

April In Sevastopol

T.S. Eliot once wrote, " *We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.* In his essay "Homo Viator," Gabriel Marcel, likewise, envisioned man as a traveler, unsteady yet determined to stand up in defiant opposition to inertia. Within whom fear originates, not from the step into the unknown, but from apathy. To quiet the echoes of his restlessness, man must leave...explore...feel the intensity of war...abroad and within...so that he might inhale more deeply...and not necessarily as a means to preserve life or defy death, for if you believe in Jesus Christ then eternity is yours and death's throb has already been pacified...Instead, we set out on these journey to discover some meaning in our lives...meaning in the tears and the fear and in the frustration which holds us captive. It is imperative in order to escape these limitations... shackles not placed there by God, but by our association with the enemy, who persists in his effort to ensnare us. From this "escape" we discover true freedom...from the chains of a soul robbing slavery...freedom to set sail in pursuit of something worthwhile and to search...across a treacherous landscape...amidst chaos and deception...until, at long last, we pass through the thick smoky aftermath and return home to encounter the Almighty God and His purpose for our seemingly little lives. Unfortunately, our days often find us at the mercy of a furious, unforgiving current, helplessly floating the well traveled fork where success and significance diverge...and where the sighs of contentment are the thousand last breaths of a thousand tiny deaths whose knell is heard as often as the sun sets. And as we slowly dig our graves one handful at a time, the trail home gets harder and harder to find.

Now I don't often subscribe to existentialist theorizing, I just don't like to fly. And I'll try anything to occupy my mind on a transatlantic flight that will eventually find me in the Ukraine. I realize it's an irrational fear considering the number of hours I've already spent at the mercy of propulsion, aerodynamics and whatever other laws of physics make flight possible. I've just never felt completely comfortable on an airplane. And yet, I suppose there's a point to it all since every thump and bob of turbulence becomes a prime opportunity to think about...my life, about writing, about my mortality and, well, I guess, by definition, what amounts to some form of existentialism... brooding over the all too regular occasions when I've opted for safety over risk, and probing, equally, the rare decision when I've leapt at an opportunity. I think about purpose and ask, why the Ukraine?

"*Go Forth,*" God told Abram (Genesis 12:1), "*to the land that I will show you.*" Later, in Acts, Christ told the apostles that they were called to serve, "*...even in the remotest parts of the earth.*" Certainly, in both cases, He had something in mind, and just as certain, Abram and the apostles probably had no idea what that looked like...I do believe that He, likewise, does have a plan for me, but I find myself wanting to know exactly what it is? With so many interests, in what direction should I set out? He's never been real specific with me so I've found myself, on different occasions, in Central America and now Eastern Europe. But am I being obedient or selfish when I travel like this? That's silly, I know He's going to use me even if I'm being selfish...but with limited resources and time...and by that I mean the hollow borders of my own faithless questioning...maybe until I set out, like a scavenger, hungry to uncover the mystery, only then is it even possible to ask those questions.

The Atlantic Ocean and France and Germany had finally passed under us in brutally slow succession, and as I sat quietly in the Vienna International Airport awaiting our next departure...maybe it was post flight delirium, I don't know, but I just watched. Eyeing my fellow itinerants arriving from colorful and mysterious places like Istanbul, Cairo and Stockholm, all conversing earnestly with their companions as if they had secrets they didn't want me to know and I listened as this mélange of foreign language, accompanied by the Mozart symphony gliding from the speakers of the duty free, danced around the concourse.

Now, I've spent many a laboriously static moment in airports, most of which make boredom look like the last night of Mardi Gras and I know that no one is ever happy in airports because, well, all anybody in an airport wants is to be somewhere else. But this time was somehow different. Maybe all this thinking has got me in a reflective mood. As the mysterious woman behind the public address voice announced, in five different languages, the names of other far off places and their portals of departure, I allowed myself a half smile as I felt the faintest tingle of romance, Like I was, indeed, on an some kind of adventure...having no idea what was to come next. I can tell you I certainly didn't expect a squat, elderly, Eastern European woman to measure me up for a text book hip check as she attempted to pass me on her way to the jet way entrance...only my excellent peripheral vision and quick reflexes saved me from an international incident.

Our flight to Kiev was a short, but I did take the opportunity to practice some Russian words and phrases. I had "mastered" please (pazhalsta) and thank you (spasiba), and was ready to move on to more complex but no less valuable phrases like, "Well, I really shouldn't, but OK...just one more," and "While you are very attractive, I'm not really in the market for a Ukrainian bride," when I was told to stow my tray table bring my seatback to its upright and locked position.

