

Letter to Friends

Robert L. Payton

November 4, 1982

We received word yesterday that our son Joe died November 2 in Kigali, Rwanda.

He had called on Sunday, October 24 to tell us that a serious refugee problem had developed recently in the northern part of the country. He and his wife, Heidi, had spent three days in the refugee camp, helping to organize distribution of emergency food supplies, clothing, blankets, and tents. It is the rainy season in Rwanda, and in the mountains it is cold and the conditions for the refugees are very severe.

Both Joe and Heidi caught heavy colds, and Joe's condition was aggravated by the asthma that has troubled him for many years. On Monday or Tuesday of this week Joe was stricken with acute appendicitis. As we understand it, the surgery proceeded well enough but complications arose and Joe's lungs failed him and he died.

When Joe and Heidi called October 24 to tell us about the new refugee situation they were confronting, they also told us that they were expecting a baby in May.

Heidi is scheduled to leave Kigali for Brussels on Friday. Her parents and her sister, who are in England now, will meet her in Brussels and accompany her here. Joe and Heidi met in Djibouti and came home to be married at Garden City Community Church. It is there that a memorial service will be held for Joe early next week.

Joe's life in Africa began in 1967 when at 17 he lived and worked at a farm school in southern Cameroon with an American Presbyterian missionary family. After a year in Spain where he finished high school, he

returned to Cameroon and worked as a volunteer with a small pox vaccination team in north Cameroon.

When we returned from Cameroon in 1969, Joe became a student at Knox College. After his first year he applied to go to France as a year-abroad student in Besancon in eastern France. It was at the end of that year that a former Catholic missionary friend from Cameroon won for him a volunteer assignment with Catholic Relief Service in Burundi. Joe worked with a small market cooperative in the remote mountains of Burundi, where he lived with three Italian priests at a mission that boasted a school and a dispensary as well as chickens and rabbits and a small goat or two that Joe looked after.

In January of 1972 Joe's brother Matthew was reacting well to the chemotherapy for the Hodgkin's disease that took his life the following year. Matthew and I traveled to Burundi and spent two weeks with Joe, including a brief stay in Kampala, Uganda where Idi Amin had just come to power. On the automobile trip from Bujumbura to Kampala we passed through a village named Gitarama. A large construction truck smashed into our car and we narrowly escaped death and serious injury. In the confusion that followed, with policemen and other officials and a thousand excited spectators it was Joe, with his command of French and working knowledge of Kirundi and Swahili who pulled us through.

A few months later the terrible tribal war broke out in Burundi, the first attacks taking place at a military post near the Catholic seminary where Joe was visiting. He witnessed some of the atrocities that were reported, and saw some of the truckloads of dead that were a fraction of the thousands of victims of that brief and bloody tribal conflict.

Joe could not return to Mabayi, the village in the mountains, and in June of 1972 returned home. He was the first American civilian to return to the

U.S. from Burundi and the press was eager to talk to him. One morning we watched him in a seven-minute interview on the Today Show, in which his interviewer, Frank McGee, pressed him to relate details of the massacres and Joe instead doggedly insisted on talking about the need for help for the survivors and refugees.

Joe spent a restless summer as a student at C.W. Post College, then returned to Africa, again as a volunteer with Catholic Relief Service. He went to a tiny village named Uvira, south of Bukavu (which shows on some maps) in eastern Zaire. There he worked with refugees who had fled from Burundi and had his first experience with emergency relief.

That was a difficult assignment. Joe was disheartened by the insensitivity of the Zaire bureaucracy and the brutality of its police, and by the wrangling among the relief organizations. He came home in 1973 and was with us in May when his brother died.

He became a student at Empire State College, the external degree program at the State university, and pursued a degree in African studies. On the side he studied classical Greek at Hofstra. After completing his degree he returned to work for Catholic Relief Service, this time as a regular employee, and went to Senegal in West Africa. He worked in drought relief there, on village well and irrigation projects. He was captivated by Senegal, and immersed himself in the study of Wolof and Fulani and in the study of the Islamic brotherhoods. Polly and David (our youngest son) and I visited Joe in 1976, and spent three weeks with him, traveling to remote villages, watching him at work. At 6'3" he usually towered over even the tall Senegalese, and it was a particularly touching experience to see the respect and affection that he felt for them and they for him.

In 1978 Joe was transferred to Cameroon, where the odyssey had begun. He worked in the north this time, with a nutrition program among the

primitive and isolated people of the Mandara mountains. President Ahidjo of Cameroon celebrated the 20th anniversary of his accession to power in 1978, and invited me to attend the ceremonies at the University of Yaounde. Joe was there at the time and we had a week together. It was the third time we were able to visit him where he was working in Africa.

From Cameroon Joe was sent to Djibouti, a tiny new republic in the horn of Africa between Ethiopia and Somalia. Joe's assignment was to organize the food relief program for the refugees of the Ethiopia-Somalia war, refugees ethnically related to the Afars and Issas of Djibouti. It was a difficult assignment, aggravated by bureaucratic tensions with U.S.-AID. But it was in Djibouti that Joe met Heidi Peacock of Oxford, England. When Joe decided to leave Djibouti and Catholic Relief Service to come home to return to school, Heidi came with him. They were married in Garden City on June 24, 1980.

His ambition to pursue graduate work in disciplines that would help him to return to his work in Africa was a frustrating experience. The science requirements for graduate study meant making up undergraduate work he had missed, and the master's degree faded into the future. Twice he had tried, unsuccessfully, to develop a program of independent study at Hofstra, but the mix of formal academic study with relief and development activity in places like Senegal and Cameroon simply proved unworkable. His educational objective was simple enough: he wanted to learn about soils and water and trees because he was convinced that the reforestation of sub-Saharan Africa was essential if an end was to be found to the cycle of drought and famine there.

