



2004

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2004 Summary

The following are emails I sent to family and friends during my 35 day trip to Lesotho, July 29-August 31, 2004. During this visit, I lectured at the Lesotho College of Education, its Director and Deputy Director; the National University of Lesotho (to both students and faculty), to Management students at the St. Augustine Seminary in the city of Roma; to hundreds primary and high school teachers and addressed hundreds of students in five of the ten Districts (provinces) in the country. I have met with head of Catholic Education; the Principal Secretary for the Ministry of Education; the Director of World Vision Lesotho; The Anglican Bishop of Lesotho; Catholic Bishop of Leribe District; the Anglican Order of the Sisters of the Holy Name; Canadian Consulate; customs people; The African correspondent for the Globe and Mail (Stephanie Nolen,); The Directors of Scripture Union and Durham Link (two fine leadership development organizations); Director of the Technical School of Leribe, had a private audience with King Letsie III at the palace, the most prominent Anglican clergy and scholar (Rev. KheKhe), and many more. I have travelled a great deal in the country in both rural and urban regions, including the high mountain areas that are among the poorest of the poor.

It was my objective in going to Lesotho was to encourage teachers and students. The need for hope in the face of such poverty, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, stock theft, soil erosion, and dissatisfaction with the government is paramount. The HIV/AIDS situation is long term. The orphans need hope today or they will drop out. The projects developed are all based on incentives for non-academic achievement (care for the environment, volunteerism, citizenship, progress, accountability, etc.).

My lectures and sessions were a combination of motivational talks and sessions on human development, problem solving, leadership development, use of authority and discipline. Before going and while there, key people asked me to include, whenever possible, the topic of corporal punishment in homes and schools. This practice of beating kids is common throughout Africa and is thought to be partly responsible for the lack of initiative, creativity and confidence found in most adults. The threat of 'beating' is still widely considered to be the only sure way to generate enough fear and control to keep the children in line. Of the children who enter primary school, only 8% graduate. They are beaten (usually caned on the top of hands, back of thighs, buttocks, etc) for not having the right books, being late, not doing their homework, being disrespectful and questioning elders. The object seems to be to break the spirit of the children.

Rather than being perceived as a learning experience, mistakes are severely punished. Although the practice has been banned at the primary level throughout the country in recent years, it continues and is frequently the first and often only problem solving strategy for ensuring compliance. This is considered a cultural practice and most feel there is no way to avoid it. The system produces adults, governments and practices prone to corruption that use fear to get what they want. Democracy is only possible when people are allowed to question in safety.

The other alternative widely adopted is to send students out of the class, for the period or often for a week, for infractions or not having the right school supplies. Sending children away from school alienates them from their peers, leaves students behind in their studies, vanquishes them to homes where the problems are most often overwhelming, where they may be more severely punished, and from which school is a reprieve, and provides an opportunity to get into trouble (theft, pregnancy etc.)

Inevitably after each talk, teachers would come up to me and admit that they did not want to beat the kids but they felt so much pressure from the other teachers. There is an expressed fear that if they do not beat the kids, there will be utter mayhem. My talks centered on the needs of children for healthy development and learning processes, problem solving structures and strategies.

When a class of children is asked for questions, most often none has the confidence to respond in a group. When the same is asked of the teachers, they too lack the confidence to question in front of their peers. They are products of this system and it is the only one they know.

These were very difficult subjects. Sister Alice informs me that after my talks, many schools have decided to discuss the matter and possible alternatives. This may be the first time the subject has been brought up so directly. It is a start. Many schools asked me to return and continue the discussion, but time did not permit. Few administrators have the confidence to bring this forward, face the strong opposition to change and deal with it proactively.

The omission of this issue in my emails resulted from a reticence to criticize another culture or to comment prematurely from a biased, western point of view. After talking with so many on the subject and listening carefully, I feel more confident to frame the issue. It will take a long time to deal with this disciplinary practice, as many are not convinced there are any other viable options.

August 2 2004

Greetings, I send an email previously this morning from another location and it crashed on me - so I will try again. I arrived safely after a long journey. All went well. At the customs, Alice was able to argue the point so that we got my luggage and therefore all the school supplies and high school science textbooks into the country without paying customs duty. The medical texts also arrived safely.

The mountains are beautiful but very different from what we would imagine. At this time of year, the land is a thousand shades of brown. The children are so beautiful. We drove today to the capital of Maseru where I have been meeting with the Director of the College of Education and about to give the first lecture. I hope that something I say will be of use. I feel disconnected with their perspective. They have treated me to a traditional lunch and I am about to be taken on a tour. I am learning my first 6 words of Sesotho.

People have been welcoming and I think we have already secured one option to get textbooks into the country duty-free (one of my main concerns). I am really tired and very happy to be here. I have so much to learn. I send everyone my best and hope all is well. I have no idea how often I will be at a computer but this week will be my best chance I think before we go up into the higher mountains. It is very cold at night - hard to sleep.

August 3 2004

I have been working at a computer today when I get a minute doing handouts from my lectures. I finally had a good sleep. I was so tired I could hardly function. It is a very long trip. Sister Alice has me so booked up much that I did not have time to adjust. I struggle to present material that is somehow useful. I was asked to give a motivational speech this morning - to the entire student body of about 1200 students and staff - rather onerous. They like the idea of having a foreigner here.

