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Slices of Papua New Guinea Life
- Aretta Loving

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I was part of a LAMP seminar with Wycliffe Bible Translators in Wewak, Papua New Guinea in 1984 led by Betty Sue and Tom Brewster. At that point, 25 years into our work with Wycliffe, I wondered what we were to do next. Our two daughters were grown and on their own, we had completed the Awa New Testament, and all that had been my purpose in life was changing. After the Wewak seminar I was asked to write about our language learning experience with the Awas for Brewster's 1985, *Community is My Language Classroom*. I titled the article "Communicating the Gospel—With a Burning Nose".¹

When we first came to New Guinea in 1959 we thought that since the Gospel is such good news, when people heard it in their own language they would quickly throw away their old practices and turn to the Lord. We still strongly believe in evangelizing and discipling people in their own language, but it was just not as simple as we had first thought it would be. In those early days we were thrilled to be living with the people to whom God had called us.

This was the moment I had looked forward to since I was twelve. The summer before I turned twelve, I had gone to an American Missionary Fellowship Bible camp. We slept outdoors under California redwoods at night, heard God's Word proclaimed each morning, and swam in the Russian River each afternoon. There I came to know Jesus as Savior. The next summer, at that same camp, I told God I wanted to be a missionary. My commitment never wavered.

When I was about to enter my freshman year of high school, I argued with my mother, "I don't want to take typing! I'm going to be a missionary, not a secretary." Fortunately, Mom had the final word. Who would have dreamed this missionary would be the secretary who typed drafts of the entire Awa New Testament as many as five times in those years we were translating?

Learning Awa

During our first years in the village, it was evident to us that an Awa man's older brother was the most important person in his life. When an Awa man is accused of wrongdoing, his older

¹ Read the article to learn what the Awa mean by "a burning nose."

brother comes and stands at his right side and answers the charges against his younger brother. If necessary, he even physically protects him from his accusers. The person who does this is called an *ehnehinani* in the Awa language, and this expression fits in beautifully for translating “advocate” in I John 2:1 , “If any man sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” So to speak of Jesus being the Christians’ older brother and filling the role of the *ehnehinani* as he stands by our side, answering the accusations and defending us against the attacks of the devil, is a beautiful redemptive analogy for the Awas!

When first trying to communicate the Gospel to the Awas, Ed was careful to get feedback as he taught by asking them to retell what he had attempted to say. By doing this, he was able to correct any wrong messages immediately. He was often surprised at how much difference there was between what he *thought* he was saying and what they *told* him he was saying. It’s one thing to be able to talk about gardens, babies, and pigs, but something else to communicate spiritual truth! He was teaching from John’s gospel and when he got into the third chapter the Awas understood him to be saying, “Unless you give birth to someone, you can’t go to be where God rules.” Certainly not what Ed, or St. John for that matter, had in mind! Worse still, Ed didn’t seem to be able to correct it at that time. Later we learned that the language required actor for the one who gives birth to a person. So we translated it as, “Unless the Holy Spirit gives birth to a person, he cannot go where God rules.”



Aretta reading stories from the Gospel of Mark to the Awa women.²

² *Slices of Life* Loving 2000, 72.

Worthless People

As I sat nursing Karen one day, Tipea, one of the young women, moved over close to me and asked, “Oretta, have you become a worthless, good-for-nothing person?” By this time we knew their culture well enough to realize why she would ask such a question. They had accepted us as people rather than spirits of their ancestors, but what kind of people were we, anyway? Who else but worthless, good-for-nothing people would “throw away” their village, their relatives, their aging parents, their gardens, their pigs—all that made life worth living—and travel day after day over “a trail of water,” then a couple days over a mountains trail to a village not their own, and then spend the days just sitting and talking, rather than making gardens or tending pigs? One day as I was sitting on the ground with the women – scratching flea bites – the women were sitting and watching, as though they had appointed Tipea to ask me the question all had been wondering about. “Have you and Honey become worthless people?”

“No, Tipea,” I answered, “Honey and I haven’t become worthless people. We came here to tell you and your people about our ‘Creator-Father who is there’ (Our God who is alive)! If we had not come, no one would yet be able to tell you about Him.” At that point my ability in the Awa language wasn’t enough to even tell them that this Creator-Father “very much wanted each one of them in His liver”—that is, loved each one of them greatly. As Tipea faced me, I felt the look in her eyes was asking me another question, *Could anything be that important? So important that a person would throw away all those things that make up life itself?*

That evening as I told Ed about this strangest-of-all questions the women had asked me, we were reminded of Jesus’ words in Mark 8:35 The person who throws away his own thinking because he wants to follow me and tell the good news will have real life” (Awa New Testament, back-translated into English).

