

Peace that Passes Understanding

We wrestle with major decisions. Ultimately, we want to do what is best for ourselves, our families and those affected by our decisions. Best does not always mean easiest or most practical. The best decisions are those made from the heart, with peace in our spirit, no matter the outcome or perceived success.



There were two distinct parts of our overseas term. We often refer to these as “the before” and “after,” much like the way we describe the “pre-kids” and “after-kids” phases of our marriage. In Uganda, we acquired three commodities, all at about the same time: these three possessions defined the “after” portion of our term. The pressure lamp, the gas oven, and the dog made the difference between mere survival and a pleasurable daily life. Had we known how much these things would enrich our simple lifestyle, we would have acquired them much earlier than halfway through our three-year term of service.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

December 1993

Dear Mom and Dad,

Thank you for your letters. It's wonderful to hear about things back home. We are so settled into our life here that I rarely think of American settings any more. I used to dream about going home. For example, once I dreamed that I went home and ended up at Park Road Shopping Center. I didn't have a car, so I called home from a pay phone booth and asked for someone to come and pick me up. Woody answered the phone and said, "I don't have enough room in the van for you." Of course, here, they can always squeeze in another passenger, or goat or whatever you are hauling. I was livid at his response.

Another time I dreamed that I phoned home to Mandy from Kampala. As we were talking she said, "Hold on, Mary Claire is crying."

"Who is Mary Claire!?"

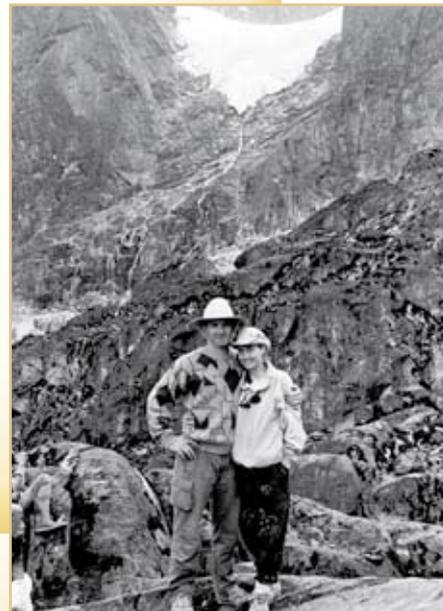
"Didn't I tell you that I had a baby?"

My dreams revealed some of my fears about being away from home for so long. I was afraid that we would eventually be completely forgotten.

Those fears have subsided and now my dreams revolve around African adventures and our daily lives. I write to you today from a place of peace.

We are happy and so grateful to live in this beautiful setting. Rainy season brings fresh air and crisp mornings. People are cheerful and moving about the village with energy, trying to get in the day's work before the afternoon rain sets in. The flowers in our front garden are vibrant and full, especially the hollyhocks that we planted by our front door. They have grown tall enough to look me in the eye and greet me with their fluffy pink blossoms. Our green grass complements the red and pink beds that border our reed fence.

As we walk to Nora's to get fresh baked bread, we look up at the snow-capped peaks of the Rwenzoris.



Having climbed the Rwenzori Mountains twice now, the "Mountains of the Moon" are no longer a mystery to us, but rather a majestic marvel.

After trekking through bogs, forests, rivers and boulders for four days, the ascent up the glacier with ice axes and crampons to reach Margherita Peak was much more than a natural high. At nearly 17,000 feet, Margherita Peak is the third highest in Africa. From the jagged, pointy top, we looked east to Uganda and west to Zaire. The four-day trek back home was full of awe for what we had seen and anticipation for returning to our bed! I now understand why people come from all over the world to climb the Rwenzori Mountains; this range truly is amazing in its grandeur, unique in its vegetation and rugged with splendor. And we live right here at the base of these incredible mountains!

