

The Color of Convergence

Life happens in layers.

Think back with me to a time when classroom visuals were primarily colored transparencies. For me, these classic thin sheets of plastic were an integral part of my elementary experience, a tool daily stacked beside the teacher's overhead projector and readily utilized to enhance each lesson.

In my mind's eye, I still see them. Each transparency seems so simple, bearing well-defined color and meaning of its own right. Yet, add a new layer and what happens? The image is magically transformed. More complex and more astounding. Add another, then another. As each new layer is added, the light shines through, revealing new color, new significance, new meaning.

This is how I perceive life. Not a disconnected series of isolated events, but a collage whereby one transparency overlays another. Each layer superimposes its image on the others. Image upon image, another and another.

One layer might distort all others with anger, bitterness, or pain. Yet sometimes, in moments of grace, the colors converge in unexpected ways to bring healing, hope, and new understanding. I recently experienced one such convergence. Simple events, each a small piece of my life. Yet together, the beauty of truth and the work of God shines through gloriously.



Friday evening. I make my way to the Lutz's house to help prepare dinner and to make a last evening email check. On my way to the office, walking past the kitchen table, I am startled by a diminutive yet distinctive sound. Was that a squeak or a chirp? My first thought is that the boys of the neighborhood must have brought a rat for one of the Lutz's five snakes. But no, those are definitely unfamiliar chirps.

I turn to find an eight by fourteen inch brown cardboard box holding three little black balls of fluff. Baby birds! They can't be more than a day or two old.

Upon inquiry, I discover that the birds were indeed brought by the neighborhood mangi (pidgin: "young boys", sounding remarkably similar to the English word "monkey"- not a coincidence as far as I'm concerned). The boys thought the birds would make a good meal for the snakes. Julie Lutz, however, was not at all pleased with the boys' choice of entrée for our reptilian friends. She suspected these birds were newly orphaned by a young boy's slingshot. She thus took ownership of the chicks and sent the boys away with a scolding rather than their customary 10 "toea" each.

As I gaze down at the helpless little creatures, I am smitten. I immediately begin crafting a nest from leftover embroidery thread, hoping to bring some solace and familiarity to the winged younglings. I doubt a more vibrant nest could have been found on the planet.

Anton and Dr. Steve caution me however. They give the birds a 30% chance of lasting the night and a 2% chance of surviving the week. Why put so much effort into creatures with so little chance of survival? "That is still a chance," I retort, "And the little creatures still deserve love." If their lives were shortened, it would not be for lack of effort on my part. Besides, I really want Anton and Dr. Steve to be wrong. I want to cling to that bit of hope. Maybe a little love would be just the trick.

Plunging forward, plugging in a transformer as a makeshift incubator, I cover the box with grating and a towel to prevent the babes from falling out. The leg of each little bird is then marked with red, green or blue string to ensure that each gets the same amount of food. Finally, I prepare a dinner, tiny morsels of bread dipped in water plus half pellets of chicken stock feed.

The regime is begun. Every two hours I, “mama bird,” patiently shove tiny bits of sustenance down their throats, ever trying new techniques. “Oh, this one prefers my approach from the left and a tiny tap on the beak. For this one, I must get a larger chunk between the ‘lips,’ then use the tweezers to nudge it down.” I can’t compete with a real mama bird of course. Yet, as I cup all three between my two hands, easy due to their miniature frames, I feel their lives literally and figuratively in my hands. I marvel at their fight to stay awake while their heads bob on the verge of sleep, so similar to human infants. The sight brings me joy.

Midnight. I tuck the infants into their makeshift nest, wondering if any will survive. I plan to be back for a 6am feeding. Only six hours of separation. Surely they can survive for six hours. Surely...

As morning’s sunrise peaks over the hills, I tiptoe into the Lutz’s house. The temperature is brisk. I hope the babies have been not too cold over night. A little prayer escapes my being as I enter the office. “God, did any of them survive?” I am holding my breath. Yes! I exhale. There are three pairs of bulbous black eyes and three eager mouths chirping a greeting, anxiously awaiting a bit of food and a lot of love.



As I leave the Lutz’s house after the morning feeding, the sound of chirping is replaced by another sound. Is that wailing? A Krai?

Back at the house that Liz and I share, she is already up and changing into day clothes. She confirms my suspicion. It is sound of keening, a communal wail with its own musical peaks and troughs. To my own ears, it resembles a mix between a Native American chant and gut-wrenching sob. Someone has died, and not just anyone. From the volume, we suspect it is a community member. Liz leaves to investigate and I follow suit, donning clothes appropriate for public.

