

Faces Burned into My Soul

By Mark Zaegel

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How do I pick up the pieces of an old life? Where do I begin to start again? How do I return home to the United States – a place that fills me with so much happiness, yet even more disgust than ever before? I would like to believe that a only a person with a heart of stone could spend two weeks in Bangladesh – or any other terribly impoverished community – and not let it change them. Unfortunately, I know better. I know the overwhelmingly oppressive power of culture and society. I know how easily the conviction to give so selflessly – to change the world and one's own life – can be suffocated by the norms and habits swirling all around us. In the words of E.E. Cummings, "To be nobody but myself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make me everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting." Some days are harder than others, but through it all, certain things keep me going.

I carry with me the faces of countless men, women, and children I met in Bangladesh. They keep me true to myself. It's the eyes. I close my eyes and I see theirs. I see a beautiful human being who wants nothing more than to be able to feed her children, clothe them in the chilly winter nights, and love them in a home that won't wash away when it rains in the summer for three months straight...every...single...day.

It's the eyes. I simply cannot imagine myself flying back to Bangladesh, looking at a woman in the eyes as she holds her beloved child, and telling her that I cannot help her. When we live in a society of ludicrous consumption and an economy driven by self-interest, it's not so easy to continue loving the people of Bangladesh. In so many ways, I am still just another rich white kid from the suburbs. So what can help me resist these self-absorbed cultural habits? What can I do so that I will actually help the people of Bangladesh? I can have mercy on them. I can have mercy on them by carrying them with me everywhere I go and allowing their joy and their pain to shape my daily choices. It has been a constant struggle to stay true to the values that have gripped me following my trip to Bangladesh, but faces like those of this woman and her child help me keep fighting in my struggle to live with genuine compassion for others.