

In an attempt to share an American Easter tradition, I handed out 100 dyed eggs to the students and staff of St. Francis School for the Blind. Even though I couldn't hide the eggs, obviously, it was a big hit. They love learning about American culture and being included in something special.



Losing It: Death & Bereavement in My Community

In Uganda, death is a prominent adversary. Recently, I learned what it feels like to meet that foe face to face.

I am both participant and observer. At all times, I have one foot in America and one in Uganda. But recently, I crossed that threshold.

In November, the blind school's secretary, Magdalene, gave birth to her second son. None of us knew she was pregnant until about a month before the due date. Ugandan women don't widely announce their pregnancies because of the private, delicate nature of the matter; they don't want to jinx themselves due to the high rates of health complications and maternal and infant deaths. On the day of delivery, Magdalene simply walked her firstborn son to nursery then sauntered over to the health center. The baby plopped out within 2 hours of labor. I was one of many who paid her a visit and partook in the jubilation of just-born baby Grivin. In the weeks following, I

stopped by Magdalene's place often. I gave her some baby clothes sent from America. I cradled Grivin's sweet-smelling body and let his hand curl around my finger. I witnessed the joyous pairing of a mother and her suckling babe. I was invested in that little baby's life.

Then Grivin's health took a sharp left turn. By the end of February, he had been in and out of the children's ward for 6 weeks. On February 27th, I stopped by the hospital to check on him and Magdalene. The words "kidney failure" and "holding onto life" filled the room. So did many stifled sobs. Grivin laid out on an adult-sized hospital bed with just a drip attached to him. No high-tech monitor or life-support machine. His breath was labored, his skin ashen, his tiny body weakened by illness. At 5 pm, I whispered into his ear that he should keep fighting, rubbed his distended belly and left the hospital with a small hope that he would pull through. By 10 pm, he passed away.

When they loaded Grivin's miniature coffin into the vehicle for the village burial, I broke down. It was just as much my loss as anyone else's. The women hovered around me, comforting me with squeezes and words of solidarity. Wait?! They consoled me? When the oft-pitied take the time to show you pity, you wonder at the irony. I looked around around me and saw the familiarity with which Ugandans greet death. They live through death as much as they live through life. When a child dies in the U.S., it's really tragic. When it dies in Africa, it's the way of life.

Ugandan women have a tricky way of dealing. They let the sorrow rise in dramatic bursts—an overwhelming cry of loss. Wailing and weeping. And then it stops. Robotically programmed, the moment is suppressed. They return to the cooking fire or to whatever womanly task they feel called to complete. Men react pretty much the same. Brief, tender moments of emotion. Then back to work. Look past

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the smiles and you will see the hard lines of grief carved onto their foreheads. Death touches everyone early and ferociously.

I am a witness of the brazenness of poverty: poor harvests, drought, malaria, lack of potable clean water, no electricity, a girl forced into early marriage, families that can't afford to pay school fees, a severely malnourished child. I am a witness to the injustices of humanity: electoral violence, increased threats to freedom of expression, discrimination against people with disabilities, sexual and gender-based violence, a son lost to child sacrifice, a street child orphaned by AIDS, a whole family wiped out by Lord's Resistance Army rebels. Now I have viscerally experienced the preventable death of an African child.

The priest in my parish once said, "When you experience love, life becomes wonderful". For the short time Grivin was with us, he was loved. He was wonderful. His death and the bereavement that followed showed me that even though Ugandans must soldier on, they do take the time to recognize every life, to honor it properly and grieve for its passing. If they ignored the sorrow and moved on too quickly, I was told, the loss and trauma would desensitize them.

In Africa, there is so much suffering. The wretch of grief

is infuriating. It induces universal feelings of helplessness, selfishness, forsakenness, demoralization and failure. If you think about it for too long, your chest gets heavy and your eyes get strained. To paraphrase Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, if you really knew the full extent of suffering, you would not be able to handle it.

