

Lectia

by Leia M. Johnson

For women—

*for those caught in the crossfire—
for those brave enough to stand again—
for those unwilling to stay silent—
for all of us.*

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Introduction

In March of 2016, I joined a team of fifteen people headed to Africa. Our plan was to learn from the people of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and to see firsthand what it means to live in the aftermath of war and in the midst of ongoing conflict.

Our goal was to raise awareness for the plight of women who have been used as weapons of war around the world, to tell the stories that have fallen on deaf ears for far too long, and to form a plan about how we could be part of the solution. Raising awareness came in the form of traveling to Tanzania to summit Mount Kilimanjaro, the tallest free-standing mountain in the world topping out at 19,341 feet.

While this sort of communal challenge created a life-long adult summer camp bond among this group of travel companions, I can't speak for every member of the team. This is my version of the story – what I saw and heard and cannot forget.

I have a habit of telling people I “grew up crazy” when the topic of faith arises. I spent my childhood and adolescence in the presence of charismatic evangelical leaders who presented a vibrant, somewhat unpredictable version of worship that focused primarily on the movement of the Holy Spirit and fresh revelation.

Much of what I learned from that form of Christianity informs my life still as I am always open to learning new ways to follow Jesus. As an adult, I began to explore more traditional versions of the Christian faith in mainline denominations.

Having experienced two sides of the same coin, I have come to appreciate certain traditions and rituals that had no place in my childhood faith. One of those traditions is a form of Scripture reading and prayer known as the “lectio divina,” a ritual attributed to a 12th century monk named Guigo.

Prayer has always been an anomaly to me. I've led popcorn prayers, attended intercessory groups, laid hands on people, prayed silently, recited the Lord's Prayer, said bedtime and mealtime prayers, used a prayer journal, gone on prayer walks, sung songs of prayer, drawn pictures of prayer, and more often than not – fallen asleep during meditation.

At times of serious doubt, I've stopped praying altogether because I found myself, like the writer of Ecclesiastes yelling at God, “Everything is meaningless!” Which I've learned more recently is in fact a legitimate prayer, one of lament.

One of the first Bible passages I memorized in Sunday school was “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” (1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18, *NIV*)

Verse 17 is really simple: pray continually. Other versions say things like “pray all the time” or “be unceasing and persistent in prayer.” There was a time in my life when I became slightly obsessive (is that an oxymoron?) about trying to figure out how to pray *continually*. Does that mean during all waking hours? Should I pray while I eat breakfast? While I shower? While I drive? And for what reason?

Here is where I am right now. I still don’t understand prayer in the traditional sense. I don’t know that I will ever settle in my mind what function prayer has in my spiritual walk. I still fall asleep when I’m trying to “listen for God’s voice” at night. I still get antsy and start making grocery lists when I’m holding hands in a circle during a worship service. So, I’ve learned to focus on the lesson, the *lectio*.

The lectio divina translates to the “divine reading” or “divine lesson.” Guigo and others after him used this form of reading Scripture and then later to pray through Scripture in an effort to receive insight and guidance from a higher power while free of personal agenda.

The first stage of the lectio divina is reading – observing without comment. Next comes a stage of reflection during which we try to hear what God might be trying to teach us from the text. Third is a stage of response – lessons do not come without consequence, or they aren’t lessons. What will we do with the lesson? And finally, we rest. We leave space for the lesson to transform us from the inside out. In the end, reading Scripture and prayer become less about circumstance and more about inner renewal.

Christians refer to Scripture as the “Word of God,” but we also take this phrase to mean the person of Christ. All Scripture in a sense points us to the person of Christ as our inspiration for living.

One of Jesus’ last teachings as he anticipated his death was a lesson about how the world will know that we are his followers. He speaks of a King who was looking for true devotees. The King says to his people, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

The King’s subjects are confused and ask when this happened, and he answers, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25: 34-40, *NIV*)

I've heard countless sermons on this passage, and most translate it to mean that we are to take care of those living in poverty, the outcasts, those down on their luck, and I certainly believe that's part of the lesson. The bigger lesson I take away from Jesus' words is this: I see Jesus in every person I meet. I don't always get it right, but I make an attempt to treat each person who comes across my path as if Jesus is physically with me.

If Jesus is the Word of God, and Jesus is in every person I meet, then my daily life is a *lectio divina*—a divine reading of the world. And this, for now, is how I pray continually. As I read the world for lessons, I can reflect and respond appropriately. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.

This book chronicles the transformation that has occurred within me after reading, reflecting, responding, and resting before, during, and after my time in central and east Africa.

I hope my words honor the experiences of my fellow thumbprint gatherers, and I pray this story agitates like a divine washing machine—that each reader who encounters these words is led to new revelation about what it means to pray and act, to observe and be immersed, to live and love in a broken but beautiful world.

Part 1: Lessons from the Field

Summerville, South Carolina, USA

*Walking with a friend in the dark is
better than walking alone in the light.*

—Helen Keller

In 2010, I was the spouse of a constantly deployed Air Force pilot and the work-from-home mama of two happy, healthy humans who needed me for everything. I cooked their food, changed their diapers, read them stories, and made sure they got enough sleep. Anyone who has raised children knows this is holy and exhausting work.

My life pre-marriage and pre-children had included quite a bit of overseas travel and humanitarian efforts. As I settled into domestic life, I missed the excitement of cross-cultural collaboration in far-off places. While I folded laundry and wiped counters and organized our daily schedule, I couldn't help feeling disconnected from the world outside my tiny bubble.

During a visit to my hometown of Oklahoma City I met a woman named Amy Williams who was working in rural Uganda to improve maternal and infant healthcare. Her organization, the Bushenyi Alliance for Rural Health and Development (BARHD) had recently built a maternity ward in a small village in southwest Uganda. They were trying to procure funds to build latrines and a placenta pit—the final developments to get the maternity ward up and running.

As a mother with not-too-distant memories of childbirth, Amy's story stuck in my gut. I tried to wrap my mind around the fact that women were giving birth without access to proper facilities to use the bathroom. The placenta pit (which is exactly what it sounds like) was necessary because of life-threatening blood borne diseases.

After speaking with Amy, I got the idea that if I called and emailed some friends, we could raise the money needed to build these facilities, so I did just that. I called my dad, who runs 4HIM, an NGO dedicated to community development around the world, and asked him if we could start a project under his wing. When he asked what we would call the project, I told him it would be called Somebody's Mama.

In the fog of midnight-feeding genius, the source of most of my best ideas those days, I told him I wanted to start facilitating projects that would help women around the world.

With a “storehouse” for the funds in place, I started making phone calls and sending emails. If memory serves me, we ended up getting donations from fourteen



women who funded the project in about a month.

Over time, our little community of friends recognized that “making a difference” in the world was as simple as turning ideas into action. My best friend and partner in many crimes, Erika Wright, was the one who decided Somebody’s Mama was more than a middle of the night idea.

Erika encouraged me to move forward, and after several years of learning at the feet of much wiser people, we attained non-profit and eventually 501(c)3 status as an organization with four areas of focus: maternal healthcare, education, economic empowerment, and ending violence against women. (I have a reputation for weaving outrageously long tales, but that is, in fact, the very short story.)

Somebody’s Mama’s Placenta Pit (Photo courtesy of Amy Wil-

Erika and I built a board of directors and advisors made up of our friends and business associates who are dedicated to bringing awareness to issues affecting women across the globe, to create a community of people who care deeply about finding real solutions, and to turn ideas into action.

Our model is pretty simple. We find like-minded, passionate friends and partner with existing organizations to fund global projects. We've built maternity wards and schools. We've funded training programs for micro-business entrepreneurs and therapy programs for women escaping life in the sex trade.

When I write it out in black and white, it sounds big, but the reality is that I have the honor and privilege of leading a fiercely committed, slightly bonkers group of this-just-might-work renegades to do real, life-changing work through simple acts of kindness. And we have fun while we do it.

I knew from the beginning of this adventure that I was not at all equipped to go it alone. With our first project, I called upon my friends to help, and that call involved a step of faith on my part to think that other people might join me and a step of trust on the part of my friends to believe that I knew where we were going. Eventually, my friends became some of the first Love Club hostesses. People began gathering for dinner parties, for play dates at the park, for happy hour at the local pub, and around the pool in the backyard for parties with a purpose.

Each Love Club looks different, but we all have the same goal: solving big problems with simple solutions. Each hostess tells the story and sets a goal to raise funds for our projects, and over the years, our community has grown to include hundreds. We believe the words of Desmond Tutu: "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

Our Love Club hostesses are stay-at-homers and executives, lawyers and writers, cub scout leaders and Air Force veterans. We are not necessarily special in any way except that we're all willing to say yes.

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

*You have to take risks. We only understand the miracle of life fully
when we allow the unexpected to happen.*

—Paulo Coelho

As the Somebody's Mama community formed, Erika met a woman named Colleen Mitchell who was running a pregnancy hostel for women in Costa Rica. Colleen and her family serve the Cabecar people of the Chirripo Reserve.

When the Mitchell family arrived in Costa Rica in 2011, women and babies from this region were five times more likely to die during childbirth than the rest of the Costa Rican population. Colleen and her family started the St. Francis Emmaus Center (a project of St. Bryce Missions) by converting a portion of their home into a place women can stay as their delivery time approaches, giving them the gift of proximity to medical care.

In addition to giving the women a safe place and providing top notch hospitality for them and their families during their stay, moms are given prenatal care, nutrition information, and tools for labor preparation. After they give birth, Colleen also helps with postpartum and infant care, education about early child development, and instruction to help them understand fertility and menstrual cycles.

In 2015, the Mitchells received a letter from the doctor of medicine in Turrialba, Costa Rica stating that their efforts have played a major role in reducing infant mortality at the reserve by 50%. Good people doing good work.

