Moments—they’re real, honest personal, and selfish. In the experience of a moment, one forgets that moments happen outside of his or her presence. Our world is made up of many worlds, made up of many moments, and only when our moments overlap do we realize we are of one people and of one world.

While driving from one side of Cameroon to the other, I had a moment when I saw a woman carrying a bucket of water on her head. I saw her. We passed her. Moment over. And yet, for her, the moment wasn’t over because she has carried buckets of water every day before the moment I saw her, and she will continue carrying buckets of water each day after our shared moment. Plus, she has other moments that make up her world that I will never know or understand because I am not there to experience them, but, in that moment, we were one because I saw, and I understood, in that split second, that our lives were different because I got water from the sink and she from a well, and we were different because I got to leave that moment, but her moment continued. Yet, we were the same because our eyes met, and we shared that moment and recognized that we are together.

Then there was the moment I shared with the children who ran to the side of the road screaming “white-man, white-man” while smiling and waving and chattering and bursting with
excitement. One moment, and it was over, and I left their moment, and they left mine, and I continued driving through Cameroon, and they continued gathering sticks or leaves or fruit or playing in the dirt or passing a football back and forth or heading to school. We were different because I left that moment and theirs continued, but, for an instant, we were united because we smiled and waved and screamed hello to each other and realized that we are one.

My moments in Cameroon were exhilarating and challenging. They were complex—hard to think about and harder to ignore. The first few days of moments were happy moments, and I realized how happy and peaceful these Cameroonian people were, and I wished American people would share such joy. I wished American people would lift both hands in waves to accompany a cheek-to-cheek grin when meeting a stranger, instead of barely lifting a finger. I wished Americans would jump in the car of a someone they don’t know to personally show them the way to his or her destination and have no problem walking the dusty, uneven road back. And, I wished that American people would gather every night to sing joyous songs and dance joyous dances and learn about each other and recognize that we are one. And, I wished that American people would wait to greet their guests for four hours on a hot, buggy evening to make sure they
were safe, and I wished American people would call their stranger-guests daughters and recognize that we are family despite race, nationality, class, or distance. I wished these things because as an American experiencing them, it was different, and it shouldn’t have been different, but it was, and it was beautiful.

My favorite part of the day was when the women of the village would come over, and they would sit in our living room, and we would all be quiet because our language was not the same, and our backgrounds were not the same, and we were not the same. To fill the silence, one of the women would begin an African song, and we would listen, and we would join our voices with theirs. Then, the women would get up and begin to dance in a circle, and we would watch, and then we’d join our movements with theirs, and then they’d laugh because we had no rhythm. But, we would laugh with them, and we would sing with them, and we would dance with them, and we would wave goodbye with two hands and cheek-to-cheek grins, and in those moments, we were one, and through those moments we became one.

On the last night they came over to sing, dance, and laugh, and we sang, danced, and laughed. But, we then surprised them by taking them outside and washing their feet, and in doing so I felt the reality of their lives. As they looked down at me with smiles and happy tears, I felt their calloused and scared feet, and I watched the dirt escape the crevasses in their feet and float in the water, and as I smiled at their smiles and felt their lives in their feet, I realized I was shading my eyes from the hurt, struggles, and difficulties with the smiles, songs, dances, and two-handed waves.

The next time we went out, I looked past the smiles, cheers, greetings, and two-handed waves into the background. I saw houses without electricity that were slowly crumbling. I saw the windows that had no screens—no wonder so many lives are taken by Malaria. I saw kitchens that were empty rooms with a small
man-made fire, filled with smoke. I saw the meal being prepared in the kitchen: a leaf with a tasteless grit-like substance called fu-fu. I saw a boy drink water from a dirty lake because that’s what he had, and I saw wives without husbands in a patriarchal society. I saw three-year old children without parents and sixty-year old grandmothers trying to care for eight orphaned grandchildren. I saw kids who could not go to school because they couldn’t afford 92 extra dollars for one year of a primary education.

I watched and wondered which children would make it to adulthood and if their lives would be different, and I wondered who would be widowed and who would leave orphans and who would become the sixty-year old grandmother trying to make a life for her eight orphaned grandchildren. But, I stopped wondering because it hurt, and it challenged me and made me feel guilty for having multiple homes, two parents, a healthy brother, a free education, and endless paths to success. I tried to forget, but we had shared a moment, and I understood, and I was responsible for sharing and helping and changing, because, as I once heard said, “to think you can fix the world is crazy, but you can certainly change it.”
I shared African moments by driving 90 mph on a bumpy highway and breaking down ten times in twelve hours. I squatpeed in a cornfield where wild piglets wander. I saw monkeys and snakes being sold for food. I saw goats play in the road like squirrels; I saw the schools and the school children. I saw their smiles when they received a book-bag full of supplies and answered to their questions when they didn’t. I experienced getting ready without electricity and taking a freezing cold shower at night with my eyes peeled for mosquitos. I watched the scenery as we passed by, and I realized these moments exist outside of my presence—that the mountains and valleys of Cameroon existed long before I saw them, and they exist outside of my sight. People still use cornfields for bathrooms and get ready without electricity. They still shower cold showers and walk miles to school, but because I shared a few moments, I understand a little better, and we now share a bond that cannot be broken, for we are one.

Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Ruth 1: 16