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Pearl

“Joy...is the gigantic secret of the Christian.” – G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy

Introduction to this Issue

At noon last Friday, my husband and I celebrated being two weeks out from our second COVID-19 vaccine. We raised our glasses of Bundaberg ginger ale in a toast of gratitude. Tomorrow we fly to Austin, Texas for the first time in more than a year to see our daughter and family. Joy!
Celebration often comes dressed in surprising regalia on the mission field. It might be a carefully planned birthday party for a child, with pineapple, wild flowers and fresh eggs as gifts. It could be the unforeseen provision of a critical need. Both unexpected serendipities of God and planned interludes of jubilee are beneficent to the soul and spirit.

In 1992, we returned to Kenya and Uganda with our three children, all in secondary school at the time. Before we left, two American friends gave us $100 with a proviso: “Spend it on a celebration. Watch for a special opportunity on your long journey.” Interesting! We’d never been given such enticing instructions, along with the gift to make it happen. It gave us jubilant pause and launched our journey with a spirit of anticipation. How/where/when would that money be used?

The theme of this issue is celebration. You will be given a multifaceted view of the joy of the Lord, which is our strength. Stories range from tears of a merry heart to laughing out loud. One reminds us that gifts of gratitude are vital to relationships.

And the $100? We joined a host of people at Lake Victoria, the source of the Nile, to wholeheartedly celebrate the 25th wedding anniversary of dear Ugandan friends whom we met in Kenya when they were refugees.

There is joy in the journey.

– Judy Palpant (Editor)

Joy’s Future Focus

by Peter Saunders

The radiance of her joy now was in stark contrast to the desperation with which she had arrived at our mission hospital just a week earlier. The woman’s story was deeply tragic. She’d first presented to a clinic in another part of the country in obstructed labor resulting in the death of her first baby and, because of the time delay, a vesico-vaginal fistula. The resulting continual drip of urine and accompanying stench had led to her being deserted by her husband and ostracized by her community. The physical problem was bad enough, but it had been eclipsed by the isolation, rejection and the ensuing emotional and spiritual damage which followed.

We had no imaging technology, and there was little to see on internal examination, so I opened the bladder under general anesthetic and was relieved to find a tiny hole in the trigone, immediately adjacent to the internal urethral meatus. The healthy surrounding tissues were easily mobilized and closed in two layers.

She leaked a little post-operatively due to pooling of urine at the bladder base, but cutting a small aperture in the catheter just beneath the balloon enabled drainage. The wound then healed quickly, and she was completely dry within a matter of days.

Her joy was in part due to the resolution of this awful problem that had destroyed her life, but this would not bring her marriage or baby back. The real joy I saw in her face on the post-op ward round that morning was due to something much more momentous than successful surgery.
She had also met Christ through the witness of the hospital staff, and her life was never going to be the same again—healed physically, emotionally and, most importantly, spiritually.

We know, as Christians, that our lives are to be characterized by joy. It is part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Yet, how easily are we robbed of it by life’s circumstances—a failed exam, physical injury, a serious illness, redundancy or a broken relationship—or often something far more trivial.

It is easy to be content when all is going well, but such feelings are vulnerable to being stripped away. Of course, the blessings of this life—food and clothing, shelter, good health, a satisfying job, financial security, a successful marriage and a loving family—are all gifts of God to be treasured and enjoyed (James 1:17). But they can also become idols which we rely on more than God Himself and can be tempted to put in His place. The crucial difference about joy, as opposed to happiness, is that it is based on something which can never be taken away.

When the 72 sent out by Jesus in Luke 10 returned from their mission trip of preaching and healing excited about the success of their ministry and declaring, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name,” the Lord replied, ‘...do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven’ (Luke 10:17-20, NIV).

Even fruitful ministry pales to a shadow in the light of the far greater treasure of knowing God Himself, who gives us our opportunities to serve and to make the use of them.

Adoniram Judson, missionary to Burma, famously said that “the future is as bright as the promises of God.” This did not mean he expected life to be easy. His own testimony is one of great suffering in completing the work to which the Lord had called him. But he treasured the promise that the God he served would never leave him nor forsake him (Hebrews 13:5, and that nothing could separate him from God’s love (Romans 8:39), nor snatch him out of God’s hand (John 10:28).

