

Broken Works Best

By the same author:

God Knows Your Name

Under the Rainbow

Rainbows for Rainy Days

Broken Works Best

When God turns your pain into gain

Catherine Campbell

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*Dedicated to
the brave children
of Mae La Mu*

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Prologue

I am a coward, and not embarrassed to say so.

Heights terrify me, the sight of a mouse will send me running, but roller coasters take me beyond the pale. They are something else. They make my blood run cold.

The worldwide appeal of being pulled up steep iron tracks in a small metal car, high above the ground, only to be suddenly and violently hurled in the opposite direction, whilst whizzing around sharp bends, escapes me. The dichotomy of squealing in terror one minute and yelling with obvious delight the next during the two-minute thrill-ride consistently puzzles me, and is at odds with my longing for a safe existence.

Yet the term “roller coaster” had not been mentioned when I slipped into the back seat of a 4x4 truck a few hours earlier. As my head hit the ceiling one more time, I wondered if somehow a short theme-park ride would be almost preferable to my present journey. Still, at least we were in contact with the ground... for the most part!

Catching the young Thai driver's bemused expression in the rear-view mirror, I realized that the moans, stifled groans and occasional squeals of three middle-aged ladies would undoubtedly fuel his conversation when he returned later that night to Mae Sariang.

Thankfully, it was the dry season.

On this occasion clouds of dust were preferable to the torrential rain and mudslides of the rainy season as we

made our way along the mountain road to Mae La Mu. The tarmac road was by now many miles behind us, and our little convoy of four trucks continued along a mud track cut out of and around the mountainous terrain of the Thai–Burma border. The scenery was both fabulous and frightening as our vehicle came much too close to the cliff edge on more than one occasion. The tossing about in the cab provided a welcome diversion at times, shifting our concern from matters of safety to our ability to actually stay in our seats. Conversation was virtually at a standstill; we spoke in staccato snatches as we bumped over innumerable hard clay ridges.

“What on earth made the UN put this refugee camp so far from civilization?” I managed to verbalize during the relief of a few hundred yards of fairly flat road.

“Looks like they want to keep its location a secret.”

“Or... they want to make sure no one can escape from it.”

Either response was probably not far from the truth. This was surely the long road to nowhere, leading to a bleak place on a troubled border that the rest of the world would rather forget.

“Remember, no photographs until we reach the orphanage! Keep your windows closed! No stopping on the way!”

The words chilled our excitement.

The trucks having been checked for “ghosts” (unregistered refugees), our little convoy was waved through the gate of Mae La Mu. And we entered an altogether different world.

The mud road through the refugee camp was narrow. The sights around us, harrowing.

No one spoke.

Wood-and-bamboo huts lined the road, inches apart. They all looked the same – rickety, leaf-roofed homes, built on log stilts to let the flood waters of the rainy season run underneath to the river below. Thin interwoven bamboo strips provided walls of sorts – an attempt at privacy in this less-than-private world. Mangy chickens ran around little piles of wood, pecking at what, I didn't know; eating dirt in the absence of anything better. Skinny dogs were everywhere, while down at the river's edge a few men were making an attempt at fishing. But it was the dry season. The river water was very low, so their success would be limited. Indeed, their endeavours were virtually pointless.

And the bank on the other side of the river was Burma – home.

Home to these displaced people. So near and yet so far. Driven out by their own government; burnt out of their homes; tortured; tormented; starved; murdered. All because they are a tribal people – the Karen – and many of them Christian believers.

Yard after weary yard, we painstakingly made our way through the UN camp, which, built on the side of a mountain, housed 15,000 people. The road was barely wide enough to accommodate our 4x4. People had to step on to the rough clay verge to allow us through, and occasionally – just occasionally – my eyes would meet with those of a man or woman for whom Mae La Mu was their enforced home.

The glancing exchange revealed pain in the raw.

Looking into the eyes of the dejected... the forsaken... the hated... the hopeless: recognizing that the disdain in those same eyes was directed towards us. These people

don't want charity. They would rather grow their own rice; educate their own children; live in their own land; worship in freedom.

