

Uganda is Calling my Name: A collection of my writings anticipating and during my Uganda trip

David R. Weiss

Prelude

David R. Weiss, February 16, 2013

Uganda. The name itself *breathes*. And beckons.

Still, of all people I am a most unlikely candidate to go. I like a good trip as much as the next person (especially in the company of my beloved wife, Margaret, who is more adventurous and less flappable than me). But honestly, wanderlust does not come naturally to me. I'm a pretty happy homebody. Give me a familiar forest trail, a backyard vegetable garden, or the sand dunes of my childhood, and my need for adventure is quickly contented. I'm not averse to going new places, but my inner world is SO rich that I just don't feel the urge to travel to exotic places. I guess my own inside is exotic enough for me.

And yet, here I am, going to Uganda next month. Why? The answer is a tapestry of several threads.

In 2010 Wingspan Ministry, the LGBT ministry at my church, St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, made a decision to seek out ways to partner in faith-based advocacy for LGBT persons in other places around the globe. We chose Uganda as our first focus because of the dire conditions faced by LGBT persons there. Homosexuality is heavily stigmatized, often using Christian rhetoric. And it is punishable by prison sentences ranging from 7 years to life in prison. But it gets even worse.

Back in 2009 a bill was proposed that would greatly heighten the penalties for engaging in—or even supporting—homosexual activity. That bill (officially the Anti-Homosexuality Bill [AHB] but often referred to as the Kill-the-Gays Bill) has not yet made it to the floor of Parliament for debate. But it still sits in Committee, waiting in the wings. And there are strong signs it will finally come to the floor this spring, perhaps yet this month. In its proposed form, the AHB prescribes *the death penalty* for instances of “aggravated homosexuality,” including in this broad definition offenses ranging from rape to “serial offenders”; under the latter category, *being in a committed relationship could get you killed*. Further, the AHB would criminalize being an Ally. Offering support of *any* means, whether material goods (like housing) or emotional aid or pastoral care (like counseling or educational resources) could get you imprisoned for seven years. And simply being aware that your child, student, or patient is LGBT and failing to report them within 24 hours would get you a prison sentence of three years.

There are rumors that the death penalty will be “reduced” to life imprisonment in order to pass the bill, but that can only happen during actual debate—and whether the death penalty remains in the bill as a specified punishment or not, *the force of the bill in any form is to make life deadly for LGBT Ugandans*. The message of the bill declares their lives without dignity and without value. It encourages social hatred ... with full knowledge that social hatred breeds acts of violence.

The Bill would create an all-encompassing field of terror for LGBT persons, as well as their families, friends, and Allies. It would effectively make any public speech about human rights for LGBT persons a criminal offense. And it would unleash a wave of blackmail threats. If it is possible for a situation in which homosexuality is punishable by life imprisonment to get worse, this bill makes it worse. By far. Already the rhetoric of public debate around the bill has political leaders, religious leaders, and the media regularly demonizing LGBT persons.

Moreover, in some very significant ways, that the AHB bill exists at all *is the result of American Christian influence*. Pre-dating the crafting of the bill, a number of fundamentalist American pastors (among them Rick Warren [who later distanced himself from the AHB], Lou Engle, and most notably Scott Lively) made trips to Uganda, carrying with them a wildly homophobic message about “the homosexual agenda.” Some of these persons, with followings in the U.S. but with theologies and aspirations far too reactionary to carry any weight in our public square, have gone to Uganda because they see it as a place where their worldview can still make a political impact. They have specifically reached out to Ugandan religious leaders and politicians in an effort to make Uganda as “gay-free” as possible. As an American Christian myself, I am horrified to realize that my tradition—a source of grace, comfort, and ethical guidance to me—is being twisted to inflict unspeakable terror on others.

Early in 2011 I met Bishop Christopher Senyonjo, a retired Anglican bishop, and Frank Mugisha, an LGBT activist with SMUG (Sexual Minorities of Uganda) at a conference in Minneapolis. Bishop Christopher is perhaps the highest profile Ally for LGBT persons in Uganda. He experienced a “conversion” around this issue after meeting several gay Christian men through free counseling services he offered early in his retirement. His solidarity has cost him his pension and his credentials within the church. Frank was a close colleague of David Kato, another SMUG activist brutally murdered in 2011. Frank’s own work and visibility place him under constant threat. From these two men I heard not simply the facts, but also the feelings. I heard their stories and the stories of many more. I saw faces. And, I saw Christ.

Some of you may recall that in the days after this conference I wrote my anthem for Uganda, “Preserve Uganda’s Future Hope.”

Throughout 2011 and 2012 Wingspan’s Uganda Task Force worked to raise awareness here in Minnesota about the plight of LGBT persons in Uganda—and about the connection between American fundamentalist Christianity and Ugandan terror. We also did fundraising to support the work of Bishop Christopher. His St. Paul’s Reconciliation and Equality Centre in Kampala, Uganda provides both direct services and social change initiatives to a range of marginalized persons, but is one of the few places where LGBT persons can receive social services without fear. He also works to educate fellow clergy about the realities of being LGBT and the need for gracious and affirming spiritual care. He is something of a saint, though I can hear him quickly saying, “Oh, no, no, no, no, David! Not a saint.” But he is.

During the summer of 2011, I met Rev. Mark Kiyimba, a Unitarian pastor from Kampala who is also an outspoken Ally for LGBT persons—also at significant threat to his own reputation and safety. Rev. Mark spoke at a Unitarian church here in St. Paul, and although we did not get to visit at any length, I was able to give him a signed copy of my book.

Then, Bishop Christopher and I crossed paths again in the fall of 2011 and in the summer of 2012 while he was traveling here in the U.S. Both times we had an opportunity for further conversation. He extended an invitation for someone from our Uganda Task Force to “come and see” the work we are helping him to do. Now, as our partnership of solidarity with and support for his ministry continues, it seems wise for us to accept his invitation and send someone to see firsthand the work we’ve been supporting. This will be a step toward deepening our partnership and helping us imagine further ways we can support their work.

But we know that we don’t simply need to send a pair of eyes and ears there. We need to *bring* back words and images. We need to send someone who can listen with empathy and insight—and then bring back to Minnesota both an articulate understanding of the situation and an eloquent rendering of the stories for whom this is not a “situation” but a personal life. That’s why Bishop Christopher invited us to send someone. And that’s why the Uganda Task Force asked *me* to be the someone who went.

So I’m going. I fly out of the Twin Cities on March 20, reaching Kampala just before midnight on March 21. I’ll be there until late on April 1, when I begin my journey home. During my time there I’ll spend several days at the St. Paul’s Centre with the bishop. I’ll spend a couple days with Rev. Mark at his Unitarian church and school. I’ll have a chance to meet with several other LGBT activists as well as some of the ordinary people whose lives are caught in the crossfire of this transcontinental culture war. And all of this will frame my experience of Holy Week this year: I arrive in Kampala two days before Palm Sunday; I leave the day after Easter. I cannot begin to imagine how my life will be remade by it all.

During my days in Kampala (which will be 8 hours ahead of CST/daylight savings time), I’ll be staying at the Namirembe Guest House, an old Anglican monastery and retreat house near the center of the city. I’ll be blogging each day about my experiences while there—you can follow my blog at www.davidrweiss.com; if you subscribe (upper right corner of the web page) you’ll receive my posts by e-mail. But ultimately, I am going there ... *so I can come home*. Once back here, drawing on all that I have seen and heard over there, I will do my best to bring Uganda to you. Through my writing and speaking I will bring home the stories and images, the hopes and needs, the fears and gifts of these children of God, our brothers and sisters in a different land but members of the same Body of Christ. Frederick Buechner defines vocation as the place where your own deep gladness meets the world’s deep need. Words are my deep gladness. And right now words are Uganda’s deep need. Vocation means “calling.” And right now Uganda is calling my name.

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Assumptions

David R. Weiss, March 18, 2013

I don't begin to think I understand where I'm going. In fact, watching *Missionaries of Hate* with my class today left me feeling in my gut all the things I don't understand. Now, as I spent the day collecting and gathering, making lists of things I dare not forget to attend to in the last 48 hours, and checking the weight on my luggage, I am weighing as well the assumptions I'll be taking with me.

Like most of the journeys in my adult life, my biggest asset will be the relative amount of humility I carry with me. I try to lead with my ears and my heart, listening before speaking. But there are a few assumptions I carry with me as well. Convictions that frame my listening and anchor my humility. These are some of them.

(1) Homosexuality as same-sex affection simply is part of the human landscape. Its cultural acceptability and expression have certainly varied widely according to time and place—as has our felt need for either an explanation or a judgment. But as much as we might wish there were a singularly “normative” way to be human—witness our whole range of biases and prejudices wed to the way we assess ourselves and our neighbors—God, it seems, destined us for diversity. So I assume that there have been “gay” Africans for as long as there have been Africans—which, by all accounts is a LONG time.

(2) Regardless of the intent of European Christian mission work in centuries past, it has served the goals of Empire at least as often as it has furthered the cause of the Gospel. I want to be generous to the spirit of my European kin, and yet whatever their best intentions were, wittingly or otherwise, they tended to “save” the souls of my African cousins into a Gospel that bound them as surely as it claimed to free them. It “bound” them into obedience to their colonial masters, to the presumed superiority of Western culture and learning, and to the rejection of much of their own past—and that with such a fervor that at some point it became an internalized suspicion about one's own sense of self. So I assume that the African viewpoint that is most authentically “African” is also one that is “post-colonial”—one that has seen through the ways that the twin institutions of Colony and Christianity have made it harder, not easier, to be African.

(3) This means, for me as a white Christian man in Africa, that while I owe to every voice here a great debt of silence, I am deeply skeptical of the voices of conservative African pastors who are determined to call same-sex affection a Western import into Africa and who are passionate in wielding their religion as a battering ram against some of God's own beloved children. I am loathe to be dismissive toward those whom too many white Christians have already been dismissive historically. But when I need to choose between the humility that silently honors their words and the humility that dares to be in quiet but steadfast solidarity with my “Kuchu” (LGBTQ) brothers and sisters in Africa, I choose *that* humility. These persons did not “import” the sense of self understanding for which they are now stigmatized. They discovered it within their own African and God-graced lives.

(4) Therefore, to a large extent what plays out in Uganda (and in much of Africa) these days is the bitter harvest of a missionary Christianity that always erred on the edge of moralism now injected with new energy in recent decades by a Pentecostalism that is high on emotional passion but which remains spiritually dys-embodied (that is, sexually moralistic in spiritually harmful ways). And in the most recent years of all, a handful of fundamentalist American preachers with theocratic aspirations that are decidedly un-American have chosen to add their own “evangelical” energy toward a socio-religious blueprint for a Uganda that would aim to destroy the God-given diversity of these people. Not “good news” at all, for anyone.

(5) So is there a word of “good news” that the mainline (non-fundamentalist) Christian church can and should bear to our Ugandan brothers and sisters today? This is probably my most provisional assumption because, really, I am only guessing at this right now. For the most part, being “liberal” in our faith has meant being *tepid* in our conviction. And tepid Christianity is not likely to impress our African brothers and sisters anymore than it impressed Jesus in John's Apocalypse (Rev. 3:16). So whatever we have to offer, if we can't be passionate about it, we're probably best to keep it to ourselves.

For my part, I can provisionally identify *three* facets of a liberal Christianity that I think are worth being passionate about and which might prove an offering of good news to Africa. (a) That at the heart of the biblical story is the tale of a God who welcomes others in the fullness of who they are and who uplifts whole peoples for flourishing around a vision of hospitality. That is not exactly the missionary story, but it is a valid and authentic biblical story and one worth knowing and embracing with conviction. (b) That within a life-affirming biblical ethic of wholeness there is an important impulse to honor the integrity of the earth and the integrity of our bodies.

Quite beyond moralism, we are invited into tenderness, into sexuality that is framed by justice, mercy, and humility. (c) That in the stories about Jesus, if we listen at all, we find that being Christ is not unlike being Kuchu: defiantly different, festively compassionate, determined to fashion a community where outcasts are the very ones cast in. These are gifts of a passionately liberal Christianity that might invite Ugandans to claim a sense of Christian faith that can actually be life-giving to *all* of her children.

