

A Personal Account from Kenya

Beatrice Spadacini (January 31, 2008)



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Nairobi (17 January, 2008). Lately I am having a hard time focusing. I find myself easily irritable and chronically tense. My sleep is erratic. There are nights I sleep heavily as if I were under anesthesia and others when I am restless and wake up intermittently. When I am awake in the darkness of the night I find myself listening quietly for a sign of distress coming from my daughter's room, which is next to mine.



What was supposed to be the most important time in our lives, a time of bonding and mutual discovery is turning into a time of persistent worry regarding possible evacuation plans and the consequences of forced decisions on an adoption process that is half way through and far from being complete.

Will I be forced to quit my job in order to stay with my daughter in Kenya? Will I manage to get her out of here if things get worse? Could we travel to another country in East Africa? Even Rwanda looks appealing from Kenya at this point in time.

All these questions swirl in my head as I twist and turn in my bed at night. During the day I turn to yoga, meditation and classical music to find a semblance of peace. A tactic that is disrupted the moment I switch on the radio and listen to the BBC World or turn to the local TV news to see for myself the extent of the damage in Nairobi and the rest of the country.

Periodic text messages from CARE security personnel on which roads in Nairobi are closed, location of street battles, gun shots and number of wounded also contribute to my overall feeling of distress. Though I appreciate knowing what is going on, I am tempted to switch off the phone, immerse myself in a book or put on my daughter's itsy bitsy spider music CD.

I also worry about one day having to explain to my daughter what is happening to Kenya now. Truthfully, I don't even know what ethnic group she is from since she was found at the tender age of two weeks abandoned in Mathare, a Nairobi slum area that has repeatedly been in the news lately due to the post-election violence.

I can only thank God that by a lucky twist of fate she is not living in Mathare now, as the country is rocked by violence and many innocent lives are lost while politicians are busy bickering about who exactly won the Presidential elections.

Ever since the results of the Kenyan elections were made public on January 30th and immediately disputed by a large portion of the population, living here has become surreal. It is also been increasingly difficult to listen objectively to Kenyan friends and colleagues who have their own versions of the election dispute and opinions on how to solve the current crisis.

I suppose it is inevitable to process their narratives through the prism of, 'which ethnic group are they from'? And when that happens I feel ashamed, unable to come to terms with a reasonable explanation of what is really going on in the country today and knowing I am guilty of projecting my own Western biases on the current Kenyan crisis.

Last week, as we drove back from a humanitarian assessment in the town of Eldoret, one of the areas in the Rift Valley that has seen a massive displacement of people fleeing from their homes and a horrendous murder of women and children burnt alive in a church, we stopped in Nakuru Park, normally a tourist destination for its spectacular population of pink flamingos living on the shores of the lake.



After interviewing dozens of displaced families and witnessing the trail of destruction that swept through the town and its surrounding areas, we needed a moment of rest to recharge and reconnect to our inner selves.

As we drove through the park, one of my Kenyan colleagues noticed that a white rhino was resting peacefully under an acacia tree not far from a male buffalo, also resting under an adjacent tree. Since this is considered a rare sight, he jokingly said, "You see, if they can manage to be next to each other, why can't President Kibaki and opposition leader Raila Odinga find a way to settle their differences for the sake of all Kenyans?"

It would be wrong to think that most Kenyans do not want peace. In fact, the contrary is quite true. Kenyans want peace but they also want justice.

Many openly say that you cannot have one without the other, thus the need to re-tally the Presidential votes or have a rerun.

As I dropped off my daughter Zawadi to kindergarten this morning, I stopped to observe a teacher playing with a group of young pupils. These children were all Kenyan, of African, Indian and European descent. Surely, among them there were multiple ethnic groups yet the atmosphere was serene and festive. A culture of mutual respect and cooperation must be taught early on, I thought to myself.

The educational system has a big role to play in fostering peace.

Children however, are the first ones to lose out from the current turmoil in Kenya. Due to elections and the ensuing violence, schools have closed early and opened later. Some schools have been destroyed and many displaced pupils find themselves unable to continue their studies.

Journalists focus on where the action is and thus images of Kenya on TV screens abroad create the impressions that the entire country is experiencing mayhem. Although the situation is extremely grave, I think it is important to encourage friends and family who live far away from here to stay connected to Kenya and not to dismiss what is happening and what they see on their TV screens as yet another, 'hopeless African tragedy'.

As a person living in Kenya and working for an international aid agency, I have a responsibility to try to understand what is going on and to promote peace and reconciliation in any way I can. The question is, how best to do so?

Besides supporting my own organization in responding to relief efforts for the thousands of displaced people across the country, what can I as an individual do to foster healing and justice? And what can YOU do?

I believe that we must promote a sense of individual responsibility and in depth analysis rather than



fall prey to simplistic interpretations of current events. I also want to remind my Kenyan friends that they have the individual power to either promote peace and justice or to foster doubts and consequently fuel violence.

Like the white rhino and the buffalo in Nakuru Park, Kenyan leaders have a choice to either live peacefully together or to fight one another at the expense of all other creatures living in the park.

[Please search for three interesting essays that gave me food for thought yesterday as I searched for answers on the internet. Two are on www.opendemocracy.net [2] (one is by Kenyan journalist Peter Kimani and the other one by historian and Africanist Gerard Prunier) and one by British reporter Madeline Bunting appeared January 14 on the Guardian newspaper.]

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