

A Puddle of Happiness

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Abstract:

Many critical care nurses travel overseas on American medical missions. On a trip to rural Africa, my daughter Lilly, then 16, accompanied me. Much of our time was spent in a van as our group (which included a physician and several other nurses) was driven to schools, clinics, and homes to provide care to those in need. Every day, people from remote villages would walk to see us for treatment of infections and other illnesses. One day, we visited a local AIDS organization and the homes of several people with HIV, ate a traditional African meal prepared by an HIV-positive support group, and visited a school they'd founded.

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Article:

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The team visited a woman who would die 2 days later. While Lilly waited for everyone else to return to the van, she watched a small boy playing in the mud. She later told me of an insight she'd had while watching this boy. Lilly's story reminded me that our critically ill patients are so much more than the reason they've been admitted to our ICUs. Her story also made me think that in order to recruit teens to nursing careers, we must share the hope, joy, and wonder we

experience in our practice. We need to tell them that as critical care nurses, in addition to saving lives, we have the opportunity to experience life in its simplest terms.

This is Lilly's story:

“Today, I was with a group of people visiting a bedridden woman dying of AIDS. As I waited in the van, I looked to my right and saw a little boy, age 4 or 5, playing in a mud puddle. He was wearing a torn and dirty shirt. Through one of the tears, I could see a stomach that was big enough to indicate that food was scarce in his family. He was also wearing tattered shorts but no socks or shoes.

“The house behind him looked like most houses in this village: made of mud with a metal roof. There was no electricity. We'd been told that people had to carry water from the closest water source almost a mile away.

“It was the middle of the morning, when most kids were in school. I wondered, was this boy too poor to go to school? Did he or his parents have AIDS? Was he an orphan? Would he die in a few short years?

“But this boy appeared to have no thoughts of poverty, no thoughts of AIDS, no thoughts of fear or sadness. Only the pleasure of slowly drifting his fingers through the puddle and feeling the water on his hands. He just seemed so happy. Once I saw the joy on his face, I couldn't look away.

“The boy reached into the bottom of the puddle, picked up some slimy mud, and clenched his fists. He grinned as the mud seeped through his fingers and slowly trickled down his arm and into the puddle.

“At that moment, I came to understand two things. First, happiness is temporary, but so is sadness. This boy's life was obviously filled with hardship, but for the 10 minutes that I watched him play, this never seemed to enter his mind.

“Second, even though this child might die soon, he'd experienced true pleasure. His mother didn't have to buy him presents to make him understand happiness. At this point in his life, he was truly and incandescently happy.

“As we drove away in the hot, cramped van, I began to laugh. I hoped that one day I'd find my puddle of happiness. When that day comes, I'll run my fingertips across its shimmery surface and find pleasure in the soft feeling drifting across my fingers. Seeing the joy in that boy's face, I've seen what some people never get the chance to see. I've seen life, in its simplest terms, at its core.”

Adapted and updated from Kautz DD, Kautz L. Lilly's gift from Africa. *Nursing*. 2011;41(4):52–53.

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