

## Getting a Truck for a Song

A Gospel Story About Feeding the Hungry in a Hospital in Uganda—Told Backwards

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Hello, my name is David Weiss, and I've been invited to share a bit about a fundraiser I've been running under the fiscal sponsorship of your congregation. I want to thank Pastor Brad, in particular for inviting me to Zoom in to be with you for this presentation.

Just a quick word about myself before I begin. I'm an "itinerant public theologian." Which is just a fancy way of saying I have a pair of graduate degrees in theology ... and after teaching college and doing other things for a couple decades, I've set aside my day job and *have chosen to think out loud about God* ... in plain language ... in the midst of our daily lives and the pressing issues that challenge our faith. And *to hope* that I at least occasionally get paid for that. And sometimes I do.

I blog at davidrweiss.com where I do what I call community-supported-theology. It's sort of like a farm-based CSA—"community-supported agriculture"—where you get a box of farm-fresh vegetables each week. In my case you get theology, more or less weekly, delivered right to your inbox. And every now and then, just as with a CSA you get something in your box that you don't quite know what to do with, or even something you find downright disagreeable. On the other hand, you also sometimes get *new things* that catch you off guard and offer you a taste of something sublime. Who knows, maybe this presentation will be something like that.

Anyway, if you're interested in learning more about my work, you'll find it at my blog, which is just my name davidrweiss.com.

So, my presentation is titled "Getting a Truck for a Song: A Gospel Story About Feeding the Hungry in a Hospital in Uganda—Told Backwards" I'm excited to tell you this story, but I have to warn you: even though I'm on tape, I'm probably going to get choked up a couple times because the wonder in this tale runs so deep in my life.

I sometimes think God is like an origami artist, making folds in our lives that occasionally make it possible for a mere two-dimensional piece of paper to unexpectedly transform into a three dimensional work of art. We sometimes use highfalutin words like "miracle" to describe these moments, but most of the time when you look back you can begin to see all the creases that made this particular moment possible. You just didn't know the design that was being worked out all along.

In Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*, the main character, Emily, returns to Earth for a single day after dying. It's become a profound theatrical moment when she gets a glimpse of all the origami folds *as they're happening* and can see where it all leads. She famously and frantically asks the Stage Manager, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?" It's as though she sees the weight of each crease made in our lives. The stage manager responds to her question in what I imagine is a tone of resignation and empathetic disappointment, "No—Saints and poets maybe—they do some."

I'm inviting you into an *Our Town* Emily-style moment this morning. A grand and holy pause to stop and see the creases that brought us to the truck I'm going to tell you about. According to Apostle Paul, all of us who gather together in Jesus' name *are saints*. So I'm

hoping that while we're gathered today, we might pause and see, even if just barely, the folds of grace that crisscross our lives.

If you unfold an origami creation carefully you can get it all the way back to a flat piece of paper. And if you trace over the creases you can see in stark relief all the folds needed to make the final result possible.

Next week my friend Moses will go truck shopping in Uganda. If he were to post about it on Facebook, his status might read something like:

*"Looking to buy a reliable extended cab pick-up to transport people and porridge to feed hungry patients at a local hospital. Limited funds—hoping to get the truck for a song. God willing."*

Now, I could tell you the story of that truck from the beginning. But this a gospel story *best told backwards*.

That truck—when it's finally found and purchased—will indeed carry porridge, bananas, and the people to serve them, across the city of Mbale in Eastern Uganda. The porridge will be in ten 5-gallon jerry cans, served up in 16 oz. mugs along with a banana to every patient in the maternity ward, the women's ward, and the children's ward at the Mbale Regional Hospital.

It's a busy hospital because it serves an entire region. Besides the beds for inpatients, it hosts regular out-patient clinic on certain days each week, like the pediatric clinics for diabetes and vision, where children and their parents often walk miles to get care before returning home (walking miles again) the same day.

