

FINDING MY FATHER'S FAITH

(Condensed from an article by Steve Saint in the Christian Reader)

For years I'd thought Timbuktu was a made-up name for "the ends of the earth." When I found out it was a real place - an African town actually called Tombouctou - I had to go there. In 1985 on a fact-finding trip to West Africa for Mission Aviation Fellowship, the opportunity came. I'd hitched a ride from Bamako, Mali on a six seat Navajo aeroplane chartered by UNICEF. They were scheduled to pick up two doctors which meant I'd have to find another way home, but I decided to take the chance. So there I was, standing by the plane on the windswept outskirts of the famous Berber outpost. There was not a spot of natural green anywhere in the desolate brown Saharan landscape. Dust blew across the sky, blotting out the sun as I squinted in the 110-degree heat, trying to make out the mud-walled buildings of the village of 20,000 people.

The pilot said: "Try the marketplace. Someone there might have a truck. But be careful, Westerners don't last long in the desert if the truck breaks down, which often happens." The Sahara had already taken a toll on me. Between the harsh environment and starving people, I was in both an emotional and spiritual desert.

The town's open-air marketplace was crowded. Men and women wore flowing robes and turbans as protection against the sun. Most of the Berbers' robes were dark blue, with 30 feet of material in their turbans alone. The men were well-armed with scimitars and knives. I felt eyes watching me suspiciously. Nothing could be trusted here. These people had once been prosperous and self-sufficient. Now even their land had turned against them. Drought had turned rich grasslands to desert. Unrelenting sun and storms had nearly annihilated all animal life. People were dying by the thousands.

I approached person after person trying to find someone who spoke English. Finally a local gendarme understood my broken French. Eyes widened in his shaded face. "No truck," he shrugged. Then he added, "No road. Only sand." At least a dozen small children jumped and danced around me, begging for coins, my pen, and other souvenirs. *This situation is extreme*, I thought, trying not to panic. *What should I do?*

Suddenly I wanted to talk to my father. He had known what it was like to be a foreigner in a strange land. But my father, Nate Saint, was dead - one of five missionaries killed by Auca Indians (now known as Huarorani) in the jungles of Ecuador in 1956. I was a month shy of my fifth birthday at the time, and my memories of him were almost like film clips: a lanky, intense man with a serious goal and a quick wit. A dedicated jungle pilot, he flew missionaries and medical personnel in his Piper Family Cruiser. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by people who were hostile to the Christian faith. It paralleled the situation Dad had faced in Ecuador.

"God," I found myself praying, "I'm in trouble here. Please keep me safe and show me a way to get back. Please reveal yourself and your love to me the way you did to my father." No bolt of lightning came, but a new thought came to mind. There must be a *telecommunications office here somewhere*. Then I also remembered being told of a tiny Christian church that was also here. The children, eager to help a strange looking foreigner, took me to a tiny mud-brick house. On the wall was a poster with the picture of a cross and a subscription in French "And by His stripes we are healed."

A young man approached. He was dark skinned and handsome and there was something inexplicably different about him. His name was Nouh Ag Infa Yatara. After finding an interpreter I discovered that this young Christian had been the victim of cruel persecution. His own mother had tried to poison him because of his faith. No one in the village dared offer him help or hospitality.

After a moment I asked him the question that I had wanted to ask to my father: "Why is your faith so important to you that you're willing to give up everything, perhaps even your life? It couldn't have been easy for you as a teenager to take a stand that made you despised by the whole community. Where did your faith come from?"

Nouh said that in addition to the Bible, a missionary had given him books about other Christians who had suffered for their faith. As incredible as it might seem, his favourite was about five young missionaries who had died for their faith in the jungles of South America.

I gave Nouh the assurance that the story was true, for one of those missionaries was my father. He, in turn, gave me the assurance that God had used Dad's death for good. Dad, by dying, had help give Nouh a faith worth dying for. And Nouh, in return, had helped give Dad's faith back to me.