

Foxes, Giants, and Wolves

Facing our vulnerabilities with the Lord's help often ushers in the desperately needed relief in cross-cultural mission difficulties and stressful situations.

by Kelly O'Donnell and Michele Lewis O'Donnell

Have you ever seen “The Wizard of Oz?” It is an American fantasy classic filmed in 1939. The film portrays the trials and adventures of a young girl, Dorothy, who attempts to return home from a magical land lying “somewhere over the rainbow”. Like many of our friends, we probably have seen it a dozen times before adolescence. During one scene, Dorothy and her companions enter a dark forest en route to Oz, the Emerald City. Anxiously wondering what wild beasts might lie within, they begin to simultaneously chant, “Lions, tigers, and bears, oh my!”

For frontier missionaries and their team mates, frequently beset with analogous challenges, a similar refrain can be heard: “Foxes, giants, and wolves, oh my!” Who are these creatures, and what do they have to do with the life and task of pioneer missions? In brief, they are biblical metaphors representing the struggles that we often experience as we try to serve God in new ways or in unfamiliar and difficult places.

Foxes try to distract us and cause us to drift off our primary tasks (Song of Sol. 2:15). Giants seek to destroy us by exploiting our vulnerabilities (2 Sam. 21:15-22). Wolves, on the other hand, endeavor to distress us, keeping our lives out of balance (Matt. 10:16). Let's take a closer look at these creatures and explore some ways to deal with them. The following three sections can be used as team building tools.

Capturing the Foxes

A few years ago we spent five weeks in a Muslim country, experiencing life in a Muslim culture and providing pastoral support to several expatriate

workers there. In so doing, we inadvertently stumbled upon an ultimate four-footed menace.

Mistrust between national believers, conflicts with colleagues, poverty, occult practices, persecution, illness: are but a few of the obstacles that can plague Christian workers in many Muslim cultures. As menacing as these obstacles can be, however, there is something much subtler but potentially as destructive to workers and their task. We call them “foxes”.

Solomon said: “Capture the foxes, the little foxes, that ruin the vineyard, while the vineyard is in blossom” (Song of Sol. 2:15). What are these foxes? In the context of cross-cultural work, we would say that they are metaphors for the everyday distractions that take workers away from their primary tasks. They are the daily chores, the frequent interruptions, the legal red tape, the time needed to set up a tent-making business, communication inefficiencies, and so on. These eat up workers' energy, and often interfere with the very reason they are ministering.

We like to refer to this distracting process as “worker drift”—the natural tendency whereby life's “currents” divert one's focus (time, activities, resources, and heart direction) to areas that are peripheral to his/her objectives. In other words, workers, families, teams, and even sending agencies succumb to the inevitable trend to “major on the minors”. It is not simply an issue of time management, but something far more challenging: “drift management”. Let's take a closer look at these little foxes to understand what frontier workers are up against.

Doing Good

It has been aptly said that the good can become the enemy of the best. Many good things demand the attention of frontier workers—like playing host or tour guide to visitors or entertaining nationals who are not members of the people group you are trying to reach. The challenge is to find the balance between good activities (which may or may not help one connect more with the host culture) and pursuing one's primary call.

Demands of Living

Basic subsistence realities are a constant energy-consumer. Some wives, for example, can spend much of their day driving their children to different schools, shopping, and cooking, leaving little time for language study and other ministry-related activities. Tentmakers are frequently stretched by the need to blend together their work demands with family life, social obligations, and time with nationals. The main problem is lack of time.

Developmental Push

This refers to the normal internal tugs that we experience during different seasons of our life. For example: the male worker in mid-life wanting to change careers and/or see something concrete established as a result of his work; the couple that meets in the host country, falls in love, and decides to return to the home country to get married and live; the push to return home to care for aging parents; the question of whether to accompany adolescent children back home as they enter into a high school. These and other inner yearnings must be acknowledged and prayerfully resolved.

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Deployment Issues

Many workers call this the “seven year itch”—the desire to move on, try something new, seek fulfillment by working in a different way. Some may feel underemployed (the person with graduate training who teaches only six hours of English each week), underutilized (the faithful full-time Mom who wishes she had more time with nationals), or overworked (people in demanding secular jobs). Wrestling with the issue of personal fulfillment through one’s work and embracing the need for sacrifice are an ongoing experience for many.

Defaulting to the Status Quo

There is a tendency in all of us to gravitate towards the familiar and the convenient. In a cross-cultural setting, this can present itself as a desire to speak/learn a trade language rather than a more difficult heart language; spending extra time with expatriates rather than pursuing relationships with nationals; or planning seemingly endless work strategies on a computer rather than seeking out additional time with nationals. It takes self-discipline, intrinsic motivation, accountability, and commitment to stay focused on difficult tasks.

Team Member Differences

Our individual variations reflect the creative genius of God. But these very differences in stressful situations could appear as deviance, leading to division and conflict. Differences in work expectations, lifestyle, and relationships, must be discussed, understood, and harmonized as much as possible. No one wins when differences are either covered up or left unresolved.

Discouragement.

