



SETTING SAIL

A JOURNEY OF REDEMPTION
AND COMPASSION

BY SCOTT HARRISON

If you happened to be in New York City late June last year, responsibly on your way to work in the morning, you might have passed me on Houston Street. Disheveled, stumbling and slurring my way home after a night of drugs and debauchery in a trendy SoHo hotel after a gala film premiere. That would also be me you saw on your lunch break across the courtyard, trying to shut out the daylight, stuffing sheets and pillows in the windows.

Ten years had passed since I first embraced New York nightlife. What started out as an exciting and easy way to earn back college money I'd blown in the stock market (shorting Yahoo! of all things) turned into a decade of global travel, social climbing, selfishness and materialism, leaving me with an appalling value system and skewed worldview. This early-morning scene wasn't a first. My New York was one that rarely slept.

I was running an event company I'd started with a friend. We produced events and threw some of the biggest parties in the city. We'd worked with everybody: MTV, VH1, ABC, *Cosmo*, *Elle*, *Stuff*. All the big record labels. Top models and fashion designers. Big brands thought so much of us we were covertly paid big bucks to wear and consume their products.

My life was enviable from the outside. I went out with a top model. Wore a Rolex. Did TV commercials. I was about to be given part ownership in a trendy new restaurant. Fashion weeks were spent in Milan and Paris—New Year's was a three-week long beach party in Brazil and Uruguay. Most would say I was living out the MTV generation's dream.

ON BOARD

Cut to the present. Seven months later, I write this from the other side of the Atlantic. Sailing in waters somewhere between Benin, West Africa, and war-shredded Monrovia, Liberia. My old ways, the city and its nightlife seem far away.

I am serving a year as the volunteer photographer onboard the hospital ship *Anastasis* with the global charity Mercy Ships. Mercy Ships operates a fleet of hospital ships, the "*Anny*" being the largest—a towering 52-year-old, 550-foot vessel carrying a standing crew of more than 350. The work done onboard and off radically transforms the lives of poor and needy Africans through free life-changing surgeries and healthcare, education and community development projects.

A most dramatic lifestyle change for sure—my Nokia and huge Bryant Park loft with grand piano traded for two Nikon D1Xes and cramped cabin quarters. My walk-in shower for a ship stall that saw the unforgiving slaughter of 12 cockroaches last month. Big windows and skylights traded for portholes and wooden decks with large views of never-ending horizon.

The exact circumstances that led to this radical change of events in my life are convoluted and perhaps too lurid for this space, but I assure you they were as remarkable as Lot's exit from Sodom.

A month of soul-searching and wandering through the beauty of Connecticut, Vermont and northern Maine followed a dramatic exit from New York. A time of retrospection and prayer. A time to look back on a decade of selfishness that surprisingly bred unhappiness and emptiness. A deal with God to try things out His way, and a pledge to spend a year in service to the poor as a tithe for the last 10: a penance of sorts.

I'd grown up in the church, raised right by parents who stayed together and loved me. I'd always inherently believed in God's existence—evolution seemed nonsense as everything I observed in nature smacked of something divine, inconceivable, outside of time and space.

Yet my rebellious streak was rabid, and the whole part about following God and the

teachings of Christ just seemed impractical. Rules upon rules upon rules. No sex, no cursing, no drinking and smoking—if it was fun, then you could be sure it wasn't allowed. I mean, come on, Jesus told people to sell everything they own and give to the poor. And that guy who just wanted to bury his father first? Simply unreasonable.

So I found it easier just to shelf my belief in God and turn my back on the teachings of the Bible. Instead, I tried hedonism and self-preservation.

I changed setting from New England to the Pyrenees Mountains of southern France. To a friend's chalet I visit every year, nestled in a village of 25 or so. After some research, I applied to two humanitarian organizations—Mercy Ships and Samaritan's Purse—and thus began the waiting game. Being surrounded by nature so pure and untouched helped me catch glimpses of the Creator and His



heart. I became acutely aware of the overwhelming and sweeping grace of God. Aware that perhaps He did have a great plan for my life, and after a lengthy detour, it would be possible to step back on track. I began to feel fortunate to know Him, fortunate to have been called back, and I began to long for the opportunity to serve a year for Him.

Snaking through winding roads one day on my bike, in the sleepy town of Lapradelle-Puilaurens, the call came from Mercy Ships and from God. Five weeks later, my hand was firmly pressed in a handshake with Him as I waited on the

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dock in Tenerife and watched the *Anastasis* crawl in. She would be home for at least the next 12 months.

