

Update 17- written Nov.6, 2012

May 2009 –an excerpt from my update – “It would take a long time for me to tell you all that happened and all the ways I was blessed at the retreat in Israel. From the first warm greeting hug I got from the staff, to the lemon blossom breeze, colorful gardens, quiet convent, tidy private pathways, fluffy towel on my bed, cheerful bouquet on the desk, sunny window seat,....it was like pulling on PJ’s that are right from the dryer – I just kinda melted in happy. When I returned to Ukraine Dr. Ludmilla looked and me, smiled and said, ‘Something has happened – your real smile has returned.’ She was right, I had been ‘marinated’ in love and it showed. “

I left that retreat with the desire to do the same for my Ukrainian sisters. To some way give my colleagues the gift I had been given; to somehow ‘marinate’ my fellow workers in love as I had been. How that could be, when it could happen and what that looked like....I had no idea.

“Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.”  
Psalm 37: 4

October 2011 – Annette came to visit and we got to talking about our Ukrainian sisters in Christ and their struggles. For the first time I shared the desire God had given me and in Annette’s response I understood I was not alone. We began to pray so as to understand His will in this situation.

October 2012 - Even if I covered pages in trying to explain what happened, how it happened and the feelings I had, I doubt I could do that actual event justice. Like most God stuff, it can’t be fully explained. To begin to ‘know it’ you must experience it. So while some details will get left out, I think I will share & show how I saw God’s hand at work....

After the Texas team left in early September I focused on preparations for the conference. I couldn't really ask others for help because those I would have asked were the same who would be at the conference. It was important to me to not ruin their surprise. So September clipped ahead with full but fun days. Then I got a phone call.

An 86 year old pastor’s wife who lives about 1 hour away had been badly burned...could I help? Turns out the explosion had happened 3 weeks ago. Her husband, who suffers from severe dementia, had turned on the gas without her knowing. She lit a match and the place exploded with a force sufficient to separate the walls from the roof of the veranda. Her face, hands and both legs below the knees were burned. She had spent 2 weeks in the local hospital but then was told to leave. Her pain couldn't be controlled and her screaming was disturbing the other patients. The family had taken her home but obviously could help her even less. Now the extended family was falling apart due to no sleep and round the clock care.

Humanly speaking this wasn't an hour that I could take on one more thing. But, blessedly I wasn't given many minutes to ponder that. I just went and only later understood that I had done the right thing. Because of God's provision for what was needed, in one visit the patient was much more comfortable and work load on the family significantly eased.

Thus, the last 2 weeks of September, between my burn patient & her 4 hour dressing changes, usual clinic days and retreat preparations, I was hardly home. I felt literally fed by manna from God as food was set before me where I happened to be. I was grateful to God for every hour that had been invested in the previous 10 months. Yes, there was still stuff to do but so very aspects had already been thought through. For those details that still needed attention, Annette & her friend came to help and Janice and Dad were put to work as soon as they arrived!

“Christian journalist Greg Levoy has said that Jesus promised those who would follow him only three things: that they would be absurdly happy, entirely fearless, and always in trouble.”

But the intensity and long days took their toll and at 11:30 am on Oct. 2nd, I hit the wall. Here it was, 20 min. before I needed to leave for the airport to pick up the Robinson's, one day before the first of the two retreats were to start and I was completely exhausted. With a friend, we went before God in prayer and I remember saying...“Lord I thank you that I have nothing left to give because now everything will be done in Your strength alone.” And so it was....

Five ladies traveled 25 hours by train to attend others simply walked but everyone had a story about how God got them to the retreat. Annette and I followed a few ladies into their rooms, just to watch their faces light up. On the pillow lay a small bouquet of dried lavender which had been gathered by the youth of the Yalta Church. On the foot of the bed stood a gift bag filled with gifts. Between Christ Community Lutheran Church and Skyline Baptist Church in Oregon, 120 shawls had been hand knit and prayed over. Resting on top of the shawl was a bookmark with our conference theme printed on it a handkerchief and tiny vial of perfume - all blessings from Skyline. A toothbrush, toothpaste, hand lotion, shampoo, conditioner and bar of soap – all from Christ Community – made the bag even more abundant. Still more gifts came from a friend of Annette's who had held a women's conference this spring in Ohio. She had asked if they could take part and they blessed their sisters in Ukraine with chap stick, pens, note pads and lots of door prizes. Each lady also received a CD with familiar hymns to violin music by Jamie Jorge a talented Christian from Cuba. The surprised smiles showed that the Body of Christ had blessed from the very first moment!

