

Open Arms - Malawi

Open Arms is an orphanage in the city of Blantyre, the commercial capital of Malawi in southern Africa. Formerly a British protectorate, Malawi was known as Nyasaland, gaining her independence in 1994 and now referred to as the "warm heart of Africa". Malawi is burdened with massive social and economic problems plus AIDS, 35% plus of the adult population being HIV positive. Many African countries are similar but Malawi is one of the poorest by far and her government one of the most corrupt.

Open Arms is a registered charity and is currently managed by a dedicated and selfless English couple, Neville and Rosemary. Compared with the other ninety or so orphanages in Blantyre, Open Arms has very good facilities for its forty babies, all under the age of two. However, they desperately lack the funding to enable them to buy medicines especially the very expensive medicines required for HIV infection which represents 40-50% of the babies, some of whom are very sick. It was with these babies that I worked most.

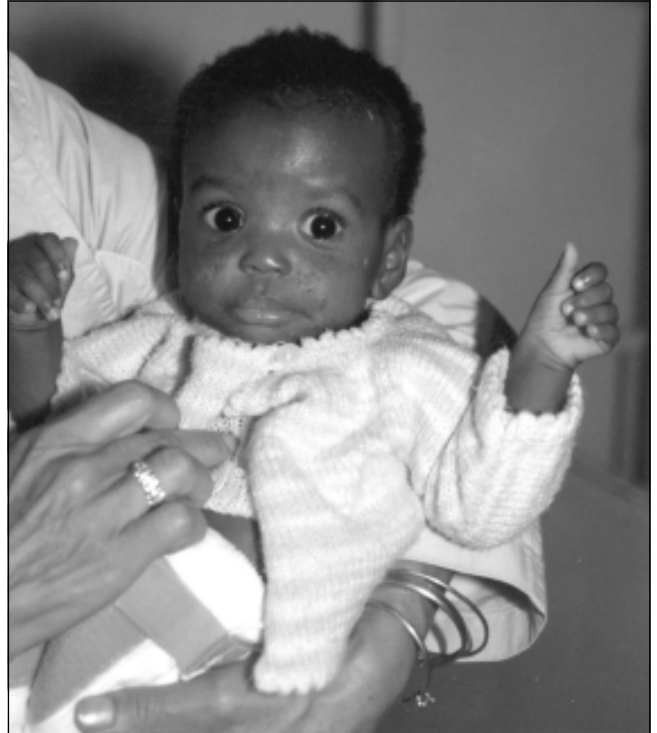
Open Arms is a place of desperate sadness and uplifting joy. I heard many stories like that of Sarah, HIV positive, an angel a few months old and very sick and of Johanni, also HIV positive, so brave and at 18 months old fighting for his life.

I felt emotionally overwhelmed and inadequate, and all my insecurities came flooding in: who was I to think that I was able to work with this amount of pain and suffering, who was I to walk into this orphanage and suggest to the dedicated people who were working there every day of the week, every week of the year, that I might, during my brief visit, hope to be able to help in some way?

I began to realise the importance of the work I had been doing with Mike Boxhall over the previous 18 months. That was very reassuring. Mike's courses had, without me realising it, helped to prepare me for the work that I was to do here.

I experienced a surge of insecurity

It soon became apparent to me, observing the very youngest of these babies, that many of them were in a deep state of trauma and shock. Apart from having to cope with the symptoms of their disease, they were also holding the trauma of having lost their mothers either during or shortly after birth, then of having been removed from the security of the extended family. In the orphanage there was constant noise and activity. This must have been a terrifying experience for them. Their physical needs were seen to, but no one there was able to give them a deeper level of attention. And this is where craniosacral work is so useful.



Sarah

There were hard-working women employed as "mothers" to the six or seven babies they each had in their care. There was no doubt that by the time the babies were toddlers the majority of them had adapted exceedingly well to their environment and were happy, bouncy, noisy and gorgeous! It was the smaller babies, those who had only been at Open Arms for a short while and those who were sick who appeared to be most in need of special attention.

I would like to tell you a little about Sarah and Johanni whom I mentioned earlier and who were both HIV positive and very sick.

Firstly Sarah - just thinking of her brings tears to my eyes - has died since my return to England. Sarah's mother had died giving birth and her father and extended family were not able to look after her. Through the social system she was lucky enough to have been sent to Open Arms and had been there about six months when I saw her. She was very small and underweight for her age and had been constantly in and out of hospital with the effects of dehydration. She suffered badly from what they called aids eczema but none of this could cloud her beaming smile and the joy of existence in those huge shining eyes. My sessions with Sarah were true joint practice.

The work that took place with Johanni was extraordinary. Johanni must be the saddest child that I have ever seen. The look of pain and distrust in his eyes was heart-rending and haunting and made him almost unapproachable.

Carol Bamber

Johanni had been most unwell. His breathing was extremely restricted. He was gasping for breath and in great distress. This is how I found him in his cot, utterly miserable. This initial session was quite short as I was feeling overwhelmed myself and Johanni was in such a state of distress. However, there was enough time for me to hold Johanni in my arms and to have a deep sense of his pain and for him to become a little calmer.