Assumptions. I have so much to learn yet, but these five core convictions are my beginning places. So let the learning begin!

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First Flight – and a glimpse of gifts

David R. Weiss, Wednesday – 8:30 p.m. (MN time)

Over the ocean, somewhere south of Greenland. Almost exactly halfway through the first 4150 miles of leg 1 to Amsterdam. (We will cross the midpoint while I am typing.) outside my window I see the leading edge of the wing illumined in the dark. That's DARK to you. Stars, light haze, and a brilliant moon behind me.

In the terminal I was doing my best Jodie Foster from Contact: "I am good to go. I am good to go. I am good to go ...". Then I realized, when Gate G9 – the gate clearly indicated on my boarding pass – was still largely deserted 45 minutes before my departure – that maybe I was not quite "good to go." So I checked the flight board and found that my flight was actually departing from G4. No one told me. I was where I needed to be in plenty of time to stand and wait for another 20 minutes before it was my turn to board.

So, here I am, in 25J: good to go, gone and went. Half way to further than I've ever traveled in my life – and when I get there (Amsterdam), I'll still only be half way to where I'm going. Yikes.

Outside, the air temperature at 38,000 feet (11,600 m) is -80 F (-62 C). You have to admit, Krystal, that makes even Minnesota seem toasty!

So I go bearing gifts. I feel a bit like Santa Claus (or Leo Treadway, at least!).

For the Bishop I have our love offering received at the luncheon on March 10, plus three cards filled with our signatures. Also, two framed photos for him to display at the Centre. One photograph shows our church building – a tangible reminder that there is a church, bricks and mortars, but also people and prayers, here in Minnesota that supports his dream for a Uganda with safety and dignity for everyone. The second photo is an image of the poster I brought with me from Luther College when we came to stand with St. Paul-Ref the day she was installed as pastor on the inside while Fred Phelps marched with his pickets on the outside. The image is Anita's stole, bursting with bright flower blooms and a quotation from Zechariah: "For we have heard the God is with you, and so we wish to share in your destiny." It seemed so fitting back in 2001. And it seems just as fitting to carry with me to the Bishop today.

I also carry with me three beautiful multicultural icons (like those that adorn the entrance stairwell to our church). They will become a gift as well to the Bishop, perhaps for the Centre, perhaps for his home. And, for Mary his wife, whom many of us met when she was in Minnesota with the Bishop back in 2011, I carry a beautiful-beyond-words glass pendant designed specifically for her by our own Lisa Mathieson. I daresay her breath will be taken away. Both by the beauty, but also by the deep affection it symbolizes. I know what it means to have a spouse – a woman with her own dreams – willing to support a calling that threatens to remake life for both of them. I know this mystery from the other side, and so I present this gift to Mary with my own wife Margaret in my heart knowing the difference that such love makes.

For Andrew, the bishop's program manager (and the point person in arranging my visit), I carry another framed copy of the Zechariah poster. Andrew is in his late twenties; he worked part-time for the bishop as a student in high school. Later, as a young man with a college degree and a job in business, he discovered that his association with the bishop made him a target in the workplace. Now he works fulltime at the Centre, setting aside his own dreams until Uganda's dreams seem closer at hand. Andrew has a three year-old daughter. For her, I carry two vibrant picture books. *Somewhere in the world right now* is a gorgeous bedtime story about nighttime arriving around the world, one place after another – and one of the sixteen or so places mentioned is Kampala, Uganda. *Whoever you are* is a warm gentle tale about children around the world ... each different in so many ways – and

yet each the same in so many ways as well. They are simple stories for a three year-old, but they already foreshadow the values the drive our common hopes.

And for Moses, the man who will be my driver, I also bear gifts. I have known Moses, though only in a virtual way, for two years now. He received an e-mailed copy of my Ugandan Anthem when I first wrote it in February 2011 – and he arranged several singings of it in Uganda. We have traded sporadic e-mails since then. Like me, Moses is an Ally. Although his solidarity has been more costly than my own. Over the past two years, as a result of his public participation in the campaign to oppose the Anti-Homosexuality Bill he has lost his job, seen his wife lose her job (as a result of his visibility) and seen his children taunted at school because of their father’s willingness to oppose hate. I had hoped to meet Moses when I went to Uganda. When I learned that he presently scrambles from one odd job to the next (he has helped out with several American-made documentaries that have filmed in Uganda) I quickly asked to hire him as my driver for the week so that I could direct a little money his way while cementing a friendship that now seems likely to last a lifetime.

But the gifts. Moses will get yet another framed Zechariah poster and a used cell phone to replace one that was recently stolen (it serves basically as a mini-laptop, especially helping him to chase down jobs as quickly as they appear). And each of his three children will get a small gift. For Hellen (1), *Global Babies*: a simple board book with a sing-song rhyme about babies around the globe. For Andrew (7) a harmonica and a beautifully illustrated *Children’s Picture Atlas* (yes, there is a global theme here). For Tracy (11) a simple dream-catcher, a coin purse made in Guatemala with a small circle of world children embroidered on it, and *Children Just Like Me*, an amazing UNICEF book with detailed photographs and descriptions of the lives of children around the world. Lastly for Moses and his wife, I am taking a small stone unity candle holder, the abstract image of a couple facing each other, holding hands, and holding a candle flame between them. It matches one that Margaret and I have. And although Moses and his wife are practically young enough to be our children, they, too, are together dreaming a new world. And so it seemed fitting to build a bridge of a shared flame of hope between our homes.

Lastly, I bear a pair of gifts for Rev. Mark Kiyimba a Unitarian pastor in Kampala that I met when he spoke at Unity Unitarian in St. Paul in the summer of 2011. Because his church runs a school and orphanage for children who have lost their parents to AIDS, I was able to get a donation of ten well-used but still very kickable soccer balls from the Hamline Women’s Soccer Team. And I carry a love offering to him that was sent to me by a UU church out in Pennsylvania. When they learned from Rev. Mark of my upcoming trip, they asked me to carry a gift to him from their congregation.

I don’t know when I have ever carried such a treasure of gifts – and mostly to people I have never met. I feel generous beyond measure, and humbled by the generosity that I am allowed to carry for so many others. Already my heart is full. From here on, my cup runneth over.

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Kampala – arrival

David Weiss, March 23, 2013

Even before you open your eyes, Kampala is sounds and smells. Birds chirping or chattering – or storks bleating like goats. Leaves rustle in the breeze, and the air is thick with the moist fragrance of a landscape very much alive. I don’t know what flowers or plants fill the air, but they are pungent, sensuous, alluring with the grace of nature. The smell says, “You and I, we are already *so involved* with one another.” And I blush, “Why, yes we are.” From the front stoop of my little room I can see the city sprawling across hills in the near distance. The Namirembe Guesthouse is in the city itself, but situated on its own hilltop, one can almost believe that the city, with its own set of sounds and smells is much further away than it actually is.

But let’s back up. Let me say something about my entrance into Africa itself. Thursday I flew from Amsterdam across Africa, finally landing in Nairobi, Kenya just after dark. At 40,000 feet I saw mostly clouds all day long. A couple glimpses of the Mediterranean Sea and several teases of the desert, but little else. Disembarking the plane to walk a hundred yards of more into the airport, Africa welcomed me with the warmth of the evening. Inside the airport that warmth became also damp and close (no air conditioning here) – a bit like a hug from an overly affectionate relative.

After a short layover and an even shorter flight I landed in Entebbe, Uganda, shortly before midnight (4 p.m. in Minnesota) on Thursday. Almost exactly 24 hours after leaving Minnesota ... and about 36 hours since my last

sleep. So the thirty-minute wait in line to get my entrance visa was l o n g. Then a weary dash to the baggage claim where my bags were just coming out and a hopeful walk to the line of drivers waiting with signs. Unfortunately there was no driver holding a sign with my name; and when the woman at the information desk called the guesthouse there was no answer; and when the airport guard asked loudly if there were any drivers here from the Namirembe Guesthouse, suddenly my welcome to Africa became decidedly understated. I still am unsure where the communication gap happened; the Guesthouse said they sent a driver, but by 12:40 a.m. with my anxiety starting to wax in exact proportion to my waning energy, I was glad when a young taxi driver approached me and said he worked for a company that was often hired by the NGH to bring guests there and he would be happy to take me. So, with weariness setting in, I was equally happy to be taken.

It's about a 35-40 minute drive from the airport to the Guesthouse at night. I think I was too tired to be overly alarmed by the driving, but I should've been. All the oncoming headlights were over in the wrong lane, and judging by my spot in the front left seat, I should've had my hands on a steering wheel. Then again, the "lanes" exist only in theory as the traffic uses whatever pavement is available at the moment – and the boda bodas (scooters) tend to even use the pavement that's not available. But I made it to the Guesthouse, received my key, made my way to my little room, washed up and crawled into bed around 2 a.m., setting my alarm for 8:45 so I didn't miss breakfast on my first morning in Uganda.

Enough for tonight. Tomorrow I'll try to review my first couple of days here.

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Sunday in Kawanda

David Weiss, March 24, 2013

The dust is the least of it. But it's red, and it has an aura of beauty to it even as it gets everything dirty. As Rev. Mark and I drove out to his New Life Unitarian Church in Kawanda, about 11 miles NE of Kampala (google it and you'll see how empty it looks on satellite) we were greeted by red dust, noisy traffic, and the cacophony of architecture that is Kampala. (I know, it's a mixed metaphor, but it's a mixed city.) Tall (8-10 story) "modern" buildings sit side-by-side with Third World shanty shops. I don't mean from one neighborhood to the next, but from one storefront to the next. Success and struggle sit side-by-side here, and I suspect the boundaries are all too permeable from one month to the next.

Leaving the paved road, we drove another 20 minutes on what was clearly built as a dirt road, but now rode far more like a rutted river bed. Serious ruts – 8-12 inches – everywhere. A one-lane road shared equally by pedestrians, bike, boda-bodas, and cars. Whoever gets to the next stretch of road first has the right-of-way – at least for a moment. It's a competition between speed and size (and each has its advantages and disadvantages) that looks like ever imminent catastrophe, but somehow unfolds into a choreographed dance where everyone moves at just the right time to avoid each other.

In the middle of nowhere, past mud homes the size of garages and some barely the size of sheds, we came to the church's property. After renting for years much closer to the city they made the difficult and daring decision to move to the "burbs." Or what they assume will become the suburbs over the next decade as Kampala continues its outward sprawl. Although these suburbs are not for the affluent, but for those at the edges, displaced as the city center modernizes itself bit by bit. They own about four acres. Bought the land completely undeveloped and have cleared about half of it. They make bricks from the dirt on their land and the building braces come from trees they felled.

There are two buildings so far. One is finished: five school rooms, with a pair that can be opened up to use as a sanctuary until they build that. The other will be done soon and has four more school rooms. Their school has almost 200 students and seven teachers. The rooms all have walls and roofs, and open-air windows and iron gates for doors. No electricity. Marginal by our standards, but an education in the middle of nowhere is a grace to these people.

Worship. I have been to several Unitarian worship services, and this one felt FAR more Baptist than Unitarian. But I can only base that on the volume and rhythm of the music which roused even my reserved German blood (if only because the bass got my blood cells vibrating!). The preaching and singing were mostly in Luganda (one of several Ugandan languages and the one predominate in this area). The singing was beautiful, mesmerizing, hypnotic. I couldn't understand a word, but I could feel the joy. Vincent, the lay pastor was as fiery as any Baptist

preacher I've heard – I suspect he would send most US UU's scurrying toward a door. But, like the singing, his fire was joyful. Loud. Actually LOUD. But even across the language barrier you could tell this was gospel encouragement not hellfire and brimstone.

I was introduced and invited to bring a short greeting, which I did. In my best English since my Luganda is nonexistent. I think the children (half the congregation of 40) understood me better than the parents (they go to school in English). I didn't see anyone who might pass for a grandparent. Life expectancy is early 50's here and while there are elders, they are few and far between.

At the end of the service – for many of them it was a 2-hour aerobic workout; for me it was occasional attempts at rhythm interspersed with long lapses into stiff Western whiteness. Oh well. In any case, during the postlude (which is my word, it was really more like a song-encore or two or three), someone came around with 12 oz. bottles of sodas for everyone there and we all refreshed ourselves – me, with pineapple malt soda – while the singing coasted to its end. No communion. No palms. But I knew I had been to worship. And in Kawanda, on Palm Sunday, it left the taste of pineapple in my mouth. Praise Jesus.

