

The background of the cover features a high-angle, black and white photograph of several people walking away from the viewer on a light-colored path. Their legs and feet are visible, creating a sense of movement and distance. The lighting is soft, and the overall tone is contemplative.

When Invisible Children Sing

DR. CHI HUANG
with IRWIN TANG

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FOREWORD

This is an extraordinary effort by a sensitive and knowing physician deeply interested in young people and their manner of living. I've read of his work with enormous interest and with great respect—a doctor transcends barriers of geography, nationality, and class. In so doing, Dr. Chi Huang gives us much to consider: how young people, no matter the odds against them, affirm their humanity even as they struggle day by day to stay alive and consider and understand the world around them.

If only more of us in the United States would get to know the people of Bolivia through the words in this book—words that tell of others we very much need to meet and come to know! Yes, we who now try to ascertain what is happening in that far-off nation can learn of it mightily, knowingly, through a doctor's carefully chosen observations—reflections which one hopes and prays will be attended by many of us in the United States and elsewhere.

Finally, here is a doctor who lives up to so many ideals. Some of us in medicine have unfortunately lost sight of these ideals. As I read this book, my mind went back to the work of Dr. Albert Schweitzer many, many decades ago in Africa; and indeed, Chi Huang, the physician who does this valuable and instructive work in Latin America, very much belongs to the tradition of honorable and valuable medical work that Dr. Schweitzer pursued in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Dr. Robert Coles

James Agee professor of social ethics at
Harvard University, professor of psychiatry
and medical humanities at Harvard Medical
School, and author of *The Moral Life of Children*
and *The Spiritual Life of Children*

INTRODUCTION

Angry. Not a great word to describe a future physician or someone hoping to care for street children. But angry accurately describes what I felt as a kid. When my naive eyes saw the black and white of the world, I was angry and confused about injustices such as poverty and famine. I was also angry about getting beat at basketball. I was angry about those three points wrongly deducted from my English grammar test. I was angry about my little sister getting more and better gifts than I got. My father, in his charity, called this anger my “temper.” When my mother witnessed this temper, she would roll her eyes, shake her head from side to side, and tilt her head back, laughing.

Christmas Day 1987. The day my life changed. The day I began to question all that I knew. Why was I alive when so many others die from cancer, HIV, TB, war, and famine? Why was I born in South Carolina and not in a developing country, earning less than a dollar a day? Why did I have two caring parents rather than abusive parents who beat me every night? Why was education stressed in my life and not just getting by? Was it luck? fate?

The meaning of life. As an agnostic, I was officially clueless, questioning everything and searching. At Texas A&M University, I learned about existentialism—we’re like ants scurrying around doing everything and maybe nothing. It made some sense, in a world that seemed to make no sense.

Having grown up in South Carolina and East Texas, I had heard the word *Jesus* many times, both in prayers and curses. Slightly coerced and slightly out of guilt, I had occasionally attended church

with a Christian friend, although I sometimes avoided going to church with him. Most of the church stuff was a sack of lies, in my opinion. I saw how some of those Christians lived very differently Monday through Saturday.

Nevertheless, one day I opened the Bible, desperately hoping to find an answer to the chaos and senselessness around me. Upon comparing the prophecies of the Old Testament with the events of the New Testament, I faced the same questions that Josh McDowell had asked years ago: Who was this Jesus? Was Jesus a liar with a knack for miracle making? Was Jesus a lunatic who convinced himself, and others, that he was the Son of God? Or is Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as prophesied in the Old Testament?

After three years of careful study and much resistance, there came a time when the research and studying did not lead me any closer to believing in God—Jesus. I had walked to the edge of the cliff, and intellectually I had accepted the evidence as proving the existence of God and Christ, but my heart was light-years away. I peered over the cliff and made that proverbial leap of faith, hoping to land on the other side. Years later, I landed. I became a Christian. While I reserved the right to ask God many questions once I made it to heaven, my faith did make some meaning of a maddening world. My faith allowed me to bring some structure to a chaotic humanity. Eventually, some of that anger transformed into a passion.

I wanted to become a politician. As a college student, I joined a Quaker peace mission struggling to stop the Serbian-Croatian War. When I was in Belgrade, a refugee girl named Nadia looked up at me with big hazel eyes: “Where is my father?” Maybe he was dead. Maybe he was killing others. “I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know.”

“Why do you murder the Croats?” I asked an eighteen-year-old Serb soldier named Tomas. “Chi, if I do not shoot forward in the tank, there is a gun right behind my head ready to shoot me. It is not hard to kill. What is hard to accept is that my best friend, a Croat, is on the other side, trying to kill me.” In some respect, I

gave up politics that day. The politicians might as well have been negotiating in an orbiting space shuttle. I was too impatient, too passionate, too ready to spit angry, honest words to be a politician.

I applied to Harvard Medical School. When the acceptance letter arrived, I stared at it in shock. I packed my bags and moved north of the Mason-Dixon Line with excitement and fear.

In medical school, I struggled to keep up with my classmates. They studied two days for a test, and I studied a week. I learned from wonderful teachers and toiled in superb hospitals. After four years of medical school, I needed only a couple of additional classes to graduate and begin my career as a physician. I reread my medical school application essay. Did I really write that? My face burned with embarrassment as I whispered to myself, “Save the world? Cure for cancer?” Did I sincerely believe in what I wrote? Hypocrite.