We were greeted in Kiev by our host, Yuri Yakovlyev, formerly a Secretary in the Communist Party, currently the president of RAZOM: Together-Ukraine and, it turns out, a possessor of one of the greatest senses of humor of anyone I've ever met, foreign or domestic. He's also the co-founder of HopeHouse International, which is the organization we're representing this week.

Established in 1991 by Yuri and Deneen Turner, a Franklin, Tennessee resident and Ukrainian native, HopeHouse International is an aide organization that endeavors to answer the physical and spiritual needs of the staggering number of children living in orphanages across the Ukraine and rescue them from almost certain futures in organized crime and prostitution. Using his government contacts and the Christian community, Yuri tirelessly searches for Christian couples willing to become HopeHouse families. In return for giving these children the opportunity to grow up in a loving family they are provided with 100% of the resources they need to purchase acceptable housing and make the adoption possible. Yuri also encourages entrepreneurial training as a means to support the family. In the past, HopeHouse had found and secured previously existing housing for their adopting families...However, our team would be the first to assist in the construction of a brand new HopeHouse home.

A long layover in Kiev allowed Yuri and his team to drive us into the city for lunch. And what did we sample as our introduction to interesting local cuisine? Chicken fingers from T.G.I. Fridays. Yuri wryly explained that he was easing us into the culture.

Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, is just a favorable wind's drift from ruins of the infamous Chernoble Nuclear Facility. And was, weather-wise, exactly the way I pictured Eastern Europe and a former Soviet Republic to look and feel, over cast and damp. But after doing a little research and watching the news for the past few months knowing I was making this trip, I discovered a proud city with a deep history. Most recently, in November of 2004, Kiev was at the heart of, what became known as, the Orange Revolution, a pro-democratic response to the corruption and fraud that plagued a Presidential Run-Off Election in October. The movement's efforts forced a highly scrutinized second election with western backed opposition candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, being declared the winner. After lunch, Yuri led us around the corner to Maiden Nezalezhnosti or Independence Square where, four months ago, the world's cameras were focused as a half a million Ukrainians demonstrated in support of Yushchenko.

By mid-afternoon we were headed back to the airport for the final leg of our journey and the only moment on the whole trip that I experienced even a hint of apprehension.

After re-checking in, we were escorted across the tarmac for our 7:30 PM flight to Simferopil. We passed six very sturdy looking aircraft before our shuttle came to rest behind a 1950's era twin prop jet...And if I was at all anxious about the plane's external appearance, the inside barnstormed the deep canyons of my air travel anxieties. The cabin lights were dim, I assume to conserve valuable energy for the actual flight. The interior walls featured a veneer of mustard colored paper complete with abstract relief design and actual curtains with actual curtain rods covering the windows. Also, the rear compartment of the plane featured two sections of booth seating. I felt dizzy as my over-active imagination conjured images of a flying Winnebago hurling down the runway. I took my seat in bourgeois class and tried to calm myself by writing my last will and testament in the spaces of a crossword puzzle in a Russian language magazine. Unfortunately, I had a window seat and well within my field of vision it appeared as though the ground crew were about to jump-start the plane with a pick-up truck. So I sat back, closed my eyes and prayed. Inside my head the opening credits of the in-flight movie rolled. It was 'My Life Passing Before My Eyes,' starring a very repentant me.

Funny thing is, it turned out to be the smoothest of the five flights we'd been on that day.

So, after 20 some hours in the air and another hour in a passenger van, we finally arrived in Sevastopol and checked into the motel-like establishment and that would be our base of operations for the next week. My bunkie, Chuck Yamek, and I located our room and, after such an exhausting day, I needed very little time before crashing.

A bit of a chill rode the breeze on our first morning in the Ukraine. As always, when experiencing a place I've never been, especially if it's the other side of the world, excitement

