

B. Susan Bauer

The Value of One Ox

“Please, Madam, just a few cents for some bread.” He must have been about seven, the skinny little African boy with the outstretched hand and pleading eyes. He wore a tattered red T-shirt, more holes than fabric. White dust from the road powdered his spindly black legs and bare feet.

I turned away, wishing the gas station attendant would hurry and finish fueling our car.

“Madam!” Now he was rubbing his stomach. “Please – I am so hungry!” Here, in the southern African country of Namibia, it was the children who spoke English, but rarely their parents.

Although this was my fourth trip to Africa, knowing how to do this never got easier. I had been told not to respond to begging children. Giving in just encourages their dependence and they will never learn to be self-sufficient. Donate to the reputable aid organizations, instead. I knew this was prudent advice, arising from many more encounters than I had ever had. But, just the same, I felt mean and hard-hearted when I refused to acknowledge the pleading voice next to my car window.

When the boy realized he would get no coins from this white lady, he dropped his arm and shuffled away, scanning the road for another foreigner.

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I usually followed the advice of my guides and mentors, rarely responding to those tiny outstretched palms. But this time, I was no longer a visitor. I was a missionary teacher. My clergy husband and I had made a midlife decision to alter our career paths and become missionaries. We lived and taught on a seminary campus in Windhoek, Namibia. During my six years in Namibia, Jonah Amakali, taught me how to share, but not in ways I had expected.

I had just finished teaching my class of second-year English students and was clearing the clutter on my desk when I noticed one student lingering by my desk. He was the young man in the pink shirt who had been sitting in the back row. He greeted me with the formal word of respect that means “Mother.”

“Meme Susan, excuse me for bothering you.” I looked up – way up. This serious young man, about six feet, five inches, was the tallest Namibian I had ever seen.

“My name is Jonah,” he reminded me. “I need for you to give me special help in English.”

“Do you mean tutoring?” I asked.

He nodded. “My English is very weak. I come from a village where no one speaks English. I need you to help me.”

I was flattered. Jonah’s request – more like a demand, really – was the first evidence in my two weeks on campus that I might be able to relate to these quiet, formal Namibians. I assured Jonah that I would be happy to help and we worked out a schedule of two sessions a week.

As I became better acquainted with my students, I realized they liked to joke and tease, and were much less reserved than I had imagined. But not Jonah. He was always serious and always polite, but his intensity and persistence wore me down. He told me about his widowed mother who lived in a small village in the rural north. She grew mahangu (millet) and occasionally received

money from Jonah's older sister who had a secretarial job in Windhoek. Jonah's sister also paid her brother's seminary tuition and contributed what she could toward his living expenses.

Jonah had seen other impoverished Namibians achieve financial success through hard work and education. He knew what he needed, and his strategy for achieving his goals was to work hard and to assume generosity from those better off than he was. Jonah cultivated me as determinedly as his mother cultivated her mahangu crop.

Toward the end of his third year at the seminary, Jonah began to develop eye problems – pain and blurred vision that new eyeglasses failed to correct. He came to us one evening, wearing that favorite pink oxford cloth shirt. He lowered his lanky frame onto our sofa, his back ramrod straight. Like some of his colleagues, he had begun referring to us as his parents.

“My mother and father, I have this trouble with my eyes. They pain me and I cannot do my assignments.”

My husband Lou, who was by then the Dean of Students, was accustomed to attending to our students' medical needs.

“Jonah, I want you to visit the eye doctor at Katutura Hospital,” Lou said. “Then come back and tell me what the doctor says.” Since Namibia's state-sponsored medical system is relatively inexpensive for its citizens, this was always the first-line treatment option.

Jonah returned a few days later and showed us his medical card. The doctor had written: “Patient needs surgery.”

Surgery? How competent was this physician? We tapped some funds provided by generous donors, and Lou took Jonah to a private ophthalmologist who explained to Jonah that he had a pterygium. He said this was common in Namibia where people toil long hours in the glaring sunlight. Scar tissue begins to grow into the eye to protect it from the brightness. Jonah was at risk of losing his eyesight.

We suggested that Jonah schedule his surgery for the week following final exams, and we explained we would find the necessary funds.

When his friends left the seminary for their three-month summer holiday, Jonah entered Katutura Hospital. The operation was successful, and he returned to campus the following day. Because the dining hall was closed, we told Jonah he should come to our flat each evening for dinner.

Namibians of Jonah's tribe are accustomed to simple fare. Their staple food is oshifima, a porridge made from millet. If the rains are sufficient, they will grow spinach, tomatoes and groundnuts. For festive events, they might kill a goat or slaughter a cow. During the two weeks that he was our dinner guest, Jonah sampled pork chops and mashed potatoes, spaghetti, and meatloaf. One day I found Casa Fiesta Taco Dinners at the grocery store, and Jonah discovered that tacos were his new favorite food. He ate four of them.

