

Learning to Embrace the Unknown

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In April, I was in an airport in Nairobi, Kenya; a massive downpour was happening outside. The heavy rains had already flooded many of the city's informal neighborhoods, with hundreds of homes and businesses lost to the rushing water. That night, the rain also took out the power in the airport. I and a crowd of other passengers were waiting – in the dark – for the power to come back on so we could go through the security line to our gates. There were no announcements or information. People looked at their phones or just stood, shifting weight from one foot to the other. At that moment, a text message came through on my phone, “Hey, my friend is going to Ivory Coast for work in a few weeks; could they talk to you about traveling in Africa?” I chuckled to myself; with the lights in the airport terminal still off, I was living the first lesson of travel, which is to just roll with it, roll with whatever happens, because you can’t control the power in the airport or the power grid in Kenya.

Today, I want to share some of what I’ve learned from my regular trips to Eastern Africa, which are part of my work with Spirit in Action; what I’ve learned about going with the flow, dancing with unknowing, and grounding in the familiar in the midst of change.

For the past 17 years, I’ve been the Executive Director of Spirit in Action, an international granting organization. We receive donations from individuals and families in North America and give grants to grassroots organizations in Eastern Africa, including Kenya, Malawi, Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. This year, Spirit in Action is partnering with 28 grassroots organizations. Each organization received a grant of \$1,000-\$12,000 USD to implement programs that address their top priorities for building thriving community, implementing education, human rights, food and financial security, and vocational skills programs. (One of the groups is the UU-connected group Flaming Chalice International, which I shared about last year.) On my trips to Eastern Africa, typically 3-4 weeks long, I visit the grant partners, see their progress, and help them plan for the next steps of their work. The days are long and contain countless unknowns.

One of the most frequent things I’ve had to practice in my work and travels is learning to let go and be okay with not knowing, as I had to do with the power outage at the airport. (And practice is the keyword here, but I’ve developed this skill painfully over the years. Believe me, on my first time in Kenya, when I was waiting on an empty airstrip in Meru National Park, with no cell phone, for a flight that was three hours late, I was not “chill” about it.)

Last year in Bujumbura, Burundi, it became abundantly clear that timing is different when a country is going through a severe fuel crisis. Each afternoon, hundreds of people stood in meandering lines waiting for one of the limited seats on the public

transit buses. The buses, after all, also had to struggle to get fuel to operate, and so, many fewer buses were in operation on any given day. The streets were lined with people walking home, opting to walk long distances rather than wait in line. I quickly realized that I couldn't expect anything to happen "on time" (in a Western sense) when getting around was so difficult and out of everyone's control.

My colleague and travel companion Mwibutsa – a UU minister from Burundi who now lives in Ottawa and is a member of the Spirit in Action African Advisory Board – was lucky enough to get us a private vehicle for getting around to visit the six grant partners in Burundi. But we still had to scrounge for gas, and our driver, Yannick, often waited hours in lines at the gas station; sometimes, after all that waiting, he'd come back unsuccessful because the tanks at the station ran out of gas before he got to the front of the line. One travel day, Mwibutsa got a lead on a friend of a friend who had a private gas tank. Now, getting the gas from this businesswoman was not a mere business transaction. I knew it might take a while, but I also knew enough to realize I could have no idea how long it'd take. Yannick and I stayed in the car (me working on a blog post about our site visits the previous day) while Mwibutsa went in to chat with the woman, talking about each other's work, asking after their mutual connections, talking about life, and then – finally – discussing the business of buying some fuel. All in all, the "fuel stop" was over an hour long. A favorite bumper sticker that I saw in a Kenyan taxi years ago proclaimed, "No hurry in Africa." And that is one of my mantras while I'm there, and also here when I need to calm my racing mind. My Kenyan colleague Wambui often says Hakuna Matata, no worries, when I'm stressing about time.

(Jack Owuer, one of the community leaders we traveled with in Kenya, had a good attitude about it when we left Nairobi three hours later than expected (all for good reason!). He laughed, resigned to the reality of time, and quipped that Kenyans are always ahead of schedule because they're three hours ahead of London time!)

(I had a chance to practice this rolling with unplanned timing on Friday when I took Black Urbanism TO's walking tour of Little Jamaica and RastaFest. It was scheduled for one hour and ended up going a little longer than two hours! It took longer because when we popped into the barber shop, the chairperson of the neighbourhood business association got to talking about the history of the area. It was way too interesting to wish he'd hurry up so we could get back on schedule.)

During many of my trips, I find myself saying the Serenity prayer (commonly used in 12-step programs), "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

The Serenity Prayer is very helpful for me in the context of the congregation, too. The transition in ministers, the many goodbyes we've said in the past two years, and the uncertainty of what is coming next for us on so many fronts can be disorienting. Repeating the Serenity Prayer, I am reminding myself that there are things that I can control and that are mine to do, and there are things that are out of my control, and it is

in my best interest to align myself with that reality. What would it be like for us to collectively embrace acceptance of what is?

Back on the bumpy roads of Eastern Africa ... when we finally arrive at our destination, there are often dances and songs of welcome. This is the traditional way to greet visitors, and it is a joyful celebration. If I'm already feeling stressed from being "late," or I'm tired from a long day or focused on my meeting agenda, I can feel annoyed when the dancing goes on for a long time.

When I'm aware, I can laugh at myself for being annoyed when I'm getting the privilege of experiencing such beauty and openness. After all, the core reason for the visits is to make time and space for sitting (and dancing) with people and building connections with the people and organizations we're partnering with. It's not about dropping in for an hour and leaving. The in-person site visits between me and the community organizations make us real to each other, which makes future conversations and collaborations easier, so it's always worth the time spent dancing.