A Mother’s Heart

Becoming a mother caused me to be even more accepted by the Awa women. Though I had declined their invitation to stay in the village and allow the women to help me deliver my baby down in their birth huts, we had returned to the village with her being carried over the trail cozily nested in a string bag like the ones they carried their babies in. And I breast-fed my baby like they did. The first time I nursed Karen outdoors a cry went out through the whole village, “Come quickly! Oretta is going to feed Kehrani (Karen)!”

Neither of our daughters ever hindered me from spending time with the people and learning the Awa language. To the contrary, they provided a common bond between me and the women, as well as opening up areas of conversation about women things.

Growing and maturing with our girls brought interesting responses from my ‘mother’s heart’. On furlough our girls were often greeted with “Oh, you must be the daughters of Ed and Aretta Loving!” Then one day while on furlough I called the Wycliffe Associates office and got the response, “Oh, I know you! You’re Karen Loving’s mother!” She went on to tell me about “that wonderful article Karen had written.”³ In that article we saw once again our daughter’s commitment to the Lord, even in the midst of the trauma she faced her first year after leaving New Guinea. It was titled *Girl without a Country* and I share portions of it here because it speaks to a mother’s heart.

Numbly I stood watching the car drive off into the distance. All that was familiar was fast disappearing over the horizon. I wanted to run after the car and cry, “Take me home. I don’t belong here!” but I couldn’t move. Although this campus was to be my new home, I knew it could never take the place of what I called home.

I thought back over the many happy years of life in New Guinea and longed for familiar faces and for Pudgy, my dog. Pudgy had understood my every mood. Here no one understood me. I was a foreigner; the only bond between me and the USA was my citizenship. In my heart, I felt that was a very weak bond.

During the next few weeks I had so many new experiences that I often felt confused and out of place. The five girls I lived with were not Christians. How different from our teachers in PNG were my professors! They didn’t seem to care about the students. Classes were large and impersonal. In the dining hall I couldn’t eat because of all the activity and noise around me. At home meal times had always been quiet and unhurried. I’d never seen so many people eating together at one time—and so fast!

I learned quickly that my life depended on the early morning “meetings,” when I’d find a quiet place and spend time with God. I dreaded each new day, but as I took it to the Lord, He gave me the strength to meet the tasks before me.

“Karen, I was a stranger among My people. I was alone and yet not alone. The crowds followed Me and so did my twelve disciples, but they didn’t understand Me or My purpose, or where I’d come from. But My Father was always there, just as I am always here when you need Me.”

For the first time in my life I began to understand a little of what Christ’s coming to earth really meant. I could identify with His feeling of loneliness. Christ had gone through so much; He understood, and I knew He could help me. I gave Him my confusion, loneliness, fear, homesickness, and culture shock. In their place He began to fill me with love and peace. Things didn’t change

³ Karen had won and Missionary Kid contest sponsored by *In Other Words*, Wycliffe USA’s publication.

overnight, but He was always there guiding me over the rough spots, comforting me in my times of homesickness, and being a friend in times of loneliness.

A couple of years have passed, and I've changed schools. I'm finishing my third year of nursing and now I love college. Yet I'm still a foreigner here. Will the United States ever be home to me? I don't know. But I do know that I have a perfect home waiting for me in heaven and a loving Father guiding me day by day until I reach that perfect home!⁴

The Leaf has Fallen

Both Karen and Tressa have fond memories of growing up in Papua New Guinea. We attribute that in no small part to those support workers who served at Ukarumpa as children's home parents and the dedicated schoolteachers. A fiction-based-on-fact article that Tressa wrote for an advanced placement high school English class showed us not only that her talent for writing blossomed under these devoted teachers but also that she longed to see Awa people come to know Jesus. Her story was called, *The Leaf Has Fallen*.

He was a wizened old man, toothless and ancient. As young as I was, whenever I saw him, I had a vague feeling that he resembled a dried and wrinkled prune. He clung to life, the last leaf on the tree with the snow swirling down. His hair, snow white and fluffy, was a great contrast to his black leathery skin and was the only softness he had. The rest of him was hard; just gaunt bones with skin stretched over his slight skeleton, dried but with dips and wrinkles.

