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### Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

*“If your parents read to you when you were little, take one step forward.”*

This instruction was given by a missions trip team leader, standing on a rickety bench in the middle of a cement block “gym” in Manila, Philippines. I took as big a step forward as my ego, having just finished its freshman year in college, would allow before I felt like a kindergartner. Some of the 100 American college students around me in the stifling gym took a step forward; others remained stationary.

We were all in Manila for training before going with our smaller teams to various slum communities around Asia. In the uncomfortable heat, I trusted a reason for this game would soon become apparent. “Games” with a point had been a constant since our arrival in Manila. It was day three of orientation, and we were participating in a race in this gym – that’s all our leaders had told us. We were lined up in four tight rows – shoulder to shoulder, front to back.

“It’s really hot,” I whispered to Sean, one of my teammates.

This was code for *“The heat is more stifling than ever with all of this body odor.”*

Sean was an optimist.

“Maybe we’re learning about team unity,” he suggested.

This was a hard way to learn such a lesson.

“What are they putting down there?” I asked, craning my neck.

I could see our team leaders doing something at the other end of the gym, but the taller person in front of me blocked my full view.

“They’re putting down a line of candy.”

My mouth watered instantly. We hadn't tasted American food in days, let alone the chocolate they were spreading out. Most of us were already tired of the rice and fish diet.

*"If you didn't have a computer in your house when growing up, take one step backward."*

With all of us lined up much too close to one another, our team leader began to explain the game. "In a real race, the cars aren't this close together; they have time trials to determine where each car will start. We're going to have time trials of our own to spread you out."

"Good, anything to get a little air," I whispered. Sean snickered.

The team leader began reading off various statements related to education, language, gender and wealth; then she told us how to respond: "Move one step up" or "Take one step back."

"Hey, have fun up there," I called to Sean as it became clear he was moving forward much faster than I.

*"If you've ever had to translate between English and a second language for a close family member, take one step backwards."*

I came on this trip to learn about and attempt to identify with global poverty. My family was very much conscious of the injustices occurring overseas; being knowledgeable about it and doing something to fight it was something I considered second nature. Of course every American Christian should know about things like systemic poverty, gross injustice, mass starvation and genocide. It was our duty to pray against the racism that caused things like the Hutu/Tutsi violence in Rwanda.

*"If your family had to move right now and could move into any neighborhood they chose without a problem, take one step forward."*

America, my family allowed, was not perfect, but it just wasn't the place to find and combat injustices like those overseas. Anyone in the United States of America could go anywhere they wanted as long as they worked hard enough. Any talk of a "glass ceiling" or continuing discrimination was probably the bitter talk of people who didn't want to work for what they wanted or who just didn't know. Of course, we knew there would always be racists in the world, but they were the few wackos with KKK outfits or Swastikas still hidden in their closet. The playing field was equal: work hard, that was all.

So, I was left looking *over there* for opportunities to combat racism and the systems that keep people below the poverty line. I came from a family which lamented these brutalities. We educated ourselves about the injustice happening *over there*. The unthinkable favoring of the rich and the taking advantage of the poor *over there* broke our hearts. How could we help fight the wrongs occurring *over there*?

*"If all options of schooling--public, private, or home--were open to your family, take two steps forward."*

In the team of people assembled in Manila, I'd found peers who were concerned about the same issues. Team-building with students from a kaleidoscope of ethnic backgrounds--Filipino, Caucasian, Hispanic, African-American and Korean--had been an enriching time of orientation.

Midway through the time trial, we were spread out along the gym. I was confused. This couldn't be a lesson in teamwork; we were too far apart from each other. Several of the men in our group had already made it well past the finish line of candy and had stopped moving. They'd turned to watch the rest of us inch forward, their faces were solemn. My eyes locked on

the peanut M&Ms lying at their feet, and my mouth watered. I thought it strange that all the people across the finish line were men, but I paid little more attention.

*“If your parents are able to significantly help you pay for college, take two steps forward.”*

“That’s the end of the questions,” the team leader announced.

I braced, hoping I was fast enough. Hoping the boys in front of me wouldn’t want the peanut M&Ms as much as I did.

“Go!” and the race was on. I charged forward.

I hit the finish line and grabbed for the M&Ms, but stopped short. Someone was weeping behind me. I spun around, wondering who had gotten hurt. Suddenly, I realized what the “time trial” questions had done. They had not only spread us out, they had segregated us.

The “glass ceiling,” whose existence for so long I had denied, stared back at me in our gym-floor arrangement. Every Caucasian male was up at the front of the group. There was a visible gap; then came the Caucasian women and the men from other ethnicities. In the very back came Asian, African American and Hispanic women. Dozens of my sisters were pressed against the back wall of the gym. When told to “take a step backward,” they had nowhere to go. They sobbed openly.

I had come on this missions trip to fight injustice, political commitments that favor the affluent, and discrimination. I wanted to understand what it means to be marginalized. I expected to find it *over here*, but not among my American teammates. The next several hours were filled with a time of group mourning, confession and sowing seeds of reconciliation.

Four years later, I have lived to see the election of an African-American president. In America, tolerance seems to be replacing discrimination. Theoretically, the glass ceiling has been shattered. But I know there is still work to be done. I have seen it. When I hear someone

say “The racism *over there*” or “Discrimination is a thing of the past,” I’d just like to sit with them and tell them about a smelly, crowded gym in Manila.