

DOES POVERTY AFFECT CREATIVITY?????



Nairobi is on the other side of the world, just about right underneath us, from our perspective! When it is day here, it is night in Nairobi. When it is night there, it is day here.

Last fall I was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit Nairobi in Kenya and Kampala in Uganda, along with a small Canadian delegation who were helping form an International Community Peacebuilding Institute with a regional centre in East Africa. My participation was directly linked to the Enderby and District Community Play (which I initiated in 1998) – now almost ancient history, but still quoted as an example of the arts in community peacebuilding here. (That project has had many long term outcomes including many personal ones: I find myself working on my assumptions – an endless process, both personally and in my community arts practice – always trying to spot the assumption, turn them over, and find new ways of looking at things.)

The day before leaving, I was in a little shop in Enderby, looking for tiny Canadian

memorabilia to stuff into my backpack. The shop owner, when she found out I was going to Africa, put her hand over her heart, and looked at me with a somewhat stricken expression. “It may be very hard for you”, she said kindly. It took me a moment to realize that she must be referring to the image of extreme poverty that the mention of Africa brings to many people’s imaginations. (For me it was more something to do with zebras.) I reassured her that I had once before witnessed extreme poverty. (I had visited Guatemalan refugee camps on the southern Chiapas border in 1993.)

My travel companion, Dorothy Christian (a filmmaker living in Vancouver and member of the Splats’in Band, my neighbours) and I were welcomed to be part of the Institute meetings. However Dorothy and I had a whole other agenda as well. We were certain that we would be able to find some interesting Arts projects in Nairobi, and hoped that we could cram something in! In 1994 I was involved in a series of puppetry projects for AIDS awareness in Vancouver, related to Oxfam Canada’s involvement with “Pup-

pets Against AIDS” in South Africa. After a few fruitless efforts on Dorothy’s part, I searched for “Puppets Against AIDS” and somehow chanced upon the “ActAlive” network, through which I was given a few email contacts engaged in the arts as a medium for social change. Almost immediately there were responses, from complete strangers, requesting that Dorothy and I visit them while in Nairobi! I hoped that some might materialize...

On the first day, Monday, we went to the National Park that is just outside Nairobi where we saw zebras and giraffes and wildebeests, proving to ourselves that we really were in Africa. On Tuesday we were part of the meetings that took place at PHARP (Peace, Healing and Reconciliation Programme) who were our hosts, with three other Canadians: Anne Goodman and Carolyn Webb, from the University of Toronto’s Transformative Learning Centre, part of OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education); and Jennifer Ball from Guelph. There we met members of PHARP Nairobi, as well as Anastase Rugirango and Julienne from PHARP, Rwanda, whose peace building efforts on a person-to-person level a decade after the genocide are awe-inspiring and heart-warming.

Meanwhile Jackie, the receptionist at PHARP, was able to line up all the meetings we’d hoped for, and more! We soon had appointments with Jimmy of Artscool, Rachel of Voluntary Youth Philanthropist, Fred of Kibera Community Youth Programme, Osano Ochieng of Penge Productions, Nyumbani Childrens Home for AIDS orphans, Isaiah Olale of CHAPS puppetry program – all in three days! (And by the end of the week there was also an appointment with Galaxy Players.) There went my assumption that things might not work out, and that we wouldn’t be able to contact people – they all had cell phones as well as email!

My mind had begun to form a picture, based on some group of assumptions, of these people that I’d never met before in a place I’d never been to. I can still picture them: Jimmy Ouma, Rachel Wambui, Fred Ouko... as I imag-

ined they were before I met them...

On Wednesday we had our first rendezvous, with Jimmy Ouma. I was completely surprised at his appearance! (I had imagined him about my age – just over the hill, skinny, even a bit shriveled but optimistically spirited...) I was surprised by his youth but mostly by a quality which I had never before encountered – as Dorothy and I agreed afterwards, he glowed! Jimmy launched right into telling us about his passion for the arts as a means of communication, and his concerns, and personal research and efforts, regarding HIV/AIDS awareness in his village of origin. We found out that many people live in Nairobi, but it is not their home – home is usually a village, even after years away. And as there are 42 distinct tribes in Kenya, there are as many languages. Kiswahili is the common tongue. Jimmy was speaking to us in his third language, English. Dorothy, a Secwepemc-Okanagan woman without the language, and I, an Englishwoman living in Secwepemc territory, became aware that most of the people around us were speakers of intact aboriginal languages!