and nervousness battled for gut space. I curiously checked out our new surroundings in the daylight. As I scribbled notes in the small courtyard in front of our building, one by one the other members of the team emerged. Troy Madge, our team leader and father of two Ukrainian adoptees; my roommate and brilliant strummer of stringed instruments, Chuck Yamek; college professor and adopted father of Ukrainian children, as well, Tommy Wooten, and Al Patterson, a pastor from a small church in East Tennessee; soon-to-be close comrade and fellow black sheep, Shawn Smith and lastly, his roommate Jay Weinstein, the fast talking New York transplant with the enviable and seemingly endless gift of encouragement. Yuri met us for a breakfast of breads, fruit, cheese and some seriously strong coffee before heading off to church buzzing with caffeine and curiosity. We separated into two groups with Troy, Chuck and myself, along with our interpreter, Irina Bragina, attending a service in a local activity center, while our other interpreter, Misha, led the others to another location. We were ushered through a run-down billiards hall into a darkened hallway that led to a small theater. As we made our awkward entrance, the twenty or thirty person congregation turned, in unison, to get a glimpse. An uncomfortable moment passed before the pastor relayed that, "The Americans are here." We slinked to our seats down front as they applauded our arrival. The pastor thanked us for coming and I felt more than a little self conscious long after the commotion died down. He continued with the service, stopping occasionally to let a group of teenagers sing praise songs. He passionately delivered his message, repeating over and over, "Spasiba, Jesus!" I had a strong feeling that the words I didn't understand mattered less at that moment than the one's I did. During the service we met the Fedoretz family. The HopeHouse family whose new home we would be helping construct this week. Vladimir and his wife courageously and selflessly took guardianship of five orphans, FIVE! After more praising the pastor closed the service with a prayer. And I tell you, if he prayed for five minutes he prayed for a half hour. Irina whispered that in the weeks leading to our arrival, the congregation had prayed for us and now considered it a miracle that we were here. A tear slipped out as the congregation repeated "Spasiba, Jesus!" The congregation fell silent for a moment but soon the floodgates opened and tears filled the whole room. The woman sitting next to me wept openly and reached out to me. I joined her, however, her tears flowed from gratitude, while mine were of shame...for after a few minutes I'd run out of people and circumstances to pray for.

There are so many areas of my spiritual life that need attention and intention, and my prayer life...well, it's pathetic. I offer to pray for someone and then I forget. Or on the off chance that I do bow my head I'm soon interrupted by a maelstrom of unpaid bills or some other obligation I've created for myself. I spend less time in prayer than I do learning the lyrics to Steve Miller Bands' "Jet Airliner." The kind of prayer I want and need is like medicine. Maybe difficult to swallow, but absolutely necessary in order to ease the gut-wrenching anguish of my pride...or to wipe my brow as I shiver and suffer withdraw from my flesh, and to praise, with calculated abandon, He who loves me in spite of me. Now that's a miracle.

I walked out of that makeshift sanctuary with a heavy heart. I know I've attended bigger churches and I've certainly been in the company of larger congregations in my life, but I've never been a part of a worship service where they prayed longer and praised louder in my life. Now this is less an indictment of any of those institutions than it is of me. I was

embarrassed...humbled...and gripped by unworthiness. I mean me? They think I'm the answer to a prayer? It'll take a miracle indeed.

The rest of the day was spent getting some background on the Ukraine and an afternoon tour of Sevastopol.

What is now the Ukraine fell under Russian occupation and regained its independence multiple times in the early decades of the 20th century. Known as the "breadbasket of Europe," it was coveted by the Bolsheviks for its fertile soil and abundant agricultural promise. Also its value, particularly the Crimean Peninsula, as a military installation and a trade center further fueled Lenin's desire to bring it under Soviet control. Still, the Ukrainian people always managed to maintain some degree of independence. That is, until Joseph Stalin came to power in 1928. Even though they had "joined" the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922, his determination to finally subject the people and wipe out any sense of Ukrainian nationalism led to the systematic starvation of somewhere between 5-14 million people during the terror famine of the 1930's. While the country was identified as the Ukrainian SSR, it remained under Soviet control until the Soviet collapse in 1991.

Sevastopol, founded in 1783 by Catherine the Great and situated on the southwestern side of the Crimean Peninsula, is a city whose fortune has always been tied to Russian naval operations, first as a defense fortress and ultimately the primary base of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. It's a supremely picturesque city that had to be completely rebuilt, not once, but twice. During the Crimean War, in 1854, it was besieged by British, French and the Turkish forces, a struggle that, even a century and a half later, still defines this city's landscape, from the monument dedicated to sailors who scuttled their ships to prevent British ships from entering Sevastopol Bay to Tolstoy's "The Tales of Sevastopol" which recounts the author's own experiences during the siege. It was reconstructed again after it was liberated from the Nazi's in March of 1944. For her valiant defenses, Sevastopol has always been known in Soviet lore as a hero's city. Travel and tourism professionals have long called her a "glorious but unpolished gem hidden from the world," largely due to the fact that, prior to 1996, the city was off limits to anyone except residents and authorized military personnel. Now, only in the last decade, has Sevastopol's charms been on display for the world.

