

Marley's Ghost: Reflections from a Kenyan Refugee Camp

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I visited a refugee camp on Saturday. In the disputed Kenyan elections of 2007, tribes and parties used rape and murder to make their point, and tens of thousands were displaced. They are refugees in their own country, and they live in squalor. Their tents consist of crude tarps and trash bags tied together, allowing the rats to crawl across them as they sleep. Kids walk three kilometers just to gather water from a river polluted with human waste. Girls on their periods are forced to miss school or reuse sanitary napkins until they fall apart. Girls not even in their teens sneak out to the truck stops at night to put a price on their bodies. Most of the fathers were either killed in the election violence or simply left when they realized they couldn't support their family. AIDS runs rampant, yet the stigma attached to it still ensures that mothers with it are ostracized along with their kids. And this is just one of the many camps and slums I've visited or worked at in my first week here.

I've seen poverty before, but never this concentrated...and never this accepted.

And yet...even in a refugee camp, the kids still laugh. Even in the slums, the mothers still sing to their children. Even in the orphanage where I live, there's so much pure, unadulterated love that I've rarely seen kids so happy. And this is what sticks with me the most.

A few years ago I wrote from Asia that I had traveled there expecting the exotic, only to find the universal. I've since come to realize that that universality is what stands out the most on my travels; it's what I'm always the most excited to discover. It's what ensures that I never lose sight of the fact that, as Jacob Marley's ghost cries to the Scrooge in all of us, *humanity* is our business. The common welfare is our business.

As I've mentioned before, after I was stabbed the sergeant handling the case told me caustically, "New York will harden you." Yet since then I've made an active effort to never let that happen, in New York or anywhere else. I want to know the poverty, the violence, the disease and the pain that infect the world, but I never want to accept it; I never want to convince myself that "that's just the way it is," even if doing so would help me sleep better at night. I need to continue having faith that the cruelties and inequities in the world can be beaten back by simple acts of humanity, whether it's helping saw and hammer together a school for refugees with thirty other volunteers, or simply smiling at a stranger who needs a little comfort. I need to believe that we can change the world, one person at a time, a thousand times a day. This is what keeps me going, here and as a teacher. Some days I feel overwhelmed by the amount of work to be done, the Sisyphean tasks that keep presenting themselves, but to quote Camus, "the struggle itself...is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

That's why I can laugh alongside them, even in a refugee camp.