You might wondering if the hospital food in Uganda so bad they'd rather eat porridge and bananas. No. It's that in Uganda—as in many developing countries—hospitals provide medical care ... but not meals. So when you go into the hospital you have to make arrangements for family or friends to bring you meals each day. And if you don't have family and friends able to do this, you just don't eat for the time you're there. Which is not great, especially if you're taking medications on an empty stomach. Or if you're a nursing mother. Or a kid. In which case a cup of porridge and a banana can seem like a feast.

Moses says the new mothers and young children in particular beam when they eat, *as if Jesus himself were the host*. Truth is, the folks behind this meal program—the members of the Dorcas Star Mission—seem to imagine that *Jesus is the one being fed*. Who knows. Maybe they're both right.

They feed the mothers and kids first. On clinic days with walk-in clinics they try to bring extra to feed as many of the walk-in patients as they can before they turn around to walk home. On good days there's leftovers to feed other patients. On really good days even some of the staff get a mug of porridge. Because some of them work all day without eating either.

This is already happening in Mbale—without a truck. How can that be?

Meet the boda-boda. These are Ugandan taxicabs. They're everywhere. Often three to a lane. Darting left and right. Scrapping to get their current passenger delivered as quickly as possible so they can move on to their next fare. Notoriously unsafe. But reasonably cheap. And in a country where poverty is plentiful, cheap is golden. And because relatively few people own vehicles, boda-bodas are a lifeline, even if a rather precarious one.

So right now a half dozen boda-bodas are used every day, five days a week, to transport 50 gallons of porridge in jerry cans and several hundred bananas and the handful of volunteers who serve the meal. *But a truck would really help.* That's why Moses is going shopping for one.

They make the porridge from scratch. Cornmeal and sugar and water. I suppose like our cream of wheat or cream of rice cereals. Of course, they cook theirs in a *big pot—and over an open fire—and gallons at a time.* But that's just a detail.

They've been doing this since mid-April. By now the hospital provides them a room to set up in when they arrive, so they can serve up the porridge. Afterwards they clean things up and store them there until the next day. When they serve another couple hundred patients all over again. And they've been at it for more than a hundred days now.

*Who* does this? Who is this “*they*”? A handful are “just” volunteers. People with time on their hands and compassion in their hearts. They take turns doing the cooking and the feeding and the cleaning. But the brains that figures out the logistics, the love that sustains and motivates, the mystery that inspired this program—these things belong to the Dorcas Star Mission, born of a simple faith fellowship of just eight persons. A house church of sorts. They'd been meeting regularly for several years now, simply to support one another in their shared faith: in navigating the challenges of daily life, from work to family, by referencing Bible passages, sharing prayers, joining in fellowship.

But last April, as the pandemic was spreading across the globe, this small circle of followers of Jesus—ordinary folks like you and me—none of them wealthy or well-connected, felt pressed in their hearts, invited by their faith, called by the Spirit—*creased by a paper-folding God, if you like*—to do something more.

So they started feeding patients at the hospital. The need was so great that before long they were feeding 400 meals a day—mostly out of their own pockets!—and that's when Moses came to me looking for a truck. That was May 2020. *But why would Moses come to me?* Why would he think I could help fold an origami truck to carry very real porridge, bananas, and people?

I suppose because this wouldn't be the first time our lives were “creased” in ways that took surprising shape.

Most recently (because I'm telling this tale backwards) in spring 2019 an eight-year old girl flew by herself from Uganda to Germany to be reunited with her mother, who had fled Uganda five years earlier. I'd helped raise \$4000 through a GoFundMe to buy her plane ticket for that trip. Actually I'd raised all that money *four years earlier.*

See, it's no small thing to get a child out of a country that her mother fled from for her life. It took Moses years and years and years of making a tiny origami fold here and another one there—perhaps a bribe or two along the way as well. But in March 2019, Chloe, against all odds, made it to Germany. And to her mother. *So why wouldn't Moses ask me for a truck?*

Moving backward, 2018 was a particularly hard year for Moses. Having been a pretty daring Ally to LGBT persons for a number of years had cost him dearly. That summer his car was vandalized and his home in Mbale, where he lived with his wife and 4 children, was broken into. He'd also lost much of his income as a freelance project manager due to his association with LGBT persons. Two of his three school age children were sent home from school because he could only pay the modest tuition for the oldest one. I asked my family members to chip in. We sent Moses enough money to repair his car, replace the

front door on his home, and get his kids back into school. It really wasn't all that much money, but looking back it was another crease in the sacred paper of our lives ...

