

CROSSING THE RIVER

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BROWN

I WAS A FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD MK LIVING WITH MY PARENTS IN A SMALL TOWN IN NORTHEAST CONGO (LATER ZAIRE) WHEN LIFE TOOK A DRASTIC TURN.

The country had gained independence from Belgium in 1960 and leadership changed frequently during the initial years. By mid-1964 a rebel group called *Simbas* (lions) had formed in opposition to the national government and beatings, killings and imprisonment were the order of the day with foreigners being particularly at risk. It was a tense and terrible time, especially when we learned of the deaths of fellow missionaries and friends. On the very day that our family was scheduled for execution, God intervened and sent mercenary rescuers. Little did I think then that I would spend much of my life back in Africa; for now it was enough just to feel safe.

We returned to Canada where I finished high school and enrolled at Prairie Bible College. Those four years became my season of discipleship, fanning the flame of missions in my heart and broadening my exposure to the work of Prairie grads across Africa. University, marriage to Myra and seminary training followed and by 1979 we were in France

for language study. Ultimately, our missionary career in Africa would span a total of twenty-six years.

In 1991 Myra and I had just returned from a home assignment and were getting settled in the city of Kinshasa. We enrolled our older daughter in first grade at the American school and, as days turned to weeks, life began to take on some routines.

By September, however, the military were restless. Salaries had been delayed, government accounts were empty, and tensions began to rise. Businesses, stores and even private homes became targets for violent looters. One morning a horde of angry men descended on our neighbor's house, shouting and banging as they dismantled the place and carried everything down the street. We were terrified and wondered if our home would be next. As the yelling reached our front gate, I hid our computer and other valuables in the attic. Just in time, one of our quick-thinking African workers stepped in and we were spared from the tide of destruction. Others were not so fortunate.

Word of an evacuation plan came over the radio network and we gathered at a meeting point. As events unfolded throughout the city, we heard via cell phone and shortwave radio that various governments were arranging special flights to pick up their citizens if people could get across the river to Brazzaville. The following day everyone congregated downtown near the Belgian embassy where French soldiers stood guard as we piled on the back of pickup trucks and made a dash for the ferry. Once across the river we waited for a plane chartered by the Canadian government to arrive at the Brazzaville airport and pick us up. It was a relief to return to family in Alberta, but we were exhausted and frazzled, reeling from the loss of our job and our function, our friends and a part of our identity. All of our belongings were later looted, including my 300-book library. Personal possessions were gone. While these losses didn't compare to our lives being saved, they were hard to take and it hurt.

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Things in Kinshasa continued to deteriorate. Much of the infrastructure broke down after we left and food became scarce. Responding to the shortage, *World Relief Canada* called on the five largest church agencies in Kinshasa to each provide someone to help administer the distribution of food through the church networks. I was called in as part of the CMA delegation and arrived back in Zaire four months after our evacuation.

I hadn't been there long when word came that my father had died suddenly of a heart attack. That was an unexpected shock. I would have to leave my assignment early and as we drove through town visiting the church distribution centers, I found myself in tears, hardly able to concentrate on the task at hand. Late that night as my plane lifted off the tarmac, in my state of grief and sadness I whispered, "I'm done with you,

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Zaire.” This was the land of my birth. I had raised my young daughters here and spent three terms of a missionary career in this place. The hardships we had endured passed through my mind and I falsely reasoned that the people of Zaire had turned on us, looting our home and invading our space. It felt intrusive and wrong; we were unappreciated and victimized.

After the evacuation from Kinshasa, a root of bitterness crept into my heart because of my perception of the treatment I received from the Zairian people. My family had been traumatized by a city gone mad, by those who took advantage of a foreigner. If this was the reward for all we had given, I would never come back to these people again. My soul became dark as a curtain and started to close, shutting out those I had once loved. I was a missionary casualty in the making.

Throughout my career I had faced political evacuations, medical emergencies, numerous robberies, and the deaths of missionary colleagues. My fellow workers had gone through similar experiences but I noticed that many of them did not quit or return to their home countries. Intrigued by this, I eventually made it the topic of my doctoral research. As a mission administrator by then, I longed to see attrition rates decrease. What enabled some to stay on the front lines even in the face of spiritual and physical attack while others retreated?

Seeking answers, I interviewed missionaries throughout West Africa, finding myself often on the verge of tears as they told me their stories. Armed robbery, rape, carjacking, home invasions, hostage taking--they had suffered so and yet they still had their hand on the plough. I began to analyze the data and discovered some common factors.

Almost all of those interviewed had a strong personal conviction of God's direction in bringing them to their place of ministry and it gave them a sense of steadfastness and calming comfort in the midst of storm. Others recalled specific times when God had spoken to them through Scripture or a message or premonition that gave them an anchor point when difficult things happened. They knew God as their keeper and understood suffering as a means to help build endurance into their character. Some had a sense of duty that enabled them to put up with hardship or a nature that could bounce back after being stretched. And there were the risk takers: those who ran toward challenge instead of away from it.

On the practical side I found that people moved on more easily when leadership came alongside and help them make good decisions in times of crisis. Finding a new ministry also helped keep them on the field. If the worker doesn't soon find something to do after a short stabilizing period, they will easily default to giving up. People in limbo need purposeful activity to bridge to the next assignment.

Team relationships were important. An individual surrounded by caring colleagues was able to meet trauma from a position of strength. Larger relational networks that provided things like a safe place to stay, communication with family, home and churches, logistics and pastoral care allowed victims to regain equilibrium and bounce back sooner.

Five years later I found myself once again on a ferry crossing the Congo River from Brazzaville to Kinshasa where I was to teach a course at the Boma Seminary. It wasn't until we were in the middle of the river that I suddenly realized the significance of this



Ron Brown: "My calling to Zaire was part of my spiritual journey."

trip. I was actually returning to Zaire after vowing I never would. What had happened to change my mind? Looking back, I realized that I had been the recipient of those gifts of strength that had allowed me to heal and take up the challenge of Africa once again. A strong mission team had been there for us to lean on and new assignments had rejuvenated us and given hope and direction for the future.

The next few minutes turned out to be a very spiritual experience. My mother gave birth to me in this country that she had adopted in answer to God's call. My father was the bearer of good news to the people of Zaire during a lifetime of missionary work. My own calling to return as an adult with my family was part of my spiritual journey and I had seen people respond to the preaching of God's Word.

As the ferry plowed across the river, I began to understand forgiveness. My misplaced anger really had no human target; I had simply fallen victim to ugly circumstances that were common to many people during that 1991 Kinshasa upheaval. In fact, I remembered fondly many of my Zairian friends and realized I looked forward to being with them again. My mind cleared and I sensed a work of God's grace as the root of bitterness dislodged and I began to anticipate my ministry week in Zaire. It turned out to be a wonderfully fulfilling experience. |S|

Excerpted from *Intersections* by Dr. Ronald Brown (PBC'71), missions coach with CMA in Canada and Senior Associate and instructor at the Jaffray Centre for Global Initiatives at Ambrose University. His book is available on www.ronaldbrown.ca