I am staying in Maseru with a Basotho family who lived in Canada for 6 years and whose son is still studying at McGill. They have a lovely home and HOT water - I was pathetically thrilled last night when she suggested I have a bath! It was glorious. I slept from 7:30pm -7am and feel so much more 'present'. The food is mainly bread, rice, 'papa' (maize) and cabbage with sausage, chicken, or fried baloney. Those who have lots to eat gain weight on this diet. The people at the college are lovely, welcoming, kind and helpful. The Basotho are a physically beautiful people, especially the children. I am learning some Sesotho words, trying to begin each talk and end them with a salutation. I am setting up appointments with people and will go to see the orphanage the Sisters run here. They are such good women. I am awed at their kindness and commitment to the children. With the exception of a hospital computer, the Sister of Charity Order has one computer in the entire country that is hooked up to the internet - which I tried to use a couple of days ago. Most places do not have land lines and so cannot be hooked up. Many areas cannot even get cell phone signals because of the mountains. I wrote a long letter and it crashed on me when I tried to send it. Actually, I wrote a long letter now and it crashed here. I fully understand now why I had trouble getting information from Alice – one just gives up.

The days are lovely and sunny; the nights are cold - very cold. I was so cold one night I did not sleep at all (my second night). I am pleased to stay in a home these few days where there is a heater in my bedroom. I hope all is well and that you are enjoying your days. You are each in my prayers at night before I fall asleep.

August 5 2004

Greetings - in Sesotho, Khotso, which means peace. My meetings and lectures are going well. There have been some exciting things happening. I just returned from a 2 hour meeting in a mission outside Maseru with Father Gerard Lerotholi, who studied in Ottawa for 6 years. I learned a lot. He is going to attempt to set up the meeting with the King.

The drive was gorgeous. The mountains, I have seen so far, are older than time: worn down, often flat topped and boulder filled. When I look at them, they seem like an essence of Africa. I have a driver and a cell phone that doesn't work. It is the only way to communicate with people here. The driver's name is Francis. He is a dear and trying so hard to educate me about Lesotho and the Basotho. He tries to teach me new words in Sesotho at a much faster rate than I can master. I am sure he thinks I am hopeless.

At the end of the day yesterday, I was able to have a meeting with Stephanie Nolen of the Globe and Mail. She has been living in Johannesburg for the past two years. We have been corresponding for about 6 weeks and were lucky to meet here, both staying in Maseru at the same time. She is the G&M African correspondent and has lived in Africa for 10 years, writing extensively. She has traveled with Stephen Lewis throughout Africa during his exploration of the HIV/AIDS situation. She is doing a large piece on Lesotho. The amazing thing is that Stephen Lewis is here in Maseru this week. She wants to include some of what Sister Alice and I are doing. I have pleaded that Lewis go to the orphanage run by the nuns on the outskirts of Maseru. It is absolutely desperate and he has money in his foundation. I so hope that he visits and sees fit to support them. The nuns are aging and working tirelessly for these dear children. It would make my whole trip worthwhile.

I do read your emails but cannot respond individually. I have to make such an effort not to lose the one I am working on. I often think of particular things various people would be interested in. These people are lovely – wrapped in their Basotho – highly creative and gorgeous- blankets to keep warm. Their faces are welcoming and their hearts are open. I must close and get back to work. God bless and thank you for your prayers and support.

August 7 2004

I hope this finds you all well. I so appreciate your kind words and prayer support. Alice cannot believe so many strangers are praying for her. She works tirelessly and has so much on her shoulders. My visit has added more to her workload.

Since my last email, we have been so busy. These meetings have given me an opportunity to meet many people and learn much I would not otherwise know. My hosts, the Sebatanes, for the four nights in Maseru have become new friends. They were both generous in sharing their knowledgeable perspectives on the social and political issues. I have really valued the opportunity to always be with local people.

I have met with Stephanie Nolen twice (once with Alice). Stephen Lewis was going to try to go to the orphanage Saturday. Although I have not as yet met Stephen, he has requested that I get in touch with his office in Toronto to discuss some things, which I will do. She will let me know when her article is coming out. I very much enjoyed our exchanges. She is an incredibly well informed woman, who works very hard to find the truth. The situation here is politically complicated and there is much dissatisfaction. She has turned over so many leaves and has become knowledgeable about multiple issues here.

I met for 2 hours with the Anglican Bishop Tsubella and briefly with his wife, a former nurse who runs the Anglican HIV/AIDS Program, and their Youth Worker. We met with the Executive Director of Durham Link – an organization for youth funded by a Durham England Parish; the Deputy Minister of Education for Lesotho; the Head of Catholic Education; the Director of World Vision Lesotho; customs people about how to bring in textbooks; a consultant who works with Queen’s University; the Mother Superior of an Anglican Order of the Holy Name; Sister Giselle, a French Canadian nun who has been here for 50 years and the last Canadian nun left; the Director and second for an international organization called ‘Scripture Union’ doing wonderful work with youth (leadership camps, prefect training etc), and several others.

I met Father Joseph Brossard, a priest from Ottawa who has been here for 54 years. He is one of the founders of the National University of Lesotho. We had a great chat. He has just secured \$1.2+ million from George W. Bush’s African Fund to do job creation programs. What a dynamic man – working tirelessly for the Basotho. Alice and I are trying to find out what is going on that can be tapped into, possibilities to bring textbooks into the country without the prohibitive duty, and how things work to give Alice the contacts to get the best for her people.

At this point, we have several possible ways to try and if one of them works, it will have been a huge feat. We are writing letters to World Vision Australia (WV Canada is not involved at this point in Lesotho) to see if they will consider starting a project in a village in the mountains here. Our meetings have gone from morning to night, whenever I have not been teaching. What opportunities!

Communication is so difficult - long distances, cell phones are very expensive, and it is hard to connect with people. These meetings have necessitated that I travel to various places and communities – again a blessing. Generally, people have been frank about issues. Our drive, Francis, is wonderful.