In addition to our picturesque surroundings, the simplicity of our lifestyle contributes to our wellness. The less you have, the less you have to worry about. I often delight in not having to pay bills, not having to choose which things to buy, and not having to meet tight deadlines. We are content with a few simple pleasures. We recently bought a pressure lamp and a gas oven. Simple as they are, these appliances have added much enjoyment to our days. I don't know why we waited so long to get a pressure lamp – maybe because they cost \$40. That's pricey for our meager monthly stipend. And, we were quite okay with candlelight. It always meant early to bed, early to rise. But now we extend our evenings, playing cards and reading to the wonderful light provided by our pressure lamp, which illuminates our whole living room. Now I find it amazing that we did everything, including dinner clean-up, by the dim light of a candle.

The oven – well, that's a story. "Where in the heck did you get a gas oven?" you might ask. Missionaries in Kampala, friends of friends, were selling all of their housewares before leaving the country. So, we decided to buy the gas oven. Getting this appliance to Ibanda was the real trick. We combined our trip to Kampala to fetch our oven with collecting our friend Rich, who had come to visit us. We rented the Habitat double-cab pickup and used the vehicle during Rich's holiday with us.

On our way home from Kampala, just for fun and adventure, and because this was one of the few times we actually had a vehicle, we took the long way through Queen Elizabeth National Park. We hoped to see the tree-climbing lions that reside on the Ishasha side of the park.

The long way ended up being the wrong way. Because of the heavy rains, the road had washed out into a slip-sliding mess, for miles. There were lorries stuck on the sides of the road and few vehicles could muster enough power to push through the mud. Every bump, twist and slide that jolted our truck sent the oven tumbling, sliding and banging in the bed of the truck. We wondered if there would be anything left of the oven when we arrived home.

We slept the night in the park at the ranger's station and enjoyed some campfire stories with the ranger, who graciously gave us a tent to sleep in as well as permission to camp for the night. The following day, we navigated the roads to complete the journey home. We did see tree-climbing lions, as well as a lake filled with hippos. At first glance, we thought the hippos were massive rocks poking through the water's surface. Once the symphony of snorting began, we became aware that plunked in muck before our eyes was partial proof of Uganda's global claim of "most bio-mass."

Also on the way home, we visited the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, an area that hosts mountain gorillas. We took a short hike and though we did not find the gorillas, the adventurous nature of the search was worth the walk.

When we arrived home, our oven was in pieces. All knobs and screws had come loose and the oven door was completely off its hinges.

Everything can be fixed. It might not look like it used to, but our oven works like a charm. With a four-burner stove on top and an oven, we cook multiple entrees and bake cookies simultaneously! We haul the gas cylinder to Kasese town for a refill once a month.



I cannot even begin to express how this cooking convenience has enhanced our life! We now enjoy cinnamon toast and hot coffee for breakfast instead of oatmeal and lukewarm coffee.

At first I was embarrassed for neighbors to see our oven. I felt rich and privileged. Bob knew that I was sensitive about owning this sign of wealth and he enjoyed teasing me by peeking into the kitchen window from outside and saying, "Hey, what you got there? Is that an oven?"

Now, I simply enjoy baking and sharing cakes and cookies with friends. As it turns out, it really isn't a big deal. Our neighbors expect white people to have much more than themselves, and they appreciate the tasty baked goods.

Bob, Rwanzo and I are three peas in a pod. We are happy. Life is good. We enjoy the days much more since we have scaled back our expectations. Somehow we have peace within ourselves that we are supposed to be here, even though we don't understand all the reasons why. Perhaps God needed to teach us a few lessons about patience, grace and humility before He could open our hearts to joy and gratitude.

Since we moved the Habitat office out of our house (about a month ago) we are enjoying a little privacy again. Job is no longer coming to our home every morning; instead we meet him down the road at the new Habitat office. Also, Habitat homeowners, who make their house payments with building materials instead of cash, are hauling their roofing sheets and bags of cement to the office instead of to our front door!

Our evenings are simple and relaxing, as we play cribbage, write letters, read about future vacation spots, and play with our dog. Rwanzo rests his head in my lap as I write. Perhaps he is the heartbeat of our joy. I never anticipated becoming this attached to a pet.

Love you, Carrie



December 1992

Dear Mark and Anne,

We are the proud parents of a dog, the most beautiful dog in the Rwenzori Mountains. The story goes like this:

“Bob, Bear had puppies again. Should we look at them?”