Call it youthful arrogance, if you may be so kind, but I wanted to change the world. And after four years of medical school, with passion intact and hundreds of hours of hard work logged, I had not changed the world one iota. I feared, in fact, that the world had changed me, softened me, bought me out. I decided to put off graduation. I asked Harvard for a yearlong sabbatical, and it was granted. My father worried that I had quit medical school strapped with a one-hundred-thousand-dollar debt in order to join the Jesuits. When I told my mother, well, my mother just rolled her eyes, shook her head from side to side, and tilted her head back, laughing.

During the first six months of the sabbatical, I studied the Old and New Testaments one page at a time. It was difficult and challenging. I was not a sitter or a thinker. I was a doer, and I was getting antsy. I was ready to serve. I did not really know what it meant to serve, to help, to assist—I just knew that I wanted to do it. I knew one other thing, something I had known since I was a little boy: I wanted to work with the poorest and most marginalized children. I wanted to treat severely malnourished children

living in the jungle and suffering from kwashiorkor. I wanted to care for children with AIDS. I wanted to treat street children who, well, lived on the street. I stuffed a hundred letters into the mailbox.

Dear Organization X:

I am a fourth-year medical student from Harvard Medical School looking to spend up to six months in some service capacity. . . . I would be greatly appreciative if there are any volunteer opportunities available.

Sincerely yours,

Chi Huang

A handful of organizations responded, and one of them fit the bill perfectly. Scott Womack, the pastor of Iglesia de la Comunidad, was willing to let me work with street children in a poor Latin American nation called Bolivia. Just as I had applied to Harvard not knowing it was in Boston, all I knew about Bolivia was that it was south of Boston.

I knew nothing about street children. I knew that they were children and that they lived on the street. I had read *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens, or maybe I had only seen the movie. Wasn't Oliver Twist a street child? There was very little written about street children in 1997, and I did not hunt it down. I was a doctor, almost, and they were children; my knowledge and my stethoscope were all I needed. As I got closer and closer to leaving for La Paz, Bolivia, I became terrified of working with street children. Do these children carry knives? Do they snort cocaine? Will they accept me, or will they kill me? How will I introduce myself to them? Do they have a booth on the street that says, "Come and meet the street children, five cents please"?

What difference could I make in their lives? I was not a social

worker, psychologist, teacher, or reverend. I wasn't even a doctor. I was a twentysomething, privileged, idealistic medical student unsure of who he was or what he was doing with a plane ticket to La Paz.

Oftentimes in book introductions, writers give statistics and histories concerning the people in their book. I will offer here only the same knowledge that I had walking off the plane in La Paz: nothing. Your introduction to the street children and their world comes with no numbers, no contextual spin.

I will tell you this one thing. At the end of my first year in Bolivia, I sat on the cold cement blocks of downtown La Paz, wondering what difference I had made in the lives of the street children on all sides of me. I asked a girl prostitute, "What do you want from me?" She did not want money or drugs or anything immediate. She said she wanted me to be present in her life. She asked me to build a home for the street children. She asked me to tell others about her life and the lives of other children of the street.

This book honors the last of those three promises, even if it is ten years later. I have attempted to portray five street children—Mercedes, Gabriel, Daniela, Vicki, and Rosa—as objectively as possible. They are real children growing up in a raw environment, and their language is often raw as well. I have used their own words whenever possible, in an attempt to depict an accurate snapshot of their lives. It is with great reservation that I write about myself. By nature, I am an introvert and private about my personal life. I have tried to describe my life and my transformation, to the possible dismay of my parents, with warts and all, so that you can understand these children through my eyes. Over the past decade, the street children and I have changed one another. In the end, I want this story to be about them and not about me. I have only lent you my glasses so you can see the children.



We've Been Waiting for You

Noon, August 1, 1997;

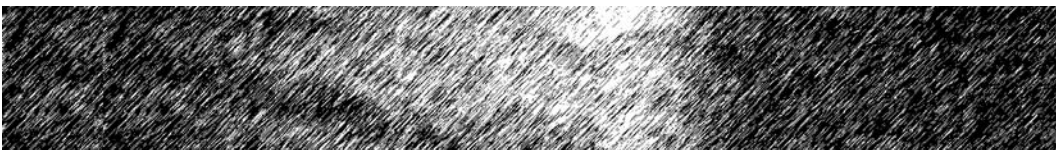
Plaza San Francisco, Downtown La Paz, Bolivia

A child.

His hands all too visible, cupped as if holding water, but holding nothing. His eyes adhering to my every twitch. His eyes glazed over from sleeplessness, from 3 a.m. flights into the sewage system, from wincing too hard trying to forget, from seeing everything, even the eyes of all those who see straight through him. He is invisible.

I reach into my pocket for a small metal disk that will make him more visible. These disks are almost magical, the way they work. The child is watching and waiting. He speaks poor Spanish. He is Aymaran—of blood indigenous to the Andes mountains. I fumble the metal disk. It falls to the pavement.

