

The Little Red Riding Hood

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It was pitch dark; the stars were shining down upon us. I directed my black six-inch flashlight into the distance; one mile out, a crowd of kids from all directions began to run toward us. Among them, I spot a dark skinned Cambodian girl, who no older than six years old. She wore a red jacket with the hood over her head. The children continued to run, as if their dreams were at the tip of their fingers. They must see people like us every day, tourists. Walking, stumbling and grasping the air for something to hang on to, we waded through Phnom Penh's accumulation of garbage towards the children. It reeked of dead animals and rotten food. This is where, during the blazing hot days, adults and children alike work. At night around all that trash, they sleep. Under a "hut" made from small pieces of fabrics sown together, they make their home.

It was April 15th, 2006. Fourteen schoolmates and I, along with two leaders, boarded a plane to Cambodia for what we called a "mission trip." Unaware of what experiences lay ahead we left Hong Kong. With the prospect of skipping two days of school, this trip was looking like it was a win win situation. We were excited to explore a new city, be away from home, and most importantly be free of stressful thinking for a few days; the homework, the tests and all the responsibilities that come with being a student. With that in mind, we arrived in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

As I walked through the mountain of waste, I shined the small beam of light to the ground as my classmates and I stepped carefully, dodging pit falls and broken glass. As I lifted my feet off the ground to take each step, I concentrated on each piece of garbage staring into my eyes; rotten apple, little pieces of chicken bones. Everything I have seen before sitting in the dark blue garbage bin under the kitchen cabinet at home. The garbage bin that I constantly throw left over chicken fat in, the garbage bin that's also a home to many rats. I constantly tapped my jeans pocket just to make sure my phone had not somehow been stolen. If I accidentally fell into a hole, my phone was the only thing that could save me from being buried under piles and piles of trash.

I spent a large amount of time worrying about being protected from the environment. White and dark blue Adidas shoes, creased jeans and a pink t-shirt with "Celebrate Jesus 2006" written on the front; was my shield. We were told to wear shoes to prevent stepping on unhygienic needles and garbage. The jeans were to keep the dust and the dirt from having much contact with my legs. I was also told to wear a long sleeve t-shirt and a mask, but it was almost 70 degrees Fahrenheit; dressing like it was winter did not seem to fit.

In one ear, I could hear my teacher yelling "Walk this way and keep your eyes to the ground! Be careful!" In the other ear, I could hear the footsteps of little Cambodian kids walking up to us. I wondered if we were like aliens to them, yet we are the very aliens whom they depend on for food.

For a few split seconds, it was as if I had a third ear. I could hear hundreds of flies over the mountains of waste, the hundreds of flies that surrounded each of us. My next step took me onto an unstable block of wood. Slowly I brought my back foot forward to balance myself like I was on a surfboard. Knees bent, they felt weak but they held me up and prevented me from falling forward. The last thing I want to do was make a scene

I continued to shine my beam of light in all directions. I lifted my head from the ground and caught glimpses of my friends, teachers and the unknown strangers. I saw little huts built all around us on the mountains. Beyond the thick layer of fog created by flaming waste, I could see the residents were getting closer and closer to us.

Only a few of the adults were wearing shoes; the rest were running barefoot. The children's clothing, tattered and worn, looked like they were sourced from the very ground they were walking on. Some children were even fully naked. These people were full-time residents of this garbage dump. They work as trash pickers every day from dawn till dusk; each family on average living on two US dollars a day. As I'm looking at them, my mind automatically wanders to my closet at home. I remember waking up for school and staring at my piles of clothes, facing – what I thought was – the tough decision of choosing my outfit for the day. That thought left me feeling a little un-easy.

We were standing on mountains compiled of the city's trash; mountains that were actually homes to many Cambodians. A mere hour earlier, my friends and I were sitting on the third floor of "Khmer Thai", one of the most popular restaurants in Phnom Penh. Looking out the balcony to other well-known bars and restaurants around, our conversation involved complaints about the heat, the dust and the muckiness of Phnom Penh streets. Without noticing our selfishness, we continued on talking with ignorance and leaving left over food on the table because we were full already. Now I wonder how many people those few pieces of pork left on the table can feed.

I took a deep breath as I shined the flashlight forward. I could hear my classmates mumble to my right ear but I was distracted. I looked in a distance to find myself blinded by a light that was getting closer. By the time I adjusted my vision to the light, the unknown strangers that were running a minute ago were suddenly standing in front of us.

My flashlight, at this point, was shining down on their bare feet, all of which were looking worn and scratched up. I could hear flies buzzing around their unwashed body. I looked around and suddenly a little six-year-old girl caught my eyes. For a few seconds, the world around me stopped. The flies stopped flying, the repulsive garbage smell disappeared and all I could see was this little girl. She was wearing a red jacket, which was long enough to cover her knees. Her bare feet scraped up like a million paper cuts. The small amount of hair uncovered by her hood was filled with dust. As these thoughts about her continue to appear in my head, her eyes suddenly opened wide and looked at me in despair. In return, I smiled. We probably looked at each other for only a few seconds, but I will never forget the look she gave me. I named her "Little Red Riding Hood."

