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The Word That Encompasses It All

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I was living my dream, which meant everybody else was living their nightmare. When you live in Ghana and work as a volunteer at the local school, there are not a lot of food choices. For my fellow volunteers and me, that meant we generally ate one of two things: rice or noodles. I happen to love noodles, and I love rice even more. I had no problems with the fact that my food pyramid now consisted of carbs. The rest of them were not as happy.

Jordan had the hardest time of all. After long hours in the blazing Ghanaian sun doing hard construction work, all he had to come home to was a plate of rice. Jordan sat at the head of the table, and I was always right next to him. Jordan had two expressions—tough and tougher. Comprised of more than just his hulking figure that had seen him through a college football career and training with the marines, his quiet air of confidence and discerning eyes marked him as our undeniable leader.

He impacted everyone, but he had an especially meaningful impact on me. I arrived to volunteer in Ghana as an incredibly shy and reserved eighteen year old. Jordan quickly took me under his wing and helped me to feel at home. He invited me to sit next to him, and that seat quickly became one of my most prized possessions.

We sat around the lunch table and quickly ate every grain of rice that our cook Tina prepared for us. I looked over at Jordan and saw that his body was getting
tired. Months of having little protein, and a lack of nutrients in his body had begun to take its toll. He had been there a month longer than I had, and it was beginning to show. Not wanting to seem ungrateful, he didn’t say anything.

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I watched as he sighed and stared down at his plate. He talked less than usual that lunch, and left early to go and sit outside alone.

I knew that it was more than just food that was bothering him. He wanted to make a bigger impact in the village we lived in and he missed his family. Watching him from the dining room, my heart felt as empty as his plate. I was willing to do anything. Surprisingly, I realized that watching him have a hard time was harder than passing through hard times myself. I was helpless.

Then I remembered. Running with my friend Isabel, we grabbed a bag from my room and went out to him.

My approach was slow, but my smile spread quickly. “Jordan, I have a gift for you. I hope it helps you feel better.” Right before I had left, my mom had given me a big bag of beef jerky. Pulling the bag out from behind my back, I gave the bag to Jordan. It was small and simple, but it was all I had.

His smile reached past his misty eyes and as he hugged us he kept repeating, “You have no idea what this means to me.”

Odds are, it meant more to me than it did to him. My eyes were just as misty as I watched my humble offering become a miracle for Jordan. The ability to have an experience and help yourself is rewarding. The ability to have an experience and help someone else is a glimpse into the reality of God. This was love.

Sports day was here, and I was going to go. Not even hundreds of ant bites covering my feet would keep me from going. The kids at the school where I volunteered in Ghana had been practicing for weeks. They wanted to win.

Right after breakfast we all began the two-mile walk up to the field where sports day was being held. My fellow volunteers and I knew exactly which kids were from our school. The week before we had surprised them all with brand new, neon yellow soccer jerseys.
Dressed in their version of shining armor (and they did indeed shine) they defended their honor and played the games the best they could.

For hours we watched and cheered as the kids ran, dodged and scored. True, I know nothing about sports. But I knew a lot about those kids. To show somebody you care, you have to show interest in their interests. It forces you to go outside of that person in relation to you, and see them in relation to themselves. Those kids cared about sports, so that day, I did too.

Eventually we found ourselves back home, and I was finally able to put my feet up and rest. The pain was getting more and more intense. Scanning my feet, I saw that my hundreds of ant bites were now accompanied by blistering burns on the bottom of my feet. That's what happens when you walk four miles in a Ghanaian summer while barefoot.

I felt the burns, scratches and bites for a few days after that, but I still feel the joy and pride of watching my kids play that day. Maybe it wasn’t sensible. Maybe we should have stayed home. Yes my feet burned, but my whole body burned with a different kind of warmth. Nothing that painful had ever felt so good before. This was love.

The next few weeks passed by as a blur and as soon as the taxi rolled out, the tears began. Every yard the car got farther away; another piece of my heart was ripped out. Isabel and Katie were in that car. Not only were they some of my best friends, but they were the only other childcare volunteers with me here in Ghana. I had been left alone not only in my thoughts and feelings, but in my responsibilities.

As everyone watched the car leave, I quietly snuck into the dining room. I felt alone with them gone; I might as well be alone as I dealt with the loss. I sat quietly at the table, my tears rolling even quieter still. What was the point of having these beautiful things like friendship and connections if they were all doomed to end? I wasn't really alone. I was left with the memories— a constant reminder of what I had lost. My friends were gone, and a new ache in my heart had arrived. A knock broke my cycle of self-pity, and I looked up to see Daryn standing at the door.

Even through the mesh of the screen door, I could clearly see two things in Daryn's brown eyes. He was both desperate and determined. He timidly walked in and sat down hesitantly. Here was the desperation. He had no idea how to console me.
“Are you okay?” Daryn looked at me and I saw the determination in his eyes outweigh the confusion. Suddenly the knife in my heart started to come out. Suddenly I started to feel like I was going to be okay after all. He was present, and that was all I needed. I didn’t need answers, plans, or platitudes. I just needed him to be there.

For the next two weeks until I left, Daryn and Giles took turns waking up at five in the morning to help me with my childcare duties. I never asked them to do it, but they saw a need and ran to fill it. This was love.


The tears came quickly, but I wiped them away before anyone could see. Twelve weeks had come and gone and it was now time for me to return home. Only one tear escaped, slowly tracing down my face and then slipping down my neck as I approached Daryn. I slowly pulled up Daryn’s sunglasses and saw that despite his best efforts; he also had a single tear slowly slipping down his face. What was I supposed to say to him? The day that I left Ghana and headed home had finally arrived. There were so many things that I wanted to say, but none of it was right. No combination of words, metaphor or rhetoric could fully tell him how I felt. I finally resorted to that word we always seem to resort to, the word that somehow encompasses it all. Maybe that’s why we invented it. A single word that could somehow encompass the simplicity, sacrifice, pain, joy, and every other word and feeling in the world.

“I love you, Daryn.”

“I love you, too.”