



WHAT I LEARNED WHILE READING MY DAUGHTER'S E-MAIL

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Sure I'm a curious mom, but before you chastise me for snooping in my child's e-mail, this one was legit. When our 23-year-old daughter, Heidi, joined the Peace Corps she gave me her Hotmail password and asked me to periodically check her e-mail since she didn't have electricity in her African village, much less e-mail access.

At first I thought this would be fun, sort of a vicarious reliving of my young adult days by listening in to the conversations of her friends. Well, it has been fun, but it's gone much deeper than that. Ironically, the thing that has been both most amusing and also thought provoking has been the junk mail. You know the routine – “Get rich quick, no selling!!” or “Amy is ready for your xxx”. Hotmail abounds with these messages. That's what the delete key is for.

But the more I became familiar with Heidi's new lifestyle in rural Mali, the more I read the e-mail titles with a different lens. I started to realize how really different her “needs” were than most of the people I rub shoulders with. Here's a sample of titles from a recent e-mail batch with my reflections in italics:

- “Free satellite system and free installation” *Now what good will that do her if she doesn't have a T.V. or an outlet to plug it into?*
- “Would you like to eliminate your financial debt?” *She's making less per hour in the Peace Corps than any previous job, but somehow it's plenty since a Malian farming economy doesn't need much cash. Besides, the attitude seems to be if my neighbor needs something that I have, it's expected that I will share it.*
- “5.5 cents Long Distance” *Doesn't do much good if you don't have a phone.*
- “Cheapest auto prices” *No one owns a car in her village. It's a real event when a vehicle comes to town. Her transportation? – Feet and a mountain bike.*
- “If you ever consider switching from cable...” *See: no TV*
- “Register for a free vacation” *She already has a virtual free two year “vacation” in sunny, hot, and sandy Mali.*
- “Be Powerful beyond measure with a 5 figure income!” *Now real power is being able to pull 10 buckets of water from a well and carry it on your head to water a garden. Or being able to find your way around a dark village on a moonless night.*
- “Something to warm you up, xxx” *I think 130°F during hot season will do just fine, thank you.*
- “Xmas at Angie's gift shop” *Mali is 90% Muslim. Maybe if it said, “Eid-ul-Fitr at Angie's gift shop.”*
- “Make your internet connection faster” *Two weeks for snail mail is faster than her periodic visits to the capital city where she can actually get on the internet.*

Granted, the situation our daughter is in is extreme, and I'm not suggesting we all take up residence in a developing country in order to avoid silly e-mail, but it does bring perspective to what I think I need and how fast I need to live life. Have we in the “developed” world created our own stress in the name of progress?

Yes, life in Mali is hard. I'm not ready to sign up for it. But I have learned through juxtaposing these e-mails next to the reality of another person's life that some of the things I take for granted or worry about evaporate as quickly as water in the desert when looked at through the eyes of my brothers and sisters (or daughter) in other parts of the world. Yes, we Americans have legitimate concerns. A family member is sick, a job lost, a marriage troubled, an unexpected pregnancy, and so forth. These things weigh us down. We're human! But then there are the things we really shouldn't waste our energy worrying about – "Xmas at Angie's gift shop" Really!

You want to know what the people in Mali worry about? Rain! Will it come when they need it? E-mail can't bring rain, but it can bring perspective. What do I really *need* to be happy? As Christians, the only thing we need to worry about is, "Have we been in touch with God and cared for our neighbor?" And we all know who our neighbor is – but he or she may not do e-mail.