Shortly after Erika met Colleen, a young mom named Naomi arrived at the center. Her baby, Sabrina, was two days old and suffering from an infection that required immediate medical care. Medical professionals discovered at that time that Sabrina was not nursing because Naomi's milk production was not sufficient, an unusual occurrence and a life-threatening complication for this young mother who could not afford to purchase the needed formula to supplement her daughter.

Colleen contacted us and asked if we thought we might be able to help. She knew she could purchase everything Naomi would need to feed Sabrina for the first year of her life for around \$400. We did not need to discern the right decision among the

fledgling members of our community. Ten people gave the smallest donation was \$5 and the largest was \$100 and Baby Sabrina was safe.



Naomi and Sabrina (Photo courtesy of St. Bryce Mis-

Colleen called us and asked if we were interested in meeting up at a conference in South Carolina when she was coming to the states for a visit. Erika and I jumped at the chance to spend some time with her at the Allume conference. Allume was for Christian bloggers, and honestly, while I am a Christian and a blogger (kind of), nothing about the conference appealed to me.

Everything was pretty the website, pictures from past years, the people involved. I was picturing a hotel ballroom full of women in dresses and jewelry, talking about Pinterest and the precious time they had with the Lord that morning over pumpkin spice lattes. I wear yoga pants (okay fine...pajama pants) in public regularly, pray if I remember (see introduction), and drink my coffee black like a real man.

In my mind, this conference represented everything that makes me dodge “women’s ministry” events and “girls night out.” I judge. I do. I know this about myself, and I promise I’m working on it. The truth is when I see women who are dressed to the nines with their nails done and perfect make-up, I make really (unfair) assumptions about how much time they’ve wasted in their day – you know as opposed to spending those hours organizing their Netflix queues or library e-book reserves like me. So much nobler. And frankly, I wonder if I’m not just slightly jealous because a tiny part of me almost wants to care about my appearance and not be the girl wearing the same black shirt and same black pants with slightly damp hair at every event. Forgive me while I use you as therapists for the moment.

The point is I’m still working some stuff out, and I wasn’t actually all that excited about dropping some cash on a pretty people conference, but I really wanted to see Colleen and hang out with Erika. So I signed up and decided at the very least, I’d have a fantastic road trip with myself (and a highly organized list of audiobooks from the library).

Erika and I arrived in Greenville and decided to pop over to the conference venue to get a feel for what we were dealing with. We signed in at registration, received our swag bags teeming with all the pretty things, and found Colleen at her table. After chatting for a bit, I decided to make the rounds to check out who was tabling at the conference. There were publishers selling books about marriage and parenting and Christian living, artists selling prints and merchandise, and fair trade clothing and accessory distributors. I chatted with a few of the people, all of whom were down to earth and lovely but *not my people* (this was the judgy mantra on a loop in my head).

We’d only been there an hour, and I was questioning how early was too early for a beer and how soon I could go back to my hotel room. I walked up to a table where two women, Belinda and Joy Beth, were standing. Behind them hung a banner that read “One Million Thumbprints: Grassroots Peace for Women Who Experience Violence in War.”

Whoa.



Belinda and Joy Beth were collecting literal thumbprints on a banner, and I gave them mine, joking that the green ink was a lie because I have a black thumb in the garden. I nonchalantly said, “So why am I giving you my thumbprint?”

Belinda, the founder of the campaign, told me a story about meeting a woman named Esperance from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Esperance was a 50-year-old widow and mother of four who had been raped and tortured during the DRC’s war. Surviving with the help of some friends, Esperance was trying to rebuild her life. In their chance meeting, Belinda knew her life was going to be forever entwined with the women of the DRC. Because Esperance did not know how to write her name, she gave a thumbprint as permission and told Belinda to tell the world her story.

Belinda started the One Million Thumbprints (1MT) campaign to raise awareness and to fund projects for women like Esperance in the DRC and around the world. As I listened to Belinda’s story, the mantra in my head changed: *I found my people.*

We speak often of divine appointments—moments in time when people come across our paths who immediately find a place deep in our hearts. This was one of those moments. I knew instantly that I needed to be a part of this movement. I was drawn to

Erika and I took a few too many pictures in the Smilebooth at Allume. Most of them were terri-

MT on a personal level and knew that Somebody's Mama was going to partner with them in the future. I wasn't sure exactly what that would look like, but I knew.

As Belinda continued to talk about big things like rape and genocide and violence against women, she told me about the climb. A team of women was going to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, "the mountain of light," to shine a spotlight on issues facing women in war zones.

I don't know any other way to explain it but to say that I was a woman possessed because the words that came out of my mouth were not from my brain. I stopped Belinda in the middle of her sentence and said, "I want to climb the mountain."

She looked at me and kind of cocked her head with a smile and said, "I think our team is full, but if we do this again, you're on the list."

Throughout the rest of the conference—where I had to let go of all my preconceived notions about pretty people and eat a little crow as I listened to women from all walks of life talk about racial reconciliation and our call to peace among other heavier topics—I chatted with Belinda and her sidekick, Joy Beth, about their mission and the climb. I ate delicious food set on tables with beautiful centerpieces, worshipped with a roomful of women, and learned that living a Pinteresty life and fighting for social justice are not mutually exclusive. (I know that you all already knew that. Thank you for bearing with me.)

Leaving the conference, I was armed with loads of books, a super cute pair of ballet flats from The Root Collective, and a sense that something big was on the horizon.

Belleville, Illinois, USA

Say yes, and you'll figure it out afterwards.
—Tiny Fey

Coming to Illinois, the most recent place the Air Force told us was home, I jumped back into real life with my family—subbing at the school and running kids to cub scouts and karate. Erika and I had a couple conversations about what 2016 was going to look like for Somebody's Mama, and we decided that if we could get all our ducks in a row, we wanted to partner with One Million Thumbprints for one of our projects.

I added “Call Belinda” to my to-do list and filed away “look through luggage for Belinda's business card” in the back of my mind. I was subbing for the reading specialist on Thursday about two weeks after the Allume conference when my phone rang during my only break in the day. I didn't recognize the number, but I answered anyway.

The voice on the other end of the line said, “Leia, it's Belinda. From Allume. Do you have a second to chat?”

I did, in fact, have a second to chat and only about a second as a group of second graders would arrive at any moment. In our three minute phone call, Belinda told me that the team had lost a member, and she was wondering if I'd be interested in climbing the mountain. At a loss for words, I let Belinda fill the silence. She said, “Why don't you take the weekend to think about it and talk to your family?”

We set a time to chat the next Monday evening, and I hung up as four eight-year-olds came running in from recess. Before we hung up, I told her I would talk with my people but the 99% answer was yes.

I have spent a good portion of my life learning to say no to the good, so I can say yes to the best, and this was, in fact, the best kind of best.

One of the things people have asked me repeatedly throughout this process is “How does your husband feel about all of this?” I get why they ask—I was going to be traveling through the DRC, one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman, and climbing the tallest mountain in Africa (with no mountain climbing experience). My husband certainly had feelings, but he's also been married to me long enough to have complete confidence in me when I make a decision like this.

His reaction was not what most people would think—the first thing he said was, “Cool. Have you checked the calendar to see if I'm out of town to get the kids covered?” Because this is how we roll.

I checked the calendar and then called my parents because of the fifteen days I would be gone, Scott would be gone for nine of them. None of this would be possible without the village elders. My dad was actually scheduled to be in West Africa for a week of that time as well, so Mimi the Magnificent Matriarch would be on kid duty for a good portion of my time gone.

By Monday morning, we'd worked out the logistics of the Johnson Family Circus, and by Monday evening, I'd told Belinda that I was committed.

It was the middle of October, and we would leave the last week of February. My biggest concern was getting my body ready for the physical rigor of climbing. My workout routine was...well, it was not a routine. I'm surrounded by Crossfit cult members and marathon runners and fitness instructors, and I count it good if my step counter reaches 5,000 for the day. Any level of "fitness" I maintain comes from good genes and my desire to button my pants on those rare days that I choose to wear them.

Scott and I went to REI the next weekend, so I would have enough time to break in my boots, and I started training. I wore my boots every day, carried a backpack full of water (increasing the weight weekly), and walked around the mall/town/my kids' school stairwell looking like a weirdo. I was told the best training was walking or stair climbing for endurance. The key to climbing Kilimanjaro was to keep a steady pace on strong legs.

My second concern was the health of my neck and back. I was in physical therapy to increase the function in my right arm and hand because my body is old and falls apart sometimes. I have a hard time sleeping anywhere but my bed and will often wake up with no mobility in my neck and limited function in my right hand. The thought of sleeping not only in weird beds for two weeks but on the ground in a tent for a week of that time was a bit harrowing.



I inadvertently matched my boots with the day pack I already had because you know, I'm super stylish.



This was the awesome ~~torture~~ device I used in the months leading up to the climb to stretch my neck.

Working with my physical therapist, my chiropractor, and my primary care doctor, we intensified my care plan and prepared as best we could. I had the clear from all three to climb the mountain (and a sackful of pain meds just in case).

In the meantime, I started “getting to know” my fellow climbers, who lived all over the United States. We connected through email and social media, and I didn’t spot a bad banana in the bunch. The only people I’d met in real life were Belinda and Joy Beth. I would meet the rest of the team in Amsterdam where our traveling paths would converge, and we’d head to Kigali, Rwanda.

Amsterdam, Holland, The Netherlands

*Friendship...is born at the moment when one man says
to another 'What! You too? I thought that no one but myself...'
—C. S. Lewis, The Four Loves*

Meeting new people isn't my *least* favorite thing in the world, but I do have some significant anxiety about being in large groups of people I don't know. I have a tendency to find one person I can call my dinner party best friend, and I will leave the event knowing their entire life story and unable to tell you anyone else's first name who attended the party.