The street. This is his workplace, his bed, his table, his plate, his fine crystal. This is his home, Mother Street. I pick up the metal



disk and place it in his cupped hands. Now they are not so empty. Now he is not so invisible.

Money. The metal disk is known here as a *boliviano*. It is the currency of Bolivia, worth about twenty American cents.

Everyone loves children, as long they belong to someone. When they belong to the street, few love them. And the children know it. Those cupped hands never ask for love. They ask for money.

I crouch down to ask him his name. He looks at my face. He knows I am new to La Paz. He knows it is my first day to walk the street. He knows he might get easy money from me. But he is not sure what I want now. Most people drop the coin in his hands and walk away, returning to their own sweet oblivion.

The child looks into my eyes, and he walks away.



The hill is steep and covered by cobblestones. The stones warp my feet as I lean forward, walking fast, as I usually do, marching double time to the girls' orphanage at the top of the hill.

By the time I reach the door of Yassela Home for Street Girls, I'm grabbing my sides and ready to vomit. A young girl runs by, giggling at me. Mountain climbers wear oxygen masks at ten thousand feet. *Paceños*—the people of La Paz—live their entire lives at more than twelve thousand feet.

I look around me at the snow-covered, craggy peaks of the Andes mountains. Each year, tons of silt roll down from these mountains, enriching the soil of the altiplano, the five-hundred-mile depression from which La Paz springs. The mountains only partially shield the 2 million *Paceños* who live there from ice-winds that blast through the altiplano. I'm told the wind is cruelly cold at night.

Panting for air, I bend over to catch my breath in front of the orphanage door. A little eyeball peers through a low peephole and examines my face. The peephole slams shut, and feet pitter-patter

away as a little girl's voice shrieks, "Strange Chinese man! It's a strange Chinese man!" The door swings open to reveal a middle-aged mestiza woman, her hands clasped before her food-stained apron. "Dr. Chi," she says. "You're here already. My name is Señora Lola."

Señora Lola leads me silently down the stairs into the cozy main activity room where girls from three to sixteen sit quietly in groups of three or four. They knit. I take my position in the center of the room. "Hello, my name is Chi. I am going to be the orphanage medical doctor here for the next seven months." The girls glance up at me, return to their knitting.

A little girl peers up at me with her twinkling, starry eyes. Her rich chocolate skin is accentuated by her simple pink dress, with which she obscures her face. She lets down her dress slowly, slowly, and ever so carefully she reaches out to me. "Do you want to see my room?"

I put my fingers in her hand. "Sure. What's your name?"

"Sara."

"My name is Chi," I say.

"*Chinito*," she says. Chinaman.

"Actually," I say, "it's simply Chi. Chi Huang."

Señora Lola and I follow Sara to her room. The air is stale with mold. Posters of teenage singing sensations spice up the pastel pink walls. Sara hops onto her bed. From under her covers, she brings forth a ragged doll, its head secured by thin cloth. The doll has one black plastic eye and one imprint of an eye long gone. "Her name is Isabel," Sara introduces.

I kneel down so I'm eye to eye with the doll. "Isabel, how long have you been here?"

"Long time," Sara says.

"Do you like it here, Isabel?"

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"I miss my mommy."

“Where’s Mommy?”

“In El Alto.”

“Where’s El Alto?”

“It’s high above, in the mountains. It’s far, far away. And it’s very, very poor.”

“Why are you here, Isabel?”

“Because Mommy does not have any money for us to live with her.”

“Do you get to see your mommy?”

“Yes. She visits every week.”

Sara’s shoulders slump, and her eyes look far away.

“Will you show me the rest of your house?” I ask her. Sara’s face lights up again. She jumps off her bed and scurries out of the room. We walk into the concrete courtyard, where a nurse grabs my arm. Nurse Olivia is a large woman, a strong woman. With her rouge thick and her silver hair pinned tightly into a bun, she looks like a big-limbed Tammy Faye Bakker. “Chi,” she says, “I know it is your first day, but I need you to see this girl’s arm.” She raises her eyebrows and peers into my eyes. “Her name is Mercedes.”

The bedroom hosts six sets of bunk beds. Mercedes, about fifteen, sits on her bed, which is a lower one and neatly made. Her hair is a bird’s nest beneath which her face is safely sequestered. Her clothes hang loosely over her slender frame, her faded pink sweatshirt having seen the scrub brush one too many times. Her skin is a dark olive; her brown eyes are encircled by black rings of makeup. She looks down and away, deep into a bedpost.

“My name is Chi,” I say, as I sit down on a parallel bed. “I am the new orphanage doctor. What’s your name?” I ask. She studies the bedpost inside and out. A lightbulb hanging from the ceiling yellows everything. “Señora Olivia wants me to take a look at your arm.”

No response.

“Can I look at it?” I ask gently.

“No,” she says.

"Why don't you tell me what it looks like since you're not going to show it to me? Is it red? Is there blood coming out of it?"

"No."

"What happened?"

"I have a cut."

"When did it happen?"

"Last night."

"How did your arm get cut?"

"I cut it," she says.

"With what?"

"With Gillette," she says. With a razor blade.

I try to slow my breath. "How come?"

"Because I wanted to."

"Were you mad at yourself? Were you sad?"

