

Half a Truth?

Phil Sparrow struggles with the task of telling it like it is. Phil and Julie Sparrow are TEAR Australia fieldworkers in north Afghanistan. They have a beautiful 6-month-old daughter, Pieta.



November 15

Rajab is sick. Ismael and Akbar had been telling me earlier in the week that Rajab was sick, Rajab, the poor man from Saidabad village. I didn't think much about it. Someone is always sick; there are always people that Ismael is worrying about and upset about. But it seemed pressing to them, so yesterday we and a few of the village men went and visited him. He lives next to the woman whose husband is in jail, down a little alley. His yard is big, though empty. He had been building a very impressive platform for his well, which was now all nicely fitted with the rings that the village has been working on. It is clear he was taking pride in doing a good job.

His house seemed pretty typical to me, but they all look fairly similar in the villages. A gumbaz house, domed roof and low doors. We ducked, went through the door, shooed out two chickens on the way. Through another low door I could see Ismael and Akbar standing over a large lump on the floor.

The room was bare, and with a shock I began to understand how poor Rajab was. There were no floor coverings - just exposed, damp mud. The walls were bare, the window was without curtains or glass. There was a single hurricane lantern for lighting.

I look closer at the lump and realise it is a body; it is Rajab curled up in a foetal position, under some coarse blankets. He will not wake to our calling and shaking

him produces only a few moans. It sounds as though I must be stupid, but only now was it dawning on me how sick this poor man is. I stand there, vacantly, wondering what on earth we do now. A young boy is crouched near the sleeping Rajab, crying and angrily brushing away tears. "Where's his wife?" I ask.

'Died. She died seven years ago.'

'Relatives?'

All in Iran.'

'Children?'

'Just this boy, and one older one.'

'Where's he?'

'Picking cotton. For 20 days work, he earns one ser of cotton.'

'What's that worth?'

'Two lac.'

Two dollars, I think. And not knowing what I am doing, I take off my shoes and walk around to where Rajab is lying. I kneel down and put my hand on his head and listen to him breathing.

His breath is noisy and with each exhalation comes a little moan. I recognise him

now, one of the very poor men who was in our first men's loan group. He bought a goat or a cow or something and made a little profit with it.

'He hasn't eaten for 10 days', his son says.

'Anything?'

'An egg or two, some chai.'

'Who is cooking for you?' I ask.

'The older brother cooks nan', one of the village men answers.

Lord heal this man, I pray quietly, heal this old man. He has no one to look after him, Lord, heal him.

I repeat my pray over and over. I feel helpless and shocked and upset and a whole flush of disabling emotions. I can't believe how few things he has in his house. Everything he owns could be put in a single bag. Two single scrawny chickens in the yard.

Rajab's forehead is hot and I think he probably has some bad chest infection or maybe pneumonia, maybe TB. I tuck the blanket around him and get up and we put

our shoes back on and trace our way across the yard. The chickens squawk out of our way, and one slips back in the room as we leave.

It is getting very cold. There was frost on the ground the other morning and the mountains are cloaked in snow. It is hard to believe how quickly the cold weather has come. It is dark now by 5.45pm, shopkeepers are locking up by 5.00. It has rained several times in the last week, the ground is thick and muddy and the trees are looking increasingly skeletal. Khunuk mekhori? has become the greeting now: 'are you eating the cold?'

No gas this morning. None yesterday either. No electricity for over a week now. Kathy, at the team meeting last night told how she has been hearing how the gas shortage is hitting people. City gas, seeming like a miracle after there has been none for so many years, and people were lulled into believing the supply would be endless. So they spent all the money they were putting aside for winter fuel, on having a gas line installed. 100 lak, 140 lak. Just as it was installed, the gas is cut off. Nothing to cook on or heat their homes with. Angry, people went to the local elders, the kalantars. 'What should I do', he said. 'Can I make the gas come?'

November 18

We had an English lesson today, practised past, present and future tense, and it was nice to see that everyone – bar Ghulam Hazrat, who is still struggling with the basic concepts, did well. Then at the end of the class, Engineer Saeb said, in simple English, 'Rajab has died'. The contrast between the simplicity of the lesson and the gravity of his statement caught me off guard. He repeated: Rajab is dead.

This is the man I prayed for last week, who I mentioned in church, who I thought about and told God about constantly through the last week.

He died during the weekend. Why? What happened? Engineer didn't know. A person came to his house and told him.

Liisa says that a sister of his has come from somewhere to take care of his two sons. I am glad of this but it does little to ameliorate the sorrow and anger I feel at his death. And it does nothing to lessen the senselessness of his death.

It may seem odd to begin an article with these few pages from my journal. But Steve has asked me to write something about Beyond Survival.

Something, as I recall him saying, about people getting beyond the point where they are just managing to live, and in fact are beginning to thrive. Beginning to really live. Life as it could be, not as it so often is.

That was what Steve asked me to write about. At the time, I was in Australia and I think, having been speaking about Afghanistan and our work here to lots of groups of interested people had been encouraging, uplifting. So the idea of writing about getting beyond survival appealed.

But as I sit down, now that I'm back in Afghanistan, I am surprised at how difficult it is to write such an article. I sat here and started it ten different times, and each time it felt like I was telling only half a story, only half of the truth. So that is why I have ended up beginning with Rajab's story.

The question is, how shall I end? I shall begin the ending by saying that on returning here, I heard that Rajab's elder son has got a good job. He ended up being trained in concrete fabrication in the well-upgrading project that we are facilitating at Saidabad, and he did so well that he is now working in the nearby town as a concrete worker. This is a direct outcome of our project putting effort into training village people, rather than using outside workers. So instead of Rajab's son continuing as a landless labourer, he is able to earn an actual wage. He is no longer just surviving.

Another good story from Saidabad is about the schools. We started stimulating interest in schooling some time back – about May last year. Found a few literate women. Encouraged them. Helped them get some supplies. Before long, there was

a school running, with 30 students. Not bad in a village of 700 people. Then there were two classes, with about 50 students, and another teacher came on board. The students each gave 3000 Afis for the week's teaching and their parents kept up with their sons and daughters progress, not wanting their money to go to waste.

Just this week I have heard that there are now four classes in Saidabad. Almost every child in the village is going to school and the teachers are getting supplies themselves from the booksellers. Today, as we walked through the village, I saw child after child scurrying up the muddy paths, a little bag bulging with books slung over their shoulders. Some boys stopped near us as we examined a newly-upgraded well.

With a little cajoling, they opened the bags and pulled out their Dari books. 'What's that letter?', we asked.

'Pey.'

'And that one?'

'Jihm.'

Saidabad is moving beyond survival. The well project that we assisted with means that instead of muddy, gaping, froggy pits, every house in the village has a concrete lined, chlorinated well. People say that repetitive gastrointestinal problems are already less than they used to be. The schools mean that children, formerly illiterate and unschooled are now getting an education. And individual families, like Rajab's are getting access to some training that results in work. There is a huge amount to be done. And contemplating that, is depressing and difficult and often feels like just too much. But people are also getting ahead and moving on from just coping, and that is the other side of the story, and it is the other half of the truth.



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