



Just Say T-I-A

My wife, Amy, arrived with Patrick Dale Sutherland, our newly adopted 14-month-old son from Zambia, on Sunday, April 26. She had been in Zambia for 14 weeks. Zambia is a peaceful country where 600,000 of its children are orphaned by AIDS and 64 percent of the population lives below the international poverty line of \$1.25 per day. On both of the five-day whirlwind trips I took to visit Amy and Patrick in Zambia, the radio warned of cholera and cautioned, “Boil your water.”

When Amy and I chatted by Skype each morning, Amy often said “T-I-A,” meaning “This is Africa.” In other words, don’t try to make sense of it. It has taken literally dozens of forms, meetings, re-meetings, resubmitting of forms, and hundreds of calls to get an adoption done, and Amy learned to say to herself, with each setback, “T-I-A.”

One of my greatest teachers taught me to look at the world through a prism of seeing the “culture” of people

“just surrender.” Surrender to the fact that people will not show up on time. Surrender to the fact that people will completely change their story the next day, and you will find yourself without help, in need of a new form that did not exist the day before, asked for more money, or just plain misled. At the store you will find that, yes, they are out of peanut butter! When you inquire about when it will arrive, you will get a quizzical look, a shrug, or an answer that to us

moment as our friend. While I did not have the privilege, as Amy did, of living where you feel blessed if the electricity works so you can read a book, write a letter, or put together a puzzle before bed, Zen teaches us that the most important person is the one next to you; the most important moment is this one; and the most important act is the next one you make. On my first trip to Africa, while on a bus, a woman turned to me and said, “You know, gratitude is the key to happiness.” She then walked off the bus.

I think that I will take Amy’s T-I-A and make it my own. My T-I-A will stand for “this is acceptable.” I will want my T-I-A charged with heart, because life is about emotion and love and all the things we feel that bring us to the moment. So along with my T-I-A, my heart will need to be full of gratitude that I can love who I am and gratitude for

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— not race, color, gender, age, education, or job, but culture. This allows us to accept people as they are and not get into the judging game. Of course, we know that it’s hard to accept a culture where poverty, HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, and orphans seem so needlessly prevalent. And when I dwell on the stupidity of the unnecessary suffering, I hear Master Dogan saying, “Paul, suffering exists, so we [spiritually inclined] have something to do!”

Yet, as most Westerners will confess, Africa drives even the most laid-back person crazy after a while. You must, as Amy will say, realize that T-I-A means

would seem flippant, such as, “It will be here when it is here.” So you just accept that peanut butter, at least for now, does not exist, and you can choose to get mad or to feel frustrated, angry, sad, or victimized — or you can just say to yourself, “T-I-A,” and accept it.

Amy’s Skype calls from Africa and her life there changed me and brought back my past mindfulness training in a new light. We just need to know when to let things go. We just need to know that it does little good to emotionally charge anything over which we have no control. We can only plow forward, with a smile, a sense of humor, and the

Amy, Akasha, Keeston, and my new son, Patrick. Tearfully, I am — I must admit — so grateful that Amy is home safe, that my family is whole, and that I can, at this exact moment, feel how wonderful and acceptable life is. T-I-A. Amy is most grateful that she does not need to boil the water.

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