

Reading: *A Single Lucid Moment*

As the plane buzzed back over the mountains, it was now just us and the villagers of Maimafu. My wife, Kerry, and I were assigned to this village of 800 people in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. It looked as if we were in for a true Indiana Jones adventure!

The mountains were dramatic and thick with rain forest. No roads had ever scarred them. We had loaded a four-seater plane with cargo (we would fly out every three months to re-supply) and flew for 30 bumpy minutes southwest to the mountain ridges. From the plane, the village looked very much like a shoebox panorama from a grade-school science project.

My wife and I were the first Peace Corps Volunteers ever in Maimafu. We had been greeted by a large group of beautiful people, all wearing gorgeous, curious smiles. Giggling, naked children hid behind trees during the trek down the mountain to our new home, and a lively entourage followed using their heads to carry our boxed supplies through the muddy trails. It was quickly becoming clear that we had just been adopted by a very large and unique family.

The basic culture of subsistence living had not been replaced; there were no cars, electricity, or telephones—just grass huts, large gardens, and a whole lot of rain forest. The women spent the day in the gardens planting, weeding, and harvesting. The men grew coffee, from which they generated their sole income of about \$200 a year. The village had lived in harmony with its natural surroundings for millennia.

The villagers had built us a beautiful bamboo-thatched hut on short stilts. Planted behind the house was a three-acre garden, carefully tended and ready to harvest. Its bounty included corn, greens, tomatoes, beans, peanuts, onions, potatoes, and pineapples. To top it all off, the path to our new home was sprinkled with flower petals the day we arrived.

It quickly became clear that Maimafu was a preserved example of communal living. Men rallied to the building of a new home, the elderly worked and lived with their families, and mothers breast-fed their neighbors' children. In fact, the one parentless, Down's syndrome man in our village was fed, housed, and clothed by everyone; he would spend a few days with one family before happily wandering in to work or play with the next.

It was when we had settled in that it happened. We were sitting in a circle on the ground with a large group of villagers to "*tok stori*," Papua New Guinea's favorite pastime of "telling stories." I had passed around photos I had snapped back home in Chicago. A villager was staring intently at one of the photos. He had spotted two homeless men on a Michigan Avenue sidewalk with crude signs propped between their legs.

"*Tupela man wokem wanem?*" he asked. (What are these two men doing?)

I attempted to explain the concept of homelessness to the group, and the desire of these two men to get some food. Crowding around the photograph for a good stare, the villagers could not comprehend how the men became homeless, or why the passersby in the photo were so indifferent. They bombarded me with questions and I did my best to make sense of the two ragged beggars in the midst of such glittering skyscrapers. I read from their questions and solemn mood

that they had made an important observation—these two men must lack not only food and shelter but also a general sense of affection and purpose in their community.

Early the next morning, we were startled to hear a sharp rap at the door. Opening it, I was greeted by Moia, Kabarae, Kavalo, and Lemek. Kerry and I went out into the bright, beautiful day and sat with them in a circle. Each man gave us a pineapple. Moia spoke: “After you left last night, all of us men on the village council had a very big meeting. For a long, long time we discussed the two men in your picture. We have reached a conclusion and have a proposal for you.”

“What could this possibly be?” we wondered.

“Please contact those two men as well as your government. Ask the government if they will fly those two men to Maimafu, just like they did for you. We have marked two spots of land where we will build houses for those two men, just like we built for you. Our men will build the houses and the women will plant the gardens to feed them.”

They were offering to do what? I was stunned and overwhelmed. Their offer was bold and genuine. It was innocent and naive. It was beautiful. And, like the twist of a kaleidoscope, my worldview had completely changed.

What does one say to such an offer? We stammered for a response and stumbled over explanations of difficult logistics, scarce money, and government bureaucracies. But the councilmen would not accept no for an answer. In their simple lives, it was impossible to comprehend that humanity was host to such an injustice. They wanted action.

The villagers were serious. They were offering everything they had. We reluctantly matched their enthusiasm with a few letters to America and long conversations with the village council. We toured the sites where the homes were to be built. We listened to the women discuss the types of gardens they would plant, which would even include coffee trees to generate a small income. And we answered numerous questions over time from villagers amazed with this foreign thing called homelessness. The plan could not work, we told them. Their hearts sank, and I could see in their eyes that this dream would not die easily.

“*Sori tru, sori tru we no inap wokem dospela samting,*” they told us (We are sorry this can’t happen). They clicked their tongues and shook their heads in disappointment.

Initially inspired by the episode, I began mulling questions over and over in my mind. Fetching water in the ink-black night and looking up the hill at our small hut, light from the lantern inside splitting the bamboo-thatched walls, I would think of the spiritual wealth of Maimafu and the material wealth of America: Can a community reach a balance of material wealth and spiritual wealth? Why do these two societies exhibit so much of one and not much of the other? Do those two ends interfere with each other? How much spiritual wealth can we have? How much material wealth do we need? How has the world evolved so that some people own mansions and others lack shoes? How many people have love in their souls but diseased water in their drinking cups?

The villagers worked with us on newer projects. And, I discovered, like many Peace Corps Volunteers before me, that the world’s purest form of brotherhood can often be found in the smallest of villages.