

Dear sponsored child

by Claudia Stack

I received your letter and photo last week. It bothers me that you never smile in the pictures; are you really so unhappy, or does the photographer tell you to put on a serious face? I can see the lush banana tree behind you, and sense the tropical climate around you in the Philippines. I wonder whether you are aware that for me your home evokes a luxury resort, even while I know that you live in rural poverty there.

The sponsorship organization tells me that you and your siblings sleep on the dirt floor. I keep hoping that one of my extra contributions will be used to get you a foam mattress, but they do not ask me to choose. Instead they give you sneakers for gym class, or a set of plastic dishes for your whole family to use. I can only hope and trust that the organization's representatives have a better sense of what you need than I do.

The set of your mouth in the picture echoes some of the more formulaic sentences in your letters. I can tell when you are copying from the letter guide they give you: "Saturday and Sunday I spend my time in helping my mother in some household chores, then attending mass with my family, we also include you in our prayers."

Some of your energy does come through, as when you begin by wishing me a "peaceful greeting" – followed by an exclamation point! I do feel genuinely blessed in the moment I read that, and chide myself for not writing more than a line or two to you on gift cards.



Claudia Stack sponsors Cherrie Ann in the Philippines. Cherrie Ann recently received a mattress so she doesn't have to sleep on the ground.

Photos courtesy Claudia Stack and Children International

Why have I not written more? It would be easy to say: because I am busy with my own children, boys aged 4 and 7. Yet they were not born when we first became connected. When I became a sponsor I was looking for a way to ease one child's journey in this chaotic world. I was also looking for a way out of my own cycle of frustration and limited means. Even with a master's degree and years of experience, I was earning less than \$25,000 annually as an advisor at a state university. The sponsorship was an attempt to break out of the entrapment that I felt, an attempt to see my money go further (where in the United States can one provide schooling and healthcare for a child for \$18 per month?). It seemed at once an irresistible bargain and a way to gauge the truth of my own needs: Was I being unreasonable, or did I really need a better living?

Lacking a computer at home, I pulled up sponsorship organizations online one day at work. I logged on, and you happened to

be the first child listed. Your birthday is the same as that of my beloved grandfather. That seemed fortuitous, so I did not look any further down the list of waiting children.

Of course you had no such chance to pick me, yet you graciously accept me and my meager gifts. The poor shall always be among you. This I take to mean: we shall always have the opportunity to be blessed by giving, and those who receive actually do us the favor. I study your pictures again. You have grown from a

6-year-old to a teenager in stop-time succession, each year a new picture that is remarkably the same. There you are, year after year, unsmiling in front of the tree. Your graceful brow and high cheekbones are reminiscent of the “Mona Lisa,” only you lack even her slight smile. Are you truly unhappy, or do you wish to convey to me how seriously you take your studies, as you write in your letters?

I grew up in New York City across the street from a woman from the Philip-
 pines, and I recall
 that she worked in
 a hospital labora-
 tory. Will there be
 any such opportu-
 nities for you? I
 dream of bringing
 you to the United
 States to attend
 college, although
 at the moment it
 is hard to see past
 the preschool tuition payment for my younger son, which eats up half of my salary.

This is the paradox of the situation, that in our striving we are also broke, but on a much higher plane than your family.

This is the paradox of the situation, that in our striving we are also broke, but on a much higher plane than your family. Our base has so much more than yours: plentiful food, health-care, clothes, furniture, and toys. A wooden floor. My children are confident in their necessities, and optimistic about their wish lists. One toy that I am glad they did not include on their holiday lists is a robotic dog that is advertised as “the future of friendship.” The idea of programmable friends is a little appalling – have we really grown so afraid of relationships? Yet I worry that perhaps relating to you through this sponsorship is similar, that in effect I am pushing a button to obtain a safe set of responses. Your experience is mediated through an organization that overlays your thoughts with stock aspirations. In this analysis your copybook letters and my one-line sentiments are just reflections of that predictable reality.

At the true heart of my reticence, though, is an ingrained Protestant culture much different from the muscular Christianity that delivers comic books about Jesus in shoebox gift packages. I come from a long line of educators, ministers, and social workers, a family in which service to others is valued above all else. In this tradition one does not voice one’s agenda. There is no overt attempt to influence, there is only teaching and leading by example. It is a way of approaching the world that precluded my mother from asking me even one time what I planned to do upon graduating college. It reflects not a lack of caring, but a thoughtful distance that says you must find your own way. There is no positive push in any given direction,

although quiet disappointment will surely follow a mistake.

Now, in parenthood, I have experienced the shortcomings of this distancing that is meant to teach. My husband comes from an expressive Catholic family and regards my familial approach as an insane lack of engagement. The toddler does not come to realize on his own that biting is unacceptable. The little boy needs parental help in dealing with a bully. The university does not change its salaries, and a choice must be made.

In the rush of life and mothering I have concentrated on learning to act in my immediate arena, and I admit that our relationship has remained in my old frame of reference. Yet now I realize that I haven’t written to you out of an absurd concern for your self-determination. In the foggy reaches of my mind, I sensed a danger that I might have an undue influence over you because of the sneakers and plastic bowls. Then the parent in me, the one who has learned to respond, laughs. This sponsorship has not been the passive, benevolent engagement that I imagined. It has been me stinting on real gifts, and missing yours as well.

Claudia Stack sponsors a child through Children International, www.children.org. There are many additional agencies providing this service.

