

d a n g e r o u s  
t e r r i t o r y

MY MISGUIDED QUEST  
TO SAVE THE WORLD

A M Y P E T E R S O N



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*Dangerous Territory: My Misguided Quest to Save the World*

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Peterson, Amy (Assistant Director of Honors Programming at Taylor University), author.

Title: Dangerous territory : my misguided quest to save the world / Amy Peterson.

Description: Grand Rapids : Discovery House, 2017.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016046651 | ISBN 9781627075978

Subjects: LCSH: Peterson, Amy (Assistant Director of Honors Programming at Taylor University), author. | Missionaries--United States--Biography. | Missions.

Classification: LCC BV3705.P47 A3 2017 | DDC 266.0092 [B] --dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016046651>

*Printed in the United States of America*

First printing in 2017

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# 1



## I Can't Tell You This Country's Name

I longed to be a martyr, to be one of that “noble army.” . . . I longed to do something. I had a strong desire to be a missionary, to give myself up to some holy work, and I had a firm belief that such a calling would be mine.

Ann Martin Hinderer, missionary to West Africa

Far too large a proportion of people [who are applying for missionary work] are seriously pathological.

a member of the Committee for Women's Work, 1915

I gravitated toward her because she was the only one in the room who looked like me: too young to be there, the confidence of the clueless tossed like a mantle over her shoulders, dreamy idealism shining in her eyes. Both blond and twenty-two years old, Rebekah and I stood out in the group of grad students gathered for the welcome dinner for our low-residency master's program. Most of the others were older and experienced, having just returned from a year or more of teaching English in Asia. They clustered in knots, the group with greasy hair and flowy clothes using exotic words like *mabu*

*dofu* and *joudza*, the scrubbed and modestly buttoned-up ones diligently discussing textbooks and area churches.

Watching them, I remembered what I'd overheard in the campus bookstore that morning. The manager, training a new sales clerk, had warned her: "Watch out for those folk in class this month. They're a little kooky." *Kooky* might not have been the word I'd have chosen, but as I sat down next to Rebekah, I wondered if this was my future: Would I become one of the strange ones? They didn't glow with holiness the way I expected missionaries to: instead, they seemed like they might have chosen to live overseas because they never quite fit in America.

"Hey," said Adam, laying his paper plate of pizza on the table next to me. "Can I sit here?"

We were three skinny new kids, fresh-faced, wide-eyed and shivering in the air-conditioning of the basement classroom, fingering garlic bread and cans of Coke. We weren't cowering, exactly. We were watching, trying to figure out what moving to Asia to teach English was going to be like, how it was going to change us. We chewed pizza slowly and observed.



I had developed a set of answers I gave when people asked what I was doing after college.

When my women's lit professor Dr. Matthews asked, I gave the short answer. "I'm moving to Southeast Asia to teach English as a Second Language at a university," I said. "I'll also be doing a master's program in intercultural studies."

This answer was good, especially for my academic friends. It sounded legitimate. And it neatly avoided the word *missionary*.

Despite my sincere and passionate desire to change the world for God, I hated that term—*missionary*—for all the connotations and baggage trailing behind it. I dreaded being aligned with the long history of abuse that educated westerners commonly associated with "missions"—destruction of indigenous cultures in the name of Christ, introduction of foreign diseases, wars in the name of evangelism. If I had told Dr. Matthews that I was going to be a missionary, she would have thought of Nathan Price. The patriarch in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, Price stood for the culturally blind failures of modern missions. He tried to baptize new Congolese converts in a river filled with crocodiles. He proclaimed "*Tata Jesus is bangala!*" thinking he was saying, "Jesus is beloved," when in fact the phrase meant "Jesus is

poisonwood.” Despite being corrected many times, Price repeated the phrase until his death.

I knew enough to recognize that Nathan Price did not represent all missionaries, and there were many I admired. But I also knew enough to be embarrassed. I knew that the British had used “protecting missionaries” as an excuse for imperial expansion in India and China. I knew that some of the early Franciscan missionaries had been unequivocally committed to Spanish imperialism, even condoning the violence and forced conversions of the Conquest. I knew that in the Americas, Christian evangelism was nearly without exception the primary logic used by “reformers” who set up boarding schools for native children, forcing them away from their homes and traditions.

It wasn't just that I feared what Dr. Matthews and others would think of me. I was terrified that I might accidentally live into this horrific, ethnocentric, imperialistic tradition.