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Sunday with Kuchus

David Weiss, March 24, 2013

It is LATE here. After 1:30 (and I need to up and ready to go at 6:30 in the morning – Yikes!), but I need to get these words out before I sleep. I am *so much* like Emily in *Our Town* today. Somewhere she's cries out, "Stop, it's all moving so fast. Does anyone ever realize life while they live it – every, every minute?!" And the Stage Manager replies with a weary acknowledgment, "No." Then he adds, "Saints and poets maybe ... they do some."

And it is 1:30 and as I write my shoulders shake, my cheeks are wet, and I can barely see through the tears. It is SO full. There is TOO much to take in, but it is rushing in, and I don't want to lose any of it. So I just weep.

The afternoon began at Rev. Mark's city office, where we would gather with a handle of grassroots LGBT activists (in Uganda they call themselves "Kuchu" – which approximates our word queer, maybe not so much in exact meaning but in being a blanket reference to LGBTIQI folks) to listen in on a meeting about the challenges they face in funding their work.

We were back in the city, although you would never know it from the road we were on which matched the Kawanda road rut for rut. Rev. Mark's office is a simple cement building; spartan is a gracious word. Office space, meeting space, a simple kitchen and a bathroom. We were among the first to arrive. Longjones, whom I'd met yesterday was already there. So was Stosh, and she (or he?) mostly is the reason for my tears. I had never met her, but I recognized her immediately from the film *Call Me Kuchu*, in which she tells of being subjected to violent corrective rape, becoming HIV positive as a result, and wrestling beyond this grief to comes to terms with her trans identity (a process in which she is still immersed, and I am unsure whether it is up to me to switch pronouns without being invited or asked to do so – others in the room joked about her being defiantly "inbetween").

She and I sat alone in a room for a short while, and I explained who I was and why I had come. And she melted with gratitude. She swelled with joy. And I had not expected this. Her story had touched me deeply. My simple tale of Ally-on-adventure-in-Africa had no reason to move her as well. But there she was – beaming at me just because I came.

And so, it seemed a small gesture to offer her a copy of my book. It was not small at all. Stosh *exploded* with joy. She was beside herself with glee. "Oh, oh, oh, you do not know, but I *so* love to read. Oh thank you! Thank you!" And it was all I could do then to hold back then the tears that stream so freely now. And I said, "You are *so* welcome."

Before the long the room filled and then some. Maybe twenty Kuchu (I do not know if the plural takes an "s," or if it is singular and plural in one form) gathered: gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans at least. I will not try to capture the conversation, suffice to say for four hours it sounded like "justice flowing down like mighty waters." Well, not always. But it was more than animated. People grabbed the floor and held onto it long after their "turn" had expired. People debated the causes behind the frustrations they faced. People shouted, less in anger than in sheer passion. Two complaints surfaced repeatedly. One, that the big and "sexy" LGBT groups in Uganda tend to hog

the funding stream to themselves and shut out of the process those who are working in the trenches with the most marginalized of all. And these were the activists in the room. The other, that too many times persons in the LGBT community itself – no doubt because of the very desperation that frames and distorts their lives – act with less than the best character. That there are too many times that Kuchu undo their own progress by acting out of selfishness, greed, or stupidity. Human vices that are freely available to all of us, but which can be triggered especially when life is desperate.

I was the fly on the wall. This was not my room to speak in, merely to listen and learn. But oh my. So much pathos. So much passion. So much suffering. And so much hope.

And as the evening wore down to its end (around 8 p.m.) person after person came up to me and thanked me for being there. No, I don't think you understand. I mean hero after hero. Person after person whose life is in danger daily, thanked *me* for spending a few days in Africa. No. It is too much.

I don't deserve all this thanks. I am not worthy to be here among these people. And I remember the words I wrote sixteen years ago in my "coming out" piece as an Ally:

"I see now that if God keeps silent in the face of your anguish, it is only because I wouldn't lend God the use of my words. Well, here they are. ... Against all this that you know so well I can offer only words—but maybe this is precisely what I have not done often enough or loud enough or long enough."

Its sixteen years later, and I'm still talking. Tonight I'm weeping, too. Because such a beautiful tragic holy person as Stosh squealed in joy over me. "Saints and poets maybe ... they do some." But it hurts and it heals and it flows down like mighty waters tonight.

* * *

Monday in Masaka

David R. Weiss, March 25, 2013

The day began in darkness and drizzle at 5:55 a.m. Given that yesterday ended when I finally climbed in bed at 2:48 a.m. and I didn't fall asleep until well after 3, even bright sunshine would not have made me particularly chipper to greet the day.

But greet the day I did, throwing on my clothes and closing up the overnight bag I packed the evening before, hoisting my backpack, and headed out the door so I would be waiting when Rev. Mark pulled up at 6:30. Oh, and of course, I grabbed my balls on the way out the door. Soccer balls! Ten deflated balls gifted to me by the Hamline University women's soccer team to be delivered to the New Life Primary School later today.

As we left the guesthouse, driving in the dark and the drizzle, making a right turn into the far left lane the car suddenly lurched left and came to a stop. Our front left wheel has gone over the edge of the pavement (any shoulder had been lost to the night's rain) and the axle itself was resting on the edge of the road. Thus began my day, climbing out (did I mention it was dark and drizzling?) and, joined by two good men from the roadside, gripping the muddy front bumper (did I tell you how RED the mud is?), leaning into the damp hood, and hoisting twice unsuccessfully and waiting ten minutes for the traffic jammed behind us to crawl past until one car graciously waited for us, Mark got his wheel angled just right, and with some mixture of adrenaline, testosterone, and sheer (and increasingly damp) desperation we lifted the car back onto the pavement, the tire caught traction and the day was redeemed from the edge of disaster. I drove the rest of the way with drying red mud on my hands. Well, there's a good morning for you!

We drove for three hours then, thankfully on paved roads, moment by moment less dark, but with unremitting drizzle toward Masaka, a city about 90 miles west of Kampala. Even in the rain and the weariness (did I tell you I was a bit short on sleep?) it was a beautiful drive. The scenery was verdant green – at least out my side window. Sadly the windshield wiper on the passenger side had surrendered most of its rubber stripping long ago, so my front view was mostly verdant green behind a muddy red smear. Along the way we stopped and bought cooked bananas from a street vendor. I wouldn't call them delicious, but "warm and satisfying" was a significant step in the right direction, so I was grateful to see the day moving in a more promising direction.

Then the day simply blossomed as we reached the school. If any of you have seen *The Mission* you surely remember the scene where the Jesuit Father takes the Papal Representative to see the beautiful mission with the huge plantation – cooperatively owned – a model of abundance in the midst of simplicity. Today *that was me*.

New Life Primary School is not nearly so grand as the mission in the movie, but in its own way *it is*. Serving 600 students, about 65 of whom are orphans or come from families that are basically destitute. The other 535 come from the community, which means they come from poor families since virtually everyone here is poor. Tuition is on a sliding scale, but few families pay anything at all. (The school does get government subsidy.) About 150 students are nursery age (so pre-school), the remaining 450 are grades 1-7.

Today only about 500 students were there. You might recall it was a dark drizzly morning and had rained harder during the night. And many of these kids walk two-and-a-half hours to get here. They leave their homes at 5 a.m. to be here at 7:30. They stay until 5 p.m. and get home about 7:30 at night. And if you count the deep ruts in the dirt roads used to get here, they do walk uphill both ways. Apparently some of the kids don't have umbrellas or raincoats, so they thought better of trudging to school today. It's a great school, and education is a big value here, but at two-and-a-half hours I can't say I blame them.

New Life has seven full-time teachers, plus a variety of staff (lunch lady, PE leader, matron – who runs the boarding house where the 65 children without homes live). The teachers were gracious and quick to welcome me. Rev. Mark credits them with the real success of the school. "They have owned it in their hearts," he explains. "They are like second mothers and fathers to all these children." And what makes that happen is "integrity and respect." He continues, "They all have their own families so they need to know that when I say they will be paid, that they *will* be paid. And they need to know that I trust *them* to lead the school." Mark spent eleven months out of Uganda in 2011 because of threats on his life. But, he tells me with pride in his teachers, "when church friends of mine from the U.S. visited here while I was gone they told me it was like I never left. Because they see this *as their school*. Their calling."

And it showed. I stopped briefly in every classroom. Kids were squeezed into long bench desks (imagine picnic tables cut in half) and in *every* room I entered, the *moment* I crossed the threshold, *every* child rose in unison and said, "Welcome visitor!" In each class I explained who I was, where I came from, how cold it still was in Minnesota, and a bit about my church. I wore my "Potluck of People" t-shirt today. Speaking of t-shirts, at 70 degrees it was perfect t-shirt weather (except for the drizzle that kept up through lunch), although several of the teachers were in coats to stave off the cold. In the two youngest classes the teachers translated my greeting into Luganda; in the others they asked the students questions about what I said to make sure they followed my words. Twinkling eyes, bright smiles, and clapping met me in each room.

In grade 7 the students got to ask me questions. "How many years are you?" Like me, they were incredulous that I carry 53 years beneath my long hair. And 99.9% of them – boys and girls alike – have shaved heads. "How many pastors are at your church?" "How many children have you?" Five did not overly impress them, since the average family here has eight kids. But when I added that I have five grandchildren they could not believe a man with so much hair could have grandchildren already. And, from one intense young man, "You say you teach religion. What can you say about how God is connected to the Trinity?" What?!!! Okay, I'll take that. Meeting them at their 13-15 year-old level, I explained that Augustine, an early church teacher from north Africa, described the Trinity as a "fence around a mystery." That we can name the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but that the whole mystery of God is too much for words, so it is hidden behind the fence." They seemed relieved that such a wise man had come from Minnesota.

I ate lunch in the staff room. It was corn flour mixed with water and cooked into a paste that tasted quite like stiff mashed potatoes, covered by a scoop of (pinto?) beans in sauce and a scoop of a dark green diced leafy thingy with bits of onion and tomato in it. Brought to the staff room for us by the lunch lady and served up in bowls. I could not understand the Luganda that Mark spoke to her, but when she added a fork to my bowl I was glad he thought to accommodate my Western utensil-envy. It was tasty, and Mark explained it is the recipe recommended by UNICEF for teachers because it provides a complete meal. Then he added, "the children get a lighter porridge because if they ate this they would all fall asleep after lunch."

Earlier when we arrived Mark thanked me for the soccer balls and directed the PE teacher to get them out of his trunk. Over lunch he opened the bag and exclaimed, "Hey, you have *real* balls!" Why, yes I do. He meant, of course, that he was excited because these balls of mine, though well-worn and having seen *many* a kick, were obviously top quality and would hold up for a lot more use. Or something like that. He and a couple other male teachers proceeded to use a small bicycle pump to resuscitate the colorful balls to full strength.

And then in a moment of eschatological glory, they proceeded to toss all ten balls out into the field where half the kids were playing random games (in the drizzle); the other half were eating lunch. And what an explosion of energy, joy, and movement! Pockets of kids here and there seamlessly divided up into games of soccer, keep

away, kickball, netball, and who knows what else. *Every ball was in motion. Every child was in motion.* And the Hamline University women's soccer coach earned BIG karma points today. I could only smile, but it was a WIDE grin.

After lunch I was invited to the big room where ALL the students had squeezed into bench desks relocated here for this impromptu assembly. Now imagine this. Thirty girls are at the front in three lines, ready to sing and dance. 300+ kids are squeezed onto benches. And the larger kids are standing outside the building peering in through the open air windows. They start singing in voices that sound strikingly like British cherubs. The tones are beautiful and full of joy. I need to pay close attention to hear their words. A phrase in Lugandan and this: "We say welcome, Uncle David. We are happy that you came. Now we send you on your journey. And we bless you in God's name." Again and again. *Dozens of time.* While these girls are dancing. *Never* have I been so wondrously serenaded. I know, I know, they do this for all the guests, and today they just switched my name in. But more than 400 of them switched my name in. And I swear they meant every word. And I am teary-eyed again. *There is SO much grace here!*

And then, hold onto your seats, because in the next song one girl came to the front (the other 29 stayed back by the wall). All the girls sang, but only this one, maybe ten years old, was dancing in delight and beauty. But, because all good things must come to an end, before I knew it, she was dancing right in front of me – and holding out her hand – OH MY GOD – and singing, "Come dance with me, Uncle David." And excuse my religious language but, holy shit if I did not make my "America's Got Talent" dance debut held in the loving hand of this girl who seemed impervious to the judges who, wherever they were, were loudly banging their buzzer and pleading for it to be over.