"No, I just felt like doing it." She looks as far away from me as she can. "It feels good. I enjoy cutting myself," she says.

I feel my stomach turning. "It doesn't hurt?"

"It hurts later," she says. There is no pride in her confession, but no shame either. I am sickened, perplexed, and my throat tightens out of anger. Knowing the tremendous odds against her survival, why does she make her life even harder? "Is there any pus coming out of your wound?"

"Yes," she says.

"I need to treat it."

"It doesn't need to be treated," she tells me.

"If you don't treat it, the wound will become necrotic," I say.

"You'll not only get the skin infected, you'll get your muscles and bones infected."

She stares at nothing. "If you get your muscle and bone infected, I will have to cut your hand off."

She looks at me, and for the first time I see a young girl in her eyes. She is wondering who I am, why I am here, and if she can trust me. She looks away for a long spell. "Okay," she says.

We walk to the orphanage examination room, a small room stocked with only bandages and hydrogen peroxide. Mercedes sits down on the wooden examination table.

"It is 2 p.m. now. What time did you cut yourself?" I ask her.

"Midnight."

"Fourteen hours. I can't sew up your wound. I'd be closing a wound filled with germs, keeping them in your arm. So we'll have to disinfect your wound and bandage it. Please uncover your arm."

She uncovers her right arm. I disguise my gasp as a deep breath. Over twenty razor blade scars run up the palm side of her arm, tracing ragged lines from wrist to elbow. By their color and texture, I discern that the scars vary widely in age. Has she been cutting herself since the age of twelve? Ten?

"Uncover your other arm," I say.

Dozens of parallel scars line her other arm.

"Do you have razor blade marks elsewhere?"

"No," she states with a twitch of the eye.

She's lying to me. But do I have the right to insist on seeing the other cuts? If not the right, at least I have the obligation. But if I insist, will I squander what little trust I've earned?

"Do you have any razor blade marks on your legs?" I ask Mercedes.

"No."

"This is my first meeting with you, Mercedes, I know. But I need to make a full examination. Are you lying to me?"

Nurse Olivia shouts at her, "How you can do such things to your body, and before the eyes of God, is a mystery to me! You don't love yourself and you don't love the Lord!" Only the vitriol hurled at this child can distract from the horror unfolding before my eyes. Five razor blade marks of six centimeters line each of her thighs. Longer scars cover her stomach, stretching from one side of her rib cage to the other. Is this real? I feel like I am a minor character ("DOCTOR")

in a tragic play. With scars closing up over other scars, she has probably cut herself at least two hundred times. If she continues, by the time she is an adult, her entire body, save her face, will be covered by this street map of razor scars.

"Did you do all this yourself?" I ask Mercedes.

"Yes," she utters robotically. As soon as Nurse Olivia went into her tirade, Mercedes tuned out of reality.

"She is a cutter," states Nurse Olivia.

I clean her arm wound and bandage it up. A putrid odor has been emanating from her lower body and getting worse. I don't want to offend young Mercedes by gagging, so I open the window and the door for air. The odor recalls for me the time I relieved a man who had been constipated for two weeks. She's fifteen! She should be clean and happy. I take a deep breath and reach for a speculum, and then I remember where we are. I have essentially no medical equipment here. I manually examine the labia. As I examine her for herpetic sores, green pus flows steadily out of her.

I sit there dazed. I didn't expect anything like this. I had hoped for docile children who just needed some antibiotics and a break in life. Whatever I envisioned, now that I'm here, I wonder what I can possibly offer these children.

"You probably have a venereal disease," I inform Mercedes.

She looks at me oddly.

"You should never have sex again, Mercedes!" shouts Nurse Olivia. "God has punished you!"

"Please," I implore Nurse Olivia, "let me take over here." Taking a calming breath, I look into Mercedes's eyes. "You have a sexual infection," I tell her, the words altering neither her face nor her breathing.

"Please take these samples, Señora," I tell Nurse Olivia. "I'll be right back." I walk to a neighborhood pharmacy and return with enough antibiotics to cover most venereal diseases. After explaining to Mercedes her schedule of medication, I ask Nurse Olivia to send

the blood and cervical samples to the nearest laboratory in order to identify Mercedes's disease. And then I walk to the boys' orphanage.



Bururu. This is what the street children say when they are cold. You can hear them saying it at night when the cold wind blows.

“Welcome to Bururu Home for Street Boys.” Señora Lydia opens the door to Bururu and then points eastward. “As you can see, we are located in the downtown area, not far from the old cathedral of San Francisco and the grand city square known as Plaza San Francisco, where the *campesina* women set up shop and the street children sell drinks and shine shoes.”

Walking past Señora Lydia, I extend my toe past Bururu's threshold. *Whuff!* A quartet of boys tackles me, staggering me but not felling me. They each grab hold of a limb and try to pull me down, giggling the whole time. I finally catch my breath, and I playfully punch a chubby boy in the chest, swing a skinny boy around by the arms, drag a boy in a *fútbol* (soccer) jersey across the room, and try unsuccessfully to shake the fourth boy off my leg. My back grows weaker with each giggle, and they pull me to the brown Spanish tiles.

Then one of the boys speaks to me. He stops to see if I understand him, which I don't, before he continues. I'm not even sure if he is speaking Aymara—which is spoken by 1.6 million people around Lake Titicaca—or Quechua, the official language of the Inca Empire, spoken by 13 million people along the Andes mountains. A second boy tries to explain what the first boy said. He is speaking a different but similarly incomprehensible language. Slowly, though, words such as *la* and *el* stand out. They mean “the” in Spanish, a language I do speak, shakily.

“My name is Chi,” I tell them. “I am your doctor.”

The boy with the soccer jersey tells me, “I am Marcos. I am

a fútbol player. When I grow up, you won't see me playing in the street leagues anymore. You'll see me only in the stadium. Do you play fútbol?"

Before I can answer, the boys all say, "Upstairs. Let's go upstairs!" "What's upstairs?" I ask.

"The bedrooms," Marcos tells me.

Room 1 stinks like feet unwashed for a fortnight. A dozen blankets laid side by side on the floor mark the boys' sleeping territories. I walk over to a beautiful, brightly colored blanket and pick it up. The indigenous women, or *cholitas*, weave these blankets, and every boy seems to own at least one.

"*Ahuayo*," says Jesús.

"*Ahuayo*," I repeat.

The children burst into laughter at my pronunciation.

"*Ahuayo*," I say.

More laughter. I grow popular through incompetence. I study their giggling faces. We look alike, the boys and me. We are all brown. They are short kids, and I am five-six. Their hair is straight, coarse, and black. Mine is so straight that it stands punk-rockishly vertical after a shower. Broad strong cheeks. My fleshy face-flanks make deep dimples when I smile. Eyes like fat or skinny almonds. My eyes are pretty round, but I retain the almond flavor. Yes, this twenty-five-year-old Taiwanese American medical student can pass for their indigenous older brother.

"It is time for the meeting." Señora Lydia stands in the doorway to Room 1. She is of pale Spanish skin, her white, oval face shining through a shower of dark curls. Dressed "Euro," like an Upper West Side art dealer, she escorts me through the carpentry room. Aged five through seventeen and of both *indio* and mestizo blood, the boys hammer together bookshelves and footlockers. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* They are dressed in cotton shirts and blue jeans or beige slacks.

"Many of these children came from off the streets," Señora Lydia

tells me. “The others were dropped off by parents who could not afford to care for them.”

We enter the meeting room, and four women sitting in a semi-circle stand up and give me solemn smiles. “Some of you have already met him,” says Señora Lydia. “Let me introduce him formally. This is Chi Huang.”

Nurse Olivia shakes my hand. “God bless you for coming here,” she says.

“I am the social worker at the Yassela Home,” says Señora Lola, who seems to possess a knowing peace. “I handle fights and hurt feelings, and I keep order.”

“Hello.” A woman in blue jeans and a collared shirt waves. “My name is Jessica. I do whatever needs to be done. I pick up the loose ends.”

A psychologist named Eva tells me, “The boys need more men around here.”

“The girls will like him too!” exclaims Nurse Olivia. “He is a god-send! A blessing!” She opens her arms to the heavens.

Señora Lydia clears her throat. Although she is now the head administrator of three orphanages, in earlier years Señora Lydia Morales spent many nights on the streets of La Paz coaxing street children to leave the street and join her orphanage. On the streets where women get beaten, raped, and murdered, Señora Lydia earned the trust and respect of the children by practically living in alleys and nooks. That is why some tiny fraction of the La Paz street children population is willing to leave the familiarity of the street to live in her orphanages.

“Dr. Huang,” declares Señora Lydia, “we have been waiting for you.”

“Waiting for so long,” says Jessica.

“Is it true that you are from Harvard Medical School?” asks Señora Lola.

“Yes.”

Harvard. They nod their heads as if the word itself were a panacea, even here, thousands of miles from the seat of global superpower, deep in the southern hemisphere among the crevices and crags of the Andes mountains. One 60-watt lightbulb hangs from the ceiling, flickering furiously to light the three-hundred-square-foot room. Boys galloping across the orphanage interrupt the uneasy silence. These women think that I am some kind of godsend. What's going to happen when I ineptly sew a boy's hand to his chest? I doubt I even qualify as an effective charlatan.

"So, Dr. Chi," says Señora Lydia.

"Um, Señora Lydia," I say in halting Spanish, "I'm not a doctor yet. I still have a few more classes before I graduate from medical school. I'm still learning."

"For the next seven months, you will be the staff *doctor*," says Señora Lydia. "Do you understand my Spanish? You will be a doctor for fifty boys and twenty girls living at two orphanages: Bururu for boys and Yassela for girls. They are orphanages for street children, Dr. Huang. Street children learning to live an ordered and meaningful life, learning to bake bread in our bakery, cook in our kitchens, and build things with their hands in our carpentry rooms. All this so that when these children leave the orphanage at age eighteen, they will survive and, if not prosper, at least sleep under a roof and within four walls. Dr. Huang, are you familiar with street children?"

File image: cold concrete; naked, protuberant bodies; rain. "Yes," I say. "I am."

Señora Lydia takes a deep breath, relieved.

Then I open my big mouth. "Park Street Church is my church in Boston," I announce, "and they sent me here to work at these two orphanages. But I must also treat the children still living on the street." My voice trails off. "Treat the children on the streets," I repeat weakly.

The staff members stare gravely into the floor. "For you to pay

a visit to the streets is wonderful,” says Señora Lydia. “When do you plan on going?”

“At night. I plan to work most every night on the street, and I want to go as soon as possible.”

Señora Lydia tilts her head and frowns. “Do you know how dangerous the streets are at night? Especially for a foreigner?”

“Nighttime is the only time when the children are not working the streets for food and money. And they usually sleep in the same place. By visiting at night, I can establish a consistent relationship with them, as a doctor.” I know she knows this; now she knows I know it.

“Dr. Huang,” says Señora Lydia, “exactly how familiar are you with street children?”

“One hundred million children live on the world’s streets. They are our silent canaries in the mine shaft, shouting to the world the state of the poor.”

“Eloquent. How familiar are you with street children?”

As I look around the room for a good answer, my own trite words echo in my ears. Nativity scenes the children made out of paper and clay sit on the shelves behind the staff members. Their creativity warms my heart. My silence answers her question.

“Yes,” says Señora Lydia, “and the streets will teach you.”



I walk southward. I am living in a partially constructed church in the southern district of Obrajes. Partially constructed means a few bricks here and there along with running water, albeit cold. I stop on the sidewalk, trying to recall how to get there, and I notice a campesina woman looking at me. She is selling bags of Brazil nuts and Coca-Cola, which she pours into plastic bags for the customers. Bolivia cannot afford to throw away its glass bottles, and she saves them to be recycled. She is a typical campesina mother. She wears

a dark bowler or derby hat, the color and shape denoting the area of Bolivia from which she originates. Her loose, full red skirt only accentuates her pear-shaped body. And on her back hangs a multi-colored shawl, in which she holds extra food, recent purchases, and her young child.

Several street children come up to me with their dirty faces and ask for a peso. Somehow these children lost their parents or had to let go of that colorful shawl. I give them some pesos. I walk on. Street girls sell fruit drinks for one boliviano. Masked, homeless shoe-shine boys, looking like banditos, offer to shine my sneakers. I want to buy all the drinks from all the girls; I want to offer Imelda Marcos's entire collection of footwear to the shoe-shine boys. But I cannot. My pockets are already empty. I walk on, past grandiose, all-knowing colonial edifices. Past modern utilitarian architecture. Past more and more and more street children.

Why does God sentence these children to life on the streets? Why does God let Mercedes cut herself? I could quote Saint Augustine, who asked similar questions. I could devise logical syllogisms about an omnipotent, inviolable, immutable God who allows such suffering. But it brings me no closer to the answers I have sought since my first days as a Christian. Since that Christmas Day almost ten years ago.

Theologically, my brain knows that God is in control; my heart has miles to go. I scramble forth like an ant whose mound is being kicked away. A lifetime could be spent helping the children living within these four blocks. Can hope sustain me? Can injustice invigorate me? Can I make a difference within one square block?

Yes, I can. "I can," I insist. And yet, as I walk, I cry. And no matter how many times I tell myself that crying is weak and useless, I cannot stop the tears.

EPILOGUE

Since 1998, the paths of these children have radiated in all directions.

Not long after Rosa's father left her and Catia, the Bolivian Street Children Project began helping Catia, Rosa, and grandmother Monica by paying their rent on a tiny apartment. Catia and Monica continued selling fruit drinks and school supplies on the streets, but they no longer slept on the streets. Rosa, for the first time in her life, had a real home.

The Bolivian Street Children Project was founded in an attempt to bring attention to the plight of street children around the world. Our goal is to return to the abandoned street children in La Paz, Bolivia, their childhood, their rights, their dignity. We also strive to equip our children with the ability to become role models and agents of constructive change. In the early years, we simply walked the streets, as I had before, talking to the kids and treating their various ailments. With a growing group of staff and volunteers, we have made approximately six thousand street visits.

In 2001 the Bolivian Street Children Project started its first home, Hogar Bernabé, in La Paz, Bolivia. Our homes specifically serve abandoned street children, who, by definition, have no adult supervision or caretakers. In my eyes, these are precisely the children to whom we are called to respond in our charity of love and kindness. Abandoned street children in La Paz have an average age of 14.4 years, and more than 50 percent are boys. Nearly 90 percent of these children have been physically abused, and more than 90 percent of these children use paint thinner. Of the abandoned street

girls, more than half of the girls are pregnant or have children, and 38 percent have reported being sexually abused.

With the building of Hogar Bernabé, I have satisfied, in a rather humble manner, one of the three requests of Daniela, Vicki, Gabriel, and others: to build a home for them. Hogar Bernabé is home for ten abandoned street children. We provide our children with holistic care. It is not enough to give them food and clothing. We must give our children the opportunity to feel safe. To know love. Besides physical problems such as dental cavities and wrongly healed bones from past beatings on the streets, the children suffer from suicidal desires, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, drug addiction, and the entire book of psychological disorders. Some have difficulty attaching themselves to others; others attach too easily. Most believe they will eventually be abandoned; in the first days off the street, some street children follow me and staff members around the home, making sure we don't leave them.

