

GIVING SPACE FOR HOPE

DURING A commuter airplane chat with a South African businessman, the current problems in the world—and the specific problems in South Africa—came up, and the businessman paused and looked me straight in the face to be sure I was paying attention, and said, “I feel hopeless.” He looked at his hands. “I pass the townships and see the poor on the streets and wonder why the government doesn’t do anything.”

PAUL SUTHERLAND started writing this during Ramadan in the Jeddah Saudi Arabia Airport and finished on the Nile river near the Aswan dam—the same dam that flooded the temples where some of his early teachers were taught by a Coptic mystic named Ahmad Bay, who jumped a freighter and ended up in the US. Life folds back on itself. paul@paulhsutherland.com



“Why don’t you do something?” I asked.

“What can I do? I am one person.”

I shrugged. But my mind raced to the one-persons like Nelson Mandela, Joan of Arc, and Malala Yousafzai, as well as the hundreds of people I have met who are humbly dedicated to being compassionately useful in the world. I didn’t mention these thoughts to him. I didn’t jump in and say he is wrong to be hopeless. I gave space to his hopelessness. But I think hopelessness can be a mask for indifference and apathy. Saying “it’s hopeless” is a great justification for doing nothing. Meanwhile, the hopeless problems causing his melancholy actually give me purpose. A surgeon is not excited that her patient is suffering—she is excited to know she can help.

He changed the subject with a question: “What do you do?”

“I am a husband and father first,” I said. But then I went on. I told him with a whimsical smile that I help create magnificent, life-changing, vibrantly beautiful books for children ages 0 to 88. He was curious, so I continued: “Do you know the three most important things about writing children’s books?”

He shrugged. “No.”

“First, it must be a good story. Second, it must be a good story.”

He smiled and said, “Third, it must be a good story.”

I added that I try to help develop a love of reading and literacy. I also try to instill happiness and mindfulness by using characters interacting in ways that build communication skills and nurture cooperative relationships and emotional intelligence. I explained that I do not sensationalize

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violence, guns, bad manners, rudeness, sarcasm, or war. I stopped for a minute to catch my thoughts, and he smiled and leaned forward to tell me he wanted more. Maybe my words gave him hope. So, I said my goal is to be transformative in my writing. I told him that I seek to have my books be culture-changing—education that builds happiness, resilience, virtue, and communities.

He then brought up government, churches, and the United Nations: “Don’t they do the same things?”

I said that we work with people as locally as possible. I said I’ve given up on governments and NGOs, who think meetings in New York, Pretoria, or Zurich cause happiness, or that research and white papers end hunger, cause literacy, boost wellbeing, and build houses.

He asked about the specifics of my work again. I said we mostly work with people who work in schools with no electricity, no Wi-Fi, bookless libraries, and few literate teachers in rural East African villages, townships in South Africa, and refugee camps with epidemic levels of corruption, language barriers, cultural land mines, and violence. As he listened to my long sentences about my commitments, he said, “You know, after talking to you, I feel more hopeful.”

As the pilot asked us to fasten our seat belts in preparation for landing, I reached into my backpack and grabbed some children’s books, as well as a manual we use in parenting workshops called *Parenting with Love*. I handed them to him and said, “Now you can go into that township on your way to work and read to the kids in a school.” My bet was that he had never been inside one of those

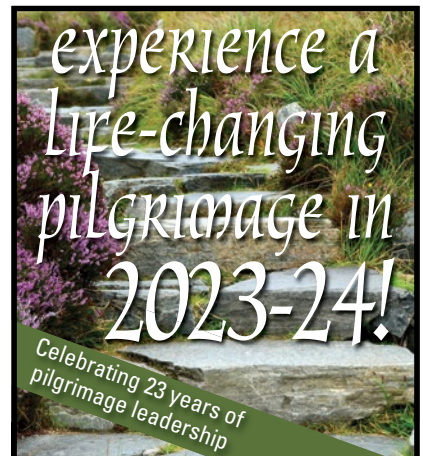
schools. Some have prison walls, barbed wire, and sleeping guards surrounding noisy children taught by under resourced teachers. These children are neglected by their parents, the community, and the local and national government—whatever “government” means.

As I walked to my car, I wondered whether he would actually stop at a township school or just give the books to his nephew or niece, saying, “I met the author on the plane.”

As I drove home, it struck me that indifference is fed best by ignorance. Not knowing—even what is right in front of you—is an excuse not to act. My thoughts wondered to my early Coptic-Christian-influenced training that was long on the idea of looking and seeing and was built on the foundation of Jesus’s words: “The truth will set you free [to do what needs to be done].”

In our lives we need to give space to this idea of looking for solutions and seeing and doing what needs to be done. If we are busy with stuff, time-suck relationships, shopping, and a busy everyday rush—we have little time for the space to see. Making time for seeing is scary and can take us to a place where we must decide what is next for us.

For me, I ask myself, “What can I do about the barbed wire township schools?” And the answer is that I can stop, go in for a look, ask, “How can I help?” and explore for solutions with the headmaster and teachers. I know that I can give books, read to classes, and talk to teachers. The truth of what should come next will guide what’s next. I can also give a man on a plane some space to have hope—and maybe a way to express that hope. **S+H**



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Contemplative Ireland:
A Celtic Pilgrimage

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A Celtic Pilgrimage

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