But this wasn't a dinner party. This was going to be one of the most intense experiences of my life, and I am socially aware enough to know that I was going to need to make friends with more than one person if I was going to make it through a week in a war zone followed by a week camping on Africa's tallest mountain.

I arrived in Amsterdam by myself with instructions to meet the team at a predetermined lounge in the airport. From there, we'd board a plane for Kigali. I'd done enough internet stalking of the team members to be able to connect names with faces. I knew Belinda and Joy Beth from the conference, and I had interacted with some of the others on Facebook and through email.

I was the last of the team members to arrive, and it felt a little like walking into a middle school dance at a new school. I scanned the group, some of them already paired off to chat with one another, and then I had an unexpected response. I just started hugging everyone. Because in moments of stress, I do the opposite of what seems natural every time. I also start sweating when I feel anxious, so sweaty hugs for everyone.

I recognized Chelsea, our team photographer and Jen, our videographer. I saw Kim, known online as the Abolitionist Mama, and Ruth, a fighter on the front lines for adoption reform. I saw Brenda and Krista, who for some reason seemed a pair in my mind even before I met them in real life. I looked from face to face and held back tears for the first of many times on the trip because I realized quickly that my middle school dance fears were so insanely stupid.

These women were my people — each one of them had left families and jobs behind, paid money out of their pockets to get here, and for a myriad of reasons believed

those sacrifices were worth it. No one boards a plane and leaves the safety of her home for this sort of undertaking if she isn't made of something special.



Krista and Ruth deep in conversation. I grew to love these snapshots of brilliance.

One person in particular helped me step out of the awkward bubble first. Krista walked right up to me, accepted a sweaty hug, and started asking questions. “So you run Somebody’s Mama? Tell me about that. And where do you live? And you're an Air Force spouse?” This woman had the gift of hospitality in a big way and made me feel at ease in a moment when I was feeling a little drained from anticipation.

As I listened to snippets of conversations, I started feeling a supernatural level of comfort knowing that while we had flown from ten different states, we were headed the same direction together. Maybe we had different origin stories — where we came from — but the answer to “Why?” bound us tightly.

Kigali, Kigali City, Rwanda

I can't go on, I'll go on.
—Samuel Beckett

We arrived in Kigali at night and went straight to a guest house. The team was tired from traveling but excited to finally be gathered all in one place. No amount of internet stalking could have prepared me for the real life connection with these women (and one guy, David, who somehow got roped into this estrogen-heavy adventure).

We enjoyed a dinner of soup, bread, and fruit salad before settling into our rooms. My roommate, Jen, a videographer from Virginia, was quiet but conscientious as she unloaded all of her gear, spreading it across our room and into the hallway to charge batteries and take stock, while I showered and called home. I listened as everyone got settled in their rooms — there was a great deal of conversation about how to make sure the hot water was turned on and if we needed to use the mosquito nets above our beds.

One voice stood out above the rest — that of Joy Beth's, one of the youngest and most exuberant members of our team. Everything about Joy Beth was loud and fun — the bright colors of her clothes, her seeming fascination with everything she experienced, her unapologetic hugs. She was rooming with Kris, the yin to Joy Beth's yang. Kris was calm and steady. She'd been in charge of communicating with the team ahead of time about the logistics of travel — she'd kept us on track with our passports, visas, and immunizations, and it became clear early on that she would continue to take care of our needs now that we were all together.

Krista and Brenda, two moms from the Pacific Northwest, also came across as caretakers from the beginning. Kim and Ruth from California and Michigan respectively possessed an air of get-it-ness. Listening in on their conversations, I could tell they spoke with wisdom and authority about what they do in anti-slavery and orphan prevention work respectively.

Laura, a nurse from Nevada, was also quiet but the kind of quiet that comes from discernment about when to make noise. Chessy, a graduate student from Boston and currently living in DC, wore a perpetual smile — a positivity that radiated from the moment I met her. Alyce, a real estate agent from the DC area, seemed to be always taking things in, observing our surroundings and the movements of our teammates. Chelsea, also from the DC area and the team member I

felt I knew best because of our interaction on Facebook, was warm but serious behind the lens of her camera.

Belinda, our One Million Thumbprints leader, and Lynne, our oldest team member and the one who inspired Belinda to take this journey in the first place, were unassuming and approachable leaders – good listeners whose brains were clearly always at work to put together this random assortment of puzzle pieces.

I wondered in those moments as we moved around the hotel getting ready for bed which of these women I would connect with most. My first impression of the team was that this was a group of smart, dedicated, vigilant women, who were ready for whatever lay ahead.

We woke up the next morning and had breakfast on the porch overlooking Kigali. The sky was blue, and our time together was marked by the sounds of song birds, cars, and a congregation somewhere in the distance singing hymns at a morning service. Charles, the director of World Relief DRC, had driven across the border to meet us and prep us for the coming days. In his demonstrative booming voice, he filled us in on our activities for the day and answered general questions. He would be our guide and host – in charge of making sure our time in Rwanda and DRC went smoothly.

Our team loaded into a bus to drive to the genocide memorial where we would walk through the memories of Rwanda’s dark past in an effort to better understand the conflict that central and east Africa was still experiencing.

When I was in middle school, I had a pen pal from Rwanda named Paul. We wrote back and forth – I was practicing my French – for over a year before his letters stopped coming. In America, our TVs were tuned into news of the OJ Simpson trial and later the scandal in the White House surrounding President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, but I was acutely aware of the genocide occurring on the other side of the world in Rwanda. I could only assume Paul was dead – one of 800,000 massacred in what became known as “100 Days.”

From that time, my heart was inextricably connected to the Rwandan story. I studied the history and current events, hoping that someday I would visit Rwanda. Standing in the entrance to the memorial, I was struck by our guide’s hushed voice as he explained that their language, Kinyarwanda, had never had a word for what happened to the people of Rwanda before the massacre of the mid-90s. They adopted the English word and changed letters to reflect a more

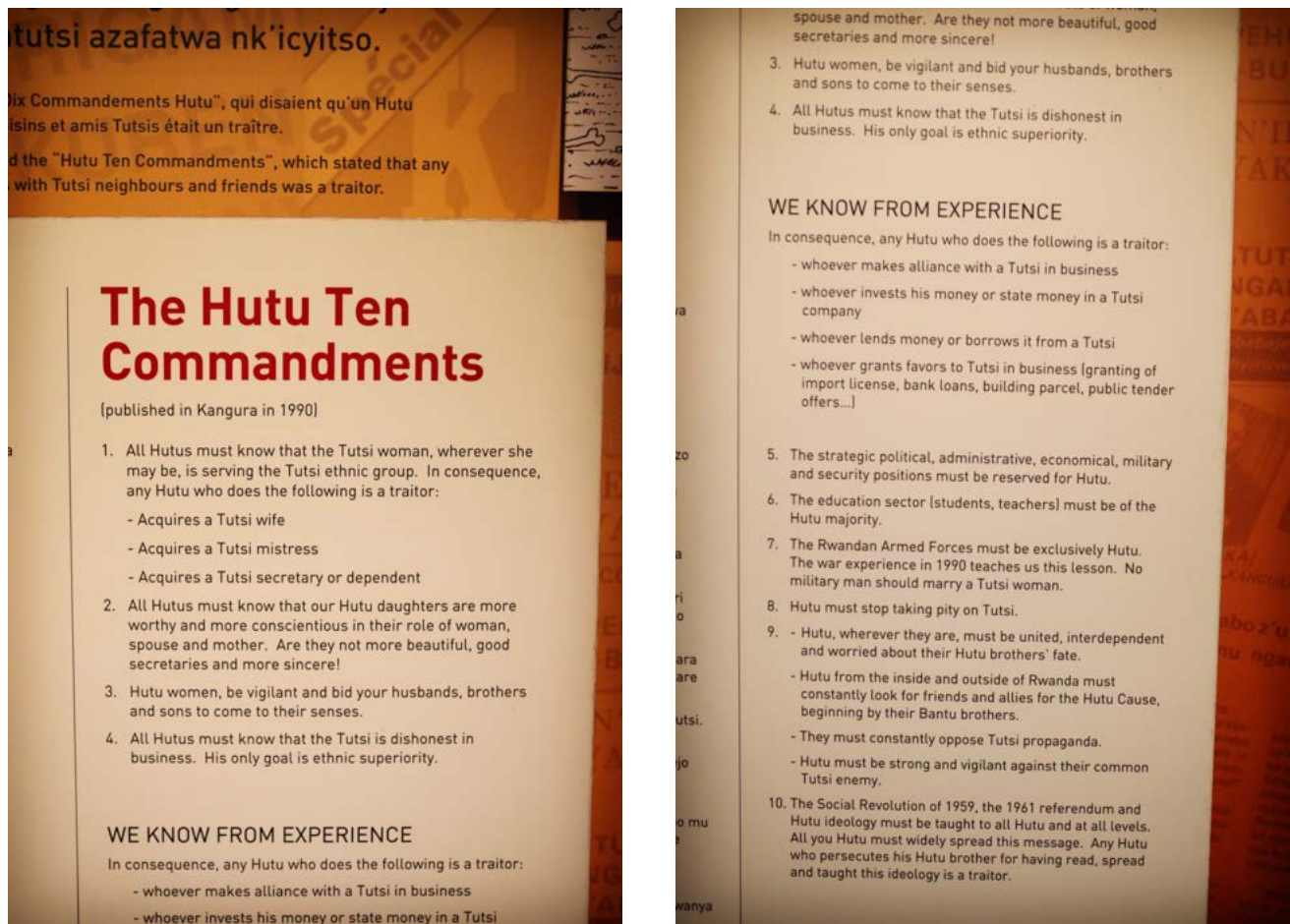
French pronunciation. The word “jenocide” was posted at the entrance with the



picture of a young girl who had lost her life to the madness.