So I saw him when I came around the beehive house. The *kunai* grass thatch that was left on the house was thick with soot. The bamboo walls sagged.... My eyes were riveted on a stick the old man clutched in his gnarled hands. The stick seemed to be an extension of the man, somehow like a branch of a tree. Just then a breeze tumbled down. The "branch" swayed. Terror grabbed my heart and I fled.

A few days passed before I gained courage to go back; by then, my curiosity was stronger than my fear.... Once again I came upon the clearing and rounded the house. There he sat cross-legged in exactly the same position as I had last seen him. He tightly clutched the hooked stick, a vague resemblance to the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*.... How many days I spied on him I do not remember. Every day he sat in the same place and hardly moved. I suppose he would never have known I was around if one day I hadn't dared to venture within a few feet of him. He looked up, startled, and it wasn't until later that I knew he was blind. I did know, however, that his eyes had a grotesque blank stare, and once again I turned to run. But his words stopped me, "*Nannahnoe, aiq seno?*" (My little friend, you've come?). His words were low, slurred, but in that moment I knew in my

⁴ *Slices of Life*. Loving 2000, 124-126.

childish way that he was my friend. I understood his quiet words, his toothless smile.

We talked. He was old, so he understood the young. “Life is like an arrow,” he told me. “At one time it is new, but with every flight it takes upward toward a bird, there is the chance that it may miss and plunge to earth and perish in the rain forest. An arrow becomes old, and the more nicks it has in it, the more valued it is. But one day it is covered with nicks and it is too frail and old to send off into the air any more. So it is no longer taken out hunting, but it stays at home and becomes a memory. It may snap, but the memory will always keep on living—somewhere.”

He was content with his life but he also realized something was missing. Sometimes I could detect a longing in his voice to be young again, to see once more the rugged beauty of the mountains, to hunt in the dense rain forest, to run home exultant, shouting across the valley in a song of triumph.

“Jesus healed blind people,” I told him.

“Jesus?” He looked blank, and then, “Isn’t that the swear word the patrol officers used to yell when they got mad?”

He did not know that Jesus was God or that Jesus loved him. So I told him about Jesus’ great love. He would ask me, “Can Jesus make me see again?” And in childlike faith I would answer, yes, Jesus could make him see again.

One day he said to me, “Someday, my little friend, I will know what you look like because soon Jesus is going to make me see again.” I was older then, and my faith was not what it used to be. But I didn’t say anything. After that he never asked any more whether Jesus would heal him. He didn’t need to.

Vacation fled and then came again. I returned home and followed the path to the clearing where he would be waiting for me. But when I rounded the hut he was not there. The leaf had fallen. Another arrow had snapped, but I knew the memory would keep on living. Suddenly I realized what he had meant when he said that Jesus would heal him; that he would see me some day. He would be running at Jesus’ side across the green fields, recognizing me and shouting my name.⁵

Both Ed and I are amazed and pleased with the way our girls have grown into lovely Christian women with families of their own and we are thankful for how the Lord has faithfully kept us as a family in His way. Ed and I were called to do Bible translation and in that calling Karen and Treesa have been kept and nurtured and chose to commit their lives to the Lord as well.

Frazes for Fazzled Tempers

“If he does that one more time, I’ll clobber him!” Have you ever felt that way about something someone did? Articles by the dozen have been written on how to deal with such near-

⁵ *Slices of Life*. Loving 2000, 109-111).

explosive feeling. “Stop and count to ten,” says one. Another also suggests you count. “Like the old hymn tells us, ‘Count your many blessings one by one.’ “ So you count: mere numbers or manifold blessings. You count to ten, twenty, thirty. And it helps—until another ‘one more time’ ticks around.

“Just ignore them!” This gem of advice comes from a laid-back friend whose children are as passive as lily-studded ponds at dawn. But yours? More like rushing mountain streams: active, turbulent, alive with activity. And so it goes, on and on. You’re angry at your children or another member of your family. Or you’re angry with a friend or coworker. And you wonder, *How can I defuse my anger?*

During Karen’s and Treesa’s growing-up years, we collected a “family language.” Not just Mommy, but Daddy and the girls, too, found these “*frazes for fazzled tempers*” (as I’ll call them) effective in defusing anger. One day while playing in the yard, our trusting three-year-old Treesa was showing excessive interest in a brood of newly hatched balls of fluff and peep on spindly legs. That interest led her too close to clucking Mother Hen who feeling her brood was being threatened, flew at Treesa. The result: tears mingled with blood cascaded down cheeks made rosy by the tropical highland sun. That same week, a bee stung Treesa on her arm. Again tears, but also a little girl wiser about the ways of chickens and bees.