“Carrie, you know as well as I do that it doesn’t make any sense for us to have a dog. We will get too attached and then have to leave it behind when we go back to the States.”

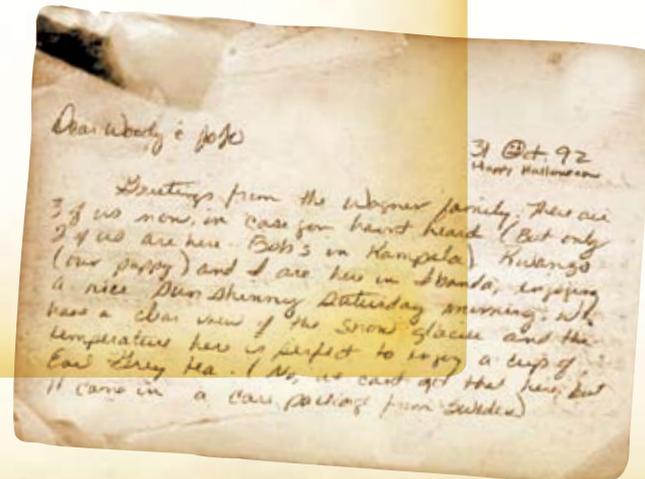
“You’re right. But wouldn’t it be nice to have a little puppy to cuddle? Okay. No dog – it was just a crazy idea.”

Two weeks later I just happened to be in Kasese, visiting our missionary friends who own Bear, a pure African mutt. There were three puppies left. Reluctantly, and feeling kind of naughty, I said, “I’ll take this one, the golden brown pup with the ridge up his back. He seems to be the most playful.” Little did I know that a playful puppy often grows into a rambunctious, WILD, dog.

The ride back to Ibanda was even more tedious than usual. I was used to standing in the back of a pickup truck with 12-15 other passengers, letting my body sway and swoop to the rhythm of the potholed roads. Only when I am carrying fresh eggs am I concerned about cargo. This trip was different. I now had a precious little bundle of fur with two brown button eyes, looking to me, his new mom, to comfort and protect him.

I was thinking, “Bob is going to kill me for bringing home a puppy, but I sure want to at least get this pup home alive. Surely, Bob will come around.”

And he did. I think it took about ten minutes for Bob to completely fall in love with the puppy. I was thrilled to see the way he cared for our new puppy; what a great dad my husband will be. We showed our puppy to Betty and Mugisha, our neighbors, asking them for name ideas.



Surely only a Lukonzo name is appropriate for this dog of the Rwenzori Mountains. Betty came up with *Olhuonzo* (Americanized to Rwanzo) which means beloved. Betty sensed how special this dog is to us. I think she has grown fond of him as well.

Bob took the lead role in Rwanzo’s training and has been spending twenty minutes a day doing training sessions. He walks around our yard and the village trading center with Rwanzo on a sisal rope (usually used for tying goats) and practices over and over, “Sit. Stay . . . Rwanzo, Come!” I am enjoying watching the two of them build friendship. My training sessions with him are much less successful than Bob’s. One day I beat the tar out of him with a rolled-up magazine because I got so mad at him for not obeying anything I commanded him to do! I hope this is not an indication of the kind of parent I’m going to be!

Bob needs a dog. He needs true companionship in the way that only a dog can give. And even if we have to bid farewell to Rwanzo when we leave Uganda, the joy he provides now will be worth the sorrow we will experience in leaving him. I hope all is well in Charlotte. We miss you guys.

Love,
Carrie



Journal Entry

January 1993

Our yard boy, Tom, said, "Rwanzo's a happy dog." That comment struck me as funny. I mean, aren't dogs generally happy? What's there not to be happy about? I started taking notice of other dogs around the village to understand Tom's comment. Mostly napping in the shade, the other dogs were not out romping around, chasing goats and dragging home cow horns the way Rwanzo does. I think Tom meant that Rwanzo is active. He was right; our little Rhodesian Ridgeback mix is certainly active!