Finally I was treated to a traditional dance by eight of the girls. Mark explained that for sake of time they would not don their traditional outfits. Instead they tied colorful sweaters around the hips, because this was one of those traditional African dances that drips with sensuousness as these not yet women magically moved their hips in a way that was entirely innocent but utterly intoxicating. BUT WAIT! Here's this girl again, she was gorgeous but far too young to be asking me out onto the dance floor again. "Come dance with us again Uncle David!" And there you have it, the image to spoil your day: me with eight beautiful 8-10 year-old girls shaking my hips as fast and furious as I can, keeping my rear toward the 400 students, both so they can enjoy the show and so that I can hide my face. Oh well. Let's all give thanks to God for small favors, because during this very much NOT a Kodak moment, Rev. Mark failed in his efforts to figure out how to snap a photo of me with my camera. A failure for which we can all be thankful.

I spoke a few words to all the children, promising to carry them in my hearts – perhaps the easiest promise I have made. And they sang a final "Farewell" song to me. We said good-bye and drove less than a mile to where Mark grew up. I met his mother, a gracious 75 year-old woman whose dignity did not need either English or many teeth (she had command of neither), but she managed to say "Welcome," and "Thank you," and it was more than enough. We ate fresh pineapple, bananas cooked with tomatoes and onions (actually, yum!), and eggs scrambled with tomatoes and onions. Sitting (finally) in the sunshine of a more typical Uganda day, it was a moment that stood still.

Then back into town to set me up at a hotel for the evening. The Shabert Motel is a three-story beauty with an inner brick courtyard open to the sky. I'm on the third floor, with a door to the balcony, although it's dark now, so I've kept the door closed lest I draw bugs inside. I have a four-pedestal queen-size bed with a full mosquito net canopy. Margaret, where are you?! Twelve dollars for the night, then back to Kampala mid-morning tomorrow.

When I checked in at the front desk, the clerk was full of questions. Where do you come from? What are you doing here? How was your day? When will you go back? What do you do in America? How old are your students? How many children do you have? Is that enough for you? (It seemed to satisfy her when I added in my five grandchildren, though she added with the usual surprise, "*You – grandchildren?*") She told me, with full sincerity, "You must come back with your wife and children and we will welcome you and your family." When I told her how old my students were, I asked how old she was. "Twenty-one." "Ah, so in America, you could be my student." And she blushed with delight. At the end of our conversation I inquired, "May I know your name?" "My name is Rena." "Hello, Rena, my name is David." To which she replied with laughter, "I know, you just filled it out on my card!" My turn to blush. It was all innocent, not even flirting really. But Rena's cheerful and seemingly endless curiosity was the perfect cap to a perfect day that began with dark, damp, muddy drizzle and ended with brilliant sunshine and so much more. Good night!

* * *

From Masaka to back to Kampala: Unexpected Turns & Tastes

David R. Weiss, March 27, 2013

At the equator nights falls promptly at 7 p.m. year round although the warmth lingers late into the night. Going out for a beer with Mark around 8 p.m. after our day at his school in Masaka it seemed later than it was. In Minnesota when it's this warm at night (maybe 75 degrees) it's July or August and the days are much longer. We chatted over beer (me) and whiskey (him) and fries (called "chips" here). It was a fitting end to our three days together.

Mark's brilliance, if you ask me, is threefold. First, he is profoundly progressive in his own theology, but in his parishes and at his schools he is profoundly patient. He knows his parishioners, teachers, and children have all been shaped by a very conservative, traditional Christianity. So the content of his preaching and the style of his administration are progressive in subtle but unmistakable ways. He isn't out to change Uganda overnight, but over lifetimes – because that's the sort of change that comes with deep roots.

Second, he has powerful gifts at visioning, planning, budgeting, and bringing things to fruition. Trained as an electrical engineer he thinks the details and the dollars while also seeing the dream – and honoring the people. "It's all about understanding people," he told me several times. At both school and church he's built teams that share his dream and own the vision. Both churches and schools (Kawanda and Masaka) have faced challenges, but the communities that Mark has fashioned have faced them with determination and spirit, guided by Mark's practical wisdom.

Third, he has an uncanny ability to be a presence to empower others, especially those whose access to power is limited. He's worked to catalyze the youngest of Kampala's LGBT activists foremost by offering safe space for them to gather, to get to know each other, and to get a bit of mentoring from him. But, as far as I can tell, even the mentoring comes through in subtle ways. He simply recognizes and honors the passion, experience, and gifts of these young activists in a way that big funders and even the power-centers in the LGBT community don't. And that genuine trust – while it cannot substitute for actual skills training for organizational leadership – does this: it brings young voices to the table. It builds confidence and supports mutual creativity. It fosters networking and affirms the work being done by these activists most deeply embedded in the trenches of Uganda's LGBT life. And it allows them – not him – to be the growing edge of change.

But the other thing about Mark is his buoyant humanity. Our conversation ranged widely. He comes to the U.S. for a couple weeks this fall, so we brainstormed ways to get him to the Twin Cities again and things he might do. As fathers and husbands we talked about our families and the way our work as Allies impacts them. When Mark confessed his love for American beer – especially Sam Adams – I shared that my son, Ben, enjoys home brewing and does a fine job of blending ingredients to get a flavorful beer. At this, Mark's eyes lit up, and this man – who has had to fear for his life, who has driven his own projects to succeed, and who is gently nurturing the growth of some of Uganda's most endangered activists – looked at me through the dark warmth of the evening and announced with exuberant earnestness, "David, when I come, I *must* have a beer with your son. Tell me about him. This will be wonderful!" That may be Mark's deepest grace – that he finds such joy in something like the prospect of a good beer in a distant land while expending his energy and risking his life to reshape the land he calls home.

Tuesday morning Mark put me on a bus to Kampala because he had work to do that would keep him in Masaka the rest of the week. Now this is not as simple as it seems. Just two weeks before coming to Uganda I'd heard a recently returned Peace Corps volunteer recount the perils of bus travel in the country, of seeing accidents with injured bodies laid out along the roadside. Having spent just a few days on Uganda's lane-less, shoulder-less, and pot-holed roads I could understand why. But who was I to protest? There is a world to change. And Mark's work for that change continues in Masaka while mine needed to get me back to Kampala for Wednesday's trip to Mbale.

So I allowed him to drive me to Masaka's bus depot and get me a prime seat on one of Uganda's "safest" buses (although I'm sure that "safest" is a very relative term!). Now this also is not as easy as it seems. When we pulled into the "depot," which is really a large chaotic gravel parking lot with a multitude of taxis (what they call buses here) scattered around in different areas heading out in different directions, I suddenly found myself the center of an argument – punches were nearly thrown! You see, each taxi driver competes to fill his bus, and they do so by descending on every car or boda-boda well before the vehicles stop, reaching through windows to get a hand on your shoulder or, if they can, to grab your luggage and start off to their bus. Thankfully, Mark had already decided

which bus I would ride to Kampala, a 29-passenger bus (the others were 12-14 seat vans) because “these drivers are the best.” So we bitterly disappointed several other drivers and headed to the big bus.

Mark told one of this taxi team (they seemed to have 3-4 persons working together) to be sure and give me a good seat. So he put me in the very front row – as in 12 inches from the windshield and right next to a window vent on my left. I was glad for a good seat. This would be a three-hour ride in an un-air-conditioned bus on a hot day. It promised to be a ripe ride. Mark came to the window, shook my hand one last time, thanked me profusely for coming to see him, and left me in the good care of one of Uganda’s safest taxi-buses. Now this also is not as simple as it seems. In Uganda the buses do not run on schedule; they depart when full. So there are now six people on my bus, and there are two smaller buses also aimed at Kampala. And all three vehicles are chasing down every passenger. And we need to find twenty-three more, and we are *not* leaving with any seats empty.

My son will attest that at 53 my bladder is not what it once was; he mocks me for needing to relieve myself more often than every four hours. Well, we had breakfast at 9:30, changed the money at the bank, and loaded me on the bus at 11 a.m. I’m sure there are latrines somewhere at the edge of the parking lot, but I really don’t need to go (yet), and I’m not about to lose my seat, but this is a *big* bus. Seventy-five minutes later, still sitting in the lot, I still don’t need to go, but I am starting to worry about the 3-4 hour drive to Kampala. There is road construction, plus potholes, no shoulders, etc. I am *not* drinking anything. Finally shortly before 12:30 we are full: all of the twenty-nine seats are taken and we have 4-5 babies on board to boot.

So we finally head out and lurch (I do not use that word lightly) around the corner onto the ruts that pass for an exit alley and are on our way to Kampala. However, this is still not as simple as it seems. When we reach Kampala the bus will begin dropping people off at various places along the main road. It will not go all the way to the Guesthouse. I need to get off at the Sanyu Babies Home (an orphanage) that, as Mark puts it, is “really quite close – just a short walk – from the Guesthouse; I can have a friend of mine meet you there and guide you home.” I am great – superb, unsurpassed – with maps. I even have a pretty good internal sense of direction. But fly me to the equator, put me in a city unlike any I have ever seen, and promise me that a stranger will meet me (granted, I do pretty much stick out in a crowd) at a drop point that has no scheduled time, and I am not without a little anxiety. So I opt to call my driver, Moses, and see if he is available to meet me there. Moses, alas, is out of town. It’s his day off, and he had a chance to pick up a day’s work elsewhere so bully for him. However, Moses does say that he is certain that his friend, Agnes, a young woman I met on Friday, would be happy to meet me and guide me home. This way, despite the lack of a schedule, the presence of potholes, the lack of shoulders, the possibilities of an accident, the unpredictability of construction, the heat of the bus, and the bladder-factor, despite all these things, I can look forward to a familiar face at the end.

And, long story short, we made the trip without incident. The fine gentleman seated next to me made sure the driver knew to stop at the orphanage, and as we pulled up only one person was there: Agnes. And our eyes met before the bus even stopped, and she smiled at me and I smiled at her, and if I were single I might have proposed on the spot. In that moment she looked beautiful to me and our meeting was one of great joy. (In fairness to Agnes, she is quite beautiful, so do not think that my trip made her so. It simply made me notice it all the more.) Indeed, the Guesthouse was just a 7-8 minute walk from the orphanage. And when we reached my room I peed like a Derby racehorse giving thanks for a bladder that proved itself worthy that day. I paid Agnes for her time and thanked her from the bottom of a heart that has grown very deep these days.

Back in my room I treated myself to a shower. Who knew water could feel so good? Combined with soap, shampoo, conditioner, and the combined sense of relief and accomplishment that might seem silly to you but are utterly authentic feelings in me, and afterwards I felt like a new man ready to take on the world.

Instead, I simply took on some incredible Indian food. When Robbyn, a woman about my age that I’d met in the Twin Cities a few years back, learned last summer that I might be going to Kampala she was excited. Her college roommate had married a Ugandan man (a Ph.D. in wildlife ecology and now chief of his clan in the Gulu tribe) and moved to Uganda thirty years ago. Robbyn was sure Rita, director of an NGO devoted to agricultural research and living in Kampala would be happy to meet for dinner. That was an understatement. Rita took me to Khana Khazana, an Indian restaurant that was sumptuous beyond words.

Indians came to Uganda just before the turn of the last century. From the late 18800’s into the early 1900’s they built the railroads across the Uganda. They stayed until Idi Amin decried them as a leech on the Ugandan people and expelled them all in a 48-hour period in 1972. But families had roots here, and when Amin fell some years later, families returned. Whatever family runs Khana Khazana has very tasty roots in Uganda.