Friday, after seeing Stephanie again, we drove the 1.5 hours to Leribe where the provincial house is. The Sisters were so gracious in making me feel welcome. The water situation is dire. The area does not have water now and people must go at night to get some. In my room, they have given me a large container of water than is more than the whole group share. Rather than refuse, I will just leave it when I go. Flushing a toilet is an extravagant thing to do. I thought I would spare some water and skimmed – only to find that it did not flush adequately and I have to use another bucket full. I was horrified that I had wasted that much. I am grateful for the things that I brought which render me much more self-sufficient in terms of water than I would otherwise have been. The nuns are fun and kind. I love being with them. Several have been to Canada to the convent in Ottawa. I learn of their conflicts and their amazing work with the people.

Shortly after arriving, the Provincial Superior for Lesotho (a beautiful woman named Sister Justina whom I met with twice in Ottawa, once with Shelley) and I accompanied many nuns to a special regional diocesan service to pray for HIV/AIDS and other pressing issues – rain, crime etc. We stayed for 2 hours with Sister Justina translating the homily when possible. As the only white person, people smiled freely and were very welcoming. It was wonderful, especially the African music. The very large church was packed with worshipers from all over the district, wrapped in their colourful Basotho blankets. The African rhythms and chanting was everything I imagined of African music. There were many very young children and they were all so good. I marvelled at their ability to be quiet so late at night for so long. We left around 11:30 pm. The service continued all-night and ended with a long processional around the fields at 8 am and another communion mass before dispersing. The Bishop urged them to pray for the pressing issues facing the Basotho.

The weather has turned and spring is here. The nights are not so cold and the afternoons are hot and sunny. We leave the provincial house today to go north to Seboche. Sister Alice is the principal there as well as the #2 in the country for the Order. The Sisters of Charity at Ottawa have 16 houses in Lesotho, schools and hospitals, 105 nuns and novitiates. She is truly run ragged. Sister Justina depends on her greatly and there seems to be endless crises. Distances are long. For example, last night a crisis came up which may have dire consequences. She, Sr. Justina and another had to physically travel for hours to speak to a person involved because she has no phone. Attendance at funerals is a constant. People are dying at an alarming rate and one goes to support a friend or colleague. Such sadness – losing a sister, husband, mother, friend, child.

I woke early to write this before 8 am Sunday mass. I so want to go to hear the Sesotho singing. I also hope to go to the Anglican service in the village at 10 if possible to compare. Then we will leave for Seboche. The Anglican Church in Lesotho is having real difficulties. The Bishop, with whom I spoke at such length, is a lovely man. When the Basotho were to pick a Bishop, they were unable to agree, so that a South African was chosen. Despite his skill at administrations and good character, he will never be accepted, although he has been here 5 years. He and his wife seemed so discouraged. She seemed actually depressed. She said she wanted to join the Catholic Church because her HIV/AIDS program is not supported well by the Anglican priests.

As I speak to Anglicans around (the sisters etc.), I can see that the church is struggling and not able to respond effectively enough to the terrible conditions of the parishioners. They are very frank about their discouragement.

I write this to you in Word so that if this slow and painful dial up fails me, I will not lose the text. It takes such a long time to load a web page – seemly especially one as complex as hotmail. The days are so busy and I am living out of a suitcase, moving around. We go next weekend up into the mountains where the most extreme poverty is to visit Alice's parents. Blessings on you all and each day I think of your prayers and interest in this project. Perhaps we can make a small difference.

August 11 2004

I am now down at the Mother House in Hlotse, Leribe after 6 days in Seboche. I was delusional when I said the weather was warming up. Seboche is higher in the mountains and it turns cold as soon as the sun goes down around 6 pm until about noon. As I lay in my room in the convent, I was so grateful for Abe's down sleeping bag and Shelagh's silk liner. The buildings are cold and one wears a fleece jacket all the time and a coat over to go outside. In winter, people never take their coats or hats off. They wear them all day, to eat, during work, etc.

Seboche is in a valley, in a labyrinth of mountains with the traditional and distinct Basotho huts (round, one room, and thatched) and garden plots. The village wanders its way over several peaks and valleys. It becomes hard to know where one village starts and another begins because the homes are often far apart to more effectively use what arable land there is. The obvious effects of the draught are heartbreaking. There are large crevices where the ground has just split and sunk, sometimes many metres deep, due to the dryness. Erosion has taken a terrible toll.

Hillsides are patch worked with rock designs where the soil has eroded completely. What soil there is a vivid iron red and so dry – it seems merely dust. The water situation is dire everywhere. I was offered a

shower last night after 6-7 days without. I felt guilty but accepted after much pressing. The dust is everywhere; yet all work diligently to keep things clean and swept. Unfortunately, there is little regard to the environment and people think nothing of littering. One finds garbage everywhere – strewn with abandon.

The nuns are remarkable – so generous with their meagre supplies and their hospitality. They rise at 5:30, prayers from 6-7, breakfast (steamed bread, cereal, sometimes an egg, and instant coffee or tea) and off to work as a nurse, administration of the mission hospital there, teacher in the secondary or primary schools, work with the poor etc. Each has her contribution and puts in long days. They gather at random for a quick lunch and then back to work. They gather 5-6:30 for prayers and then dinner. Lunch and dinner are similar. The food is mostly starch with cabbage and some other vegetables. There is most often the steamed bread, cabbage, and chicken, then perhaps mashed pumpkin (delicious). I passed up on chicken feet and intestines. Their generosity and kindness will stay with me forever.

