

FESTON'S SANDALS

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After eight days in Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi meeting with representatives from the United States Embassy, USAID and the Ministry of Education, I was eager to travel to the location where I would be living for the next year or two. It would be there near Nguludi, which is not far from Blantyre, Malawi's largest city that I would be taking up my 'more permanent' residence while assisting in the training of teachers at MONTFORT TEACHER TRAINING COLLEGE.



Montfort Teacher Training College
Nguludi, Malawi
AFRICA

My new home, located near the center of the small campus, is half way up the rolling hill on which most of the college is situated. In fact, the entire Blantyre region is one series of rolling foot hills, small mountains, and proportional valleys. Particularly at dawn and dusk, the effect of the sun's acutely angled rays of light accents the pristine beauty found throughout this part of Malawi, self-proclaimed as *the warm heart of Africa*.

The people here are as pleasing as the undulation of the hills. Their hard work and devotion to God along with their patience in tribulation and steadfastness in prayer is truly incredible. And tribulations they have had their share.

They are on the tale-end of the worst cholera outbreak in ten years and are in the middle of the worst famine in fifty. Remarkably, having even a very little money or income seems to ward off this dual calamity and so at least for now, my colleagues at the college and I seem relatively safe from it.

This fact however, underscores the genuineness of the pleas for work by those who so far have made a steady stream to my door. With 80% plus unemployed and an average income of only \$180 (US) per year, the Malawian seeks work for money to exchange for nothing more than the commodity of survival.

Consequently, I have been easily persuaded to hire what little help around my meager (*less than* 700 square feet) home that I actually can use and contrived to create additional work to be done as needed. For pay, I attempt only to balance my immediate sense of compassion with the sensibility driven by the discrete limit imposed by the availability of discretionary dollars and the concept of sustainable practice that has been driven home over the past two years by experts in the field of international ‘development’. Still, I go to my bed nightly wondering and praying for the comprehension and insight to find still other ways to help.

Thus, I now find myself with a growing number of full and part-time ‘employees’ in addition to a full-time live-in student. One of the first of these to be hired was Feston, my daytime ‘watchman’. Generally, Feston’s English falls just a tad shy of being adequate for the purposes of communication, but on a recent Friday, he approached me early in the day pointing to his shoe while exclaiming, “*Sandal . . . broke. Sandal . . . no good.*”

Indeed, the sandal being produced in evidence had a severed strap and a crevice running across the bottom sole suggesting that had the strap lasted even another day, the sandals very well would have split right into two.

“*Only shoes. Broke. No money. Sandals broke . . . no good.*”

Even I could figure this out. I knew full well that Feston had just endured nearly two years of unemployment and was trying to keep his wife and three young children fed. I also knew it would be awhile before discretionary purchases like sandals could even be considered by him.

Somehow he had it in his mind that perhaps I might help. I was going to town that day to pick up some educational supplies that *World Literacy Initiative* had sent me but which were stranded at Blantyre’s Chileka International Airport awaiting for someone (me) to fetch them. As I was doing time and money calculations, Feston must have seen he’d gotten through to me for while still holding the broken sandals up to me he smiled expectantly. I smiled back nodding and asked, “*What size?*”

Feston realizing there was hope after all smiled more broadly and said, “*Seven. Feston size seven.*”

This of course absolutely sealed my duty and obligation to him and as much promised something on the order of a size seven solution to Feston’s size seven problem. Just about then, a car from the college pulled up at the road about ten meters or so from the house and the driver, a veteran lecturer at the School for the Deaf, Mr. Laston Mkhaya (pronounced “M – k – eye –

ya” more or less all at once) waved me on. I waived to the others of my new employees standing about and yelled “*Tsalani bwino!*” (or, stay well, goodbye in Chichewa).

Feston’s eager eyes grabbed at my gaze and looked on – but before he could say it, I said once more, “*I know . . . size seven . . .*” Feston’s face grinned back.

Mkhaya and I began exchanging greetings and then followed this with our lists of things we hoped to accomplish with this allocation of petrol. Each trip to town minimally ran 40 plus roundtrip kilometers but this one with the airport being on the far side of Blantyre would easily hit 60 k or the equivalent of about 38 miles – surely 8 litres or more of petrol given the driving conditions which here are hilly and rugged requiring lower gears most of the time and, just as last year in Zimbabwe, with a full compliment of passengers.