Hoping that Jonah was feeling more comfortable with us, I risked teasing him a little.

"Jonah, I see that many of your colleagues are becoming engaged. Is there some special lady in your life that you aren't telling us about?"

His face became serious, and I feared I had made a cultural blunder.

"Meme, Susan, it is not the right time for me to think about marriage."

"Why not?" I asked.

"You see, I still have a year to finish my studies and then I must do my six-month practicum. I must not be distracted by a marriage."

At the end of the two weeks, I bought him a pair of sunglasses and Lou gave him a few Namibian dollars for his nine-hour bus journey home.

I was relieved when Jonah left. His neediness had wearied me. It had been a demanding semester, and I was exhausted. I craved some time and space alone.

When he returned at the beginning of the new school year, Jonah brought me a red clay pot with intricate patterns carved onto its surface, plus a large basket with handles and a lid.

“Meme Susan, my mother made these for you. She thanks you for helping me.”

Most Ovambo women make baskets from reeds and grasses on their homesteads, but this basket, cream-colored with darker grasses tightly woven into the design, was one of the most elegant I had seen. Jonah had ridden nine hours with these precious gifts on his lap.

“My mother said since you are my parents in Windhoek, I must listen to you. She said she will always remember what you have done for her son.”

I knew I had just been given a piece of her motherhood, as surely as she had woven dark grasses into the cream-colored ones.

The following year Jonah and his classmates were ordained as pastors at a rural village church in the far, northern part of the country. As faculty, we knew our absence at such an occasion would be conspicuous, so we traveled a full day’s journey to Ovamboland and spent the night in the home of our friends, Rev. Amaambo, and his wife Esther. We always stayed with the Amaambos when we came north. It was an exchange, of sorts. They provided lodging and were our guides to these hard-to-find churches deep in the bush. We contributed groceries and the use of our Toyota Venture, a cross between a station wagon and a pick-up truck. The back of the Venture had pull-down seats and could transport about nine passengers.

The following morning, Meme Esther eased herself onto the back seat next to me and settled her large basket of food and drinks on the floor. As always, we had to stop along the way to collect as many of the Amaambos’ relatives as we could squeeze into the Venture. As we rattled along the rough gravel road, Rev. Amaambo told us that the church we’d be attending was brand new, built by President Nujoma for the people of his village.

This gleaming white church looked out of place in the midst of the crusty millet stalks and parched stunted bushes, like a bride at a backyard barbecue. Crowds of people were pushing

through the doorway, so we hurried inside, eager to find good seats. The wood pews shone with fresh polish, and the altar was arrayed in elegant green. The women, a sorority of flowery, cotton print dresses and white headscarves, chattered and hugged one another. The men sat stiffly in their sober dark suits. I waved to our former students in their black robes, and one or two of them risked tight, nervous smiles in response.

Little brown birds swooped gaily through the rafters as the congregation rose for the processional hymn. I felt a gentle breeze on my neck and was grateful to be seated near a window. The printed program indicated that ten choirs would be singing and each of the twelve honorable guests seated behind the altar would give a speech.

During our six years in Namibia, I had taught myself mental tricks for dealing with the tedium of these never-ending ceremonies. I discovered that I could remain attentive to the events at hand while taking small fantasy trips with the other half of my mind. If that failed, I would keep reminding myself, “You will be in bed at the end of this day.” And I always deliberately dehydrated myself so I wouldn’t face the embarrassing need to find a toilet (or a bush) in the middle of such an event.

I glanced at my watch. Three hours had passed, and we were little more than halfway through the program. The relentless midday sun was turning the cement block walls into a solar oven. Even the birds were dozing on the rafters. Beside me, Lou struggled to keep his eyes open. A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek and disappeared into his beard.

Two hours later, the congregation spilled into the churchyard. The recently solemn worshippers shouted and laughed and embraced the young men and women who would soon be their pastors. Some older women broke into spontaneous dances, stirring up little whirlwinds of white dust.

Rev. Amaambo and Meme Esther had wandered off to greet friends, and I was wondering where to find a toilet when Jonah tapped my shoulder.

“I would like you to meet my mother. She is over there.” He pointed to the far side of the parking area.

As soon as I saw this tall, stately woman, I knew who she was. She wore a tailored brown suit and had the same serious, penetrating eyes as her son. Mrs. Amakali spoke no English. When she bent down to hug me, murmuring a few soft words, Jonah translated.

“My mother says she does not know how to thank you enough for taking care of her only son.”

I smiled and reached for her slender brown hands. The rough leathery palms returned my grip.

