

September 30, 2006

Lungile's Story

When Lungile came to visit my home for the first time, we ate grilled cheese sandwiches, avocado on bread, and Asian stir fried broccoli. Then she insisted on washing our dishes and wiping our tables off, so I helped alongside her until these were done, then finally convinced her to rest after she asked for a mop.

We snuggled on a couch beneath a blanket in my cold house, and she asked if she could tell me her story.

I had met Lungile at the church we attend in the Zulu tribal area, but she's used to foreigners because she lives and works at an orphanage run by Americans. The story she told of her life, so typical of South Africans, is among the most painful and beautiful I have heard.

"I was born on December 3, 1978." That makes us both 29, she just six months older. The years of our schooling and graduation line up, but how different what filled the gaps in between.

Her father died fifteen days after she was born, leaving her mother with twelve children, two boys and ten girls, with Lungile the last. Without money, her mother had to leave for Johannesburg for work. The eleven oldest siblings stayed together—the oldest raising the youngest. Lungile the infant went to stay with an aunt.

The mother could scarcely afford to send money for the eleven self-sufficient siblings, much less visit any of them, much less send anything to the aunt for Lungile. So over time the aunt grew bitter.

"She would make me wake up at three a.m. I would heat the water for everyone's baths, and cook food for the day, and clean, all before going to school." In a Cinderella life, Lungile's auntie pitted her own children against Lungile, so they mocked her and cried if she touched them. Lungile was the scapegoat.

"She might see a teddy bear on the floor, and just say, 'Lungile!' and spank me, but she never asked if I did it. So I always had to notice everything—every crumb under the table, everything. But God took care of me."

She said this last line many times, and the question in my mind grew—"But how?"

Sometimes her aunt would beat her so she ran away to the neighbors, but always her aunt would find her and beat her harder than ever. Still, she ran away sometimes just to escape, and slept outside on the ground when her aunt locked her out.

This continued until eleventh grade. Then one night her aunt hired a *sangoma*—a spiritual healer, and a creepy, old, demonic man as Lungile described him. The aunt told him to come to the house. While Lungile was away, the mother told the man to hide under Lungile's bed.

“She hired him to rape me.”

When I asked why, she said simply, “Because she hated me.”

Lungile climbed into bed that night. She prayed as she always did. She turned off the gas lamp.

Then she felt something. Soon she knew it was a man, and she fought him.

“The Lord gave me power. Great power.” She sat up straight on the couch and her whole body tensed as she told this part of the story.

She fought and screamed. Her mother had turned the radio on loud so the neighbors couldn't hear. Her siblings did nothing. So Lungile fought alone, into the main room, punching him until his face bled. Someone, maybe the aunt, broke a bottle as a weapon. Lungile grabbed at it with her hands, leaving a deep wound across her fingers. Her back also, she told me, is covered in scars.

Finally the man stopped fighting. His face poured blood, and finding himself without any real spiritual strength, he was frightened. “I can't do this,” he said. “She's too powerful.”

Lungile ran. She slept outside in a field, then washed her face and hands as best she could and went to school the next day. She told no one, even the teacher who pulled her aside to ask what had happened.

Instead she went to a store and bought rat poison. She took it back to school. In the middle of the school day, she swallowed one pill. She thought she felt dizzy, but not enough to “end it quickly.” She took another. Soon she passed unconscious.

The students found her. When they could not revive her, a teacher took her to the hospital. She remembers nothing, but supposes they pumped out her stomach.

When she awoke she prayed hysterically. She screamed at the top of her lungs, and her words to heaven were, “God, why didn't you let me die?”

They kept her in the hospital a long time, until one day she awoke to find a visitor. A woman standing at her bedside told her, “Lungile, I'm your real mother.”

Lungile had met her real siblings and heard of her mother, but the two had not met since Lungile was a month old. This was no happy reunion, though.

“Who was my mother to leave me for all those years?” she said. “I hated her.” Lungile went back to live with her aunt. Her mother did move back to their home town, though, to live with Lungile’s siblings, and gradually their relationship improved.

In just a year, though, Lungile had graduated from high school and left for Durban, a city of three million people two hours away. In Durban she arrived with nothing. But again, God took care of her.

A Zulu woman saw her on the street and hired her as a housekeeper. The woman treated her well, even supplying a place for her to live. She taught Lungile to save her money and plan for the future. After a while the woman insisted that Lungile deserved a better job than she could provide. So she helped her fill out job applications until Lungile found a job—in the army!

“The army?” I asked, thinking I had misunderstood. “What did you do?”

“You know, the army. They taught me to shoot a gun, and what to do when people shoot at me, and everything.” I shook my head in disbelief, looking at this quiet woman whose head comes no higher than my armpit in height.

“It wasn’t long,” she smiled. “Actually people in my church said, ‘Lungile, you should get a different job.’” So after a year she applied again, and this time found a job working in the office of a construction company.

She made good money, enough to get some property and build her own house. She still had not married, but all in her life seemed to be going well. Then she heard news from her mother.

Her sister had died, leaving a one month-old baby. Lungile came home and spent some of her savings to pay for the funeral, knowing she was the only one in the family with steady income.

How strange the twist of fate that now brought Lungile into the place of her own aunt. She took the one month-old niece home with her, vowing to give the child the loving care she had never received.

“I hardly knew how to put on a diaper!” She shook her head. “The task was too great. But I hired a woman to care for the baby while I worked, and she knew what to do.”

After three years, the baby went back to live with Lungile’s mother and siblings, but by that time more deaths had come.

One by one, her sisters died. Her brothers died. Lungile came home and paid for each coffin, each funeral tent, every spread of food and all the necessities of every funeral. At

last, she heard her last sister had died. A total of ten orphans were left with Lungile's mother from all the lost parents. Lungile wept uncontrollably.