The same afternoon, we had another meeting: with Rachel Wambui, of Volunteer Youth Philanthropists. Again I was way off in my assumption that she would be large, older, short-sighted and benevolent. She was young, with a million long thin tresses, and sharp sideways looking eyes that clearly did not let anything pass unnoticed. We asked her to take us to where she worked, so we all took a taxi to Kangemi, a slum district where she lives and works. The word slum, we discovered, was a totally acceptable word, to describe a frank reality. Just as we arrived, a huge crowd was gathering, to see an impromptu theatre presentation to educate people on the upcoming constitutional referendum. Rachel brought us up to date on Kenyan politics.

In her tiny office (which serves also as an “internet café”) we met two more young people, silent Susan and wise Wachira –both of whom had a similar “glow” that we had noticed with Jimmy Ouma! Rachel and her friends organize, among many other things, a Peace Camel Cara-

van – starting with a performance of about 50 youth from Kangemi, they get a hold of some camels (!), and go on a tour of villages around the country. Each village they visit puts on a cultural presentation for the Peace Camel Caravan. Linked by a theme, the presentations promote discussion on a community level, while promoting cultural participation on a large scale. We spent quite a lot of time looking over the puppets I had brought, which we found were deemed “useful” by everyone we met! As night fell (and it falls fast near the equator) we went on a quick walk. We passed so many lives. We even passed a funeral procession. When I close my eyes I can still see all those people walking, walking, walking.

We were told again and again about African time – that things would not happen punctually so we needn't worry about the clock. (Hmmm, Where have I heard this before, and found it to be wrong? “Indian time”...) All of these people were perfectly punctual, even early, even though they had traveled from who knows where to get to us. This was amazing to me, as my understanding of the meetings that were lined up on the email, from the other side of the world was very vague!

Next morning it was arranged that Mr. Fredrick Ouko, Director of Kibera Community Youth Programme, would pick us up at 9 at the PHARP office. I had seen the web page of KCYP. It contains several pages, tells of several programmes, and is written in a very clear, knowledgeable language of empowerment. I could clearly picture Mr. Fredrick Ouko, an aging, slightly portly gentleman, a touch tired but still with a bit of a twinkle, and he'd pick us up in his little car and take us to the large if shabby community centre building where the offices were, and where Mr Ouko and others held activities for young people.

When we arrived at the PHARP office that morning, Fred was waiting for us. I couldn't believe my eyes, I had been so wrong ! He was the youngest person we'd met yet, and with probably the brightest expression I'd ever seen. I had

to prevent myself from popping. And of course he had no car, he had walked from Kibera, which we had by then learned is probably the largest slum district in East Africa, where 800,000 to 1,000,000 people live, with no services.

We went with Fred in a taxi to the community centre. After following some busy trafficked roads, the taxi turned in onto a bumpy clay dirt path full of people and we were in Kibera. We stopped and got out at a lonely tree stump by a shack that boasted a tiny hand painted sign, Kibera Community Youth Programme. This was it.

In that shack of no more than 10ft by 20 ft, we met with the youth of KCYP. Fred invited us to sit down on a bench. Gradually others filtered in. (They were not late, we were – I realize now they had surely been there earlier waiting for us!) It was dark, as there was no electricity. I had to strain my eyes to see the intent faces, looking at us frankly, and to notice the incredibly varied and beautiful bone structure, unfamiliar to me (a puppet maker, I notice these things!) and surely representing many of the tribes of Kenya! I had to strain my ears to hear the quiet and quick melodic speech of the Kenyans (I, a soft spoken person, felt I was yelling), above the din of the life going on just outside.

After a quick introduction from Fred, we went around the room, and each person introduced themselves. Many had a function, of program officer for example; each clearly had a voice. Dorothy said it reminded her of the experience of being in a traditional longhouse. I felt I was in the presence of some of the world's Wise leaders. The KCYP mandate of equality of gender, of religion, of culture, and of disability was clear in the room. We were told of “The Uncommon School” – although they do not have the opportunity to go to university, they do not have to live in poverty of the mind – and so they get together to study philosophy and history and literature. Every single person spoke, extremely articulately, about the program. (How can anyone be so articulate? I wondered. They are close to their issues, Dorothy said later.) Plans were well underway

for a large-scale Arts and Sports event for World AIDS Day, entitled “Keeping the Promise”.

More and more young people filed in, and suddenly it was announced that they would present one of their plays for us! There we were, in that tiny hut, with an intense and compelling story played out in front of us, in a language spoken so quickly it could have been English or Kiswahili and by then we didn't know the difference; the room rang out with the chorus and the drum.

On a board against the wall at one end of the room was a dense schedule of the day and of upcoming events, highlighting “2 days countdown to the Great Debate: Does Poverty Affect Creativity?” Oh I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall listening to that debate! But unfortunately we were booked solid with other meetings... I asked Fred to please keep track of it for me, as I am sure it will be of interest and

hugely thought-provoking. Here is the (unedited) account he sent:

Poverty hinders Creativity!

This is a motion that was scheduled for a discussion between young people who are members of Kibera Community Youth Programme, through the uncommon school project: an initiative within KCYP that seeks to improve literacy levels of youth living in the slums, outside the schooling system. The project concentrates on promoting a culture of reading to enable young people break from the yoke of poverty of mind which then hinders their personal and community development.

By giving skills on public speaking, it enables youth to communicate their issues effectively to any given audience without missing an inch of what they purpose to pass out. It also



helps improve self-esteem and be able to talk in front of people.

On the Great Debate! We sought to find out youth perspectives on poverty in general and if they think it's a major hindrance to creativity. This was purposeful in the regard that; most of the activities undertaken at KCYP are arts oriented and creativity is central. This served as a learning lesson to what youth think and helped us inculcate their views in the general planning of projects based on the perspectives both negative and positive; we are working to improve them.

Below is a summary of the whole discussion though in point form:

Motion proposers:

- A poor man concentrates on routine tasks like bringing food on the table and has nothing in mind after that.
- Resources are required to support creativity, an element limited in the poor man's world.
- Poor people are pressured to think in a particular direction thus, no freedom to exercise their brain power.
- Poor people are busy-bodies with no spare time to taste the upper latitudes of reasoning.
- Creativity requires a certain level of skills which are too expensive for the poor man to afford.
- Efforts of poor people are directed to copy on what others have already achieved thus lacking originality.
- Most poor people fear trying/putting their ideas into practice, something that makes their ideas intangible (they are pessimistic)
- Low self-esteem professed by poor people hinders their reasoning as they perceive themselves as inferior beings.

Motion opposers:

- A problem pushes poor people to think solution wise.
- Poverty is creativity by itself as it compels one to survive, something that calls for constant thinking/reasoning.
- Economically, poor people spend cautiously whereby, alternative cheaper ways of satisfying a

need are considered or invented.

- A poor man's creativity is much practical as it is tailored towards meeting a definite problem unlike the rich.
- Dreams of a poor man are the fuel to creativity; they find it motivational to be creative unlike the rich.
- Pressing environment gives a poor man greater responsibility and thus more creative he/she has to be based on the decisions that have to be taken.

Based on the points given above, the motion of the day won due to the quality of points and arguments presented. Guess what!, it was just a motion and it all depended on the participants from each side. I however believe that if it was true, then I would not be doing what I am trying to do, lots of creative guys exists in the slum and they refuse to lie low just because of poverty.

Written by:

Fredrick Ouko

After the presentation, we were taken for a walking tour, with Laura, KCYP Assistant Director; Andrew, Special Programmes Officer; and Kepha, a poet. We walked through the narrow mud streets strewn with plastic, the true remains of our civilization. Again I strained to hear every word, while I tried at the same time to see what it was that we were walking past, confused about whether to avert my eyes from the people whose neighborhood I had entered, or to acknowledge each person with eye-to-eye contact, as they were my hosts. Kepha, who will run for election, explained that Kibera is not on the map – the government recognizes it as officially a forest on the outside of Nairobi; therefore there are no government services to the 800,000 to 1,000,000 inhabitants.

