

COMPASSION IN ACTION

Open hearts in Lesotho

by Kaye Thompson

Here in Lesotho, Africa's Mountain kingdom where I serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I often have the good fortune to observe subtle and quiet acts of kindness. They are simple yet breath-taking.

A Masotho friend, 'M'e Mobola ('M'e serves for "Mrs.") invited me to her graduation party at her home in a nearby village. Many friends, family and neighbors attended the event that included a feast, speeches, live music and lots of *joale* (homemade beer). When the speeches began, my friend's adult son, Thepe, who was already overflowing with drink, took center stage to talk about his mother. Thepe's words were slurred, he kept breaking down in tears, and he didn't seem to know when to quit.

After a reasonable amount of time, *Ntate* (Mr.) Mobula went up to his son, put his arm around him and sat down with him, effectively quieting him without any shame or blame. Everyone applauded and the speeches proceeded. I was impressed with the gentleness and generosity in which this was handled by the father and by the guests.

'M'e Mobula's family is known for their open-heartedness to those in need and therefore often have a few of the poorest showing up on their doorstep. They gather food for the village orphans and do small acts to support the homeless and disabled. One of the individuals they regularly feed is Teboho, a developmentally disabled man who is given food and treated kindly when he stops by.

Teboho wandered into the gathering while the speeches were going on. He had only his tattered blanket, his toeless shoes and a smile. He stood in front of the tent in a prominent spot and waited. Within minutes, *Ntate* Mobula approached Teboho and ushered him into the tent where everyone was sitting. *Ntate* gave him a seat alongside other family members and he became a part of the group. Again, I was struck by the spontaneous, quiet kindness of this action by father of the family.

Soon after, another village regular, Thato, came into the gathering. Thato is a teenage orphan who is mute, mentally disabled, and wanders the village half-clothed. This child is the essence of "vulnerable" with no guardian, no communication skills, and little ability to care for himself. He is completely at the mercy of the good will—or bad will—of those around him.

This day was warm, so Thato had no desire for clothing. He came into the gathering and stood behind the speaker, naked and oblivious. The speech went on and people acted as if they didn't see anything unusual. I, on the other hand, was shocked, uncomfortable, and fascinated. I kept looking around to see if anyone was taking notice besides me. Finally, a Masotho woman, looking a bit flustered, went to the young man and led him away, back onto the road outside the party. But both 'M'e and *Ntate* Mobula jumped up from the table and brought the young man back into their compound.



Kaye Thompson

View of the Peka area near St. Rose Mission, in Lesotho.



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Grandmothers and their grandchildren gather at St. Rose Primary to receive donated food for orphans.

While the speeches went on, the family bustled around behind the scenes looking for some spare clothing. They found a pair of sweat pants, assisted the young man in dressing, and brought him a plate of food. The speeches continued, the hosts rejoined the gathering, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

To me these are the ultimate examples of compassion in action. This is the true spirit of all religions. Compassion is the simplest of actions, yet it takes us to the deepest part of our values. Much is said about the breakdown of the family support system in Lesotho due to poverty and the high AIDS infection rate. But this couple displayed such spontaneous and authentic care not only to their own, but to whoever wandered into their sphere. They offer a fine example of what “walking the talk” looks like, what the Golden Rule suggests.

I now carry within me their example of what compassion can look like. I will remember through their actions that humankind, even in its most impoverished state, has enough to feed and clothe the neediest of us. And I see that the

core values of Basotho people are still living and breathing. After the basic needs for food and water are met, there comes our need for contact, our need to be seen.

We are surrounded both by needs and by opportunities to address these needs. Compassion is the opening of our own hearts to the Other. We may only be able to give others a moment, some eye contact, a greeting, a sympathetic murmur. But perhaps that is enough for both us and the other to feel that there is a connection, that caring exists, and that there is hope. Although we may feel helpless and at a loss to address so many overwhelming needs of others, we always have our compassion to offer. In that we are offering the best of ourselves, the truest part of ourselves, the part of us that will live on in Lesotho long after our bodies and our project monies have left.

Kaye Thompson is a Peace Corps Volunteer in Lesotho. In a prior life, Kaye worked as a psychiatric social worker in Sacramento, Ca. for 25 years.

For more of her experience in Lesotho, visit <http://kayeinlesotho.blogspot.com>.



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