In Scripture, suffering and joy are inextricably connected. The promise of reaping “with songs of joy” is given to “those who sow in tears.” The context of mouths “filled with laughter” and tongues with “songs of joy,” the Psalmist reminds us, is of going out “weeping, carrying seed to sow” (Psalm 126, NIV).

James urges us to “consider it pure joy” when we face trials (James 1:2, NIV). Paul writes of rejoicing in our sufferings (Romans 5:3), and Peter warns us not to be surprised at painful trials but rather to rejoice that we participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that we might be overjoyed when his glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:12-13). God is using the difficult parts of our journey to prepare us for eternity. And in the light of this eternity, the worst things that life can throw at us, Paul tells the Corinthians, are light and momentary when measured against the “eternal glory that far outweighs them all (2 Corinthians 4:17, NIV).

Jesus Himself, we are told, “endured the cross, scorning its shame” because of the “joy set before him” (Hebrews 12:2, NIV), the joy of knowing what His work was achieving in “bringing many sons and daughters to glory (Hebrews 2:10, NIV). And in sharing in His work, being His hands and feet and mouths on earth, we too can hold onto the certainties of His promises which can never fail.

So, let’s allow the joy of the Lord to be our strength (Nehemiah 8:10) as we press on toward the goal (Philippians 3:14), each day willingly taking on the good works He’s prepared for us (Ephesians 2:10) and sharing in His call, because our real security rests in eternal life which can never be taken away.

Medicine is a wonderful gift of God, but we look forward to a world where there will be “no more death or mourning or crying or pain,” where the “old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4, NIV).

The glorious truth, as the woman with whom we started this reflection realized, is that although Jesus wonderfully healed many people, and thousands of His followers have since walked in His footsteps, His ultimate mission was not to empty the hospitals of the sick, but to empty the graveyards of the dead. Let’s hold on to joy’s future focus.
Dr. Peter Saunders was a general surgeon at Auckland Medical School, New Zealand, before serving as a missionary doctor in Kenya. He served with the Christian Medical Fellowship UK for 27 years and is now Chief Executive of the International Christian Medical & Dental Association (ICMDA). His current work involves leadership training, teaching evangelism and ethics, medical mission, writing, editing and media work. He is a council member of the Evangelical Alliance. He and his wife Kirsty live in St Albans, UK and they have three sons and one grandson.

Happy Tears

by J.T.

“I want the world to sing in her native tongue
Maybe we could learn to sing along
To find a way to use our lungs
for love and not the shadows”
“Native Tongue” by Switchfoot

When we returned in the fall, a long-time local friend (who we will call Molly) drove by on her scooter. When Molly saw us, she stopped abruptly and burst into tears. “I am so happy to see you! I was afraid you would never come back.”

Last month, Molly’s mother became very ill and had to be hospitalized at the clinic’s partner hospital. Thankfully, the clinic charity fund was able to cover her hospitalization and purchase an oxygen concentrator for her.

Over the last few months, Molly has been coming over once a week to cook Chinese food with us. Last week, Molly thanked us profusely for helping her mom. Suddenly Molly said, “I just need to give you a hug! When I am with you, I feel LOVED! Even more than with my own family.”

We were invited to join Molly and her family for Chinese New Year’s Eve dinner where we enjoyed delicacies such as pig ear, liver, fish, eight treasure rice and our favorite Chinese dumplings.

As much as we try to communicate with words, the Father’s love is the native tongue that crosses culture and language barriers. After years of experiencing love from multiple families here, Molly knows the Source of that love. It is her native tongue.

J.T works in a creative-access country as a physician.

Give Us a Goat

by Jerry Bowen

We had no idea what awaited us when we stepped into the thatch-covered, outdoor cabana. Cooks, janitors, groundskeepers and maintenance men, more than 30 in all, had squeezed themselves into the space, dressed in their Sunday best, to speak to us, the “inspectors”—the school accreditation team from the U.S. A spokesman rose from their midst. Plucking a copious list from his suit pocket, all eyes rested upon him as he graciously, but pointedly, shared their wants, concerns and input. Heads nodded in agreement as he read the list. Their concerns were fairly typical, but there was one unusual item—a goat. They wanted a goat.
In the debriefing session with the school leadership afterward, we heard how in the past, the Kenyan staff had hand-dug a regulation soccer field from the very hilly lower school property, including a massive boulder in the center. It was chopped, with hand tools, into blocks that became a retaining wall along the neighboring game preserve. When the field was finally level and finished, there were the usual celebrations and soccer games for the school families, but little focus given to the workers themselves. Turns out, they had been hoping for a goat as a “thank you” gift, but none had been forthcoming. Whether a cultural oversight or just “ministry busyness,” it had not seemed important at the time.

