Beyond Our WALLS

Finding Jesus in the Slums of Jakarta

Forewords by
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Beyond Our Walls: Finding Jesus in the Slums of Jakarta

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Chapter 1

The Art of Unlearning

Lord, as the Word you became flesh and blood,
And moved into the neighborhood.
Keep us from trying to take shortcuts in compassion.
Help us resist seeking quick, superficial results.
Please give us the grace to follow your downward mobility
And not just admire it. Amen.
–John Hayes[1]

In October 2010, just a few short months after graduating from university, I found myself in the Jakarta international airport for the first time. It was completely different from any international airport I had ever visited. Everyone seemed strangely subdued, and there was no music blaring over the loudspeakers. Even the architecture and art on the walls contributed to the quiet, museum-like atmosphere. As I waited in the customs line, I found myself making a mental list of the similarities and differences between my first glimpses of Indonesia and my previous experiences in the Philippines during high school.

I had joined Servants to Asia's Urban Poor a month after my graduation from university, and spent a few months training in Vancouver, Canada. "Servants" is an international network of Jesus-following, justice-loving people who live and serve among urban poor communities throughout Asia.[2] I initially encountered Servants in 2006 while attending Urbana.[3] As I heard Servants workers share about God's heart for the more than one billion people who live in slum communities around the world, I was inspired by their vision of inviting foreign missionaries to move into slum communities to seek Jesus's transformation. After listening to their presentation, I walked up to the Servants booth in the huge convention hall and asked, "How old do you have to be to join?"

1 John Hayes, "Incarnational Ministry."

2 Visit *servantsasia.org* to learn more.

3 InterVarsity Christian Fellowship hosts Urbana every three years. See *urbana.org* for more information.

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The friendly person at the booth asked my age.

"Eighteen," I said.

"Well, then, you probably need to be at least twenty. Do a few more years of school, and then contact us."

I was frustrated by this answer, because I felt impatient and restless in America. The three years I spent living in the Philippines in high school left me itching for more.[4] But in time, I realized that God still had a lot to teach me.

Over the next three years of university, most of my learning did not take place in the classroom, but through my involvement with a church community that was trying to take Jesus's words about loving the poor seriously. They welcomed homeless people into their homes, journeyed alongside people struggling with addictions, and strove to make Scripture a central part of their community. My time with this church community helped me learn to love people struggling with poverty in my own country—an important step on my journey back to Asia. After many prayers and tears during my final year of university, I surrendered this beloved community to the Lord, recognizing that the Lord was calling me to take the next step on my journey of following him. I was no longer *running away* from something, but was *being called* somewhere. Though I had to sacrifice a place and people I loved, I embraced the journey ahead with joy, trusting that God was leading me.

In 2010, during my preparation time in Vancouver, I had assumed that the Lord would send me back to the Philippines. I had already spent three years there and was familiar with the culture, and I had been working hard at learning the Filipino language online. But through conversations with my Servants mentor and with different Servants teams, I felt drawn to visit the Jakarta team, as I had an interest in working in a Muslim context.

As I rode in a taxi through Jakarta—the capital city of the most densely inhabited island on earth, in the country with the world's largest Muslim population—scenes of dizzyingly tall skyscrapers, wildly weaving motorcycles, and dancing monkeys on chains flashed by my window. I saw glimpses of immense wealth and snatches of hidden poverty. Jakarta reminded me of Metro Manila, but on a much larger scale.

4 My parents served with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Looking back, I admire my parents' courage in moving three kids—ages five, twelve, and fourteen—across the world in the aftermath of September 11. Moving our family to the Philippines was my parents' way of living out an alternative response to the warfare that the United States government was waging as the solution to September 11. They wanted to demonstrate to their children that Jesus calls us to love our enemies, not bomb them. We spent three years in Metro Manila.

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Over the three weeks that followed, I explored the slum community where the Servants team lived, and I spent many hours praying and conversing with teammates. I was discerning whether I would join them long-term. The team was made up of two couples, one toddler, and one single female. They were praying for another single female to join them. Was this the country the Lord was inviting me to serve in, with this group of people?

People always talk about what you learn by going somewhere new and meeting new people, but I was being invited to *unlearn* many of the things that had been ingrained in me since childhood. In twenty-first-century American culture, one ingrained truth is that we should be productive. As a result, we measure our self-worth by our achievements: good grades, higher education, or professional, high-salaried job.

In the slums of Jakarta, the Servants team invited me to *be* rather than try to achieve something, and to focus on *listening* to my Indonesian neighbors rather than doing something for them. This process of *unlearning* has been ongoing—and often painful. But over the years, I have begun to realize that my worth in God's eyes is *not* tied to how much I can accomplish in a day, but it is intrinsic to who I am as a beloved child of God. When I live from this sense of being beloved by God, I can respond with deeds of love. I have also had to *unlearn* the belief that my worth is attached to what I do. And I've had to *unlearn* my tendency to place myself on a pedestal of pride and pretend to be God. While work is good (and part of our calling by God), I can also pray, rest, and worship, because my worth is not determined by what I produce.