So here we were, seven Americans strolling down Primorsky Boulevard on a breezy but sunny afternoon, waves lapping the banks of Artillery Bay and gulls squawking overhead. The area's gorgeous Inkerman stone architecture proudly wore the ties to a deep cultural legacy and Konstantinovsky Ravelin, a fortress built at the entrance to Sevastopol Bay, sat stately at her post. I found it a strangely thrilling opportunity to see a statue of Lenin pointing confidently on a hill above the city...Fascinating, not because I have any socialist leanings, but here I was getting to see, with my own eyes, a chapter of history that someone with my background has only read about. Briefly walking through a market filled with colorful curios and laughing children it's almost easy to forget that the Ukraine is only decade removed from the Russian yoke, especially if you fail to notice the hammer and sickle emblems still adorning many of the buildings and light posts or the formation of Russian sailors marching through the nearby park. Thanks to a 1997 accord, the Ukraine maintains sovereignty over the Crimean Peninsula, but Russia leases her ports for its Black Sea Fleet, an arrangement

which is certainly beneficial financially to a nation still ankle deep in the bountiful yet occasionally treacherous waters of freedom.

Our day ended with visit to the site of the ancient city of Khersones. While present day Sevastopol is only slightly older than two hundred years, the region's history goes back some 2500 years to 421 B.C. and the establishment of this Greek colony. At its peak, Khersones marked the northeastern-most borders of the Greek Empire and was the socio-economic center of trade and culture for the region. It was ultimately destroyed by a Tartar invasion in 1399, but in between it had successively fallen under Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman control. For its archeological significance, Khersones is reverentially labeled the Ukrainian Pompeii or the Russian Troy. If I thought getting face to bronze with Lenin was a history lesson, it was nothing compared to walking the pathways between layers of defensive wall and touching marble pillars from the ruins of a temple constructed centuries before the birth of Christ.

A hearty dinner greeted our return from the excursion. Unbeknownst to us, at the time, we would need it. Tomorrow would be a day our bodies would not soon forget.

As children our true nature is exhibited frequently and without reserve, but as we get older, we are expected to arrive at a certain level of maturity and, on occasion, selflessness. This is especially true of our development as Christians. And yet, I think even the most ripened believer would agree that, never are we closer to that egocentric child-like spirit as when there is heavy lifting to be done.

The foundation of the house had been dug and poured weeks before and sat waiting for our more willing than able hands when we arrived on site Monday morning. The team was well rested and, after more of that coffee, we felt confident we were ready to go about God's work. We were eager to show our Ukrainian brothers and sisters clear reflections of the love of Christ and, perhaps, through our hard work, change any lingering perceptions of Americans. Grand goals indeed...unfortunately, it became pretty clear after our first task that the potential for failure on all counts was well within reach.

We needed to relocate a fifteen ton stack of block inside the perimeter walls of the foundation...a distance of some twenty or thirty yards. And this is not your father's cinder block or brick-o-block, or whatever you call it. It's a coral-like rock mined from the floor of the Black Sea. When cut and dried, each solid block weighs approximately forty pounds.

Yuri teased us as we devised sophisticated lever and pulley systems and considered other promising transporting methods...all in an effort to prolong the inevitable. Yuri spoke to the Ukrainian workers he'd hired and they shared a laugh, which we took to be our cue. To avoid further derision or becoming a part of Ukrainian joke-lore, we decided on a "bucket brigade."

One by one the blocks were moved and restacked. Their razor-like edges tore into our gloves and our resolve. We laughed at ourselves and each other to keep the whine fermenting inside us from pouring out. Eventually, the last block did pass through our hands. But, in the end, there was no sense of accomplishment...we were filthy, thirsty and most certainly humbled.

Someone made the mistake of looking at their watch. A mere thirty minutes had passed. And then someone uttered for the first time what became the week's official appeal... "Troy, fix this!" We all laughed again and Yuri looked at his watch, signaling the end of break time.

