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My PTSD: Part 2

(Warning: this story contains violent content)

Until recently, thinking of Jacob Kuju mainly caused sorrow, my (Nancy's) reflections on Nawiyapuru caused guilt, and memories from Boma caused my body to shudder.

In 2010, Shelvis and I worked in neighboring countries: Kenya and South Sudan. Shelvis navigated the bustling metropolis of Nairobi, Kenya, with skyscrapers and incredible traffic jams, while I resided in a rural town called "Boma" with limited electricity and a few dirt roads. We took turns visiting each other during that eight-month stretch.



The view from the side of the mountain as the sun starts to fade in Boma.

Each morning in Boma, my colleagues and I emerged from rooms on the side of a mountain as the fog lifted from the valley below us. During the day, our group divided into teams to facilitate different community development programs in nearby communities. When the sun began to set, we often gathered under the vast

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sky of stars to take turns telling stories. Our friendships grew quickly, their strength providing a sense of safety in a place of unsettling unknowns.

Jacob Kuju was one of my colleagues. We worked together daily on a team of three in both Boma town and neighboring Nawayapuru. Jacob grew up in Boma, attended Bible school in Nairobi, and then came back home to help develop his community.



Above left: Our team of three, Jacob (left), preparing for an asset-based development program with churches in South Sudan; above right: A woman at home in the Nawayapuru community.

When I spoke to people in town, Jacob translated my words into the Murle language. When I struggled to understand cultural differences and felt completely ineffective, he offered me words of encouragement to keep me going. He became a trusted friend.

After eight months, my relationships in that isolated part of South Sudan had grown to carry significant weight in my life. Consequently, it hurt to my core when I received two emails shortly after arriving back in the U.S.

The first message shared about Jacob's tragic death. The second recounted an attack on Nawayapuru in which women and children burned to death in their homes. After reading the two emails back to back, I walked outside, sat behind the garage and wept. I have never cried with such intensity before or after that day.

In the months and years following that news, my thoughts of Jacob mainly focused on his death. I thought about the man who took a heavy stick and cracked Jacob's skull from behind. I imagined what it was like for the perpetrator to be jailed and then starved to death.

When I thought about Nawayapuru, I mainly thought about the fire. Images of mothers and children screaming in blazing grass homes seared my mind. Mothers with whom I studied scripture. Children with whom I sang Sunday school songs.

My mind got stuck there.

As a mission co-worker, I usually keep stories like these to myself, afraid sharing them would transfer pain to others. Afraid people would respond by saying, "You should not be in South Sudan." During a weekly counseling session in June, though, the stories began to flow. Sensing the depth of my wounds, Dr. Susan Rhema suggested EMDR.

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EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) sessions begin by focusing on a core memory and a connected negative belief about oneself. Somehow, EMDR therapy helps the brain reframe the past, lessening its harmful impact on one's present. An EMDR session ends by focusing on a "safe place." Sipping hot tea after dropping the kids off at school is my quiet, safe place.

During my EMDR revisit to Boma and Nawiyapuru, memories flashed through my mind like a slide show.

With my eyes closed, I saw the women of Nawiyapuru during our "visioning session." We sat scattered in a grass field, taking a few minutes to dream about possibilities for future development.

I saw their daughters too, attending a girls' afterschool club. Eagerly, they raised hands to answer questions. Smiling, they walked home, carrying plastic chairs on their heads.

I also saw Jacob. Joking with colleagues while hiking up the mountain, he seemed so at ease.



Above left: One lesson in the Bible Study curriculum allows participants to think individually about creative ways to address poverty using local resources; above right: We pause for a photo during a group hike up the mountain (Jacob Kuju on the left).

During this EMDR session, something unexpected happened. The women spoke to me. They looked directly, deeply into my eyes, and said "We are strong. We are going to be ok."

Even though some of them died in the fire, in my mind, they were all there. Their words helped me release the guilt that "I should have done more" to protect them and their children. I carried that sickening feeling for so long... what grace for them to help me let it go...

Their daughters spoke, too. From the open-air market, the children paused and looked directly, deeply into my eyes to tell me, "We are strong. We are going to be okay." In doing so, they reframed my memory of them; no longer surrounded with regret and heartache, instead held in place by compassion and strength.

"You are holding your cup of tea... It is warm in your hands..." Dr. Rhema said to close the session. "You are by yourself, and it is quiet." The images stopped passing by, I imagined my warm tea, and it was quiet. But, at the end of this particular session, I was not alone. Jacob somehow came to sit across the table from me, his tea cup in hand. His silent presence, his willingness to visit, a healing gift.

Now, when I remember him, I don't focus as much on the way he died. Instead, I feel deeply grateful to have witnessed his life and ministry up close. To God be the glory. Amen.

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