

November 25, 2001

Learning To Take It Seriously

By DEAN NELSON

PASSIVE. He looked just too darn passive. Other times my son and I have flown together he was excited -- almost hyperactive. The engine noise at the start of the runway would get his own engines going. The first time he was on a plane with me Blake was about 3, and as we sped down the runway, he slapped my leg and said, in his Elmer Fudd voice, "This is going to be fun!"

This time was different. Everyone else on the plane was terrified. It was a few weeks before the attacks in New York and Washington, so we didn't have anything that horrifying in our minds. We were flying out of Skopje, Macedonia, during a lull in the fighting there. Our plane felt as if it were slipping backward, the way it feels when a person tries to climb up a slide unsuccessfully.

The passenger across the aisle shook my knee to wake me and told me we were going to make an emergency landing. Then she returned to reading the 23rd Psalm. Her father was hyperventilating, lacing up his shoes so he could run from the wreckage. The cabin was eerily silent and dark, for lack of power. The engine noise made it clear that we were operating on only one.

I looked at my teenage son. Clueless. Listening to hip-hop music on his CD player. I motioned to him and he pulled one headphone away. "We've lost an engine and have to make an emergency landing," I said. He nodded. The way teenagers nod when they're really saying, "Not interested, Dad." Then he returned to his music.

Did he not have any sense of the enormity of this situation? He's 14, was about to enter his first year of high school and was merely acting his age. Which is exactly what concerned me about this trip in the first place.

I had wanted to take him with me, precisely because of his age, to two continents as I conducted interviews for a book. We would be traveling to Tanzania, where the U.S. Embassy was bombed in 1998, to Kosovo, where a war had ended in 1999, and to Macedonia, where a war was possibly just getting started. All three places, the State Department warned, were sites for potential terrorism against Americans. But I had good contacts in each place, and trusted them. Before Sept. 11 those State Department warnings could be ignored.

Blake had traveled. For the last two years he had spent spring break with his church youth group in Ensenada, Mexico, working at an orphanage. What concerned me most was whether he would "get" this trip. Would it make him realize that American life is Disneyland compared to that in virtually every other country on the planet?

The first part of the trip we spent in Tanzania in a village dotted with mud-and-grass huts. I was there to interview two members of the Black Panther Party who have been in exile in Africa for 31 years. Later in the week we went to the Tarangire game preserve. We spent the early part of those days among elephants, zebras, lions, wildebeests, impalas and vultures. We were even mugged by a band of baboons that stole the box lunches right off our laps, then chomped their teeth and hissed at us as if we should feel lucky that they only got our lunches.

In evening interviews the Panthers and I discussed Marxism, socialism, individualism, collectivism, revolution, fear, terrorism, peace, God and other Big Ideas, as well as Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Richard Nixon, J. Edgar Hoover, Charlie Parker and other Big People. Blake listened to every word. Late at night when I would ask about his impressions, he didn't have much to say. Mostly he shrugged his shoulders.

This worried me. Did he realize he was very close to where humanity quite possibly began? That iMacs, Nintendo and Nike were incomprehensible and irrelevant way out here in the bush? He nodded. That teenager's nod.

In addition to the interviews with the Black Panthers, I had scheduled time with families in Kosovo. We flew into Skopje and continued by taxi to Kosovo. The drive was less than an hour and uneventful. But the border was abruptly closed to vehicles just before we got there. The Greek Army controls that region, and the soldiers were in no mood to explain their decision. They were more concerned with weapons smugglers.

Weighed down by backpacks, Blake and I walked the last two miles, past the stranded trucks and cars, avoiding military vehicles speeding by, sweating in the 90-degree temperature and high humidity, choking on the diesel exhaust that turned the sky gray. I kept looking at him. No expression.

That night we called home from an Internet cafe. My wife, Marcia, was not there, so we left a message on the answering machine. What Blake told her was technically accurate -- that we were in Kosovo, but since the border was closed we had had to walk across. But Marcia had been reading the State Department Web site that encouraged Americans to evacuate Macedonia and southern Kosovo. Even though Blake said "walk across," she no doubt heard "we snuck in, dodged bullets, and barely missed the land mines and other booby traps." I knew she was worried about my taking Blake on this trip. What I didn't know until later was that his call sent her into full panic. But I was with a former Army doctor who heads a United States humanitarian group, so it didn't feel risky to have Blake there with me.

In Kosovo we spent part of a day interviewing the family of the 11-year-old girl who was raped and killed by a U.S. serviceman there last year. It was excruciating. I have an 11-year-old daughter. The family brought out pictures of their girl, alive and dead. Her backpack still hangs on the wall of the two-room house. We visited her grave. The headstone was designed by Heart to Heart International, a humanitarian agency, and paid for by donations from American servicemen. We all wept -- even the tough young Albanian interpreters who all looked like James Dean.

We drove through several villages with some houses still roofless, where weeds have filled in the bombed-out, abandoned blocks. We visited a family where the mother was dying of breast cancer. Her husband was brain-damaged, and her children were severely handicapped mentally and physically. She whispered that she was worried about what would happen to them if she died. We found out later that she died a few hours after we left.

We spent part of a day at Bondsteel, the sprawling United States military base in Kosovo. Thousands of men and women were surrounded by sophisticated war machinery. Blake liked the Burger King on the base. Later, in Skopje, we went to McDonald's at his request and to Mother Teresa's birthplace at mine.

Our airplane made it over the mountains of Macedonia despite the lost engine, and approached Sofia, Bulgaria. We could see the runway with emergency vehicles and people in foil suits, all, happily, unnecessary.

The airline put us up in a fancy hotel in Sofia for the night. In the restaurant there was a giddy euphoria from other passengers grateful to be alive. Given how much they were eating and drinking, they were really appreciating life that night. When I asked Blake how he felt, he said he had been listening to his music during the scary part.

I wondered how much of these last two weeks had gotten through to him. It was impossible to assess.

I ordered a seafood feast for our dinner at the hotel. When it arrived, he gazed at it for several seconds.

"Exactly how are we supposed to eat this in light of what we have seen for the last two weeks?" he asked.

Whew. He got it.

DEAN NELSON directs the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego.