

## Life by Increments

My hands touch the globe displayed at the Aristok bookstore on Kampala Road. One hand finds Uganda in the heart of Africa. Its easy to find because Lake Victoria, the largest lake in Africa clearly easily draws the eye. The left hand touches north America thinking of our Rocky Mountain home and conjuring the blue green colors of British Columbia. My hands are on either side of the globe. A rush of emotions pour through me. My own ones are far away, very far away. I imagine the web that weaves our lives together acknowledging my central source of friendship and family.

I depend on you for support, love, play, advice, listening, seeking. And yet I do not depend on you to survive. Here in Uganda people relate strongly to their family, clan and tribe to assist in helping each other. They need this tight structure to make today work: food and shelter and love. "When did you last eat?"..." Days ago" is the frequent answer.

If one member of a family is doing well economically he may be taking care of as many as twenty family members who have come to live with him or rely on him for school fees or medical expenses. "No" is not an option. For the poor life is lived in increments of whatever can be gotten together today. Spend as little as possible, buy what little you can afford, go without, do not dream of other things. The smallest opportunity must be fully exploited through hard work, determination, asking for help, being ingenious, taking risks. And it is never "sure."

This picture of life of the poor is mirrored in the traffic in Kampala. Every driver is looking for the next little bit of space, the slightest opportunity to move life forward, All manner of vehicles crowd together: cars, matatus (minivans bursting with 14-18 people), Boda-Bodas (motorcycles), bikes, pedestrians, hand carts, even goats and cows compete for space and inch forward with no order. There are only a few stop lights in all of Kampala and every intersection is a free for all. The aggressive make it through the "jam"...the meek never make it.

The matatu drivers are a colorful group of "cowboys" rushing bravely or foolishly into small spaces, measuring in a few inches the appropriate space between you and them. The matatu will only go forward when it is totally full, actually crowded, as it costs too much to operate if only a few customers are riding. So it will patiently wait at any stop while the barker enjoins passersby to pay his 10 cents for a wild ride to town. The matatu will go to the gas station a dozen times each day putting in only a few dollars of gas each time. That is incremental living.

For the poor there is no margin. Everything is needed now. There is not enough for today's needs. Having reserves, savings, a cupboard full of food, a spare dollar is not possible. Water is carried home to be used today. Firewood is gathered and cooks the day's boiled matoke bananas. Even "airtime" needed to make a call is purchased for the ubiquitous cell phone by most everyone in \$2.00 increments. Conversations are often interrupted as the phone goes dead when the "airtime" runs out. .

Just as the traffic starts to look like an undulating but functioning sea of metal, smog and faces, so the social fabric begins to make sense in its coherence and loyalties; each individual related to others in blood and need.

Walking through the Acholi Quarter with my friends we spot Millie Grace sitting and leaning against a mud wall in the sunshine. Her big smile reveals a gap between her teeth considered good luck in Africa. She tucks her chin a little as she greets us "You're most welcome". Her lap is filled with colorful beads. We squat down to have a look. Millie rolls long triangular strips of colorful paper into small tubes. She shows me the strips of paper she has carefully cut from an old magazine. Her deft fingers quickly roll the paper from the thickest end to the smallest. A dab of glue seals the bead and she drops it into her lap ready for the next one. On our urging she pulls one necklace out of a crumpled black plastic bag. It is orange with muted browns and reds. I immediately put my hand out for a closer look. The necklace is light, graceful, a string of beads, each one unique, each one a blend of colors.

We have to encourage her to show us more necklaces and discover that she has a hundred of them in her home along with beaded handbags, earrings, and bracelets. Where is she selling this wonderful jewelry? It turns out that a Canadian man had been marketing them but he was killed in a motorcycle accident a year and a half ago. Since then "Marketing is our problem". Millie Grace has trained over fifty Acholi women to make this jewelry and each and everyone has a growing inventory. Sales are non-existent. I buy three necklaces and immediately put on a lively yellow and orange one. In the next three days I have received so many compliments that I have literally taken off all three necklaces and given them away to my friends who want to know where I got them. An idea grows in my mind. . Here is a cottage industry ready to be born.



The initial meeting of the Acholi Bead for Life Project was held in a mud cottage with open walls. Beaders arrived with bulging plastic bags. Sitting on the floor they displayed their creations. Piles of turquoise blue, banana yellow, fire engine red, and jungle green necklaces were arranged artfully. A handbag of purple, mauve, and red beads catches my eye. We decide that in order to show our potential retail customers the range of colors and products we should buy a "production line". But how to choose with over sixty beaders looking expectantly at us? A democratic solution seems the best and we buy one necklace from each beader. As the afternoon turns to evening beaders continue to arrive hoping to sell one necklace. We hope we have not raised the expectations too high....but it is difficult to dampen hope for a better life.

A subsequent meeting with the group establishes a local committee to guide the beaders, to think through how to form the cooperative and to develop local Kampala marketing. Within a few days our first international order has been placed by Hollyhock. Islandwood, on Bainbridge Island, also expresses interest in carrying the necklaces. Meanwhile a first marketing excursion in Kampala turns up three retail outlets. These first sales give us hope for creating a sustainable web that will provide an on-going market.

The Acholi people have been displaced from northern Uganda by a war that seems ceaseless and is particularly brutal. Its tactics include kidnapping children. They force the boys into the rebel army to kill with machetes and the girls become soldiers "wives" to be sexually exploited. Families from rural areas have fled the north leaving their farms to be burned and their few possessions scattered. They are squatting on undesirable land on the edges of Kampala. Cristine, an Acholi beader told me yesterday "At home everyone was always busy planting and harvesting matoke, tending animals, making all that we need. Here you need money for everything and the young men sit around becoming thieves because there is no work for them. So many problems."

Creating sustainable income generating projects is a key to helping people move out of poverty. The Acholi beaders already have a terrific product they can produce at home from relatively low cost materials. What they lack is the expertise of marketing, a little start up capital, and knowledge on the intricacies of exporting and creating markets in the lands of plenty. Income redistribution wants to happen. That is where all of us come in.

If any of you can help us with ideas, and doing some exploratory work on markets in the U.S., Canada or Europe please let me know. Also, if you know how to set up on-line sales that could be sustained through teaching and training a few of the Acholi beaders I would love to have your involvement. I need you on the team. Hopefully in time most of you and your loved ones (and your neighbors, and their loved ones) will have their own Acholi recycled magazine necklace ! Love all the way around the world...Torquin



WHEN I COME HOME AFTER A CLINIC DAY I AM EXHAUSTED, exhilarated and happy. There is so much chaos in the clinic. 160 patients today. They come knowing they may wait all day. They look forward to Reach Out's lunch; a plate heaping with rice and beans.

The Church's Parish Hall becomes the medical space: 6-10 practitioners (paired with translators when needed) tend to each patient behind the partial privacy of strung curtains, all bright bold colors creating a rainbow effect. I encounter moment after moment and smile after bright white smile feeling so warmly received, accepted, and appreciated by the dearest people, who suffer and struggle. Jimmy is starting to get over TB. He still has abscesses and a swollen painful knee. His light is so bright.

I hear from Mary, moaning on the matte while her loving husband Edward describes her steady headache for a week with daily progressive vomiting. She looks so weak, exhausted and frail. "She must have cryptococcal meningitis." I wish the appropriate tests were available. They simply are not. But the treatment is... a safe but expensive oral daily anti-fungal, free for the asking, thanks to "those drug companies." One pill daily with no side effects! 70% of people are cured completely. Further delay seems unwise so I skip waiting for the required

blood test and order the drug. It isn't until the next day when the test returns positive that I relax again, and after two weeks I see Mary, a vibrant and whole woman, re-emerge. Edward asks if he can be our driver.

Her story is easier to share than Samuel's. Over ten days he got sicker and sicker. I did step after step to diagnose and treat his failing. His eyes would hold me and he'd ask that we pray together. He died last night... My first loss in a sea of millions.

So I am blessed to be here to start these people on effective therapies. Actually getting therapies that are just now available in Africa. Mary will get these drugs. Mary's life and course have been turned around. She will recover from meningitis and likely recover her immune system.

I fall asleep thinking of, and praying for, Samuel.

Love, Charles