

A letter from Rachel Brown in Kenya

March 14, 2009

To my dear Friends and Family,

Shurie and I were crammed in the back of the bus with our knees up to our chests and sweat dripping from our noses. I could smell the leftover ugali on the breath of the man in the front who was preaching his 20-bob-a-pop pills to a hundred glazed, tired eyes. The heat was suffocating, and I would turn my head towards the cracked window for a breath of dirty but cool Nairobi air. The less often I turned to feel the coolness in my lungs, the sweeter the air seemed.

There was a man beside me, grey, stretched, contemplative. His mouth was tight, but his eyes were deep like pools of black water, still and unaffected. He was so deep in thought that he must not have felt the same heat I was slowly dying in; he wore a long sleeved checkered shirt, a wool sweater and a bucket hat. His hands fumbled over the paper, but he wasn't reading. We didn't see each other, and we didn't talk.

It was then that the eight young men standing in the aisle ducked, as the air grew tense and silent. The bus slowed to creep by 15 policemen as it carefully maneuvered around the yellow road spikes. I turned and saw the smirking cop raise his hand to flag us down. As the driver hopped out of the bus and paid the police off, the old man beside me shook his head, slowly, slowly.

"It's just money in the pocket. They don't want any trouble, you see. We would be forced to alight, and we would be taken to police holding cells," he paused and looked at me. "This is Kenya." I couldn't respond. I never saw him again, but I will never forget his honesty or his sadness.

These trips back and forth between Nairobi and Gatundu are spiritual for me, filled with thousands of inner conversations. There is something about the physical move from the filth of the city to purity of the village that bathes my soul.

Maybe it is the nature of matatus (small buses), but as soon as I board I start praying and can't stop until I get off. I count my sins, I count my blessings, and I thank God for all that I've seen and heard. I list my experiences and reflect on the frustrations of the day. And when I reach my destination, I stop and move on.

Recently I've been moving from prayer to prayer instead of moment to moment, or day to day. And most of the time, I don't even know what to pray for or if I am being heard. I mean, yes. Ultimately I know I am being heard, but I feel rather alone in the depths of my mind. Have you ever prayed to God without direction? Without knowing why? Have you ever prayed without words?

The other night I had a dream that I was with my family back at home. We had just been reunited in the airport, when my teeth began to fall out. I was so worried and confused, and when I smiled at my sister, she said "Rachel, now you are beautiful, just like Maureen!"

I really love those dream books; the ones that list all of the things you could possibly dream about and define exactly what they mean in your dream. Unfortunately, the last time I was in a Barnes and Noble, I guess I didn't see 101 Dreams and What They Really Mean as a worthwhile purchase. Anyways, because I lack such a book, I have to interpret the insane workings of my mind on my own.

Maureen is my neighbor, my Kenyan “mother” of sorts, and my best friend. She is exactly the person I wish I could be. She is beautiful and happily married with three amazing children. She radiates kindness, laughter, and love and has a heart that is like an unpopable balloon. When she sings, you get the gooses and when she laughs, you want to laugh with her. And, holy crow! That woman knows her Bible!

Back to my point: when Maureen smiles, she has two teeth missing on each side. So, this is where I would have opened 101 Dreams and What They Really Mean to the section entitled “teeth.”

When I first came to Kenya, I was sure that I was called here to be a teacher. Six months later, I’m starting to see a different story. I teach, yes, but I no longer see that as my calling. If I were to summarize my calling in one statement, I’d say I was called here to learn. I was brought here to meet Maureen, and to learn from her beauty, character, love, and faith. And now that I’ve met her, I want to be just like her. I want to smile like Maureen does.

Is that enough? Is it enough to say that “I was called to Kenya to make friends with a woman” and leave it at that?

The funny thing about callings is that they grow and change as you grow and change. Today, that is why I am here. But for tomorrow, I cannot say. And as I teach my students about nouns, articles, myths, and haikus, I always try to end my classes with Maureen’s smile. Maybe one day, they will see it like I do.

As we draw closer and closer to August, I ask that you keep all of the Young Adult Volunteers in your daily prayers. We are a tough crowd, but as we grow and learn, and even as we change, your prayers are needed! Thank you for your continued support, and God bless!

Peace in Christ,

Rachel

Visit Rachel’s blogspot for more updates:

www.rachelbrownkenya.blogspot.com.