Trucks laden with food only serve to remind them of what they have become. Like the many foreigners who had come before us, we were trespassers in their dark world, needed but not welcome. The windows of the vehicle may have been tightly closed but the pervasive stench of hopelessness easily oozed in through the vents.

Unexpectedly the truck screeched to a halt, throwing us forward.

"Oh no," groaned my friend from the front seat, as we strained forward, trying to see the cause of her distress. "That dog's back legs are broken!"

The pathetic puppy was trying to drag its back end across the narrow road, while people simply ignored its existence, never mind its pain. No one cared – it was just a dog, after all. And as I watched the empty faces that fronted devastated lives, my heart cried: "*Everything's* broken here, Lord!"

The smiling faces of children and teenagers soon helped to lift our spirits as we finally exited our roller-coaster cab and walked up the long steep path to the orphanage. Their willing hands carrying bag after bag of supplies, they covered the rough terrain with ease, as sure-footed as mountain goats. Happy chatter replaced silent stares. Laughing echoed along the path. It was hard to believe we were still in the same place. And for a short time the atmosphere matched the bright sunshine of a truly beautiful day.

"How old are you?"

"Do you have a brother?"

“How many children do you have?”

We were perfect fodder for practising English conversation, the one vital school subject that might just lead to a work permit from the Thai authorities – a ticket out of this prison without parole. They came as children seeking safety; now, young adults, they were trapped, unwanted by the countries that flanked their jungle home.

In return they answered our questions.

“My father died when our village was attacked.”

“My mother died in the jungle when we were trying to escape.”

“My little sister died of malaria because we had no medicine.”

“I lost my leg when I stood on a landmine.”

And the smiles briefly slipped from the faces of these children, who had seen things that should be alien to the young; who had experienced heartache of cataclysmic proportions. My eyes scanned the edge of the group to the quiet sufferers – those who, as yet, had been unable to put their horrors into words, hiding dreadful secrets in their hearts.

Knowing what we did made it difficult to teach the Bible memory verse we had chosen for our visit. Our little team felt such heartache in sharing words that were such a vital reality for these children: easily spoken in the West, but deeply felt amongst these damaged young lives. Yet their loud, strong voices echoed back words written by the prophet Isaiah many centuries earlier, bringing us the comfort that we had hoped to deliver to them: “Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Don’t lose hope, for I am your God. I will make you strong and help you” (Isaiah 41:10 NLT, adapted).

As I looked into the beautiful faces of 171 children, my resolve began to waver. Old questions that I thought

I had laid to rest years earlier began to surface, as I heard myself question God on their hopeless plight. And then, as if to condemn my doubting thoughts, they began to sing – singing such as I had never heard before. Faces heavenward; hands raised or clutched to their chests; voices raised in unashamed praise of their wonderful Saviour. A sound that undoubtedly reached the throne-room of Heaven as a sweet-smelling sacrifice of praise, bringing joy to the Father’s heart. Guilt mixed easily with my sorrow as I recognized an old Gaither tune I knew so well, now sung by some of the bravest people I have ever met:

*Because He lives I can face tomorrow,
Because He lives all fear is gone,
Because I know, I know who holds the future.
And life is worth the living just because He lives.*

Extract taken from the song “Because He Lives” by William & Gloria Gaither. Copyright © 1971 Gaither Music Company/
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And I wept.

Silence once more filled the cab of the silver truck as we slowly made our way back through the camp towards the manned gate. Each of us was busy with our own thoughts of the children and young people we had met, of the horrendous stories we had been told. Why did it have to be this way? It was all so unfair; cruel, even. All around us I could sense the darkness of despair once more. Women and children in their thousands, with so few men, each burdened with a heavy sorrow I could do nothing about. The orphanage was different to the rest of this oppressed

place. Somehow, at the back of this dark world, perched on a rocky hill, was a place of joy, laughter – and even hope.

A smile crossed my face as God planted a comforting thought in my mixed-up emotions:

Their singing doesn't only reach Heaven, Catherine. They are my "city set on a hill, that cannot be hidden". They are the light in this dark world. (Matthew 5:14, paraphrase.)