Rita and I spent two hours beside a gorgeous Indian fountain, getting to know each other over a meal that made the entire day's ordeal seem like a short prelude to this leisurely feast. First they brought us thin sliced carrots and cucumbers with assorted masalas to dip them in. I melted. We ordered an appetizer made with potatoes, red onions, and green peppers in another masala sauce. But besides tasting divine, this dish included *whole* red onions, golf-ball sized pieces of heaven. Rita warned me when I picked up the first one, "That's not a potato, that's an onion." "Oh my," I said with quiet delight, and to myself I thought, "God is *so* good." And so was the onion. For our meal we shared a bowl of mushrooms and sweet corn in a royal cream gravy and a bowl of cubed cottage cheese in a spinach puree, both eaten with pieces Naan (Indian flat bread) made with garlic or filled with cheese. When we were finished eating they brought us a small spice box with little compartments and a tiny spoon inside. We took turns putting tiny spoonfuls of fennel and sugar crystals in our hands and nibbling them together. I do not ever remember relishing a meal as much as this one. The depth of my experiences so far, the day's adventure, the joy of a new friend, and the unexpected ecstasy of Indian cuisine made this my own *Babette's Feast*.

* * *

On to Mbale: Holiness at the foot of Mt Elgon

David R. Weiss, March 28, 2013

The road to Mbale is actually a good road. It takes you across the dam that catches the first flow of the Nile as it leaves Lake Victoria. Like all the roads in Kampala it is a magnet for little villages along the way, but in this area the villages are as likely to include traditional Uganda huts as they do simple and/or ramshackle homes. It is a long drive, three-plus hours even in good traffic. And today – yes! – we had good traffic.

Moses and I had a chance for more leisurely conversation than we have had when jetting (hint: that was irony) around the big city, though I will confess that when he asked at one point if I'd been taking a little "power nap," I was. Still, he kept me apprised of the countryside, we talked about families, about racism and homophobia, and about our perspectives and roles as allies. And we drove past off to one side the place where David Kato is buried and off to the other side the place where he was murdered in January 2011.

We reached Mbale, population about 100,000 – and bustling with energy – about 1 p.m. Mount Elgon was straddles the Uganda-Kenya border, greeted us as we approached the city. At 14,000 feet it's one of the tallest mountains in Africa. The city itself sits in the foothills, at 3500 feet. As I said, it feels busy. But in a different way than Kampala. Moses noted as we turned onto one of the main streets that driving here is different. A bit more courtesy holds sway. And less omnipresent attention is required. A Kampala driving style will not make you popular on the streets of Mbale. Life is busy and moves fast, but most people here have lived in this area their whole lives. People *know* you, and that frames the bustle with a measure of friendly leisure as well.

We headed right for the Mt. Elgon Hotel at the north edge of the city, quite beyond the noise. It is a minor luxury. A beautiful courtyard out back and even an outdoor pool. Spacious rooms, well-appointed. At \$80 a night (which includes breakfast) it is a bit pricy, but seems a reasonable luxury for a single night. Plus, Moses said it would be quiet at night (it is), and so I would get a good night's sleep (I'm not – it's 2:20 a.m. and I'm still writing the night away). Oh well. Also, although Moses didn't say so, I'm certain that another plus is the relatively discrete safety of a setting where the locals don't venture regularly. Later he would bring a lesbian woman and two gay men to meet with me in the courtyard – a tolerable prospect here and a daunting one in the city center where the hotels are cheaper. That friendly attitude because everyone knows you doesn't carry over if everyone knows you're gay.

After lunch and a shower we stopped by the boarding school that Moses two older children attend. The principal called them out of class to visit with Moses briefly out in the yard. Eleven year-old Tracey looks like her father, with a wide bright grin. Seven year-old Andrew was more reserved; he'd been awakened from an afternoon nap. I presented each child with the gifts I'd brought for them (see my "First Flight" blog). I explained that their father has been very good to me, and these gifts were a small thank you. Tracey was clearly pleased, delighted, surprised, grateful, astonished by the book and dream-catcher and coin purse. Her face is like a lava-lamp-mood-ring carrying every emotion across it. Even Andrew, who stood close to his father's side the whole time (sleepy, shy, and "always thoughtful" Moses said) offered a glimmer of interest in the book and obvious interest in the harmonica. They both thanked me and ran off to bury their treasures safely in their rooms before heading back to class. Moses had also brought them treats: a gallon jug of juice, a loaf of bread, and a can of jam. Food for after

hours snacks. And their excitement at receiving these staples testified to a life much closer to the bone than my own.

As we drove off Moses remarked about my gifts, “For once they will be the envy of their classmates.” Maybe so, but to have a father as devoted to their well-being and to a better world for them to be in, *that* is worth the envy of their classmates even if they don’t realize it.

From the school we drove through town to the far side where, just outside the city proper we picked up a dirt road that took us to the land that Moses’ father left to him in a neighborhood of small plots. Houses running the gamut from sticks and mud to brick and plaster. Moses’ home is a work in progress. He and Sara (his high school sweetheart and partner of twelve years) had been renting in the city and slowly working to build this house. One of the things about Uganda is that almost everyone owns a small plot of land. It may take years to put a house on it, but the land is there. But when Moses was outed as an Ally, and then when he lost his work as a consequence of that, the need to leave the city became an economic priority to eliminate a rent payment. And all the more pressing because as they fell behind in their rent the landlord had the right to come and confiscate all their belonging. So, while it is not quite accurate to say they “fled” their apartment in the city, it is entirely true that they moved here in a hurry, to a house not yet ready for occupants, but far enough along to accept them as refugees.

Today the house still lacks glass windows (though many houses here do without them altogether), to have windows is a plus. The home looks modestly nice from the front. When you get to the back, where the unplastered brickwork is still exposed it looks much rougher. Walk through it and three of the four rooms are virtually unfurnished; only the bedroom is “complete.” When he needed to move his kids from the public school to a boarding school (they were being taunted because of his visibility as an Ally), and when Sara lost her job because of her link to him, all the imagined household furnishing were delayed in favor of school fees and rent in Kampala where Moses can at least occasionally find work. The house is bare because he dared to be seen.

One room that is bare (well, except for the couple of chickens kept in it) has special significance to me. Moses and I met through Pastor Brad Froslee (another story, another night) who e-mailed Moses the anthem I wrote for Uganda in spring of 2011. We debuted it at St. Paul-Reformation on Pride Sunday in June 2011. About that same time, a tiny group of gay Christians gathered with Moses in this room and he taught them my anthem. One day, two years before I came here, my words furnished this room with hope. It will be nice when it has furniture as well. But for me – and for Moses, too (he told “this was the room” with a sense of shared pride) – this room is already full in its own way. Everything else will be icing on the cake.

Out in front three men are digging and bricking up a septic tank. This neighborhood does have running water and electricity, and Moses knows that his pit latrine is filling fast and that it is not healthy in the long run. But the hygiene of a toilet comes at a steep price: about \$1000. And progress comes to a halt when there are no more bricks or cement. Tonight I paid Moses in advance for his work as my driver later this week so that before we head back tomorrow he can give the men his wages to build a better place to hold his shit. In the most humbling and literal sense.

I will pay Moses about \$500 this week – it will be the majority of his income for the month. And a third of it will go to his rent in Kampala; a third to his delinquent children’s school fees; and a third to build a better toilet for his family. The furniture and the windows are *way* down the road. Hopefully someone else will hire Moses months from now and it will mean a sofa or an easy chair. But I’m a good Lutheran, so if, a month from now Moses can sit down on a toilet and be grateful to me while he takes a crap, that, too, counts as gospel. One person becoming Christ to another in a world with need enough so that everyone can take a turn. And often enough already Moses has been Christ to me.

In the late afternoon the real holiness of the day sets in. And my eyes are wet before I even try to tell it.

Before he lost his job Moses helped convene a small circle of gay and lesbian Christians here in Mbale: the Rainbow Fellowship they called themselves. One of the conveners was killed in an accident. Another, a pastor, was outed as an Ally, kicked out of his church, and fled the country. Moses just moved to Kampala, but it means that there is no one to gather the people right now. Not that there are many to gather. But, wherever two or are gathered ... and right now that rarely happens.

But today it did. Out in the yard behind my Hotel Moses brought three members of the Rainbow Fellowship to meet me. I promised them that neither their names nor their photos would appear on the internet. Even with that promise one of them asked not to be photographed. They all knew that gay couple where not too long ago one partner was beaten to death by his lover’s family. One of them had been beaten by her own family when they

found out she was gay. She was only twelve years old. In Ugandan in general – and anywhere outside Kampala in particular – you don’t claim a gay identity, you *risk* it, at times with your life. So my words about these three holy persons will be general.

Two gay men and a woman, and Moses, of course. I borrowed deeply from the trust they place in him to get this meeting. I bought them all supper. Well, Wingspan did. When the food came Moses invited me to bless it. It was a prayer of short simple sentences. Anything longer and the tremble in my voice would have become a full weep. These people were far from starving, except for fellowship – for company with saints. And the food on our plates was WAY more than just food. We had communion in the shade on the grass in the yard outside my hotel. One of the men spoke very little English. I think he followed some of what we shared in words; I have to trust he followed everything else in faith. It was clearly important for him to be present even if the words failed him.

Over supper I listened to them explain a bit about their fears. The need to be guarded at all times. The knowing that being outed will cost you your job, your family, your friends, your community, your education, your dreams, your health, your safety ... And yet, for each of them, for different reasons, going to the big city is not an option. If you don’t have connections in Kampala or an immediately marketable skill, the fear that is familiar is preferable to the fear that is not.

Except for the (now on hiatus) Rainbow Fellowship, none of them have a worshipping community of any sort. As Moses explained, “Even a dog knows where it is not wanted.” If there is *never* a word of grace or welcome or gospel uttered that has your name on it – and if the only words that connect to your experience feel like rocks hurled your way – eventually you don’t come around anymore. And here is one tragic observation: while they all clearly miss the tiny Rainbow Fellowship (it was never more than eight persons at its peak), they don’t miss a “church” per se. I think they can’t even imagine well enough that one could possibly welcome them to yearn for the day that it might.

I asked them what they wished for, what would actually make a difference to them in their lives. Here’s the short list. (1) A safe place to gather again (since being outed on TV, Moses’ home is no longer a viable option). (2) A local leader and pastoral points of contact – even if distant. (Words of thanks invoked to Pastor Brad on this count.) (3) A vetted network of professional persons to whom they know they could go to in times of need, whether bankers, doctors, pastors, etc. (4) Having access to training that allows them to be self-employed (and thus not fired at the whim of a boss who senses they’re not straight – a big fear). (5) Financing like microloans that make it possible to start your own business. (6) Scholarship aid for education (tuition varies, but about \$13,000 can cover a three-year college degree. It’s a pretty practical list. Not easy, but hardly extravagant. I couldn’t grant any of their wishes, but I could hear them with an aching humble presence. And I could thank them for trusting me with their words. To which the woman said, as though it was the most important words she had spoken all day, “No, thank *you*. Because you came.” There is no end of tears for me as I replay these days at night.

When we parted after two hours I gave the two who knew English a copy of my book. The other man, who couldn’t even shape a sentence longer than a “Thank you,” let it be known in vigorously spoken Lugandan that he wanted a book, too. Right now it is probably the only tangible proof he has – that he can pick up and hold in his hands even though he can’t read the words – that there are actually people (theologians, no less) who claim him for the love of God. Whether he ever reads the book or not, it may be one of the most important ones I given out.

* * *

In the Company of Angels – Grassroots in Kampala

David R. Weiss, March 29, 2013

“Angel” simply means “messenger.” We often imagine wings and a robe, but the litmus test for an angel is neither apparel nor pinion. It’s *message*. So I’ve spent the last two days in the company of angels: four activists whose message is liberation and good news and whose life is anchored in God. Angels, to be sure.

I first saw John "Longjones" Wambere in the 2010 documentary *Missionaries of Hate*, and again in the 2012 documentary *Call Me Kuchu*. He was a close friend of David Kato, the gay activist murdered in 2011 amid the furor over the Anti-Homosexuality Bill and the incendiary climate created by a couple local newspapers and a handful of American evangelists. In *Missionaries* Longjones briefly discusses his faith, so as soon as my trip became moved from planned to “tickets purchased!” I let Andrew, who was arranging my trip at this end, know that I would be very interested in having a conversation with Longjones – and yesterday I did.

