



Modern Medicine Failed Me in Kenya

Kathryn L. Butler^a

^a MD, Trauma Surgeon, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, United States

His bottom lip trembled as I leaned in with my stethoscope. Although his eyes shimmered with a thin sheen of tears, he did not recoil. As had his toddler sister, he waited, straight, silent, and obedient, and he studied me. I crouched to his level, and we connected for a heartbeat or two. I listened to the cadence of his breath; he searched my face.

Searched for what? Understanding? Hope? The missionary leading our team often remarked, “You are the face, and hands, and feet of Christ.” As this child scanned my face, I felt the sweat snake down my neck, glimpsed the elongating line of villagers through the paneless window, heard the howls from the procedure room. . . and I realized the profundity of my failure. I wore no face of Christ. I wore a grimy white coat, a stethoscope, and other flashy trappings incongruous with the dirt floor and dilapidated benches of the clinic. I considered the hundreds of people piling onto the grass into lopsided queues, stumbling over each other in the hope that we, *mzungu*, would cure their cataracts, their diabetes, their oozing wounds, and arthritic hips. I met person after person for whom I could prescribe only vitamins, and I watched their hopes crumble. Rather than mercy, I offered disappointment. Rather than the face of Christ, I wore a perpetual air of apology.

I journeyed to Kenya to devote my skills toward care of God’s poor. In my arrogance, I envisioned myself pouring out mercy like water. I dreamed of dousing villagers in the healing power of western medicine, all the while preaching the love of Christ. With the assistance of the local

church, we assembled a clinic in a schoolhouse, and giddily set about our calling. Patients flocked to the clinic. They left their homes at five o’clock in the morning and rode their bikes or trudged barefoot along muddied roads. Volunteers filed entire families into lines and beneath tents, where they waited for hours to talk with us about their back pain, their toothache, their cough, their blindness.

One Village Among Many

Inefficiency drowned our efforts. We had no diagnostics and no referral hospitals. I punctured countless finger pads to test for malaria, dispensed ibuprofen, and fumbled through physical exams, but the tests the patients *really* needed — the CT scans, the colonoscopies, the biopsies, the blood tests — were unattainable. Even acquiring a medical history proved formidable as we haltingly translated between English, to Swahili, to the local vernacular, and then back. One after another, patients leaned forward on the rickety table and implored me for help. Each time, I winced as I explained that despite my white coat and fancy credentials, I could not cure their advanced disease. They would trudge away crestfallen, with their five children in tow. With each encounter, despondency crept further into my bones.

Desperate for fortitude, each night I huddled under a mosquito net with a battery-powered headlamp, and read Matthew 8 and 9. I pored over passages of healing accounts in Jesus’ ministry. When solace came too slowly, I concocted preposterous plans for a mission hospital, to provide



real care. I schemed about radiology wings and operating theaters in the bush. Via a spotty internet connection one hour nightly, I forewent writing to my family in favor of researching hospital finances. As I tallied the needs of the patients, my heart — still anchored in the world — became heavy. This is just one village. How many more so direly need help? How can we endure such poverty and suffering? Lord, how on earth can I help here?

The Patient Diagnosed Me

Such morose thoughts churned in my mind the day I met J. “I was wondering if you could please help me,” he said. I glanced up and noted he clutched a cane for refinery, not for infirmity. He had cordially removed his hat, and worry creased his brow. “I had an operation for hemorrhoids some time ago,” he continued, “but it’s not fixed anything. I am constantly bleeding. Every time I go back, they just give me tablets, but they don’t help. I wish to know what I have. Even if it is something that cannot be cured, I just wish to know.”

He dropped a tattered booklet of hospital records onto my table. I leafed through the stained pages, and froze upon a word scrawled in pencil. My heart sank. J did not have hemorrhoids. He had rectal cancer. He could not afford the operation that might save his life.

Patients crowded outside. Our clinic measured success according to the number of patients we treated daily. A nurse signaled for me to hurry. “Too many waiting!” she mouthed. I searched J’s eyes, and the verse surfaced through the tumult: *Your faith has healed you.* (Matt 9:22) I choked back tears. In my brokenness, I had wasted precious reserve lamenting our paucity of technology, as if healing was titratable and mechanical. As if the machinery constituted the heart of the thing. Yet God worked in our hearts, and in those of the patients whom we served, in ways subtle and dramatic, indiscernible, and cacophonous, beautiful, and mysterious.

I shrugged my colleague an apology, leaned forward, and held J’s hand. We discussed his diagnosis for the next half hour. I drew diagrams. We prayed together. Tears blurred our vision. “Thank you for explaining to me,” J finally said. The creases had smoothed away from his forehead. “I see you have sympathy and compassion for me, and I am grateful. I am in the Lord’s hands now. I must trust in Him. He will provide what is best for me.” He squeezed my hand. I still feel the warmth.

Martha in the Mission Field

The clinic was God’s vehicle, not the ultimate aim. He required no diagnostics; he healed through faith in His power. In my very urgency to serve Him, I had supplanted my devotion to Him with idolatry of modern medicine. I had relinquished dedication to the Lord for adoration of my own pride.

When I discarded esteem of my own efforts, in favor of *being present* for people in the clinic — of being Christ’s face, and hands, and feet — narratives arose from the fogginess of our dialogue. They wove stories of rejection and discouragement at local clinics; anecdotes of struggling with ailments for years without an understanding of the cause; and the frequent complaints, “They just give me tablets, and it never gets better.” They received tablets, but no *care*. No laying on of hands. No consolation. No teaching. No hope. No hint of the Gospel.

In most instances, I could only give over-the-counter pills for their complaints. Yet with the Lord’s mercy, I could assure them that I had traveled halfway around the world to *be with them*, because we are all one in Christ. I could reach out my hand and replace the distant white coat with the warmth of my palm. I could listen to the impact of illness on their work, their families, their homes. And I could conclude each encounter with an appeal to God, to remind them that all are without pain and suffering in Heaven. To remind all of us,



that any works we achieve of our own volition, pale in comparison to those accomplished through the love of our holy and perfect God, who gave His Son for us.

Competing Interests: None declared.

Acknowledgments: This article was published on-line 13 June 2016 at Desiring God and is reproduced with permission of the author <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/modern-medicine-failed-me-in-kenya>

Correspondence: Kathryn L Butler, Harvard Medical School, United States. klbutler@partners.org

Cite this article as: Butler LK. Modern medicine failed me In Kenya. Christian Journal for Global Health (Nov 2016), 3(2):140-142.

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