Not only did a goat cost almost nothing, but it was so insignificant as to have slipped from their minds for over a year. The leadership could not believe that the goat was still coming up and obviously felt embarrassed.

At the visit’s end, we encouraged them to take another look at the “goat” issue. It seemed to have significant potential to meaningfully express the school’s support and appreciation.

Nine months later, a note from the school head arrived stateside that began, “Well, you won’t believe what happened with the goat!” The school had finally purchased not one, but two goats and offered them as a “gift of appreciation and gratitude” for all the hard work by the Kenyan staff. A time was set up for a “goat party” during which the goats were roasted with all the additional accoutrements for a celebration. She described the event as one of the most joyous and celebratory ever seen in the school’s history. From the janitor to the senior supervisors, the Kenyan staff repeatedly and profusely expressed their gratitude for honoring them and their contribution.

Jerome “Jerry” Bowen

Raised as a third-culture military kid, Jerry traveled the world with his family living in 37 states and eight different countries before he was 18. His own military tenure then took him to several more countries. After college, he settled in Tucson, Arizona where he and his Hebrew-Christian wife Shelley raised three daughters. Jerry served for 22 years as a teacher and administrator in a Christian school before taking an executive position with the Association of Christian Schools International. Retiring after 22 years, he continues to serve the kingdom as an elder in his church and a mentor of young administrators. He still occasionally travels abroad to assist schools, but he loves coming home, the address of which has not changed in 40+ years.

Surprised in the Midst

by Eric MacLaughlin

The everyday events of my work have an undeniable tone of sadness. Tragedy is the predominant image. But in this case (a mother gives her three sons poison to drink and then takes it herself), we very clearly see something that is usually hazy, but always lurking. There is evil in the sadness, some sense that things didn’t have to be this way. Things could have been different. They should have been different. I don’t always have the strength to look directly at the evil, but it’s always there.
I want to write this story, the worst case I have ever seen, and then still say this: since moving to Africa, I have never been so acutely aware of the positive presence of the goodness of God in the world. I know that is jarring, but that’s the point. It jars me. I’m not sure what caused this increased awareness. Perhaps it’s God’s particular grace to help me endure, or perhaps it’s a simple matter of striking contrasts. At any rate, this goodness, which may be shattered and mixed like one would expect in our fallen world, is still emphatically and jarringly present.

One day, a couple months after the mass suicide attempt (where the mother and one son died but the other two boys survived), I am walking from the NICU to the pediatrics ward. To get there, I exit a door and walk on a kind of balcony between the buildings for about 30 feet. There’s a right turn on the balcony, and at the bend, I can look left out over the hills. They are the striking shades of green that tea fields variously take on as they mature. The green goes up and up, stitched together like a quilt, all the way to the bald peak of Motigo Hill, where sheep are grazing under the blue sky. The air is fresh, and there’s a slight breeze.

Standing there, leaning on the rail is a physician assistant student, a young man visiting from Kentucky. He is looking out at the hills, and I can see tears on his cheeks. He looks briefly at me, and then turns back to the view.

“I just saw my first child born here,” he says.

Uh-oh. My mind immediately goes to a dozen awful things that could have gone wrong. I remember that his guy is very early in his education, and I don’t like the idea that some tragic birth would be his first impression of obstetrics.

“How did it go?” I ask quietly.

He continues to stare at the horizon. “Hmm?” he says, as if he has already forgotten that I’m there. “Oh, it went fine. Just fine. It’s just amazing, you know?”

For all the sadness, if you walked through our hospital, the predominant sound is not wailing. It’s laughter and the chatting of friends—and not just from the families whose loved one is getting better, but from the others as well. A baby snuggles up to her mom. A gentle wind brushes my face. An ibis calls as it flies overhead. There are red blossoms in the treetops. The chai cup warms my cold hands. A friend is only too glad to help. Two kids play together outside, running and laughing for no particular reason.