When Rwanzo gets that look in his eye, we know it's coming. It starts with a short bark, just once. Then he cuts his eyes sideways and gives the "I dare you to chase me" growl. Suddenly, the raucous play begins. Tail in the air, down on his front elbows, he barks up a storm as he shakes his head back and forth; he will not accept no for an answer. After he has stolen your full attention, he darts around the yard, running in a figure eight like he is being chased by a cheetah. We refer to these moments of madness as "the dog devil has gotten hold of him." Once Rwanzo has thoroughly exhausted himself (usually in about ten minutes), he crawls into our laps, all 60 pounds of him, and takes a nap.

Our beautiful, distinguished dog makes an impression on people. They know he is no ordinary dog. Rwanzo is a handsome dog and he carries himself like royalty, displaying courage and confidence. The children are as curious about him as they are afraid of him. He generally stays within our three-foot-high reed fence that surrounds our home. But when he wants to explore something on the other side, he finds a gap in the fence created by reed snatchers, people who sneak a few reeds from the fence for firewood. Children often sit on the outside of the fence, peering through the gaps, watching Rwanzo as if he were an animal in the zoo. Rwanzo sometimes runs towards the kids to give them a little scare, and then he dodges the rocks hurled at him by the children just before they run away screaming.

As if we wazungu are not enough of a spectacle in this village, the addition of a rambunctious dog following behind us provides great entertainment for the children. Rwanzo bounces along, occasionally flitting into the bush. Then he pops back onto the trail, wagging his tail in delight at the banana peel or mango pit he has found. He chases after chickens and goats, just for the fun of it. One time, he created a disastrous situation as he chased a goat into the river. Bob rushed into the gushing water to grab the goat as he rapidly swept by. Rwanzo barked as a large audience cheered at the river's edge. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Truly, this dog, though he infuriates us with his naughty behavior, is a delightful addition to our lives. He makes us laugh and spend less time worrying about problems we can't fix.

Rwanzo offers such companionship and protection. Bob is currently in Sweden to be in his friend Patrick's wedding. Rwanzo and I are on our own for the week. He snuggles in my lap as I read and write. His soft brown fur collects my tears when I'm sad and his alert expressive eyes indicate his excitement when I'm ready to play tug of war with a knotted sock.

I have to admit that I have fallen in love with this dog.



April 1994

Dear Rich,

The place we called home for three years is now an exit stamp in our passports. As we travel through Africa and Asia, transitioning ourselves to a new life chapter, we feel sad and empty. Leaving Ibanda was painful and would have been unbearable had Rwanzo not been by our side as we drove away from the village. Certainly our unknown destination and lack of career plan make dog-ownership difficult at this point, but sometimes the easy way is not the best way. After hurdling several complications, we put Rwanzo on an airplane and sent him to Arizona. There he will stay with Bob's high school buddy Mike for three months, as we travel.

As you know from your visit in Ibanda, we agonized for months over the decision to bring Rwanzo with us to the States. Bringing an African dog into the US is costly and can involve obstacles through customs. However, unlike European countries, who impose long quarantines, the USA simply requires a thorough examination and a number of inoculations.

In a very heartfelt letter, Bob's dad explained the challenges we would face importing an African dog to the US. He knew from his visit here that Rwanzo is quite a handful. His letter was sensible, yet sensitive to our love for our dog. But, essentially, he said, "Don't bring the dog home."

This was very difficult counsel for Bob to accept from his dad. And certainly, it meant that we couldn't ask Bob's parents to keep Rwanzo while we travel! I don't know how we thought of Mike, but Bob figured his buddy owed him a few favors from bailouts during their youth. In a phone call from Kampala, Mike gladly accepted the responsibility, saying, "Send him on!"

Perhaps the most phenomenal part of the story about sending Rwanzo home was the supernatural influence which solidified Bob's decision. Even after Mike had agreed to keep Rwanzo for several months, we still struggled with the decision. The travel, the health considerations, and our undetermined future – my father-in-law's words rung true and clear. It was not practical. Two things occurred that helped us make the decision about bringing Rwanzo home.



We received a three-month-old letter from Habitat, notifying us of a stipend increase that gave us exactly the amount of money needed to send Rwanzo home. That solved the financial challenge; however, up until one week before our departure, we were still undecided.

