



around the world in 80 days

by susan stoffelman, mft

mom and teenage son survive!

Raising a child in Malibu, Calif., has its advantages: amazing weather, awesome scenery and experiences and environments that many people only dream about; but it's also slightly surreal, and as my son entered adolescence, I noticed certain disadvantages to bringing him up in such an affluent surrounding.

An idea planted itself in my mind and heart: take him away from the comforts of our life and travel where he could understand his place as a citizen of this diverse world. Part of me said it was ridiculous, but when I mentioned it to friends with grown-up kids, they confessed they'd once had an idea like mine and regretted not acting on it. So I decided to go for it. We ended up traveling for two and a half months to Uganda, Tanzania, Australia and New Zealand, returning with extraordinary memories and a deeply enriched relationship.

We began in Uganda with the opportunity to spend time with orphaned baby chimps. My son Ari turned 15 on the day we arrived, and after our first close

encounter with these animals, we looked at each other with a mixture of glee and disbelief. Our home was a tent at the water's edge, the chimps' habitat was about 30 yards away and it felt like we were on another planet. And aside from getting up close and personal with the chimps—a lifelong fantasy of mine I got to both have *and* share with my son—the people we met made quite an impression.

The first thing I noticed about most Africans is that they look directly at you when you're talking, and they seem to do so with a mind that's quiet and still, and as a result I felt uncomfortably out of synch. My mind is accustomed to quickly digesting someone's words and working on my response well before they're finished, believing I know what they're saying before they've said it. Ari quickly attuned himself to the pace of our African hosts, and I'm grateful that we took the trip while he is still so impressionable.

From Uganda we traveled to Tanzania to stay at the home and community center of former Black Panthers Pete and

Charlotte O'Neal. Never have I fallen in love as quickly as I did with these two exceptional people. We listened to the story of how they fled the States to escape fabricated charges and came to Tanzania, thinking they'd be there a year. Thirty years later, they were still there, and had embraced life as Tanzanians. The O'Neals had created all kinds of opportunities for people in the villages who were eager to learn and improve their lives, including computer classes, art training and even radio broadcasting. Our first day volunteering there, Ari and I were asked to help teach an English class. I watched my son engage and connect with the students, aged nine to 65, who were so happy to have native English speakers to teach them. Ari got into it and ended up spending time after class with a few of the teenage students.

We quickly realized that however long we stayed in the O'Neal's compound would be too brief, and when it came time to leave, we knew we'd made friends for life. In fact, we do still correspond with Pete and Charlotte; thanks to the Internet,

kids on the mat

discovered in Africa what I suspected was a significant contributing factor in problems with attention: our frenetic pace in the States and constant stimulation *creates* a scattered and unfocused mind. The rhythm there in Africa felt so much more appropriate to our nervous system. I felt settled down, and much more present. When it came time to leave, I found it difficult.

But it was time to move on, and we flew to Nairobi to make our way to Dubai, Singapore, and finally Brisbane.

One of the things I hoped Ari would gain from this trip was the ability to deal with the inevitable bumps in the road that come when you travel off the beaten path. When the Kenyan airport officials—unfamiliar with electronic visas—refused to let us board our flight, thinking we didn't have visas for Australia, I watched Ari start to sweat and get irritated. I reminded him that the worst-case scenario would still be bearable—we'd be okay if we didn't make the flight—and that it was best to stay positive and calm. At the last minute, a fax arrived confirming we had the right paperwork, and we began the 49-hour journey to Brisbane.

The flights to the other side of the world plunged us into a strange, time-warped state. Hour after hour, flight after flight, we wandered in and out of waiting areas and gift shops in semi-consciousness. As strange as this sounds, Ari and I really enjoyed this part of traveling. We each had our ways of hunkering down with our "stuff" on planes, and we actually enjoyed the journey—and the space from one another. We traveled a row apart, each beside a window, communicating only now and then through gaps in the seats.

It feels like weeks had passed when we finally land in Australia. In our bleary state, we spent an hour or so with customs. After going through our baggage and taking away forbidden crafts made of seeds or bark, our agent pulled a live cricket from the bottom of our duffel bag. A stowaway! Ari and I watched as our 'traveling companion' was immediately squashed, and finally we emerged into the world down under.

We spent 10 days traveling and visiting friends, then we headed over for our month in New Zealand. I'd planned to wander the country in a motor home, which sounded like a terrific idea...in theory. In reality, the motor home was a stick shift, requiring me to change

gears with my *left* hand while driving on the *left* side of the road in unrelenting, torrential rains. As determined as I usually am to overcome obstacles, three days into driving this beast—having managed about three glimpses at the scenery *per day*—I accepted my limits. I felt exhilarated and free when we took off in our rental car, and thus began the gypsy phase of our adventure.

We wandered all over the islands, leaving a city when we felt "done" and asking locals for advice about where to go next since we had no plans or agenda. We rode horses through sheep pastures and rivers,



hiked on a glacier and settled for a few days in a small town where we roamed everywhere on foot. We learned bone carving from a talented, one-armed Maori artist, producing an amulet we still both wear almost every day. Ari convinced me to cross the world's longest swing bridge—a terrifying prospect when you're a bit afraid of heights. But the thrill of flying tandem back across the river, in a harness suspended by a cable, made me want to do it again and again.

We spent time at a two-room school in a tiny village on the southern island, one of the stunningly beautiful places where *The Lord of the Rings* was shot. Ari joined the kids—aged 5 to 16—as they all happily played soccer together, most of them barefooted, in the foothills of the mountains of "Mordor." After teaching the students and teachers a trick I knew for learning the times tables in an hour,

I chatted with the principal outside while the kids played—again. "These village kids have to get along together; they're all they've got." I think about the schools back home where a 7th grader wouldn't dare hang out with a 3rd grader, or how most children I know dread going to school. Every child I ask told me they loved school. "It's fun!" they said. I was struck by how relaxed and normal it felt there.

Finally, the dreamy life we'd been living for 10 weeks came to an end, and after an extremely short flight—only 13 hours—we were back in California.

Coming home had its delights. I was reminded of how many loving people we have in our lives, and it was sweet to find out we were missed; but I felt out of place for weeks. I found I was moving much more slowly than those around me, and I stopped and took the time to really listen when an elderly neighbor told me a story I once would have rushed them to finish. Now I find that I have difficulty spending money frivolously, being far more aware of the value of a dollar, and I feel softer and less complicated.

As for Ari, he is simpler, more grounded, he asks for less and is more appreciative. He has a compassion that's unusual in a teenage boy, and a sense of being rooted in who he is, independent of his peers. Despite moving deeper into adolescence, there's a comfort

we have with one another that seems different from what I see between many of my friends and their sons, a mutual respect and sense of connection that generally gets us through things without a lot of drama.

In my life, parenting has been the ultimate journey. It's propelled me to stretch, grow, and take extraordinary leaps of faith in an attempt to offer my son the greatest possibilities to become the truest version of him. Exposing him to the reality of how others are living on this planet offered him, and me, the chance to understand the values that matter most: simplicity, generosity and openheartedness. What we gained from our adventure together will continue to transform us as we both continue to grow up.

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