True to her nature, Treesa was not about to give in to circumstances! She was ready to confront every chicken that strutted about and every bee that flew into our yard. She would look them in the eye (as best one can look a chicken or a bee in the eye) and with a seasoned three-year-old air of authority command, “Don’t do dat!”

Another family *fraze* came via Karen when she was four. One evening, her dad and I were heatedly *discussing* an issue. “You’re inconsistent,” I accused. “You’re saying something that you yourself don’t do.” Karen, exhibiting the zeal of Judge Wapner to see justice prevail, pronounced, “You’s a hippo-kit, Daddy! You’s a hippo-kit.” Where she picked that up, we don’t know (hypocrite is not a word we used in our family). But nevertheless, “You’s a hippo-kit” became part of our family language!

Yes, long ago in our home, when tempers flared and one of us felt, *If they do that one more time*, how handy it was to spout out, “Don’t do dat!” or “You’s a hippo-kit!” It never failed to defuse the anger and, more often than not, left us all laughing. It also opened the way to say “I

love you” using our favorite family *fraze*. Tressa, the lover in our family, would sit on my lap and pat me on the cheeks expressing her love to me. “I zuv you, Mommy! I zuv you!”

“Oh, Tressa, I love you, too—a little bit,” I teased one day.

“Oh, Mommy!” she shot back, “I zuv you zot, zot, z-o-o-t-t-t bit!”

“I zuv you zot, zot bit!” became firmly entrenched as part of our family language. Today since our girls are grown and married, we have less use for our *frazes* to defuse anger. But we’ll never outgrow the need to use our favorite *fraze*. Even emails from our girls often end with “Luv you zot, zot bit!” Love diffused across the continents.⁶

Moving On

As I end this contribution to honor for Betty Sue, definitely not a ‘good for nothing person’, I turn from the years with the Awa and focus on our current “sunset” years. The girls are grown-ups now with families of their own, which puts Ed and me in a new phase of life. At the turn of the millenium I put together a series of devotions called *Slices of Life*. Chapter 24 is titled “Heartbreak”, and touches on a later phase of life that I know has fully enveloped Betty Sue as well as it will all of us.

How could she leave him, one she had grown to love so much? He had come into her life while home on furlough. And now that time was coming to an end. But, *Oh*, her heart cried out, *how can I leave him? How can I? Africa is so far away, so very far away from him.*

Yet she was committed to serving God and that meant returning overseas. Returning and leaving him, even though she felt her heart was breaking.

As she packed, her thoughts went back to the first time she’d seen him. For her, it had been the proverbial love at first sight. But he hadn’t even noticed her, hadn’t even smiled at her. Most would have considered him unattractive; some might have described him as ugly.

She couldn’t explain why she felt such an attraction to him. In the months since she’d first seen him, he’d not shown her much attention. Once in a while he smiled at her—and at those times it seemed he felt the same about her as she did about him. Yet mostly he ignored her. Still she loved him more and more each day and her heart was breaking at the thought of leaving him. But the bottom line was that even though she loved him deeply, she loved God more. So she was returning to her work overseas.

She would count the months, forty-eight of them. And she would write him that many letters, knowing that the precious few communications she received from him would be, at the most, only quickly scribbled pieces. And she

⁶ *Slices of Life*, pages 137-138.

would tick off the four long years one by one and dream of the time she'd return—
return to him.

He would meet her at the airport. She could see him running toward her,
reaching his arms out to her. He would greet her with, "I love you, Gwa'ma!"⁷



Aretta and Ed Loving worked with the Awa people in PNG from 1959-1986 translating the New Testament, the first three chapters of Genesis, and a book of Old Testament Bible stories.. They served in Kenya with a national Bible translation organization from 1987-1993. Then they returned to PNG to help the Awas revise their NT. Now they live in Waxhaw, North Carolina, near Wycliffe's JAARS support center where they are still active members as recruiters, working in Vernacular Media (Ed) and writing and editing for colleagues (Aretta).

Besides *Slices of Life*, Aretta has written *Together We Can!* and *Immersed in Jesus Christ, the Light of the World*.

⁷ *Slices of Life* 2000, 137-138.