I'd already shaken his hand on Saturday and again on Sunday – here I am, just one week in Kampala and already moving “in certain circles” ☺ – but this was my first chance to actually engage him in conversation. Most people who meet with him want to talk politics or activism. He does that happily because it's essential to telling the story of LGBT persons in Uganda, but his face really lit up when I'd told him back on Saturday that I wanted to hear about his faith.

We met in the small chapel at Bishop Christopher's Centre. It's a bare room, actually a one-car garage converted into a chapel. It has ten white plastic chairs and a small table for an altar. There's a photo of David Kato on one wall. We visited for an hour. I told him enough of my journey as an Ally of faith so that he would know where I was coming from, then I sat back and listened to him.

Longjones is 40 years old, tall, lean, fit, and (dare I say) fabulous. Caught in a parental tug of war between a Catholic mother and an Anglican father, his dad won out early on because he was the one who had the car (so anyone who went with dad got to ride in the car rather than walk with mom) and the one who treated any of the eight children who came with him to a nice restaurant meal afterwards. We all begin our faith journeys somehow, and John's journey began through the lure of a car and a lunch.

Maybe the car was symbolic or providential or both, because over his forty years he's covered a lot of religious territory. At seventeen he converted to Islam, much to his father's chagrin. But the generosity of his Muslim friends helped him complete his education as a teacher. A few years later the hospitality of a Pentecostal family led him to reclaim Christianity with a fervor that included revival style outreach preaching in rural Ugandan communities. When life led him to Nairobi, he was adopted by a Muslim family, and his practice of Islam re-emerged, then drifted away.

During a scary period of illness as a young man – for two months his lower body was paralyzed and he was unable to walk – he experienced a miraculous healing at Easter time and dedicated a year of his life to itinerant Christian evangelism and hospital ministry. Having fulfilled that commitment, he began to teach. In the community where he was teaching he met some Latter Day Saints who welcomed him and eventually he was baptized and became quite active in the LDS church. In fact, it was an American LDS woman who first set him up in the travel business, a career he's pursued for more than fifteen years now (although he has let go of the LDS faith). You can hear this spiritual meandering in several ways – it certainly reflects the real way that economics and personal need intersect with faith – but I think it most reflects a intuitive restless on Longjones' part (I'm not sure he has yet found a community in which he finds all of himself welcome) and an attraction to the experience of hospitality.

Longjones struggled for years with his sexuality and at times he cried to God in prayer, asking to have his desires changed. But ultimately he put his faith in the goodness of the God who created him – and loved him – as he was. Around 2005 John sort of gave up church altogether, having grown tired of the hate speech that surfaced whenever the issue of homosexuality came up. Today he says he believes in himself, in Jesus, and in God. His faith is defined less by doctrine than by practice: he is generous, compassionate, and committed to being a blessing to others, both gay and straight alike. “I have no fear,” he concludes. “I am confident that on judgment day I will be successful. God created me, he knew me – and that I was gay – before I was born, and he asked me to call him Father. And no true Father would reject his own child.”

Now he begins each day with a simple prayer that offers thanks, asks for protection, and seeks wisdom. He says, “I believe after everything that my days have been preserved for a reason, even though I am not yet sure for what purpose. But I am on a journey of fulfillment.”

“Longjones” is best known for his height, his nickname, and, of course, his LGBT activism and work (he's part of the leadership of Spectrum, an agency providing care and services to the MSM – men having sex with men – community). But the roots of his passion for justice are grounded in a deep personal faith. Few journalists or filmmakers are particularly interested in that aspect of his life, but if you ask, it quickly becomes evident that the God whose love he knows in his heart is the Power that gives him comfort and courage and that draws him into deep relationship with those around him. As angels go, Longjones is holy in a fashionable fabulous way.

After we ended our conversation and John left, Moses and I headed – through thick traffic to Garden City, a fairly modern open air shopping mall. Thick traffic is the norm in Kampala, but on Thursday it nearly did me in. Equal parts hot sunshine, stalled traffic, thick air, auto exhaust, and an empty stomach (we'd had no food since an 8 a.m. breakfast back in Mbale), left me feeling nauseous by the time we reached the mall for a 5 p.m. meeting with Jay and Frank.

Moses and I would eat our Maundy Thursday evening meal later when we got back to the Guesthouse at the end of the day. But my Eucharist on Maundy Thursday took the form of Communion with Frank and Jay over a tropical smoothie at Café Pap in Garden City. Both the drink and the conversation more than revived my spirit.

Frank Kamyia helped found Youth on the Rock in 2010, a grassroots group that serves one of the most marginalized sexual minority communities: LGBTI youth. We had met and chatted for maybe ten minutes on Sunday afternoon at Rev. Mark's office. In setting up this meeting over a series of text messages while in Mbale he called me "dear" six times, told me I was such a handsome man, and signed off by wishing me sweet dreams. Not that he's a flirt or anything. He's just Frank. (But his messages did make me feel special ...)

When Frank came out after his last year of high school he was chased out of his home by his mother and told not to come back. He wasn't from the slums himself, but when his mom kicked him out, it was a friend in the slums who offered him a place to stay. Having been once cared for by these least of the poor, he now works to care for them in return. His group – comprised of five volunteer staff – serves about 200 youth, many of whom are kicked out of their homes when they come out or are outed. With no resources (they're already in the worst of the slums) they have few options other than to rely on "survival sex" – bartering sex for food or lodging.

In the honest desperation of this situation, the sort of messy reality that makes donors and foundations queasy, Youth of the Rock simply strives to meet the most immediate needs. Sure, they love to empty the slums themselves, but that's not going to happen. So if they can do some sex education, if they can distribute condoms and lubricant so that survival sex is less deadly, that's at least a start. If it keeps kids alive until they can escape the slums, that's at least a glimmer of hope. But a much messier hope than we are used to. We like our hope bright and cheerful. Well, I've seen a video of some of the Youth of the Rock performing in drag, and they do have a bright side of hope. But not on most days. On most days they glimpse hope only as seen through a glass *very* darkly.

Having flirted with Frank by text, I think what struck me most about his presence was his quiet earnestness. Quiet, at least in part, for personal safety. We'd met at a café in a shopping mall with widely spaced tables because public spaces like this or safer than residential areas, less likely to draw attention (which so easily draws violence). But quiet also because alongside his passion, Frank is thoughtful. He says he tries "to be an example" to his members of a better life. And he's earnest about this work in a way that is disarming. He may seem playful on a cell phone keypad, but he's well aware that in real life, in the work he does, the kids he serves are playing a game of Russian Roulette in which more than one chamber is often loaded.

Jay is twenty-seven and the Executive Director of Fem Alliance Uganda, an organization dedicated to serving another of Uganda's most marginalized groups, LBT/WSW (women who have sex with women) persons in both rural and urban areas. That needs to be unpacked a bit. "Executive Director" says both too much and too little. With no budget and no staff, it seems pretentious. With 48 known and named person in rural areas depending on you for life-saving education, material aid, and emotional support, it seems like an understatement. Like Frank, Jay is also dedicated to being a "first responder" of sorts, the person who would like to avoid crashes altogether, but knows that right now that are so many people needing to be bandaged up that this work needs doing *now*.

And LBT – well, while Jay is a man, he was born in a woman's body. In Uganda, that means it's likely he'll die in a woman's body. And that's true for the vast majority of Uganda's trans population. So Jay, who straddles sexual/gender reality in a way that is at once a bit confusing and a whole lot humbling, focuses his work on serving women, because *he's a woman, too*.

In best case scenarios he creates a "cell" – a loose group of individuals in a common area who can offer mutual support to each other. In other cases he simply keeps track of who is where and offers support as he can himself. Many of these persons are HIV-infected, often chased out of homes, thrown out of schools, depressed, desperate, suicidal. They need counseling and support, dental dams, lubricant, and condoms. Ideally they need economic empowerment skills and capital to become self-sufficient. More often they need "lots of little money" to get from one day to the next. And, like a Methodist circuit rider, he travels to where his people are as often as he can. He's been doing this for three years now.

Jay started Fem Alliance in part because he didn't feel that the larger LBGT organizations were really (or even really serious about) reaching the person most in need. Having lived part of his youth in a rural area, Jay says, "I'm part of this community." But, living now in Kampala, he knows it's much worse for others elsewhere, and although he says, "I'm touched by their suffering," it's truer to say he bears deep in his heart the wounds of God's children in the Ugandan countryside.

Both Frank and Jay are deeply religious in a personal way. They pray daily. They regard themselves as born-again Christians.

Now here is the last thing I will say about these two angels. I say it with hesitation and with resolve. Because you, my readers, *you need to hear this testament of incarnation*. Jay and Frank are not “funded” in any real sense of the word. (They have received a few small grants and donations, but the needs they try to meet are a yawning abyss. They receive no salary. They sleep where friends let them stay. They eat as friends share food. And they provide what they can to those they serve as gifts come in. The LGBTI community in Uganda has so little, but what little they have, they do work to share with each other, and these two angels are key points in delivering these little bits of mutual aid to the places most in need and hardest to reach. Next to no funds. Sometimes no funds at all. Endless needs. Occasionally these angels enter the messiness of sex work themselves not for profit but for compassion, to fund their own enterprises of grace. Can you hear this?!

We dare to speak about incarnation as that mystery where holy love becomes frail human flesh as though we can imagine what that means. We speak about Jesus as “one who knew no sin yet became sin for our sake.” And we remember, on Maundy Thursday, “the night in which he was betrayed,” the words, “this is my body, broken for you ...” *Who am I to say that Frank and Jay are not also in these messy moments somehow caught up in God’s own anguished reach – in ways as scandalous as the cross itself – to touch the lives of the least of these?*

Today (Good Friday) I claimed as a day of personal retreat. Exhausted by long days, late nights, and interactions that are filled with grace in a most exhausting way, I needed down time. I got some, but I also got a phone call from Stosh, and you might remember from my March 24 “Kuchu” post that “she” (which I now know should be *HE*) is the one who exploded with a squeal of joy upon being given a copy of my book. He apologized for not returning my message from the day before sooner, but he didn’t have any airtime on his phone. I explained I was “landlocked” at the Guesthouse for the day, having told Moses he was free to run his own errands all day while I was rested, but that I’d be happy to meet him here if this felt like a safe place. Stosh was eager and willing, but had no money to hire a boda-boda to bring him here. I promised that if he came, he could call me down to the front gate and I’d pay the driver for him. So I brought Stosh to me.

He arrived just in time for lunch. So Wingspan, after paying for the boda-boda, also picked up lunch for both of us. He explained, as he set the silverware to the side, that he liked to eat with his fingers (the traditional Ugandan way) because the food tasted better if your fingers lifted it to your mouth. We chatted lightly and softly over lunch, sitting outside at a table far down from the buffet line. In a bit of bartered irony, I’ve chosen to be friendly to everyone here at the Guesthouse, but to *not* tell anyone here why I’m here ... precisely to make a moment like this possible. If other guests or staff knew my purposes I might be less welcome, but I wouldn’t be any less safe. *Stosh would be less safe*. And my silence bought him a safe place and a good meal to eat today. Such are the choices made in this land.

Stosh is a thirty-six transman. Already as a little girl she never liked wearing dresses and was grateful to have had a grandfather who, when the school complained that she wasn’t wearing the proper uniform, told the school that he wasn’t pay them tuition to dress her but to teach her. So she was allowed to wear the boys uniform. At sixteen, after a hired hand in the family noticed that she was still playing, almost flirting, with girls, he decided to “teach me how to ‘play’ with boys.” Today we call it “corrective rape.” That was 1997. Her family refused to believe that she hadn’t consented.

She became pregnant as a result, but having never been told anything about sex, she thought maybe she had a hernia or some other stomach ailment. When the pregnancy was discovered at five months her family turned on her, refusing to believe she hadn’t slept with other men. Eventually her grandfather, telling her that no child should have a baby like this, took her to a clinic where she received an injection that led to an abortion – the delivery of a dead, but very human-looking fetus into a basin at home about a week later.

(Now, having recounted the rape and the pregnancy, which happen to Stosh as a girl, I will switch back to the correct pronoun for him.)

