blacks. It is difficult to understand how, for more than forty years, good and God-fearing people perpetuated so unjust a system, defending segregation and inequality from the Bible and the teachings of a loving Jesus. And black children grew up with diminished dignity and self-confidence as a result of the same incessant brainwashing.

PAYBACK TIME

On this trip I got a glimpse of how dearly my misdirected school friends are atoning for those attitudes and actions. The wounds from half a century of extreme injustice in South Africa do not quickly heal. Although Nelson Mandela heroically prevented a bloodbath when the all-white government and apartheid system dissolved, severe repercussions persist. Violence and fear among all races are as common in South Africa now, as "whites only" signs and enforced segregation were a decade earlier. Injustice does not condone crime, but it does help explain it. With the economy in shambles and crime rampant, for good reason many dub Johannesburg the rape and crime capital of the world.

We visited several of the people I grew up with, including a friend whose seventeen-year-old daughter was raped at gunpoint in her own bed while he and his wife slept through the ordeal across the hall just two weeks before our visit. He explained how the offenders poisoned and killed the watchdog, scaled the six-foot concrete fence, disengaged the alarm system and circumvented the multiple heavy locks on the doors. When we arrived at

their house, workers were busy adding barbed-wire and an electric-current protection above the wall surrounding their property, plus a panic button in each room that, when triggered, alerts a security company.

Later that week we shared a lovely dinner party with another old friend I used to play with as a child. He had taken a further step after their last burglary. In addition to steel bars over all the bedroom windows, he recently installed a floor-to-ceiling wrought-iron gate in the hallway leading from the living room to the bedrooms. Each night after everyone is in bed, they padlock the gate so that when the house is broken into again, the criminals will not be able to harm the family. Due to their indoctrination since infancy, these friends of mine may not have recognized how they were oppressing black people during the apartheid; but many scars that were inflicted still fester.

Often the privileged class justifies their treatment of the poor by saying they are lazy or ignorant or angry and need to be controlled. Having visited some fifty countries—many of them in the developing world—I have become increasingly convinced that the majority of the world's poorest people are poor through no fault of their own. On the contrary, most of the world's poor are decent, hard-working people who have been victimized by unjust systems that place insurmountable hurdles wherever they turn: corrupt governments with untenable national debts, no legal property rights and consequently no collateral, ancient cultural traditions including overwhelming restrictions on women, trade barriers, and no access to credit, insurance, safe banking or the legal system. To add insult to injury, many of the poorest people in the world live in regions with either too little or too much rainfall, infertile soil, and other geographical conditions that make survival a daily struggle.

Not that these climate conditions are inherently unjust. For example, drought isn't injustice but a natural disaster. However, drought to a family dependent on a tiny plot of maize compared to drought in America's Midwest are two very different disasters. Families in the Midwest may have to pay more at the grocery store, and even though some children in many American cities are malnourished, the vast majority of Americans eat well regardless of the weather. Did I deserve to live in the Midwest where I can purchase any kind of food any time of the year? Does the father in Sudan deserve to live where life is so fragile that one bad season could result in the

deaths of his children?

We can't change weather patterns or geography, but we can do something about injustice.

WHAT IS JUSTICE?

Economists, ethicists, and philosophers have written extensively about justice, but what I have learned from the working poor is that justice means simply that everyone has a realistic opportunity to meet their basic human needs. An African woman named Esther exemplifies what can happen when finally given that chance.

Zimbabwe, renamed from Rhodesia after gaining independence from its oppressive white regime in 1980, has since suffered under the corrupt and unjust leadership of its black strongman, President Robert Mugabe. During his thirty-year reign this once prosperous nation and breadbasket of southern Africa has become an economic wasteland, earning recognition by the United Nations as the fastest shrinking economy in the world.

Today few foreigners dare visit Zimbabwe as it hemorrhages under immeasurable hyperinflation and strict military control. When Lise and I visited in 2003, the U.S. State Department had issued a warning against travel to Zimbabwe. Coupled with shortages of food and gasoline, this warning caused tourism to join the rhinoceros on the list of endangered species, shrinking the economy further while rewarding my wife and me with a bus entirely to ourselves for the two-hour journey from Victoria Falls to Hwange Game Reserve. The week we spent in Zimbabwe offered a crash course in justice and the impotence of the poor, which does not suggest that the poor are less responsible for their actions. To a great extent, wealth and poverty are simply byproducts of where we are born.