Ugandans do suffer extortionately. I sometimes get really angry when I think about it. Then once again I look to my exemplars, the Ugandans, and do not detect antipathy or rancor in them. What secret do these people possess that makes them doggedly persevere? Long-suffering, patience, God's will? Truthfully, God does give them graces. Through all the drudgery, artifice and depravity the world thrusts at them, they have a peace in their soul. They accept the natural rhythm of life. Of course, life is not completely tragic when you have divine love anchored in your life. •

Magdalene & Grivin



Project Updates

This Month

- Applied for Peace Corps grant funding for the blind school's "Turkey Income, Sanitation & Demonstration Unit". This idea came from a critical need to be more financially self-sufficient while providing a high-demand delicacy for sale, a learning opportunity for the visually-impaired students and a sanitary place to house existing turkeys.
- Heading up to Gulu for Northern Camp GLOW (Girls Leading Our World). I will be a counselor for 10 girls, guiding them on topics of female reproductive rights, sexual health, empowerment, breaking down stereotypes/stigmas, healthy communication, goal-setting and self-discovery. In Uganda, where the majority population is under the age of 30, youth must be encouraged to become civically-engaged changemakers.
- Celebrating World Malaria Day by painting a giant world map and malaria-prevention messages on the school's walls.

May-June

- Helping to set up Madera's village savings and loans association (VSLA) as a solar lighting distributorship for income generation. A locally-based solar company will train them on the product line, marketing and business skills. The VSLA will invest their group savings into purchasing solar-powered lights, lamps and batteries and sell them to villagers and family. It will help the group grow their savings and help meet local power needs. As we have power only 60% of the time, people crave independence from infrequent, high-price electricity.
- Working with Soroti Organizational Development & NGO Network (SODANN...Ugandans love big fancy acronyms) to conducting social entrepreneurship workshops for local NGOs. In addition, we're gearing up for the radio serial drama project to stimulate frank discussion and civic engagement on democratic governance and human rights.

THE KARAMOJONG

My tribe, the Iteso, are the kinsmen of the neighboring Karamojong tribe, who have been responsible for 50 years of deadly cattle rustling and banditry in this region. They are reputed to be violent and "uncivilized", although I believe they are grossly marginalized and misunderstood. It is commonly believed that the Karamojong were supplied with arms by the Ugandan government in an effort to antagonize the anti-establishment Iteso. Before colonialism drew arbitrary district borders and criminal elements infiltrated the region, the Iteso and the Karamojong shared social functions and engaged in barter trade. The customs of the Karamojong are similar to the Masai of Kenya & Tanzania. Adults usually have one bottom tooth removed. Men display short, deep scars below their temple to signify manhood. Animal skin is common dress, women go bare-breasted and hunters drink a cow blood-milk mixture for strength. Today, Karamoja is the most desperately under-developed and famine-blighted region in Uganda.



This epolon (old man) lives 20 minutes from me in a place called Gweri. When a rogue leopard was recently spotted in the area, he sought it out and killed it with his bare hands. He recently received a government commendation for his bravery. That's real.

Please extend, Madam!

The anathema that is Ugandan transport

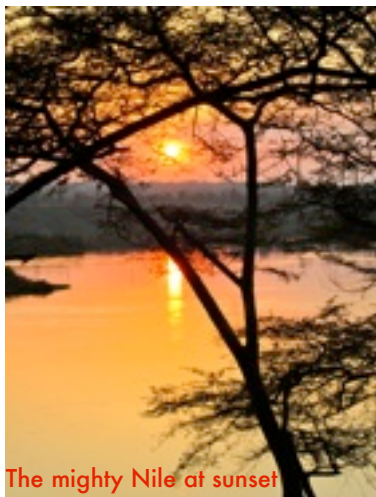
Transportation sucks. Sitting right over the wheel on a giant bus passing over crater-sized potholes at ____ km/hr. Because the speedometer is broken, you aren't sure how fast the bus is traveling—fast enough you swear the front end is lifting off the tarmac. Your butt throbs. Your knees achingly press against the seat in front of you. Crates of small chicks unremittingly chirp beside you. A baby burps up all over your foot. Someone asks, "Please extend, Madam" but you have no more room to move. Ugandan music warbles from the speaker right above you at a decibel level only dogs should be able to hear. The windows are closed so the air is stale and sauna-like. You have to pee really bad although you've been fearfully sipping your water. Your seat mate is talking—but it sounds like yelling—in an indecipherable language into his phone. You are torturously thirsty. Your iPod just died. The beads of sweat collect on your furrowed brow. You look out the window and ask yourself, "Can I safely throw myself out onto the road and escape this?" I come to terms with my own mortality every time I ride public transport.