There's a breath meditation podcast that I often listen to on my trips. A line in the meditation that is a welcome and needed reminder is: "If it is long, let it be long. If it is short, let it be short. Let it be natural; let it be normal." The meditation is talking about the breath, but it is helpful for any situation when I'm trying to control that which is impossible to control.

There are parallels again for us in the congregation. As much as we want to, we cannot control the construction timeline; "if it is long, let it be long. If it is short, let it be short." While we wait, and while we are mostly online this fall, I invite us to really savour the in-person time we have together. We'll have in-person services on the first Sunday of the month at the Nia Center on Oakwood, and we'll gather on the third Thursday evenings for Social Thursdays at St. Matt's on St Clair. (Owen Smith and I are hosting a board game night at the November Social Thursday!) And there will be other opportunities too, which we'll announce as they're planned. These are chances to boost our connections and carry us through the weeks when we are online.

One of Spirit in Action's partners working with Burundian refugees in Rwanda is the Forum pour la Mémoire Vigilante (FMV). When I visited them last year, Ferdinand, one of the volunteer leaders, told me about their motivation for starting the project, saying, "We're tired of feeling vulnerable all the time." The group is a collective of 29 refugee families consisting of about 120 people. Mostly, they left Burundi in 2015, when there was an episode of political turmoil, during which the government cracked down on anyone they thought might oppose their leadership. In that time, almost half a million Burundians fled to safety in neighboring Rwanda, Tanzania, and Malawi. Now, it's been almost ten years of living in a different country, where there are regulations against them getting jobs, and the official language of business is English instead of French, making it difficult for Burundians to be hired for jobs they're otherwise qualified for. The refugees want to feel grounded in the area and add their skills to benefit the local community. They're eager to establish stability, understandably.

With a Spirit in Action grant, FMV members built modern pig pens with a cement floor and trough to catch the urine for fertilizer for their gardens. They purchased three female pigs. When I visited last year, one of the pigs had just given birth to five very adorable piglets. The other two pigs were pregnant, and there was hope they'd give birth soon.

In addition to being an income-generating business, the pigs also provide the families with purpose. It gives shape to their day and gets them together for social support and camaraderie.

This spring, FMV shared the sad news that a flu had gone through the area and killed all their pigs but one. It was a heartbreaking setback when things were starting to look hopeful. I was impressed with Ferdinand's resilience and acceptance when relaying the news. Rather than be destroyed and give up when things didn't go as expected, the FMV members were ready to try it again.

Another part of FMV's work is holding events for the Burundian children who have only ever known Rwanda as home. They teach them the traditional drumming of Burundi and the songs of home. For these families, shared culture and gathering together with people who have seen them through many transitions is grounding.

In a message to the congregation in March 2023, I mentioned my practice of bringing a grounding object, a touchstone, with me whenever I travel. I have a small metal cat figurine that lives on my desk at home. I bring it with me, and when I arrive in a new location, I put it on the bedside table, which helps me land there. (That cat has been in 23 different locations so far this year.) When I get back home, I return the cat to my desk and, in that way, land back here. Having this ritual gives me a way to ground wherever I am, and it brings something familiar into the unknown. In that testimony, I suggested that we become touchstones to one another in this time of congregational transition. We can be that familiar stability for each other.

On my site visits, I never know what my accommodations will be like. In my life in general, I am a planner, and there have been times when I've tried to control my accommodations, but since most hotels or guesthouses don't have websites and I can never tell exactly how far something that looks close on a map actually is, I usually rely on my colleagues to arrange the places we'll stay. Which means it's all a mystery! In Burundi, I stayed in a newly built Flaming Chalice International guesthouse, which miraculously had running water in a tiny rural village; a monastery where the monks graciously welcomed me; and a 4-star hotel. In Kenya, the rain flooded my room in a Catholic conference center, and the bugs were plentiful everywhere. In Uganda, I can always assume the power will go out on the regular.

To deal with the uncertainty and lack of control over what any night will be like, I've started asking myself, "What is the simplest or the smallest thing that I need to be comfortable?" When I can't get everything I desire, what will be enough to satisfy me?

Recently, the answer has been: good facewash and face lotion, along with my eye cover and ear plugs. Your answers would likely be different, but with just a few simple items, I know I'll be able to be mostly comfortable almost anywhere – or at least I'll be okay for a night! (And then when I get the chance to take a hot water splash bath, or can get some laundry done, I am super extra pleased!)

For our congregation, with our extended season of online services, when getting on Zoom one more time sounds less than ideal, I invite you to ask yourself, what is one simple thing that will bring comfort during this hour online?

In a way, it's all about how I look at it. I could say that during my travels with Spirit in Action, our meetings frequently start late and run long. Travel always takes longer than expected (with traffic, fuel stops, bad roads, flat tires, etc.), and meals take a minimum of one and a half hours, even when I think that they might—just this once—be shorter.

But to look at it from another perspective, meetings start when everyone arrives and take as long as we can give them so that everyone has a chance to share; travel time is a good time to catch my breath, post to social media, or gaze out at the countryside; and lingering over a meal is worth the time it takes. If it is long, let it be long. Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. Be here now.

In this in-between time of interim spaces and interim ministers, and the disjointed reality of being a hybrid congregation, we have plenty of chances to roll with what is, and enjoy the time we have together, to find purpose and belonging in our Journey Groups and committees, and to find comfort and connection in the rituals of Sunday service - lighting candles, sharing our Joys and Sorrows, and singing familiar songs. We can be touchstones to one another, finding strength and grounding by spending time together, knowing each other, and working together.

As Pema Chödrön reminds us, "Nothing is static or fixed; that all is fleeting and impermanent, is the first mark of existence. It is the ordinary state of affairs. Everything is in process." And so it is. Amen.