It had been my intention to work with Johanni a few days later, but things developed otherwise. I had been working with other babies and had set aside part of the morning to be with Johanni. However, as he was better in himself, he was to be taken out for a walk. As he was leaving he turned and looked straight into my eyes for what seemed some time. It was a very poignant and meaningful moment. I had a sense of loss at the missed opportunity to work with him, but at the same time it felt complete.

Next day Johanni was not at all well. I had to put on rubber gloves for my own protection, before lifting him onto my knee where he sat rigidly clutching a piece of bread. I was very aware of his pain and the distance I had to give him. After some time just being there with him I gently put my hand on his sacrum. He was unable to make eye contact at all. With my other hand I gently approached his occiput but this was obviously too threatening for him and so I picked him up and we went outside where his attention was taken by the other children playing. Again I sat with him on my knee and, although he was still not able to look at me, I went into a deep still place within myself from where I held him, sensing the tide and expecting nothing. After what seemed a long time, he flopped forward, resting his head on my chest and stayed there softening and relaxing. When he was ready he sat up and there were moments when he looked deeply into my eyes, hopefully beginning to find some sense of who he was. He was not too well again that day with noxious green pus exuding from his ears, eyes and nose but I felt we had made huge progress in this session.

The following afternoon most of the babies were outside and Sarah, without her nappy and with a very sore bottom, was lying in a rubber ring. She greeted me with a smile and a chuckle and I played with her and held her. How much more relaxed she was now. Whilst on the floor with Sarah, I noticed Johanni sitting only a few feet away but with his back turned towards us. He was quite motionless and inert and completely isolated despite the activity all around him and so I extended my awareness to include him whilst I was working with Sarah.

I moved over to Johanni and sat with him on the floor and talked to him gently. He was looking away from me although



Johanni with Carol Bamber

we had had brief eye contact so I held the space from within myself and after a while placed my hand on his back between his shoulder blades. There I sensed a lot more space within him and, although he was still looking away from me, I felt a softening and expansion under my hand. At this moment I experienced a surge of insecurity. Was he pushing me away or was my sense of what was happening real? Trust the tide, trust the tide, I repeated over in my mind and continued to hold him, just lightening my contact a little, giving him more space. I quietly moved my hand from his back and ran my fingers gently down his arm to his hand and, at that moment, he took hold of my finger and held it. Something had changed. I hardly dared believe that we might now be reaching the point where he was meeting me and was able to find some trust in me. It was a moment of awe and total absorption.

There was a yellow duck, a squeaky toy, to one side of Johanni and so, with my free hand, I slowly picked up the duck and brought it round in front of him. As I did this Johanni lunged at the duck with his free hand and I had a moment of insecurity, was this him expressing rejection or were we working together? My answer came very clearly as I passed the duck in front of him again and again he raised his hand to hit the duck. We were having a game! And our game progressed to playing peek-a-boo with the duck, me squeaking the duck and gently pushing it into his tummy. Johanni began to smile and then to laugh and giggle and this went on and on. Johanni brought the session to an end by looking straight into my eyes, as if to say "thanks a lot for that" and then hurriedly crawled off back into the house!

I sat for a few moments checking out how I was and then followed Johanni into the house. It was as if he had been waiting for me to come in as he looked straight at me. I sat in a chair and he crawled right over to me and pulled himself up to a standing position leaning into me. We continued playing, now

it was clapping hands! Again he looked right into my eyes and showed me that he wanted to be on my knee. Once he was on my knee, I realised that the noxious smell which had been so strong yesterday was not there today, the suppurations from his ears and nose were not obvious and his breathing was much easier. He flopped onto my chest again and rested there awhile before becoming fascinated with and excited by my bracelets. At this point, Neville came over to join us and remarked that all the staff had noticed how much better Johanni seemed today and how wonderful it was to see him playing and laughing with me. We talked some more about how I was working and what I was "doing". In the meantime Johanni had discovered the delights of my bag and was, with great gusto, removing all the contents, examining them carefully and then disposing of them onto the floor!

At teatime one of the "mothers" came over and took Johanni away to be changed and fed. I was so delighted that he went happily, unlike our previous partings, and later I observed

him in his high chair enthusiastically covering his face with food like all the other toddlers!

how wonderful it was to
see him playing and
laughing

It was very hard to leave Open Arms. I questioned myself again as to whether it was right to work with these children at all. I was now to return to England. I felt that any help at all, even to just one child is of immense value. Johanni won't live for long but to have seen the joy in his face and to have heard his laughter left me with no doubt as to the value of this work with these children. □

Trip to a Ukrainian Orphanage



Photo: © Judy Clover

I originally decided to explore the possibility of doing something to help orphaned children following a visit made by a friend last year to an orphanage. I contacted the airline (Ukraine Airlines) to ask if they would waive the excess baggage allowance. They allowed me a total of 50 kilogrammes for humanitarian aid. I was able to collect clothes and shoes for the children from friends and colleagues, who were very generous. A friend gave me a large supply of echinacea, to

boost the children's resistance to infection. The trauma and excitement involved in making the arrangements were great! The orphanage I originally planned to go to turned me down four days before I was due to go and alternative arrangements had to be made. I found a Ukrainian student nurse who could help me. He belonged to the Scout organisation of the Ukraine and arranged help through them. So with only someone to meet me at the airport, off I went.