As we went to bed one night, I said to Bob, "This is your decision. I will support you either way. We have prayed about this for months. It's time to make the decision and do what is necessary in carrying out the decision we make."

Bob responded with melancholy, "I'm going to sleep on it one more night."

The next morning a familiar hum woke us. Poking his head through the slit in the mosquito net on Bob's side of the bed was Rwanzo, looking for Bob's attention. This was not Rwanzo's usual morning greeting; he often started at the window, barking at the chickens and goats who are the first to rattle the stillness of daybreak. This morning was different. He stood by the edge of the bed with his chin resting on Bob's chest. I cuddled Bob from the other side, resting my head upon his shoulder. As if saying the "Amen" of a prayer, Bob blurted out, "We're taking him!"

"Are you sure? Will you be at peace with that decision, even when complications arise?"

"Absolutely, this is the only choice for us."

I quickly responded, "Well, let's get moving. We'll have to fetch Nyasyo to build a travel crate."

Excited about his decision, Bob hopped out of bed and said, "I'll ride my bike up to Nyasyo's house and on the way back, I'll start collecting whatever building materials we need for the crate."

As Bob was pulling on his trousers, I looked out our front window and was shocked to see Nyasyo standing by our fence.

"Bob, Nyasyo is here!"

Bob hustled to the fence to greet Nyasyo. "*Kuti Bwa. Wa henoende?*" (Hello my friend, how are you?)

"*Ah Yi, Aneyo Ndeke.*" (Everything is okay)

"I was coming to see you today. We need your help."

"I know. That's why I'm here."

Nyasyo wore a tape measure around his neck and he had a pencil tucked behind his ear. He was ready to measure Rwanzo and study the cage specifications provided by British Airways.

After Bob regained his composure from the shock of Nyasyo's unexpected appearance at our house, (we hadn't seen Nyasyo for weeks) he asked, "Can you build this cage within a couple of days? We leave on Tuesday."

"I can."

Bob came back into the house and found me in the kitchen where I had overheard the whole conversation through the open window. He then hugged me so hard that I thought my ribs would crack. Bob had been affirmed through "an angel" (as we later referred to Nyasyo) that the very difficult decision he made was the right decision. With his hug, he squeezed out the last bit of tension that had built up in him (and in me) and never looked back on his decision.

Now Rwanzo is enjoying the luxuries of the US, lying on carpet and swimming in a pool with Mike's dog, Sparky. Just before we boarded a bus to Tanzania, we received a fax from Mike, stating that he had successfully retrieved Rwanzo from the Phoenix Airport. Rwanzo made the two-day, three-connection flight, all by himself!

Not seamlessly however. We had to sedate him heavily in order to crate him for the duration of the travel; I was worried about effects the medication would have on him. And, his handmade wooden crate did not pass code in London. Thankfully, they swapped his cage for another one in the London airport and got him on a connecting flight to the US. Amazingly, Rwanzo's flight arrived one hour before a major earthquake jolted LA, and he was transferred successfully on to his last flight, which landed in Phoenix.



After wrangling with a customer service rep over the \$250 crate charges, Mike cleared Rwanzo's airport departure and drove him to his home in Tempe.

Besides a little culture shock: barking at his reflection in the mirror and at the TV (both of which he has never seen), it sounds like Rwanzo is healthy and happy. We can't wait to reunite with him in a few months. We also look forward to seeing family and friends. Perhaps the travel time will blur the goodbyes while building excitement for reconnecting with folks back home. We also hope to gain insight about what's next for us: Graduate school? Jobs? Where to live? Our future is open-ended.

See you soon,
Carrie



How could a pressure lamp, a gas oven, and a dog make such a drastic difference in our happiness? Well, the truth is, that those things, in and of themselves, did not transform our lives. Collectively, they represent a time when our spirits had been transformed. We regained our inner peace and renewed our ability to appreciate simple pleasures. We did not do this on our own; rather, we had been given the peace that passes understanding. Of course, there are numerous interpretations and commentaries on this popular biblical passage. My pastor described it beautifully when he talked about a peace within the midst of trouble – feeling calm when surrounded by madness. While I agree that the peace can be an inner serenity surrounded by an external conflict, I also believe that it can be the stillness before or following a storm. Either way, the peace that passes understanding is a gift from God, another aspect of His grace: undeserved and freely given.