And so without pausing in his description of the things we could do this day, he would pause and pick up employees and students of the college or people known to him through his church where he is an elder waiving them aboard with his brown hand and saying in his deep baritone voice, “*Come on . . . Noooo problem . . .*” Then he would smile and nod, “*Noooo problem.*”

We went to the bank, and the office supply, and then two or three other places for the college before we finally started for the airport. Now, sans all of our riders, it was just Mkhaya and I.

When we got to Blantyre’s international airport it was just a few minutes past one o’clock. Despite having already seen the international airport at Lilongwe which should have fully prepared me, I couldn’t help but be surprised at its small size, the general absence of people, and its mostly unremarkable features.

As I got out of the car after Mkhaya pulled to a stop, he looked hesitantly at me and then I beckoned him, “*Please come, Mkhaya, I’m sure I will need your help.*”



Chileka International Airport
Blantyre, Malawi
AFRICA

I had to laugh silently when this became immediately apparent as it was nearly all Mkhaya could do as my indigenous companion to manage our situation even with his fluency with respect to speech and culture. We went

to one place only to be directed to another but only after a two to three minute description of our problem (*me*) and what we needed to do concerning it (*retrieve the package*).

At perhaps the third such encounter, at something that looked and felt like an open warehouse, we met a young fellow in his late 20's named, Joseph. It seemed like we were finally getting somewhere. Mkhaya elaborated at length the importance of the college's visiting lecturer (*me again*) and the value the package we were retrieving was to Malawi and all 12 million of her citizens.

Finally, Joseph jumped in to action. He walked back to his office and began pulling out forms and spreading them on his desk and then like a scene from out of the past pulled one sheet of used carbon paper after another from one drawer and placing them 'just so' behind each piece of paper forming duplicate arrangements for all but one of the papers. *It* was to be in triplicate!

Then with pen in hand, Joseph set about in earnest asking Mkhaya many questions. How Mkhaya suddenly possessed knowledge of this package sent from the United States was beyond me but always having respected the work of authors of good fiction, I let him wax eloquent unabated by 'the facts'. Mkhaya was clearly making progress and it was still just after 2 o'clock! Joseph diligently recorded every word while I stood dumb-founded by the entire affair only briefly aware at the time of the growing irony that just an hour before Mkhaya had wondered whether his service might be of any value or not.

Next, Joseph moved on to the other two forms that sat before him. For twenty minutes he then wrote out numbers and performed calculations, all done by long-hand, long-multiplication and long-division. Where these numbers were coming from was anyone's guess, but now it was apparently Joseph's time to wax eloquent.

Finally, Joseph rested his pen and looked up smiling first at one and then the other of us. He thinks he has it accomplished I thought. And sure enough, he proudly stood up and pointed at the results of his recordings and calculations and all the forms and various copies that lay still on the desk and walked back and forth behind his desk gesticulating exuberantly while singing his own praises.

Whatever else it might be, we were clearly to appreciate the masterpiece of craftsmanship, skill and insight that we had just witnessed. Mkhaya and I raved to one another about how wonderful in fact the recordings and

calculations were. Finally, Mkhaya told me that at this time it would be most proper if the gratitude we were so busy expressing might be expressed in still another way.

“*How much?*”, I asked.

“*Three hundred.*” He said, clearly having already accomplished the appraisal of Joseph’s work and our situation before my question, “*Three hundred kwacha.*”

So I found the money (nearly \$4 [U.S.]) in my fanny-pack and handed it over. Joseph seemed pleased so it must have been a circumspect and wise appraisal after all. Joseph grabbed up all of the papers and re-sorted them in to piles adjusting and stapling until all of the packets were ready. Still, Joseph was so clearly proud of what must have been to him at least two full days of laborious form preparation for any *other* mortal that *he* had managed on our behalf in just less than 50 minutes. Finally, his own appraisal of his completed work finished, he smiled and looked up and said, “*We go.*”

So, we went following Joseph with our completed forms and the established value of what I learned later was the “assessment” to another building, one of those we had visited previously. There, Joseph handed over the paperwork to the man behind three layers of Plexiglas and turned to smile once more before leaving us to sit in the good hands of his worthy colleague.

