



January 2004

The Last Page: Following Schweitzer's path

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Recommended Citation

Carlson, Rima Lathrop (2004) "The Last Page: Following Schweitzer's path," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 93 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol93/iss1/11>

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following schweitzer's path

By Rima Lathrop Carlson '96

"Some of us know how we came by our fortune, and some of us don't, but we wear it all the same. There's only one question worth asking now: How do we aim to live with it?"

—Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*

What is *my* fortune and how do I aim to live with it? This year I found a mentor from the past who helped me answer that question for my future: Albert Schweitzer.

Schweitzer grew up in a wealthy family in Alsace, Germany, during the late 1800s and took full advantage of his privilege and his talents. He earned three Ph.D.'s, wrote three books, became an expert on Bach and a world-renowned organist, was a minister and director of a theological seminary—all by the age of 30. At that point, he looked critically at his fortune. He decided to give it all up and become a doctor. Schweitzer wrote, "Everyone must work to live; but the purpose of life is to serve and show compassion and the will to help others: Only then have we ourselves become true human beings." Feeling compelled to utilize his fortune, he traveled to Africa to start a hospital to provide care in a region with great need.

As a fourth-year medical student at the University of Vermont, I had the opportunity to spend three months at the Albert Schweitzer hospital in Gabon, Africa. I can report that the need still is there.

Despite my inexperience, I found myself in the role of "doctor" helping critically ill children. I felt the frustrations of providing medical care in a poor country and felt helpless in the face of senseless death. I felt the privilege of being born American, but at the same time I felt lonely and isolated. Most important, I found reasons to be thankful for *my* fortune and found ways to "serve and show compassion."

On our weekly boat trips to weigh, vaccinate and treat sick children, I loved watching the rural riverside villages pass. The kids on shore would squeal and wave frantically. On one trip, we unloaded our medications and scales into the village chief's house. Despite having more than 50 kids to treat, we did our work in his living room, crowded with moth-

ers and screaming babies. As I was counting out pills, one mother approached me. I had diagnosed her child with Otitis Media, a middle-ear infection, and I distinctly remembered explaining this to her. She interrupted me with a question and I lost count of my pills. It was after 2 p.m. and I had not eaten since 7 that morning. I was annoyed and grumpy as the mother said, "If you please, Madame, could you write on a piece of paper what my baby has, because his papa is going to ask me. I will not remember later, and he will be angry with me."

Immediately, I felt horrible for being annoyed. I wrote the diagnosis down and took extra time to explain her child's illness. And then, for a moment, I stopped. I thought about the people I was helping, that they must be hungry, too, that they must be as hot and tired as I was. I felt dreadful for being so selfish and hoped the woman's husband would be satisfied with my diagnosis. After that trip, I began to understand the tremendous gift of compassion that Albert Schweitzer gave to his patients. In fact, he coined the phrase "reverence for life" while returning to the hospital from Europe. His philosophy became real to me that trip.

On my last day at the hospital I wrote, "As I look around at the hospital he built and all of the patients he treated, I am in awe. I only hope that I live up to his ideals. . . . I hope someday I can return as an 'official doctor' and repay the hospital for my wonderful experience."

After returning from Gabon I learned, to my surprise, that Schweitzer had a Colby connection. He was "a very warm-hearted and loyal friend" of President J. Seelye Bixler. In fact they corresponded faithfully from 1928 to 1964 (the letters are in Special Collections), and Bixler visited with Schweitzer and his family in Europe. Bixler solicited donations for the hospital in



Rima Carlson examines a child in a rural village in Gabon. Carlson treated residents in the African country during a stay at the Albert Schweitzer hospital as part of her training as a family practice physician.

Lambaréné during World War II. Schweitzer once gave Bixler a private organ concert in the church in Alsace where Schweitzer's father had been pastor.

Perhaps there was something to this Colby coincidence. I don't know. I do know that, in my family practice residency in Marquette, Mich., each time I am called to see a patient after working for 24 or even 36 hours straight, I remember Schweitzer and the children in Gabon.

When Schweitzer was asked how others could be as influential as he despite feeling overwhelmed by the enormous need and challenges, he replied, "Create your own Lambaréné." He was right. You don't have to start a hospital in Africa to serve and utilize *your* fortune.