The plan was to get four rows of block done everyday. And once everyone found their place, the site slowly became a hive of activity. Troy and Jay delivered wheelbarrows full of mortar mixed by the mortar-meister, a gruff-looking but friendly fellow we called "Boston," because it was the only English word he knew...that and we couldn't understand his real name. Brother Al, our team's experienced brick layer, and Tommy partnered on one corner of the foundation while Shawn and one of the Ukrainian workers, Ivan, started on another. Chuck and Petra, another Ukrainian, paired up on the third, which left the foreman, Sergei stuck with me. It was awkward at first. There was no time for pleasantries, nor were there the words. At first, my job was solely to keep Sergei supplied with block, and I worked very hard at not impeding his progress. But by the afternoon he was teaching me to mortar. As he affixed the block, I followed behind, filling in the ends and the top. I offered my effort for inspection with a tentative shoulder shrug and, like a child, delighted in his affirmative nod of approval. The afternoon passed as the warmth of camaraderie began its slow steady burn. At the end of the day, despite its dubious start, I couldn't recall having had more fun working so hard. That isn't to say that I wasn't tired and sore. I could barely summon even a grunt during the evening devotional. I do recall that we prayed for God to soothe our aches and for the strength to make it through the next day. And then God answered a prayer we hadn't even thought to ask.

I have sat under a tin roof in complete submission as a thunder storm cast its hypnotic spell and I have seen nature's beauty wilting under the weight of drought but I humbly and somewhat ashamedly submit to you that...never has precipitation been more welcome than on that Tuesday morning. The steady rain made work on the house impossible so we were "forced" indoors and the heaviest thing we would lift would be our conscience.

Next to the foundation stood a two story structure built months before...The finished lower floor would serve us this week as a dining facility, meeting room and sanctuary, often all at the same time. It will eventually be used as an apartment to let while Vladimir utilizes the upper floor for a fruit wholesaling business. Today, Troy, Shawn, Chuck and myself would add a few coats of primer to first floor's freshly hung drywall while, upstairs, Al, Jay and Tommy built the rebar forms that would be used to pour the corners of the new house later in the week.

As they handled the manual labor on the second floor, downstairs we were engaged in some sloppy brushwork and spirited debate, mostly concerning the full extent and inclusiveness of 1 Corinthians 6:12, or more precisely and less honorably so, whether or not it was OK to enjoy a beer now and then. I mentioned a quote from noted Trappist monk and reluctantly famous author, Thomas Merton, who said "I love beer, and by that very fact, the world." It added little to the conversation, but it does make me feel like, perhaps, there is some hope for me. The day wore on and a host of other topics went unresolved as well, including an issue, since forgotten, that caused Chuck and Troy to speak slightly above the prescribed volume for spirited debate. In the end, we chuckled and concluded that we were all lousy

philosophers and even worse painters, a point that went unopposed by Yuri as he periodically checked in on us.

Though the rain had stopped by early afternoon, the ground in and around the foundation was a quagmire, leaving the possibility of getting any substantial block work done resting comfortably at nil, so we called it a day a little early and headed back to the lodge.

Before dinner, Shawn and I walked across the street to explore a park that turned out to be a museum dedicated to the Russian liberation of Sapun Heights from the “Facists” on March 7th, 1944. Not sure if we were even allowed to be here, we nervously approached a tall monument called Obelisk of Glory. Attached were memorial plaques honoring the units that took part in the assault. Surrounding the obelisk were two walls of granite engraved with the names of the “Heroes of the Liberation,” and at its base burned some sort of eternal flame. Down a pathway we saw a large building with an ornate bronze or bronze plated door. At the base of the door laid the largest pile of black fur I have ever seen not in captivity. It could have been a wolf...it could have been a bear...it was most likely a guard dog and, even though Shaun is a professed dog man, neither of us had any desire to disturb its peaceful slumber. We quietly moved down the path around the building...nodding to a gentleman in military uniform vigorously inhaling a cigarette. His indifferent nod told us we weren't trespassing so we moved on to a large open air exposition of Russian T-34's, T-70's and other military weaponry and equipment. Below the observation deck, down the slope of the hill, was a network of fox holes and gun placements. I found out later that what we saw beyond the vineyards that blanket the vale was the very “Valley of Death” that Lord Alfred Tennyson vividly depicted in his “The Charge of the Light Brigade.”

