

Utter Bombardment

Jamaica Plain, January 21, 2007, Homily by Molly Heyman

The only words available to accurately describe my return from Mwanza, Tanzania, a remote village off the coast of Lake Victoria to the congested airport of Logan International and worse the world of unsettling familiarity, that awaited me outside of the revolving airport doors. Amid the jolting reentry into cars, noise, and the natural grim of a capitalist city filled with over programmed individuals. Was the good intended bombardment of questions from the friends and family that had supported me in my trip and awaited my arrival for the inspirational stories I promised.

But my personal reentry process did not have the same ease as the trips to Europe I had taken with my parents. That pre-Africa comprised all I really knew of travel. I had gone to beautiful places. Taken pictures of all the monuments the guide books told me to, stood in what I hope appeared genuine amazement at the art of bourgeoisie paintings and climbed the hundred of steps within in towers and cathedral, the physical effort of the climbing making me feel as though I had "really experienced the culture."

But Africa was different. Something so unknown that when I return after only three short weeks that could only scrap the surface of absorbing this culture the stories did not flow, they did not even formulate in my mind.

A smell, an open sky, the universal smile of one of my nine year old campers; this is how I remember my experience in Africa. Sensation, it is the only real converter I know between two cultures so fundamentally oppositional.

And that is why my arrival to the states did not come with an excited rush to the phone to call Terry, fulfilling my responsible commitment to speak the congregation about my experience in Africa, I had predicted of myself. That is why it has taken me almost half a

year to bring any tangible words to an experience that somehow I found more comforting remembering purely through sensation.

So I invite you, my first audience to hear about my time in Africa to remember the open mindedness that at one point or another in some form somehow drew you to Unitarian Universalism; And not listen, but to feel the sensations I will try to transmit for you with my words.

Does America have an accurate perception of Africa? This is the question amid the bombardment of "Did you like the food?" "Was the scenery beautiful?" "Did you go on a Safari?" (by the way the answer to all of the above are yes.).

But it was this question implored my Morning, my grandmother's home health care worker that my mind answered quicker with the vivid pictures this question provoked than my honest answer, NO.

The America mentality I knew and was equally guilty of possessing, could not have a more incomplete, flippant perception of the Africa culture I experienced.

A continent so distant in mileage and mentality we have put it in the "foreign" category. Most glean their sense of the culture from the headlines of newspapers covering articles about AIDS, civil war, genocide.

The constant bath of these media images, leaves little room to image lives of happiness; families that still take the time to see each other, choirs with boys that beam when they sing, mothers that cook what Barbara Kingsolver described at the equivalent of 3 Thanksgiving dinners a day using the inside of metal tire rims as a stove. Because this is a culture uncharged by a constant pursuit for more, faster, better. We flippantly do not accept its existence. But even if our media and western mindsets will not accept it, its still there a type of contentment that is worth acknowledging, even appreciating.

At this point I would like to put out a disclaimer, a cap on my own arrogance. When I say "Africa." I can only speak of the village of Mwanza, a one night stay in Nirobie and a lay over on the based on Mount Kilimanjaro. These are the only locations I have an authority to speak on when I fall into the western habitat of using the term "Africa," an entire continent to communicate my time spent in one tiny, remote lake village. But my sense that part of intuition that extends beyond logical experience, detected a consistency among the culture that spans the vast continent and allows me to speak of something larger, that extending beyond the shores of Lake Victoria.

One of the many eclectic tasks allotted to myself and nine America companions and classmates from the NYU Social Work program I am a part of was laying the foundation for a new center to be built for street girls.

Westerns would use the term "Orphanage" a word strictly prohibited from the dialogues of the local community because of its negative connotation. I observed a similar pattern denial with a little known epidemic we freely refer to here as, "AIDS."

But my personal role at this point in the journey was in laying the foundation for what would be a new home for girls neglected for various reasons spoken, being poverty, the unspoken being AIDS. The work that ensued was probably the most difficult physical labor any of us had ever part taken in.

And I am speaking as someone who volunteered domestically with Habitat for Humanity for years at various sites, and ran varsity cross-country and track throughout high school. I have never thought of myself as someone from who hard work, was a foreign concept. But this is just one of the many perceptions about myself and the world I live in, that Africa completely shattered.

When I hear the phrase "hard work" now I visualize the morning we arrived at eight am to the hillside on the shore of Lake Victoria, the site for the new center. Our early arrival greeted us with a landscape dotted with bright colors, a closer view would reveal the

impressionistic specks as congas, the fabric most women in rural eastern Africa get to, or have to, wear in adherence to the conservative culture that prohibits women from showing their legs. Beneath these congas were individuals, strangers, who continue to be for me the human manifestation of hope in the intangible.

These members of the community believed so strongly that this center would be good for their village. The potential of an open field was enough. No need for blue prints or a contract, of even a motive to trust the white people who spoke little Swahili and were managing the construction.

They saw without any prior knowledge all the possibilities. A school for girls that would mean, a cook, a teacher, a cleaner, gardener, jobs for their community, education for their children. The fruits of their own labor would fuel this school for girls.

But for this great vision to actually take off first we needed a foundation. And at this point all that laid in front of us was an uphill field of boulders covered in nettles, sharp picker that embedding themselves in the beautiful yet immobilizing congas.

And so we dug, and dug some more and stopped to pick the nettles from our skin to return to the digging. We came equipped, or so we thought.

We had bought shovel, and plows, in the same manner you buy almost anything in Mwanza, along the roadside amid an eclectic spread of everything from toothbrushes, pop music tapes, fried bananas and farm tools group together, like we arrange products to the same isle of a super market here.

I distinctly remember the confusion of jumping on the edges of my shovel, only to have the metal instantly give out from under me. I looked around bewildered, before everything came humorously clear. The native Tanzanians working with us were instinctively digging with their hands at the dirt it. Here in Africa the people were strong

and the tools were not. This contrasted the culture I knew where the tools were strong and the people were less than.

I could train everyday and one day, possibly be able to do the physical labor that flowed so easily from the sweat drenched muscles of the Tanzanians, each droplet, dripping from each pore, forcing me to remember a universality that is often forgotten between continents, we are all made up of the same stuff.

Yes, I am made up of muscles, pores and sweat too,

And it is possible that with enough effort I could move as many boulders as the Tanzanians I worked in awe with, but their trust, such hope in the intangible is a type of faith completely different from my own. But will remember through the sensations of colorful congas, tire rimmed stoves, songs in Swahili, road side shopping marts, prickly nettles and a whole new type of hope.