Once Joseph left, we were told to sit and wait, which we proceeded to do. In fact, we sat and waited for some time. After nearly three hours of waiting, even Mkhaya - who possessed the quintessential ‘patience of Job’ - finally expressed concern to the man behind the counter. Its being in Chichewa I am uncertain what exactly transpired but it was something to the effect that by even Malawian standards, our wait had surely been enough.

I was about ready to suggest that we return on another day when suddenly our package appeared, somehow freed from its bureaucratic log-jam by force or forces unknown. Now all that remained was for me to pay the ‘assessment’. This, it turned out, was to be another three hundred kwacha. Whether the length of Joseph’s calculations owed more to figuring his own cash reward or the size of the assessment remains shrouded in mystery even unto this day.

By the time we were back in the college’s vehicle and under way again, it was well after five o’clock and the sun was already down behind one of the western mountain peaks. Though the sky was still faintly lit, Blantyre’s

lights were already coming on. I finally chanced to breach the question I had had since departing for town that day, “*Will we have time to get Feston’s sandals?*”, I asked.

Mkhaya, so quick to give reassurances and his characteristic ‘No problem’ response normally, instead moved his head side to side and said glumly, “*I don’t think so. Shops are closed.*” Then, he added more brightly, “*We will get them next week sometime when we come to town again. Nooo problem.*” Smiling now once again he repeated, “*Noooooo problem.*”

My spirits sunk as I contemplated Feston hobbling around on his only pair of sandals ‘now broke’ and beyond repair for three or more days. Nearly as bad, I also saw the hope that he might have had in me suddenly slipping down the drain of daily disappointments as just one more instance of so many let-downs experienced in the poverty of Malawian life. I really did not want to let him down, most particularly on this, the first occasion on which he was to rely on me.

At just a few minutes before 6, Mkhaya was now (as a good Seventh Day Adventist), clearly going in to ‘overtime’ as being that it was Friday, the Sabbath had begun at sunset. He pulled the Mitsubishi into one of our final stops, the *ShopRite* plaza for me to pick up a few quick items from the grocery to take home for the weekend. *ShopRite* was one of the few stores in town to stay open this late I was told.

I promised him I would be just a few minutes and popped on out of the car in a flurry. As I walked briskly towards the grocery, I suddenly saw a clothing store a few doors down from the grocery that still had its doors opened and its lights on. Now, in a mad rush to beat the inevitable closing of these doors as it was clearly opened ‘late’ and could close any instant, I rushed towards it praying that I might find men’s sandals in a style somewhat like I had seen that morning.



As we finally made our way back out to the college (another 20 kilometer drive), I couldn’t help but wonder what Feston would think or in fact if he would even be there at all. After all, even after the grocery, we still had made two additional stops before finally heading home and so now it was after 7 PM and totally dark as we pulled up in front of the house. I searched to find Feston in the darkness hoping beyond reason that he would still be there 11 hours after having come to work that morning.

Suddenly, I saw him step forward into the light provided by a neighbor's porch light, still on duty watching over the house and my belongings his face set in a frozen glaze of fatigue. With a few packages in the car for unloading, he came up to help me get them in to the house. Once we were in and Mkhaya had departed, I finally found Feston's wonton eyes searching mine for the answer he sought.

"Feston," I began, "*here are your new sandals! Aren't you going to try them on??*"

Hardly believing his eyes and ears, he asked plaintively, "*For me???*"

"Yes." I said, "*Sit down here and try them on.*"

He did and he did and when he had safely secured the straps around his feet he stood and said as if only noting it for the first time, "*Size 7!*" while both smiling and nodding. "*Size 7!*".

The night blurs in memory after that, but for his final expression of gratitude as he headed on home to his family, "*Zikomo, Ms. Jan. Zikomo kwambili!*" – Chichewa for "*Thanks, Ms. Jan*".

"*Thank you very much!*".

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Nguludi, Malawi

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