Now go back to November 2016. Sunday, November 13, my wife, my son and daughter-in-law, my daughter and her son—the six of us are sitting down to eat Sunday dinner. I get a phone notification of a new Facebook message. It's rude to check Facebook at the dinner table, I know. In fact, it irks me when my kids do that. But I see it's from Moses on the other side of the world, so I open it and read it to myself. And I am stunned. When I try to share it with the others at the table, I'm reduced to tears. He writes to tell me that twelve days earlier, on November 1, Moses and his wife, Sara, have welcomed their fourth child. And they named him "David." In my honor. As Moses puts it, as "a testament to our enduring kinship."

When someone has creased your life like *THAT*, how do you say NO when they ask for help in buying a truck?

Still earlier, from 2014 to mid-2016, there were yet other folds being made, as the congregation I was attending at the time sent modest quarterly support payments to the Rainbow Christian Fellowship, a community of 20 or so LGBT persons and allies based in Mbale. Moses had become their leader, a sort of unofficial deacon to the community, several years earlier after their original leader was killed in a tragic accident.

During this same time window – in the summer of 2015 – I started the fundraiser that raised money to fly Chloe to Germany 4 years later. It turned out that most of the original money got spent on the ensuing legal maneuvers. So when Moses finally got clearance to buy the plane ticket in 2019, we made a direct appeal to one person who covered the outstanding funds needed to get her on the plane to her mother.

The year before, in fall of 2014 I ran my first fundraiser at Moses' request, to fly his dear friend—Agnes, Chloe's mother—to Germany where she eventually made a successful application to be considered for asylum. Although Agnes was heterosexual herself, like Moses, she was a courageous Ally to the LGBT community in Uganda. As a small-time independent seller of crafts—a one-person street vendor, really—she used her movements to serve as a courier of documents, evidence of human rights abuses, and other important communications between high-level LGBT activists and organizations. When her role was revealed, her life was put in jeopardy and she made the very difficult decision to flee for her own safety while leaving her daughter in her grandmother's care.

In one of those origami moves that *makes something out of nothing*, I not only raised \$3500 from 50 different donors, I also serendipitously connected Agnes with a chance friend I'd made years earlier through Lutherans Concerned/North America. Markus was a gay Lutheran who lived in Germany—and he was not only willing to drive a couple hours on short notice to meet Agnes at the airport, he also hosted her on her arrival and connected her to an immigrants rights organization that guided her through the asylum process in Germany.

Now we're seven years back, as the folds ago. 2013. My church at the time has decided to send a person to Uganda to meet in-person with LGBT Christians and allies working for acceptance, welcome, and justice in Uganda in hopes of establishing some relationship and building longer-term partnerships.

Me? I am a *homebody*. My international travel up to this point has included a couple short day trips across the border into Canada and one high school trip to Mexico thirty years earlier. I am NOT excited to go, but I am a writer and the church wants to send someone

who can “bring the experience back to the congregation,” so they want to send me. Because I *am* a writer, I cannot protest like the biblical Moses, that I am “slow of tongue”; but I make clear that I am “anxious of foot,” and would be happy if they selected someone else. I am as successful in my reluctance as that earlier Moses was. Before long I am getting my passport—and a bevy of immunization shots—and new luggage.

And I’m anxiously trying to map my plans for spending time and getting around in a country far away from anything I’ve ever known. That when I reach out to Moses. At Pastor Brad’s suggestion.