Our guide, a survivor himself, led us from room to room, detailing the horror that led to those days. I had forgotten many of the details, and seeing them displayed in words and pictures was unbearable. As we learned about the institutionalized racism and classicism that was strategically put in place by Belgian colonialists and the Catholic church, I was riveted. How did this happen in my

time? How did the entire world sit by and watch it happen? What can we do to ensure it doesn't happen again?



I was particularly moved by the propaganda that encouraged people to focus on targeting women. The leaders who wrote these perverted ten commandments knew that taking out women was the key to attacking the Tutsi population. The fact that this information was disseminated so quickly and thoroughly throughout Rwanda points to the power of media. The role that the church played in encouraging these ideologies from the time of Rwanda's independence in 1959 cannot and must not be ignored.

The hardest room by far was the children's room, full of pictures and stories detailing the lives cut short by brutal violence. Many of us had to move outside quickly after standing in front of thousands of pictures of children caught in the crossfire of ethnic cleansing. I couldn't help but reflect on the current situation in the Middle East and in other parts of Africa, where this same sort of

hate is driving people out of their homes and into refugee camps. I felt physically ill as I thought about some of the public discourse in America among some of our current presidential candidates who have called for heinous measures against people because of the color of their skin, their ethnicities, or their religion.

The horror of the Rwandan genocide is in our not so distant past. We must remember and learn, so that we do not repeat the same mistakes.

The last part of our tour of the memorial was through the gardens where close to 250,000 bodies have been laid to rest. It's customary for visitors to leave fresh flowers on the graves. Knowing my personal connection to Rwanda, Belinda graciously asked if I would be willing to represent our team in laying white flowers to mark our remembrance. The moment was gripping and solemn and holy — one that will stay with me forever.

After our time at the memorial, we met the staff of World Relief Rwanda for lunch, where they greeted us, presented us with beautiful gifts, and told stories of the tremendous work World Relief has been doing in Rwanda for decades. During that lunch, I met Courtney, a marathon runner from the Chicago area,

who would become my point of contact later for getting information about the work we were supporting in South Sudan. Courtney is fast-talking and smart as a whip.



The other person who left an impression on us was a woman named Rhona, who has worked for World Relief for several years and is currently

pursuing her PhD. Rhona was born in Rwanda, and her mother struggled to raise eleven children. Rhona's story is representative of so many. At some point in Rhona's childhood, her mom received a grant to start a business and eventually became a successful businesswoman in her community. Today,



Rhona's mother boasts of her 26 college de-



grees earned by her eleven children.

I spend the majority of my time trying to convince people of this – elevating women elevates families. Elevating families elevates communities. That's it. You know what women do when they make money? They send their children to school. You know what children who have the opportunity to go to school do? They give back to their communities as professionals. They earn their mother 26 college degrees.

Listening to the World Relief staff from Rwanda was like visiting the ghost of Christmas future – this is where we were trying to go with the programs we would fund in the DRC, South Sudan, and Syria. As the staff members shared stories of success and stories of failure, they painted a picture for us of some of

(Left) Rhona and me; (Right) Listening to Courtney talk about her work with World Relief.

the challenges we would face but also the immeasurable benefits of investing in people who need our help most.

Rutshuru, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

The antidote to despair is action.
—Lynne Hybels

Driving from Rwanda to the DRC took several hours. Charles regaled us with stories about his time as the director of World Relief Congo, filling us in on the details of the complicated social and political landscape of the DRC's conflict. We also spent much of this time chatting with each other.

Some were quiet — later, Kim would tell us it was because she was fighting back tears the entire ride as she tried to take in everything we'd just seen at the genocide memorial. Some filled each other in on the details of our lives back home. It had the same feeling as lying in bunk beds at summer camp with new friends. Some were missing home. Some had funny stories about their families. Some had moving stories about the work they were doing around the



world.

Visually, there was a distinct difference in crossing the border from Rwanda to the DRC. We crossed the border on foot and then climbed into the back of World Relief cars. We had a handful of men escorting us from the border crossing to vehicles marked with pictures of guns with a red circle and line over them indicating that these vehicles would not be used to transport anyone carrying a gun. You know, in case men with guns tried to catch a ride.

We drove to our hotel, a beautiful building on the shores of Lake Kivu. I had a room to myself that night with a king bed and a view of the lake. The air was cool, and I slept part of the night with the window open before waking up in the middle of the night because my body was still not sure what time zone it was in. I sat up in bed with the light on for several minutes looking out at the moon through my window. It was dark outside, and the only sound I could hear was the lapping of the water against the concrete walls built below the restaurant.

I wondered if anyone else in the hotel was awake. I tried to calculate how many hours separated me from my family—my dad was in Ghana, my husband was in Afghanistan, and my mom and kids were in the central time zone. I was clueless about what time zone I was in, so I really had no idea what the difference was.

The next morning, we had breakfast and drove to meet the DRC World Relief staff. They welcomed us with songs and scripture reading. Lynne and Belinda greeted many of the people as old friends. During the group's introductions, we received another piece to the puzzle from Charlene. She described herself as the "president" of the IDP camp—this was the woman who had inspired Lynne on her first trip to the DRC in 2009. Lynne met Charlene in the camp, learned her story about being raped like many of the women we would meet during our time in the DRC, but also how she had risen above the trauma to help other women who came to her, all while raising her nine children in the midst of being displaced from their home.

We also met Dr. Esperance, a woman eight months pregnant with her third child who was an integral part of getting these women the help they needed after enduring the horrors of war. Together, Charlene and Esperance were helping women and their children navigate this new life with therapy groups and medical care. Dr. Esperance had trained to work with HIV/AIDS patients, and she was now learning to care for fistula patients.



We tried our best at singing in Swahili.



Mama Charlene, Dr. Esperance, me, and Alice (WR staff member) what a seat of honor.

After our short visit with the World Relief staff, we drove into Rutshuru to our lodging. Half of the team was staying at the Sister's House, and half the team would stay at the Father's House, guesthouses run by nuns and priests for the sake of visitors like us. Rutshuru was a place



Papa Marcel, gentle and wise



Charlene and Lynne



Charles, WR DRC Director

known for its violence, and this is where we would begin to understand the larger picture why we were here and why we would climb the mountain.

Papa Marcel was our guide through Rutshuru, preparing us for the groups we would meet. Marcel was an integral part of implementing programs for World Relief in the DRC. A pastor and father of nine, he carried the hearts of his people in the palm of his hand. His understanding of the issues plaguing the DRC both enlightened and reassured me that the despair we witnessed would not have the final word in the DRC's story.

Papa Marcel stressed to us the importance of the church being a part of peace-building. The first group we met with was a group of pastors with whom Marcel was intimately connected. When he first started working with them, they were divided by self-imposed barriers. They spent their time promoting their churches as better than other denominations, and some of the pastors were bitterly opposed to working with others.

Marcel organized a peace-building conference where he invited pastors from all over the region to gather for a time of learning and rest. As he arranged lodging accommodations, he purposefully made pastors who did not get along with each other room together. When they gathered together as a whole, he locked the doors and told them they couldn't leave until they'd worked out their differences. Marcel laughed at one point telling the story saying that peace by force is sometimes the answer.

The group that had assembled to meet with us had traveled from near and far to tell how peace-building among themselves had to happen before they could expect members of their communities to do the same. It was hard to believe that the same gentle spirits sitting before us would have been in conflict with one another. As they spoke about being leaders in their communities, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if we brought Papa Marcel to the U. S. to lock our pastors in a room together.

At one point, Ruth stood and asked why there weren't more women in the group, and they smiled sheepishly. Marcel spoke on behalf of the group saying they were working on that. I asked what we could do—how could we pray for them? An older, very smartly dressed man stood and said (through Marcel's translation) that we should pray that they would not grow weary in doing good work. At first, I was struck that this was the only prayer request they gave, but then again, isn't that what we all want? Strength to carry on with the good work we know we are called to do? And the support of those who believe we're on the right path?

The next group we met were the women of the sexual-based violence groups (SBVGs). We sat stunned into silence as we heard the stories of girls and women who had been violated in ways we could never have imagined in our worst nightmares. Kidnapped from the fields while they were tending their gardens and tortured for days by militiamen. Taken from the road as they walked for water then raped with machetes. Abused and left for dead. Abandoned by their husbands and families. Mocked and ridiculed in the days and months following by their neighbors.

Teen girls still trying to learn how to navigate the transition to womanhood. Young women raising families. Grandmothers with calloused hands from years of working the land.



I felt conflicted as we listened – who am I that these women would trust me with their truth? What kind of courage does it take to say these words out loud? What does it feel like to speak of the attacks and torture while nursing a baby, the product of this rape?

Each brave woman stood to tell her story – a process the group leaders have encouraged as a part of their healing. Many studies and scholarly articles point us to a surprising revelation – storytelling can literally heal parts of the brain that have died because of trauma. The hours we spent with these women are hours profoundly rooted in my being – where the other women in the room wept openly, nodding their heads in affirmation – yes, I have been there too.

If ever there was a picture of despair and hope holding hands, this was it.

At the end of our time with the SBVG women, we offered them each a gift. In all my travels across the continent of Africa, one thing that seems the same in each place is an appreciation for brightly colored cloth. I've been given enough cloth to outfit a wardrobe or decorate a banquet of tables, and each time I received these gifts, I knew that they were offerings of the deepest kind of love. We brought fabric from the market for each of the women, a small token of our gratitude that we were invited to share in these moments with them. Each woman took the fabric, and smiles broke out across

the crowd as they removed the bolts from their bags and compared patterns. A representative from the group stood to tell us that they would be making dresses from our gifts to be worn on International Women's Day. The same day we would summit the mountain in their honor, they would wear the gifts we had touched with our hands.

After a short break for an extravagant lunch of fried fish, boiled cabbage, rice, and fresh fruit put on by the World Relief staff, we met with the Savings for Life (SFL) Group and the Village Peace Committees (VPC). Both of these programs are in place as an answer to the problems of displacement and ongoing conflict. I was particularly interested in learning about Savings for Life because the money the Somebody's Mama community was raising for the One Million Thumbprints campaign would be going directly to this kind of program in South Sudan.

The SFL group spent our time together explaining the system through an actual demonstration. Many of the SFL members were also members of the SBVG. They had all brought their money and ledgers for a meeting. The first thing each member did was put a small offering into a bowl. They explained that this money was kept in a fund to give to sick people or people who had had a death in the family – a grieving fund. Next, they moved through the group in an orderly fashion recording the amount of money each member was investing in the group. These investments would be used to create small loans for group members in the future. The loans could be used for anything, and most often they are used for building their businesses, paying for their children's school fees, or accessing medical care. Each loan has to be paid back with 10% interest within three months. When we asked what happens when someone doesn't pay it back, they said that has never happened.

Watching the process in action was informational, but the thing I loved most was seeing the sense of communal pride in building a future together. The groups have elected officials who run the meetings – president, vice-president, and secretary. Each cycle runs for nine months, at the end of which people can opt out and new people can join. In a country rife with corruption, these groups are a grassroots solution to helping people become financially stable. One thing I've learned in traveling in the developing world and in studying conflicts in these places is that war is always tied to economy. Economic empowerment at a grassroots level is key to building strong families and communities.

Having seen what World Relief was implementing through the Savings for Life groups, I was even more excited to learn about the Village Peace Committees. Each VPC is made up of leaders from every tribe represented in a region. The leaders are as evenly divided between men and women as possible. Again, there was overlap in membership from the SBVG, SFL, and VPC. The goal of the VPCs is pretty self-explanatory – they create a system in which the members of the community are empowered to

solve problems without going to police or other local officials who may or may not make the problem worse.

The day was long and parts were emotionally draining. In fact, at one point, I had to excuse myself to go lie down in the World Relief office with my feet propped against the wall. My legs were swelling from the heat and travel, and Belinda was worried it was going to cause more serious problems if I didn't get my feet above my heart. Lying in the office listening to the sounds of people shouting at one another in Swahili outside the window, I stared at the ceiling putting all of the pieces of the mental puzzle together.

The programs in place were raising leaders, meeting the psychological and emotional needs of trauma survivors, empowering people economically, and building peace in communities still reeling from the horrors of war. I kept getting stuck on this question—how do people live through this kind of violence and instability and still have the will to live? From a bird's eye view, none of this was possible. And yet, I had just witnessed despair turned to action. I heard their stories from their mouths, looked into their eyes, held their hands and their babies. To steal a line from an old Pentecostal favorite—nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing, nothing is impossible.

Our last night in the DRC, we had dinner at Sister's House before half of the team drove back to Father's House to sleep. The accommodations were more than adequate—comfortable(ish) beds and hot water in the shower. I spent the evening reading a little before sleeping a few hours.

The next morning, we would learn that our friends from World Relief had been shot at in their car after dropping us off that night. The team members at Sister's House heard the gunfire, prompting a mantra that continued to pop up throughout the trip: it's fireworks until it's not.

Charles filled us in later that some bandits were popping off rounds to scare motorists into pulling over when theoretically the bandits would rob them. The World Relief staff was experienced enough to keep driving, and they were safe—shaken but fine after a good meal, Charles said.

I won't say that this rattled me too much—the same could happen driving through neighborhoods not far from where I live—but it was a reminder to be thankful for our gracious hosts who had kept us safe during our time in the DRC. It also solidified for me that what our team was attempting to accomplish together—telling these stories that need to be told—was not necessarily going to be packaged with a nice happy ending. The stories we would tell would be of a world where love is most certainly bigger than fear and where hope must be held vigilantly.

Part 2: Lessons from the Mountain

Body

*Strength does not come from physical capacity.
It comes from an indomitable will.
—Mahatma Gandhi*

When I returned from Africa, the first question most people asked was “How was the climb?” I felt conflicted every time because the short answer is that the climb was one of the most transformative experiences of my life, but whittling that down to an elevator pitch at school pick up proved challenging.

For the first two weeks, I had a physical response to this question — my heart would rapidly start beating, the anxious sweats would start, and a few times, I felt a lump in my throat as I tried to hold back tears. I was tempted to shout “I’M WRITING A BOOK ABOUT IT BECAUSE I DON’T HAVE THE EMOTIONAL FORTITUDE TO TALK ABOUT THIS LIKE A NORMAL HUMAN BEING. I’LL LET YOU KNOW WHEN IT’S FINISHED!” and then walk away quickly to my car. But mostly, I told a short story about how it took six days and my brain swelled, which left the listener with her mouth gaping and me feeling like I’d done a huge disservice to the story.

So here it is — in black and white. The climb.

We stayed at the Kilimanjaro Mountain Resort the night before the climb. Our team gathered for a briefing with Abraham, the head guide from African Walking Company. At that time, he gave us our sleeping bags and expedition weight parkas that we were renting and a basic rundown of what to expect on the climb. That’s when we learned we would each have a personal porter who would be carrying our big duffles while we carried a smaller day pack of essentials. The duffle would need to weigh 15 kg or less. (I learned a couple hours later back in my room that mine weighed almost 20 kg, and I’d have to cut weight by 25%.)

During the briefing, we were given a map of our route with our stops marked along the way, a tiny tent signifying each of our camping sites. We talked about the importance of drinking water, what kind of food we’d be eating at meals, and how we would deal with bathroom issues (from that point on, this was referred to “sending an email” on the mountain).

After a hefty last meal, our team took communion together and prayed.

Jen and I spent the evening laying out our clothes and repacking our bags. I sacrificed extra clothes for snacks. I packed and repacked five times, weighing the bag each time and hoping for the magic number. I finally decided to start distributing snacks to other team members who had extra space. No snack left behind.

As I lay down to sleep, I found myself reflecting on our communion. As we passed dinner bread and two glasses of wine around the table, we were remembering Christ's act of sacrifice. Crucifixion is physical—that's where we get the word excruciating. Christ's death and more importantly, his life was one of physicality. He rubbed dirt in the eyes of the blind to heal them. He turned to heal the woman with the issue of blood when she *touched* the hem of his garment. He fed people. He gathered children in his lap.

When I agreed to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, it was very much an extension of my faith in Christ's physical example. The moments of my life when I've felt most intimately connected to a higher power have come in physical acts—birthing children, building houses for flood victims, assisting doctors in rural medical clinics, distributing food to people experiencing homelessness, holding the hand of a grieving friend. Faith in action is what grounds me in the spiritual.

I believed wholeheartedly that having skin in this game would produce results for the women I met in the DRC and for the women in Syria and Iraq and South Sudan, whose lives had consistently consumed my thoughts and prayers for the last few



Camp that night was at Hut Hut next to a beautiful pond in the shadow of the mountain. Elevation: 14,206 feet.

Me with Jen. Twins! Look at those happy faces, so oblivious to the challenge that awaited



Please note how clean my boots are.

months. My prayers were good – my choice to climb a mountain to get the world’s attention on their behalf was better. I prayed the scripture as I drifted to sleep. *Creator God, tomorrow I offer my body as a living sacrifice, an act of true worship.*

I slept relatively well, despite the incessant sound of what I decided was the Smoke Monster from *Lost* moo-barking all night long. We got up the next morning, had a breakfast of beef sausages, omelets, and potatoes (I washed it all down with seven glasses of mango juice – not an exaggeration).

The bus arrived, and we drove a couple of hours to the entrance to the Rongai route. The Rongai route is considered less physically challenging than some of the other routes and gave us the benefit of climbing up one side of the mountain and down the other.

After eating a boxed lunch of a sandwich, mini banana, chips, and a chocolate bar provided by African Walking Company, we gathered for our first reading from the team devotional. Seven spectacular writers donated their time and words to put together this little bit of encouragement for us. Their words were with us in the morning and at night – a reminder that there were legions of people back home thinking of us, praying for us, and cheering us up the mountain.

Day One

The first day of climbing was not even close to what I'd expected. The weather was perfect – sunny and warm, but not too warm. We started walking through dense vegetation pretty quickly, which looked similar to forests I've hiked in the Ozarks or Pacific Northwest. Far from strenuous, I started to think all that time I'd spent climbing



stairs at the mall was overkill. This was quite literally a walk in the park.

I confess that I was a tad on the arrogant side that first day, commenting at one point, “I hope we don’t go this slowly the whole time. I feel like a sloth.” Our guides

My shock on the first day may have had something to do with the fact that we were “hiking” on the same route these kids were using to walk home from school.

introduced us to the Kili mantra of “pole, pole” meaning “slowly, slowly.” I understood



that we needed to pace ourselves, but this was kind of ridiculous.

Oh.

How.

The.

Mighty.

Fall.

Day Two

I woke up the second day with a throbbing headache, a cold turned into a full-blown sinus infection. I knew we had a long day ahead of us—four hours of climbing before stopping for lunch and then at least four more hours. We would ascend a little

The team—still looking so fresh and so clean at our first stop. Simba Camp: elevation 8,763 feet.

over 3,000 feet to our next camp. We started out pole pole, slowly slowly, again, but this time, I was thankful for the pace.

I'd slept well in four layers including my down parka. The camp had very few sounds at night apart from the occasional rustling of one of my fellow campers making her way to the bathroom. I could hear Jen's soft breathing on the other side of the tent, our large duffles sandwiched between us in the only way we could fit everything inside the tent. I was thankful for the good night as several of the other climbers complained of their inability to sleep due to the cold or middle-of-the night intestinal adventures.

I couldn't shake the pain, though, that was increasing with every step. My head was full of mucus, and I spent all of our breaks trying to blow the snot out unsuccessfully. Pain medication wasn't helping, and I didn't have decongestants in my carefully packed first aid kit. Anti-histamines, anti-inflammatories, pro-biotics, anti-diarrheals, my prescriptions for nerve pain and altitude sickness, band-aids, anti-biotic cream, anti-itch cream I'd packed everything I thought I might need, but nothing that could loosen the phlegm.

I had to do something to take my mind off the slow, trudging steps of the first half of the day, so I pulled out my iPod. I didn't want to chat about our lives back home with the person next to me I needed to be somewhere else mentally as I had no way to teleport off the mountain. Mumford and Sons and Grace Potter got me to lunch. I also snacked along the way on Kind bars, switching to Easy Cheese and crackers when I needed something savory. The Easy Cheese had been a last minute grab during my final trip to Walmart for trip necessities. The rest of the team members had laughed at me when they saw my snack stash, but no one turned down fake cheese in a can when it mattered.

At lunch, I reached a true low point. I was physically exhausted from trying to keep my head upright, the pain increasing steadily. Knowing that we had to walk as long as we already had before stopping for the day felt impossible. I talked to Laura, the marathon-running nurse on our team, and she suggested starting a round of anti-biotics if things didn't get better. Innocent, one of the guides, a soft-spoken man with thoughtful eyes, heard me talking about the pressure in my head and pulled out a box of pills.

After looking at the ingredients with Laura, we figured out it was the equivalent of Sudafed, and I wanted to buy Innocent an all-expense trip to Herotown. I popped some Sudafed and hoped for



the best.

The first four hours of climbing had been rocky and steeper than the first day, but the second four hours of climbing was far less strenuous. My head started to clear a bit, or at least the pain was gone, and I was able to start blowing my nose with some success. I used every tissue in my pack along with every tissue in everyone else's pack. Every now and then I'd hear one of the guides remind us of the importance of PMA (positive mental attitude), and I wanted to tell them to kindly shove it.

As far as I could tell, no one else seemed to be struggling as much as me. The A-side of my mental soundtrack played *only four more hours...only three more hours...only two more hours...* punctuated by the reverse B-side of *what have I done...I've made a terrible mistake...this is only day two*. I blew my nose, fought back angry tears, and took another step. And another. And another and another. And we finally made it to camp.

Fake smile and fake cheese. Also: the beginning of a super fun sunburn.



I'm pretty sure that Chelsea took a picture of me (left) taking this picture (right) of the view from my tent. Sleeping in the clouds is something I'll never forget – and that might just be the title of my first solo album. Campsite: Kikelelwa, 11,800 feet.

Day Three

Four hours into our hike on the third day, my nose starting bleeding. How my body could be creating such massive amounts of mucus and yet somehow be dried out at the same time was baffling to me. The pressure in my head was gone (insert a thousand more thank yous to Innocent), but my nose was raw and there was no end to blowing it. I was out of tissues and nose-friendly wet wipes, so I did what made sense – I packed all my extra underwear in my day pack to use as snot rags.

We stopped hiking after six hours for lunch and a rest. I crashed for an hour of sleep and woke up groggy. We'd reached our camp for the night, but we needed to hike a little further up (just to come back down again) to test out our oxygen tanks and acclimatize a little further. After my nap, I was not exhibiting signs of PMA. In fact, my mental attitude was about as negative as possible. I couldn't breathe (snot), my nose was bleeding (why??), and we were going to take a pointless hike just to come back down again. I slipped into a full-on internal temper tantrum when I tried to put the plastic tubes in my nose to test out my oxygen tank.

Because you now what's not awesome when your nose is bleeding and full of snot? Shoving something inside your nostrils. Up to this point in the trip, I'd spent most of the time at the head of the pack. I liked being in front if for no other reason than not having to stare at someone's butt while I walked. For the acclimatization hike, I fell behind. Way behind. And I started crying.

At one point, I sat down on a rock and yanked the tube out of my nose. Our main guide, Abraham, walked back from the crowd and crouched down in front of me. He started in with his PMA pep talk, telling me that everything I was experiencing was a normal part of the climb. He reminded me that crying was just going to create more mucus, so it was important that I stop crying. Which made me cry more. He sat down on the rock and asked, “Leia, do you want me to cry with you?”

I stopped crying and started walking again.

A few hundred feet further, I stopped again to take the tube out and blow my nose. The group was getting further and further away from me, climbing the mountain at the right pace. One of the other guides, Tosha, whom I found out later was the one who trained Abraham years ago, sat with me while I dabbed at the snot and blood with a pair of underwear. He put his hand on my back, and I immediately had a picture of my dad in my mind. If my dad had been there, he would have sat with me and rubbed my back and not thought twice about the fact that I was using underwear as a snot rag.

We sat for a minute or so, while I took some sips of water and plotted how I could quit gracefully. During our climb, the guides updated us with stories of other climbers who had attempted the same route we were on – famous athletes who quit at different points along the way. If an NFL running back couldn’t finish, who was I to think that I could do it?

Tosha looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Leia, my name is Tosha. Do you know what ‘Tosha’ means? It means enough. I am here with you, and you have everything you need to do this. You have enough, and you are enough.”

I stopped crying and started walking again.

I’d left my nose tubes out after asking Tosha if it was okay because they were hurting so badly. He said that was fine, and five minutes later we were at the stopping point for the day and ready to head back down the mountain to camp.



I have no idea why I look so happy in this picture. I was not happy. At all.



The rest of the team was snacking when I got to the pit stop. I sat next to Brenda and told her the story of Tosha's encouragement how we had everything we needed to finish. Tosha overheard me talking and sat beside me. He said, "Leia, do you know why my name is Tosha? I was my mother's eighth child. I was enough!"

Day Four

My tent mate, Jen, was the official Keeper of the Trash in our tent. She graciously kept a ziplock bag next to her sleeping bag where I had been depositing all my used tissues and granola bar wrappers from the day. So when I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't find my head lamp, I started shout-whispering her name. "Jen! Jen! Wake up! Where's the trashbag?"

Her sleepy voice cut through the darkness. "Hold on. Let me find my head lamp."

Her light switched on, and she handed me the ziplock as I scrambled to get the zipper to our door open. I wasn't sure if she was going to make it in time to help me. My stomach was rolling, and just as I unzipped the tent to let some fresh air in, Jen handed me our "trash can." I vomited pretty violently for about a minute before it was all over.

I started apologizing, and Jen, always gracious and kind even in a sleepy haze, told me it was fine—did I need some water? I found my backpack to wash out my mouth and lay back down. Luckily, that was the only surprise attack that night, and I was able to sleep soundly until morning.

I woke up with a much clearer head and with no sign of nausea. We had a long day of hiking ahead of us, but for whatever reason, I started to regain some of that PMA the guides were always demanding.

The fourth day took us to Kibo Hut, our last camp before summit day. We ascended to 15,419 feet before stopping for summit preparation. After two rough days, day four wasn't so bad. Other than the first day of lush vegetation hiking (with school children), this was the next most surprising day. Almost the entire climb was relatively flat desert. We had open blue skies and could see miles in front of us as we crossed the terrain. At one point, we came across a plane crash, eerie in its stillness. Pieces of the plane were scattered around as we walked across the desert, a door here and other metal fragments there.

The view of Kilimanjaro (I know we were on Kilimanjaro, but the top of the mountain that we could see as we walked) was mesmerizing and motivated me to keep trudging along the path. We stopped once near some large boulders, so people could send emails, and Belinda asked us all to circle up.

Thus far, we hadn't really processed our time in Rwanda and the DRC together as a group. For many of us, we didn't have the words yet. Each of us was carrying a picture of a woman from the DRC, South Sudan, or Syria in our backpacks. Belinda

asked us to pull the pictures out, so we could have a moment to reflect on why we were climbing the mountain in the first place.

As we stood in a circle to pray, the guides joined us, taking our hands and listening as we spoke of these women. We held their pictures and cried together, promising in that moment to not forget. We stood on the side of Kilimanjaro, the mountain of light, praying that the people who would eventually hear the story of our climb would



also not forget these women.

Day Five Summit Day

We didn't sleep at the end of day four. We rested. I wrote a letter to my friend, Jamie, who had sent letters to me ahead of time to open each day of the climb. We ate Skittles. But we didn't sleep.

We had to be ready to go at midnight, and the anticipation was just too much. I was feeling okay. In fact, at this point, my adrenaline had kicked in, and I was so ready to be finished. In my mind, the summit was going to be challenging, but all I could



think about was how close we were to the end.

At midnight, we lined up in the dark with our head lamps on and ready to get to the top. For six straight hours, we trudged through sand, moving back and forth on switchbacks to keep from sliding straight back down the mountain. It was pitch black and silent most of the way. The only thing I could see were Brenda's boots in front of me. I mimicked her experienced hiker steps trying to conserve energy.

I had Jen snap this picture of me waiting for summit night. This is possibly the worst picture I've ever taken in my life. When I am having a bad moment, I look at this picture and laugh. How could feeling good look so bad?

I rotated between breathing through the tubes and blowing my nose into a long-sleeved gray t-shirt (I had used all my undies). Four hours in, I was struggling to stay awake. I've heard people talk about falling asleep standing up, but falling asleep walking was a whole new experience. It was the middle of the night, and we'd been up almost 24 hours at this point. The goal was to summit near sunrise, so that we would have



enough time to get back down the mountain in good time.