As I watched the people turn their heads away as we drove past, I realized that strangers cannot reach the hearts of these broken people. But the songs of other broken people, reaching down through that miserable place day after day, could.

They are not forgotten by God. Instead, He makes His presence felt and His love known through the lives of 171 children every day in Mae La Mu.

The big gate clunked shut behind us. Our young driver turned the key in the ignition as I grabbed the steadying strap hanging above me. In a cloud of dust we were off, and as my nose pressed against the glass I whispered: "Broken definitely works best here, Lord."

ONE

BE PREPARED

Pain – part of the package

I don't know what it is about a newborn baby that captures your heart so completely.

Perhaps it's the sight of perfection in miniature: the tiny toes and fingers; the wrinkled skin that looks almost too big for such a small frame, while feeling softer than the exquisite work of the rarest silkworm. Or maybe it's the unrepeatable expressions that cross her beautiful face as she sleeps; the smell of baby powder; her utter dependence on you for her every need. I just don't know.

I only know that, from the first day we set eyes on her, our firstborn stole my heart, as well as that of her proud daddy. Beautiful, blue-eyed and blonde, she wrapped her little life tighter around ours with each passing day.

Then, barely seven months later, words spoken by a paediatrician swept over us like a tornado. Wreaking havoc, they turned our hitherto ordered lives upside down. Those words branded our child, destroyed our plans, devastated our family, clouded our future, and broke our hearts.

"Mrs Campbell," he said, "don't you realize your little girl is handicapped? She will never be normal."

The anguish of soul that followed such a damning diagnosis catapulted my life into a very dark place of pain, confusion, disbelief and despair.

The tragedies of life have a way of doing that, don't they? One minute life is wonderful, and the next, everything is falling apart. What was previously sure and certain suddenly falters. The present melts into a chaotic state; the future no longer holds what you had planned.

Survival, at some level, becomes the daily challenge.

Even simple physical chores seem insurmountable. Decision-making is often one step too far. And tears, anger and denial are constantly battling for prime position in an already cluttered mind; to say nothing of the pain – that constant tormenter of the life you never thought would be yours.

And none of it makes any sense.

Especially for those who know God as our Father, Jesus as our Saviour and the Holy Spirit as our teacher.

What went so terribly wrong here? What happened to Fatherly protection? Why did God not come up with the goods when I needed Him? Where was the promised happy life now? Have I been struck down, struck out, judged, condemned, forgotten or, worse still, ignored?

Heartache wasn't part of the deal.

The deal was that I give up my sin and become a follower of Jesus. Jesus lives in me through the presence of His Holy Spirit, and His forgiveness, love and peace give me the life I have always dreamed of. A joy-filled, purpose-driven, exciting life of walking with God. He could have everything; my life, my career and my home were dedicated to Him. That was what I had signed up to, willingly and wholeheartedly.

I loved Him.

He already had all of me.

Why did He have to break my heart?

It's funny how we think we have life all worked out. Every single area of our lives is organized and filed away in such neat little compartments. Family, work, home, friends, church; each of the portions that make up who we are is divided into manageable pieces. Pieces that, when working in harmony, produce a pleasant carefree world for us both to enjoy and feel productive in.

Life, however, is never quite that simple. In fact, the life we are called to live in Jesus is alien to the one we would normally choose. The only problem is, few of us have read the small print.

Suffering, pain and heartache become the magnifying glass that lets us see what this life with Jesus is really all about.

We ignore the small print at our peril!

For when one of our "essentials for a happy life" starts showing cracks, or worse still, violently implodes, we discover the package doesn't contain what we thought. There is more in there than we bargained for.

Or perhaps it should not have come as such a surprise. Could it be that we were only interested in the "good" bits? The truth was not, in fact, hidden. Heartache is out there; suffering wrecks lives. We simply prefer to believe that God wouldn't let it happen to us.

What would we think of a construction engineer in Christchurch, New Zealand, who ignored the tectonic fault line running under the country, because "it might never happen"? How would we feel if he built homes unable to withstand the force of an earthquake because the sun usually shines in New Zealand? How would we judge his professionalism, his ethics, his humanity, if one day the earth shook and rubble was all that was left? We