I went to the airport with 55 kilos of luggage and two pieces of hand luggage that were full of shoes. The plane was not full and they did not charge me for the excess baggage, on learning what was in the bags. I arrived in Kiev airport and was directed from the green to the red channel because of the amount of luggage. They were interested in whether I had sweets or food and then waved me out of the airport. I had previously been warned that customs may keep the bags and say they would forward the goods to the orphanage (perhaps selecting exactly what items they would prefer to keep). I was told to stand my ground and was not looking forward to this.

Three people were waiting for me with a mini-bus, which was arranged by the Greek Catholic church and I was asked to go to the church on Sunday to pay the priest for the mini-bus. I was taken to the Greek Catholic charity home for the night. This had four beds (two bunks) in a small room - the luggage had to stay outside the door. Breakfast cost 20p.

The following morning, I waited for someone to take me to some orphanages. Eventually Natalia, an 18 year old university student from the Scout organisation, arrived. She had a list of all the orphanages in Kiev and she gave me the choice - did I want juvenile delinquents, the mentally subnormal or 'just' an orphanage where the children have no parents? I opted for the latter. We used public transport of metro and trains which cost about 7p a journey.

The deputy director of the school I chose (all orphanages are called schools) was slightly amazed and amused when he heard what I wanted to do and said that nobody had ever offered to do this before. But he thought that giving the children a massage would be possible and he would consult the director. The school had 98 children aged between 7 and 16.

The next day I was to meet Natalia at the church at 10 am. Having got lost, I arrived there exasperated at 11.30 to find, much to my relief, that I had not missed her. We then took the clothes off to the school. I had also bought clothes for a younger age group and, later in the week, I was able to take these to an orphanage for disabled children.

The director met me at the school on Sunday and, in a very brusque manner, asked me many questions and told me to turn up at 9am on Monday to meet the doctors. I then moved into the university students' accommodation which was walking distance from the school. The accommodation left a lot to be desired and I got a real taste of how people live in the Ukraine. The communal showers, which were in a separate building from the living accommodation, were only available between 9 and 11pm on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Hot water was also available for two hours in the evenings and I was not able to sit on a toilet for that week! I was advised to squat over the toilet bowl, by standing on the toilet. My shoes were stood in urine on the floor and the stench made me hold my breath.

On Monday morning, I appeared in the director's office, waited while she busied herself signing and stamping papers and then, in a very hurried manner, she showed me around the school. The classrooms had no more than 10 pupils in a class. They had a part-time psychologist who had a very plush room and finally I was put in front of two doctors, who after questioning me, gave me a white coat, took me to the side room and unfolded a massage table. A nurse then brought the children to the room all day.

My brief was to provide craniosacral therapy and massage, using trigger points. I was basically practising acupressure, from my experience as an acupuncturist. The children suffered mainly from enuresis, scoliosis and had multiple deformities. Most of them had tension around T9 - which is not surprising since this area supplies the adrenal glands. Some of the children were also slow in their speech. They spoke Russian and I spoke English, yet they did everything I asked. I could smell cigarette smoke even on the clothes of the young children. Some of the children were very aggressive, but meek on the couch when they were receiving attention. Towards the end of the week, the children would come past a few times a day for kisses and cuddles and go off again.

I saw 15 children a day and was watched carefully for the first two days. Wednesday was a public holiday and, because the doctors were not present in the school, I wasn't allowed access that day. However, one of the doctors asked to be treated for sciatica; the next day they did not scrutinize my work so closely and, by Friday, I was allowed to work with the children on my own even though the doctors were not there.

On Saturday, Natalia came to the school to translate for me. We spoke to the deputy director, who said that they were pleased with the results of the work and agreed to have other people come from Britain to help in similar ways. He said that the school would arrange accommodation at a local hostel and send invitations in order to obtain visas. I already have someone else that wants to go at the end of June.

Socially: I went to see Swan Lake at the Opera house. Tickets ranged from 4p to £15, making the cheaper seats available to most people! (The average monthly salary is about £60.) I also had a joyful evening when Natalia invited me to her birthday party. Out of nothing, and in dire surroundings, she was able to produce food that was beautifully presented, tasted good and was thoroughly enjoyed. I was touched by the melodious voices when the people there sang folk songs and played guitar.

What I got from the week was great joy. The children bought me sweets and apples. They brought their pet hamster for me to admire. There was a lot of laughter and giggling and they also brought their friends to say hello! Some of the children were dirty, their socks were black, had holes in them and their feet smelt. Some of their clothes were dirty and needed repairing. I also got the impression that their bodies had not seen water for a while. Sometimes it was a riot in that room. The children were expected to line up on a bench to wait their turn. But they got restless and started running around the room, under the table and occasionally they were aggressive to the child being treated possibly because they were not receiving the attention.

I would recommend this experience to anyone who wants to make a difference and hope that I can continue what I have started. □

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