As I mentioned in my previous update, our goal was to invest spiritually, physically and emotionally in each of these women who are in active in ministry. Spiritually their buckets were filled with lots of singing, times of prayer, teaching from a local pastor and talks from our 4 American guests. Physically they had a gentle schedule and opportunities to receive a medical consultation, massage and simply relax. Emotionally we surrounded them with music, flowers, gifts, pretty decorations, laughter and love!

Thoughts and impressions from our American speakers...

Pastor David Robinson from Cannon Beach Community Church in Cannon Beach, Oregon was quickly dubbed the 'Joyful Jew'. Pastor David stepped into the shoes of the 'Son of Encouragement' himself and reminded us how very important it is to be a 'Barnabas' in the lives of others. Pastor David, himself a musician, wrote - "One of the lovely surprises of the two conferences held in October at the Efas Center near Feodosia was the worship in song. I will find it difficult to describe in words the beauty and uplifting power of women singing praises to God at these conferences. The worship was led by two women: Annette Dryden is a very accomplished pianist/vocalist, CMF missionary (along with her husband David) from Ohio working among the muslim people in the region; Annette was also one of the conference organizers along with June. The other worship leader, Inna, one of our interpreters, is a mom and Ukrainian church-planter (along with her husband Pastor Sergei our other interpreter); Inna is a guitarist gifted with a beautiful voice and a tender heart toward the Lord, helping us all draw nearer through worship in song. I was deeply moved to hear the women gathered from many places around Ukraine, united in voice and spirit in singing "Slava Bogo" praises to our Lord, including songs we were familiar with but sung in the local Russian language, as well as local songs in Russian and Ukrainian. On this earth, we don't get to hear the angels sing very often. This experience among our sisters in Christ in Ukraine came close!"

Trina Robinson – David's wife and RN added to the retreat with 2 talks. She shared how men and women deal with stress differently. Then she had the women break up in to groups and talk about ways they dealt with stress. Turns out chocolate and a good girl friend help in this land too! Later Trina reminded us of God's love for each of us – how special we are in His eyes. In this culture of criticism she touched some hurting hearts. When I asked Trina what had been an unexpected joy she shared, "...a favorite memory took place after lunch, when I had finished my talk on the Love of God. One of the women, made the comment to me saying that 'we thought the women living in America were so different.' After hearing my valleys and places God took care of me and loved me, she said something like, 'We are just the same! We have the same struggles with family and life and in-laws!' It was a moment of total recognition of our sisterhood in the kingdom of God. I had the same recognition as we sang and worshiped together, these are my dear sisters in Christ."

Janice Lemke - a CMF missionary to Ukraine for 15 years and a lot of the ladies were thrilled to see that she would be sharing. Her history in this land gave her authority to discuss some delicate subjects. In this quick to judge and slow to listen culture, she addressed the value in and gift we can give another in asking open ended questions. Janice also knows that in Ukraine, 'difficult times' are quickly assumed to be punishment for sin. She chose to be transparent in her own faith walk as she talked about 3 valleys that we all encounter and how God uses these times to grow & equip us and bless others through us.

Janice shared, "It has been a big gift to be able to return to Ukraine and help with a couple women's conferences. The two women's conferences averaged about 50 women each – with most from around Crimea, but some came from other parts of Ukraine. Co-workers in Ukraine,

June and Annette, organized the conferences to provide encouragement for women in ministry. Attendees' enthusiastic and appreciative feedback showed it met a need.