At the gate, I am met by our neighbor Jenny. She informs me that word had come by phone: Sam, the husband of our wonderful Agus, had passed away in Port Moresby that morning. Agus, a member of our HIV awareness group United to Be (UTB), counselor at the Voluntary Counseling and Testing clinic, my dear friend. Not Agus! Not Sam, the man who had fathered Agus’ three children? Sam had left for Port Moresby to avoid facing the property damage charges, which had resulted from his drinking. That Sam? Indeed it was.

I hurry to the market where many of my friends are gathered, crying and wailing, crouched along the sides of the street. Seeing Roselyn, another friend in UTB, I find a place beside her. Between tears, she points out Sam’s mother and various other family members. I let my own tear wells pool for a while as I observe the community in mourning, then arise to find Agus. There she is. Liz is sitting on one side of Agus and I take a place on her other flank as she wails, pulling little bits of hair out and throwing it to the wind. Signs of grief, despair.

The crowd begins to convene in the center of the market, and we change positions accordingly. With the arrival of each new person, my tears begin anew. The mourning continues as the morning passes. I see Josef, our gardener. And there is Jevalyn—we were supposed to go watch the volleyball game at Kumbis today. Plans change. Over there are the

girls from my youth group...Joyce, Pricilla, Pamela, Matilda. Now I see Elizha, and then Win. Sitting there, I recall the last communal Krai I attended, only a month after my arrival. I was an observer then. Now, I am part of the community. I am family.



I've been reading a book that my Grams and Gramps gave me during my August visit to the States. "An early birthday present" they had said with smiles. It is the story of a man, Mack, who loses his six-year-old daughter when she is tragically kidnapped and murdered. During his prolonged grief, Mack receives an invitation from "Papa," the name his wife uses for God. "Papa" wants Mack to return to the shack where his daughter was murdered. Thinking it to be a cruel joke, but hoping otherwise, he goes. And in that shack he finds a God he wasn't expecting and healing he hadn't imagined.

Both my grandparents had read the book and loved the depiction of the Trinity. Knowing my own love of theology and a good story, my grandparents felt assured I would enjoy it. And I do.



Moments of joy sprinkle my day as I make the trek to feed "the babies." Three little mouths, ten times a day. A big task, and yet, my efforts are rewarded. The younglings are becoming perkier, more agile, now able to escape from their little box. Eventually, we exchange the cardboard box for an old refrigerator tray, hoping that enough heat will still get through to them. Which is the greater danger, the birds escaping and dropping to their doom or becoming too cold in the night? A tough call and one we make on faith.

Dr. Steve also recommends that I begin to feed them worms, a little closer to what we guess is their natural diet. He even shows me where to dig for such dietary delicacies. I scrounge through the mud, my hands becoming more and more dried out with each food-gathering expedition. The glamour of my task is quickly fading as I slice the worms into small pieces to accommodate little throats. I am thankful that I've outgrown my childhood squeamishness. The little birds seem to like their new diet and are soon eating larger portions. They also seem to be growing. My concern for and attachment to them are also growing with each feeding.

That evening, I leave to lead movie and discussion night at Amapyaka. Mentally, I know the young ones are in good hands with the Lutz's, but still my thoughts return to the birds throughout the night. "Now would be about the time that I would be feeding them." It is almost as if I can hear their little chirps and see their tiny mouths open. Later when I return, it seems though a piece of myself snaps back into place. I am back in my role of mother bird.



Now a quiet sorrow. We are waiting, waiting for the body of Sam to arrive back from Port Moresby. When there is a Krai all prior plans are canceled. The market is eerily hushed without the hustle and bustle of buying, selling, and storrying. Even Sunday School and church attendance are down, and those who do come seem subdued. No tambourines. No clapping. Nothing that might disrespect the mourning of the family. For days, we wait.



As the community waits in stillness, I read. In the story of Mack and his encounter with God, I read of struggles and questions and the search for meaning. I read of healing and hope. It is a wonderful distraction and a beautiful tale. On Monday I finish reading the book, but my thoughts on the content are just beginning. The message sinks in slowly.



Monday night the baby bird I call “Little Blue” begins to show signs of lethargy. I have considered him to be the weakest because he frequently seemed to eat less than his siblings. On most mornings I found him the closest to the transformer’s heat, desperately trying to stay warm. I am concerned.

I feel better when he has a good first breakfast at 6am on Tuesday. I must admit that I am starting to feel weary after several nights of broken sleep. Yet I deem the diggings and the cuttings and the feedings to ultimately be worth it. The little birds are all still alive.

I arrive for the second feeding a little after eight. As I pass through the kitchen, Dr. Steve verbally commends me for my diligence. The birds have survived four nights, and he offers his congratulations. He is impressed. But when I enter the office, any self-assurance from the adulations is abruptly and forever extinguished. Dr. Steve spoke too soon. Little Blue’s life has been swept away in the last two hours. I swallow down feelings of being jinxed by Dr. Steve’s praise. I try to squelch my tendency to second-guess myself and the amount of food I’d given him that morning. I try to subdue the pain of loss.