I have spoken to numerous schools and distributed the supplies to some. When Sister Alice and I went over what I brought, she was insistent that we share the bounty with the several poor schools in the neighbourhood. We both agreed that Sister Margaret's orphanage should have some as well. I cannot tell you how appreciative people are. When I have given each teacher in each school a 'foreign' pen of his/her own and their faces bring tears to your eyes. The children often sing for me. One afternoon was a professional development session with Alice's teachers.

The students are beautiful and so happy with whatever I bring. I am leaving things behind for the principals to be given quietly to the children who have nothing. The paucity of resources and the plethora of challenges boggle the mind as I see the classrooms, staff offices, hear the voices of dedicated people trying to make a difference. It is incredibly humbling.

The exposure I am getting is beyond words. Sister Alice is highly regarded for her compassionate, competence, and hard work throughout the region. People instantly open their hearts and concerns to me. I am compiling a list of really worthwhile projects, costs, volunteer options, etc. The challenges of transportation and communication make everything arduous and time consuming.

Today, I have come down to Hlotse to prepare for a session of 2 hours with the primary teachers of the region. The driver and I will leave immediately after (at 11 am) to drive to my private audience with King Letsie III. The fact that I am not associated with any organization has proven highly advantageous for me to gain access and a listening ear. I must scrub the spot off my only skirt! I will be seriously underdressed but enthusiastic! One does what one can! We will drive back here in the evening as I have a 2 hour session with the high school teachers the next morning. Tomorrow will be a very long day – possibly 4 hours of driving – which is tiring here.

Friday, we leave for the high mountains, to Paray, where I will see a few schools, the hospital (I already know the Director of Nursing there, Sister Marie Annunciata. I am expecting it to be cold, especially at night. We will sleep Friday night at a convent there, then Saturday and Sunday nights with Alice's family. I believe they are very poor and have little room for a visitor, so I appreciate them having me. I came with a sleeping mat so that I can sleep on the floor. We set aside supplies and two soccer balls for the primary school there. This is one of the villages we are petitioning the World Vision Australia to support. They are among the poorest in the country. I am so looking forward to meeting her family. We set aside some of Brent and Suzanne's medical textbooks for her sister who is in third year Medical school in Malawi and cannot afford the books.

I am captivated with the grandeur of this land. At every vista, one's breath is taken away with the beauty. All remind me that this is the bleakest season and in the spring and summer the land is green and beautiful. I read that the mountains are famous for their alpine flowers, especially fields of multi-coloured columbine. I will hold the faces of these children in my minds forever. I have never seen such lovely faces and shining souls. They stare at you until you wave or greet them in some fashion – when you do; they light up like a spring sunrise sheer joy to behold. I could take a few home if I weren't so old!!!!!!

I thank you for your encouraging and kind emails. I am thinking of you all in various capacities. I am not comfortable having the nuns pay for my email time, so will stick with this format of a general letter. Mom, your birthday is next week and I am thinking of you daily as it approaches. We all have had so much fun celebrating with you in the past.

August 18 2004

As I write, I have returned from the high mountains. I confess, coming back to the Provincial House is like a vacation: the altitude is lower; house is warmer at night; they have more water (not much but more); the food is more varied and there are more condiments! In both Seboche and the Provincial Houses, I have my own room and may leave things there. It makes me feel at home, as I am on the road so much. Communication is so difficult that one has to physically drive to another place to discuss an issue or problem. Telephones are outrageously expensive and unreliable. Few people have electricity. All the convents do. Africans seem to go to bed with the sun and rise on its return.

We had dinner at the provincial house and then continued to Seboche. When we arrived, there was a water alert – no water. The public radio was warning people that water had become so scarce that people must conserve and in many cases do without. I have borrowed a computer and write this letter and work on my proposals today. I will send this Wednesday night when I am at the provincial house. I had tea this morning with a Swiss doctor's wife who kindly invited me and shared her experiences of 2 years here.

I had a private audience August 12 with King Letsie III at the Royal Palace in Maseru. The fact that I am not associated with any organization has proven highly advantageous for me to gain access and a listening ear. I tried to scrub the spot off my only skirt! I was seriously underdressed but enthusiastic! One does what one can! Our half an hour meeting seemed to go well. I found him gracious, welcoming, circumspect, hard to read, and non-committal. As is the African way and his political caution, if he were to intervene at all, it would be later and discretely. We will see. We discussed the difficulties bringing used textbooks into Lesotho, the need to support the schools, the notion of volunteers etc. He was prompt. We shared tea and I think had a fruitful exchange. He is young – around 42 with a young wife, a three-year-old and a new one on the way. He has known grief, political unrest, political rejection, and has survived.

I have met with the head of UNICEF here, a charming Frenchman. Stephen Lewis has met with both him and the King. Stephen is well known by those in international development and well respected. Apparently, he has been in Lesotho at least four times.

The weekend in Thaba Tseka and Paray was incredible. It was not as cold as people had warned me. The temperature in the mountains drops immediately after the spectacular African sunsets and it remains cold until late afternoon at this time of year. However, it was fine. We travelled the 5 hours up. We were at the highest point of any road in Africa! The mountains here are so old. They are very high but are worn down. The rock is soft – which makes the erosion much worse. The surfaces are worn and relatively smooth, with many smaller rocks covering surface, with small brush, weeds etc. In the spring and summer, they are covered with beautiful alpine flowers. I can only imagine how lovely it must be, because even now it is breath taking. Sheep roam on many of the hills. Young boys, enshrouded in the Basotho blankets guard them constantly. Stock theft has become prevalent and is now a major factor in the increase in poverty. One sees the effects of erosion everywhere – fissures in the ground. I was so disheartened on the trip through the mountains to see the tributaries where melting snow should have created waterfalls and streams, to find that there is no water. Almost all are dry. Rivers are so low they barely run. Villages pepper the mountains. People have one hut for cooking and one for sleeping. At every turn in the winding ascent or decent into the valleys, the view is spectacular.