GUST OF CHANGE

Old habits die hard, and since I'd vowed to stop drinking and smoking, I'd done some of both the night before in a last hurrah. I was slightly hung-over as she moored, yet as I stepped on the gangway, I felt a joy unknown to me for quite some time—perhaps ever. A sense of divine providence and peace. A feeling that I was firmly planted in the center of God's will through obedience.

Almost five months in, and it's been a wild ride. I landed what others repeatedly call the "best job on the ship." Although *job* may not be the appropriate term. All of us onboard Mercy Ships pay crew fees to serve. We pay for our room and board and insurance and malaria meds to keep administrative costs low. This seems crazy to some, but the rewards and the freedom are plentiful.

The work is radical, life-changing and fulfilling. A week into the gig, in early November 2004, the ship held a patient screening, or "screaming" as it's sometimes fondly referred to. I came face to face with 5,000 sick lined up outside a Benin sports stadium to meet our doctors and surgeons. They came with the hope that Mercy Ships would grant them one of the coveted surgery slots. They came for a cure, and with a collective need so great, it was difficult to process and even harder to explain.

Unspeakable tumors grew from faces and necks and mouths. I met 15-year-old Alfred on the other side of the lens—an encounter so horrific and indelible it sent me scurrying away with wet eyes to recompose.

The two days and more than 2,000 photos put a face on that thing about our responsibility to the poor. The thing in Matthew 25 about feeding the hungry and the thirsty. About offering hospitality to the outcast, clothing the naked, visiting prisons, caring for and healing the sick. Do these things, and we do them to the least of His brothers. We do them for Him. He says this three different ways, and then says if we don't, then we're screwed.

As a self-centered person, this just didn't make sense to me. The plight of the world's weak and poor just "was"—their pain and suffering no more resonant or real to me than Sally Struthers' kids in Africa covered in flies. I'd hear statistics of 2.8 billion people living in poverty—on less than \$2 a day. Of the world's 1.2 billion living in what is called "absolute poverty" or less than \$1 a day. Of the billion who lack clean water. Of the 2.4 billion who don't have even basic sanitation like, ummm, toilets. That in Liberia the adult life expectancy is 41, just a little more than half a life.

They were just numbers to me, numbers without faces or solutions, and besides, a billion of anything was just inconceivable anyway.

WAVES OF COMPASSION

Yet Alfred was a face. A face on the verge of manhood, and something unexplainable was growing out of that face where his mouth should be—a cemento-ossifying fibroma or enormous benign tumor. His story proved to be like many of the cases and patients we saw. Years of heartache, a family living on about \$1 a day, unfruitful visits to countless witch doctors who spread pastes and cut his face. Yet God had a plan for Alfred, and watching him heal on the ward would prove a watershed experience for me. He and I became pals, and I was fortunate to drive him home to his village after his second operation.

I saw many, many patients like Alfred. Many lives transformed through the practical application of Matthew 25, and seeing the principles in action is intoxicating. Mercy, I've learned, is a powerful drug.

So, I write this as the ship sails to Liberia, at the invitation of Liberia's Transitional Government and the United Nations. It's the ship's first visit to one of the most desperate places in Africa.

Liberia is tenuously peaceful after the end of a 14-year-old civil war that ravaged the people, and we have been told to prepare ourselves for a great need.

I recently read the biography of World Vision's founder, Bob Pierce, and was struck by his simple prayer to God. "Let the things that break Your heart, break mine." How simple, yet profound. How differently we might use our lives if we caught just a glimpse of the Father's heart toward His weak and suffering children.

So as we sail on, I can laugh at my early fears of a boring year, of a wasted year. Following God has been many things so far, but certainly not dull. I've taken more than 40,000 photographs—observed and recorded five or six surgeries, one of them more than 10 hours. I've driven Land Rovers thousands of miles over dusty African terrain. I've seen some of God's stranger creations—elephants, hippos and even a komodo dragon. I've covered patient screenings and treatments in remote villages only accessible by small dugout canoes. I'll be on a UN chopper next month flying up-country with the medical team.

Through His redemptive grace, I've been given an opportunity to tell stories with pen and camera in a vibrant land of the less fortunate and downright destitute.

Allowed to escape a life of selfishness with my health and my sanity. There's that verse in the too-little-noticed book of Joel about God restoring the years the locusts have eaten. "You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame" (Joel 2:26). He surely does deal wondrously.^d



MERCY SHIPS, a global charity, has operated a growing fleet of ships in developing nations since 1978. Following the example of Jesus, Mercy Ships brings hope and healing to the poor, mobilizing people and resources worldwide. For more information, check out their website at www.mercyships.org.

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