Wednesday morning was crisp but sunny so we went back to work on the house. And there seemed to be a noticeable increase in the comfort level. We were more relaxed around our Ukrainian brethren. And they seemed to be warming to us as well. During conversations over lunch and dinner and during work hours over the last two days we picked up little bits about Petra, Ivan and Sergei. The rest we gathered as we watched the attitude and temperament with which they dealt with each other as well as the earnestness with which they went about the work. We learned that each of them had families at least a half a days train ride away and they lived for months separated from their wives and children while working construction in various places. But this is how they support themselves and their families. Petra appeared to be the elder statesman. A beaming grin always seemed to emanate from beneath his rosey cheeks. We found out when he wasn't busy laying block, he was quite a good chef. If any of the three remained a mystery, it was Ivan. Wiry and cautious, he was a tireless worker and we sensed both joy and pain in his nervous laughter. And Sergei...He was the site's foreman. Stout and bull-wide, I can only assume, to hold the giant heart beating beneath his chest. His infectious smile was framed by a thin goatee. All three displayed infinite patience with us and we marveled as they all expertly and methodically built this home.

Everyday at lunch Yuri would regale us with interesting stories and jokes about growing up in the Soviet Union. While preparing our palates for our long awaited introduction to authentic Borsch, He told us that even at its peak, no one in the rank and file necessarily

believed in the system and would often mock it with sarcastic statements like “We don’t need bread...just more work!” Out of earshot of their superiors, of course.

Late in the afternoon, Sergei and I took a break long enough to learn a few words in the other’s language. It warmed my heart when he called me by name and was able to describe what he needed using only his hands and the words we’d exchanged. And, of course, I continued to delight in his approval of my sloppy mason work.

I don’t believe it occurred to any of us that afternoon that we were still ten rows short of our goal for the week and there was very little usable block left on site. It became, however, glaringly noticeable when a large utility truck backed down the access road hauling fifteen more ton of the stuff. The truck’s low rumble was soon drowned by a chorus of American whimpering. And our collective countenance was still teetering on Thursday morning when yet another loaded truck arrived. While unloading that second truck sweat burned my eyes and I lost the feeling in both of my forearms. I looked up at the truck to check our progress and could have sworn I saw Satan dancing a jig atop the cab of the truck. And it hit me.

There is no neutral ground...no sanctuary. It’s all battlefield. Wherever God’s children endeavor to do His work, Satan will be there in opposition, weighing our efforts against measures of selfishness and entering and exiting freely through the wide open door of our human nature. One evening we had the opportunity to attend a men’s Bible study started by Irina’s husband. We sat on one side of the table and Sergei, Ivan, Petra and five or six other Ukrainian men occupied the other. Through our interpreters, we exchanged a multitude of questions concerning our struggles with the world as well as the struggles inherent in our individual and collective walk with God. It was fascinating for us, and hopefully for them, to discover that we all have the same hopes and the same fears, whether we’re from a richly developed world power or a nation experiencing the growing pains of independence. Most importantly and most comfortingly we saw that we all believe in the same God, the one true God.

Satan wants us to feel like we’re alone. He wants to divide us. And he wants us to believe that our humble individual efforts aren’t enough. I know he wanted me to think that lifting these blocks was, at the very best, an undesirable task. Admittedly, it was backbreaking, even with the minimal effort we put forth. And while I’m glad I don’t do it every day, I had to ask myself, what if Christ thought the same of me, a sinner called to be a living stone in the construction of His house? What if Jesus had found the considerable burden of my sins too great to bear? What if He decided that the cross was too heavy and just dropped it?

In his devious way, Satan is right about one thing. Our efforts aren’t enough. Not if they are attempted outside of our partnership with God. And certainly not if were attempting to earn favor through them. We may have merely left this foundation a few feet higher than we found it. But, thankfully, what happens now is up to God. And I hope that the beads of sweat that dripped from us were Satan’s tears, for though he wins often, this week he had lost.

Friday was set aside for orphanage visits and a tour of the town of Balaklava. Also, Yuri said he had something special he wanted to show us.

It was cool and drizzly as we arrived at the doors of our first stop armed with sure fire ice breakers...boxes filled with toys and candy. Tommy donned a frizzy rainbow wig, colorful suspenders and a big red rubber nose. He twisted balloon animals...dogs or giraffes, if the neck was too long. Chuck and Misha took turns playing guitar while Troy was busy churning out Polaroid pictures of each of the kids. He handed each of them the picture he had taken and I studied their faces as they watched the image develop before their eyes. I thought, 'What were they seeing?' Most of these kids are from the streets. They've been abandoned or displaced by circumstance. This place, we learned, was more of a transient facility where they'll stay until someone figures out what to do with them. I know as my own picture develops...as God, with a supernatural patience and grace, continues to transform my life, it's still difficult to see myself as lovable. Did they feel loved? Were they loved?