Children at our homes live in a safe environment, with a high staff-to-child ratio. We do not utilize corporal punishment. An in-house tutor catches the children up on missed education. Our staff and our psychologist help the children recover from physical, emotional, and sexual trauma so they can take their first steps toward a future free of murder, rape, and homelessness—a future, perhaps, with peace of mind and spirit. Through both academic and technical education, the children learn to sustain themselves within the mainstream economy. Some of the children at Hogar Bernabé aspire to become lawyers or businesspeople. Through tenacious studying, one child is now the top student of his grade level at school.

Sometimes people ask me why we have only ten children in Hogar Bernabé. First, one cannot bring too many children off the street and into the same home simultaneously; the instability causes mass exoduses of children back to the street. Second, with our high staff-to-child ratio, more than 60 percent of our children stay in our home until they are prepared to sustain themselves in the outside

world. Others who work with street children in other homes privately admit that their retention rates are in the single digits. Thus, our home for ten children rehabilitates more children than two or three homes housing fifty children each.

Our second home, Hogar Renacer, opened in 2005 as a transitional home for children who have recently left the streets. It is used as a bridge for children not yet ready to live with stricter rules and responsibilities. In 2006 we hope to open a third home, and if we can secure the funding, we would like to open four more homes for abandoned street children and street babies. We also hope to build a small school, a library, a soccer field, and microenterprises where children learn trades in realistic settings.

I cannot take credit for the successes of the Bolivian Street Children Project. Over the last decade, donations have appeared in my mailbox just in time to cover my bank account that was overdrawn by hundreds of dollars. I have survived several close calls on the streets. Some call it fate. I call it God.

In addition, 95 percent of the real work is done by the wonderful team I have been blessed to work with, along with two dedicated boards in Bolivia and in Boston: Francisca Martínez Alave, Ben Branham, Kristy Branham, Juan Carlos Arteaga Flores, Luis Javier Yrusta Campos, Luis Carlos Ruiz Carreño, Carola Contreras Céspedes, Luly Quispe Condori, David Copa, Moisés Hurtado Céspedes, Rosario Quiroga de Castellón, Hernán Oliveira Durán, John Eggen, Michelle Eggen, Luis Gonzalo Fernández Pereira, Mary Frances Giles, Kristin Huang, Kep James, Noemí Karageorge de Rivero, Kurt Leafstrand, Laura Leafstrand, Luis Fernando Morales Medina, Vernonica Mendoza, Nils Cajareico Nauro, Gigi Ohnes, Karla Eliana Saavedra de Fernández, Deb Veth, George Veth, Antón Villatoro, and Thania Villatoro.

I have crossed paths with many of the street children I met in my first year in La Paz. Some of those children, sadly, I have never seen again.

A street girl spotted Mercedes on a bus going to the red-light district in 1999. I have not heard news of her since then. If she is alive, she is an adult by now. Maybe she is a prostitute. Maybe she sells ten-cent soft drinks on the corners in La Paz. Maybe she is married. Maybe she is a mother. Maybe she made one final razor slash.

Alejandro cooks at a local restaurant in El Alto, providing for himself, his wife, and their child. He was the catalyst for our project in 1997. He has done more for the children than he knows. I am excited for him and proud of his accomplishments.

Jorge continued to live at Bururu orphanage until he was promoted to a nicer orphanage with more opportunities.

Fernando moved from Bururu orphanage to another orphanage a couple of years after I first met him.

Gabriel reportedly traveled to Cochabamba, and I have not seen him since I washed lice out of his hair in 1998.

Tómas left Bururu shortly after the accident and was spotted on the streets a couple of times during the first year thereafter. Some people at the orphanage knew he was never going to stay. I disagree. A child will fail if you expect him or her to fail.

Anna committed suicide in 2001 in El Alto. She hung herself from a metal bar that held up a shower curtain. A street boy who was passing by told the authorities that Anna was one of the street children, and he walked on. No one else claimed or identified her.

Javier is a homeless man, spending most of his waking hours drinking and committing petty crimes. When I told him that Anna had killed herself, Javier was silenced, shocked, and saddened. Having lost his lover and his unborn child, he almost shed a tear. But he did not. He walked on. I have not seen him for nearly two years.

Maria's burial structure was destroyed because the cemetery permit was not renewed. Although Daniela and her mother continue to have a frigid relationship, both Daniela and Natalia now live with Daniela's mother. Daniela sells fruit drinks on a downtown corner.

Daniel Chávez remains a street boy, eight years later. He is currently one of the older boys who abuse younger children, physically and probably sexually. Christopher Chávez lives in a home for street children. I have not seen them in two years.

Juan Carlos and César continue to sleep on the street, often inebriated and sometimes committing small crimes.

Vicki is doing remarkably well in a home for teenage street girls. I bumped into her in 2005 on one of the main streets of La Paz as she was running off to a class for beauticians. She has a small baby girl, and they are doing well together. It has been a long journey since the days of child prostitution and selling overgreased potato chips.

Ernesto, Rosa's grandfather, died on the streets in 2000, from alcoholism. Rosa spotted her biological father once over the last eight years. He did not acknowledge Rosa during their brief encounter. Rosa's grandmother, Monica, continues to sell trinkets and other small goods every morning beginning at 8 a.m. in Plaza San Francisco. Over the years, multiple attempts were made to assist Catia in taking responsibility for her daughter, but she continued to lose her ongoing battle with alcoholism, regularly putting Rosa's life in danger. Rosa was eventually adopted by a loving family. She is doing well in school and aspires to go to college.