The sky began to turn orange, and during one of our breaks, I sat down next to Chelsea, and she looked at me with glazed eyes. All I could say was “I’m so tired” and she barely eked out a “yeah” before lying back on the rock. Honestly, I thought the sunrise was going to be motivating—a moment when my heart would race as the heavens opened. Instead, I wanted to cry as I looked up the steep incline we still had in front of us—what would be two more hours of climbing. For the first time, I could actually see where we were going, and I felt nothing but defeat.

We started again, and I fell back. I couldn’t breathe, and my PMA was non-existent. I drank when I heard Joy Beth’s voice yelling “Sippy, sippy!” and I kept walking because I didn’t have a choice. My brain started to feel a bit fuzzy, and my heart Like something from Star Wars was racing. The space

between me and the rest of the team grew, and I literally started counting my steps. I was panicking a little bit, and I was worried that if I didn't control some part of this, I was going to lose sight of why I was even here. One...two...three...four...rest. One...two...three...four...rest.

I made it to Gilman's Point, a few minutes after most of the team members, where I was greeted with warm tea and hugs. I pulled everything out of my bag that I'd brought with me—my friend Barbara's sister's ashes, a Flat Stanley from Norman, OK, my Somebody's Mama t-shirt, my ONE t-shirt, and a t-shirt from my friend Logan (who was supposed to climb with us but couldn't). We snapped all the pictures we needed, and the team decided at that point who was ready to go back down and who wanted to continue to the other summits.

I had never been so tired in my life, but I still turned to Belinda and said, "This doesn't feel like the end for me. Seven of us headed one way, and the rest of the team started back down. We made it to Stella Point in about 45 minutes. The terrain was mostly flat, and I kept up with the rest of the team pretty well. Our guides told us that if we kept the same pace, we would make it from Stella to Uhuru, the last summit, in about an hour. The last five minutes of that stretch took me twenty with two guides encouraging me the whole way to keep going. We weren't at Uhuru for more than five minutes. The altitude was too high to stay much longer, and a storm was rolling in. We'd had spectacular, out of the ordinary weather for the entire climb. The tension in our guides' eyes told us that we needed to move. Quickly.

It started snowing—big soft snowflakes. The pressure in my head was giving me a headache, and my heart was beating so fast that I was having a hard time breathing. At one point, right before we reached Gilman's Point on the way down, I squeezed through two rocks and blacked out. Our guide, Mustafa, lifted me up off the rock, and Ruth and Kim were asking me, "Did you fall? Or did you brace yourself on the rock before blacking out?" I couldn't remember. I took ten more steps and vomited.

At that point, Mustafa began to support me while I walked and told me that it was very important to get down the mountain as fast as possible. Down is always easier than up, and with Mustafa by my side, we started running. The sand, or scree, was soft and easy to slide through. I was dizzy enough that I was fearful of falling, but Mustafa continued to support me. At one point, I looked down the mountain and saw a figure walking toward me. It was Joel, my personal porter. I stopped for a breath and to blow my nose—my t-shirt was full of snot and blood. Another guide, Innocent, had taken my arm in his to hold me up as Kris, one of my fellow climbers, caught up to me.

The last clear thing I remembered was Kris saying, "She's going down again."

From there, all space and time were irrelevant, and the details were filled in for me later. Innocent and Joel ran down the mountain, holding me up. I tried to move my feet, but I felt like I was in water. Occasionally, I'd close my eyes, only to be slapped awake. At one point, I heard someone say, "I'm a doctor" and I could hear Laura, the team nurse, talking about me. Innocent kept asking me questions—what is your name, where are you from—and I knew the answers, but I wasn't fast enough.

I became aware of my surrounding for the first time in about an hour as I lay on a bunk bed with an IV in my hand. Christina, a doctor from Stanford, had been coming down the mountain the same time as me, and she had everything I needed in her bag. Abraham sat next to me holding my hand while I took medicine and received fluids. Joel stood at my feet. Laura explained what was happening. I was taking anti-nausea, anti-inflammatory, and steroid pills for the swelling. When I asked her what was swelling, she told me it was my brain.

Within about half an hour, I felt relatively okay—pretty shaky and still mentally cloudy, but my body felt strong. This is still a mystery to me. The doctor took the IV out, and Abraham shuffled me to the mess tent for lunch. I had twenty minutes to eat and get my things together. We still had four hours of hiking down to the camp where we'd be sleeping.

Aside from some snow and hail, the walk was quite pleasant, due in part to the fact that I was a bit high from the drugs but mainly because we'd reached an altitude that wasn't making my brain swell. It wasn't until about two hours into that walk that I really thought about the fact that I'd summited Mount Kilimanjaro. I had done it—there had been so much drama in the immediate, but I finally had a minute to appreciate what we'd accomplished.

I walked most of that way with Lynne or Chessy, chatting about life back home, stopping for snacks and water occasionally. It was all quite anti-climatic given what we'd just experienced. We reached camp at Horombo, where our diligent team of porters had set up our tents for the last time.

Day Six

I woke up that last day feeling clear-headed for the first time in days. It was still dark when I heard someone tapping on our tent to ask us if we were ready for tea. I sat up and even in the dark knew something wasn't quite right. I fumbled around for my head lamp and switched it on. Jen was stirring, so I said, "Jen, I think something is wrong with my face."

Jen sat up and switched on her head lamp. "Oh my gosh!"

I knew the exclamation was directed at me. I grabbed my camera and snapped a selfie because I didn't have any kind of mirror. That was when I got my first glimpse of



what would be forever known and affectionately referred to as #kililips.

Having now done a little research, I know that it was probably a combination of sun exposure and a reaction to the medication I'd taken to combat the brain swelling. The result: looking like a really dirty, smelly Angelina Jolie for about two days.

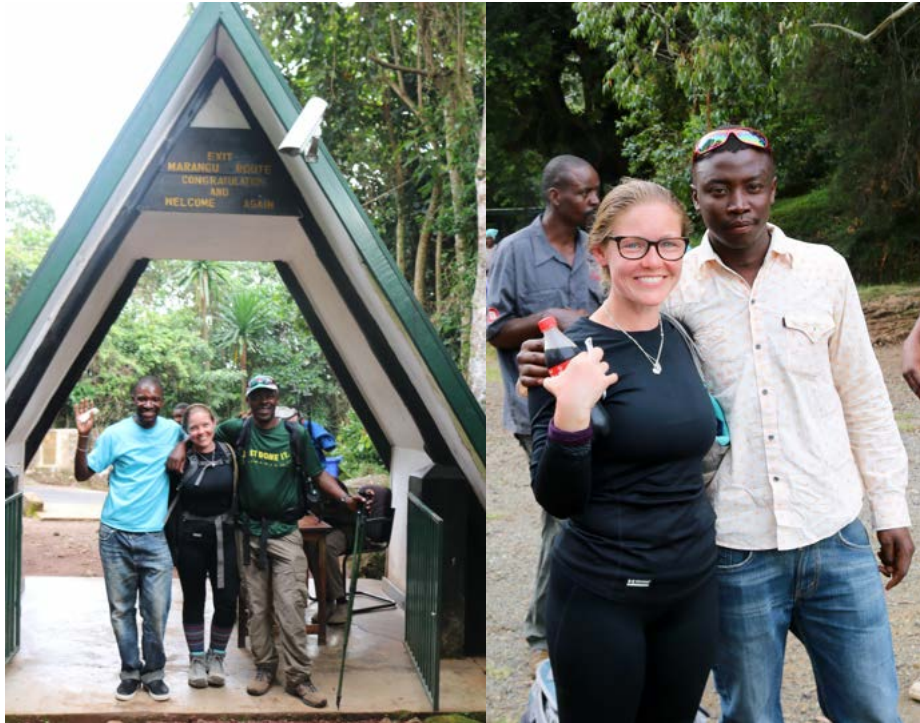
We had breakfast together followed by a “tipping ceremony” where we presented monetary gifts to our guides and porters. Culturally, it was appropriate to do this in front of the whole group for transparency. At that time, I gave an extra personal tip to Innocent and Joel for being my mountain angels who graciously carried my snotty, incoherent self to safety the day before.

Lynne offered some kind words on behalf of our team, and the African Walking Company assembled to sing us a parting song. At that time, we learned that we had 12.5 miles to hike that day – practically a half marathon – but we were ready. I aligned myself with Laura and Chessy, two of the faster members of our team, and committed to myself to give it all I had. We tore down the mountain. Tosha, who stayed with us until the end even said we were moving fast.

Laura was a great leader – motivating us to move faster than the times marked by the signs along the way. My PMA level was high – I knew there was a hot shower and warm food on the other end of the trail. And I couldn’t wait to connect to wi-fi to let my people know I’d made it down the mountain safely.



The last day’s hike was beautiful and cloudy – the perfect temperature for moving fast.



Left: me with Abraham and Tosha, world's best guides.
Right: me with Joel, my personal porter who took care of me so well.

Spirit

We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.
—Thich Nhat Hanh

On some level, it took several weeks for me to wrap my mind around the spiritual aspect of climbing the mountain. In the moment, my physical needs overwhelmed. In trying to articulate the lessons I learned over a month later, I continue to come back to one word over and over again: interdependence.

I find myself drawing connections between myself and the Other, that which is not me, over and over again. Me and the rest of the team. Me and the World Relief staff. Me and the women we met in the DRC. Me and my village back home. Me and the African Walking Company. Me and God. Everything I am—all my thoughts and feelings—are at once mine but also inextricably bound to the relationships I have with the Other.

I believe wholeheartedly in shared agency or collective intentionality. In my relationship with God, I'm motivated by the belief that God is love and wants all human beings to be loved and know they are loved. That I am moved to love and be love to everyone around me is my deepest calling, one rooted in God's intention for creation. If I am made in God's image, we're in this together.

