The Time It Takes to Age

Rebecca Smylie

We moved to Africa for my husband's job, and those first months in Dakar, Senegal, were hard. We had a newborn and were sleep deprived. The antimalarials gave me bad dreams. We were living out of suitcases, we found dead birds in the back bedroom, and our three-year-old couldn't seem to stop crying. Increasingly, we heard her fighting with a row of new imaginary friends, who were more often than not consigned to time out in the "bird room." How would I survive two years?

It was a joint struggle at first, but before long Levi found traction at work, and, left behind, I found myself staring at the government-issued rug—a dull yellow—and wondering how these children and I were supposed to pass our days in an empty apartment. Occasionally, I would muster strength and take initiative, but most mornings, I woke to find we were once again covered in a fine Saharan dust carried in by the Harmattan winds.

No problem. I've always known where to turn when things are hard. I prayed for strength and guidance and searched my scriptures. I listened to living prophets and threw my head back to receive anything heaven would send. And yet, heaven seemed oddly silent.

There was the morning I came downstairs to the parking lot to find our car blocked in by a three-foot pile of sewage soaked rags. It's funny now, but at the time I was too bogged down to appreciate the thrill of something *not* mundane in my life. I found our building's maintenance man and tried to explain the problem, but the language barrier was real. In the end, I resorted to universal hand gestures: I plugged my nose to

say "this stinks" and when that failed to impress him, I put my hands around my neck as if I were choking. "You are killing me," I told him.

This new culture was confusing and exhausting. I now carried a sort of low-grade stress and anxiety at all times. It was created by nagging fears of the unknown, of the language barrier, of malaria, of dirty water, of political unrest. Also I was dealing with hardships more familiar—I was lonely, I was bored, I lacked purpose, I just wanted to sleep.

My husband wasn't unsympathetic, but what could he do? We stayed up late, night after night, talking through my unhappiness, and then, in fix-it fashion, he offered possible solutions. One night, in a burst of uncharacteristic optimism, the two of us came up with a list of hobbies tagged for their potential to make this place come alive. We got a small garden plot, we signed up for sailing lessons, we started to learn about artisanal cheese making.

It started off rough. We soon found out that the garden was inhabited by spitting black cobras. When we showed up at the Dakar Yacht Club, we were surprised to find that it was in fact only a rusted out shipping container and an old Hobie catamaran. We capsized four times on our maiden voyage, and then our sailing adventure ended when the wind pushed us into the rocky port of Dakar, where Levi and I jumped ship (literally), clambered to and then over a barbed-wire fence and hitchhiked—barefoot, bruised, and bloodied—back to the beach.

But we still had cheese. We chose cheese making as a hobby when a friend back home pointed out that because of food laws in the United States, it was often difficult and not always legal to obtain raw milk. But those laws didn't exist in West Africa. "You'll be able to get raw milk there," she said. "You'd be able to make really great cheese."

I myself had never desired or even sipped raw milk, let alone turned it into cheese. But just knowing that I could, that Africa was increasing my freedom in this one small way, I latched onto the idea: We were going to be cheesemakers.

Stories differ about how the very first cheese was made. To be safe, we could say it happened somewhere in the world sometime between 3,000 BCE and 8,000 BCE. Since ancient times, inflated animal organs functioned as storage vessels. Rennet, the enzyme that turns milk into cheese, is found in animal stomach lining, and so it makes sense that cheese was discovered accidentally, and more than once, when milk was stored in a bag made from an animal's stomach.

I like the oft-cited theory that cheese first happened at the hand of an Arab nomad, who before starting out on a desert journey filled a sheep-stomach bag with milk. At some point on that journey, he reached for

his milk and found curds and whey instead. Voila! Cheese. Please bless, I thought to myself, that here in my corner of the desert I might find, like that ancient nomad, unexpected surprises.

Our first step was finding good raw milk. Everything we read emphasized the importance of healthy and happy cows. "The cheesemaking process begins with what their mammal of choice is eating. Are the cows grazing up the French Alps? . . . Are they eating fresh clover and grasses that are only available in a certain part of the world?"[1] wrote Gordan Edgar. Here was our first obstacle. We saw cows every day in Senegal, but they failed to inspire us. Somewhat menacing was our three-year-old's observation when we quizzed her about the foods that animals eat. "What do sharks/monkeys/lions eat?" we asked.

"Fish!/Bananas!/Antelope!"

"And what do cows eat?"

She paused, obviously picturing the cows she saw walking up and down our street, sloshing through the occasional stream of raw sewage. "Trash!" she yelled back enthusiastically.

Indeed, asking the cowherd next door if we could buy a bottle of milk was likely to yield a round of cheese with after flavors of plastic bag, cardboard pulp, and raw sewage.

Undaunted, we kept looking and did eventually find a small dairy outside of town that produced fresh, cream-line milk. At first opportunity, we drove out to meet the cows. They were the healthiest we'd seen in all of Senegal, and so at roughly nine dollars a gallon, plus a three-hour car ride on pocked and largely unpaved roads, we were closer to cheese.

Turning milk into cheese sounds easy enough. Left alone, milk sours and then curdles. This is because of a naturally occurring bacteria that turns the milk sugar (lactose) into lactic acid. To get cheese, you want the milk to curdle before it's sour. This is where rennet comes in. Rennet speeds up the coagulation so that it happens while the milk is still sweet. So milk either spoils on its own—we call that spoiled milk—or someone forces it to spoil, and we call that cheese.

We were ready to try it ourselves. We had read everything we could, we were corresponding with experienced cheesemakers back home, and we had good milk. And yet, repeatedly, we failed. Time and time again we lifted the lid off the pot to find that instead of neatly separated

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1. Gordon Edgar, *Cheesemonger: A Life on the Wedge* (White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2010), 399–403.

curds and whey, we had a few gallons of rotten milk. Prone to dramatics, I had to make a conscious effort not to see the failed cheese as a symbol of myself or my surroundings. I couldn't help but compare myself to the famously unhappy. "Hast thou not poured me out a milk and curdled me like cheese?" cried Job (Job 10:10).

Only once did we get to the step in the cheese-making process where we cut the curd. After heating the milk to exactly ninety degrees, we covered the pot to hold the milk at that temperature for a specified amount of time. This was important: we had to keep the milk's dark environment the same and then time would change it into cheese. It was a sweet moment for us, lifting the lid off the pot to find that the curd gave a clean break. For the first time, bonds had actually formed between the protein molecules.

We poured our curds into a mold and then pressed them with a haphazard press we'd fashioned out of old law-school books. First ten pounds, then twenty, then fifty. And then we left it alone so it could age. At least a month, the instructions said. The longer we waited, the better the flavor. We decided we'd hold out for at least six weeks and talked about the ceremony with which we'd cut into it. Should we invite people over? How many?

It was heady stuff, this aging our own cheese. I got on the Internet to look at the British Cheese Board. And why not? These were our people now: people with curd. They had conducted a study, I read, to assess the effect of cheese on dreaming. "Get this," I told my husband. "If you want more vivid dreams, try a bit of Blue Stilton. Red Leicester for nostalgia. Cheddar, it seems, helps you to dream of celebrities." We laughed. What celebrity would come to congratulate us in our dreams?

And then there came a point when we couldn't wait any longer. At least that must be how it played out, because I really do remember making plans to share this moment with friends, but as it happened we were in pajamas and by ourselves when we cut into our first hard cheese. With flair and showmanship I lifted a thin slice to my mouth. I couldn't believe we were finally at this point in our journey.

One of the lessons I kept forgetting in Senegal was that I needed to manage my own expectations. For example, I should not have expected there to be a yacht at the Dakar Yacht Club. If I were successful in managing my expectations, I knew, then every once in a while this place could really surprise me. But as punishment for my naiveté, the disappointments were always real and often hilarious. I spit the cheese out before I even fully closed my mouth. It was, without a doubt, one of the worst things we had ever tasted.

We gave up. From that point on, our Senegalese hobby would be binge watching whatever television series our expat friends had on DVD—which is how celebrities made their way into our dreams. Who needs cheddar cheese?