In the capital city of Harare it was shocking to drive on roads at rush hour, clogged not by cars but waves of pedestrians. With the soaring price of fuel, more and more people were unable to pay the ever-mounting cost of public transportation, which for many commuters consumed half of their already inadequate salaries. Those who lived too far to walk were forced to quit their jobs. For an increasing portion of innocent citizens, the solution was to migrate from the big cities and return to the rural areas, where at least they could plant vegetables and feed their families.

Conspiring alongside corruption and extreme poverty the HIV/AIDS pandemic finds its epicenter in Zimbabwe and neighboring countries Botswana, Zambia and South Africa. Each year almost half a million HIV-positive mothers in the developing world infect their babies. And more than two-thirds of all people with the disease live in sub-Saharan Africa. Though the official rate today may be ten percent, for several years approximately 30 percent of Zimbabweans were infected with HIV/AIDS. The disease has already killed more than twenty-five million people and infected another thirty-three million. In Zimbabwe, home for almost thirteen million people, twenty-five hundred die every week from AIDS, most of them among the economically active.

With life expectancy shrinking to the low thirties, the government was forced to respond, increasing publicity about how the disease is spread and about its telling symptoms. A few years ago they introduced a tax whose proceeds provide some relief for HIV-infected citizens. The program requires that people be tested in order to take advantage of the benefits. Parents with a certificate verifying they carry the disease are guaranteed that their children will receive free schooling after being orphaned. Today life expectancy in Zimbabwe is officially forty-four years, tied for lowest in the world, along with war-torn Afghanistan.

ESTHER'S CASH COW

We traveled to Vasho Ghon, a tiny village that does not exist on most maps. Quaintly nestled in picturesque hills three hours from the capital city of Harare, the Shona tribe has made this remote farm-community home for many generations. And ancient ancestors would still feel at home here today. With no electricity or running water, many conditions remain unchanged over hundreds of years. The most notable developments include a school for the children and the calamity of AIDS.

Individual homesteads encased by brush and thorn bushes, dot the slopes of rolling grass-covered hills. Each clearing offers home to one family, with a round mud building for the man, and a similar dwelling for each of his wives and their children. Vast open fields for grazing separate the enclaves, connected by dusty footpaths. The shallow river that gracefully meanders between the lowest points in the valley serves the drinking, cook-

ing, washing, and irrigation needs of those living in Vasho Ghon. It was in this remote African village that I met the woman who has inspired me these many years, though our paths crossed only briefly.

Esther meets me at a narrow stream bridged with strategically placed stepping stones. Beside the water she welcomes me with a gracious smile. Cautiously I follow as she leads me confidently across the slippery rocks. She is stylishly dressed in a two-piece suit, with pumps that inhibit neither her dancing nor her walking through her fields. As we walk up the hill to her home, she points out the gravestone of her husband who died four years ago, just months after their third child was born. When I try to express condolences she nonchalantly comments, "Life is difficult for mothers in my village."

Her husband had been sick for a long time. Fear kept the family from giving the symptoms a name—fear of knowing, fear of dying, fear of being stigmatized. But when Esther tested HIV-positive, she knew the same unforgiving virus had killed him and would eventually take her. What she does not know is how much time remains for her to prepare her farm, and her three young children to tend it on their own.

Much like the other homesteads in the community, Esther's embraces a few improvements. Though the basic structures are still made of roughly felled trees, and roofed with thatched grass, her husband had plastered some of the mud walls with cement before he died, and poured a thin layer of concrete over several of the compacted cow-dung floors. There are still no windows, but a solid wooden door hangs on steel hinges that she secures with a lock and key.

About half the size of a football field, Esther's compound perches on the side of a gently sloping hill that her family cleared and carefully maintains. She protects it with a barricade constructed from sticks and interlocking bramble and sweeps the hardened reddish dirt clean with brooms made from tree branches. Within the fenced area, two dogs, perhaps a dozen chickens, and a gaggle of six geese roam freely. Corn that Esther harvested earlier in the year is stored outside in a large bin, several feet above the ground, well out of reach of animals. The shaded area below the corn serves as home for seventy-eight chicks which she breeds for both consumption and commerce.