Whether we were on a bus driving around Goma or on the side of the mountain, the thing that kept our team moving was this same shared intention. We laughed and cried together, shared snacks and chapstick, and bolstered one another in moments of weakness. Joy Beth had perfect timing—every time my mouth started to feel dry, I'd hear her voice behind me yelling, "Sippy, sippy!" Krista tore pages from her journal to share with me, so I could write a letter to a friend. I shared my crackers and extra can of Easy Cheese with Alyce when it was the only thing she wanted at the end of the descent.

While these moments may seem insignificant in the grand scheme of things, caring for each other in these very physical ways was in fact spiritual. Meeting physical needs tells the Other that she matters in tangible ways.

This entire undertaking started with shared agency with a higher power. The intention was strengthened with the support of my family and the Somebody's Mama community. Assembling with the team was confirmation that this was bigger than my individual quest to end violence against women, but the biggest lesson I learned about shared agency came from the work of our guides and porters of the African Walking Company.

Again and again, I watched their sacrifice, perseverance, and strength and thought to myself *this is how we should all live our lives*.

Every morning on the mountain started at 6:00 with a light tapping on our tent from our porters. We unzipped the door to receive our tea with or without sugar—our porters quickly learned our preferences. After tea came the “washy washy,” a bowl of hot water for each of us to use to wash our faces and hands. Jen used it one day to wash her hair, a somewhat pointless effort that made her feel better about the grime we’d collected along the way and had me shivering just thinking about how much colder I would be if my hair was wet.

Next, we would gather in the tent where the AWC had filled the table with bread and fruit and some kind of grainy, warm breakfast soup much like malt-o-meal. They made special accommodations for some of our team members who were gluten or dairy intolerant. Nothing was left unnoticed. After breakfast, we’d load our packs for the day’s hike, and the porters would break down the entire camp, hoisting our duffles and tents on their backs and on top of their heads to continue our journey.

During our hikes, they would ask us how we were feeling, offering snacks and medication if needed. They sat with us while we told stories on our breaks, offering their own when we asked. They rubbed our backs when we cried, gave us advice about blisters and headaches, and reminded us that we were strong enough to keep going when we doubted.

At the end of each hike, we would gather again in the mess tent, the table covered with platters of popcorn and peanuts—appetizers before dinner. Our dinners were generous piles of carbs—rice or pasta—with meat and vegetables in tomato sauce. For dessert, we had pineapple, mango, and watermelon. Even when I was weary, I knew that our guides would take care of us every step of the way.



When we stopped at Kibo Hut, the last camp before summit, my porter, Joel, greeted me with a large brush in his hand and started dusting off my pants and boots. I couldn't help but think of the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, a hum-



bling act of service for the people he loved most.

I want to be the African Walking Company for the world. I want to serve in this same way – selflessly, with regard to the needs of the person who needs me, with love and honor and respect. I want to shock people with unexpected kindness.

To me, the African Walking Company is the perfect metaphor for what it means to be the best kind of human. I have been blessed with a family that loves me unconditionally in a supernatural way, a group of friends who know how to help me be the best me, and a God whose quiet voice whispers to me daily *I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine*. It is not out of obligation or a need to prove something that I give from my abundance. What is life if not the opportunity every day to wake up wondering how I can make someone else's day a little brighter?

Opportunities abound if we are paying attention. The prophet Isaiah encourages us in a chapter marked with the words, "Invitation to the Thirsty." Isaiah says, "You will go out in JOY and be led forth in PEACE; the MOUNTAINS and the hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands." (Isaiah 55:12, *NIV*)

I am thirsty.

I want to live a life of joy and peace.

I want to make the mountains sing.

Acknowledgements

When I was walking down the mountain, I had hours to write a book in my head and knew that upon returning home, I would need to get the words out as quickly as possible. Even before I started writing, I knew this was going to be a project that wouldn't fit the confines of a blog post. So many words. So many stories.

I considered starting the formal process of writing a book proposal and trying to publish something the traditional route, but the reality is that I didn't want to spend a single second working on anything but this story. I didn't need to formalize this—I just needed to get it out there for the world to read.

So I sat down to write and didn't stop writing except to eat chips and salsa. And feed my kids and make sure they were brushing their teeth. (Okay, I'm lying. My parents and Scott took care of all of that.)

As I worked my way through the details of these stories, I wept on the keyboard repeatedly, sometimes laughing through the tears, as I remembered these moments. I must say a few thank yous.

To Jamie: Who edits the editor? You do. Thank you for editing these pages. Thank you for writing me letters for the mountain. Thank you for holding my hand from multiple Air Force bases over the last ten years. You are the best friend, board member, Love Club hostess, and snark goddess a girl could ask for. I have no idea what I would do without you and your constant encouragement. You get it. You get me. I can never pay you back for the joy and meaning you've brought to my life.

To the Somebody's Mama community: this is an important chapter in our story, but the book is far from finished. We did this together, and we're going to keep doing our little good in the world one project at a time. I stand in awe every time each of you says yes to continuing on this journey together. Thank you for making my life better and bigger and full of surprises.

To my family: thank you for your constant support and belief that I'm doing the right thing. Whether I'm climbing mountains or making dinner, everything I am and everything I will ever accomplish is a direct result of having the best damn village on the

planet. I'll leave it at that because I have a few more books to write for you, and I don't



want to use up all the words in this one.

And to the women who made up the One Million Thumbprints team

Jen: I've said it a thousand times, and now it's in print. I could not have asked for a more perfect roommate/tentmate. Thank you for letting me use your trash bag for my snot rags and for putting your phone between us, so I could check to see what time it was in the middle of the night. Some of our best conversations didn't even need words—it was enough to catch your eye and know I wasn't alone.

Joy Beth: You are one in a million. Your enthusiasm bolstered the whole team, but your vulnerability made me fall in complete and utter love with you. I will never again think of Jesus as living water without thinking of you. You are the real freaking deal in the most surprising of ways, and you are stuck with me for life.

Kris: Mama — that's a word that has a deep-seated place in my heart, and you embody it. Watching you care for people in their weakest moments (including my messy descent) was like magic. I also have mad respect for your unapologetic love for Diet Dr. Pepper and all things not vegetable.

Laura: Hey, wanderer. Your independent spirit was a source of strength for me whether I was listening to your stories about traveling the world or watching your back as you ran full force up and down the mountain ahead of me, I am in awe of your watch-me-now attitude. Thanks for saving my life.

Lynne: How did God pack so much punch into one tiny person? I read your book before I met you, and the real life Lynne was exactly as spectacular as I was expecting. If you're ever near me, come for dinner. I'll be serving carrots in your honor. (Also, I am a full on Aquafor convert.)

David: You did it! And by it, I mean spent two weeks with 14 women without losing your mind. Gold star for you.

Ruth: I can't type your name without crying. Every time. Beauty. Grace. Humor. Kindness. Perfect timing. Encouragement. Quiet strength. Quirk. Maybe you can put all those words together to form the perfect sentence because right now, I can't. You are my people. In the deepest possible way.

Kim: You and your eyelashes are revolutionary. Your heart bubbles to the surface fueled by the heat of activism. You're a woman with a plan and a woman of action. I'm so glad to have a front row seat to watch you becoming the best you, and I can't wait to see how well you lead.

Brenda: What a gift it is to know you — to see what it looks like to live a life of service while raising a beautiful family. If I painted a picture of what I want my life to look like down the road, I might steal a few of your snapshots. You are some kind of special, but I knew that the moment I learned you were from Oregon. Pacific Northwest lovers unite.

Alyce: As a mom of boys, I love watching the way you love your girls. You are raising future leaders, and they couldn't have a better role model. After we watched you prowl the mountain like a lioness, I read that in any given pride, the lionesses are almost always related — sisters, aunts, nieces. Unlike their male counterparts, lionesses do not operate within a rank hierarchy, and they always hunt in a group. You've given me a whole new reason to cry "I am woman, hear me roar!"

Chessy: You are hands down the bravest, boldest Disney princess I've ever met. You prove that romance doesn't have to take a backseat to realism because the best life incorporates both. Whoever invented the word moxie was waiting for you to exist, and I

am waiting with bated breath to see how your brain makes the world a better place. FYI, I am still on stand by for marrying you and Joe.

Chelsea: Indispensable Chelsea. In the fog of post-trip drip, it was your images that grounded me in this story. It was your interaction on social media that reminded me that this all happened in real life. Your talent behind the camera is what is most obviously awe-inspiring about you, but your guts – your unwavering pursuit of truth and desire for what’s real – is what makes me so sad to live far away from you. I have started digging a tunnel from my backyard to yours. See you soon.

Krista: You are you. Fully and completely. What a joy it is to watch you lean in to the gifts God has given you. Your hospitality, the genuine interest you take in other people’s lives, your pink skirt – every bit of it is bold and authentic and beautiful. I’ll carry you like a lucky charm on the bracelet of my heart – I have so much to learn from you. (Keep the light on because I will be crashing your pad at some point. Promise.)

Belinda: I believe in divine appointments, and I believe the road that led me to you was ordained. Nothing about you surprises me because I get it. Every single time. You are my favorite badass too. And this is all your fault.

Extras

Download the team devotional: <http://www.onemillionthumbprints.org/devotion>

Please check out these other offerings from my 1MT team members:

- From Kim Yim, Abolitionist Mama: <http://abolitionistmama.blogspot.com/2016/04/one-million-thumbprints-what-i-never.html>
- From Lynne Hybels: <http://www.lynnhybels.com/climbing-kilimanjaro-i-we-did-it/>
- From Chelsea Hudson: <http://www.chelseahudson.com/beautiful-kilimanjaro/>