

AFRICA NOTES # 4: PERSPECTIVES



FROM TORKIN:

Africa...ebony, wildness, smiles, poor, pollution, dangerous, burnt umber, bright mint green, wood smoke, roosters, movement, migration, pulsation, vibration, sensation, ALIVE AFRICA.

Africa has me...I feel it pulling me towards the elemental, into the earth, up to the sky, into the past. It feels like a pulling tide and is both imperceptible and perceived at the same time. Something has been at work on me since I stepped on to African soil, red soil ground to dust by the cars, cows, feet, motorcycles, and bicycles. Red earth that coats my clothes and reddens the water when I take a shower. The soil is fertile in Uganda and green flowering plants are in profusion. They rise up to greet the fresh hot yellow sunshine that pours down heat...heat that pulls water out of each pore as if I was on the edge of steaming. Sweat runs freely down my chest and belly pooling in my bellybutton. I allow it, enjoying the novelty of this phenomenon. This profuse sweating just seems to happen suddenly on hot afternoons. The sweat mixes with the red dust and creates a thin coat of mud where it pools.

Africa, earth energy, drum beat, baritone dark brown, magnificent abundance. The very names of its rivers conjure mystery, riches, danger: the Congo. the Zambesi, the Nile. Trees of such stature and elegance they call out to the tom-girl in me to come and climb their friendly branches to join the chimps who laze

in the crooks of great branches snoozing away in freedom. Africa is animals, not long ago wandering from one great savannah into the great Rift valleys, across rocky desert plateaus to the next fruiting valley. Of all the continents this is the one with a profusion of animals of such great variety and unusual features: the tubby hippo who can sprint for short distances, the impossible giraffe, the exquisite coat of the zebra, the gentle gorilla that can pick up a bird's egg and carefully replace it.

But all is not inviting: crocodile teeth and thorny bushes, scorpions in the bedroom, pollution spewing a fog of coal black particles like curtains in the traffic. Then there are the unseen insidious energies of mistreatment of women: rape, incest, abuse. And AIDS snakes its way through the population, joining TB, malnutrition, unemployment, lack of education, and civil war to rob these beautiful people of health and life.

Oh Africa, you who are so beautiful and primal, you who have me in your grip, I share your joys and despair.

I heard the Acholi women danced the night of the first bead sale. They crowded into the alleyway in front of Millie Grace's one room mud home. They sang songs and gossiped, the sounds of their native Luo language filling the air until after midnight. They were celebrating and hoping and being happy together. There is a glimmer of hope that is growing in the Acholi Quarter, the hope that radiates out brilliant colors, subtle combinations, fun, and sunny summer days. It's the beads! Small triangles of magazine paper carefully rolled by practiced hands. For four years the beaders of the Acholi Quarter have quietly been making paper beads and stringing them into necklaces. Never mind that there was no market and these beautiful necklaces stayed lumped together in black plastic bags in the corner of mud huts.

900 of these necklaces are now going to see the light of day in America as The Acholi Bead for Life project gets off the ground. The cottage industry I mentioned in the last "Notes" is filling its first eight orders and getting ready for summer farmers' markets, conferences, and "Beadware" parties. Bead for Life is a co-operative business venture between 75 beaders and myself and colleagues in Boulder. Having never set up such a business I'm in a crash course on how to do it. Oh well, I won't let a little thing like ignorance stop us.

Watch for the Acholi necklaces. Buy them if you are able. Host a "Beadware" party of necklaces. We will help you set it up. If you know any retail outlets that might want to place an order please email me. If you want to design a simple

Acholi Bead web page to support this business, I need you. Much of the work is already done in terms of photos and text.

One of the things I love about Africa is that each day brings some unseen opportunity. In my next letter I will tell you about the monkey. One of the things I do not love about Africa is that I am far from loved ones. My friendship with you helps me here.

Sending love..... Torkin

FROM CHARLES:

Treating AIDS in Africa. That's why I came. That's why I am here. That's what I am doing.

Last week Lucile was carried in by her husband and grown son and sat in the chair in my cubicle, looking somehow stiffened and scared. Not talking. The chart is full of notes about marital abuse but now the husband seems caring. Michael explains that 4 days ago his 37 year old wife's right side was paralyzed — neither her arm nor leg work anymore. My first thought really is "It's Tuesday now. How can anyone imagine waiting 4 days with paralysis before asking for help?" An exam of her chart (low CD4 count, on cotrimoxazole prophylaxis, not on ARV's yet) and her body (definite lateralizing signs) led to the list of possibilities: a stroke, brain tumor, or a brain abscess from TB or Toxoplasmosis. Back home a CAT scan and a few labs, and probably a neurological consult, and I would know what to do. None of that is available here.

What is available is Mulago Hospital, the tertiary care hospital associated with Makerere University. I taught my first two months there and know it is rife with difficulties. What to do? I explain to Michael that this is serious and to take her to Mulago. The transport will cost 4000 Uganda Shillings (\$2.00) which he doesn't have, and it is the least I can offer.

Michael called me the next day with Lucile's progress. She had been admitted and seen by the doctors, who had wanted 40,000 Shillings to treat her (a bribe). So he brought her home. I almost shouted at Michael, "That's wrong. They should take care of her. They are doctors and Mulago is free." All he replied was "This is Uganda."

Edward is home in his bed. His wife, Beatrice is giving him milk in a straw when the nurse and I make a home visit. I was hopeful for him last week when he was in clinic with pneumonia. I could hear it in his lungs, and his intense shortness of breath led me to diagnosis the common AIDS pneumonia called PCP. "I can treat that with what we have," I had told them both. Now, a week later here he was at home, pneumonia significantly better, but he significantly worse. In fact near death. What was going on? Clearly dehydration, but what else? Drug toxicity? Organ failure? Another infection? Again all I could do in this mud hut was encourage the wife to take Edward to Mulago, and offer the 10,000 Shillings (\$5.00) for transport.



Leaving Edward's home is my nurse Rebecca and the neighborhood volunteer Rita.

Not a good day. Four hours later my phone rings. A friend of Beatrice and Edward is calling. Can I please help with the transport of Edward's body back from the hospital? It took 4 hours to arrange his transport there, and he died virtually at the hospital gates. His body is at the morgue and it will cost 40,000 Shillings (\$20.00) to bring him back. Why had I sent him there? His last 4 hours on earth could have been much more comfortable in his own bed with his wife giving him those sips of milk.

Friday I did end the week with “happier” experiences diagnosing TB. Margaret came in for her pre-ARV check up (The HIV drugs are AntiRetroVirals or ARV’s). I reviewed her X ray. We do screening TB Chest X-rays on all our patients. Almost half of them have TB, often without symptoms, and to start ARV’s before treating the TB can make them worse. There it was. Classic popcorn-like right upper lung infiltrates of TB. By taking 4 drugs a day for 2 months, and then 2 a day for 6 months, Margaret can cure her TB. And after a few weeks, we will add in the ARV’s and control her HIV. She has a good chance of regaining total health. We have all the meds for her, absolutely free. We can even pay her transport home today carrying a huge bag of food.

Not much after she left, Godwin approaches me skinny as a rail. This severe wasting must be late HIV I think, so I am surprised to see he has a high CD4 cell count, a marker of a healthy immune system. He must have TB too, I think, as I pull out his chest X ray, hoping for a repeat of Margaret’s. It looks mostly clear, hard to make a case for TB. But 2 seconds into his exam there it is, the classic “string of pearls” series of enlarged lymph nodes running down his neck marking extra-pulmonary TB. Serious and yes, TREATABLE. Really the treat is for me as I explain to this wisp of a man he will get his medication today, and his life back tomorrow.

Treating AIDS? If I could have three wishes for three treatments here in Africa it would be: 1) A treatment for poverty. People so need safe food and water, shelter, education, vocational training and work. 2) A treatment to stop male predatory sexual behavior. Stephen Lewis, the UN special ambassador for AIDS in Africa has named sexual abuse of women as one of the most important social aspects that must change in order to defeat HIV. As a man, I am thoroughly ashamed for what the human male does to women. 3) A treatment for corruption. At every level, from the pharmacist at Mulago who is “out of stock” because he sells his meds privately for profit, to the doctors demanding bribes before they will treat patients, to the top Ministers of Government who call it “savings” when they take home a huge percentage of their budget, this is what is bleeding this red soiled continent into abject poverty.

We feel so fortunate to be able to be here. Some of you are asking how to help. We had thought to mention fund raising only when we saw clearly the need. At this time we are excited to direct your donations into either school fees or our medical fund. For \$100 a year a child can go to school. That covers everything: tuition, uniforms, exercise books, crayons and even a lunch. We are also finding university level bright young Ugandan’s we are helping go to university. And in

the medical clinic, where we have the expensive ARV's, we sometimes lack basic treatments for high blood pressure or diabetes, basic blood smears for malaria, let alone the unimaginable cost of \$50.00 for chemotherapy for Kaposi's Sarcoma. The needs are around every corner, so we welcome your donations.

Checks made out to "All Season's Chalice" (a tax deductible 501c3) with "Partners in AIDS Service" in the memo can be mailed to :

All Season's Chalice
PO Box 2180
Boulder, CO, 80306 USA

Thank you and love, all the way around the world, Charles

p.s. We love hearing from you. You can reach us directly at torkin@charlesandtorkin.com and charles@charlesandtorkin.com. (Hitting "reply" will go to Ben, who is helping us send this out.) E-mail Ben to add someone to our list, or if you no longer wish to receive our Notes from Africa. And check out the website he is building us at, you guessed it:
<http://www.charlesandtorkin.org>