



# A RADICAL EDGE

LESSONS IN FAITH & LEADERSHIP

Since writing *A Radical Heart – Lessons in Love and Leadership* in 2019 as an article for the UK's Association for Management Education and Development e-O&P journal, I have sometimes been asked by curious readers, "What happened next?" The article was a simple account of my work alongside Jasmin, a woman among the poorest in the Philippines, and observing how she lives her remarkable life in that context. I continue to feel humbled, challenged and inspired by her example.

We left off her story when a storm hit an island in East Philippines, where Jasmin grew up and where her parents live now. Their home was completely destroyed by a mountain mudslide and severe flooding. That wasn't the end of the story though, but the opening of yet more incredible chapters in Jasmin's life, faith and leadership that I will seek to capture and express, as authentically as I can, in this short paper too. Words can never do the vividness of real life justice, but I will do my best.

## TYPHOON

To be honest, I can only imagine how it must feel: to rush into darkness in the middle of the night, torrential rain pouring down and, just seconds later, a thick flood of rocks and mud crashing through your home, destroying everything you own and have worked for. This was December 2018 when a typhoon brought widespread and heart-breaking devastation across the Philippines. The poor have no insurance and no savings to fall back on and to recover. I hate that the poor are so vulnerable.

Jasmin had arrived a few days earlier to visit her parents for Christmas. That, itself, was a miracle because a friend had suddenly felt inspired to pay her fare home. It had made it possible for her to travel 12 hours by ship just before the winds and rains struck hard. Jasmin carried bags of lovingly-wrapped gifts with her for poor children in a jungle village where we had taught together. She was determined that they should feel a tangible sense of God's love for them at this special time.

On that fateful night, the rains fell heavier than usual and Jasmin had an intuition that something was wrong. She cautioned her family to prepare for an emergency evacuation if needed, but they just laughed and told her not to be paranoid. Late at night, however, they heard and felt a strange and unnerving thud, followed by a neighbour calling out desperately to them to leave the house – now. The mountainside behind the house had broken away and smashed through their ground floor.

Jasmin leapt up and immediately ushered her family outside. Startled, they quickly grabbed what they could and ran out into the pouring rain, dressed only in shorts and t-shirts, and raced up a nearby hillside to safety. Within no time at all, the house had filled up with dirty water, and all Jasmin's family could do was to stand and watch helplessly. She turned on her phone and sent me some photos. I felt absolutely horrified by the dramatic scene unfolding in front of my eyes.

Yet what happened next astonished me even more. Having ensured her parents, children and family were safe, Jasmin hitch-hiked a ride on a passing motorbike into a nearby town, bought bags of warm bread and returned to distribute them to her now soaked-to-the-skin neighbours. She then returned to the town to cajole local officials into assembling an emergency response before, finally, setting off to search for a safe and dry room to rent. She sent me a brief note: "Jesus is with us."

## VILLAGE

Jasmin waited for the waters to begin to subside and then returned to the house to see what she could salvage. It felt distressing to see the children's gifts floating on the muddy water, yet she was relieved she had wrapped them in plastic bags so that quite a few could be saved. In the following days, she bought additional emergency supplies of rice, noodles and other essentials and gift-wrapped them all beautifully. "I want the poor to feel loved, not only to receive practical help."

The jungle village was, however, cut off by a raging, swollen river and, like Jasmin's parents, the people living there had lost everything in the floods. Jasmin, who can't swim, called a cousin to help her and he soon arrived with a makeshift raft. I pleaded with her to wait until the water calmed down. Nevertheless, she pressed ahead, navigated the river, trudged and biked through sodden forest and rice fields and handed out precious gifts and parcels to astonished and grateful families.

I felt alarmed by some of the personal risks she was taking, both in challenging passive government officials to take action – which can itself prove dangerous in that context – and in risking drowning to get immediate relief supplies to the poor. I asked her, quizzically, what possessed her to do it. She looked at me directly and spoke firmly: "It's what Jesus would do." I reflected by contrast on how self-focused I could be, prioritising my own wants and needs over those of others people.

### CANDLES

Some months later, in a city now, Jasmin saw an elderly woman sitting on the ground beside a busy highway. As she approached, the woman stood up to try to attract her attention. The woman lives on the pavement, at the roadside, and tries to eek out a living by selling candles to passers-by on their way to church. She reminded me of 'The Little Match Girl' in the Danish fable. She beckoned to Jasmin with a smile, inviting her to buy a candle.