During the next two years we had occasional visits from Jonah when he came to Windhoek. He always wore his black suit and clerical collar. We asked about his congregation in Oshali. The rains had not been good for the past two years, he sighed, and the harvest was meager.

“And what about a wife, Jonah?”

A small smile appeared. “There is a young lady. We will see what happens.”

Courtship in the Ovambo culture obeys strict rules. Each family must approve the match, and expensive, ritual gifts are exchanged: wristwatches and other jewelry, as well as cattle. By tradition, the groom must also pay for the bridal gown and the dresses of all the bridesmaids. I had attended several of my students’ weddings; none had fewer than ten bridesmaids. I wondered how Jonah would be able to afford these things.

During our month-long term holiday, we decided to visit Jonah and his congregation at Oshali. Johnny Haufiku, another former student, accompanied us. Once we left the highway, we became hopelessly disoriented. The roads were little more than tire tracks on the grass. Namibian men have no hang-ups about asking for directions, and Johnny told us to stop at three homesteads along the way. At each, we parked the Venture close to the five-foot-high stick fence surrounding the dwellings inside. We knew the fences were designed to keep the animals away from the living

spaces, but we'd been inside enough homesteads to know that as many chickens and sleepy-eyed donkeys wandered about inside the fences as outside them. While Lou and I waited in air conditioned comfort, Johnny hurried through the fence for a quick exchange with whomever he encountered. I watched the women, their heads wrapped in colorful scarves, hanging the family laundry on the fence. A little boy cast glances at us over his shoulder as he pushed his toy car made of wire through the dust. Two others were kicking a soccer ball back and forth. Their ball was a lopsided sphere of plastic bags bound together with rubber bands.

At the last homestead, Johnny emerged with a smile on his face. "We're almost there!"

Oshali wasn't much more than a smattering of homesteads in the bush, scarcely large enough to be called a village. Parched, stunted, stalks of millet bore witness to another year of drought. The midday sun penetrated my wide-brimmed hat, and I had to peel my damp skirt away from my legs as I climbed out of our Venture.

An old man napped in the shade of a tree and two little girls in threadbare dresses peeped at us from behind the neglected church building. Several villagers, skinny and dressed in tattered clothes, had heard our vehicle and appeared from somewhere. Jonah came running, clad in his formal, black clerical shirt and trousers. He hugged us tightly. His effusive greeting surprised me. I wondered if he had felt like a castaway when his bishop assigned him to this forlorn outpost. He must have read my thoughts.

"When I first came to this place and saw the church building, I cried," he said. "It was in such bad condition. But I was able to help the congregation put glass in the windows, and we're doing what we can."

He took us to his home, a simple concrete-block building a few yards from the church. In the Ovambo culture, it is considered rude not to serve visitors some sort of a meal when they arrive at your home. Jonah invited us inside, and I saw four women working in the kitchen. They smiled

and nodded when Jonah introduced us. On the kitchen door Jonah had taped a sign: “Wanted: A Wife.” I pointed to the sign and raised my eyebrows. Jonah just grinned and shrugged.

A long, dark wood table consumed most of the space in his small dining room. Against one wall was a tall, matching sideboard cluttered with Bibles, books and papers. Jonah hurried back to the kitchen. A few minutes later, two ladies brought us the customary plastic bowl filled with hot soapy water and a towel. We washed our hands, and they served us lunch: fried liver and cans of Sprite.

All I really wanted was another cold drink and a nap, but Jonah insisted on showing us the border town of Oshikongo, so we climbed into the blessed air conditioning of the Venture. Until recently, Oshikongo had been off-limits to foreigners because it had been overrun with freedom fighters and refugees from Angola. I felt apprehensive about this trip, remembering that Angola was the country in which an entire generation had grown up knowing nothing but guerilla fighting, wrenching hunger and fields strewn with land mines. Almost all vestiges of civilization in Angola – schools, municipal government, and hospitals – had disappeared. A Namibian colleague had told us that many of these young Angolans, uneducated and unsocialized, were little more than savages.

The border crossing was teeming with activity: not gun-toting freedom fighters, but a steady stream of commerce. Over-sized trucks were lumbering back to Angola laden with furniture, cartons of food, and a few protesting goats tied to the top of the heap. I hadn’t expected to see all the foot traffic. Women with impossibly huge burdens on their heads, babies swaddled on their backs, trudged through the checkpoint. I heard the soft slap-slap of their shoes, and I noticed that the Namibian guards rarely stopped them. I wondered what they had come to sell, or buy, in Namibia.

Jonah introduced us to his friend Petrus, a young man who worked in a furniture shop. Dressed in a crisp white shirt and tie, Petrus was surprisingly fluent in English which, he told us, he had taught himself. He described what it was like working in a retail shop in this border town.