Aside from one handsome little man who was all smiles, most of the younger kids looked...well, confused, at least initially...and the older kids...it took some time for their tentative expressions to melt but as they posed for pictures together and sang songs, you could see a semblance of joy fighting to emerge. Regrettably, as soon as we started feeling comfortable, someone announced that it was time to go.

Now I do understand that we had a schedule to keep, as, I'm sure, did the facility administrators, but... God has blessed me with a heart for children and I was looking forward to some...well...I couldn't honestly tell you what I was looking forward to...until it actually happened...at that moment, though, all I felt was empty...Maybe I'm attaching too much gravity to our visit. Who knows, maybe they wouldn't have traded the toys and the lollipops for an extra hour or a few innings of kickball or a hug. Maybe that brief time was all that was required of us. Maybe my attitude stinks of being too precious about our purpose here and, worse, questioning God.

On the way to the van I turned and saw the sweetest little dark haired girl...she couldn't have been more than four or five...with the deepest brown eyes I've ever seen, she waved at us through a window. The only thing that kept my heart from shattering at that moment were the little fingers she'd wrapped around it.

Our next stop was less an orphanage and more a holding area for orphan teenage boys who'd run afoul of the law. Armed officers patrolled the narrow, poorly lit halls. Doors opened into small rooms equipped with military style bunks. In the middle of another room painted elementary school cafeteria green sat a dusty ping pong table...without a paddle in site.

It's possible that a few of these boys didn't have much choice in the course of their past or present. Then again, I don't know...and that's what I mean...Jay spoke boldly and tenderly about his own struggles...as I stood and watched uncomfortably with ignorantly pitying eyes...then as Misha prayed for the boys, I'm sad to say, all I could think was...so what. What were their names? What were their dreams? What did they do well? Did they know why we were praying for them? What were they thinking about in this all-too-brief time?

It's heartbreaking to see the hollowed eyes of a child in need of sustenance, but it's a different and possibly deeper kick in the gut to see a child who's hungry for a little love. Food can be bought. Love is a priceless commodity that, unfortunately, is often in short supply, at least between we sentient beings. Then I think, who am I to feel sad about these kids? Did my pity-filled eyes keep me from seeing what I needed to see?

As we drove a winding road through miles and miles of vineyards, my frustration turned a murky shade of shame. Christ said, "*He cuts away every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit. But he trims clean every branch that does produce fruit, so that it will produce even more fruit.*" (John 15:2). I had arrogantly let my expectations define my experience instead of being open to what God was showing those kids as well as me. My expectation was a branch that required amputation. Oh, Please, Lord, help me to not be a corrupt tree...one that brings forth bitter, evil fruit.

We entered a small hillside village of bucolic cottages. Roughly half a mile and multiple turns later, the dirt road ended into a stone pocked, grassy field. On our right were the concrete foundations of, perhaps, a dozen unfinished homes without doors or windows or roofs. On our left was an unfinished three story structure.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, sites like this became all too common. It's as though, once the financial support pipeline dried up, everyone dropped their tools and left. Consequently, uncompleted construction is common in cities and hillsides all over the Ukraine like monuments to a failed idea. The tall grass swayed in a refreshing breeze as Yuri stood in that field painting a picture of a new idea. Through his eyes we saw his dream of a community planted like a garden of concrete mustard seeds.

With a reasonable investment, he said the fragments of these dwellings could be completed and inhabited by HopeHouse families and construction could be finished on the three story building, eventually turning it into a bed and breakfast/hotel with a HopeHouse family as its proprietor.

You know, occasionally we afforded the extreme yet unexpected pleasure of crossing paths with someone that can only be a divinely designed engagement...meeting someone that grips the limits of what you thought possible, someone who's plans make your dreams seem miniscule by comparison, though they'd be the first to tell you that no comparison is necessary...someone who twists whatever axis you thought you were spinning on upside down, creating a real disturbance in your life...perhaps more like a detonation. I have previously found such inspirational pleasure in Guatemala in my friendship with Alvaro Perdomo and now I have found it again in Yuri Yakovlyev. These men won't make many headlines. They walk so quietly that they rarely leave footprints but they deeply impact, not only those they help, but also those they recruit. They are truly Christ-like men...quiet revolutionaries with huge hearts for the lost and broken children of their countries.

As we neared the Black Sea, the road wrapped around the craggy cliffs that overlooked the coastline. On a lone red rock outcropping perched 400 meters above the sea sat the Byzantine styled Church of Christ's Resurrection, or the Church on the Rock. Its vantage point offered

a spectacular view of Foros, a coastal resort town and former vacation home for many Soviet leaders, including Mikhail Gorbachev, who was imprisoned here during an attempted coup by hardline communists in 1991.