As we left Uganda, we gave the lamp and the oven to others who would appreciate the joys of simple luxuries. The stories of Rwanzo continued for another ten years, creating memories for many people around the world, as we continued working internationally with Habitat, and later settling in the mountains of North Carolina. Bob's dad became great friends with Rwanzo and the disagreement about bringing the dog home became just another story for us to laugh about. The next time we came home from Africa with Rwanzo, following our three years in South Africa, Bob's parents collected Rwanzo from the airport after his 20 hour flight and fed him three Wendy's hamburgers.

The lamp, the oven, and the dog: each holds its story, but most of all, they symbolize a time of peace. They represent the calm after a storm and they mark a time in our marriage when the anonymous prayer at our wedding was most fulfilled: "I wish you love and strength and wisdom, and gold enough to help some needy one. I wish you song but also blessed silence and God's sweet peace when every day is done."

The peace that passes understanding is God's sweet peace and it is given to us when we have followed our hearts: when we have prayerfully made a decision – one that may oppose common sense yet feels right. That peace allows us to move forward without regrets, having faith that we have made the right decisions.

Bob's "Ode to Rwanzo," written in November 2004, a week after we buried our beloved dog in our backyard.

Ode to Rwanzo
August 12, 1992 – September 12, 2004

I feel as though I have a hole in my gut. My shoulders are slumped. My head is heavy. My heart aches. A sea of sadness stirs inside me and I can feel the tears well up in my eyes. Depending upon where I am, I either let the tears flow or I try to suppress them. Emptiness. Melancholy. Aching.

My dog, my trusted friend, my confidant. He's not wagging his tail, running up to the car when I come home from work, nor the first to greet me. I look for him when I get out of bed in the middle of the night, to avoid stepping on him. He's not there. Nor is he lying under the dining room table at dinner.

Rwanzo offered comfort and compassion and also wildness and energy. He could run like the wind, grab my shoe in full stride and trip me. Then he would stand over me – the victorious warrior. Nobility ran in his blood as he guarded the yard and protected his family: head high and chest out. He was strong and powerful, yet graceful. He was to be admired, and feared, by those who did not know him. A pure blooded Rwenzori Ridgeback I used to call him; he was unique to the world.

He was not a perfect dog, but our Rwanzo was an excellent dog. He had a mischievous side. He would play as hard as you wanted, sometimes biting down on your arm until it hurt, but never bled. He could be rough, and gentle, yet always playful. He and I learned to communicate quite well. He knew me and I knew him. Had he been a person, he would have been a noble leader. He would have been a sinner, but chased after God's embrace. And while he was "bad" sometimes, he had a heart of gold.

For a month, Rwanzo was ill. The vet could not find anything wrong. But since he was 12 years old we knew the end could be near. On Sunday he lost all strength to stand. In the evening I carried him to our bedroom where he had been sleeping since his health began to decline. After putting the kids to bed, I came to be with him, to rub his soft fur, especially his ears, his paws, and his head.

I came to comfort him. For a month he had been fighting whatever sickness was eating at him. He was tired. He couldn't wag his tail. Only his eyes, his expressive eyes, could speak. As I rubbed his head that night, I whispered in his ear, "Its okay. You've carried us for 12 years through difficult and good times – through four moves, three countries, several years without kids and several years as our boys' best friend. This is your time. If you need to go, you can go."

His eyes studied me. I yelled for Carrie to come in and join me. Then, he stretched back and took four more breaths. I held his head. Carrie held his chest and felt his last heartbeat. And we loved him as he went on to be with his Maker.

Thank you God, for sharing Rwanzo with us. I do believe you sent him to us, that you lived in him, and taught and comforted us through him. He was family, with us every step of the way. If I can get my arms around "heaven," I know that Rwanzo will be amongst the first to greet me there, running up to me, tail wagging, ears raised, eyes focused, barking "Catch me if you dare!" My broken heart will hopefully heal and I will be able to get on with life. Yet I know, the memory of Rwanzo will live on in me, and those he touched, forever and ever and ever.

Bob

