

Runaways

Exodus 3:7-12 and Luke 15: 11-32

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On April 20, 1998, two months after I arrived in Zimbabwe, four former street boys moved into Lovemore Home, a big pink house on Lovemore Road. The home, purchased earlier with funds provided by the Outreach Foundation and individuals in the United States, Europe, and Zimbabwe, was intended to serve as a group home for children making the transition from living in the streets to living in a home, a family, and a community. I was thrilled to be there at the birth of such an exciting project. The home's director was a very capable, intelligent young man named Gilbert Chikuni. I was his assistant. Together we tried to help these boys transition as smoothly as possible. One of these boys was Hamza.

Hamza was ten when he arrived at Lovemore Home. He was the youngest but not necessarily the smallest child in the program. Hamza had broad shoulders and long skinny legs. He was awkward looking—he didn't seem quite comfortable in his body. And he was careless, impulsive, and accident-prone; he often said and did things without thinking—things that frequently got him into trouble. He was raised by his maternal grandmother in Chitungwiza, a large high-density suburb just south of Harare. His mother and father were never married, and he rarely saw either of them. We suspected that his mother worked as a prostitute to earn money to support herself, Hamza, and her other children.

When Hamza was about six or seven, his grandmother became ill; as a result, Hamza became more and more difficult to manage, wandering around the neighborhood and in and out of other people's homes. (Hamza has sticky fingers. I don't think Hamza ever really intends steals things, but when he finds interesting objects he likes to pick them up, and sometimes he forgets to put them back.) When Hamza's grandmother finally died, he was sent to live with his father and his father's new wife in another town about four hours from Harare. Hamza's father and stepmother did not know what to do with this strange looking, strangely behaving child with sticky fingers. Although most children his age were in Grade 3, Hamza had never been to school. He was enrolled in a Grade 1 class, where his already awkward body must have felt very out of place. And as if that were not enough, poor Hamza was left handed. He hated school. He began to spend more and more time at the bus terminal and market near his home, playing in the stalls, chasing stray animals, and finding plenty of nice things to pick up and not put back. When he would finally return home at the end of the day, his father would beat him. Hamza was used to beatings. His back and chest were covered with lines, grooves, and cuts from his father's attempts to discipline him with belts, sticks, wire hangers, and electrical cords. One day, he sneaked onto a furniture truck headed to Harare and began living on the streets.

In spite of all that Hamza had suffered, he did well at Lovemore Home. After much tutoring, Hamza finally began to read, and although he was uncoordinated and generally not very useful on a football field, one of his teachers let him train with the

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school volleyball team. Hamza shared a room with Leon, a hard little kid with a big heart. Hamza simply adored him. Overall, Hamza seemed very happy. We were very proud of him, and we thought he seemed to be adjusting very well to life at Lovemore. Then, four months into the school term, Hamza, along with Leon, disappeared.

I felt as if somebody had ripped out my heart and thrown it back in my face. I was crushed. I was shocked.

Both Hamza and Leon had been stealing from the home. Just little things—pencils and markers. Then they started stealing at school and were caught. We wanted them to apologize and to earn the money to replace the things they had stolen. But tough little Leon could never say sorry. Hamza couldn't say anything at all. I suppose running away, sleeping on the streets, and eating out of trash bins was somehow easier for Hamza and Leon than accepting responsibility for mistakes and working to make the situation right. It is so easy to forget how fragile these children are. Running away—this is how they had dealt with problems in the past. This was their first reaction; this was their gut response. They went back to the streets—back to a life free from guilt and worry and failure. It was five days before Leon's eleventh birthday.

My first reaction was to search for them. Gilbert Chikuni and I spent two days searching the streets, the bus terminals, the market. We looked in sad, ugly, desperate places where (fortunately) Hamza and Leon were nowhere to be found. Then four days later, as I was running errands in town, I saw Hamza's long skinny legs sticking out of a large trash bin located next to a fast food restaurant. He and Leon were looking for something to eat. I was *very* surprised to see them, and they were *very* surprised to see me. Hamza gave me a look of sheer terror. Just a few days earlier, I could make Hamza laugh. He would smile when he looked at me. But now he looked at me as if I were a monster. Never before had a child reacted to me in that way. While Hamza and Leon were living at Lovemore Home, I thought we had done a good job letting them know that we loved them. We had given them a safe place to sleep, plenty to eat, we sent them to school, we never beat them. And they had been successful both at the home and at school. I hated the fact that the guilt and shame they felt for the things they had done had made them forget our love, or question or doubt our love. I hated that. I just wanted them to know that we loved them.

But as soon as they saw me they ran away. This was not how I had planned the encounter. For some reason I had thought that if I could just find them everything would be okay. They would come back to Lovemore Home and we would just deal with things. But they ran away. I was close enough to Leon to grab his shirt. I shouldn't have, but I did. When they turned to run away, my first instinct was to catch them, hold them, and never let go. I could have done a better job of holding on to Leon, but I think I knew that I couldn't force them to listen to me or return with me to Lovemore if that wasn't what they wanted to do. Leon wriggled out of his shirt and grabbed Hamza; I was left standing next to a big trash bin in the middle of downtown, with Leon's dirty, tattered shirt in my hand, yelling and sobbing, "Hamza! Leon! Please! Don't go! Happy Birthday, Leon! We love you!" It was pathetic. I was a mess.