Want a few stories? Of course you do!

Once, I rode a bus from Nairobi to the Kenya-Uganda border. It should have lasted 8 hours max. It lasted 22 hours. When I asked why we delayed, the bus driver said he was trying to escape from the police.

Another time, I was on a matatu back to site. I was made to sit in a jump seat right next to the door. When it opened, a piece of metal pierced by pinky toe. I couldn't walk properly for 2 weeks and contracted a minor staph infection. Good thing I had my tetanus shot updated!

On the 8 hour bus ride from Soroti to Kampala, I like to sit next to the window. Window = air = survival. There was one time when we traversed a pot hole so cataclysmically large I thought we happened upon a new volcanic caldera. The jolting impact made my air-supply window spiderweb into dozens of cracks. One shard even fell onto the road. I asked the conductor to stop the bus and deal with the problem. He stopped the bus, came over and pushed the rest of the fractured window onto the road. So, for the entire trip, I was left with an un-glassed open window, an unmitigated wind turbine and dirty curtains that stuck to my face because of the gale force.



The mighty Nile at sunset

VIVE LE RAINY SEASON

The insufferable dry heat has let up and our version of spring, called rainy season, has arrived. Uganda has an equatorial climate which means the seasons vacillate between dry and rainy. With the rains come a bounty of ripe mangoes that collect on trees.

Schools kids love to scamper around and throw rocks at the unripe ones. Towards the end of mango season, the roads are littered with piles of rotten fruit covered in feasting flies. After each afternoon downpour, the earth sprouts with more green carpet. The nights are cool and sweat-free which means I do not have to shift between damp and dry sides of the bed all night. This is my favorite time of the year. Ole!



Golden girl

Super Duper Websites

<http://www.signspotting.com/>
<http://textsfromhillaryclinton.tumblr.com/page/2>
<http://other90.cooperhewitt.org/>
<http://www.echoinggreen.org/>
<http://www.africayogaproject.org/>

Rad African Jams

- "My Miss" by Coco Finger
- "Stamina (Remix)" by Eddy Kenzo
- "Pata Pata" by Miriam Makeba
- "Shakara" by Fela Kuti
- "Wombo Lombo" by Angelique Kidjo
- "Somalia" by K'naan
- "Ashawa (Sawa Sawa)" by
- "Lambadina" by Teddy Afro
- "Bella" by Faasi

Actual Ugandan First Names

George Bush
 Gifty Dillis (sounds like a country singer)
 Deo Gracias
 Silver
 Ignatius
 Juventine
 Pious
 Boniface (pronounced Bony Face)
 Erasmus
 Wilberforce
 Nicodemus
 Ebenezer
 Dorcus
 Shadrach

Appreciation is a wonderful thing; it makes what is excellent in others belong to us as well.
 —Voltaire

I wish I had....

- gifts for my community
- art supplies
- posters and pictures of America
- American flag decorations for 4th of July
- educational/family DVDs
- headlamps for the nuns
- magazines for me & the community
- a flash drive with lots of storage
- Crystal Lite powered flavor packets (esp Margarita mix)
- any snacks from Trader Joe's or Whole Foods
- quinoa
- Taco Bell sauce

Mailing Address:

Teacher Amoding
 St. Francis School for the Blind
 P.O. Box 603
 Soroti, Uganda

To deter tampering: Please write only "educational materials for the blind" on the customs form. Write "par avion" on the outside and cover with Christian symbols.