I didn't even use the word *missionary* in my second standard answer. This one was for my parents' friends and people at church in Arkansas. When, over donuts and coffee in the foyer on Sunday mornings, they asked what I would be doing after college, I'd say that I was going to teach English in Southeast Asia. “Oh, like for missions?” they'd ask, southern drawls drawing out the words.

“Well, yeah, but the country isn't open to missionaries. I'm just going to be a Christian English teacher,” I'd reply. I liked to say that I was going to live my life with God in a foreign country. I planned to be a Christian in my new home, teach ESL there to the best of my ability, and practice loving God and loving the people around me. In fact, I chose my sending organization because they described their goals in this way—they didn't use the word *missions* either.

I couldn't have explained to people at church my reservations about becoming one of the photographs pinned on the church missions board. I couldn't have explained that I was relieved to be going to a “closed” country, where evangelism was technically forbidden, because in some unspoken way I wasn't fully convinced that the Message I was bringing was strong to save, or that it was even truly true. I disliked the idea of cold evangelism, so I was glad to be teaching in a place where my main goal could be simpler, just to be a faithful presence and to provide a desired service—language lessons.

But of course, regardless of whether or not I used the word, I *was* a missionary; I sent out letters asking for prayers and money, and gave people refrigerator magnets of my face. The suitcase I would carry across the ocean

didn't hold my own clothes; it held clothes I had bought for someone playing the mythic role of a "missionary"—long skirts, loose linen pants, sensible brown shoes. And when I explained to my supporters my decision to go, I said as much. I still didn't use the word, but I asked for what we all called "fruit": I asked them to pray that I would find girls to disciple in my new home.



"Where are you going?" Adam asked Rebekah, while gathering our paper plates for the trashcan. They, like most of our classmates, were headed to China. I wasn't. Even now, a decade later, I can't tell you the name of the country where I worked. My students and friends, whose names have been changed in this book, remain under police surveillance because of the story I'm about to tell you, because of everything that happened while I was there. I told Rebekah and Adam where I was going, but that I didn't know yet what city I'd be in. Camille, our country director, would update me as soon as my placement was finalized.

"What made you decide to go?" Rebekah asked me. Having heard her and Adam talk, I knew that these were people who could be trusted with the whole story, the long answer I was still trying to work out, the one that was as honest about my evangelical zeal as it was about my hesitations.

"I grew up reading missionary biographies," I began, certain Rebekah would understand, that she had found her glow in the same evangelical world I had. I'd grown up believing that the most important, most spiritual, Christians were the pastors and missionaries. I was taught that as a woman I couldn't be a pastor, but I preferred the missionary path anyway—pastoring sounded like it could be boring, but missions was sure to be full of adventure, exotic destinations, and wild experiences.

As a child, I wanted to be like Amy Carmichael, who had redefined what kind of work was possible for a single woman in 1800s Ireland by starting a Bible study for poor young women who worked at the mills. Soon over five hundred women attended weekly. Later, she spent fifty years in India, assimilating into the native culture. She snuck into temples and rescued child prostitutes.

The glamorous, glorious stories of people like Amy Carmichael, Hudson Taylor, Gladys Aylward, George Müller, and Jim Elliot shaped my imagination in my formative years, and I believed that the most valuable way I could serve God was to serve God overseas.



Sure, if you had asked me, I would have said there was no division between “sacred” and “secular” work—that copy editing at a publishing house could be just as meaningful and worthwhile as moving to a foreign land for God—but I didn’t really believe it. How could I? No one wrote biographies of housewives. Accountants never snuck into temples. Copy editors never changed the world.

Sermons about lives of full dedication to God rarely made daily floor-sweeping an example of dedication. They seldom lauded people who responded to e-mails punctually and thoughtfully. They didn’t praise those who regularly attended conferences for professional development and stayed up-to-date in their fields.

I wanted an extraordinary life, flush with spiritual vitality and adventure, a life fully committed to God. I wanted to be the greatest.

“And when I was a teenager, I promised God that I would spend a year overseas either before, during, or after college,” I continued. I’d been on a youth group retreat. Fifty or sixty of us sun-kissed, leggy teens, slapping mosquitoes away at dusk, listening to our pastor speak, infusing us with what he called God’s vision for the world. Of course at the end he asked us, with every head bowed and every eye closed, to raise a hand as a pledge that we would spend at least one year serving God overseas. (“Mormon youth spend two years doing missionary work! Don’t you think you can give God one?” he pushed.) I didn’t feel pressure, though. I didn’t do it to please the pastor. I raised my hand because I felt, even at sixteen, that it was nearly inevitable: I knew in my bones that I would be leaving.

“Did you go to OneDay?” I asked, pausing.

“No. I went to Urbana twice, though,” Rebekah said. Urbana was the biggest annual missions conference aimed at mobilizing college-aged people into overseas service. I told her about OneDay.

The summer after our freshman year, my friends and I had road-tripped to Shelby Farms outside Memphis for the event. We camped in a large, flat field with thousands of other college students, gathering before a stage early in the morning, kneeling in groups and praying. When the music began, with insistent thrumming bass lines and driving guitar, we stood and lifted our hands. Our bodies swayed with passion, our Chacos drummed the ground, we lay flat on our faces in the damp dirt and wept.

Later we sat, bandanas wrapped around our greasy braids, prayer journals opened and pens held ready, listening to John Piper. Nodding, we agreed with him that our lives would not be organized around 401ks and retirement funds. Our eyes shone as we rejected the American dream that led to a safe

suburban existence, golden years aimed toward golf courses. Rapt, we could almost see the example he gave us as an alternative, a story from his church. Two widows in their sixties had moved to Africa, and spent years serving there. One day, driving a jeep down a mountain, their brakes went out and the car flew off a cliff, “soaring into eternity,” Piper said, gazing into the clouds as if the women might still be up there, flying above us now.

I imagined them, gray haired Minnesotan ladies, but like Thelma and Louise, finally free. That had to have been a more meaningful life than they could have had in America, leading quilting groups and prayer circles, baking cookies for their grandchildren, organizing church rummage sales. Golfing.

I wanted that more meaningful life. I wanted the adventures that I had been promised, and I couldn't see any way for a woman to have them except on the mission field.

A few years later, I'd met a famous missionary. She was back in the States after three months of imprisonment by the Taliban for preaching the gospel in an Islamic state. She put her hand on my shoulder, looked into my eyes, and said softly that she felt God had chosen me for something special. My heart warmed. I wanted so badly to believe her.

Despite all the cautious posturing of my standard answers, the truth was that I wanted to save the world. My reasonable explanations about university teaching and living life with God in a foreign place masked a deep zeal to do big things, to make a difference. My educated, cynical view of the history of missions was simply a veneer overlaying an evangelistic passion instilled from childhood. I was a conflicted missionary—desperate to save the world and afraid of doing it wrong—but also very willing just to go love God in a new place. I was equal parts zeal for God's glory, hunger for adventure, and fear of failure.

Rebekah and Adam understood. As our other classmates joined the conversation, I realized that I was happy to be part of a kind-of-weird group of people. After all, I wrote in my journal later that night, weren't we supposed to be strangers and aliens on earth?



Rebekah and I bonded over our newness, and during study dates at Borders, I told her about my sort-of-ex-boyfriend, Charley, with his floppy brown hair and crooked smile. We'd broken up a year earlier, but despite the misogynistic undertones to his theology I still thought maybe I loved him. We weren't

exactly together, though as it turned out, he was moving to Asia to teach English too. Maybe that was a sign? Rebekah wasn't convinced.

"Can you see yourself marrying him?" she asked. I stuck a pen in my textbook and folded it closed, chewing my bottom lip.

"I don't know. I don't know if I even want to be married," I admitted.

Charley and I had had a troubled relationship, off and on and off again. Perhaps I simply wasn't ready to settle down, or commit. I wanted to be free to go.

Halfway through our intensive classes, I still didn't know exactly where I'd be going. Maybe the slow and complicated nature of my city placement should have been a warning of what was to come, of the fact that there were multiple powers at play in the region and that not all of them welcomed foreign influence—but at the time I just assumed delays were par for the course in international work.

Finally, in mid-July, Camille sat down next to me at the cafeteria table, pulling a blue cardigan over her shoulders. The air-conditioner ran at full blast; we were constantly moving from freezing classrooms to heat-saturated sidewalks and back again. I liked Camille, but found her intimidating: there was a solidity to her, something that said she would not be moved. Later that characteristic would be comforting, but when I first met her, I always felt naïve and tongue-tied in her presence.

"We have a placement." Camille smiled a brittle and shaded smile, like a teacher announcing an exam to an untested pupil. Streaks of the noon sun through the skylight lit our plastic food trays. I pushed mine back as she opened her laptop and edged it into a patch of shade.

"Here's your city." Camille pointed to a map dot near the coast in the center of the country.

"Great!" I said happily, wondering why her smile seemed tempered. Was there sadness in her eyes, or uncertainty? "We've only had teachers there for one year," she continued. Her piercing blue eyes made contact with mine. "Both of them have returned to the States now, so you will be placed there with another new teacher, Lisa. We don't know of any other foreigners in the city . . . or any Christians or churches. It's a very poor area, too—still suffering from the devastation of wars."

My excitement was undiminished. Camille paused before going on, wanting to make sure my expectations were adjusted appropriately. "This is a hard place," she said finally. "It's hard soil. Over the last year, we haven't seen any spiritual interest."

"Okay," I said, not sure what reaction she wanted from me. "That's fine. I'm just glad to know where I'm going next month." In truth, it was exactly

what I would have chosen for myself: the hardest place, the most unreached, the farthest-flung and most adventurous, was the place I wanted to be.

Later that week, I journaled on my laptop:

How do I find the balance—I don't want to treat people like objects, like items on a conversion checklist. I don't want to have the attitude of a self-righteous crusader going to save the heathen. I just want to go live my life for God in a place where he is not known.

But I don't want the simplicity of that attitude to lead to my developing a "small" view of what God can accomplish. Too many people I know seem to have settled with low expectations for their overseas work. They seem resigned.

How can I learn to expect big things of God without thinking big things about myself?

Like a good Christian girl, I wrote to the people who were supporting me with their prayers and their dollars. I told them about my city placement, and I asked them to pray. I asked them to pray that by the end of my year there, I would have two or three girls to disciple.

Unlike a good Christian girl, I didn't really expect God to answer.



"I just don't see you with Charley," Rebekah said as we entered a lamplit hotel ballroom. We were in California now, for just a few days of teacher training before flying out.

"I see you more with someone like . . . him." She pointed across the room, past a hundred or more nascent English teachers, to a man standing quietly against the wall, hands in his pockets. He wore a plaid button-down in earth tones, one that looked fresh from Goodwill, with grey slacks and tennis shoes. Slender and tall, his brown hair curled gently across his forehead above wire-rim glasses. He was totally adorable.

"Jack?" I'd met him, briefly. He was headed to the same country I was. "Yeah, he's okay, I guess," I said. Rebekah and I sat on padded chairs near the back, and I watched Jack. Two exuberant girls rushed over to him. One touched his arm, the other rolling her eyes and laughing as she told a story, and they pulled him to a seat.

"Hey," Charley said, grabbing the chair next to mine. The same organization that was sending me to Southeast Asia was arranging his placement at a university in China.

“Hey,” I smiled, squeezing his hand. He looked good in his blue button-down. “How’s it going?”

“Good,” he said. “Our group is actually meeting in the other ballroom for most of these sessions, so I can’t stay. But I’ll look for you later,” he said, his voice rising at the end, asking.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sounds good.”



Several days later, our plane left at two in the morning. As it rose over the dark Pacific Ocean, I wondered if I should feel regret about the night before: Charley and I had kissed again. We had broken up so many times, but never managed to make it a good, clean break. I kept coming back to him, craving the way he comforted and companioned me, but we each had too many edges that didn’t fit, and we just ended up frustrating each other. Facing such a drastic transition, I had wanted something to hold on to; selfishly, perhaps, I had wanted the comfort of his presence, the familiarity of his kiss.

But in the airplane, under my blanket, trying to sleep, my thoughts drifted easily away from Charley, an indication, maybe, of where my heart truly was. I was thinking about leaving Rebekah and my new grad school friends, who already felt like best friends. I was thinking about LAX. We had boarded at one in the morning, and the terminal had been packed with people. Few of the faces in the crowded seats and aisles had been white. An Indian woman in a crimson sari had slept beautifully, dangled across one seat. Chinese children had played with crayons on the floor. Exhaustion and hopelessness crept across the faces of those who still had hours to wait.

When we had checked our bags, two Asian women at the desk were attempting, with little English, to check in too. They had no tickets. An experienced teacher had stepped in to help translate.

As I fell into a light sleep on the airplane, high above the Pacific, I imagined that someday, I could be that person—the one who translates, the one who helps people get tickets home.