



## A Drop of Hope

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It was just like any other hectic evening. I was on the air, broadcasting my radio show, taking requests, chatting with listeners, playing dedications and scrolling through e-mails—when you’re on air 35 hours a week and you’ve got eight kids, you’ve got to multitask, like it or not.

I stopped my cursor on an e-mail that looked like one of those we’ve all gotten—you know, someone in a faraway place begging for help, in an unusually solicitous manner. The sender claimed to be a woman named Winifred at the Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana. She needed money to care for three small children. I was about to hit delete—it had to be a scam—but something stopped me.

I wrote back: “Who are you? How did you get my e-mail address?” Suddenly I was corresponding with someone a world away from Seattle. Turned out it was Winifred’s cousin writing, because she’s illiterate. He was in a chat room seeking help for the children, and someone mentioned that I’d adopted African-American kids and might make a donation.

My mind and spirit were restless when I got home that night. *Why me?* I could hardly sleep. About three in the morning, I bolted straight up in bed. A guy named Rich—the president of World Vision, a Christian humanitarian organization—popped into my head. I dragged myself out of bed and wrote to him. “This is going to sound weird, but I’m forwarding you some e-mails I’ve been exchanging with a person in a Ghana refugee camp.” I knew nothing about Africa—didn’t know where Ghana was—and he was an expert.

Rich called at 8:30 that morning. “I just read your e-mail. There’s a man standing in my office who not only knows where that camp is, but he used to work there.”

What were the chances? “Rich, I want to find out if this family is for real and if I can sponsor them.”

Within a week World Vision staffers went to the camp and found that Winifred and her three siblings had escaped the civil war in Liberia, and were starving. Rich asked if I’d come to the World Vision office for a meeting.

I took a seat in the conference room. “I’d like to make a grant,” I said, “to help this family get food and a place to live.” No problem, they said. *Great*, I thought. *Done*. I got up to leave. Then someone spoke

up. “You’ve helped five people in the camp,” he said. “What are you going to do about the other forty-two thousand?”

“Not my problem,” I said. “They didn’t write to me.” I stepped out of the office, and it was like a two-by-four hit me on the head. God spoke loud and clear. *What did you just say?* I started to cry, and walked back in. “I can’t believe I said that. I am so sorry. What can I do?”

“See for yourself,” someone said.

I nodded. “Okay. How do I do that?”

“Go.” *To Africa?* What I’ve always loved about working in radio is its intimacy, the way it brings people together across great distances, the way it connects us. But Africa just seemed so distant. Seattle is about as far from Africa as anywhere in the United States can be. And I’d never been anywhere—except once to Mexico 20 years ago, and a couple trips to Canada. I didn’t even have a passport! But I got my passport. I got a visa. I got my shots. And then I got on a plane and flew to West Africa. I was excited, and incredibly nervous. I had a picture in my head of what I thought I’d encounter.

The reality of Buduburam refugee camp was nothing that I could have ever prepared myself for. I found Winifred and her family among more than 42,000 others, a great mass of humanity, crammed into 140 acres, with no clean water, no toilets. Families of six to a dozen living in 10-by-12 shacks, with no beds, no chairs, few blankets. Unaccompanied kids running around. Grinding poverty everywhere I looked, and life-threatening illnesses: HIV/AIDS. Malaria. Tuberculosis. Water-borne diseases. Most people were surviving on one meal a day—sometimes less. Children were taking care of children.

I returned home to Seattle, more troubled than ever. I’d had hard times, sure. But I’d never gone hungry, never been cold, never lacked a roof over my head. At Buduburam, the tragedy was on a scale I’d never witnessed. The suffering was extreme. There was so much need. Where could I possibly start to make a difference?

One day not long after I’d gotten back from Ghana, I went into my kitchen to get a snack. A small sound stopped me. *Plink*. The sink faucet was dripping ever so slightly. I stood there, mesmerized, and watched the water form a bead dangling from the lip of the faucet. The bead got fuller, heavier, then fell. I couldn’t take my eyes off that tiny, glistening drop. *Water*. It seemed like such a simple, basic thing, that I’d taken it for granted. But for the people at Buduburam, it was a matter of life or death. A mom at the camp with no water or money would watch her child die.

I turned off the faucet, tight, suddenly angry at myself. I’d prided myself on living simply. My parents weren’t rich. Dad would keep fixing a car until it couldn’t run any longer. Mom did upholstery to pay for my shoes. I learned to sew and cook and can. I’ve never been into expensive vacations or cars or clothes (I’m a thrift-store addict). But I didn’t live simply at all.

Here I was, in my warm, safe house, where I never had to worry about my kids having clean water to drink. It hit me how blessed I am for no reason. I knew what I had to do, what God wanted me to do—use the blessings he’d given me to help others.

You know that saying about being the change you want to see in the world? That’s why I created a ministry called [Point Hope](#), to bring water—and more—to the people at Buduburam. Today there are 12 pumping stations at the camp. We first tried to dig wells, but the water was too saline to be potable. Even that turned out to be a blessing, because it was perfect for fish ponds. Now we’re farming tilapia right on the camp. We have another farming project too, growing vegetables on a five-acre plot.

I don’t take anything for granted now. Not water. Not food. Not the roof over my head. I measure everything against what I saw at Buduburam in 2004. I’ve returned to Ghana many times since then to check in on the water and farming projects, bring supplies to the clinic and meet with people I’ve come to consider friends. (Winifred is doing great with her own hair-braiding business and a baby girl named Delilah!) My kids started to get used to me flying across the world. With so many children, life at home was always fun and interesting—and busy. Sometimes I worried I was stretching myself too thin.

Then one day last August, I walked into Buduburam. My eyes met the eyes of a little girl, a refugee from Liberia. I knew instantly what was happening. *You have plenty of kids to take care of*, I told myself. *What are you thinking?* But I knew. This little girl, Willette, was my daughter. And she knew that I was her mother. That same day, I met another girl named Mercy, another Liberian war orphan. I had that same unshakable feeling that we were family. I had never had any intention of adding to my big brood, but God surprised me, the way he did with that e-mail that first brought me to the Buduburam camp.

Both girls wanted to start fresh in America, with new names. Mercy decided to be called Angel. And Willette? She chose Blessing. Their names couldn't be more fitting. Every day the girls remind me of the angels who have surrounded me and the many blessings that have come to me. And they remind me of Africa—where so much remains to be done. And with enough compassion and commitment, faith and work, we can bring more hope, and save more lives. You. Me. All of us.