Each of the previous six foxes feed into this one, making it the most menacing. Two reasons for discouragement include slow progress in one’s work and having to say farewell to colleagues who move to another location.

Although mourning a loss is healthy, unchecked discouragement frequently results in an inordinate self-focus that distorts one’s understanding of God’s perspective and decreases one’s faith that God will move. Discouragement can also result in someone obsessively yearning for the proverbial greener pastures lying out there somewhere.

The above seven distractions in and of themselves are neither wrong nor necessarily problematic. What makes them troublesome, is their unrecognized, ongoing, cumulative affects, which subtly prevent us from “fulfilling our ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5).

So how do workers, their families, and teams “capture these foxes”? Awareness is an obvious first step. Openly identifying and talking about them with family, friends, and team members is required. Second, it is important to strategize and pray through solutions to the natural drift process. Accountability to one another for use of time and work is a must. Finally, spiritual warfare is crucial. Distractions, though natural, can be used in unnatural ways by demonic forces. Satan is as equally pleased to sabotage one’s work through distracting foxes as he is with ravenous wolves or fearsome giants.

Applications.

Have you ever seen a fox in the wild? We have seen three of them over a five year period, in the woods by our house. They just seem to pop up and then vanish before you can figure out what happened. If you think its hard to spot a fox, then just try catching one! In the same way distractions—the little foxes from the Song of Songs 2:15—can be difficult to identify and even more difficult to apprehend. Nonetheless there are some ways to capture these foxes. Here’s an exercise that can help.

Get together with a friend and talk about the five items below. Discuss whether you would want to hold each

other accountable for some of your “little foxes”. Also consider doing this with your team or family. Remember, responsible self-disclosure, as opposed to indiscriminate disclosure, which considers the well-being of everyone in a group as one shares one’s own thoughts, is a powerful means of staying united as a team and staying focused on the task.

1. In what ways, if any, do you think you have drifted off your primary tasks over the past six months?
2. Which of the seven foxes previously described seem to distract you the most? Try your hand at drawing a quick picture of one of them—make it realistic or abstract.
3. Why do you suppose it may be hard for you to catch your foxes?
4. What helps you to stay focused on your work? List three practical steps you can take to help yourself.
5. Are there any other thoughts and insights you have about the “little foxes”? If so, discuss your ideas with a friend or colleague..

Giants: Facing our Vulnerabilities

There are troublemakers lurking out there, waiting to take advantage of our vulnerabilities. King David’s last battlefield experience illustrates this.

Scripture tells us in 2 Sam. 21:15 that once again there was war with Philistia. And once again David and the men of Israel made the familiar trek down to fight at Gob, lying on the border area between the two nations.

However, this time things were different. First, David was probably an older man, lacking the robust strength of his youth. Second, a Philistine giant called something like Ishbi-Benob, was out to get David. The battle commenced and in the midst of the fighting, David became exhausted. It would seem that the giant had been waiting for such a moment—when David was the most vulnerable—in order to make his

move. So his assault was likely a deliberate, premeditated act. You might say that Ishbi-Benob wanted to shish-kebab David.

Interestingly, the text points out that Ishbi-Benob was wearing something “new” on his waist, perhaps a belt or a sword. The interpretation of this is not entirely clear, but its inclusion in the account is significant. One possible interpretation is that he was wearing a belt of honor, suggesting that he was a champion among the Philistines. Another possibility is that he wore a new sword, which may have been forged and dedicated for a specific purpose, such as killing David. Abishai comes to David's aid though, surely at the risk of his own life, and smites the giant and kills him.

Enters the important epilogue: David's valiant men gather around him and make him swear that he will never go into battle again. Why? Well, not just for David's own safety. Something even more important is at stake. It was “in order that the lamp of Israel might not go out”.

What does this phrase mean? As we understand it, David, as king, was like a lamp that reflected the character and purposes of God to Israel and the surrounding peoples. To extinguish this witness would be to endanger God's redemptive purposes for the nations.

Frontier missionaries likewise are lamps to the particular nations and people groups in which they work. We are the light of the world, the Lord tells us (Matt. 5:14). As with David, the forces of darkness seek to prey upon our vulnerabilities in order to diminish the intensity of our light—our witness—among a people group. It's an age-old tactic whose only antidote is to fight the giants and face our vulnerabilities with the strength of the Lord and with the

help of close caring friends.

Applications

Let's look at the biblical text again in 2 Sam. 21:15-17 and do some self-exploration. Read through the eight items below and answer each question.

Take time to discuss your responses with a friend or family.

1. Like David, we all have vulnerabilities.

“worker drift”— the natural tendency whereby life's “currents” divert one's focus (time, activities, resources, and heart direction) to areas that are peripheral to his/her objectives.

These become even more visible for those who are in leadership positions. Sometimes we may not be aware of them until a crisis brings them to light. What are some of your own areas of vulnerability?