I am grateful I could participate. Often, when church planters and pastors talk about "their" ministry in various villages – these women carry much of the load. While men often attend pastor's conferences and such, little is available for women. I saw women I knew and loved, and I didn't need to travel all over to visit them. They serve in hard places and difficult circumstances and touch lives I cannot. The women had many good things to say about all of the speakers, as well as the worship, food, accommodations, gift bags, craft, decorations, and other details. We cried, laughed and worshiped together. "

"When we give casually, we receive casual joy. When we give effortfully, thoughtfully, creatively, we get immense joy."

Howard Johnson – retired surgeon and locally known as 'Kristina's Papa' shared - "Two years ago my granddaughter Linsey came to Ukraine to serve in summer Bible camps for children. When she returned home I questioned her about her trip and when I pressed for details about what she did, she grinned and said, 'Grandpa our job was just to love on them'!

A couple weeks ago as I awaited the ladies arrival for the first conference I was again worrying about the details of what I was to do and then the thought came to me: "Howard your job is just to love on them". Well through both conferences that is what I did and what a joy! It was great to be able to bless and encourage pastor's wives, Sunday school teachers, church accountants, church guards, youth group workers, choir, Child Evangelism Fellowship workers, those involved in sharing the Gospel through medical care, missionaries and many women without a specific named ministry but are the ones their pastors rely upon to "get things done."

During my talk, I was able to share some of what God has taught me on medical missions around the world. I even surprised them by telling them what God has taught me in Ukraine - SLAVA BOGO! This is how you say "Praise God!" in Russian. I also shared my own life's story of how a lady, just like one of them, had held out her hand to me and invited me into church when I was 12 years old. I was a poor badly dressed boy out picking up pop & beer bottles on a Sunday morning when she held out her hand to me and said, "Come in and be my guest". That simple invitation led to God entering my life and leading me through the "impossible journey" of college & medical school. Now 62 yrs. later, with God still blessing me with good health, He sent me to love on them by providing medical consultations and care half way across this world. I also challenged them to extend their hand to some dirty poorly dressed 12 year old boy in their village and invite him into their next summer's Bible camp. Who knows - perhaps that boy may go on to help many others in Christ's name.

It is more blessed to give than to receive and even though I gave them all I had, I received much much more in return. These ladies loved on me by making me feel useful again. When you are 74, feel at the end of your career and realize you have forgotten more than you have learned, it is pure joy to see patients and have an accurate diagnosis pop back into your head. A torn medial meniscus, torn plantaris tendon, herniated lumbar disc, sterile abscess of buttock, etc,

etc. Being able to give an accurate diagnosis and then being able to counsel them on whether or not to have surgery or who to seek further help from made me suddenly feel useful again. These ladies really appreciated it as most here do not trust their doctors and have been given badly conflicting information & advice. They said it with their hugs and sometimes even with their tears. In summary, I have really been loved on these past weeks.”

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s hunger meet.”

My deep gladness started a year ago when the desire God had placed in my heart began to take form. For the past 12 months I’ve poured prayer, time and effort into the retreat preparations and have thoroughly enjoyed it. For me the biggest highlight was experiencing those paradoxes that only make sense in God - ‘really hard’ & ‘great joy’; a following leader and being absolutely empty yet having sufficient for the moment. Other highlights included hearing the God stories of how the women got to the retreat; reading the questionnaires and understanding that my sisters had left the retreats with their buckets full of new knowledge, renewed strength and new friendships. Just seeing their eyes dance – their grateful joy made all the effort worth it.

The success of the retreats rested in that it was God's idea, done in His timing and in His way. The fact was that I was surrounded and supported by a fantastic team made all the difference as well. From your generous giving & your prayers to housekeeping, registration, photography, administration, kitchen, each speaker and Annette....everyone on the team chose to give above and beyond. I was (and am) very grateful! Thank you!!

Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” It blows my brain to think...God planned for us to get to do this. Wow! Who knew??!! This was one of the fun-est God jobs I've gotten to be a part of!! If made to sum it all up in one word, I would choose – privilege. Thank you Lord for the pure privilege to serve You and my sisters in Christ in this way!

June

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are by John Ortberg from his book-  
‘When The Game Is Over It All Goes Back In The Box’