Entering this new country and culture as a learner, I had to reckon with my limitations: I did not speak the language; I did not know anything about the culture; and I most definitely did not understand life in a slum community. To approach these limitations as a learner, I had to become vulnerable and invite others to teach me, like a baby, for I could not speak and did not know how to survive by myself. I also needed to learn to "suffer kindness" by allowing the people around me to offer generous hospitality—even though I knew that they barely had enough money to put food on their own tables.

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One evening, my teammate took me to visit an *ibu* (literally "mother," though the term can be used for any adult woman). This ibu was seventy years old, which is very old for people in Indonesia, and she lived in a room about the size of my aunt's laundry room. She had a sixteen-year-old grandson who lived with her, but since he studied at school across town, he was gone from five in the morning until eight in the evening.

As I sat in the tiny room of this seventy-year-old ibu, she kept giving me her peanuts and crackers. At first, I wanted to politely refuse her food, along with the food that other neighbors kept offering me. But then I thought of a phrase that I once heard, "suffer the kindness of strangers," and I realized that I am poor in many ways and have much to receive from these neighbors, who are so rich in generosity, kindness, strength, and resilience.

I fell in love with the people in the slum community, and my time with them was a gift, filled with joy. The three weeks went by too quickly, and I did not want to leave. I sensed God inviting me to return long-term so that I could continue to learn from the Indonesian people. I also sensed my need to *unlearn* many of the assumptions of my twenty-first-century American upbringing. Visiting this beautiful grandmother in her shack, I realized that she had much to teach me about God's kingdom—things I had never learned in my years of studying the Bible.

On my flight back to North America, where I would spend the Christmas holidays with my family before moving permanently to Indonesia, I made a humorous list of why I was glad to be moving to Jakarta rather than Manila. My top three reasons were: (1) No loud karaoke in slums; (2) stray cats are less scary than stray dogs; (3) Indonesian food is delicious!

In January 2011, I arrived at the hushed Jakarta airport for the second time; I was moving to my new home in Bandung where I would attend language school for two months before moving into the slum community with the rest of the Servants team. Instead of paying to rent my own apartment or house, my teammates found an Indonesian family to host me. I had my own room and bathroom but shared two meals a day with my host family. Living with a host family was an incredible way to learn, as it plunged me into the culture and gave me opportunities to practice the language in my daily life. My host mom and older sisters worked as maids in middle-class homes, and the men in the household were construction workers and motorcycle taxi drivers.

Local children became not only my best friends, but also my culture and language guides. The children did not judge me when I made mistakes, and

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they introduced me to many parts of Sundanese culture.[5] They welcomed me with grace and astounded me with their abundant love, always eager to pull me into their games. Whenever we walked somewhere, they asked to hold my hand, and I wondered if it was for my protection, or theirs? Was it to show off to the world, "here is my *bule* (pronounced "boo-lay," meaning "white-skinned foreigner") friend?" Or simply an act of friendship?

One day, they held my hand and guided me through winding alleyways to follow a circumcision parade. There were men on stilts dressed in vibrant costumes. Boys were lifted up high on a platform, decorated with colorful lion heads. Loud music blared as they processed down the street. This Sundanese tradition was a vivid reminder that I was living in a very different world.

I learned my numbers and colors from my nine-year-old host sister, who also taught me to play a Sundanese version of jacks. While her small hands grasped the smooth ocean shells confidently, their rounded forms were foreign to my hands. As I watched her lift two, then four, then ten shells from the tile floor with ease, I was humbled, no longer able to cling to my excuse of having small hands as the reason for my failure to excel at this game.

Her long black hair hung in layers against her shoulders and then cascaded down her back. She smiled at my continued awkward attempts to play, and I could see that she now felt comfortable with me around. I felt that I had found a new home, where roosters crowed at all hours of the day, cats fought on the corrugated metal roofs, spicy chili sauce was part of every meal, clothes were always hanging from lines in the courtyard below, and two-year-old neighbors called my name over and over again.

When Jesus tells his disciples to enter the kingdom like a child, I wondered if he was inviting me to blow bubbles, trust the children who were constantly expressing care to me, and laugh while smacking bouncy balls around. As I played with these children, they taught me how to be more creative and resourceful as they joined rubber bands together to make a high jump bar, turned discarded cardboard boxes into chairs, and transformed the common courtyard into a play marketplace.

In many ways, I was like a child—learning my numbers, colors, animals—and learning how to do simple things in new ways—hand-washing my laundry, trying new foods, using a toilet with water instead of

5 The Sundanese are the second largest ethnic group in Indonesia, second only to Javanese. Both ethnicities are from the island of Java but have unique languages and cultures.

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