In April 2005, Catia disappeared from the streets.

I completed my Harvard residency program in internal medicine and pediatrics in 2002. I now split my time between Boston and La Paz. I work several months each year at the Boston Medical Center at Boston University School of Medicine, where I am a hospitalist in pediatrics and internal medicine. My dual roles as a Boston hospital doctor and a Bolivian street children advocate are made possible by Boston University's Dr. Barry Zuckerman, Dr. Bob Vinci, Dr. Jeff Samet, and Dr. Jeff Greenwald, all of whom value the work we provide for the marginalized in both Boston and Bolivia.

Do you see our invisible children? Economics and technology

widen the moats and heighten the walls between us in the developed world and the poor of the developing world. Political parties distort our vision. Many on the left wish us to believe that our street children are innocent and helpless victims. In contrast, those on the right often define these children as violent, lazy vermin deserving of their torture. Street children are not good or bad, but rather complex human beings with good and bad qualities—just like us all.

Do you see our invisible children? Have you focused your vision on them so that you may judge them? Tell me what is black and white in their world of gray; I myself am so often confused. Is it wrong for a street child to steal a piece of bread to survive one more day? Is it right to give a street child money, knowing he may use it to buy drugs? Is it better to leave him penniless, knowing he might starve? Forced to choose, do you help the street baby or the street boy or the street girl?

Do you see our invisible children? I take issue with the current tilt of American Christianity. The “wealth and prosperity gospel” says that Christians, because of their belief in God, receive gifts from heaven. Does this mean that the street children need only believe in God to find themselves living in loving homes with food and medicine? Does the popular understanding that God helps those who help themselves mean that the street children do not help themselves and that they deserve to be starved, murdered, and raped?

Sometimes my anger gets the best of me. I yell and snap at those I shouldn’t, as well as those I should. What is anger in the cause of the street children? Perhaps it is passion. My passion is still youthful and strong. My body, however, has aged. Where once there was a healthy tuft of hair, there is now a smooth patch of scalp. As my workouts become more difficult, my waist widens. My spiritual blind spots remain, but I am more aware of them and am searching for others yet unknown. My hypocrisy weighs the same as it used to. My family, children, friends, and colleagues will readily attest

that I am far from a saint. Sometimes I do not treat the children as well as I would like. Working with street children is mundane and often hopeless. For street children, it is always about “me”—not unreasonable since no else cares about them. Through all the troubles, I try to remain present in their lives, but sometimes at a cost. The heartbreak, stress, rage, and hopelessness have contributed to the many valleys of my life.

To know the street children is to have one’s life transformed. So many of the peaks in my life have come from being present with the street children. I truly enjoy seeing the children play and smile after being cured of various diseases. To play soccer with a street child and see him or her happy for a millisecond is one of the most treasured gifts I can ever receive. My other peaks are my marriage to my caring wife, spending time with our daughter, Grace, and looking forward with great anticipation to our new daughter, Lily, from China, and another infant due in June 2006.

I still struggle with my lifelong conundrum: Why did God take my sister Mingfang and not me? Why must our children suffer on the street? Why is such evil allowed to be inflicted upon our children? Intellectually, I have come to accept that God has created us with free wills. He also allows us our evil, our neglect, and our blindness.

Will you decide to see my invisible children? My children ask for your money. But more important, they ask to be seen, to be known as human beings and as children. Tell our stories, they told me. To Daniela, a hundred dollars made me rich. The street children flounder in absolute squalor. They ask for your understanding and empathy and not necessarily for your sympathy or forgiveness. They ask to live with dignity.

Our lives are short and fleeting. What is the legacy we leave behind? Maybe my legacy is a few square blocks of La Paz, Bolivia, where all the children have homes.

Our children die not from disease or malnutrition. Our children

die because they are poor. In reality, most of us do not even watch the children as they die, for we dare not let ourselves see the children. See my children.

No, you needn't help them all, because we simply can't. In fact, I prefer that you help just one. That is, help one child at a time. There are 70 million street children in the world. With your help, there will be one former street child. One child in a home. And then two. Three. Four. Five, six, seven. . . . A girl named Rosa, a baby named Elisa, a boy named Jesús. . . .

You can donate to our efforts at Bolivian Street Children Project, P.O. Box 990579, Boston, MA 02199 or online through PayPal at www.bolivianstreetchildren.org. The Bolivian Street Children Project is a nonprofit organization.

Chi-Cheng Huang, MD

La Paz, Bolivia, April 2006

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The Bolivian Street Children Project was created to address the unique needs of street children in Bolivia and around the world—to uncover their potential and make a lasting difference in their lives. We do this through direct service, research, and advocacy, with the goal of diminishing the street child population, one small child at a time.

Our approach to intervention with street children is holistic in nature and builds upon the dignity and worth we believe every child innately has. We do not seek to “rehabilitate” them but to return to them their right to a childhood filled with love and opportunity.

For more information or to make a donation, please contact us at:

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