“I remember I was in the room with the body. She was dead before I got there from Durban, but I just couldn't believe it. I was yelling and hitting the body with my fist and shouting, ‘Why did you die? Why?’”

I noticed as she spoke that Lungile never mentioned the cause of these deaths. Judging by the ages of the siblings, and by the fact that the cause didn't need to be spoken, I guessed that most if not all had died of AIDS.

Lungile had no money left. She and her mother wept. They could not even afford a coffin.

Lungile wandered into the mountains, sobbing and praying. When one of the ten orphans followed her, she shouted at him to go home. She yelled to the Lord, and again, He was good.

When she came home, she saw a car outside her home. She had never seen a car at her home before. The people with the car said they knew Lungile, but she had never seen them. They came from a church in a city an hour's drive away. They came to buy a coffin and pay for the funeral. They would not accept repayment. They said God had sent them. Lungile and her mother considered it a miracle.

Still, her mother was sick, and Lungile could not leave her with the ten orphans to go back to work. Instead she stayed home and mourned, plunging into depression.

“I wept all the time. No one in my church would visit me. They were tired of seeing me cry. I could not be happy. They didn't know what to do.”

Then one dear friend, “a sister in Christ,” talked to some Americans interested in starting an orphanage. The friend told them where to find Lungile, but never warned Lungile they were coming.

So one day a large van filled with Americans arrived at Lungile's home. As a new organization, the orphanage never considered how strange it would appear to a Zulu woman if a van full of whites poured into her yard. So they did just that.

“They went everywhere,” she said, laughing about it now. “They took pictures of everything! They climbed into everything! Americans!” We laughed together over the cultural blunders of my fellow countrymen.

Too stunned to speak, Lungile listened as one man explained in English and gestures that they wanted to care for the children. They also needed someone as an adult caretaker to come with. They would give them one day to decide.

The next day the van returned as promised. What could Lungile say? “I needed help.” She shrugged her shoulders, making a desperate face as she explained one of the bravest steps of her life. “So I trusted God.”

Four orphans refused to go, but the other six and Lungile piled into the full van onto American laps. The Americans had no food ready, no beds, no blankets, nothing. They had good intentions, but made many mistakes.

Still, Lungile doesn't complain. Now she and all ten orphans live at the orphan village, which has since bought property and grown to hold over forty people.

Lungile says she's lonely sometimes, missing Durban friends. But among the greatest gifts she feels the orphan home has given her and the children is Christian company.

“If I were home, I probably would have married when I got lonely.” But now she's waiting for a man who won't disappoint her. “I want to marry someone who's born again.” She's the only Zulu woman of her age without a child I have met yet.

Instead she cares for ten nieces and nephews, and perhaps just as importantly, cares for the many American volunteers who come and go from the orphan village. And she tells her story, because it pleases God, and because people like me need to hear it.

September 25, 2006

Spilling: A Story and a Poem

Let me explain that I'm reading this book called *Good Poems for Hard Times*, which is full of poems chosen (not written) by Garrison Keiler. Every one of you reading this should click right over to your favorite book-selling website and order a copy for yourself, and another for somebody else as a Christmas or unbirthday gift. Because it's fabulous.

And I don't care if you hate poetry. It's not about poetry (even though it's all poetry). It's about looking at life, seeing truth, and pointing our fingers at it. We human beings all have a need for that.

Garrison writes this intro to the book that has me—a former English major—nearly floating off my couch in ecstasy, but not in a high-falutin' way you engineers and elementary school teachers wouldn't dig it, too. He writes, “Poetry is the truest journalism we have. What your life can be, lived bravely and independently, you can discover in poetry.”

So I read a poem tonight, just after visiting my friend Jabu (the one whose name means happiness, who I wrote about earlier). After nearly three months in this country, I still had never visited the home of a Zulu friend.

On this day I invited Jabu to my home—a radical step in itself. I had taught her to make lemon scones, then we visited the garden together, then she invited me to walk to her home, twenty minutes away. Phoebe and her son played, Zeke wandered after them with a soccer ball and squealed in giddiness. Night fell, the children cried to play more, and Phoebe insisted on walking home barefoot like her Zulu friend. Jabu scooped Phoebe onto her back and carried her half way home. We will visit again soon.

On the last stretch of road, some white neighbors found us walking home in the dark and gave us a ride. They sounded concerned seeing us out after nightfall. I struggled to explain how very safe I felt, and how very happy.

The children sensed the happiness of our day, too. Home long past dinner time, no one whined for food. We ate, we danced, we stayed up past bedtime. Jabu called, spending precious money on a phone call to check on us and say goodnight. I am touched to know my neighbor, my new friend stronger than me, calls just to wish me sweet dreams. I will have them.

So then, with the children tucked in bed, I read this poem, a tiny little poem with one line that's big to me.

My Cup

By Robert Friend

They tell me I am going to die.
Why don't I seem to care?
My cup is full. Let it spill.

Nobody's telling me that I'm dying, but of course we all are. Mostly I just loved that last line about spilling. We were spilling tonight—me teaching Jabu to cook, her offering me peach tree saplings, our broken language, our happy children crying when we parted. I couldn't resist trying my own poem.

My cup is full tonight.
How rarely I notice that it's always full.
Just look and it's full—that's all it takes.

Instead I grip it so tight like trying to hold in drops
Spins upside down on a roller coaster
And of course it spills
And that's infuriating.

But it's not

If I see that the cup refills as soon as it empties
And all around me sprouts goodness
In the wet soil where life spills me
From birth to death one great spilling
Of the One who spilled for me.