2. Apart from their literal meaning, what might the “giants” represent? Are they metaphors for spiritual forces, vulnerabilities, or what?
3. It has been stated that Ishbi-Benob had a premeditated plan for killing David. Do you think there is a similar spiritual strategy to hinder God's life in you and His work through you? If so, how?
4. David, as the leader of Israel, was a lamp reflecting the character and purposes of God. How is this true of your life? List three ways that you are practically doing the same.
5. Let's look at mutual support between workers. What does this passage imply about teamwork, our need for each other, and our willingness to let oth-

ers speak into our lives?

6. David's battlefield experience started with a giant (Goliath) and ended with a giant (Ishbi-Benob). But these were not the last of the giants. Verses 18-22 of chapter 21 goes on to talk about other encounters with giants. Which types of people and which type of gifts are needed to subdue the various giants? Are giants ever finally vanquished?

7. These giants did not just show up one day on the battle line in order to be promptly slain by a God-appointed warrior. Reading between the lines, there must have been many casualties inflicted on Israel's army by the giants. Are casualties among workers inevitable? Which personal wounds are you aware of which have come as a result of your battles with giants? Take time to bring these before the Lord in

prayer.

8 Regarding the giants in our lives, can you make any other applications of this passage for your life, your family, or your team?

Prudence in the Presence of Wolves

Frontier workers must find practical ways to be “shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves” in order not to become prey to the stress-producing “wolves” of missionary life. No one would want to become “lamb chops”! Yet that is basically what Jesus said would happen to people if they did not exercise prudence in their ministry. Consider for instance, His warning in Matt. 10:16: “Behold I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Notice that He did not send His disciples (nor us) out as emboldened lions, but as vulnerable sheep needing the flock and needing the Shepherd. Why such a solemn warning? Because mission life is neither easy nor always safe.

Foxes, Giants, and Wolves

When we first started working in missions as psychologists, we understood that the main struggle for missionaries was in the area of cross-cultural adjustment—"just persevere in language and culture learning and you will probably make it." Well we were right—sort of.

In practically no time, though, we became painfully aware of another significant stressor for missionaries, and one which proved to be our own greatest struggle during our first three years overseas:—trying to harmonize one's background/preferences with the organizational culture of one's mission. Like many missionaries, we soon realized the draining impact of unresolved interpersonal conflict.

Next we became more keenly aware of spiritual warfare. To make a long story short, as we gained even more experience on the field, we also began to see a host of other "wolves"—stressors—which affected us and others in frontier missions.

We soon saw the need to develop a conceptual grid to help appraise the various wolves that are part of missionary life. "CCHHOOPPSS", as in lamb chops, is an acronym we have gradually developed to help remember ten general categories of stressors common to missionaries. We have reproduced this grid below and use it regularly as a member care tool.

Applications.

Read through the ten categories and then write down some of the stressors that you have experienced over the past several months. Put these under a column labeled "struggles." In a second column, "successes," list some of the helpful ways you have dealt with stress during the last several months.

Finally, under a "strategies" column, jot down some of your ideas for better managing stress in the future. Discuss your responses with a friend. The

categories are:

Cultural—getting your needs met in unfamiliar ways: language learning, culture shock, reentry.

Crises—potentially traumatic events, often unexpected: natural disasters, wars, accidents, political instability.

Historical—unresolved past areas of personal struggle: family of origin issues, personal weaknesses.

Human—relationships with family members, colleagues, nationals: raising children, couple conflict, struggles with team members, social opposition.

Occupational—job-specific challenges and pressures: work load, travel schedule, exposure to people with problems, job satisfaction, more training, government "red tape".

Organizational—incongruence between one's background and the organizational ethos: differing with company policies, work style, expectations.

Physical—overall health and factors that affect it: nutrition, climate, illness, aging, environment.

Psychological—overall emotional stability and self-esteem: loneliness, frustration, depression, unwanted habits, developmental issues/stage of life issues.

Support—resources to sustain one's work: finances, housing, clerical and technical help, donor contact, leisure, children's education.

Spiritual—relationship with the Lord: devotional life, subtle temptations, time with other believers, spiritual warfare.

Stress assessment and management must not occur solely at the level of the individual missionary. Rather, it is vital to identify and discuss the stressors that affect missionary families, teams, departments, the region, and the overall mission agency itself. The CCHHOOPPSS tool, if diligently done at least once a year, is a useful means to understand and minimize stress at various levels of the mission

organization. As we deal with the stressors we need to be reminded of Luke 12:32 "Do not fear, little flock, because your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom."

Questions for Discussion

Stress is the response of the whole person to the internal and external demands that we experience. The following questions will help you become more familiar with how stress affects you. It will also look at some ways that you can use to deal with stress. Respond to each of the five questions below and then discuss them as a group. What insights can you get from one another?

1. How do you know when you are experiencing stress? What signals do you receive from your body, behavior, and emotions?
2. How does stress affect your interpersonal relationships?
3. When was the last time you went through a significant period of stress? What was it like? Briefly describe it.
4. What did Jesus do to manage stress—to deal with the wolves and potential wolves of his ministry? There are at least 25 different things he did to manage stress which are recorded in the Gospels. How many can you identify?
5. What helps you to deal with stress, and what helps you keep your life in balance,—keeping the wolves at bay? What does not help?

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