We stayed at the convent the first night in Thaba Tseka (again a warm welcome), then spent much of Saturday at a ceremony to end a period of mourning. June 23, a cousin of Sister Alice's, his wife and 20 year old son were high-jacked on the road to Maseru in early morning. As a vendetta against the son, he was tortured in front of his parents. Their truck was stolen. The parents hitched a ride home. Their distress was so great that the father went to the hospital, suffered a heart attack and died. The mother is left with a 12 year old daughter and 15 year old son. There is a cultural ceremony to end the formal period of mourning when the villagers get together with the extended family to hold a mass, eat and visit. I was welcomed by all and for the first time allowed to help in the food preparation. There were over a hundred people there.

They slaughtered and cooked several sheep in front of us. The women prepared an enormous quantity of food, paid for by the widow (I have no idea how). The food for the family was varied and delicious. The food for all the rest was the standard fare. Two of Alice's 5 sisters were there with her mother, Anna (each person has a Basotho name and a Christian name – unfortunately, I usually opt for the latter as I am meeting so many people and still have trouble pronouncing the Basotho one). She is dear.

We drove back to the village where Alice grew up – high in the mountains - an arduous journey! People up here have such a long way to go to school, often walking for 1-2 hours over the crests of the mountains. In the morning, it is windy: starting at 6:00, often on an empty stomach is challenging. As I mentioned previously, Alice's mother is the only person in the village with a full time job. She is an elementary teacher and makes a very small salary. Having already raised 8 children, she is now raising her orphaned relatives – with no electricity and 8K to go walk each way to school.

Alice's family has three small huts. One is the cook hut; another is the storage hut for grains, seeds, etc. The wind can be very forceful there, as they are close to the top. The third hut is a room, partitioned by a curtain and the back of a wardrobe. One half is the kitchen and eating area with a table and two propane burner stove. The other half is the bedroom with a double bed.

There were originally 9 children, with six girls left. The three boys died. The last one died at 15 in 1998 when he was struck by lightning. This is not uncommon here because of the ferocity of the electrical storms and dryness. When the children were growing up, they slept in the hut that now serves as a storeroom. Her parents were thrilled to have us and were lovely and welcoming.

I slept on the floor with my mat and sleeping bag. Alice, her mother, and a 12 year old girl (a relative whose parents are too poor to keep her) slept on the bed. The father slept in the storage room. A 20-year-old orphaned relative they are keeping, sleeps in the kitchen hut with the fire. The latter looks after the animals to earn his keep. When I gave the father and young chap new shirts, they were so delighted. We brought food, school supplies for Anna's school. They are delighted when I use my limited Sesotho.

Alice's parents have so little but are the ones to share with their neighbours. For example, an elderly woman, her granddaughter and great-granddaughter came in the morning for a visit but really for breakfast of bread and porridge. The woman has lost 4 children in the past two years and is trying to take care of 8 orphaned grandchildren. Despite having so little, when their cow died of eating plastic, they shared the meat with the entire village. She often comes to Anna for food.

The following morning, we went on a round of visiting. When we went to see the Chief and his family he was so thrilled to host a visitor, and especially one who had tea with the King, that he insisted I take his chicken. I was deeply touched and told him how honoured I was but due to my travel schedule, it would be impossible to take the chicken!

We attended an outpost church service. A congregation of 132 meets weekly in a dilapidated old concrete building on a mountainside, an hour walk from Anna and Joseph's. The windows are broken and the wind (this is the windy season) roars through at an astonishing velocity. They welcomed me warmly during the service. It was a fascinating service. The music was terrific. Someone had brought a drum. I received real compliments at the end for moving appropriately to the music as "white people never get the rhythm"! The children were so cute. The service was 2 hours, then choir practice for an upcoming feast followed. I blew up some balloons and played with the kids for a while. Their joy brought tears to my eyes.

We visited in the afternoon, one destitute family giving me a whole bottle of preserved peaches! The following morning, I visited one of the poorest schools in the region. What these children do to get an education puts me to shame. I then gave a workshop at the Paray high school. I must tell you that having the opportunity, as a non-Catholic to be welcomed into the bosom of this amazing congregation of women has been one of the highlights and privileges of my sojourn here. I have had the opportunity to chat on an individual basis with many, often for long periods as we travel across the country. They are unencumbered by the general angst and personality preoccupations of so many of us westerners. Without exception, each has told me of her contentment with her decision to be in this sorority, of her joy in serving the Lord, of her happiness with the camaraderie and support of her sisters. They laugh easily and often, despite the arduous circumstances. Their thoughtfulness to and interest in each other's well-being and work is nothing short of inspiring. They are such fun and interesting. These are dedicated, hardworking, smart, well educated women who know what they are doing in life and wholeheartedly believe in the value of their mission. They run many schools and hospitals here. They often get into trouble with the government for not allowing government officials and their families and friends to take priority in cues for health care or seats in the schools. They have supported the current King when few else would. Their commitment is to the poor and there are no exceptions! Because of their vows of poverty and obedience, they are no susceptible to corruption as are others in administrative positions.

