

Holly Tieney on her work in India

Sunday, June 16, 2011

I would first like to thank members of this congregation for all their support. Back in 2008 I held a fundraising dinner in the Fellowship Hall for my first trip to India and it felt so great to have the community come together to enjoy music and to support my somewhat rebellious efforts to leave the country and volunteer. Since then I'm happy to say that people are still interested and supportive. So, I'm here today to talk about why I'm still in India and how far I've come since my first trip in 2009.

For those of you who don't know, my first 6 months were spent in a town called Ramnagar, not far from Bangalore City. There I taught at a school called Pavithra Rashtriya Vidyalaya. In 2010, I spent 6 months at Ooty Children's Home as a care provider in small village called Thoopur, in the state of Tamil Nadu.

I'm asked almost every day, "Why did you choose India, why do you continue to go back?" When I first decided to volunteer abroad, I knew that I wanted to go somewhere in Asia, but I decided to leave it to the volunteer exchange program to decide, based on which country would be a good match for me and which place needed the most help. After my first trip, I felt such a strong connection that it's more like India chose me.

I have a great admiration for the people, though, like any other country, there are a few weeds mixed in with an abundance of flowers. In Ramnagar, I stayed with a rather undesirable host family. Though the grandfather was a joy, the parents and their two-year old daughter were difficult to connect with. They weren't friendly and had little if any interest in talking to me,; though the youngest did have an interest in throwing cockroaches at me and especially enjoyed pulling my hair. Because the father was the principal of the school, it seemed they only wanted me there as a business tool to win them more students and tuition. Luckily, I lived in an apartment building separate from their house. Unlike my host family, my neighbors made such a warm tight community. These eight families enjoyed seeing each other every day and it took me a while to know who lived in which home because they were always visiting others or talking outside. They all worked together to maintain the area, as I also did. We worked in the garden, cared for the chickens, and kept everything swept and looking clean. When my neighbor Sunnitha, discovered my host family wasn't feeding me enough, she insisted I eat double, first at her house, then with the host family. I did, and was happy for it because there is nothing like a good home cooked South Indian meal. They also took care of me when I was sick and when I needed help with anything. Though I didn't really know the language and was this foreign American girl, they treated me as their equal and I felt great comfort being part of their world. Though these families didn't have much money, they worked so well together as a team. I hope that others can learn by their example of lifestyle and warm heartedness. I'm embarrassed to say I haven't even made an effort to know my neighbors in Salisbury.

I enjoy being in India because I love sharing ideas and learning from foreign cultures. Particularly those who have traveled to a place culturally different have witnessed how easy it is

for a person to become a product of their community. Though we are all individuals, equally special, our surroundings shape our behavior and lifestyle much more than we realize. I'm not saying this is bad but sometimes we forget to think outside of the box. This is where an outsider can be quite helpful. When I worked at Pavithra School, the children were instructed to memorize text to learn their subjects. If a teacher asked the student, "what is photosynthesis?" the answer would sound like this: "The process by which green plants and some other organisms use sunlight to synthesize foods from carbon dioxide and water. Photosynthesis in plants generally involves the green pigment chlorophyll and generates oxygen as a byproduct." These kids knew such little English that they didn't understand the answers they were giving. Having full range of my classes, I took the opportunity to use teaching methods that most influenced me growing up in the US. Using words they understood, I explained the material from their other classes. I used visuals, hands on experiments and anything else that would tickle their brains. I never had to directly voice my opinion of memorizing text books. The teachers saw that my students were happy, engaged, and knowledgeable from what I taught them. Before the kids knew who Michelangelo was but, after, they understood his talent by seeing the beauty of his art.

I think Indians have taught me more than what I've taught them. Being in such a different environment inspired me to compare and question every little aspect of my lifestyle and theirs. My mind ran sort of like this: "The secret to their beautiful hair must be from applying coconut oil. The elderly do so much, even into their 90s, how can they move so well? WOW! I haven't made any garbage in the past 2 months."