Jasmin stopped and asked this stranger: "Lola," (which is, in the Philippines, a respectful way to address an older woman, showing deference to her age) "how old are you?" "I don't know", she replied. "The last birthday I can remember was when I was 34." I found myself wondering, silently, what had happened in her life when she was 34. Jasmin responded warmly, with admiration, "And here you are, still working hard to make a living under the heat of the sun."

“Would you like to buy a candle?”, the woman asked. The tone in her voice suggested she was bracing herself for disappointment, that same disappointment she had felt day after day, year after year, on so many occasions. After all, there were other people selling candles too, so what hope did she have? “How much for a candle?”, Jasmin asked. “2 pesos”, she replied. Jasmin said, “I will take 10 candles”, then slipped a 500 pesos note into the woman’s hand. It was all she had.

“But I don’t have any change for such a large amount”, the woman exclaimed. “How about you keep the candles and pay me next time you pass by, when you have some smaller change?” Jasmin replied softly, “Lola, this is a gift to you from Jesus. Please accept it as a gift from Him.” At that, the woman threw her arms around Jasmin’s neck, burst into tears, and cried, “Maam, thank you for helping me!” Jasmin hugged her back and whispered gently, “Pray, and say thank you to Jesus.”

Being curious, I asked Jasmin what had just happened, and tears welled up in her eyes. “I remember selling candles as a child, how hard it was. I wasn’t good with maths and so, if I made a mistake when giving people change, I had to pay it back out of my own tiny earnings. I know what it is to be poor.” So, I asked about her choosing this woman, this one person, this stranger. Jasmin responded, “At least, for one day in her life, she knows how it feels to be loved, to be blessed by God.”

I fell silent. I was astonished by Jasmin’s willingness to give everything she has to a person in need, trusting that God would somehow meet her own needs too. I was also amazed, also, by her extreme generosity. After all, paying a fair price for the candles would have been reasonable. Yet, for Jasmin, that wouldn’t have been enough. All I could see now were images of Jesus, touching the lives of the poor and most vulnerable: “I have come to bring good news to the poor.”

## COVID

The following year, the Covid-19 pandemic arrived and the Philippines went into strict lockdown. The effects were catastrophic for the poor, especially since it cut off their livelihoods by preventing them from working. It created great fear too, particularly for those with no food and no access to medical care or help. I was afraid for Jasmin, living with her children in a crowded 'slum' and so vulnerable. All Jasmin could think about were the poor living outside on the open streets.

One day, Jasmin wrapped her face in a thin headscarf, the best personal protective equipment she could manage, then prayed to God and went out to the local market. She had scraped together enough money to buy 50kg of rice and gave it out to poverty-stricken day workers. They were living at subsistence level and had been left destitute by the effects of the quarantine. In doing so, she quite literally saved their lives. "God calls us to be wise but not to be safe. Be safe – but not too safe."

The year moved on and the Covid-19 crisis dragged on too. Jasmin continued to save hard, living on very little herself so that she could share what she had with those in greatest need. I tried to convince her to buy more for herself but she refused. She prayed to God, as always, donned a face mask and headed out. One family in a nearby 'slum' revealed that they had barely survived until she arrived. They had been living on boiled water with a little sugar stirred into it. No rice, and little hope.

Jasmin then went to a nearby squatter camp where people were living precariously under fragile shelters. A group surrounded her when she, this masked stranger, at first appeared. Some men snatched some of the bags of rice she was carrying and rushed off to avoid being caught. At that, she lifted her mask and yelled assertively: "Bring that back now, or I leave here with everything I came with." Slowly, the men reappeared, with guilty expressions on their faces now, and handed them back to her.

Jasmin pleaded with them: "We are poor, but this is no way to conduct ourselves. We need to learn to pray and share what we have, like Jesus." At just 5 feet (152 cm) tall, Jasmin can present a surprisingly imposing stature. I was reminded of a story she told me once before where an arrogant boss had patronised her. She responded half-jokingly with, "Just remember it was David who killed Goliath." This time, she held out the sacks and cash, and every family went home with something real.

I asked Jasmin if she had felt even a little scared, to be confronted and robbed like that in broad daylight. After all, she was alone and anything could have happened. "I wasn't afraid", she said, "because I had prayed hard before I set out. I know what it is to be poor, and I have lived my entire life among the poor." I felt speechless. She was willing to risk putting her own life on the line, at times it seems quite literally, including for people who are willing to try to take advantage of her.