Their kindness to me is something I will never forget. Without hesitation, they have taken me to their bosoms and shared their food, hospitality, concerns, and joys with me. I am honoured to have been so fully accepted - me a stranger from a strange land, of another church and custom. I have grown to love them individually and will miss their teasing and daily sharing.

Tonight, I am invited to dinner at the home of the Nigerian doctor at the mission and his wife. I have talked at length with her. She too is a stranger here. She has promised me a traditional Nigerian dinner – I am looking forward to the visit. I have been asked back to several schools and will try to do as much as I can.

As I continue to see the situations in so many schools, I admire those who continue to forge on ahead and guide these young people under such circumstances. I was at one high school on the top of a mountain that has no supplies at all. There are no books and without the dedication of their wonderful principal, Mary Grace, a bright women and fierce advocate. Her office is a small table and two plastic chairs. There are no books, no place to store papers, and no evidence of her dedication. She is hoping to get a tractor because the only thing this poor school has, is land. Her dream is to rent out the tractor and also use it to grow enough food for the children and to sell surplus. She wants to make the school self-sufficient so that it will pay for the school fees. These children do not have money for fees. She certainly has my vote! I am writing a proposal for her to get money for the tractor from the Canada Fund for Africa. I talked to the student body. I am making every effort to address the girls – to tell them that they can have a future if they refrain from giving up and giving in. The situation at home is often so dire that they just quit. It is too hard. Many teachers come to me after my talks and ask for me address so that if they have problems they can write to me!!!! All are so thrilled with the meagre things I can bring for them.

When Alice and I split up the supplies and balls, etc., there were only a few things for each school. The harmonicas (they call flutes) are going to the school choirs. The soccer balls are a huge hit as you can imagine, especially at this remote school. I am determined to find more schools to twin with these kids. Because it is so difficult to send things there, I have drawn up a 'Twinning' structure, called 'Building a Future Awards', we can apply to all the school that will join us. There are incentives which can compound as the individual moves along. None of the incentives are for marks. The school system here stresses marks to the exclusion of almost all else.

I am keeping a file of small and larger projects churches, individuals, or schools might like to take on. I am finding out and making charts of the volunteer opportunities, accommodation possibilities, job descriptions, and follow-up contacts. There are some interesting possibilities to share expertise and experience this wonderful people.

I just finished addressing the student body of St. Charles High School - we had so much fun. The kids sang for me - amazing. I almost cried it was so beautiful. Tomorrow, I go back up the mountains to give a full day workshop at a high school for all the primary and secondary teachers in the region. I will then go to see the famous Katse Dam, then back to Hlotse to the provincial house for the weekend.

August 23 2004

6am - Just when I think I have seen poverty, I am confronted with a whole new dimension. I have been back up into the mountains to stay at another convent in the village of Mamohau. The setting is panoramic and magnificent. Where I am staying, the buildings are old and I am sure was once lovely. It is run down and the five nuns who stay there have little in the way of amenities. They were superb hosts, were so generous with what they have but I saw how hard their lives were.

They look after a little orphan girl whose mother was a nurse in their mission hospital. This little one stole my heart. She is nine and so bright. We played with a balloon for ages. What a dear child. She eats in the kitchen and sleeps somewhere in the girls' residence of the high school. Many children must board due to the distances or they have no homes to go to or their parents are working elsewhere and there is no one to take care of the children. The conditions are hard to imagine. On a walk I was accosted by about 25 young girls....we had such fun. They sang for me and I had to sing a song for them. It was a riot. They all want to touch me – especially my hair to see if it is real or corn fluff. We happened upon a choir practicing, in the dark (no electricity), in an old stone building and so they did a performance for me, delighted to have someone to sing for. What a choir – they were outstanding young chasseurs. You would be impressed at the many beautiful stone churches and schools throughout Lesotho that were built by Canadian priests, almost all French Canadian. Canadians have been here for over 150 years and are well regarded.

Thursday, I gave a full day workshop at a high school – on very challenging topics. Friday, I drove further up into the mountains on a road I would not have believed it possible to traverse to the village and school of Mahlekefane. Some sections went straight up. The view was incredible. The boulders and ruts made it quite a challenge for the driver Frances (my new friend and most constant companion). I thought my spine would break from the jolting – back on anti-inflammatories again. On the descent, one could clearly see the almost dry riverbeds. What will this country do for water? As an aside, we passed and picked up various young women and their babies. Two women were walking, sharing the load of a plastic box full of beer bottles, about 45 minutes uphill to buy beer for their husband because many husbands don't like to be seen doing so!

Our destination – near the very summit of a series of mountains was a small school of two classrooms and one tent. The classroom benches had been taken out. Children were mixing cow dung and dirt to smear on the classroom floor to reduce the dust (a common practice). There were 5 grades in one room. The 318 kids were the personification of poverty. Many walk the 1.5 hours up and down hill through the mountains without shoes. I will never forget the children. We played balloons for a while. They were so happy. When you see the pictures you will appreciate my comments.

I also went to see the famous Katse Dam, Lesotho Highlands Water Project. There is one area at the top of the range with a huge man-made lake, covering many miles. The dam was constructed before the years of draught to sell water to South Africa. Funded by the World Bank, it provided for tarring the road up to the summit, connecting many communities and impacting the transportation system widely. Where the road is tarred, people can now travel infinitely faster. There are communities constructed to house all the workers required. It was a huge project, a real feat of engineering, tunnelling through the mountains to pass the water through. During the construction, men had money; women flocked there to prostitute themselves to feed their families. Aids spread like wild fire. The project is finished, the men left – leaving behind hundreds of orphans and women with HIV/AIDS. The water continues to be sold to South Africa at a time when the Basotho are desperate for water. The government is not respected by any person I have spoken to, with the exception of those who work for the government themselves. There are no provisions to get this water to the citizens. A recent audit of the money made from the dam by the World Bank reports that there are 12 million rand missing every year from the books (approx. 3 million CDN). The housing communities are deserted. The houses cannot be used because the government controls them. The fancy hotel built for tourist seemed empty to me.