It is goodness, and it is everywhere. For this story of mass suicide, I do not know where the light is. Maybe there isn’t any. Nevertheless, I do maintain that the goodness of the world in which that woman lived was abundant, though I have no doubt she was unable to see it. At the very least, she had three sons, each of whose birth was enough to bring tears to the eyes of a grown foreigner.

Buechner writes, “What’s lost is nothing to what’s found, and all the death that ever was set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.”* And he’s right.

Excerpt from Promises in the Dark by Eric MacLaughlin

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Laugh On!

by David Stevens, MD, MA (Ethics)

“As soap is to the body, so laughter is to the soul.” – A Jewish Proverb

As a missionary, days are one long breathless sprint trying to catch up to an overwhelming workload. Nights are often a somnambulation to the operating room or wards. Add to those burdens—administration, management, communicating
with supporters, spiritual ministry and trying to have family time—and fun falls off the curve. Laughter is relegated to happenstance or more likely doesn’t happen at all.

What do I mean by fun? I’m not talking about finding time to watch a video or even reading a good book. Both are important breaks from your busy schedule, but what I’m talking about is putting more laughter into every day. You know, belly laughing and even having such a good time you are going to be talking about it for months, if not years.

It’s biblical! It says in Judges 19:6, “...let your heart be merry” (ESV), and in Proverbs 15:15, “he who is of a merry heart has a continual feast” (NKJV). When God used Esther to save her people, the Jews created a new holiday for laughter (Esther 8:16, 9:17). David tells us in his great Psalm 100 how to give thanksgiving to God, “Bring a gift of laughter...” (Psalm 100:2, MSG).

Science has demonstrated what the Bible already tells us is true. Dr. Lee Berk and fellow researcher Dr. Stanley Tan of California’s Loma Linda University have been studying the effects of laughter and found it reduces blood pressure, decreases stress hormones (epinephrine, dopamine), increases muscle flexion and boosts immune function by raising levels of T-cells, B-cells and gamma interferon. It also causes the release of endorphins, reducing the level of pain, and produces a general sense of well-being. Laughter is good medicine, an emotional purging and a good vitamin for the soul. You feel better and are healthier when you laugh.

Don’t you love being around truly funny people? They make you feel good. Well, each of us can bring laughter to others. The best way is to poke fun at yourself and what you have done. Secondly, look for a source of laughter in common everyday occurrences and “crack a joke” about it.

I remember having to do a very fast C-section for severe fetal distress. I had just loosened the cord around the baby’s neck. As I handed her off to the nurse, I noticed an odd feeling. I had tied my watch and wedding ring in the drawstring of my scrubs, and they were coming untied. I couldn’t break sterility, so I leaned against the operating table, finished the case and without thinking, stepped away from the table. My pants hit the floor! One of the missionary nurses, “lost it,” and went through the operating room door furiously laughing in between saying loudly, “Everyone come in here and see this!” Before long, the incident had the entire staff chuckling.

Laugh with your family. My wife Jody’s dad lived with us with advancing Alzheimer’s. Though he led a rich life of ministry as a college professor, gymnastic coach and mayor of his small town, now he had trouble reading. His memory was largely gone, but he made me laugh. He still loved watching The Three Stooges. His belly laughs were contagious, and before I knew it, I was laughing too!

It is also good to have periodic planned times for fun. If not, you will get consumed by everyday things. When we arrived on the mission field, we had “game night” every Friday evening with the other missionaries. We met at someone’s house, had some good things to eat and played games, did skits and laughed. I can still remember a game night when we all came “dressed” in costumes for Christmas. Have you ever seen a Tropical Santa? I came in a baby blue leisure suit with a huge pillow under it that shook like a “bowl full of jelly” and a beard made out of a surgical mask and cotton balls. I had written an appropriate adaptation of the “12 Days of Christmas” song to go with it. That was 35 years ago, but I still can hear our laughter!

For even more fun, plan parties and celebrations around holidays or other events. We visited our daughter’s family in North Africa around Halloween. All the missionary families gathered for a party in ridiculous costumes, had a watermelon carving contest and had a candy hunt for the kids. We helped to make donuts, and they were a highlight of the evening. Lots of laughter was the liberally spread to oil our souls.