Although she was in a crowd of children as well as adults, something in her eyes left me at a lost for words. I imagined living life through her eyes and it made me cringe. I imagined every day is the same for her, she wakes up and sleeps to the mountains of garbage, she walks around all day digging around the piles for recycled cans. Everything I've accomplished, everything I had in my room; my toys and my stuffed animals, they all suddenly meant nothing because I would be just another malnourished kid running around barefoot on these mountains surviving on a piece of bread or less every day.

I could see the desolation in her eyes, but I could also see sparks of hope fighting to be liberated. It was an uncomfortable moment of silence. A part of me pondered the question of whether anything I did could make a difference, including a smile. I don't know if I should've smiled. After my eyes started wandering again, a million more questions ran through my mind. What was she thinking? Should I have walked towards her? Who do her parents do? Were her parents' watching me staring intently into her eyes? Did they think I was a psycho about to kidnap their daughter? How did Little Red Riding Hood interpret my smile? What's her story? The language barrier created a wall in which these questions could not be answered, even if I tried, but the best I could've done was hold her in a hug and showed her I loved her. But sometimes our body and our mind take over, and we forget how to show love.

I shifted my feet nervously. I looked at my classmates; they all had smiles on their face. I quietly wondered if their smiles were genuine or if their minds were racing with a million thoughts. I replayed the scene over and over again in my head. What happened? I've seen poverty in China, in Thailand and in the Philippines, but this was nothing like that. I felt a nudge in my heart to express my thoughts but at the same time all I wanted to do was crawl back into my bubble of comfort. I was terrified.

I wanted to get out. As if the teachers heard me, we were soon heading back to the hotel for our daily reflection meeting afterwards. We would laugh, play games and complain again, as if nothing had happened. I secretly wanted to be home, in Hong Kong. I wanted to be with my family, I wanted my "comfort zone." Somehow in my head, being home meant I wouldn't have to think about what I had seen. I wouldn't have to talk about it with anyone. I could go back to my selfish lifestyle, in which I traveled the world, went out with friends, and was able to buy and eat anything I wanted.

I snapped out of my daydreaming stage and looked around again. I finally heard my classmates mingling with each other. They no longer seemed like mannequins with a smile on their face. My stomach began to grumble, I had a lot of chicken curry and rice for dinner. There was no way I could've been hungry. I felt queasy. Was it guilt traveling through my body? The guilt of living a fortunate life, or the guilt of not giving Little Red Riding Hood a hug?

I was scared. Being in this environment of dirt, garbage, heat and a lack of food was a terrifying concept. If my being here meant losing what I had at home, from my talking Tigger sitting on my bed waiting for my return. Fortunately, somewhere along the way, I recalled the small sparkle of desire and hope in "Little Red Riding Hood's" eyes, and realized if she was fighting for love- who are we to not give love?

It wasn't until I was back in Hong Kong when I finally understood the reason that led these residents to desolate poverty – genocide during the late 1970s. Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge political party ruled from 1975 to 1979. During this time, over two million Cambodians were murdered through political executions, starvation, and forced labor. This genocide killed off everyone who had power, everyone who had the least bit of education, and anyone who was capable of rebelling. Some were able to flee, escaping the torture of Pol Pot but were faced with the loss of family members. After the Pol Pot regime, the whole of Cambodia and the people was left with nothing, but each other.

As I learnt about their past, I began to understand that despite all they have gone through and all that they continue to go through they still continue to live their life regardless of its meagerness. They don't complain about the things that they don't have because they have each other. In their hearts they hope for a better life but they're most content with being alive and having loved ones around them. I wonder if that's the kind of love I'm living out on a daily basis.

As I stumbled past the empty cans, the broken glasses and the unstable blocks, I was sure that would be the last I'd see of this mountain. Maybe a part of me was secretly hoping it was. The despair that these people were going through left a striking discomfort in my heart. I was sixteen years old and did not see Cambodia as a part of my future travels.

Thinking back to those five minutes of heartache I felt from the simple look of Little Red Riding Hood, I honestly say you never know which direction life brings you. Three years later from that fateful day, I've returned for two weeklong trips and spent a year living in Phnom Penh volunteering as a first grade teacher assistant. My time there also led me to co-produce a documentary, "The Forgotten Children", about the people who first made me turn my back and run.

The documentary started out as a senior project, as something we were required to do. But as we traveled and documented the life on the garbage dump, I realized it was the beginning of a journey in my life. Every trip I took was like taking one extra step out of my comfort zone. Till this day, the image of "Little Red Riding Hood" and all her surroundings lay vividly in my mind knowing I will never stop going back to the people I've fallen in love with.

To this day, I can still hear my teacher yelling at us to be careful. I can still hear the delicate footsteps of those Cambodian children. I can still hear the buzzing noises from the hundreds of flies' circle-ling around us. The smell, the sights, the feel of it all and the looks of the kids' faces continue to linger. In retrospect I was pretty naive then and some might argue that I still am. But there is no doubt in my mind that I wouldn't have gained the appreciation of life and my family that I have now having not taken that trip.

Now, back in my "comfort zone" I still look back to those days I spent in Cambodia. Sometimes fondly and sometimes still saddened by what I witnessed. Those eyes though, are still fresh in my mind. Little Red Riding Hood is a constant reminder of who I used to be; that one man's trash is another man's treasure.

I've come a long way in the last four years. And I don't plan on stopping.