The external structure may look primitive, but once inside I am impressed by how thoughtfully and tastefully she has furnished it. The single large round chamber serves as living room and sleeping quarters for Esther

and her three children. A stuffed sofa and two matching chairs grace the room, each covered with little hand-stitched hearts. On one side rests a double bed with attractive spread and pillows. It is obvious she takes great pride in this immaculate home, ringed with handcrafted cabinets.

Adjacent to it stands another round structure, now inhabited by her sister, also widowed by some unknown, or at least unacknowledged, disease. She, too, mothered children, and she, too, tested positive for HIV. Nearby, a separate building functions as the kitchen for the two families, where the sisters cook and feed their children.

But there is one special building that Esther is particularly eager to show us. "I built it myself," she says proudly, as we cross the lot to the far corner. The smaller hut blends in with the others, made of mud with a matching thatched roof. As she opens the wooden door Esther lunges aside, and with arms stretched wide, gestures with glee to the sparkling white commode, the kind you'd find at Home Depot. "I bought it in Harare!" she exclaims with confidence. "And I even put in a septic tank!" Without running water, the toilet's tank must be filled by hand. "It's a good place to dump the dirty washing water," she expounds.

I can picture her bringing this white porcelain fixture home, strapped on the roof of a crowded bus, along with mounds of other passengers' luggage, including perhaps a couple live goats. How this single woman maneuvered the toilet from the spot where the dirt road ends, across the bridgeless river, and up the hill on the other side to her home, I can only begin to imagine.

Granted, Esther and her sister have ample experience navigating that hill with heavy loads. Each morning starting at five o'clock, they begin the daily routine down the hill to the creek. With five-gallon containers balanced on their heads, and one in each hand, the two women haul water to irrigate their small vegetable garden. Over the next three or four hours, they each make about twenty-five grueling trips up and down, following the well-worn footpath connecting their source of water and their source of livelihood.

Potatoes, tomatoes, and a few other vegetables provide food for their own table. Most of the carefully raised-bed gardens, however, are dedicated to producing covo, a leafy dark green vegetable that she sells in the market, along with her chickens and eggs.

How has this radiant woman become so self-sufficient? What motivates her to press on despite her deadly illness is something that gradually be-

comes clearer as we spend several hours together.

With increased publicity and information about AIDS, a couple years ago Esther suspected she may be infected. And with the possibility of her children receiving modest government assistance, she agreed to be tested. Now she must live with the haunting memory of her husband's slow and painful death, and the near certainty that she faces a similar demise. But with certification that she is HIV-positive, at least her children will remain in school after she dies.

Making provision for their school fees is only one component of this determined woman's aggressive plan to create self-sufficiency for her family. Daily she prepares for the inevitable, hoping and praying for their sake it will be later rather than sooner.

For all practical purposes, unemployment in her immediate community is one-hundred percent. Factories, formal businesses, and regular paying jobs simply do not exist. Life for Esther looked hopeless, for simple farming was all she knew, and years of tending to her dying husband left the family garden and their only source of livelihood in disarray. She dreamed of owning a cow so she could sell milk to the other mothers in the community, but she could never scrape up the \$30 required to buy one. She considered borrowing the money but the bank would not allow her in the door, even if she could afford the 100 percent annual interest. Alternatively, the local loan shark charged 40 percent per month.

It was then in 2001, two years prior to my visit, that she learned of a non-government charitable organization named Zambuko Trust. Zambuko means bridge, signifying the bridge from poverty to hope. With affordable interest and no requirement for collateral, she borrowed \$30 for six months to buy the cow that would give her life new hope. In gratitude she named it Zambuko. Each day Zambuko produces the nutrients that help keep Esther, her sister, and their five children strong so they can maintain their grinding schedules. There was enough milk left over to sell to her neighbors, enabling her to make her weekly loan payments.

When the loan for the cow was paid off Esther borrowed another \$75 to reestablish her vegetable farm. The money created work for the women she hired to prepare the soil and collect the brush that would serve as hedge against animals and thieves. Finally, she planted covo seeds and began fertilizing the young plants that would soon sustain her family. With her

youngest strapped to Esther's back and the other two children at her side, they quickly learned how to care for the cow and the garden. They are not yet aware how important this knowledge will be all too soon.

Communities like hers have virtually no working-aged men, only boys and the elderly. Most of the few living young men have left the village for the cities in search of work. Widows and orphans learn to work together behind a common goal and support each other like geese flying in formation.