“I’ll bury him,” I say. With leaking eyes I dig a little hole beside the house and nestle Little Blue into it. A new earthen nest for this small creature of God.

When I return to the kitchen to wash my hands, Julie offers condolences. “You know,” she says, “you have given an admirable amount of devotion to those little birds, but perhaps it’s not good to become attached.” Silently I wonder “How can I not become attached?” My entire schedule has revolved around them these last three days. I have fed them almost forty times, each time holding them in my hands, encouraging them, honoring their lives. Maybe others can do that without it becoming a matter of the heart, but I cannot. And I’m not sure I want to change.

As I stand musing, Julie wonders aloud if I had taken any pictures of the baby birds. No I hadn’t. Part of that was intentional. Somehow I had believed that if I didn’t take a picture maybe I wouldn’t become as attached. A silly notion. It clearly hadn’t worked. And now I can’t imagine taking a picture of just the two. It just seems too late, and I ache.

Thankfully, I have a Bible Study at Amapyaka that night and the next day is my **birthday**—two lovely diversions. Plus, there *were* still two more birds who needed care. No time to grieve for too long. “Good-bye, my little friend,” I say as I quietly bury the memory of Little Blue.



Tuesday night and Wednesday morning are a celebration of life. After Bible Study, I stay up late talking with the girls in the dorms. As my dorm roommate, Irene, and I are about to drift off to sleep, she leans over, declares that it is 12:01am, and sings “Happy Birthday” to me. I have to laugh. The celebration continues in the morning when Irene presents me with a beaded necklace. Her gift, the first present of the day, reminds me I am loved. I go to the school’s library to talk with my parents on Instant Messenger. After all, had it not been for them, I would have no life to remember and celebrate. After a blessed e-conversation, I return to Mambis with high hopes for a joyful day.



The way back is slow and feels sluggish. The school bus, nearly empty at the beginning, collects many people from neighboring communities, all traveling to my hometown. Sam's body is returning today so all are gathering. It is afternoon by the time we arrive back in Mambis.



The little birds won't eat. I feel utterly and completely helpless. I try to force feed them. However after several days of eating worms on their own, they now refuse forced nourishment. Please, please eat. But my efforts seem fruitless.

When I put "Little Green" back in his box, he stumbles and falls. I can tell he is dying. I pick him up again and see his beak is open, struggling. As Julie walks in, I look up from where I am seated on the footstool. "What do I do?!?" I am desperate for a miracle solution. "I don't think there's anything you *can* do," Julie says with empathy. I look down again as Little Green lets out a final breath. I sigh and head to the yard for another private burial.

When I return to the house, I take Little Red in my hands and retreat to the porch, one of my comfort places. Somehow I sense that he will soon follow his siblings. I just hold him and stroke his little body. "Enjoy the light and feel my love, little one," I say with my fingers. Some time later I hear the sound of a siren. I don't want to leave, but it's time. "I'm sorry, I must be with humans now." I hope somehow my winged little friend understands. Sam's body is arriving.



The ambulance and a string of other vehicles weave their way down the hill towards Mambis market. As they approach a cry arises, a communal sound, a song of mourning. Hands move upwards as fingers tear at bushy black hair, throwing it to the wind. My hands likewise instinctively go to my head, not to tear hair but rather to clasp the back of my head as a supportive gesture. My forearms provide some privacy as tears stream down my face.

Why God? Why must we feel so helpless in the face of death? Such sorrow. Such needless loss. Can nothing be done?

I sit for a while in the midst of the crowd, knee to knee, shoulder to shoulder, until I am removed by friends concerned for my safety. The mother's tribe is coming and they are angry. They blame our hospital staff for Sam's flight to Moresby. The staff had threatened to put Sam in jail for the property damage caused by his drinking. In the family's minds, if Sam had not fled to Port Moresby, he would not have died in Port Moresby. They need someone to blame. We are not sure what they will do.

I understand. I too in my own sense of grief feel the urge to blame. Should I have done something differently? Were the baby birds too hot, too close to the transformer? Were they too cold? Should I have rejected Dr. Steve's suggestion to switch to worms? Was I wrong to leave them alone so long the previous night? What else could I have done, should I have done? Was I a bad mother? I want to find a cause, a reason, someone to blame. But the reason, the "asua", remains elusive, and I am angry.



Liz and I sit at a distance, watching the crowd below. She notices me crying and puts her hand on my leg. “Are you ok?” I will be. “This will definitely be one of your more unique birthdays.” My birthday! I had almost forgotten. My celebration of life has been marred by death.



