

Keep Me Close to You

By Claudia Thomason



The horrific sound was one I had never heard before, but will never forget. It was clearly an animal in extreme distress. When the cry pierced the quiet afternoon service, we were standing in a sweltering hot African church constructed of bricks made from mud and animal dung. I was quite woozy from the smells, heat and humidity. Only our small group seemed disturbed by what we heard. The others continued listening to the speaker without flinching.

Clearly startled, one person in our group asked a local, “What was that?”

“That was the cow we chose for our celebration meal.” He smiled, revealing several missing teeth. “We will have a grand meal today after the service!” He explained its throat was cut so they could prepare the meat for us, their special guests.

Reaching for the key on the ribbon around my neck, I noticed a few other women in our missionary group searching in pockets for their keys. Holding mine tightly, I recalled glancing out the open door a few minutes earlier, seeing villagers happily leading a painfully skinny cow down the road.

“Oh, no,” I thought sadly, “they just slaughtered that poor cow.” As I fingered the key, I forced myself to set aside my reaction to the cow’s sacrifice and remember why we were there, which was to minister. I needed to dismiss everything else that might distract me and focus on that goal.

“Thank you, Father, for keeping my thoughts on You. Help me get over myself and introduce them to You.” I had become accustomed to praying when I held the key because it reminded me that Jesus is the key, the answer; and I was representing Him.

I don’t normally wear a key around my neck. When we first arrived in Uganda, our leader gave everyone a key. He said to keep it with us at all times because we never knew when we would need a tangible reminder of who we were and why we were there. He had made several trips to Africa and didn’t seem affected by the things that made most of us gasp.

“You will experience things that will take your attention away from your sole purpose for coming,” he said. He was right. As we frail Americans encountered the harshness of African life and customs, we needed something to pull us back into reality. Touching the key reminded me to turn my thoughts back to God.

The queasiness in my stomach began to subside as I thought of other days I reached for my key:

Traveling up a muddy incline to a remote mountain village, our vehicle began sliding toward the edge of the cliff. One rear tire was already perched over the edge before the vehicle miraculously stopped sliding and gripped the road again.

On another occasion, while preaching in a village, three hostile men disrupted the service, threatening the “white intruders.” Our hosts invited them to worship with us. Surprisingly, they stayed, but their demeanor remained menacing.

The following day, we ate our first meal in the jungle villages. “We prepared a feast for you.” the woman said, offering me muddy potatoes and green chicken. My fixation with cleanliness had to be set aside. Refusing food was out of the question, so I reached for my key.

Another time, I saw a child scooting along the ground, struggling to get close to me. She had no legs but pulled herself along with her hands. She was wearing broken sandals on her hands for protection from the rocky ground. My heart broke. I reached for my key. Removing the ribbon from my neck, I placed it around hers. She beamed as though she had been given a treasure.

Subsequent trips revealed I had only seen bits and pieces of the struggles those Africans encounter on a daily basis. On my next trip, I brought a number of keys and ribbons. Placing them in the hands of children and adults, I explained the purpose of the key. I let them know I would be praying for them. This insignificant item became a tool for God to use, reminding us to keep our eyes upon Him because His eyes are always upon us.