You see, among the many jobs he’s juggled, Moses has worked as a “fixer,” an on-the-ground guide and jack-of-all-trades for visiting journalists and film crews. Because he speaks at least three Ugandan tribal languages as well as near-perfect English—and he knows the country and the culture(s) and the rules for filming; and he knows where to get equipment repaired without getting ripped off, and he knows people everywhere, and he knows which police to bribe “as the cost of doing business” and which ones you don’t dare try to bribe—because of all these things, he’s a priceless resource for someone coming in from outside the country. He was both a fixer and a translator for “Call Me Kuchu,” an award-winning 2012 documentary that put faces and stories to the lives of LGBT persons in Uganda.

Well, in 2013 I hired Moses to be my driver for the two weeks I would be in Uganda. As a bonus, he was known and trusted by multiple members of the LGBT community there—including Bishop Christopher Senyonjo, one of the very few church leaders willing to be public in their support of LGBT persons. The bishop had actually been defrocked by the conservative Ugandan Anglican Church for his stance—and had his pension revoked. But he kept wearing his collar and using the title because, as he said, “It is how my people know me, and I continue to serve as their shepherd.

Anyway for two weeks Moses was my driver, my translator, and my liaison to a community that would otherwise have had no reason to trust me. He *daily* held my life in his hands. And, on the two occasions he was not available to do so, he arranged for a trusted friend of his to meet me and accompany me in his stead. That friend was Agnes, who held me safely *in her hands* when Moses could not. One of those times, her hands also held then 2 year-old Chloe. So it was my great honor—my holy privilege—to later play a role in shuttling both of them in turn to safety in Germany.

While in Uganda I was mostly in Kampala. One day I stopped with Moses to see his closet of an apartment where he stayed when working on assignments there in the capital city. Humble abode *is understatement*. I also made one trip with Moses about 150 miles east to Mbale, his hometown. There, in a large hotel courtyard that provided more discretion than a local coffee shop would, I met several members of the Rainbow Christian Fellowship, including Aisha, whose name will appear again a few folds backward yet. Aisha had never even heard of me before this day, but she was awed and teary-eyed to meet me because I had some shirttail connection to people in America that had been grace to her.

While in Mbale I also met a couple of Moses’ children though I never got to meet his wife. But I did visit his simple concrete block home—four bare rooms and an outdoor toilet. One room in particular left me in speechless awe, but we’ll get to that next.

Now we’re all the way back to 2011. I’d just heard Bishop Christopher speak in the Twin Cities about the plight of LGBT persons in Uganda. For several years earlier I’d been a national trainer and the Twin Cities coordinator for the Reconciling in Christ program. By 2011 my contributions to that work were no longer formal—but no less fervent. In

February, shortly after the brutal murder of David Kato in January—he was the leading activist profiled in “Call Me Kuchu” and a personal friend of Moses—I was moved, inspired, *en-folded in the Spirit you might say*, to write a hymn text: an anthem for Uganda. Titled “Preserve Uganda’s Future Hope,” it poured my grief and passion and faith into a powerful, poignant text. As Pride approaches that summer—likely in May of 2011—I shared that hymn with my email circle of RIC-related pastors.

Pastor Brad was one of the recipients of that hymn text. He, in turn, shared it with someone he knew, but had never met. A young man in Uganda named Moses. A week later that man reached out to me by email, to introduce himself and thank me on behalf of the Rainbow Christian Fellowship, for a song I’d written.

It was the first email I’d ever received from Africa that didn’t come from a wealthy Nigerian prince or the widow of a rich diplomat hoping to leave me her fortune. It was my first contact with Moses.

Moses taught my song to the Rainbow Christian Fellowship, and on October 19, 2011, the Rainbow Christian Fellowship sang my anthem for Uganda in that bare room with a concrete floor in Moses’ home. That’s why, when I stood there about 18 months later, I could not speak, because the echo of my words on the lips of saints unknown to me was still so heavy in the air.

That, my friends, is the song that Moses will buy this truck with. *Because had that song not linked our lives, not of these other folds would have been possible.*

But we’re not quite back to the beginning yet. There are two last scenes.

I didn’t know Pastor Brad well in 2011, but we knew *of each other* through our common vision of a church that welcomes and affirms LGBT persons in the fullness of their being and their calling.

I knew of Pastor Brad in particular, because of his association with the Naming Project, a summer camp for LGBT youth that he helped found in 2004. The project took its name from the name-calling that so many queer youth must endure—some of whom *don’t* endure it, but die as a result of it. At the summer camp these youth are grounded in faith and in their *being named as beloved children of God*.

All the way back in 2006, while he was pastor at St. Luke Presbyterian, a person in Uganda reached out regarding the Naming Project and the desire of a small circle of persons based in Mbale to better support the spiritual needs of LGBT youth and young adults in their faith community. That contact came from Chris, Moses’ predecessor with the Rainbow Christian Fellowship. It opened a relationship that continues to this day with several members at St. Luke’s who support educational opportunities, particularly for those who have lost familial support because of their sexuality. One of the first young persons who received that support was Aisha, the young woman who tearfully greeted me in that hotel courtyard in 2013 as though I were the personal ambassador of all the goodness she had received.

Today Aisha is among the founders of the Dorcas Star Mission, paying forward into Mbale the same grace she received from Minnesota more than a decade ago.

And that overture from Chris and the Rainbow Fellowship in 2006 became the fold that built the origami bridge that led Brad to share my song with Moses five years later in 2011.

Finally, we get to the first fold. What brought Brad to the Naming Project? That's not really my story to tell. But I can share this much—since it's up on the Naming Project's website. In 1998, while serving as a hospital chaplain, he met a young woman whose anxiety over the seeming conflict between her family, her faith, and her sexuality had expressed itself in anorexia and bulimia; it was eating her alive. Around the same time, at the same hospital, Brad met a gay teen in such torment because of the world's rejection of gayness, that he contemplated suicide.

These two queer kids, fighting for life and faith—and food—became the first folds in a piece of paper—a living Scripture now stretched across 22 years—that led Brad to the ministry that connected him to the Naming Project, to Moses, and to my song.

The song that formed a friendship so enduring that when I say “Moses is looking to buy a truck for a song,” that's about as much truth as a single sentence can bear without bursting into flame.

Today, there are eight persons in Mbale, including both Moses and Aisha, whose lives have been faithfully folded into God's work feeding the hungry. When they approached me late last spring about help in buying a truck, *after all these other folds, who was I to say no?*

So I reached out to Pastor Brad to seek his help in providing a fiscal sponsor for the fundraising. This was critical because we had at least one major benefactor for whom the chance to make a tax-deductible gift was essential. But it also raised the credibility of the campaign to have it sponsored by a church rather than me as an individual.

So you, too, at Saint Michael's, have been folded into the gracious reach of God that runs between Minnesota and Mbale, Uganda.

Let's return for just a moment to Emily on the stage in *Our Town*. She still exclaims, “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?” And the stage manager still responds, “No—Saints and poets maybe—they do some.”

Well, you ARE gathered saints. And perhaps in this moment you *do* feel, at least a bit, the way all these origami folds of grace crisscross our lives. I hope so.

Thanks for letting me tell you about the Dorcas Star Mission and their silly sacred belief that they just might get a good truck—for just a Song. This has been a “Gospel Story About Feeding the Hungry in a Hospital in Uganda Told Backwards.”

But it's time to move forward now. Time for Moses to go truck-shopping with whatever money is available. I'd be remiss not to mention that a few final gifts would help him shop for a little more reliable truck. In origami, as in the mysterious workings of grace, *every crease counts*. And who knows, the next fold just might be yours.

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Interested in making a gift to this campaign? You still can right here:

**[www.charity.gofundme.com/o/en/campaign/five-loaves-two-fish-and-a-truck-in-uganda](http://www.charity.gofundme.com/o/en/campaign/five-loaves-two-fish-and-a-truck-in-uganda)**

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