I return to the house. Somehow I know I have one more task to perform today. I sense it is time to bury my last little bird. The silence when I enter the office tells me I am right. I take his little body and return him to his first home in the earth. When he is laid to rest and the shovel is put away, I stand in the kitchen slowly washing my hands. Julie tries to comfort, but my basic grieving mechanism kicks in. I don’t want to talk about it. I want to be silent. I want to be alone.



I lie down on the bed. Yet as I try to restrain the tears, words from *The Shack* come back to me. God, my heavenly Papa, declares, “It’s okay honey, you can let it all out... I know you’ve been hurt, and I know you’re angry and confused. So go ahead and let it out. It does a soul good to let the waters run once in a while—the healing waters” (83).

I allow the tears to flow, and when they run dry, the week’s events continue to swirl around me. Joy and life. Smiles. Death. Shock. Pain. Community. Waiting. Solace. Nurturing. Helplessness. A loss. Regroup. Celebration of life. Encouragement. Trying. Ineffective. Powerless. Anger. Weeping. Exhaustion.

Gradually my thoughts begin to clear. Mine is only a minor grief. I loved and nurtured these little lives for four days. I gave them my time and devotion. I sacrificed for them. But only for four days.

My birthday. I think of my parents. They have loved and nurtured me for nearly 25 years. Someday perhaps I will be a parent— like my own parents, like Sam’s parents, like Mack in William Young’s book. How deep the love of a parent! How deep the potential loss, the possible grief. Why risk it? Why love or hope at all, only to have it dashed?

My anger returns. God could have stopped it, but he didn’t! He didn’t keep Sam from dying. He didn’t keep Agus from losing her husband and her children from losing their father— first to alcohol and then to death. God didn’t even spare the lives of my little birds for a single extra day. It *had* to fall on a day that was *supposed* to be one of celebration. I seethe.

And then I hear the gentle voice of wisdom, “No, God didn’t stop it. He doesn’t stop a lot of things that cause him pain. Your world is severely broken. You demanded your independence [in the garden and in daily life], and now you are angry with the one who loved you enough to give it to you. Nothing is as it should be, as Papa desires it to be, and as it will be one day. Right now your world is lost in darkness and chaos, and horrible things happen to those that he is especially fond of” (164)

I cry out. But why God? WHY? Why do you allow it?

God speaks to my heart, “There are millions of reasons to allow pain and hurt and suffering rather than to eradicate them, but most of those reasons can only be understood within each person’s story. I am not evil. You are the ones who embrace fear and pain and power and rights so readily in your relationships. But your choices are also not stronger than my purposes, and I will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and the most loving outcome” (125).

My heart recoils as Mack's did. How can it be? There is so much pain in the world. Today is only a tiniest sampling of all the pain that exists. "I just can't imagine any final outcome that would justify all this" (126).

And the voice of the Trinity calls back. "'We're not justifying it. We are redeeming it" (126).

But God, it hurts! It doesn't feel like redemption.

And God reminds me, "Paradigms power perception and perceptions power emotions. Most emotions are response to perception—what you think is true about a given situation. If your perception is false, then your emotional response to it will be false too. So check your perceptions, and beyond that check the truthfulness of your paradigms—what you believe. Just because you believe something firmly doesn't make it true. Be willing to reexamine what you believe. The more you live in the truth, the more your emotions will help you see clearly. But even then, you don't want to trust them more than me" (197).

But God, how can I see clearly when there is so much darkness around? I want the world to be different. I want it to be a place of truth and joy. I see little glimpses of how the world should be, but I don't know how to *change* it.

And God declares, "No one is asking you to! That is [the Holy Spirit]'s task and she knows how to do it without brutalizing anyone. This whole thing is a process, not an event. All I want from you is to trust me with what little you can, and grow in loving people around you with the same love I share with you" (181).

But what difference does it make? What difference did it possibly make that the little birds died today rather than four days ago? What difference did it make for me to sit and cry in the market? It didn't change a thing.

So softly the words come, "If anything matters then everything matters. Because you are important, everything you do is important. Every time you forgive, the universe changes; every time you reach out and touch a heart or a life, the world changes; with every kindness and service, seen or unseen, my purposes are accomplished and nothing will ever be the same again" (235).

Alright. I sigh to myself. I will trust you...I will trust you...I will trust you....A quiet refrain as I slip into a silent sleep...

When I awake, my heart feels tender, but whole. I thank God for the little birds, the joy they gave me and the love I was able to give. I even thank God for the pain and what it teaches. The sting is not gone, but I know in my heart it is not pointless, and I am not alone.

Thus I continue to love because I have known love. I love, though the risk always remains that my love will not be effective by the world's standards. My hope might seem vain and my efforts fruitless, but results are not my life's goal. It is the relationship. Relationship with the One who is Love and whose love pours through me. *This* gives me the audacity to hope. Through all the layers and colors of life, three things remain. Faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is LOVE.