Stosh himself had been conceived by and born to an unmarried mother, an embarrassment in the culture at the time, so his mother had given him to his grandparents to be raised and Stosh never met either of his biological parents until his late teens. He finally met his mother during the pregnancy. A few years later, when his grandfather died, he tracked down his father in Rwanda. He’d gone there as a soldier during the war, had his jaw badly mangled by a bomb and poorly repaired by doctors. He couldn’t chew any food any longer. He was married. It seems like it was an amicable reunion, but after such a long silence it didn’t produce a fairy tale ending.

In 1996, when Stosh was nineteen his mother became ill with HIV/AIDS and eventually died. At that point, Stosh became scared and got tested himself. He was positive. The only sex he'd ever had was being raped. Having watched his mother suffer, he chose suicide instead. HIV was as good as a death sentence at the time. He swallowed watch batteries to no effect. Tried combined anti-malarial meds with alcohol. But after eight "unsuccessful" attempts he was still alive.

By 22 Stosh had been HIV+ for six years but had told no one and sought no treatment. What could be done anyway? He moved around, made ends meet, for awhile started up and ran a little restaurant in Entebbe. Had a "lady partner" for a year, and for the first time, thanks to love, his HIV status was not a source of stress. Stosh is clear about this, "I am a man who loves women, but I have the body of a woman myself."

In 2005, at age 28, the HIV began to manifest itself. About the same time an uncle she never really knew because he'd been in the army and then in Germany for years came back to Uganda. He was a divorced medical doctor and hired Stosh to look after his children. He noticed that Stosh was not well, and showed concern. Stosh decided, "I am ready to die. I will just come out to him and let it happen." Instead, the uncle broke down and cried, saying, "Don't you know, you can live!" Stosh has been on ARVs since then and is amazingly healthy today. He says, "We expect miracles to fall out of the sky like something supernatural, but my life, my *natural* life, is a miracle."

Shortly after this Stosh became active in LGBT groups, particularly working with HIV+ persons. He's in a new relationship, though it hasn't been easy. Three years ago, on different occasions, both of them had their photos published in local papers, outing them to family and friends, costing them jobs, lodging, relationships. Once, when a landlord damaged his laptop and he threatened to report it, the landlord laughed it off, saying, "Where are you going to report, *you're gay*." And there's a measure of truth to that taunt. Being gay is always the worse offense. Stosh has been outed like this four different times. Each time it has a new cascade of consequences. Each time it takes a toll.

There is a measure of resignation in Stosh's outlook. He is convinced change will come to Uganda, but also convinced it will not come in time to benefit him. He's seen his education halted and his dreams, like that aborted fetus so many years ago, have been mostly stillborn. He had aspirations to be a journalist once. And maybe still. But the maybe is soft spoken and weary.

He has very little to do with the church anymore, "tired of going to hear the Word of God only to hear human words of hate." He is deeply disappointed with the American pastors who have heightened homophobia here in Uganda. "We assume that America is a place where people are more learned, but these men, they are scared of what they don't know." He wishes we – American Christians who *are* welcoming – would work harder to shut down the voices of hate from our side. And although he says at this point, he wishes he could just leave Uganda, what he truly desires is a Uganda worth staying in. That's the dream, however impossible, that he still dares to dream. If not for himself, then someday. For others.

Still, weary resignation and impossible dreams are not the only thing you hear. There is an inexplicable buoyancy in his voice at times. "God" was a constant theme through his story. God as a source of comfort, a companion in loneliness, a reason to be grateful, a surprise in being alive. In a narrative that seemed to lurch from one catastrophic moment to the next, God was always invoked with affection. At one point, in crisply clipped British English – imagine Desmond Tutu, Stosh said with a wry grin, "I think God is a very funny gentleman."

After spending two afternoons in the company of company of angels, I have to agree. Although I might want to stretch the gender a bit and add some richer adjectives alongside (but not in place of!) "funny." Then again, I bet these angels would want to do that, too.

What else? Three conversations with four very different persons. Here was one common theme: with each person I lost track of the number of times they said, "David." These persons hunger to be heard. Partly I think it is the African way, which is so relational. You name the other person so often because each naming strengthens the bond between you. God, I feel tethered to these persons, to their lives and their loves in a way that is uncomfortably holy. I have been named too many times to ever walk away.

Lastly, an observation, when I knew that I would be in Kampala over Holy Week, I anticipated how the liturgical rhythm of the week might shape my time here. In a word, *it hasn't*. Holy Week is there, in the background. But Palm Sunday at Rev. Mark's church didn't have any palms and no Palm or Passion lectionary. It was gospel encourage like any other Sunday for the people there that morning; they don't have the leisure to parade around with palm fronds. I never made it to a Maundy Thursday service. After slurping smoothies with

Frank and Jay from 5-6:30 p.m. I never really thought about looking for a church service where I could hear the familiar story about Jesus' body and blood. And although I did go to a Friday afternoon service of songs and readings today at the Namirembe Cathedral, for a whole variety of reasons it paled compared to the two hours I'd just spent with Stosh listening to her life. I guess I'd already had my fill of crucifixion for the day. This wasn't exactly the Holy Week I'd poetically imagined in advance. Not even close.

You know, we go through all the rhythm, taking for granted that Easter will show up like clockwork, on the third day. But in the week I've had here you can't count on that. *You don't know*. And it is way too shallow to say, well, "you just believe."

Yes. They do "believe." I heard that again and again. But in a practical lived theology of the cross quite like Luther describe it, they believe in, with, and under broken and breaking bodies and hearts. My week has been holy not because of the liturgy I've kept, but because of the company I've kept. Angels each one of them. Holy Angels.

* * *

Easter in Kampala

David R. Weiss, April 1, 2013

Saturday night brought a torrential downpour to Kampala. It's the beginning of the rainy season here, and it thankfully delayed its coming until just before my departure. My roof (like most roofs here) is corrugated steel. Which means that "torrential rain" is a uniquely aural experience, serenaded by a thousand drumbeats every second. You *feel* the rain. It also brought a "Western slip" (my term – like a Freudian slip, but when you have a Western thought that is almost grotesquely out of context).

After a long day out and about, followed by a soothing and cleansing shower, the rain drumming away above me as I dried myself off, I thought, "Gosh but I'm glad we beat the rain. Wouldn't want to be racing up to my room in this." And then, "Oh. But for at least half a million people in this city there is no beating the rain." Pavement is reserved for main thoroughfares here. The VAST majority of residential roads are dirt. And even "dirt road" is a wishful euphemism. They're more accurately imaged as dried riverbeds used as roads in between the rains. I can't imagine what the poor neighborhoods look like during a downpour. Kampala is built on hills, and the neighborhoods are a maze of twists and turns, but also ups and downs. This rain won't "run off"; it will make a muddy white(red)water rapids. I was still grateful to be dry, but keenly aware of all who were not.

I slept early and long Saturday night. Easter morning dawned with drizzle. The Guesthouse was mostly deserted for the holy-day weekend. Moses came by to collect me and we headed over to join the Bishop for morning worship.

Bishop Christopher retired in the late 1990's ('98, I think) and had his Ally epiphany not longer after that. Unfortunately his Church – the Church of Uganda (Anglican) – didn't have the same epiphany and the bishop has paid dearly for being "off message." His pension has been suspended by the church, and he's not allowed to preside at official church ceremonies or worship services. The church has even requested that he tell people to stop addressing him as "Bishop." But in his heart (and in God's heart, no doubt) he remains a bishop, and his deep purple clergy shirt with white collar are a quiet reminder that he will not allow be invisible in this church. He tells me, "David, it would be like telling children to no longer call their father 'father.' I have confirmed so many and they know me as a bishop. I am no less to them today."

So he worships regularly at St. Andrew's Church, just a half-mile from his home. It's his home congregation. Some in the congregation are respectful and appreciative of his work, though few will publically say so; to be seen too close to the bishop can set you back in both church and society here. Others tolerate his presence with respectful disdain. It's hard to be openly contemptuous of a small stout eighty year-old man.

St. Andrew's is a thriving congregation. Our service was the third of four scheduled for Easter. We had 400 people, and by all accounts the 7:30 and 9:30 services had been equally packed. The first is in English, the second in Luganda, ours in English again, not sure about the 4 p.m. one. Our service began with a familiar hymn: "Jesus Christ is risen today." The whole service was a mix of stately (or staid) church music familiar to me from my youth interwoven with praise songs with lyrics projected a big screen up front. I'm not sure how long that's been the case, but the praise aspect (almost Pentecostal energy) of these songs seems to fit the personality of the people better than the older and slower Anglican hymns. Not sure the theology serves them better though.

Still, it was a warm vibrant worship. A children's blessing (an annual Easter event) brought close to a hundred children up front to "Marching in the Light of God." I don't know what the future holds for this church or these children, some of whom will no doubt grow up to be gay, but I felt honored to raise my hand in blessing alongside the hands of Moses on my left and Bishop Christopher on my right. We were a trinity of subversive blessing; humble and gracious.

After the service, which ran almost exactly two hours, we drove back to the bishop's residence for Easter dinner. He and Mary live in a spacious home. Hardly luxurious in its furnishings, but with eight children (all grown now), it is well-used. The living room is a large square room and has a variety of sofas and easy chairs to seat fifteen. Moses and I waited there, visiting briefly with the variety of family and friends who wandered through. Easter Monday is an informal holiday in Uganda so Easter weekend becomes a gathering time not unlike Thanksgiving for us. So three or four of the bishop's children gathered with us, as well a couple of young men who work at the Centre.

While we waited for the meal we could see cars pulling up and potluck dishes carried to the back door. The aromas of multiple foods teased us, but it was a full hour before the curtain was pulled back, a table prayer said, and Moses and I were sent through the feast line first. Aside from mashed bananas, there was nothing unfamiliar to me. Cole slaw, avocado slices, beans, rice, potato/egg salad, and an African flat bread. All home-made, all delicious. Best of all, to be surrounded by family, including six grandchildren overlapping some of the ages of my own. Family is different everywhere, but family is also the same. And the two and a half hours I spent with the Senyonjo family on Easter felt like home to me.

I had told the bishop when we arrived that I had some gifts to share and he said, let's wait until after the meal so the children and grandchildren can see, too. So, after a light and fresh fruit cocktail for dessert I made presentation after presentation. Several copies of my book; one to stay in the Centre library, others to be passed on to potential allies in this work. Two copies of my CD of welcoming hymns along with lyric sheets. Icons featuring multicultural images. At this point the bishop asked Mary to join him. Two framed photos: one of St. Paul-Reformation as a sign of our partnership; one of our "We have heard that God is with you" banner as a sign of our solidarity. Then the three signed cards and the \$300 love offering.

Finally, I said, "And Mary, we also have a gift for you, because we know it is not easy to married to a man like this." Smiles and laughter all around. She began to protest, but I continued, "No, I *know* this, because I do some of this work back in Minnesota, and I know it is not always an easy thing to be my life partner, but I also know that Margaret's love for me is a priceless gift to what I do, and we know that the bishop treasures your support in his work." The bishop *loudly* confirmed this, and then Mary opened the box with a sigh of astonished delight. The necklace, crafted by SPR's own Lisa Mathieson, was a huge hit, with both children and grandchildren eager to see it.

I know the bishop's work has been a stress on his family. Although they are all supportive of him, when your father receives death threats and plenty of bad press, it has to take a toll. So I think he was very pleased to let me join their family for this meal, and to allow his family to see in these gifts and in my grateful presence the testament of those who honor, support, and treasure his work from afar. After this we assembled outside for a bit of a ragtag family photo. We gathered as many as could be corralled, I was placed next to the bishop, and Moses and two of the bishop's sons snapped pictures to capture the occasion.

Then, around 4:30 p.m. we walked two houses down to where the Centre is located and set up for the afternoon chapel service. People come by foot or by bus from a range of places, so from 4:30 to a little past 5:00 is gathering time. By 5:15 we began, fifteen of us. Using thin paperbound Ugandan Anglican liturgies and songbooks, with extras photocopied and stapled, we were a small band struggling to carry a tune, struggling (some at least) to carry faith, and yet, as they say in Latin America, we were, each one of us, *Presente!*

Dennis, a gay man in his thirties whom the Centre helped complete his education to qualify as a teacher, serves as the volunteer chaplain. The bishop helped Dennis guide us through the service of evening prayer, mentoring Dennis to become a worship leader. At eighty the bishop has plenty of spark, but he is actively looking to position leaders at the Centre so that the work has fresh sparks as well. We sing (sort of), pray (deeply), and listen to the bishop's reflections on 1 Corinthians 13. At the end, I'm invited up to say a word.