HIV/AIDS ravishes the country. Clinics and posters everywhere extol the merits of testing and treatment. It is a hidden disease. Most people still do not believe it exists. They attribute the deaths to witchcraft –

someone wishes you ill and death out of envy or malice. Traditional medicine men tell the people it is not AIDS. The stigma of being HIV positive or having AIDS renders it futile to get tested. Orphans whose parents die of the disease are stigmatized and many won't have anything to do with them. One either goes up here or down. Elevation is the point of reference. Saturday, I went up to the village of Pitseng and had a meeting with the principal of the school Rockcliffe Park Public is twinning with. It is a residential school for these mountain children. I played with the kids for quite a while –always the best part of a visit to a school. Apparently there are quite a few Albinos here. I had noticed one little one in church last week. At this school, there was a little girl. She watched me intently throughout my visit. I approached 'Mary' and put my arms beside her so that we could compare the colour of our hands and forearms – they were the same. I said, in front of all the kids, "Mary is like me". The children repeated it – Mary is like 'M'e (which means mother or Mrs.). Mary kept comparing us: hands, arms. I think she may never have seen a white person before and was thrilled there was someone who looked like her. The principal showed me around. As it was the weekend, he had no notice of my arrival and was rather taken aback. It allowed me to see things un-sanitized – a good thing. The rooms where the preschoolers sleep would put a rancid sardine can to shame. The children are dear. I had a good meeting with the Principal and think this school will benefit so much from the venture – where they are really needed – again, pictures will reveal a comprehensive message. There is no phone signal leaving these communities isolated.

I also had a second meeting with Mary Grace, who lives in a nearby village – I could walk - who runs a school in the mountains, has an orphan and aged husband with dementia to look after in Pitseng. She works all week at Bokoro and returns home on weekends. She is amazing and an inspiration. She is the one I referred to earlier who has taken a group of poor students from a remote village and struggles to create a positive community. We are discussing twinning and other ways to help the school.

This weekend at Pitseng was a gathering of all the Sister of Charity nuns – around 105, in Lesotho here – an annual event. It was such fun to be a part of it. They are terrific – allowing me into their inner sanctuaries and ceremonies. They put on a lovely lunch for Sister Justina, who is the Mother Provincial in Lesotho. It was a real Basotho feast with singing and speeches (although I could not understand a word). I love watching the nuns all moving gracefully to the music – even the elderly ones. There were performances from the youngest novices and even from the more mature ones. Their singing was excellent. They laugh so readily.

Advent of spring displays itself in Lesotho, especially in the mountains, green creeping over the slopes, trees budding, flowers blooming. I have enjoyed watching the hues change from many shades of brown to mottled transitional tones. We all woke the other night to the sound of thunder and rain, each silently praying that the rain would fall – gently enough not to erode the arid soil but enough to replenish something. Much ado about nothing! The amount of precipitation was about 3 cm with a lot of crashing and bluff. How disappointing! The lack of water increases daily. Children are dirty from poverty but also there is no water to wash. Every day after school, children must go and collect sticks and dead grain stock for firewood for cooking. Little ones carry large containers often very far, sometimes with wheelbarrows or on their heads, and at a terrible ascent or decent to fill the containers with water. I marvel at the efforts to have order and cleanliness. Women take their laundry to wash in the trickle of water that used to be a river. The dusty ground is swept daily around the houses with a 16 in. broom particular to Africa. It requires an amount of bending that my tired back groans to watch.

Today, I leave for another visit to the school twinned with Rockcliffe Park, then to Maseru for meetings. I am going to a lodge in the mountains for Tuesday and the night. I will go pony trekking – a real tradition

here and I am excited to have the day off to explore outside. Wednesday, I lecture at the National University of Lesotho and the Oblate Seminary Management students. I go to the orphanage (Steven Lewis did not have time to do so). I will take pictures to show him. I will return to the provincial house Friday night for the weekend, then leave on the Monday night. We are contemplating going to South Africa to Johannesburg and taking my flight from there. We will see, everything changes daily here – plans must be flexible.

Sunday morning, I walked into town to the 8 am Anglican service to take communion and to compare. No contest: it was boring and lifeless. The priest was an Englishman who has been in Lesotho for decades and I think has lost his marbles. He ranted about Ronald Regan and Saddam Hussein – quite incomprehensible to the Basotho. During the passing of the Peace he came back to see me, asked me where I was from and added “Well at least you know Ronald Regan!”. He was delighted to see a white person. They are indeed scarce. The only ones I have seen are a couple of American Peace Corp young people in villages and some visitors with UNICEF one day. The Anglican nuns asked me back for tea and one took the initiative to show me her residence for girls. Everyone wants me to help them – the need is everywhere. I was glad to see it and realized there could be room for 16 orphaned young girls there for sewing school or high school. I will add it to my information.

I have heard from Stephanie Nolen a couple of times and the article about Lesotho, mentioning Alice and me, is to be published in the Globe any day now. She said the editor was unusually pleased with it...we will see. Please keep a copy for me. I would also like to send a hard copy to Alice. She would laugh to see her picture in a national newspaper. I am off to Pitseng and then Maseru. Again, thanks for the emails. I will return here Friday night.