Around that time, Gilbert led the other boys in a Bible lesson on the prodigal son parable. It seemed like an appropriate story to discuss. The boys talked about how hard it must have been for the prodigal son to return home and face his father. We discussed what we would do if our two prodigal sons returned to our home. One of the boys felt our prodigals should not be allowed to come back. After all, the boys who continued

to live at the home had also made plenty of mistakes, but they had faced the consequences of their actions. It wasn't fair. I suppose that it is not always my first reaction to forgive either. These four boys, and all of the boys who have participated in the Lovemore Home program since that time, are no angels. They are often stubborn, whiny, selfish, lazy, and mean-spirited. (I'm sure those with children can identify!) But sometimes we have to put a little more effort into loving one another. I want to be like the father of the prodigal son. I want to be loving and forgiving and patient even when those little prodigal sons made poor decisions—decisions that broke my heart.

It wasn't until several months later that I began to think about my role in this story and in Hamza and Leon's story in a different way. At a Presbytery meeting, I met a young pastor who worked in a rural village. He was interested in the work I was doing but asked, "Why are you helping all those bad kids when there are so many other good children who need help?" I didn't really know how to answer. I imagine he is right: there are *countless* children living in Zimbabwe in the same conditions in which Hamza and Leon grew up, suffering the same abuse, but I wasn't doing very much for them—nobody was. Why was I working with street kids? Why did I have to wait to trip over a child in the streets before offering him some help? Our work with the street kids was work that just treated the *symptoms* of a much larger, much more complicated injustice. All over the world and even here in the United States, children make up the greatest percentage of the poor. *Something is wrong with this picture*. How is it that health insurance for our neediest, most vulnerable children is not our top priority? Why do we consistently intervene only after children have turned into "bad" kids and have become the property of the juvenile justice system, where they are frequently tried as adults? *This is an ugly picture*, and I don't want to see it. It is easier to run away and stay away. This prodigal daughter is afraid to face her father. I don't want to face my responsibility until it stares me down in the streets through the eyes of a street kid and I can't look away.

Why did I go to Zimbabwe? I am certainly no martyr. I didn't make any great sacrifices. I love children, even difficult ones. I loved my work there. It was convenient for me to go. I'm not married. I wasn't ready to go to graduate school. And the stories I had heard about the street kids made my heart hurt; I couldn't look away. My soul was hungry; I felt if only I could go to Zimbabwe, like the prodigal son, my hungry soul would find food. And for the most part, when I arrived I received a warm and enthusiastic welcome. But those of us from the West are not always appreciated. And why should we be? The anger the older son feels toward his prodigal brother is justified. I chased down Hamza and Leon in the streets, but where was I when Hamza's mother lost her job as a store clerk and was forced to sell her body for food, or when his school, for lack of funding, cut classes for children with special needs, or when my government, in its preoccupation with patent rights, prevented Hamza's grandmother from receiving medication that could have at least prolonged her life? God was there, but I wasn't. I should not have been surprised when Hamza and Leon didn't welcome my efforts to make things right. While these boys were growing up, I was watching television; I was eating ice cream. I was living in a country that throughout history has profited from Africa's rich resources through slave trade, through colonization, and even now through globalization. We take the father's treasures, we take our inheritance, and our brother's inheritance, and we run away. We come back only when it is

convenient or when we can no longer run and the apologies that we offer are sometimes too little and too late—desperate attempts to treat the symptoms.

I think it is important to treat the symptoms. Intervention work through programs like Lovemore Home is absolutely essential. But how can we also support children and families in their communities before families fall apart? How do policies established by our government affect children living in developing countries around the world? How do we treat children in the United States? I now know that these are questions I need to ask myself all the time—not just during the holidays or during political campaigns; not just when I have some free time between college and graduate school; and not just when children crawl out of the dark, ugly, desperate places where they grow up hungry, neglected, abused and resentful and make a stand in the streets.

Children suffer even when I choose not to see it. God heard the cries of the Israelites even after Moses had fled from Egypt. I imagine Moses was very happy tending sheep in the wilderness. He had a nice wife and a family. But God called Moses, the runaway, to return to his home, his family, his responsibility, and to lead the Israelites and their children to freedom. I believe that God is calling us home, too.

Last July, as I prepared to end my term as a volunteer, the political situation in Zimbabwe became a little tense. First the tourists left, then the volunteers, then the ambassadors and the foreign investors. The journalists came in for a couple of weeks, covered the story, and then, when Zimbabwe became old news, flew away to another hotspot. I hated being a part of that mass exodus, being yet again the runaway. I even told the boys at Lovemore Home that I was running away. They thought that was funny, especially Hamza, who eventually did come back to Lovemore Home and had been living there for over a year by the time I left. What an incredible child! Leon is still on the streets. I now consider those children who have stuck with the program to be exceptions, miracles—they are a testimony to God's magnificent grace.

The day before I was scheduled to leave, I found Hamza sitting alone next to the gate to Lovemore Home. He seemed especially awkward and shy; I suspected he had something to say. He told me that he would miss me. He would miss *me*, the spoiled American kid who indulged herself on ice cream and bad TV while Hamza simply struggled to survive. He would miss *me*, the prodigal daughter who flew to Africa to find food for her soul. Hamza loved me, imperfect but well intentioned me. And I think that he knew I loved him, too. I gave him a hug. Hamza is not a hugger, but he let me hug him that day. I was very grateful. So there we were—quite a pair—I, fighting back tears; Hamza, looking confused and awkward and a little emotional. Two runaways, reunited. It felt like a homecoming. It felt like God was throwing a party.