Our staff always celebrated “Bosses Day” (i.e., “Laugh at the Bosses Day”). The theme one year was the Nine to Five movie. Before that day was over, they had tied my COO and me up with computer cords, blindfolded us and “kidnapped” us out of the office in a van. Unbeknownst to us, a staff member was in the vehicle videoing us from the front seat. I had just laughed and said, “All we need now is for a cop to stop us” when I heard a siren. A policeman pulled
us over and told us that we needed to follow him to the station for questioning. He then led us to a picnic spot by the river where our staff had gathered for a raucous party.

Okay, God tells us to laugh, and it is good for us! What can you do to get more laughter in your life and the lives of your family, friends and colleagues? As you do, you will find the added benefit of better morale, reduced stress and more strength for what God has called you to do! Laugh on!

Dr. David Stevens serves as CEO Emeritus of CMDA. He served at Tenwek Hospital in Kenya from 1981 to 1991 and then as medical director for World Medical Mission from 1991 to 1994. He became CEO at CMDA in 1994, a position which he held for the next 25 years. Dr. Stevens and his wife Jody have a son, Jason, and two daughters, Jessica and Stacy, and 10 grandchildren, all of who are involved in domestic or international healthcare ministry.

Virtual Groups Survey

January’s e-Pistle linked to a survey asking about interest in virtual groups for healthcare missionaries. Here are some of the results:

81 percent of respondents were either somewhat or very interested in a virtual group that would meet to provide mutual support, encouragement and prayer. Preferred meeting interval was monthly.

67 percent of respondents expressed interest in a professional development group (missions journal article, medical journal article, case discussion, book discussion). Preferred meeting interval is quarterly.

With these results in mind, stay tuned in the months to come as we seek to bring together a plan to offer virtual groups to help support those of you working in situations where this would be a blessing.

Announcements

Pre-Field Orientation for Healthcare Missionaries will be held August 11-14 in Boone, North Carolina. Would you please do us a favor, and let your sending agency know we offer this conference to any medical personnel who are preparing to serve (physicians, dentists, nurses, allied health personnel)? The conference provides excellent preparation that addresses the unique challenges and opportunities encountered by healthcare missionaries. Spread the word!

CMDA’s Medical Education International (MEI) is the administrator of the exciting new Dietz Scholarship, which aims to facilitate development of servant leaders in medical and dental education from low and middle income countries (as defined by The World Bank). The scholarship funds tuition, fees and expenses for faculty, leadership and/or theological training needed for physicians and dentists to assume academic leadership positions in their nation. Additionally, when fully endowed, the scholarship will help fund applicants to obtain a master’s or doctorate degree. Please make your national colleagues aware of this opportunity and encourage them to apply. Additional details on the scholarship and the scholarship application are available here. The application deadline for the first cycle of funding has been extended until April 30, 2021. Applications received after that date will be considered in the fall cycle of funding.

CMDA is developing FELLOWSHIP [⁺]. This 21-month fellowship is intended for people at inflection points in their career who are feeling God’s call to missions. This may be post education/residency, after return from missionary service overseas or when feeling God’s call toward a transition mid-career. As a community we will live together, seeking God
and preparing to follow His calling for each of us. Part-time professional work will be required in the community, but this also leaves time for soul work. We believe a deep spiritual life is the key ingredient for long-term service. We desire well trained healthcare workers and administrators who have a deep well that is overflowing as they serve. We seek to be a “living fellowship in action.” As we live out Christ’s call where we are—abiding, learning, paying down debt, gaining real world work experience—we also live in intentional preparation to serve wherever He sends us. Locations coming to Detroit, Michigan and Memphis, Tennessee beginning fall 2021. For more information and/or to speak into our efforts, contact Jeff Amstutz, DDS, MBA, at jeff.amstuz@cmda.org or visit us at www.fellowshipplus.org. We welcome your voice and expertise.

Equip International is seeking an additional faculty member for its Missionary Medicine for Physicians (MMP) course, which is scheduled for November 16-20, 2021. MMP is a four-day hands-on course at Equip International, a CME partner of CMDA. It’s designed to help medical providers utilize their skills effectively in the majority world. It is distinct from the Pre-Field Orientation noted above in that it is more clinically focused. Candidates with long-term missions experience in the majority world and firsthand clinical experience with HIV, TB, malaria or gynecologic conditions are encouraged to apply. Equip provides travel, lodging, meals and an honorarium. Interested candidates should contact amorris@brchs.com. For details and registration, click here.