

Lessons from Africa:



MAIN PHOTO: The homeland valley near White River.

LEFT: Many villagers do not live by clocks, yet they must take their medications on time. This village leader organized a system to yell from the hilltops so the ill know when to take their pills.

BELOW: Georgianne Nienaber and nurse Gundula Koething.

RIGHT: This abandoned AIDS orphan is treated with care and respect by Koething.



how to get on with the business of living

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A wide smile, set in parchment-thin skin stretched tighter than a drum over the architecture of a once-beautiful face, greeted me as I slid quietly into the hospice room. Outside, in the South African instant that escorts day into night, Legogote's shadow touched the red bricks of the hospice building as the sun slid behind the rock formation known to me as the "crouching lion." The sentinel of the Lowveld keeps watch over the town of White River and the Homeland Valley, where HIV and tuberculosis gather like hyenas for the kill in the valley below the Mpumalanga Province escarpment.

Gundula Koething, an expatriate German nurse with the look and mannerisms of a young Bette Midler, and I had just returned to the clinic grounds after a day spent driving through the red African dust on a series of home-visits to gauge the compliance of HIV patients on anti-retro-viral cocktails. The AIDS hospice was a waystation that offered comfort and dignity on the road to death. Out of respect to the weary pilgrims on that road, the lens cap covered the Nikon camera.

The paper-thin woman raised herself slowly and painfully onto one elbow to greet me. Her smile seemed too big for a face now devoid of any muscle or fat. Other shapes shifted slowly under the cotton blankets of nearby beds.

“Hello, mum, thank you for coming to see me.”

The smiling face wanted me near and I obliged—wrapping my strong arms around frail shoulders—flesh on bone.

“How are you today, sweetheart?” was the lame greeting that fell from my lips like so much over-ripe fruit falling, bruised, upon the ground.

“Much better, mum, now that you are near,” she replied, her eyes holding mine in their caress.

Irrational thoughts flooded my mind as I worried about catching the disease that I knew could have no hold over me and was impossible to acquire with a touch. A friend asked me weeks later, “How could you do that? Weren’t you scared?”

Of course I was scared, but we try to act in rational ways as we face our own insanity, and we do what we must do to remain human in the presence of inhumanity.

The woman I held was so very alive, even though I held death in my arms. Death was the detainee and I, for an instant, became the prison guard. This is the look and feel of Africa for the many Minnesotans from Lake Country who go there on their own or in groups as medical missionaries.

Brainerd’s Dr. Paul Milloy, now retired and living in Colorado, was recently awarded the Human Rights Award by the Crow Wing County Human Rights Commission for his organization of medical mission trips abroad, many of which were in Africa. Uncounted others, both medical professionals and lay people, have made the journey to what many still call the Dark Continent—the heart of the Heart of Darkness. Altruism abounds in Lake Country, but sometimes we forget to ask what the people of Africa have to say to us. We tend to refer to Africa as the true “middle of nowhere,” forgetting that the middle of nowhere is the middle of somewhere for the people who live there. It is also drenched in blood.

At this writing—August 2008—there are 1.2 million internally displaced people struggling to survive in North and South Kivu Province in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the security situation there is deteriorating. Nearly six million souls have vanished from the DRC since 1996 and there have been 200,000 documented rapes of women and children.

Our personal “somewhere” allows us to define “remote” villages and “backwaters” of the world with “savage” and “tribal” elements, in sharp contrast to our so-called “civilization”—the white, urban, industrialized landscapes of the first world. In the rural areas of Africa, the people’s lives and histories revolve around their intimate communities and connections with people, the land, and themselves. African people extracted from their famil-

RIGHT: A grandmother blinded by disease holds her granddaughter close.



iar landscapes and deposited in urban landscapes rife with pollution, violence, noise, industrial decay, and technological refuse would find it totally savage and inhospitable—their “middle of nowhere” is our “middle of somewhere” and vice versa.

Said differently, to people living in Africa, the land is not exotic, wild, or foreign—it is home. And home does not always provide safety and comfort due to multinational interests, proxy armies, and the scramble for the continent’s mineral wealth—gold, diamonds, coltan, oil, and other strategic minerals.

In South Africa, the scourge to the Homeland is HIV and the menace of emerging, resistant strains of tuberculosis. In Rwanda it is the legacy of genocide. In the Democratic Republic of Congo it is the one thousand people a day who die from starvation and preventable disease in war-torn Kivu Province.

This is what Minnesotans see as they face Africa. But there is something else going on here. Something that Africa is trying to tell us.

* * * * *

“Hello, mum, thank you for coming to see me.”

The woman at the AIDS hospice in White River, South Africa, was grateful to be alive and to have a visitor. No words of protest fell from her lips. She was willing to get on with the business of life and eager to take whatever the moment had to offer her—with no complaints and no recrimination.

We don’t speak often enough about the lessons we can learn from a continent that formed the cradle of civilization. We go there to help them, but in so many ways these people are offering us a chance to redefine our own lives in a manner that embodies simplicity and honors humanity.

Women keep babies tied to their backs in makeshift slings for several years, instead of removing the baby from mom as soon as possible. Motherhood is valued in and of itself. A young Rwandan woman adopted me as her “mother.” An entire generation of mothers was wiped out in the genocide of 1994 and this loss is felt viscerally. It is amazing to be valued for my knowledge and age



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alone, instead of fearing age as the craven stalker of my youth.

The African people have a deep and spiritual connection to nature. Africans can teach us how to live simply and respectfully. They are an incredibly innovative people. Waste is unheard of. Objects such as wooden bicycles with wooden wheels are created out of nothing and used to haul vegetables and wood to markets which are day-long trips from the villages. There are no “stores” in remote areas of Congo and Rwanda, and sometimes the wooden wheelbarrow with wooden wheels is used to haul a friend with no arms and legs to the village church.

Africa knows how to get on with the business of living.
“Much better, mum, now that you are near.” 🌍

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