I also learned many large lessons about faith and morals. Last year, I went to an astrologer who warned me that I had the Evil Eye. In India it's a form of black magic where a powerful person just by looking at you can put a curse on you. Though I didn't think anyone was doing any wizardry against me, I was intrigued that he said this because for the first time in my life a very jealous girl spread terrible rumors about me, and soon everyone in this particular town thought negatively toward me. Anyway, the astrologer gave me a piece of paper, or prescription if you will, and sent me to the Hindu temple. The priest asked me the names of anyone I thought might be angry with me. Then they proceeded to do a 30-minute ceremony for my protection, but, to my surprise, we mostly blessed everyone that might cause me problems. They had me repeat mantras that had the names of these people. And by doing so I did my best to think of my compassion for them. By the end of the ceremony, I only felt kindness toward these people and decided that there is no point in stressing about someone else's negativity. I did some research to discover that the "evil eye" has been recognized in many countries if not literally then as a symbol of the hate that we can bring to others. In addition, almost every Holy Scripture gives lessons on loving those who cause us pain. And it's possible that the astrologer was just trying to scare me, but it occurred to me that maybe he saw not that others were harming me, but my poor reaction toward them. That maybe I was creating the evil eye for myself. It became clear that love is the antidote for the evil eye. Before, in that town, I wore a mask of smiles over the truth of my disappointment. After my visit with the priests, a huge weight was lifted because even though these particular people had their grudges, I was able to be sincerely nice to them. So this is just one lesson I've gained and I thank the girl who started the rumors because if she hadn't, I wouldn't have learned about it.

My next reason for staying in India is because I want to stay where I can be most helpful. At Ooty Children's Home, 18 children (either orphaned or destitute) lived together as a family.

They were the easiest most well tempered children I've ever met. All of them even the youngest who was two washed their clothes and dishes by hand. They would come home and start their homework without a fuss. They spoke at least four languages and ranked first in their classes. Even though they were very independent, they had a strong need for guardianship and family so I was there for them 24 hours of every day. At bedtime I read stories and all 18 got goodnight hugs. I woke them every morning and, though they were good at getting ready for school, the younger ones needed help with braiding their hair and taking out the head lice. Though they never shed a tear about their sometimes traumatic past experiences, one minute I would be comforting two-year old Vibha who struggled with tying her shoes, and the next minute I was with Nitya who was overwhelmed with the stresses of becoming a woman.

It never really occurred to me how close we all were until four-year old Saurav got a very high fever. I wanted to wait till after sunset to take him to the hospital because I would have to carry him two miles under a very hot Indian sun. In the meantime, I did my best to keep his fever down but at 3:30 p.m. he developed a terrible heat rash and his fever was over 105F. Because we were in the plains of Tamil Nadu, it easily became 115F in the shade, but I wrapped him in a wet towel and we started for the hospital. Even with the wet blanket, the sun baked us through. Poor little Saurav lost the effort to cry any more. He looked up at me and said, "Mommy make it stop". At that moment it dawned on me that the other volunteer and I were the closest thing these kids had to a mother. And I felt a huge impact by that responsibility. By knowing these great children I felt privileged and loved as I had never felt before. I feel deeply needed. To be truly needed is a great gift of responsibility. I'm talking specifically about responsibilities that we have not created. Anyone can plant a garden, build a house or give birth and call it a responsibility and these are great things. But, taking responsibility of what is already here makes the world more harmonious. I can sleep soundly knowing that I do my best to make the world a better place.

On Thursday I will leave again for India. This time I'll be studying to receive a Bachelors of Social Work. My dream is to create a women's safe home with an attached school. Women who leave their husband's home, regardless of why, are often outcasts of their communities, so with children in tow they resort to or are enslaved to undesirable fields of work, such as prostitution, heavy labor, or begging. I want them to have a place where they can learn the skills needed to gain independence and to contribute to society, and to have a place where they can be safe from the people who've caused them harm. Unfortunately, there are very few support systems for them. Some Indians who believe in Karma think that they deserve their fate because of something they did in a past life. Others figure they deserve to be miserable because they were selfish enough to leave their husbands. This is a situation where international help is crucial toward aiding a specific demographic. Even though I see their suffering first hand, I can't believe the lack of funding they receive compared to orphanages, schools, and even prisons. I also feel that India as a whole has been overlooked by western charities. For example: Sub-Saharan Africa and India have about the same population, close to 1 billion, and both countries have about 300 million living in poverty. Sub-Saharan Africa receives three times the amount of funding from foreign countries. I'm not saying that Africa isn't deserving of what they receive but I feel my place is in India with the women and children who are overlooked by much of their country and the world.

It's humbling to know such an inspiring group of Indians and I feel so lucky to have grown up in a small town that is uniquely Salisbury. We have been able to share our morals to become stronger and in turn strengthen humanity. To feel appreciated by many Indians has made me feel so blessed, and to be truly needed has strengthened my belief of responsibility to help others. Everyone is responsible for trying to make the world a better place. It's not the amount that we do but the amount that we try that reflects positively in God's eyes.