



Perspective Taking and Compassion

By Katherine M. Sprague, Psy.D.

Everyday experiences can be unexpectedly life changing. About three weeks ago, a friend of mine asked if I wanted to join her book club while visiting her in Los Angeles. The book they had chosen to read for the month of May was, *What is the What* by Dave Eggers. I almost declined the offer due to time constraints; however, I thought I could get a lot of reading done on my long flight out to California. I am so glad I decided to read this extraordinary book because it has changed my thinking for the better. This book is based on the life of Valentino Achak Deng, one of the 'lost boys' of Sudan. If you are not familiar with the story of the 'lost boys,' please visit the following website for a brief description of their struggle: <http://www.unicef.org/sowc96/closboys.htm>

What is the What, details the struggle of thousands of boys who suffered the dire consequences of civil war and their courageous journey across Africa. There were parts in this book that were extremely difficult for me to read due to sheer horror. For example, on three separate occasions, Deng witnessed a fellow 'lost boy' being eaten by a lion and at the age of eight he witnessed his best friend's death and proceeded to bury him. These two examples are just the surface of what the 'lost boys' experienced collectively. The 'lost boys' experienced events that no human, let alone a child, should have to experience, and yet, thousands of these boys are still alive today and haven't given up on living.

Reading this book helped me to gain perspective on my own trials and tribulations. Though I believe my journey through life has been challenging at times, I am also aware that I have had more support and opportunities in my life than some can even dream. One particular part in this book that was poignant for me was when Deng had been walking for weeks through the desert of Sudan to Ethiopia where he would temporarily be safe. Some of Deng's thoughts during this part of his journey were as follows:

We walked that day, through the most desolate land we'd crossed yet, and the heat grew in surges...The sun was our enemy. But all the while, my own dreams of splendor of Ethiopia increased...In Ethiopia I would have my own bed...In Ethiopia there would be hospitals and markets where all foods were sold. We would be nursed back to our former weights, and wouldn't have to walk each day...Chairs! We would have chairs in Ethiopia. I would sit on a chair, and I would listen to the radio.

The fact that Deng was so excited about a chair blew my mind. I have taken chairs for granted my whole life, and after reading this passage, I wondered what other things do I take for granted that some may consider a luxury? In no way do I want to minimize the pain and suffering that takes place in the United States every day, but reading this book has helped me to become more grateful for the opportunities I have been given.

In addition, this book has helped me to become more compassionate towards strangers. It is likely that some of us have crossed paths with a 'lost boy,' for many of them have sought refuge in the United States. As we pass by these strangers, we are ignorant to the suffering they have endured and the hardships they continue to experience in the United States. We are oblivious to the adversity others have faced or continue to face until we get to know them, and yet, so many people are judged by superficial information such as appearance or inaccurate stereotypes. Although there were moments when I wasn't sure if I could read more about Deng's misfortunes, I would recommend this book to

anyone. It reminded me to keep the obstacles I face in perspective and to be more kindhearted towards those I know little about.