I tell them how honored I am to be with them on Easter, this festival of transformation and hope. I explain that I met the bishop several years ago. That Wingspan has helped fund his work the past several years. That the bishop and I have crossed paths four times now in America, and that Wingspan felt it was time for someone to cross paths

with the bishop here in Uganda, and that I was chosen for this honor. I offer greetings on behalf of all who sent me. And, speaking directly to those gathered in this garage ... not much larger than an empty tomb ... I salute their courage and encourage their faith. They clap. I hope for all of us, for I am least deserving of applause. But it is good. So good. Christ is risen. In Kampala he is – we are – risen indeed.

* * *

On Leaving this Land (for the time being)

David R. Weiss, April 2, 2013

After Easter chapel ended there was a line of people hoping to catch my ear. It was probably the least comfortable moment of my trip. Not in a bad way, but in an honest way. Four people, four stories of deep need. Quite beyond my capacity to respond to in any adequate way. Uganda is the “Pearl of Africa,” and amid the jarring living conditions of so many it does offer frequent and consistent glimpses of breathtaking beauty. But there are so many for whom the pearl that is Uganda has not been kind or fair. And in that moment I felt like Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, when he cries out, “There’s too many of you – don’t push me. There’s too little of me – do’t crowd me. Heal yourselves!”

A better man would not have felt so claustrophobic in the face of so much need, but I’m not yet that better man. Or, as Luther said, *simul justus et peccator*, at once saint and sinner. One moment I am the man speaking good news in the temple, the next I am cowering on the inside because I don’t see how there can possibly be enough loaves and fish to feed this crowd. Maybe next time I’ll know how to multiply the little there is into ... enough ... and then into abundance. But not yet this Easter.

Moses and I departed from the Centre on what seemed like a frivolous affair, but such are the contradictions that carry life forward. Rita, who hails from North Dakota and whom I was linked to via Robbyn, a mutual friend who hails from St. Paul, treated me to Indian food on Tuesday night. Tonight, leaving behind the teeming need at the Centre, we would both join Rita at an upscale, though far from exclusive Chinese restaurant. And we’d go Dutch. Fair to those at the Centre? Hardly. But a bid to help Moses meet the teeming need in his own life. Having lost his steady supply of work in the field of social research (most often assessing the effectiveness of public health campaigns) as a result of being outed as an Ally, Moses’ and his family are increasingly close to a day-to-day existence themselves.

Everyone’s needs cry out to me, and I owe everyone here more than I can possibly pay, but I owe Moses most of all. Hired “simply” to drive me around, he has also served as an almanac of Ugandan life and culture, a broker of conversations with activists, a treasure trove of insight and perspective into the LGBT community and issues here, a fellow father-husband-dreamer for justice, and a friend. So I asked if he and I could join Rita for a second meal with a soft but sure agenda, to see whether Rita, with her NGO connections here, might connect Moses to some income again. So alongside treating Moses to his first-ever Chinese cuisine and teaching him to use chopsticks (his competence outpaced mine in minutes) we recounted our week to Rita and then segued into a conversation about Moses’ skills and experience and whether and where they might intersect with Rita’s programs or her network of connections. No deals were made, but seeds were planted, contact information exchanged, ideas explored, live opportunities even mentioned. Time will tell where exactly it leads, but for now the path at least looks like hope.

Sunday night: *where did the time fly?* Suddenly packing looms as an unwelcome task after a long day. Of course, I’m ready to go home. I have a full life back in Minnesota, and I enjoy it there. I’ll be glad to be back. But maybe just one more day or one more week would be nice. I was just getting warmed up. Just making connections. Just beginning. So I packed my bags with reluctant eagerness.

At breakfast this morning I saw a new face at the Guesthouse. We’re pretty empty right now, and I’d heard a new voice moving her things into the room next to mine last night as I packed. So, stifling my introverted self, I brought my glass of juice over and joined her. After introductions and noting the irony that her first day here is my last, I cautiously explained the mission that brought me to Kampala. She was enthusiastic in her affirmation. I asked, in turn, “What brought you here?” “Well, I’m the buyer for this region of Africa for ‘Ten Thousand Villages’ – have you heard of them?” OMG. Heard of them? My daughter Susanna and I *volunteer* for them in St. Paul. Small world. Melissa, the buyer, knew some of the staff at the St. Paul store. She is here now to meet in person with some of the artisans and organizations she purchases from. I mentioned the Women’s Empowerment Project at Bishop Christopher’s Centre to her and I got a business card to pass on to Agnes, Moses’ friend who is a

local craft vendor. I came here to open doors for Wingspan, but it's also a *big* world, and if I can open a door for someone else, that's good, too.

I had my final conversation with Bishop Christopher Monday morning at the Centre. I gave him Melissa's contact information so he could pass it on to their Women's Project coordinator. She'll be in Kampala all week so hopefully a connection can happen. We discussed the many opportunities (and challenges) that sit before Centre. I need to review my notes and then share those thoughts first with Wingspan, but I can mention several themes.

(1) There is more to do than there are funds to make things doable. How – and how much – Wingspan can help will be a big conversation for the rest of the folks on the Uganda Team when I return. But there is no lack of energy, leadership, passion, or presence of Spirit at the Centre.

(2) One need that may be of particular interest to us is their chapel program. They would welcome worship resources (I left two copies of my CD and several copies of my lyrics with them). Financially they need support to allow them to do more outreach and pastoral care to those who become regular at worship and then become absent. And they need funds to provide subsidy for transport to those who come from a distance to worship there. For many who need the chapel's spiritual support, the choice is between a meal or a bus ride – they can't afford both. To date the bishop offers what he can out of his own pocket. He told me on Monday morning that St. Paul-Reformation's \$300 gift carried by me on this trip will be designated for chapel work.

(3) The bishop continues to dream about a "safe house" – as he puts it a *hospitality house or hostel*. At times in Uganda's recent past the military had "safe houses" where dissidents got disappeared, so for many the phrase "safe house" connotes anything but safety. And he anticipates that others would say retort that Uganda is already "safe" for everyone – the same way many churches respond that LGBT people are already welcome, why do we need to say it out loud? A hospitality house or hostel could offer moments of sanctuary to activists whose safety is occasionally in danger. For a Centre that lives on funding week-to-week, this is a still just a day dream, but it's Easter, and maybe a new day is about to dawn.

(4) Tomorrow is often on the bishop's mind. What's next? What does the future hold? Two things stand out here: youth and sustainability. The bishop's work as an Ally began in a calling to raise a single voice: his. But over the past decade the Centre has aimed to take that single voice, that spark of passion, and gather it with other voices and other sparks, to create a movement with staying power. From the perspective of his eighty years, even my fifty-three counts as youth. But around the Centre several of the staff are in their late twenties or early thirties. And that clearly delights the bishop. The other thing he mentions repeatedly is sustainability. In a country where many people live on just a few dollars a day, sustainability is a real challenge. The Centre may never exist apart from outside donors. But one reason that economic empowerment is a priority in the programs is because, as you help people become self-sufficient, you help them reach a position where they can give back to the Centre. The bishop isn't interested in charity, although he knows that in the short term that's probably the best word for the aid that comes his way. What he really hopes for, though, is partners in the pursuit of justice, fellow workers in the kingdom of God, a community of midwives working together to birth a world where welcome and opportunity are truly part of the common-wealth.

Wrapping up. My last conversation was with Andrew, the programs manager at the Centre. His story deserves more attention than my brain can offer now. (I'm finishing this post up in the Amsterdam airport, on too little sleep and with a throbbing crick in my neck from the little sleep I got on the last flight.) For now, I'll say this. At twenty-seven Andrew is about six months older than my own son, Ben. Like Ben, Andrew is diligent and takes pride in his work. He knows what he's doing, and he does it well. Still, it was humbling to know that many of the logistics for this trip rested in hands so relatively young. Andrew is a nephew to the bishop, and for some years offered his technological expertise and typing skills to the bishop as a volunteer. Eventually his own life experiences ignited a fierce passion as an Ally, and today his commitment to the Centre – and to its future – is remarkable. He is the bishop's right hand. And a hand that is steady and sure.

One side note, if you've followed my blog from "First Flight" twelve days ago, you know that I brought a few simple gifts for Andrew and his young daughter. In our closing conversation he returned to those gifts, telling me how again last night he said to his wife, "Over the last three I've arranged for so many people to come visit the bishop and see the Centre, but until David, no one ever brought a gift for me of my child. This man is special." Well, this man (me) is both a father and a grandfather, so I can't take extra credit for seeing the value of children, but I will take credit for honoring the gifts of a person too easily overlooked. I've been that person, too. And I knew that as we (Wingspan, St. Paul-Reformation, and other partners as yet unseen) move forward in supporting the bishop's work, we're really supporting the work of a movement, not just a person. And Andrew is one of the

faces of that movement tomorrow – and already one of the shapers of that movement today. Our work together is only beginning, and those simple gifts made it a good beginning indeed.

Leaving the Centre, Moses took me out to see where he stays in Kampala, a two-room 300 square foot apartment. It's a brick and plaster duplex; his landlord has a 600 square foot apartment on the other side. He pays \$100 per month, utilities included. It's nicer than most of the homes I've seen in the poor neighborhoods: small, simple, clean. His kitchen consists of one wall of his living room and features a small gas cook stove, used mostly to boil water for tea, a small three-shelf assortment of plates and cups, a dorm-sized refrigerator hosting a small TV, and a few staples: bread, margarine, jam, and sugar. It's humble by any stretch of my imagination. Even reminding myself, as he does, that his goal, when he's in Kampala, is to work and send as much money as possible to his family in Mbale. But sitting in his apartment, toasting our friendship with Mango juice, I realize that we both are wealthy. Family that loves us (and that we love), dreams that we chase because they are worthy, other lives that we honor because they have dignity, and a God who opened pathways to a friendship that will last a lifetime. Kings have had less.

To the airport. One last errand. One of the activists I met last Thursday, Jay, a transman briefly profiled in "Company of Angels" (March 29) had e-mailed me hoping to at least say a word of farewell in person on my way out of town. Since meeting last week he has read all my Uganda blogs and plunged into the book I gave him. So I call him and put Moses on the phone and let the two of them identify a rendezvous point on our way through town to the airport. It's a gas station. Jay has used some of the small money I gave him last week to pick up a few diapers to send to some of his members in a rural area. After we say goodbye he'll put the small package on a taxi-bus out to one of the villages.

I have a final gift for him. His last e-mail mentioned that part of his Easter day was spent listening to gospel music. So I bring my last CD to him as a parting gift. It brings him almost to tears. Like many of the LGBT activists (and LGBT non-activists), they've managed against enormous odds to claim the love of God despite all the rhetoric posed against them. But they have not experienced the gift of a book or songs that allow them to see that their stubborn claim is more than just a gut feeling – that it is also the very heart of the biblical story. In my words Jay is beginning to see that his gut feelings about God's unconditional love have roots in the story taken away from him by the church, now returned to him by a long-haired bearded man born on Christmas Day. Sweet irony.

He tells me that he will share this – along with my book – with his members. In fact, some of them had already expressed the hope they might meet with me before I go. Our eyes meet, and together we say: "Next time." A hug that seals this hope, and Moses and I are off.

An hour and a half later we reach the airport. We've driven much of the way in silence, savoring the ten days we've had together and dreading the final goodbye. It happens so quickly. Hello. Day after day of grace. Goodbye. But each of us is a new creation. Ambassador for Christ from one culture and one continent to another. I don't say it out loud, but as he walks away, I think of the distance we have crossed to reach this place, and I borrow a phrase from Star Trek to send a final blessing chasing after him: Live long and prosper, my friend. Live long and prosper. And may the justice of our God wrap all the world, so big, so small, in welcome.

Good-bye from Amsterdam. Next stop: St. Paul ... and Margaret. Thanks be to God.

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