I never did get good at living there. I figured out where I needed to go in order to buy things, and I knew which roads would get washed out during rainy season, but I never enjoyed myself, even as the expats around me seemed thrilled about the "magic" of Africa.

I kept praying and seeking, and the answer continued to be no. I felt like a pot of ninety-degree milk in an unchanging environment. It did end though.

After two years in Senegal, I got to go home. It was pouring rain and still dark when we drove to the airport. The dirt roads in our neighborhood had been washed out since the start of rainy season, but like I said, we knew our way by now. We told our driver where to find roads still passable and huddled our daughters on our laps, still in their pajamas, damp from that final run from apartment to car. Tomorrow, I thought, there will be more cockroaches in the apartment than usual.

I have strong memories of sitting on the runway, looking out at Dakar for the last time. The sun was starting to rise on a landscape both wet and dusty. As I observed the busy of the tarmac, and with the span of the Atlantic to really sort through my emotions, I came to acknowledge (and then scribbled it in my daughter's coloring book so I wouldn't forget) that the true sadness of my time in Senegal was that by the end of it, I couldn't look back and talk about ways that the challenges had grown or bettered me. Conversely, I recognized in myself weaknesses that hadn't been here before. I was relieved and happy to leave this place because I hoped that the closing of the airplane door would create a blessed demarcation of space wherein I could overcome and change the person that had happened to me in Dakar.

I've heard a hundred thousand times that our trials will strengthen us, but, I wondered, isn't this because we sally up? The glory is not in the trial itself, not just in the dust and the heat. I gave myself credit for finishing the race, but I was weary. Oh so weary! And I thought about our cheese and saw in myself that it's not the rot, it's controlling the rot: the difference between a carefully aged piece of cheese and spoiled milk.

These new weaknesses were confusing to me, because I had tried. I'd prayed for help all along the way, reaching for God, but like never before in my life, he was hard to find. Then seeking him yet again as I got off that plane from Senegal, bone weary, I was quietly gifted the understanding that God was okay with me in my weary state. Eventually,

I started to wonder if he was letting me experience this weariness on purpose.

I thought of Lehi, that prophet who teaches so well the value of opposition, having to travel "for the space of many hours in darkness" (1 Ne. 8:8), before getting to the tree of life. I thought of Christ, forsaken. I thought of a round of perfectly aged cheese and remembered that the passage of time was as essential an ingredient as any.

I thought of a favorite Messianic prophecy. "When ye are weary," writes Isaiah, "he waketh morning by morning" (2 Ne. 7:4). It's a prophecy that speaks so directly to the mornings when I just didn't want to get out of bed, or the afternoons when I sat on that government-issued rug watching my babies play but couldn't find the energy to join them, or the evenings where I sat still and absent, staring at the heavy front door and willing my husband to walk through it.

Was this God controlling my spoil? It felt an awful lot like rotting, but time passes and we are different than when we started. Though I may be too tired to notice, when I am weary, he wakes.

And so the point of all those cheese-making failures hit me suddenly one day. I was with my family at a festival celebration in Guatemala City, where we were happily living. Somewhere, and only by the passage of time, I was okay with a life overseas. When I told other foreign service officers that I hadn't liked living in Senegal, I excused the country. "But I think it was me," I would say. "It was my first time living overseas." And here, without fail, those more experienced than I would nod their heads emphatically. Yes. It is all hard at first, but time *is* the process.

At that festival, I met a goatherd named Walter. There in the busy plaza, he fed my children milk straight from the bleating goats behind him. "Could I buy more milk from you?" I asked, thinking *chevre*. I pictured myself standing over a pot of warming milk with my Levi. I imagined lifting the lid together to see if this time there was a clear separation of curd and whey. I smiled to think that it might actually happen. What's more, I also smiled at the subsequent thought that for us, it probably wouldn't. But no matter, we would try again. Time would make us better at this thing that was hard for us. We were aging.

This essay by Rebecca Smylie won third place in the BYU Studies 2016 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest.