

An Ethiopia Travelogue, by Maria Pignataro Nielsen

It had been a lifelong dream of mine to travel to Africa. In late March of 2013, I journeyed to Ethiopia for two weeks with Helen Boxwill, a fellow congregant at our Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Huntington, NY, and a small group of three fellow travellers. Based out of Addis Ababa, we travelled north, south, east and west by small plane and rugged van, culminating in a visit to the school library that Helen had built in Hosanna.

Day 1, Sunday: ADDIS ABABA

Just the first day and already it has been an amazing experience. Uneventful 13.5 hour trip on Ethiopian Airlines to the new (but apparently leaky) airport smack in the middle of Addis. Today a trip to the huge, dusty *merkato* where we dodged buses, mopeds, cars, taxis, donkeys, goats, dogs, and people carrying giant loads on their heads, and haggled over cheap backpacks to take on our various short flights around the country. (I learned how to say "thank you" in Amharic! --"*amasa genalo*".) We spent a lot of time climbing over ruts and stones in the spice alley, smelling cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and pepper, and watched a woman kneeling on a mat and forming large cones of cheese out of goat's milk curds with her bare hands. There were bushels of pulses and grains in every color, small windows with jewelry of Ethiopian gold and silver, and aisles of stalls selling more old-model sneakers than I have ever seen at one time. Our wonderful friend and guide, Helen, bought a lump of incense and a tiny ceramic charcoal burner for it. My new camera is red, deliberately, so that I can find it easily, but it doesn't quite help you take surreptitious photos, and some folks are reluctant to have their pictures taken, so you have to be sensitive. A smile and a "Salaam" go a long way. A young boy playing in the driver's seat of a parked car gave me a cheerful "Hello" and when I said hello back I got a big smile and a thumbs up. I did get a photo of him. I also got a short clip of an Ethiopian man pronouncing the three most important things in life to us: peace, health, and education. Then, on to the balcony of the oldest hotel in Addis (built 1898) for lamb tibs, injera and a "St. George" -- in this deeply religious country, even the beer is named for its patron saint. Tomorrow to Harrar, where I plan to pick up a lot of coffee to bring back! (Why? Because I remember seeing "Ethiopian Harrar" coffee at Zabar's selling for \$14/lb.!)

Day 2, Sunday: HARRAR

Up at 5 for a quick breakfast of tea and toast and hard-boiled eggs so we can leave the guesthouse by 6 for our flight to Dire Dawa, in the east, followed by an hour-long van ride to Harrar – about as close to the war-torn and lawless Somali border as I care to get. Due to the poor condition of the roads in Ethiopia, short intra-country flights are common, but the small plane is late leaving, so we spend the waiting time teasing and laughing, this nice little group that has just come together the day before. It is easy to get altitude sickness in Addis Ababa, and easier still to become dehydrated, both of which I realized had happened to me as we waited in the long security queue. I am resigned to the habitual patting down because of the metal in my knee, but this Ethiopian lady did such a thorough job of inspecting me that

I later joked she had gotten to second base without even buying me dinner beforehand. It takes two full bottles of water – which we needed a passport to purchase, don't ask me why - before the dizziness and nausea go away. And then we are walking across the hot tarmac in the blazing sun to climb the rickety metal steps to our small plane.

An hour later, after a brief stop for *buna wotet* – strong coffee with steamed milk -- we are in our van, whizzing across the dry, brown Ethiopian countryside, which is patched with green only where there is water and bordered on the edges with imposing mountains and deep ravines. The umbrella-shaped acacia trees are withered. During the entire drive the only other vegetal color I see is a purple jacaranda tree in the far distance.

It is frustrating to drive so fast in the van because of all the missed opportunities to capture arresting images: here a child driving a small herd of goats. There a bush arrayed with drying laundry, a woman and her cow sitting nearby. A group of young boys kicking around a battered soccer ball. Two small girls squatting in the dirt and washing dishes with a plastic jug of water. Riotous color against all the dry brown is provided by the occasional clusters of huts and glimpses of the women's exotic garb. The shacks are stunning in their decrepitude – patched with plastic sheeting and corrugated metal in every possible color. The women are attired in layer upon layer of colourful clashing patterns – red, green, yellow, purple, blue, white. Everyone has dusty feet.

Of course to our driver these images are nothing unusual, although several times he does stop the van at the roadside so that we can take pictures, but I don't. It feels uncomfortable, almost voyeuristic, to pull up to an impoverished village, lean out of the windows to snap photos of people's subsistence lives, and then speed off for the next "photo op".

This feeling is exacerbated when we arrive in Harrar, a walled town of ancient winding alleys, crumbling cobblestones, peeling paint, and faded signs. Our first stop is the marketplace, a loud, bustling square which smells of dust, garbage, hot oil, sweat, dung and spices. Women sit on cloths on the ground next to their small piles of fruits and vegetables – mangoes, avocados, cabbages, tomatoes, peppers, bananas, limes, dried chilies. They eye us warily and often avert their faces resolutely when they see a raised camera. I feel so conspicuous I want to shrink inside myself. I feel like the caricature of a rich American, with my clean white shirt and my sunglasses and my fancy camera. I used to quip that wearing a full-length burka wouldn't be so bad because popping one on would save me a lot of time getting ready in the morning, but here I long for some similar contrivance – to be able to observe and absorb without in turn being watched and judged. I want to say I'm here to help, I'm on your side, I've brought schoolbooks! -- but all they see is an entitled *farenji* (foreigner) invading the routine of their days without their consent.

The exception to this unwillingness is an old, old lady in the busy market who takes one of us by the arm and motions pointedly to the camera and then to herself. Her face is as wrinkled and brown as a walnut, but she stands stiffly upright in her white tunic adorned extravagantly with colored beads and faces the camera. We snap a few shots, say thank you in Amharic, and start to walk away when she gestures angrily and starts to argue with our guide. Of course, she wants money for the photographs.

And why, after all, shouldn't she? Why shouldn't there be some small exchange here? What is she getting out of this encounter? What, after all, is 10 birr to me? Ten birr is less than a dollar.

Quickly we are surrounded by a large swarm of villagers and children clamouring to see how this altercation will turn out. My new friend Daniel takes my elbow and maneuvers me away. "Do you understand what is happening here?" he says quietly. "Yes," I say, "but it is so hard not to give money. It's not that much, after all." Daniel replies, rightly annoyed, "You saw that crowd. We were about to be mobbed. Give money to one and you will find yourself being expected to give money to all."

It is what Helen had cautioned earlier – not to give out money. This advice was occasioned by my first encounter with a beggar in the car lot of the Addis airport just minutes after we had landed. As I went to climb into our van, a dark-skinned woman in a headwrap appeared at my side, holding the hand of an adorable little girl smiling up at me. With a brief shock I noticed that the woman's right breast was completely exposed and there was a small baby in her arms, searching blindly to nurse. "My husband died," she said abruptly to me in heavily-accented English, and I gasped instinctively, "I am so sorry!" I looked at the little girl smiling up at me and then at Helen, realizing this was a practiced appeal, and Helen shook her head no, get in the car.

Helen, one of the kindest women I know, who has dedicated her retirement to volunteer work in Ethiopia, must have been prepared for this moment, and she explained as we drove away. It is heartwrenching, she admitted, to refuse to give. But giving will help them for only a moment. You can't help everyone, she said, by just giving away your money to beggars. It's difficult, but better to give to causes that can change their situation permanently. And she is right, of course, except it feels so callous not to help in that moment.

We spend the day driving around in two rattletrap *bajajes* – open, three-wheeled vehicles for a driver and three passengers, covered with tarps, with cracked windshields, no doors or seatbelts and seemingly propped atop a lawn mower engine. The dashboards inevitably are decorated with magazine photos of soccer players or bumper stickers about Jesus. The drivers blast music from their radios, which adds to the general cacophony of the street. We trudge through the old, winding alleys designed to thwart interlopers in this walled city. We stop at a textile stall crammed floor to ceiling with fabrics and buy brilliantly-colored wraps and scarves. I spy a large length of a gorgeous floral print and our guide translates: "He says this one is very special. It is quality. It is what would be worn for a wedding. That is why it is expensive." Of course, I chuckle inwardly, I would pick the most expensive one in the shop – it is 450 birr! Then I mentally do the math – that is, like, 30 bucks, and I know that is only his starting price as we prepare to haggle. It is beautiful, I think, and I can add it to my collection of special occasion tablecloths. He brings it out to one of the men sitting in the street with a banged-up old Singer sewing machine, who swiftly hems it for me. While he is stitching it, a goat wanders by and noses the fabric puddled on the ground.

We pass a wedding party posing for photographs, the bride clad in orange and white and the groom wearing a needlepoint skullcap. I figure it will be okay to take at least this photograph, and notice how much younger the bride's smooth, clear complexion appears next to the more weathered visage of her older groom.

We hear the muezzin's call to prayer over loudspeakers at the mosque. We pass processions of donkeys bearing loads of sticks, the guide ropes wrapped around their lower lips. We pass stray dogs, and goats of all sizes. I pause to scratch one under the chin and he luxuriates in the attention, twisting his head around my hand, his odd eyes following me longingly as I eventually move on. We pass the open air butcher stall, with clouds of flies buzzing noisily around the scrawny hanging shanks of camel meat. There is dirt and dust and ruts and loose stones everywhere. I take a picture of a straw mat covered with chicken eggs and garlic bulbs, and have to pretend I don't hear the man who dashes out of his stall calling, "Sister! Sister! *Baksheesh* [gratuity]!" We watch men lazing in the street, chewing away at leaves of the addictive *chat* and spitting spent chaws onto the ground next to them. A pile of filthy rags and cardboard in the street might be trash or it might be someone taking a nap. A white goat stands high atop a pile of cement rubble, gnawing at the hot pink branches of a bougainvillea hedge. At an outdoor restaurant, we eat a lavish assortment of dishes, *maharabwe*, with the sour, spongy crepe *injera* and the beer they call "Obama beer" because it is dark beer, and I feed to the stray cat at my feet bits of the spiced goat from my round tray. Another cat notices the contribution and comes over and I feed it, too, hiding my hands under the table from the sure-to-disapprove waiters. The too-skinny cats bat my leg politely with their paws when they are ready for their next bite. We take pictures of a traditional Ethiopian coffee brewing ceremony and buy woven baskets and carved trinkets. That night, after dark, we visit the hyena man in an empty clearing, he who has trained wild hyenas, plentiful in Ethiopia, to eat fresh meat from his hands by the light of the observers' car headlamps. Feeling reckless, I take a turn too, holding out a chunk of bloody meat as the hyena lunges and marvelling at how the hyena's surprisingly endearing face masks such a vicious nature.

Not everyone was hostile about having their picture taken, of course. Children especially, unless they were very timid, loved posing for the camera. Some stood ramrod straight, some posed like pop stars, some smiled broadly, but all delighted in the resultant images of themselves in the camera display. And late that afternoon we had been walking down a cobblestoned path when a young woman passed me, holding an infant boy in her arms. I smiled at the baby and the young woman smiled at me. Shyly I held the camera up and she nodded her assent, adjusting her wrap for the camera and facing the baby forward. The older woman with her, I assumed her mother, moved to her side, and I snapped the picture. I was so pleased. I smiled and said thank you and the older woman immediately made the open-handed, fingers-up gesture that I had quickly learned means "give money".

I'm sorry, I say. Thank you. I'm sorry. And as I walk away, a young girl falls into step alongside me. She has lovely mocha skin the color of the *buna wotet* from this morning, and luminous brown eyes, and she is wrapped in a blue cloth with gold embroidery. After some time she speaks. "Why," she says simply, "did you not give them money?" "You speak English?" I ask, and she nods. "I think we are afraid," I say carefully, "that we cannot just give money to one without giving money to all." "Ah," she murmurs, and is silent for a moment. Then she looks at me gravely and says, "But if those people are poor, and you have money to give, and it helps them, that is a good thing, yes?" She looks at me to see if I understand, and continues, "That is of God."

Yes, I say to her, clutching my plastic bag with the expensive wedding wrap that I had haggled down to 400 birr, feeling miserable and remembering how ready I was to feed the stray cats.

And so went day 2.

Day 3, Monday: HARRAR TO ADDIS

If day 2 was a day of humility and conscience, then Day 3 was a comedy of errors and Day 4 redeemed all that had gone before. On Day 3, we were faced with the frustrations of petty bureaucracy, and on Day 4, I was temporarily an outpatient at the hospital in remote Lalibela.

Nothing goes smoothly on Day 3, so all you could do was laugh. As Harrar is famous for its coffee, we decide to make an early-morning stop at the coffee factory in town before heading back to the airport for the flight back to Addis. When the two *bajajes* show up, it turns out that neither young driver speaks a word of English, and Helen's attempts at saying, "Coffee? *Buna?*" are met with complete incomprehension. Finally, Daniel is inspired to show them a photo of the coffee factory on his camera display, and it seems we have gotten through. Our driver nods, takes off, and soon demonstrates that he has absolutely no idea what we are talking about. We are careering through the streets, making sharp turns, reversing direction, missing other vehicles by half-centimetres, until finally by some grace someone spots something familiar and we arrive at the factory's double metal doors.

To enter the factory, you step on some large wobbling rocks to reach the first cement step. The "factory" turns out to be an anteroom filled with several shelves of ground coffee in plastic bags. Beyond the shelves are a rusty coffee roaster and an ancient grinder. Nevertheless, the coffee smells good and we each buy several bags for friends at home.

We have now been up since 4am for the hour-long bus ride to Dire Dawa Airport and the flight back to Addis. Because of the poor road conditions, intra-country travel by short flights is common. But we are starting to grow extremely tired of the airport security checks and the overly-authoritative uniformed guards. There is a thorough check when you enter the airport, and another to proceed to your gate which is 50 feet away. I'm always patted down; Rhoda has to try to explain her doctor's note that says she can't take her shoes off because she needs them to walk; and Daniel is now doing a striptease when he takes off his watch and belt. We are losing boarding passes and mixing up water bottles and finding that a scheduled flight time can be one to three hours too optimistic.

This proved a good thing this day, because Daniel is stopped at the outgoing Customs Desk (a folding table and plastic lawn chairs) due to a stone frieze he bought at a souvenir shop depicting St. George slaying the dragon. The Customs official is suspicious of its provenance and declares that Daniel would be purloining a historic artifact by removing it from the country and thereby stealing part of Ethiopia's heritage. Helen tries to say that she is living in Addis and will keep the piece, but now we are told that not only can he not take it from the country, he can't take it from the region. The Customs official wants a receipt for the purchase and there is some consternation among us that if the seller made a "mistake"

in selling this piece, as the official keeps alluding, he could well wind up in prison. The official wants to keep the piece in Harrar until Daniel can produce a permission letter from the National Museum in Addis, but Helen counters that the museum cannot inspect the piece if he has to leave it in Harrar.

I am torn between standing by to demonstrate solidarity and moving away so I'm not associated with them. In the end I fudge it by standing near them, but with a good ten feet between us.

Meanwhile, Rhoda and Randa have gone through the check-in and are fretting about missing the plane. They have obviously forgotten they are in the developing world and that flight departure times are apparently only broad suggestions.

Finally the Customs guy agrees to give Daniel a receipt for the frieze so that he can reclaim it at some point, and all of us are through the check-in. Finally – but wait! Is that coffee in that transparent plastic bag? That is cargo, another huffy guy in a uniform tells us. Cargo travels separately. So Randa retreats back to the check-in desk with 6 pounds of ground coffee and is given a torn carton and some shipping tape to wrap up the “cargo”. None of us mentions the other bags of coffee in the *opaque* plastic bags.

Finally we are sitting in the waiting area, and waiting, and waiting. I decide to amuse our little group by pretending to file a “complaint” with customer service about our tour guide – Helen. The flight is late AGAIN, I say; the TV reception in here is awful; I smell cigarette smoke; and where the hell is the snack bar.

Seated next to us is a group of Senegalese musicians Helen recognizes. She excitedly tells them that she heard them last week in Addis and that they were great. They say that they are returning to Addis again to perform that night at a club called the Aladdin, and we say we'll see them there.

By the time we get back to Addis it is mid-afternoon and all we have accomplished the entire day is buying some coffee.

We decide to recover by taking a break and then meeting for an early dinner and some music at the Aladdin. Big mistake. No one has any idea where this place is, but we're determined. We are into hour 2 of driving around the construction sites of Addis, looking down dark streets for landmarks or anyone who can direct us, calling “A-la-DEEN? A-la-DEEN?” out the window of the van, when somehow out of sheer luck we stumble upon the Aladdin's red neon sign.

A cheer goes up. We enter the place and see the only white people we have seen since we landed in Ethiopia. The Aladdin is apparently a watering hole for young expats in the humanitarian field. You can tell because the guys are in chinos with pressed short-sleeved shirts, and the women all have that deliberately global fashion look. But we are happy to have made it; the food is tasty; and the music is good.

When we leave the Aladdin, we discover that the anticipated hour-long drive back to our guesthouse takes under five minutes.

10 Things to Bring When Traveling Through Ethiopia

1. Kleenex: to blow the dust out of your nose, to wipe the dust off your sunglasses, and to take with you to the very basic privies
2. A long cotton scarf: to keep the sun off your neck, to roll up into a neck pillow, as a light wrap, for modesty in churches, and to keep the dust off your face
3. Eye drops: For your dusty eyes
4. Ziploc Bags: for more versatile uses than you will anticipate. To keep toiletries in, to use to rearrange your belongings for different legs of your trip, to contain spills in your luggage, to hold your damp washcloth (bring one of those, too), to wrap handfuls of *kolo* in to hand out as little gifts, to hold your dusty shoes
5. A notepad: you otherwise will never remember all that you do and see
6. Click pens: to hand out to schoolchildren
7. Bottled water
8. Bottled water
9. Bottled water
10. An open mind and a loving heart

Day 4, Tuesday: ADDIS TO LALIBELA (Part I)

Lalibela Hospital is where you go when you have hurt your foot so badly you think you have broken something, and even though you have strong doubts about the quality of care in remote Lalibela, are unwilling to stay behind in Addis and miss the next experiences while the rest of the group travels on.

How did I injure my foot so badly? I could lie and make up something exotic – I stumbled while running from a hyena, say, or I fell out of a runaway *bajaj*, or I tripped while walking backwards to capture some amazing photograph.

But the truth is so completely ignominious. I slipped and fell in the bathroom. And not just slipped, but wound up airborne and sprawled on the wet tile floor.

I know immediately that something is really wrong. I have twisted my left knee – my good one – into an unnatural position, and when I move my left foot sharp pains shoot up my leg.

I manage to hobble downstairs to the van, and into the airport for – the first security check. I am so obviously in pain that a rickety wheelchair is quickly supplied. The good news is that we are moved to the front of the check-in line. Daniel makes the young woman behind the counter laugh, along with everyone else, when he says to her, “Excuse me, we have cargo?” and points to me parked in the wheelchair. “You recommend we wrap her? Shipping tape?” he says, and I am laughing so hard I am almost crying – or maybe that’s the throbbing in my foot, which is now very swollen and visibly bruised.

After this little bit of merriment, the bad news is that we have to go to the second floor, and – the elevator is broken. I manage to haul myself to the top of the stairs and when I see the second security check, I wilt. Helen, though, takes charge. She states loudly to the officious security clerks that I fell and hurt myself *IN THE AIRPORT* and I cannot possibly undergo a second security check. For some reason, this fiction works. The uniforms let me through into the waiting room – where we learn our plane is delayed and there is a two-hour wait. Those two hours seem inconsequential, however, when after boarding the plane and sitting on the tarmac for a half hour, we have to deplane because of mechanical troubles and wind up waiting in the airport for another two hours while a second plane is located. We have arisen at 4am to catch our 7am flight; it is now approaching noon; and we are still sitting in Addis.

I'm allowed to sit in a wheelchair on the ground level near the runways to avoid having to climb the cement stairs again to the waiting area. An elderly and severely crippled old lady in traditional Ethiopian garb is sitting patiently beside me in her wheelchair. Disaster threatens when we realize I have discarded my boarding pass in the original plane – who would have thought I would need it again? – but I look so pathetic that the ground crew waves me on.

Despite the delays, the airport hassles, the pain, the uncertainty about whether to stay or go – my deciding to soldier on to Lalibela is the best decision of the trip so far.

On the drive to Lalibela, I witness the harshest landscape I have ever seen. We are at a high elevation (2600 meters) and the land is severely dry, there having been no rain since last September – deathly dangerous for a populace dependent almost completely on agriculture.

But as our van passes through the small villages on the way, we are met with a completely different reaction than we have received so far in the urban areas. Seeing the white van full of *farenji*, the women look at us not with suspicion but with curiosity, and the children run alongside the van, waving and calling, "Hello! Welcome!" Lalibela is in the remote highlands, but a tourist destination due to the imposing 12th century churches carved out of the rocky mountainsides, and for only the second time we see other white faces.

We stop at a restaurant high on a hill – the Seven Olives – and out of nowhere, it is like paradise. It is lush and green and we travel a stone path under hanging boughs of flowering trees to a wide sunny terrace with a panoramic view of Lalibela below. There is a cool breeze, mellifluous birdsong, and a couple of dogs lounging in the sun. We share a traditional meal, and while the others head off to visit the churches, an arduous excursion I couldn't possibly manage, Helen and I move outside to catch up and enjoy a cup of *buna wotet* in the shade. It is so lovely and cool and refreshing that we don't want to leave.

But on to the hospital, because now my foot looks worse, with the bruising changing colors and traveling up my foot. Our guide Cheru drives us there, through an arched sign to an assemblage of low-slung, dilapidated buildings connected by open-air tin-roofed passageways. The conditions at the hospital are worse than I had imagined. The blue walls are dirty and peeling and covered with faded posters about TB and HIV. Waiting benches surround hard patches of dirt squares where the occasional scraggly flower stubbornly

pushes through. People of all ages are waiting, and whether traditional or Western, their clothing is worn and patched, and their shoes, if they wear shoes, are tattered. We sit on the benches facing the villagers and Cheru goes in to add my name to the list and I experience momentary horror that he is going to get me seen before all the local patients who are already waiting and cause either an uproar or silent resentment.

But the people waiting on the benches with us are friendly. They try cautious Hellos and we answer Hello with smiles and soon we are communicating with a few words in English and Amharic and many motions and gestures. I try the trick of taking pictures and showing the children their images on the display, and the mothers look too, and beam.

I ask if there is a bathroom I can use while we are waiting and one of the young female assistants offers to accompany me. She takes my arm to balance me, and we set out on the walk to the toilet – a 15 minute trek through passageways and stony fields, over deep ruts and high grass and unexpected ditches. A second young woman joins us and takes my other arm, and I say Thank you in Amharic, and the girls start giggling uncontrollably. I start laughing too and say why are you laughing? I ask if they speak English and one of the girls replies, “A small.” We are all laughing as they help me across the fields. They manage “Are you okay?” and I respond with a grimace “not really” and we three are laughing again.

The toilet is unspeakably filthy. It is one stall in an empty room and the door is broken, there is no seat, there is an inch of stagnant water on the floor, and it doesn't flush. Needless to say there is no paper and I am glad I remembered to bring Kleenex. But when I come out of the stall, there is one of the young girls with a bashful smile and a plastic pitcher of water so that I can rinse my hands. I have no idea how far she had to go to retrieve water, and I am touched.

Outside, a small group is sitting -- some women, a few kids, a couple of men. They eye me with innocent interest, and I say Salaam. They chorus Salaam in response, with smiles. As I limp away, a little boy of about 4 calls out Hello! and I turn around and limp back. Hello, I say, bending down, and he is jumping up and down with excitement. “How are you?” I say, and repeat it and point to him. He gets it and repeats it as best he can. The group claps and laughs. As I turn to leave one of the women calls out, “You are beautiful!” I turn around and call, “You too!” and she looks shy and pleased, to yet more cheerful laughter.

On the trek back to the waiting area we are met by one of the young doctors assistants, who introduces himself as Addison. He asks how I am and if I would be interested in a tour of the hospital while I am waiting to be seen, and of course I say yes.

The hospital is clearly trying to do its best, but it is shockingly inadequate. There are flies and dust everywhere, more peeling paint, and the rooms are crowded with patients. Addison tells me that he wants to study to be a pediatrician, and takes me to the hot and dark maternity ward. I stand at the threshold to respect the privacy of the five or six women, and he points to one in particular sitting stoically on a bed.

She is pregnant, he says, and the delivery is going to be difficult. She must stay for five days, but she doesn't have the money. I ask how much that costs, and he says 450 birr. Twenty-five dollars is, I realize, the same price as that wedding wrap in Harrar. I ask what

will happen if she can't pay, and he lowers his eyes to the ground and says, She will have to leave. "So," he ventures in his limited English, "If you are able to be voluntary ..." and doesn't mention it again. But I already know what I am going to do.

We return to the waiting area and he bows and wishes us well and says he must leave as it is time to distribute medications. I have already told Helen what I want to do, and she said I should do what feels right. This feels right: there is no one watching, no one need know, no one is competing for the same, and so before he leaves, I hand him 500 birr.

Then I am x-rayed in an empty, dusty room, on a gritty table, wondering how old their one x-ray machine is.

He comes back later while we are waiting for the x-ray results. He tells me that she said thank you over and over and over. The other patients in the room were amazed. She was so grateful. But as happy and grateful as she was, he said, I am equally happy and grateful. Now she will be OK, her husband will not leave, she can grow her crops, her children can go to school.

Helen nods. You have not only saved a life, she says, but kept a family together.

There is more good news: the doctor tells me (erroneously, I will learn back in the States) that my foot is not broken. I am given a slip for the pharmacy, and when we arrive at the cracked, grimy window a woman calls out to a man in the road, who comes jogging back. It is the pharmacist, who was on his way home but came back to help me. He gives me some pills, tells me to rest and keep my foot raised, and wishes me well.

The cost of my treatment? X-ray, 45 birr (25 cents). Consultation, 80 birr. Pills, 2 birr.

Day 4 (Part II)

On the way back, Rhoda asks our driver if it would be all right to stop and visit a family in their small round thatched hut to see how they live. She describes later how the daughter was doing her homework by dim candlelight and how the grandmother insisted on feeding her some lentils from their pot.

I can't make it down the treacherous slope to the *tukul*, so I wait in the van, and am soon joined by a group of young boys. They are open-faced and eager for my attention and to try out their English.

One boy says, "I like soccer!" Another boy says, "Basketball! Michael Jordan!" Then a slender boy at the middle of the group speaks to me in perfect textbook English: Hello, my name is Richard, what is your name, how are you, I am fine. I learn that Richard is 13 and wants to be a doctor, and that he lives in town with other boys in a "rental" so they can attend school. His parents are still in the countryside and Richard wants to study medicine so that he can go back to the countryside and deliver medical care.

Richard is obviously pleased by my interest and warms to my questions. When it is time to leave, he reaches inside the collar of his worn shirt, removes a small wooden cross and places it around my neck. I am so moved by this gesture. No, I protest, you shouldn't give me your cross, but he says it is no problem, he will go buy another. Then, I insist, I want to give you money to buy another cross, and he says don't worry, it is only 3 birr. It is a gift, he says, and I don't want money for a gift. I tell him that I prefer him to spend his money on school, and ask if I can give him some money for school supplies. He hesitates for a moment, then accedes. Okay, he says. I will accept your money for school supplies, and I hand him some birr. He asks for my email, a request which still surprises me in this resource-challenged country, and I ask him to send me updates on how he is doing.

Maybe it's practiced, maybe they know how to tug at the heartstrings of presumably wealthy *farenji*, but I am enjoying these interactions. They are not the aggressive money-grubbing assaults of the central marketplaces. The boys are smiling and eager to interact and clamouring to practice their school English.

The van stops at a line of shops where we can buy some small souvenirs. The "shops" look like metal beach cabanas, attached in a row – an Ethiopian strip mall. One tiny stall is marked "Lalibela Supermarket", and its display out front includes plastic bins, bananas, metal jerricans, baskets, rag mops, and empty water bottles for reuse.

I hobble clumsily into a couple of the stalls and buy a few trinkets – some St. George's cross charms, a few postcards hand-painted on animal skin.

A teenaged boy spots me outside the stalls and calls out tentatively, "Yes we can!" I turn around and respond, "Obama! Yes we can!" and he grins broadly and gives me a thumbs up. Then I hear someone call, "Maria!" It is Richard. He runs up to hug me. And after a few minutes of chatting, he leans in and says quietly, "Maria, I have to tell you something. Your money is so kind, but I don't need your money. What I need are books." I ask what kind of books and he takes my hand and pulls me over to a stall where the man behind the counter pulls out several soft-covered schoolbooks – Mathematics, and Biology, and an Amharic-English dictionary.

I can't help it. "Which one do you want?" I ask. He responds without hesitation, "Biology – because you know I want to be a doctor. I must learn all these things."

No, no, says a voice behind me. It is another, somewhat older boy. Take the dictionary. With the dictionary you would be able to learn every other thing. I would take the dictionary.

How much I ask, the seller. He wants 20 American dollars for the biology book and \$30 for the dictionary. I look dubiously at the books. They are old and ripped and dirty. Still, words and basic bio can't have changed all that much. That seems like a lot, I reply, and he immediately drops the price to \$30 for both. It is still too much, but I want to do this. I hand over 30 bucks and the seller hands the dictionary to the older boy and the biology textbook to Richard.

The older boy holds out his hand to me. "I will learn every word in this book," he promises earnestly, "and every time I open the covers I will think of you and your kindness." Richard is hugging his biology book to his chest with his eyes shining.

So. I feel pretty good. Sure, maybe it's a scam. Maybe they supply the kids with these small wooden crosses and tell them to give them to soft-hearted tourists to win them over. Maybe Richard sells the books back to the book seller so he can sell them to another tourist again tomorrow. Maybe the doctor only took me on the hospital tour to arouse my sympathy and cadge a donation. Maybe I am reinforcing dependence. Maybe the email exchanges will only result in future appeals.

But I don't think so. I cannot allow myself to be that cynical. These interactions felt genuine and personal. And so what? So what if Richard was rewarded for boldness. He needs money for school. And so what if the offer of a hospital tour was calculated? The doctor did what he had to do to help his patient.

Maybe it's wrong for me to give only when I approve of the approach or get some pleasure out of it. Is a boy who is polite and fun and speaks English more entitled to my money than another boy who is also needy but doesn't observe the niceties?

These are difficult questions that I continue to wrestle with, and I don't believe there are easy answers. Helen said to do what feels right. I only know that I feel relieved and light-hearted, and it makes me realize how down I have felt since Harrar. No, I didn't help all who needed help. I helped only two or three – one with a medical problem, two with a passion to learn. But if health and education are two cornerstones of human dignity, then I have done some small part. And that felt precious and right and soul-saving.

Day 5, Wednesday: AKSUM

On Day 5, we fly from Lalibela to Aksum, one of the holiest and most historical places in Ethiopia, a former naval and trading power in the north that UNESCO has added to its World Heritage Sites due to all the important archaeological excavations there. We visit the fields of *stelae*, 1700 year old grave markers, some reaching nearly 100'high, and tour the catacombs underneath. We stop at the Tomb of Kaleb, and see the Ezana Stone, carved in Ge'ez, Sabaeen, and Greek – it is Ethiopia's Rosetta Stone -- and pass the Queen of Sheba's Bath, a huge reservoir filled with muddy water.

I am trying to be a good student and listen closely to our guide, Mengistu, but he has a heavy accent and his richly-rolled "r's" are hypnotic. I realize I would rather read about all this history another time as I am missing interacting with people, and that opportunity soon comes, when we visit the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion (*Maryam Ts'iyon*), a modern cathedral built by Haile Selassie in the 1950's and considered the most important church in all of Ethiopia.

Initially unpopular due to its modern neo-Byzantine design and seeming resemblance to a mosque in this land of Orthodox Christians, it is the reputed home of the true Ark of the Covenant, guarded by a monk who is confined to its chapel for life, praying and offering

incense. Its large white marble dome can be seen all over Aksum, as can the tall bell tower that stands beside it. Its stained glass panels glow in the bright sunlight. On the grounds of the church, hundreds of pilgrims are milling about, squatting on the ground, the women covered in gauzy white wraps called *netelae*, all awaiting the start of the afternoon processional. Soon a man emerges from the front doors of the church, ringing a bell, and the pilgrims congregate at the steps of the church behind the small group of priests, who are arrayed in elaborate multicolored vestments and sheltered from the hot afternoon sun by velvet umbrellas decorated with lavish scrolls of gold. They begin the first of three circumnavigations around the church with the white-clad pilgrims following behind, chanting and bowing in unison. Amid the walkers I notice a crippled woman, crawling and dragging her lame leg behind her at the feet of the hundreds of marchers.

After the third circle is completed, the prayerful disperse. Helen and the others remove their shoes, cover their heads, and enter the church to view the interior, but I only peek in, because with my injured foot I cannot afford to leave my sandals outside and take the chance of losing them. Rhoda has found a bench under a small tree, and I join her to wait for the others in the shade. A group of women and children are nearby, sharing a post-procession snack, and I notice an elderly lady, clad in her white *netela*, standing near us, and I offer her my place on the bench. After some polite mutual protests, she accepts the seat, and Rhoda and I move into the sun.

Suddenly another woman comes over and takes my hand and thrusts something into it. It is a handful of cold, cooked fava beans – part of their afternoon meal – and she bows to me. I bow my thanks to her in return and wonder whether they are safe to eat, but unwilling to offend, I pretend to eat a few.

A young boy comes to stand near me. He says, in English, “You can sit over there, on the side church steps, where it is cooler,” and he joins me and Rhoda companionably on the steps. We chat easily. His name is Simon, like the apostle; he is thirteen years old; and he wants to be a science teacher. I tell him that my husband is a scientist, and that he taught science for a while, and Simon smiles a broad white smile.

Another elderly woman soon appears, and holds her palm open, dipping it up and down in the sign for money. I know that it is a nun because of her mustard-colored wrap, but I also know that Helen has not been too impressed with what the church has done for the poor of Ethiopia, and so I shake my head no, repeatedly. Simon intervenes, saying what sounds like “Mama, no” and eventually she moves on. He shakes his head, and says the mantra: “You can’t give to one, or all will expect it.” I know, I say, but it is often hard to say no, and he nods his head in resigned agreement.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see movement, and I despair. It is another crippled beggar, moving towards us on all fours, recumbent and crab-like, his hands and his feet protected by worn plastic sandals. He stops right in front of me, and I can no longer ignore his presence.

I look into his face, and I see a handsome young man of about 20, with a sweet expression and a beautiful smile. And we start to talk.

He has been crippled his whole life, I learn. We chat for a few minutes, and eventually he asks for money, shyly, and unthinkingly I give what is by now the reflex response – no, I'm sorry. He smiles at me anyway and begins to move away.

I watch his arduous, struggling movements until he is about twenty feet from us, and I can't stand it. "Simon," I say urgently, "what should I do? I can't not give him money!"

"Him, you can give money," Simon says, reflectively. "He is poor, he has no family. He lives alone. He cannot work. It's OK." Thank god, I think, and give Simon some birr. Hurry, I say, and Simon calls out and trots over to the beggar, handing him the money. The beggar turns his twisted body around, and drags himself the twenty feet back to me just to say thank you. And he smiles his beautiful smile.

The others are calling now, and the van is readying to leave. I give Simon some money and tell him it is for school supplies. "What is your husband's name?" he asks, and gives me a pen, but it doesn't work, and I really have to go. Simon says, "Tell me, I'll remember" and I spell it for him over my shoulder as I head for the van.

That afternoon, as we leave the excavation of the Queen of Sheba's palace, Simon is there. He runs up to hug me, and I am tickled to see him, realizing there must be a set sequence for the tourist spots. He hands me something, and says it is for my husband. It is a small black clay replica of a *stela*, strung on a thin black thread. "Men can wear this," he assures me, and I know how pleased Jon will be.

Later that night, I turn the small talisman over, and there, carved on the back in careful letters, is "J-o-n."

I see Simon twice more before we leave Aksum. He tells me that tonight he will come to our hotel, high on the hill, with a gift for me, but warns me to alert the guard, as otherwise he will not be admitted, and when he shows up, he has a necklace for me, too, a larger Aksum cross, strung on the same black thread, with my name carved into the back. Before he leaves, I tell him that I want him to work hard at his studies, and ask him how I can help. After a moment he confesses that he will soon need to buy his school uniform. It is not a lot of money, and I readily hand it over. I like this sociable young boy. I have the strong feeling that my incipient relationship with young Simon will continue, although I don't yet know what form this will take.

The last time I see Simon is early in the morning the following day, outside the artifacts store where Daniel and I have come to pay the balance for the items we've bought. Simon hands me yet another gift, a brilliantly colored, woven round basket, saying that his mother wanted to show her thanks.

DAYS 6 & 7, Thursday and Friday: ADDIS ABABA

On Thursday morning, we leave the walled fortress of Aksum and its four city gates and fly back to Addis. We are so eager to return to the lovely little guesthouse Helen has found for us on the outskirts of the Bole airport. Once past yet more construction and the ubiquitous

corrugated metal fencing, we turn into a small little courtyard and climb the steps to the carved wooden doors of the Arequ.

Almaz, the proprietess, is an elegant and soft-spoken lady who used to work for the UN. After her husband died, her architect son decided it wouldn't be good for her to be idle, so he designed and built the small guesthouse for her to run. He salvaged old windows, wood flooring and ironwork from a demolition on the other side of Addis, and combined that with grey stone walls and yellow stucco. With plants, skylights and local artwork, it is a homey respite for us.

Almaz sees we are tired and asks if we would like tea, and the steaming infusion is restorative. We decide to lay low for the rest of the afternoon, writing in our journals and catching up on emails. That night, to a "beer garden", where we order a meter-high "beer tower" for the table, and the *bauernbraten* tastes just like *tibs*.

The next morning one of the young girls prepares a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony for us. Arrayed in front of her are baskets and handleless cups and the customary bowl of popcorn. A lighted incense burner wafts fragrant smoke into the room. She roasts the green beans in a flat pan over a charcoal brazier, fanning the flames, and once the beans are dark and oily and aromatic, grinds them with a mortar and pestle. The grounds are brewed in a *jebena*, a round black clay pot with a tall slender neck and low spout, and filtered through a horsehair sieve before being poured into the small cups and served. Almaz explains that the coffee ceremony is a way for people to spend time together and chat – or gossip, really, she chuckles – and coffee in Ethiopia is one thing that never disappoints; it is invariably dark and rich and delicious.

We head over to the Shiro Meda shopping area to pick up some gifts and mementos. The district comprises stall upon stall of inexpensive textiles, baskets, beaded jewelry, bags and sandals lined up on a dirt street. Helen selects dozens of wraps, scarves, necklaces and bracelets to bring back to the States and resell to raise funds for her non-profit.

I am accompanied by an old lady who attaches herself to me for virtually the entire excursion and repeats "Money-money ... money-money ... money-money" till I wonder if she is going to climb into the van and return to the guesthouse with us. I hear her monotone supplication in my sleep.

We learn later that Rhoda and Randa narrowly escape a nasty altercation when they are invited to snap a photogenic group of women in native dress sorting grain and are then surrounded with an insistent demand for payment. The initial one birr offering is rejected indignantly and Rhoda and Randa pay up hastily to ensure their safe escape.

When we return to the guesthouse, we are greeted by a little brown monkey who is playing on the terrace – lounging on the tile floor and swinging on the iron balustrade – and Daniel and I stop to feed him some *kolo* (a snack mix of roasted barley and peanuts), which he seems to enjoy. His tiny wrinkled face and fluffy white eyebrows and sideburns give him the look of a little old man enjoying an afternoon nosh. Once sated, the monkey turns his attention to one of the fence's wrought iron light fixtures, eventually succeeding in

unscrewing its finial and scampering off with it. His will be the swankiest abode in the monkey 'hood tonight.

The monkey is not the only wildlife we experience at the Areqa. There is the tuxedo-clad black magpie with the white chest who sits on a nearby roof and opines loudly on all that we do. And not to mention the pack of stray dogs who congregate under our windows each night and serenade us to sleep with their barking, growling and yowling.

Friday morning is our visit to the National Museum, one of sub-Saharan Africa's most important. It houses a cast replica of "Lucy," the 3-million-year old human fossil discovered in 1974, along with paleontology exhibits, artwork displays, sculpture, and glass cases of farming implements. We see the Emperor Selassie's huge and ostentatious throne, and learn that he was so short (just over 5') that he needed a stool to climb onto it. (Empress Menen's throne, by contrast, is decidedly smaller, and less impressive and ornate.)

Lunch is at Lucy's, the restaurant next to the museum, where we sit in the lush courtyard and order *spris*, the eye-appealing drink composed of layered fruit purees – avocado, orange, strawberry, papaya, and mango.

On Friday night we head over to the "Habesha 2000" nightclub ("Habesha" a broad term for "Ethiopian") for traditional food and *tej* (honey wine) and witness some of the most amazing dancing we've ever seen. The amplified music of traditional instruments is loud and pulsing; the dancers' costumes exotic; and the dancing mesmerizing. There are over 80 ethnic groups in Ethiopia – Amhara, Tigray, Oromo, Gambella, Gurage -- and each has its own style of dance, many of which we enjoy tonight. There is wild head-shaking and hip-swivelling and running in place without rest, mock bride capture, and the especially impressive *eskesta*, or Ethiopian shoulder dance, which involves rapid independent movements of the neck, shoulders and chest. Each table is approached by a dancer who invites us to mimic her movements – and of course we try, to hilariously unsuccessful results.

Tomorrow, off to our sleepover in Awash National Park.

DAY 8, Saturday: AWASH NATIONAL PARK

On Saturday we set out for our overnight stay in Awash National Park. Here's a brief CV of our driver Yohannes:

Courteous, intelligent, trustworthy driver able to drive van full of farenji long distances for hours at a time. Capable of driving at high rate of speed while dodging wandering cows, goats and donkeys. Able to drive van through flooded roads full of boulders. Good spatial orientation enables him to miss pedestrians and other vehicles by centimeters. Casual about the presence or use of seatbelts. Knowledgeable about roadside stops with reasonably-acceptable pit toilets. Skilled at dealing with police officers at the occasional roadblock. Helpful with luggage and menu translations.

We all are so glad not to have to fly anywhere and deal with airport security, but the van rides are tiring in their own way – long, hot, and bumpy. We keep the windows open for the breeze and become accomplished at sliding them closed quickly whenever a passing truck kicks up a dust storm.

Daniel sits shotgun so he can take unobstructed photos; instead of a rifle it's his camera lens that's propped out the window. His right forearm has become so sunburned from incessant photography that he has taken to wrapping my cotton scarf around it like an improvised sleeve. The others arrange themselves in different formations in the middle seats, and I usually perch on the rear bench seat, where there is room for my long legs. This is the bounciest seat in the van – my body frequently leaving the seat and my head just missing the roof – and I think of my 8-year-old niece, who would be treating this like an amusement park ride and screaming with glee. At the conclusion of the ride, I invariably have a headache from my brain being jostled around in my skull for hours.

It is greener here in the Afar and Shewa regions, with more sources of lifegiving water, brown though it be. The *tukuls* seem more substantial, with mud-chinked walls and thicker thatched roofs. Many are painted with multi-colored tribal designs. There are goats and donkeys here, but also more cows and camels. In one town we pass a truck filled with cows crammed flank-to-flank, and a flatbed loaded with camels, both likely headed for the markets of Djibouti. The haughty camels look bored and are resting their chins desultorily on the high sides of the truck.

Once we arrive at the park, it is a long drive to the lodge from the entrance; the park is a considerable 292 square miles of grassland, bordered on the south by the Awash River. We spot a *dik-dik* -- a pretty little antelope the size of a fawn -- leaping through the brush, and a flock of guinea hens, and all of us crack up when Helen says, "Daniel, you cannot chase the warthogs!" as he jumps out of the van to snap two of the huge, unsightly, lumbering beasts.

We follow the pebbled path to the falls, and it is a breathtaking vision. There are several falls filling a wide vista, all falling into a deep gorge. They create a roaring sound and a mist that softens the late afternoon sunlight.

Once at the lodge, we are met with trays holding glasses of powdered orange drink, and hide-covered menus. There are two huge, funny pet ostriches sashaying around, and their long necks and snooty expressions make me grin.

We place our dinner orders – as always, including a large bottle of water – and head to our accommodations, small stone cabins with thatched roofs and erratic patches of screen to keep out the mosquitoes. While emptying my backpack I hear an "Eek!" from the other side of the stone wall and Randa calls, "Just a lizard; it's OK, they eat mosquitoes," as a healthy-sized green lizard skitters over the stone wall into our side of the hut and disappears out of sight.

Insect-eating lizard or not, I am relieved to see that each bed has a mosquito net hanging above it.

Dinner is by the lodge where benches have been arranged around a campfire. It is a beautiful, clear, breezy night and the smoke from the campfire keeps any mosquitoes away. The dark African sky sparkles with faraway stars. We spend the evening there, relaxing, chatting, and stargazing.

That night I take bug patrol seriously – I spray myself with Deet, climb into bed, tuck the netting around the mattress, and then fumigate the perimeters with my aerosol can of permethrin. I fall asleep clutching the can and my water bottle as if they were stuffed animals.

In the morning we have breakfast at the lodge, with two Save the Children workers and a woman from the BBC's Media Action, as Daniel and Randa head down to the gorge to hunt crocodiles – I decline the offer to accompany them; crocodiles scare me -- and indeed, they are “rewarded” with a sighting. Even the photograph gives me chills.

On a distant ridge we see a baboon loping along. On the drive out of the park we spot a *nyala* -- a spiral-horned antelope -- and another baboon patiently awaits us at the exit. He has a long nose and close-set eyes and I imagine he is wondering why we are not tossing him food as the other tourists must do. (The baboons of the park, in fact, are notorious for filching food from inattentive diners.)

On the road to Hosanna, more images: a woman in a yellow top and red skirt leaning against the door of her brown thatched hut. Three children loading a donkey – one steadying the cloth bundle atop his back, one tying the ropes, and one holding the donkey's face gently in her little hands. A herd of cows congregated under the sparse shade of a solitary tree. A small child standing all alone in a wide field. Stacks of pumpkins and watermelons for sale at the side of the road. Bushes with sharp thorns two inches long. A clutch of villagers at the side of a lake, the women washing laundry, men washing a horse. Men walking with the customary branch laid atop their shoulders – useful for resting arms, acting as a walking stick, and brandished for protection. A crippled man crawling on all fours through traffic, dodging truck tires.

We arrive in dusty Hosanna late Sunday evening. Tomorrow is our visit to the library, and a full day of teaching classes.

DAY 9, Sunday: HOSANNA

Helen Boxwill is a freaking saint.

A main purpose of our trip was to visit the school library she helped build there, bring suitcases full of sorely-needed school supplies, and lead a day of teacher trainings. And indeed, seeing the library in person for the first time is so exhilarating. It is a low, simple cement building. There is a large reading room, freshly-painted, full of long tables and shelves crammed with books, with magazine photographs of famous people on the walls: Anne Frank, Maya Angelou, Amelia Earhart. There is a children's reading room, with educational posters and encouraging banners. A family movie viewing is going on in a multi-purpose room, and the children inside are laughing at the screen. I feel proud to have been

a part of this effort, and to be able to bring back photographs to my fellow congregants at the Fellowship, who supported her goal.

It sounds noble indeed that Helen has devoted years of her retirement to bettering the national education system on behalf of the children of Ethiopia. But only after seeing Helen in action can one appreciate what a Sisyphean effort and Herculean accomplishment this has been.

She volunteers full-time at the Ministry of Education in Addis – unpaid. She climbs the multiple staircases to her office with her bad knee five days each week, works on her computer till late in the night, takes frequent phone calls after hours. She lives in a small apartment in a shabby compound where the long driveway is rutted and rocky (surprise) and where there can be no water for a week at a time. She's allergic to dust, which is exacerbated by the typical conditions in Ethiopia, and coughed the entire time we were there. And on top of it, she has to deal with the same sort of petty bureaucracy we've experienced in the airports, only to an exponential level.

And I blame this on the male local school administrators, who for the most part appear to be self-important, pompous, and incompetent, with no accountability.

I'd want to fire them summarily. But due to local politics, Helen has to resort to other methods. She listens patiently. She cajoles. She begs and pleads. She wheedles and teases. She demands and fumes and insists and extracts promises that she knows will go unfulfilled. And when it all gets to be too much, she just lays her head in her hands and laughs.

In 50 years, a statue of Helen in the center of Hosanna will show her with children gathered around her. She will have on her glasses and blue windbreaker. One arm will be hoisting a textbook to the sky and one will be holding her cell phone to her ear. One foot will be on the neck of a school administrator at her feet.

We visit the library on Sunday evening after our late arrival in Hosanna, and make our way across the bumpy schoolyard grounds, and are met by the male "head of quality assurance" for all the local schools. Helen first notices that the lock on the front door to the library is still broken, despite assurances months ago that it would be repaired. She wants to know why the fluorescent light fixtures are still flickering maddeningly, and vows not to pay the electrical contractor "one more birr" until it is fixed. But her biggest annoyance is about the textbooks, numerous copies of new and used but serviceable textbooks that have been donated and shipped: why are they still locked in the storeroom, when they should be in the hands of the students?

It seems that textbooks are too valuable to put in the custody of children. They will get lost. They will become dirty. Every suggestion Helen makes – sign them in and out each day, have the children use them at the school – is met with a ridiculous counterargument till it makes me want to pull my hair out.

When it's time to leave, Helen asks about the status of the school librarian, who was supposed to be hired months ago. She is told there are no candidates, but she knows this

cannot be true, and appears supremely irritated. I know full well this is not the end of that discussion.

We need to prepare for our long day of teaching in the morning, so we head back across the uneven schoolyard. Helen aims the light of her phone display at the ground, links arms with me and Rhoda in case we trip, and I hear her say to Rhoda, “Yes, we have to hurry, because they come out at night. But don’t worry, they don’t like light.”

“What don’t like light?” I ask.

“Hyenas,” she says.

Day 10, Monday: TEACHING IN HOSANNA

The nicest hotel in Hosanna looks Moorish and elegant from the outside, but it has a few minor shortcomings, namely location, plumbing, and bugs.

At 4am I am awakened by shouts and revving engines and beeping horns and assume it’s some sort of demonstration, but when I pull the window curtains back to investigate, I learn that the hotel backs up to the local bus depot. Bus drivers lean out their windows, yelling the names of their destinations; dispatchers yell in return; would-be passengers yell back; buses honk to get other buses and pedestrians – and goats, for all I know – out of their way. I put the pillow over my head and try to get a little more sleep.

When it’s time to shower, I see that the light has gone out on the water heater. The only way to turn it back on, it seems, is to grasp the exposed wires coming out of a hole in the cement wall and twist them together. Doing that would require standing in the puddle of water that has accumulated on the bathroom floor as toilets above me were flushed during the night – perhaps not the best idea.

Sticky with Deet, and not enthused by the thought of a cold rinse, I throw on a robe and head down the hall. Rhoda answers, looking unkempt and unhappy. She has no hot water either. I don’t want to bother Helen, who I know was up late working. I finally shower in Randa’s room. I remember to keep my belongings off the floor, as warned by Daniel, who’s had some unfortunate experiences with creepy-crawlies in Hosanna.

Classes are due to begin at 9am, but we arrive early to get settled and sort through the school supplies we’ve brought so we can divide them evenly among the local schools. Daniel’s brought a suitcase full of them and my husband has done a great job with the donations my friends have sent, filling an entire suitcase with items from Staples and the dollar store: crayons, markers, paints, brushes, pens, pencils, erasers, rulers, magnifying glasses, flash cards. Daniel’s ripping an old t-shirt to serve as makeshift tourniquets for his first-aid class.

We’re rushing so as not to be late, but – no worries! Apparently nothing has been arranged ahead of time. We don’t have classroom allocations; no translators have been assigned;

and at 10:15 we are still standing in the schoolyard in the hot sun, waiting to learn what the deal is. I am steaming in more ways than one.

But the classes themselves are really fun. Mine is on girls' empowerment, and I draw on the curriculum that my friend Mary Beth was generous enough to share. I engage the teachers in acknowledging impediments to girls' education in Ethiopia, and brainstorming on solutions. We talk about lack of resources, and poor security for girls walking to school, and girls having responsibilities at home, and low expectations; we make lists of famous Ethiopian women and role models for young girls (the Minister of Health, Ethiopian runners, an activist against female genital cutting, their mothers, their teachers). I encourage them to put a "pride wall" in their classrooms where female accomplishments can be celebrated, and to include the achievements of their female students. Their favourite exercise is the "Prime Minister" simulation: I pair them up, and tell them one person is the new Prime Minister, one person is a journalist, and it is National Girls Day in Ethiopia. What, Prime Minister, are you prepared to do on behalf of girls? They have five minutes, and it is rewarding to see them so engrossed, talking animatedly and scribbling notes.

It is tricky and fatiguing to try and do this right – to be relevant and appropriate in a different culture and a different language. And the (male) translator seems to be going off on his own tangents – I'll say one sentence and his improvised translation will consume five minutes, replete with wild gesticulations that either mimic gestures I've used in an earlier class (thus subverting that lesson) or else bearing no relationship that I can see to what we're discussing. Helen had warned us about this, going so far as to disappoint one translator by excluding him from translating due to his known penchant for extemporizing.

No matter. I sense the teachers have enjoyed themselves. I close by reminding them how important they are to their young students, and to the future of Ethiopia. You are putting the first thoughts in their heads, I say, and that makes your role very powerful. These are the thoughts they will carry around with them for the rest of their lives. By empowering your female students, you are empowering fifty percent of the population of Ethiopia. This seems to resonate with them, and they gaze at me solemnly as I speak and mime.

At the end, I ask them to rate the class, and put their slips in the envelope to be passed around. Three if it was really good, I say; two if it was just OK; and one if it wasn't really useful.

When I go through the slips, I am so relieved to see that I have received all "3's". I'm touched to see that one teacher has added, in small careful letters, "This was very nice. I thank you."

When we regroup at the end of the day, we're all on a high. Randa had no translator, but her classes on movement and learning have gone well, as have Rhoda's and Helen's classes on reading methods. (In using a version of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" as a learning technique, Helen learned that Ethiopian cows also have their own language, just like the 83 languages spoken elsewhere in the provinces of Ethiopia: in lieu of a "moo moo" here and a "moo moo" there, Old Yakob's cows say "maw maw." Amharic, for example, bears no relation to Tigrinya: thank you, "amasa genalo", becomes "yakanele." I am sure the goats and donkeys also have their own dialects.)

I am only disappointed that due to the disorganization earlier in the day, we only had time for four classes instead of the intended five.

At the conclusion of the day, there are the obligatory speeches, and official photographs, and we each get a stamped certificate acknowledging our participation in the teacher training.

On the way to our van, I pass Helen engaged in heated discussion with several of the administrators, and I overhear Helen, saying in no uncertain terms, "I. Want. A. Librarian!!"

We wait in the van for that argument to wind up, and are soon joined by a group of students. They are typical teenagers, jostling, chasing each other, stealing each others' purses. A cow meanders by, the kids pester it, the cow makes a half-hearted charge, and the kids dash away, shrieking. As always, they love to try out their English. We hand out pens and word spreads like wildfire till our stash is depleted. One girl calls, "Thank you, my mother!" and I call back, "You're welcome, my daughter!" to giggles of delight.

Soon a scowling teacher appears at the chain-link fence, and ushers the children back into the schoolyard. He smacks one young straggler on the back his head. The boy turns around, makes a funny face at us, and waves before disappearing into the schoolyard.

It is getting dark, and finally Helen appears, looking tired. I recall her staying up late these last few nights, tapping away on her keyboard. She and several of the male administrators climb in the van to join us for dinner. I say to Helen, sotto voce, "Is it time for a little good cop, bad cop?" and Helen agrees, "That might not be a bad idea."

"So Helen," I venture with mock displeasure, once we are all in place, "what happened this morning? You told us everything was set up in advance. Why was it so disorganized? No classrooms, no translators ..."

"Well," Helen says innocently, "I thought it was. I'm not sure what happened. Do any of you know?"

The supercilious "head of quality assurance" lifts his chin. "I am sure you can understand. There were many details to arrange."

"Yes," I respond pleasantly, "which is why I would have thought these would have been arranged ahead of time."

"There was no problem," he asserts.

"There was," I counter. "We were supposed to teach five classes. Because of all the delays, we only had time for four."

His small eyes narrow. He goes on the offense: "Well, then, you must have gone over with your classes. I am sure it was your fault."

“Oh, no no,” I chirp cheerily. “I did not go over. We only started after 10.”

“It is complicated to assign classrooms,” he maintains.

“Really?” I feign surprise. “But as Head of Quality Assurance, I am sure you can see it would have been better not to leave all this to the last minute. No matter!” I finish. “It can be a lesson for next time!”

I don’t know if he has ever had a woman speak to him this way. He looks incensed. But I don’t care. My little charade may not change anything, but I’ve avenged Helen slightly, and I’ve gotten my ya-ya’s out.

Days 11 and 12, Tuesday and Wednesday: ADDIS AND FAREWELL

Driving along in the van on our return to Addis, the countryside smells wonderful – carried on the breeze, a heady fragrance of early morning charcoal fires and eucalyptus trees wafts through the windows. We stop at two historic sites – a small *stelae* field recognized by UNESCO, and a site excavation with a museum housed in three *tukuls*. It’s jarring to arrive back in the late afternoon to the chaos of Addis, with its crowds, traffic, and omnipresent construction rubble.

As always, the Arequ is a haven. I climb the guesthouse stairs to my room and flop face down on my bed, still in that position when Daniel comes to get me for dinner. It’s at an Italian restaurant – there’s a strong Italian presence in Addis, due to Mussolini’s occupation of Ethiopia in the 1930’s – and we all celebrate our last night together with a bottle of red wine.

Wednesday morning is packing, and then last minute errands: an unsuccessful attempt to put our photographs on CDs to share, last minute purchases of scarves for gifts, a trip to a jewelry store for inexpensive silver earrings, a visit to the leather district, where we peruse bags and belts.

As we prepare to drive away from one store, Daniel leans out the van to mimic the bellowing bus drivers in Hosanna with our destination: “Helen’s apartment!” he yells, “Helen’s apartment!” To our surprise, several women in traditional dress line up at the side of the van. I think they’re in on the joke, though, because their eyes are twinkling and they laugh right along with us.

It is late afternoon now, and we need to get back to be on time for our evening flight, but just then the skies burst open with a crashing rainstorm. A deluge ensues, and the clogged streets become flooded. It’s over quickly, though, and soon women are wringing out their wraps and men are pouring water out of their shoes. Someone says, “Look!” and Daniel has his lens out the window. It is a wide, vibrant rainbow, arcing over the city, and I think that will be a nice last image for me of Addis.

But no. That last image would be of a man taking a leak on the side of the main road at rush hour.

There are the same annoyances at Bole airport – the repeat security checks, and the waiting, and a moment of anxiety when the lights suddenly go out, pitching the entire airport into blackness. A redcap tries to extort 100 birr from us for our bags, thinking we're all *farenji*, but Helen rejects this adamantly – it's 10 birr per bag, she states, and the guy knows he's been caught. But the highlight was the international incident which almost ensued when I have the exact same experience Daniel did in Dire Diwa – some uniforms confiscate the stone frieze I bought, calling it “heritage”, even though I tell them there were ten more just like it in the souvenir store where I bought it. I think I am prepared for the confrontation, as I have the receipt they demanded from Daniel, but no – the seller forgot to rubber stamp it in purple ink, so of course it is not official. I'm livid, and resolution requires a visit from two Customs girls in tight jeans and braided hair.

Then there's the surprise of seeing my luggage at the baggage claim at Dulles, even though the airline agent in Addis had said he was checking them straight through to New York. Had I not noticed them while keeping Randa company as she retrieved her backpack, they'd probably still be down there, revolving forlornly on the baggage conveyor belt.

So a three hour wait in Addis. Then a seven hour flight to Rome, and a two hour stopover there. Then a nine hour flight to Dulles in DC, and a two hour wait. Then a 90 minute flight to LaGuardia in NY. The return trip from Ethiopia takes over 24 hours from start to finish.

I had cried when I hugged Almaz good-bye, this elegant, gracious lady who had taken such good care of us at the guesthouse, realizing I might never see her again. “My dear,” she said in her soft accent, “I will miss you,” as we kissed three times on the cheek in the Ethiopian manner. And when the wheels of our plane touch down on the tarmac at LaGuardia, I am suddenly overcome with an unexpected rush of emotion. I weep then, too, realizing I am home.

Maria Pignataro Nielsen
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