I think I might have acted very differently in that situation, annoyed by their attitude and cautious for my own safety. By contrast, she showed courage, empathy, faith and love. Soon after this incident, Jasmin heard a sharp disturbance outside of her own boarding house. It was two neighbours in a knife fight and had started over one person showing rations she had received to another. The other, worried about her own family facing starvation, took it as an insult, as bragging, and flew at her.

Without hesitation, Jasmin leapt outside, into the street and straight into the midst of the affray. She ran in between them, held a safer space between them and calmed them down. I asked what on earth she was thinking of to do that. She replied, "They were acting out of desperation, out of fear." Jasmin gave the aggrieved party what little of her own cash she had left. The woman burst into tears. She could now buy food for her baby. Enough to survive. Life is hard-edged for the poor.

## COMPASSION

Some weeks later, Jasmin headed into town to buy essential supplies for her own family. As she stepped down off a jeepney (public transport), a young boy caught her eye. He was guiding cars into parking spaces. The sun was beating down and it was steaming hot. Exhausted, he slumped down against a wall for a break. Jasmin noticed he looked weak and unwell. She walked across to him, spoke gently then reached out and touched his face with her hand. His skin was burning with fever.

She urged him to stay there and wait while she ran quickly to find somewhere that she could buy medicine, food and drink. Jasmin then returned and explained she would take him home, reassuring him: "Everything will be OK. I will give your family the money that you could have earned in 2 weeks, along with the food, so that you can rest to recover." The boy looked up weakly at this stranger. He couldn't speak...and just cried. She helped him into a jeepney and honoured her promise.

I asked Jasmin why she had taken such a risk, to touch a person with clear signs of fever in the midst of a Covid-19 pandemic. She looked tearful as she answered. "I imagined how I would have felt if I was that teenager." She couldn't bear to leave him alone, so very sick. She gave what little she had so that his family would not become destitute. I flashed back in my imagination to the parable of the good Samaritan. Jasmin loves Jesus and is willing to get involved. I might well have just walked by.

## CHRISTMAS

Towards the end of that year, Jasmin had a vision to provide Christmas gifts for 600 poor children whose families had been impacted by the lockdown and typhoons. When she told me about this, I have to confess I felt anxious. I admired her compassion and trust in God but couldn't see how she could make this possible. I suggested she reduce the number to 100 to make it more realistic. She, however, took a leap of faith and ordered the gifts. She told me to stop over-thinking and to pray.

“When I was a small child, living in dire poverty, every Christmas Santa would come to our village and distribute gifts. I would run up to him, jumping with excitement, but he never gave me anything. He only delivered gifts to the wealthier families. I felt sad – and sure it must be because I wasn’t good enough. I only learned in later years that they had paid him.” She was going to write on every gift: ‘Jesus loves you.’ She wanted the poor children to know that they are loved and matter too.

I now discovered that Jasmin planned to send 400 of the gifts 3 remote island communities. “How will you do that during the lockdown?”, I asked, bewildered. Fast-forward to 2 weeks before Christmas, however, and the carefully-wrapped parcels had meandered had their way successfully across the Philippines on trucks, ships, small boats, motorbikes and on foot. She had been determined they should arrive by 17 December. On 18 December, a typhoon struck and all transport was suspended.

Jasmin took the remaining 200 gifts to the squatters’ camp on Christmas Eve, the same place where she had been ‘robbed’ previously. A concerned friend went with her this time to help ensure her safety. He remarked, in amazement: “Jasmin makes the impossible possible.” 196 children had arrived, jumping wildly with excitement, and went home thrilled. As Jasmin was about to leave, 4 more children appeared, as if out of nowhere, and looked very poor. “Maam, is there anything left for us?”

As Jasmin placed the last gifts into those final 4 children’s hands, all I could imagine was her looking up at me afterwards with characteristically wide grin, and biting her lip to not chastise me for my lack of faith. “Jesus is with us. Light shines in darkness. Remember the poor.”



# NICK WRIGHT

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*[Copies of previous article, A Radical Heart - Lessons in Love & Leadership, and follow-up article, A Radical Vision - Lessons in Hope & Leadership, are available free from Nick Wright.]*