We accompany Esther to the weekly meeting that she committed to attend as part of her loan agreement. Though almost all the women in the group are HIV-positive, I would not know it by their joyful exuberance and determination to succeed in their businesses. As at many traditional African gatherings, the women allot ample time for singing and dancing. Setting aside the multiple trials that burden them, they face this final unfair scourge with courage and resolve. I am as moved by the beauty of their open-air music, with its rich a cappella harmonies, as by any symphony in Chicago's Orchestra Hall.

When the women in loan groups meet each week and share experiences, they gain support and confidence in running their various enterprises. They know each other intimately. Each member of the group guarantees the other members' loans, giving them assurance that should one become incapacitated the other women will cover her weekly payments and not burden her children with debt.

Every four or five months when their loans are repaid they have the option of a larger loan to expand or diversify their businesses. These subsequent loans are withheld until every member of the group completes their payments. Thus, if one of them is not able to make the weekly payment because of illness or some other legitimate crisis, the others chip in and make good on the loan. However, if one member stops coming to the weekly meetings or tries to cheat the system, the other members visit her and pressure her to pay what is owed. With this level of peer support and accountability, repayment rates in these groups approach 100 percent.

Together Esther and her neighbors named their co-op the "Enjoyment Group". A few weeks prior to our visit, Esther's cow added to her enjoyment by giving birth to a calf. Her farm grew as did her hope. With her first two loans paid in full, Esther borrowed \$250 to expand her garden as well as purchase a brood of baby chicks. Every week Esther proudly reports on

her progress to the rest of the members, an invaluable encounter when they hold each other accountable and exchange encouragement.

The group leader imparts training on how to improve their businesses. Members receive guidance in pricing and marketing, inventory control, and how to keep accurate records. Belonging to a co-op, the members are able to buy materials and supplies in bulk and negotiate favorable prices.

Esther also learns much about her illness and how to care for herself from the co-op. Many weeks a health worker attends the meeting, bringing additional information about how AIDS spreads, how to prevent it, and how to live productive lives once infected. With no access to medicine, let alone a cure, Esther eagerly absorbs all the techniques that may extend her life. For her dream is to establish her farm, nurture her children, and maintain her strength long enough for her oldest to carry on the business and care for the younger siblings after she is gone.

I listen as a health worker addresses Esther and the other forty women who have gathered for their weekly meeting. Peppered throughout her machine-gun like presentation, the reoccurring theme is that everyone should be tested for AIDS.

“Knowledge is power. As I stand here before you I am HIV-positive. My husband was a soldier and he brought this to me. But as you can see, I am strong. Once I discovered my status I improved my diet. Unfortunately my child was born before I knew I was HIV-positive. Now the baby is also crippled by the disease. When you feel loved you live longer. Don’t reject those who are infected. It’s not always wise to tell others if you’re positive. Conserve your energy. Refrain from hard physical labor that will fatigue you. Avoid stress, as that will also sap your physical strength.”

As I listen, I watch the women’s faces in humble amazement. “How can they be so strong and joyful?” I wonder. These women can be impoverished and in want of medicine, and still choose to experience fullness of life. Is this another lesson that the working poor are teaching me? That joy does not come from material wealth but from relationships; shared experiences, regardless of how bleak they might seem.

Esther’s weekly loan group meetings provide camaraderie, and gradually she discovers the hope that many with AIDS lack. Several times during our brief visit Esther expresses her appreciation for the weekly meetings where she not only receives financial assistance and business training, but health

training and invaluable support from the other infected members.

With guidance from the health care worker, support from her group, milk from her cow, eggs from her chickens, and fresh vegetables from her garden, Esther eats better and feels stronger. But Esther has also learned that to prolong her life she must minimize physical work and conserve energy. How can she possibly follow that counsel when every day begins with three to four punishing hours, hauling water up a rugged hill?

I can sense her deep angst as she outlines her vision. "I must carry so many buckets. If only I could buy a pump and some hose, then I could stop making these many trips every morning." Esther elaborates on her dream, "I could expand the garden and grow more covo. And I'd gain several hours each day to sell my vegetables."

Not wanting to squelch her enthusiasm, I needed to ask my obvious questions, "What makes you think there is water here?"

Esther had obviously been thinking about this and was ready with a response, "I know there is water near the ground. Others here in the valley, no closer to the stream, they have some wells."

"And do you know how deep they had to drill in order to access the water?"

"They only dig some few meters. I've tested and it's here, too."

"And how do you operate this pump without any electricity in this valley?"

"We don't need electricity. The pump has two pedals that you push with your feet. It's not so difficult."

"What does a manual pump like the one you're describing cost?"

"Well, that's the problem. It's very expensive."

"What does that mean? How expensive?"

"Today, in U.S. dollars, the pump will cost about three-hundred and fifty. But I also need to buy some short hoses, so I can get the water to all of my garden. And it would be good if I could have some little extra money to buy some fertilizer."

Consider the implication of what she just said. A small four-hundred dollar loan could purchase and install a manual pump, and fully equip this determined farmer. This small investment could mean the difference between life and death for Esther and her three children!

But this entrepreneur's dreams do not end with a water pump or a farm.

If she can live another six months and pay off the loan for the pump she'd borrow a couple hundred dollars to buy a sewing machine. "When I was a little girl my mom taught me to sew. I see other women in the co-op who make a good business with this."

Esther feels confident she could convert the skill into a lucrative enterprise. A simple pedal-operated machine and a few bolts of cloth are all it would take. "The children here must all wear uniforms to the classes," she reminds me. I've seen them, and recognize that the demand will remain as long as there are children. "And what's best is I can teach this skill to my girls." In five years the oldest child will be thirteen and able to raise the others. If only she can prolong the inevitable and equip them to survive on their own. Noticing me mulling matters over in my mind, Esther chimes in with the same confident assessment she attributed to operating the pump, "It's not so difficult."

EVERYONE CAN DO SOMETHING

It's easy to look at countries like Zimbabwe with their poverty and corrupt governments and think there's no hope for people like Esther. But we can't let our frustration over issues like this immobilize us. Individuals like you and I can do a lot to bring justice to people like Esther. We can speak out against systems that perpetuate their poverty. We can tell their stories and make others aware of the day to day challenges they face. We can put pressure on our government to confront their country's leaders. We can live more simply in order to make more self-sustaining resources available. We can show the poor respect by thinking of them with admiration and anticipation instead of disdain or pity. We can wisely offer the most effective and lasting solutions. We can avoid adding salt to their wound by suggesting they are poor as a result of their own doing. We can acknowledge that we are wealthy and that part of the reason for that is the fact that we live where we do—a blessing over which we had no control.

Surely doing justice includes leveling the playing field at least this much.

Esther did not want charity—just a fair chance to better her life and that of her family. It is from a poor working woman like Esther that I am learning that justice is not a handout but a hand up—an act by someone with power or privilege to give those without either a chance—an opportunity.

To do justice, then, is to do something. We cannot sit idly by when we see injustice, but use whatever resources we have—including our spheres of influence—to provide others with a way out of their poverty. What we actually do will be different for each of us, but doing nothing will only allow injustice to flourish.

A PRAYER FOR ESTHER

As we leave Zimbabwe, I recall the majestic force of Victoria Falls and imagine Esther in the water getting ever closer to the falls. The raging river rushes ever faster, unquenchably consuming all that enters its domain. Powerfully and irrevocably it crescendos toward the blinding mist that follows the immense cliff. There is nothing I can do to rescue her from her inevitable demise. I imagine her calling out to me to protect her children and keep them from being swept into the deadly current just as she was. Envisioning a bright future, I commit to do all I can to transform my prayer into reality. In my heart I respond, “Esther, born in Zimbabwe you innocently entered the water when it was but a gentle tributary. Quickly streams converged, rains fell, waters mounted, and you passed many of life’s rapids. Your place in the turbulent river is no more your doing than mine here on the secure bank. I stand on the precipice admiring the beauty of the falls, gently caressed by their never-ending spray.

“The soft moist tickle becomes a trickle. Soon I am as wet as you. We are sister and brother, created in the image of our loving Father. But you are being swept away by the very waters that cool and nourish me. I cannot enter your world any more than I can invite you into mine.

“With no hint of self pity, you have taught me much, Esther, in these fleeting moments as our paths crossed. I will never be the same. I have marveled as you prepared your children. Now I promise to try and protect them from entering the river.

“I am honored to have been a part of your journey and to have played a small role in helping you endure. Someday we will gather our families together and dance to the song your group first sang to me near your home, from the narrow stream, bridged with strategically placed stepping stones.

“Go in peace, Esther, knowing that with God’s help you equipped your family well.”