Joe returned to Catholic Relief Service, and he and Heidi were assigned to Benin (the former Dahomey) on the coast of West Africa. This small country, burdened for a decade with an oppressive Marxist government, confronted Joe with endless bureaucratic snarls and low-grade corruption,

but he persisted. He felt the work had improved significantly by the time he was called to Rwanda in September of this year.

Rwanda, ethnically linked to Burundi, a former Belgian colony, is mountainous and beautiful, poor, overpopulated, and cultivated over every square inch. The government is responsible, the C.R.S. program diversified and twice the scale of that in Benin. The situation was promising and Joe looked forward to the new assignment. Joe threw himself into the work with his usual intensity, and things started out well. Joe had already started to travel to get into the field where he most enjoyed his work. Then the refugees began to pour in from Uganda, at a rate of 2,000 a day, and he set everything else aside and began organizing the emergency relief effort with C.R.S. and the Red Cross.

As this is written, Heidi is waiting in Kigali for the flight to Brussels. She will be accompanied by a new friend, a woman who is in the administrative office at the U.S. embassy there. We are told that Heidi is bearing up well.

Joe's life was much more than this brief outline suggests. Struggling with Latin in ninth grade, he was told he had "no aptitude for languages." Languages became his love. Kirundi, Swahili, Lingala, Wolof, Fulani, Somali, and some others; his first request on learning of his new assignment were tapes that would help him with Kiruanda (or whatever it is). He was never long enough in one place to master any of them, but he worked hard to learn enough to be able to work with the people in their own language.

He was a Shakespeare buff. At 15 we had sent him to England on a bicycle tour with seven other boys of the same age, and the trip made an indelible mark on him. He read and memorized the plays, and studied the actors who recorded them. Without any of the incentives of courses and

grades he found Shakespeare sustaining as well as inspiring. He also found his way into Greek and studied it with a professor at Hofstra whom he admired. In Africa, he used his leisure to read Shakespeare and Homer.

Joe was a bibliomaniac, like his father, and acquired a library of African materials and Shakespearean and classical studies. His spare funds were always spent on books. Whenever he came home, as he did for about a month every year, the scene as his departure neared was always the same: stacks of books all over the floor of his room. Which to take; which to leave behind.

Nothing else material interested him very much. He dressed simply - sweaters and t-shirts and jeans, and a grudging coat and tie occasionally out of deference to his parents. He lived in modern cities like Dakar and Yaounde, but he lived also in small and remote villages, in small huts and in houses without plumbing, and he traveled endless thousands of miles in Land Rovers over roads we would not consider passable. He ate food of every variety and description, and his stomach endured all the illnesses serious travelers know. He relieved his asthma with medications made necessary by the dust or the altitude or by allergies. But he never complained about such things -only about bureaucracy and paperwork.

Until he married he wrote regularly, and well. During the past years Heidi became the principal correspondent, and a faithful one. We have hundreds of letters from all those remote places, and thousands of photographs of projects and people and animals and trees.

We have many photographs of Matthew, too, of course, and photographs of Matt and Joe in Cameroon and Burundi and of Joe and David in Senegal. We have one special photograph of Joe and Matt in West Cameroon; they are shown standing together in the doorway of the Magnificent Brothers Bookshop.

It was Matthew's hope to follow Joe to Africa. On his 18th birthday, five days before he died, he told us his ambition. He was sitting up, cross-legged in bed, his elbows resting on his knees. The cancer was in his lungs, and it was very difficult for him to breathe. He spoke in a whisper, with pauses between phrases, and he told us that he wanted to become a medical missionary and go to Africa -- "if I ever get out of this darned hospital."

The heartbreak of Matthew's illness and death would have been too much to bear had Matthew not been so strong, and had Joe not been with us. He comforted David, supported him, and quietly led all of us through that troubled time.

But when it was time for him to go back to Africa he was ready, and eager to get started. Every time he came home was a moment of inexpressible joy and wonder at the beauty of his smile and the strength of his embrace. Every parting was an act of discipline for all of us. He was always happy to be home; he was always ready to return to his Africans.

There is some risk in the sort of work Joe did. In his case it was increased by his asthmatic condition, which flared up occasionally in those circumstances. He accepted those risks, and so did we. He accepted the years of separation, and so did we. He accepted the hard life, and we made no effort to dissuade him from it.

For nine years the most difficult question I have had to answer is the casual question from a new acquaintance: How many children do you have? After Matthew's death I found it difficult to say "two," because that seemed to deny that he had lived. I don't know what I will do now, because the loss of two sons in the prime of life will seem excessive in some way. And that simple and innocent question will touch on the deepest and richest -mystery of our lives, the love we have for our

children. The love we have, not had, for Matt and Joe are as much a part of us as when they were living. The bond in which we unknowingly invested so much love is not broken by death.

Polly and I have learned some things about the meaning of life and the meaning of love and the meaning of family, and if we could somehow share them we would. We have been blessed by friends and parents and brothers and sisters and children in ways that make us feel very specially privileged. You can sense perhaps how intensely proud we are that Joseph Keith Payton was our son, and that Matthew and David were his brothers. Joe lived a full and honorable life, and died while passionately engaged in his honorable work.

He leaves his parents, his brother, his wife, and their child. God is great, and merciful, and life goes on.