August 28 2004

This will be my last letter. It is hard to believe I arrived only 4 weeks ago. My stay has been intense and profound. Last Monday, I went to Maseru to stay with my friends Freda and Esau Sabatane. I had a hot bath! It was glorious! The next morning was the second anniversary of the death of their eldest daughter at 29 of leukemia. I was glad I was there – we talked at length.

Frances and I drove to the village of Morija to see some craft guilds and then onto Malealea further south. Although the lower elevations to the south are warmer, the mountains are still high. I notice that the effects of erosion are greater in the south. My photos will show you whole sides of mountains where there is no longer any soil. The lodge where I stayed is the only tourist place I have seen. The owners are white Basotho (I did not know there were any). The lodge is in the Lonely Planet and gets visitors from all over the world. When I was there, groups were from Belgium, Germany, Holland, and a few from Israel travelling alone. I was the only North American. It seemed odd to be among only white people! I went pony trekking for 2 hours Tuesday afternoon. The panorama is all one could wish for. The crest of the mountain to which we rode gave us an almost 360 view of valleys. I loved the ride. I kept thinking how my boys would have loved it. If I had time and especially if they were there, we could have taken a four day ride into the mountains. I struck up a short friendship with a couple from Belgium about Jesse's age. They had been volunteering in Africa for the past three summer vacations. They were fun and keen. We chatted for hours, discussing fundraising ideas and how to involve people. They are interested in coming to Lesotho to one of our projects next year – we will see. They would have so much to offer. He is an accountant and she a translator (and a very bright young woman).

That afternoon, it started to rain. The fall was perfect – gentle enough not to disrupt the arid soil but continuous enough to last all night. Everyone was delirious with joy. It will help the newly planted seeds to stay in the soil and not be blown away. The actual rainy season is supposed to start in December. We drove to Maseru in the late afternoon to spend some time at the orphanage, then to the convent at Roma. Roma is about 45 minutes from Maseru and is the university town. It was established by missionaries – who planted trees. It is one of the few forested area I have seen.

Almost all the land here is used, either for farming or grazing. The country is historically deforested but efforts to obtain firewood and make furniture have taken many of the trees they do have. People are incredulous when I tell them how many trees are in Canada. The positive effect of this is that one can often see great distances. The convent and seminary in Roma are really attractive: made of stone, with inviting gardens. Flowers are now beginning to bloom everywhere. It helps me to imagine what it will be like in a month.

I gave two lectures at the National University of Lesotho (one to professors and one to about 100 students) and then one to the Seminarians. The priests were my least enthusiastic audience! I also met for 2 hours with a professor and scholar, Rev. Khekhe. He is in the philosophy department and widely respected. He has been very involved in the politics of the Anglican Church in Lesotho and was forthcoming with me about the problems. He provided an alternative and elaborated perspective to that of the Bishop Tsubella – ah politics! We discussed ways we could increase the communication with the Anglican community in Canada and how to involve university students in both countries. His wife joined us for tea. They have 5 children and are most cordial.

In the morning on Friday, we returned to Maseru for a 3 hour talk to the Primary and Secondary teachers there. I met with the Canadian consulate and then back to Hlotse. I was absolutely thrilled to arrive back to find 240 letters from the students of Guardian Angel Primary School to the children of Rockcliffe Park Public School. The twinning begins in earnest! I will spend the time today finishing up some work, writing two proposals and some letters. I did some laundry and am making packages of things of my own to leave behind for prizes for the awards. I have been scouring the country for things to bring back to the school so that they can learn of Lesotho. There is no hope of finding anything once I leave the country. I have full bags to take back and am excited to get the children in both countries involved. I have been given some lovely gifts and had some memorable farewells. It will be hard to leave. I hope I can return sometime.

I certainly have my work cut out for me once I return to Canada. I leave here bearing much friendship, gratitude and prayers to people of Canada. I cannot remember just how many lovely young Basotho women want to marry my sons! I brought a picture of the boys and it has proven to be a real icebreaker. Motherhood is highly valued here.

I leave having prepared several schools for twinning, with an explicit agreement and an award system. We have done up some 'manageable' proposals for excellent ways to motivate and encourage youth and feed the hungry. There is lots of work ahead but I think our time has been well spent. There have been many contacts made and confidences built. Alice and I have had picked people to work with who will follow through on these initiatives. That is the thing the king asked me twice: "Who here will follow up on what you are doing?"

Tomorrow, we leave for South Africa. Monday night I fly home from Johannesburg. Several nuns are coming on other business so I will have a special farewell. I will carry with me many letters to the Sisters of Charity in Ottawa from their dear friends here. Thank you to each one for your support and prayers

while I have been here. I could not have imagined a better exploration into this culture and its people. It truly has been an amazing experience, for which I have been most grateful!

Postscript

My final afternoon was spent with Mary Grace finishing the proposal to the Canada Fund for her tractor. The Sisters gave me a wonderful party – decorated with Sister Valentina’s lovely covers. The food was wonderful – including pumpkin. They had a cake, presents: a medallion necklace from Sr. Françoise from PNG, four t-Shirts from Bokoro saying that Bokoro High School will ever remember Peg Herbert on the back (one for me and one for each of the boys; three t-shirts for each of the boys from St. Charles High School and one for me). A lovely mug from St. Charles, the sisters gave me a mug, a beautiful, traditional Basotho Hat. They sang for me. Even the kitchen girls sang a song. Alice made a lovely speech. They are all dear to my heart. I will miss them very much. Being with them has made me a better person. After a long trip home, Jesse and Mel, Lucas, Abe and Sam met me at the airport and had a really special feast and wine. It was so nice to be welcomed home in such a way.