We reached the town of Balaklava after crossing a narrow inlet surrounded by steep hills. The weathered 19th century villas that line the harbor and the ruins of Cembalo, the Genoese fortress that adorns the southern slope overlooking the town, give it the look of a charming Mediterranean fishing village. However, what's hidden from sight is what has lured us here.

Throughout its history, this area has been militarily significant, but never more, perhaps, than during the Cold War era. In the 50's, the Soviet Union began construction on a massive underground base and submarine repair depot. Upon its completion, Balaklava became one of the most secret places in the world, requiring special permits just to enter the city.

We stood in the doorway leading into this enormous subterranean complex grasping the large flashlights we were issued. We were told that much of the facility remains dimly lit if illuminated at all and they requested that, for safety reasons, flashlights remain on at all times. Our footsteps echoed against the concrete walls that surrounded us as the beams from our flashlights strained to reach into the darkness ahead of us. We each squeezed through a half opened thirty inch thick concrete and steel door into what looked like a hub room with passageways heading off in different directions. The blast door that we'd just passed through, the guide told us, could be closed in the event of a nuclear attack, protecting the thousand employees that would have manned this complex and there would have been enough resources in the facility to sustain them for approximately a month without having to go outside. The floor was criss-crossed with rail tracks that were used to transport the cache of nuclear warheads that were stored here.

The Ukrainian government is currently developing this site as a Cold War museum with the hopes of eventually turning it into a major tourist attraction, but as we made our way around, most of the spaces that once served as laboratories and workshops and living quarters are bare and dark. Even the area where warheads and torpedoes were once stored remains unmarked. Down a long, cold and particularly dark corridor, we wedged through another blast door that led to the eight meter deep channel where Soviet submarines would enter for repairs or reloading. To our right was the mouth of the tunnel and the exit into the harbor and to our left, the channel continued on for roughly another kilometer. It's hard to believe having seen its present condition, but the Russians didn't totally abandon this base until 1995.

We're all adventurers...the Psalmist wrote "*I am a sojourner on the earth.*" (Psalm 119:9) some call it a journey...I prefer adventure...it sounds bold and wild and exactly like everything I want but find it difficult to be...Beyond just touching remnants of an ancient civilization or being one of few foreign eyes to have seen the hollowed mountain headstone of a bitter war that, thankfully, passed away. It is to walk her streets and breathe her newly discovered independence...It is working side by side with her...crying and being pierced and shaken by lonely eyes. Allowing her to seep into you, and inviting the best parts of yourself to surface...It's exploration that's sometimes selfish and, on rare occasion, heroic in

intention...But the passage is steep and uncertain and sometimes downright unsafe. Still we must make the attempt. On our hands and knees, if necessary, blazing trails through dense opposition and rising above our nature to breathe freer air and gaze almost into infinity in the direction of home...all the while studying the masters in the art and architecture of hope...catching a glimpse of or participating in, what Walker Percy called, the “privileged zone of possibility.” Secure in the knowledge that the opportunity exists for each of us become a living rock...the kind of rock that turns society’s current rather than one that turns in it. And in spite of all that contradicts, realizing it’s possible to be the answer to a prayer.

Ultimately, for me this is about transformation...beyond any itinerary designed by man, for we cannot begin to imagine its complexity. History and myth have recorded the noblest of deeds but neither they, nor the altar in the most vibrantly ornate Orthodox Cathedral can hold a candle to the adventure God has planned for each of us. Truly it must be the result of supernatural circumstances and for supernatural reasons that we are here. In His service there are ramparts to leap and there is wickedness to fell but not through any strength that we might possess, and in our most difficult pursuit, we must rescue from the prison of our sinful selves, the greatest of all treasures, the mother of hope and the fruit of Christ’s inexplicable suffering, which is, of course, love...the ultimate death defying adventure.

And with love the Kingdom of God is built...stone by stone...40 lb block by 40 lb block...once again, not under our own power. To succeed we must become less. As much as we see ourselves as the protagonists and occasionally the antagonists of our own story, we must all become dependent clauses in His story. Thankfully, the hope of Vladimir Fedoretz and his family is not in me or my ability to use a trowel or even to speak eloquently the gospel. In fact, some days the world would be much better off if I were blind, deaf and mute. Their need is my need and our hope, together, is in Jesus Christ, the architect whose foundation can never be shaken.