

e- musing Aug 2011

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At 7:30 GMT, BBC Network Africa comes on my short wave radio. It features, as part of its program structure, *Wise Word of the Day*, which is contributed to by listeners from all over the reaches of the airwaves. At the Ganta Hospital Operating Room, I've heard of some "wise words" that were both funny at that moment and insightful in a bigger sense.

I was called to do an emergency Caesarean section on a woman who had prolonged labor. The baby just wasn't able to pass normally through the birth canal. It was a natural, expected and welcome sound to hear the first cry of the baby. But this baby wasn't just crying, he was bawling! The nurse-anesthetist, Saye Waylaun, said aloud, "Welcome to the world, brother. You have joined the struggle." After the operation I went to check on the baby who was continuously bawling. "Hey, what's wrong baby?" I said. The midwife who was doing the umbilical cord care chimed in and started reassuring the newborn babe. "Don't cry so, its going to be all right. You can make it. It's not

hard. Life is not hard. You will make it. Don't cry." It's wonderful to witness demonstrations of kindness.

Wednesday Chapel service is when people give their testimonies. It's very common to hear Liberians thanking God for being "able to see this day" or "to be counted among the living." After years of civil conflict and the ever present threat of diseases, Liberians are often heard to say, "It's not easy-oh!" It is true, life here is not easy.

One Friday evening I got a call from another doctor informing me that there's a one-day-old girl, born without an anus, and asked if I can operate. Tricky! I would love to do it; I was trained to make holes. But the procedure itself is not the most important thing. It is the pre-operative preparation, anesthesia management and post-operative care. I argued with myself— if we don't operate the baby dies. If we operate, at least we give her a chance to life. This hospital has not managed a neonatal operation before. In fact, this will be the second case since I came here. We explained the risks to the family and they agreed. Saturday morning we brought her to the OR. The operation took less than an hour; the defect was simple so I was able to make a hole in the appropriate place. Rev. Kathy and Dr. Daniel Dickriede, UMVIM missionaries from the East Ohio conference, were visiting at that time and were present inside the OR giving me prayer and moral support. Rev. Kathy also took pictures and video recorded the operation which I hope to upload if I know how. For now I can only send one picture. We were rejoicing when we saw the rushing poop. But our rejoicing was short lived; the baby died that same night. Should we stop trying and just be resigned to the fact that this county cannot handle the simplest neonatal

surgery? Should I start pointing fingers? Rev. Kathy asked me how I deal with my loss (es). That Sunday I sat in church alone in the midst of worshippers, away from them who know me personally, and I cry to God. I thank God for sending these two friends to help me process grief.

I am reading a book written by a Pediatrician turned Psycho Oncologist (*Kitchen Table Wisdom* by Rachel Naomi Remen). She talks about us doctors being trained to deal with loss “with strength.” We are to show that we are in control of the situation and not show tears—tears being a sign of weakness. It is true—it’s not a formal training but I sort of learned it. Maybe not well enough because I still cry. But another unofficial motto is “on to the next.” You can’t dwell on one patient because there are others waiting. So on to the next we shall go.

I have a 13-year-old boy who came with a big wound behind his right knee. It was bleeding so profusely that his blood pressure was dropping. I was just starting a big case so this boy had to wait while the bleeding area was controlled by surgical clamps. Finally, I was able to assess him. I alerted the OR staff that it was a possible vessel injury. (Popliteal artery and vein running behind the knee.) The story was that he fell onto a blade and sustained the cut. Months before a covenant supporter from Fulks Run, VA sent her father's left-over medicine here hoping it might be of help. It was Heparin, a blood thinner to prevent clotting. It is not available in the whole of Liberia. Although Heparin has lots of uses in surgery, I never thought I could actually use it! Indeed, both artery and vein were completely cut and we had to join it back together (anastomosis) and the big nerves were damaged too. Prayers goes to this boy because

if the anastomosis doesn’t work, or our timing was late than the muscle damage setting in, he is going to lose his leg. After the operation, his right leg remained colder than the left leg and I can’t feel a pulse....waiting and more prayers: For two days now, the leg is showing signs of surviving; it is warm, pink and not swelling up. Saye the anesthetist told me that he prays God will bless me and the boy. The real story was that the stepfather of the boy threw a just-sharpened blade while trying to get hold of the boy. The blade hit the boy’s leg causing the cut. Life is not easy! There is no law on domestic abuse here, no family court or social service. The police don’t interfere with domestic disputes, and there’s not even a complaint from the mother.

Now I'm not saying that you should send your unused medicine here. What I am saying is that we need to be sensitive to what the Holy Spirit prompts us to do and then to obey. In this week’s Lectionary Old Testament reading (Exodus 1), the two Egyptian midwives weren’t asked to become something that they weren’t in order to make a difference. Shiprah and Puah have encouraged me today to just carry on with what God wants me to do. Death or life, God will grant that and it’s not for me to decide. I can cry all I need, for He loves me enough to record it and keep it in a bottle (Psalms 56:8 KJV). And don't you go worrying about me. God is giving me more than enough reason to laugh. I was seriously planning to have my hair plaid like the African braid. You know how my hair gets the brunt of my distress. But the braiders don’t want to do it and my friend strongly opposed it. So I will just color-streak my hair red. It’s the only color available here anyway. Something to look forward to!

Thank you for standing behind me and kneeling for me. I really appreciate your partnership.

- Please pray for the boy, that he might keep his leg and that he will not suffer more from the stepfather.
- Pray that we will be able to help newborn babies with simple birth defects. May we become better equipped to care for them.
- Pray for our plan to renovate the Operating Room after the rainy season. The roof is leaking and the ceiling is termite infested (also by rats & birds). Pray about how you can help us bring this about.
- Pray for peace in Liberia. There will be a Referendum on August 24, and a national election in either October or November.

Thank you for all your love and prayers.

Elma