“You would be amazed to see how much money these Angolans have – probably from diamonds. Every week, big trucks come across the border, and these guys buy sofas – maybe six at a time. They always pay in cash – American dollars – and when they return to Angola they’ll sell these sofas for five times what they paid for them.”

Black market “blood diamonds,” converted to U.S. dollars, bought the sofas that were furnishing Angolan homes.

We returned to Oshali in mid-afternoon to meet the congregation. Jonah seated us on white plastic chairs at the front of the church; the parish hadn’t yet come up with enough money to buy pews, or even plain wooden benches. In his pocket, Lou had a \$200 check to present to the congregation. An industrious row of ants scurried in and out of the large crack in the wall next to my chair.

About forty congregants filed in, most of them wizened elders. Jonah invited Lou and me to step forward while he explained to his parishioners who we were and why we were there. When Lou handed Jonah the check, everyone applauded and a few women stood up and ululated. Several members of the congregation came forward with gifts for us – two clay pots and a basket.

Then Jonah asked one of the parishioners to join us.

“Meme Susan, I would like you to meet Mrs. Shikomba. She is one of our deacons.”

I recognized her as the elderly lady who had been supervising the kitchen workers at Jonah’s house. She placed a necklace of white and pink beads around my neck.

“This part of the necklace is very valuable,” she said, pointing to a thin strand of delicate, lavender-colored beads. “The beads come from Angola, and it is the kind of necklace that is worn by the wife of the king. Its value is one ox.”

I was speechless. Although I had been the recipient of numerous gifts from generous Africans, none had the intrinsic value of this necklace. How do you thank someone for a gift that

could have been exchanged for enough meat to feed dozens of people in this drought-plagued village?

The next day, when Jonah took us to the Shikomba homestead, we learned that in addition to her full-time job as Jonah's housekeeper, Mrs. Shikomba was also the primary caregiver for her blind, diabetic husband.

The twilight was casting deep purple shadows on the sand when we all walked over to the parsonage for the feast. White plastic chairs now rimmed the walls of Jonah's dining room, and we squeezed in with the elders and their families. Other guests spread blankets in the sandy yard. One of the elders had donated a goat for the meal, and there were also chicken, rice, pumpkin, cabbage and the traditional millet porridge, oshifima. Jonah lit candles and oil lamps. After dinner, the women silently cleared the dishes and began washing them in huge galvanized tubs.

"How far must the women walk to get water, Jonah?" I asked.

"The well is about one kilometer from here."

The men left for home while the ladies continued washing dishes. Jonah sat and talked with us in the flickering light of the oil lamp. He told us about his experiences during the past two years.

"It was hard to know where to begin this ministry. There is so much to do, and we have so little money. The name of this village, 'Oshali,' means 'a gift.' I hope that I can be a gift to these people."

He was particularly proud of his youth group, and he told us he was constantly encouraging them to stay in school and improve their education. "And I myself am taking correspondence courses to improve my academic standing. Can you send me an English grammar book, Meme Susan?"

I sent him several.

We only saw Jonah once more before we left Namibia. We took him to dinner at a downtown restaurant in Windhoek. In a subdued voice, he sadly told us that his fiancée had broken

the engagement, but his face brightened when he said that he had another young lady in mind. When it comes to marriages, Namibians tend to be more pragmatic than romantic.

Another year passed. We had retired to America and were preparing to move to a new home when an envelope arrived from Jonah. It was a wedding invitation. An enclosed letter asked Lou to officiate at the wedding, which, of course, was impossible. Jonah mentioned his difficulty in meeting all the financial obligations of the upcoming nuptials. I remembered the basket and the necklace, and sent him fifty dollars.

Today the clay pot and finely woven basket from Jonah's mother adorn the living room of our new home. A visitor will never know the worth of this destitute widow's gifts to us. When I wear the necklace, I have an urge to tell everyone that the beads have the value of one ox.

No, Jonah was not my favorite student. His poverty, his overwhelming neediness, tethered itself to me. But the gifts – the villagers' to us, ours to Jonah – may have taught me something about Ubuntu, the being-in-relationship that defines African societies. Gift-giving wasn't simply a cordial exchange of presents. It represented reciprocity and obligation, binding giver and recipient to each other.

Did Jonah use me? Of course. But not in the calculating way I had at first assumed. He invited me to be in relationship with him, knowing I could provide certain things he needed, just as his sister provided his tuition. Jonah's gifts to me were his trust and the privilege of entering into the life and culture of this shy, reserved young man from Namibia. I still think about him, with Nelao, his new wife. And I think about Oshali, the village that means "gift."