Our destination: a spot on the railway which provided a unique viewpoint. On the left was a golf course, on the right the sprawling sea of Kibera's rusty tin roofs as far as the eye could see. Laura told us with wry humour that the golf course

is watered every evening, with clean water.

As we walked through Kibera, the city that does not even exist, I thought of the kind shopkeeper in Enderby. I asked Laura if she thought people here are sad. She said, "Some are sad, some are happy, most are sometimes one or the other or both!" When I told her that I thought people from the "First World" would assume, from a photograph, that people here are sad, she answered, "It's them that are sad, because they're looking at it, if looking at it makes them sad."

"I came away from Kibera feeling that the world is upside down," I wrote in an email to Fred on my return. "The world is upside down; it's up to us to bring it back to normal," he replied.

Article Submitted by Cathy Stubington, Runaway Moon Theatre, Enderby, B.C., Canada and Fredrick Ouko, Kibera Youth Community Programmes, Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya

Another (unedited) article submitted by Fredrick Ouko follows:

Empowering Kibera community through Arts.

In one of the largest slums of Sub-Saharan Africa, you will meet a group of young talented and dedicated artists knit together through an agency known as: Creative Art Promotions (CAPS), a project of Kibera Community Youth Programme (KCYP).

This is unthought-of idea, people are battling with means of surviving yet this energetic team of 20 youth have given their lives to enlightening the community on various social issues through the use of community theatre.

One of our recent projects was centered around community sensitization on stigma reduction and positive living after getting testing to know ones' HIV status. This was one of the successful projects undertaken in partnership with Population Services International (PSI).

Sensitive topics such as cross-generational relations were also handled and the prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV/AIDS.

There are signs of remarkable enlightenment of the community towards the social issues tackled using community theatre inform of songs, poems, narrations and short plays.

The group has engaged in efforts to sharpen their skills where they managed to get a volunteer from Winchester University who offered a three and half month training in Theatre for Development skills covering some aspects of art of improvisation and community participation in characterization of the plays made around a particular social issue. The University has shown interest of sending two students in February 2006 to continue with the same program with a view of making the participants to be trainers of trainers (ToTs).

CAPS considers this to be a real empowerment and a boost in their community work, and are now looking into ways of incorporating trainings to further enhance the pool of youth using TFD skills for community development.

We will be finding ways of partnering with like-minded organizations in a bid of finding necessary support towards the scaling up of this wonderful project. We are looking into ways of making arts; an avenue towards finding sustainable livelihoods for youth who are the majority of the unemployed populations making the largest statistics of the people living in object poverty and thus at high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

All of our community projects are not funded, we'll be more than happy to enter into beneficial partnerships and funding arrangements for the success of the planned projects.

We are proud to have organized a youth-focused World AIDS Day 2005 whose theme was; "Stop AIDS. Keep the promise." This was attended with many youth groups and stakeholders including the World Bank, Kenya.

Some of the actions picked from the event have led to music recording for a number of youth who participated and won the 1st-3rd positions. CAPS sees a need to organize the youth talents within Kibera for proper and effective nurturing coupled with promotions for them to reap from

their talents in bid to reduce poverty inline with the MDGs.

We are focusing on fundraising for setting up a music recording studio that will enable the youth from Kibera to record their music cheaply and access a vast niche of market that shall facilitate flow of income for their personal development and that of the community. This is a shared dream and we are keen to link up with partners who can assist in seeing that it is actualized for the benefit of youth in Kibera slums.

We'll also be looking into possibilities of setting up a multimedia studio that shall assist us to record the plays and put them into DVD`s, CD for wider distribution to realize income for the sustainability our programs and the participating youth.

There are plans to hold a Kibera Culture Week in August this year, this will enable us scout for talents that young people posses and be in apposition to market them for the sole purpose of a finding a decent form of livelihood for the participants. It is our belief that, there are people and organizations of goodwill out there who shall respond to our call of partnership to assist us in breaking this vicious circle of poverty through arts.

At CAPS, we believe that; arts are the only way left to go if we want genuine and effective community development. Harnessing the various talents from young people in the slums will assist in making it a dream come true.

We must fight poverty with any weapon at our disposal; the creativity commanded by youth is something to rally behind if we are indeed concerned with the future.

We call any person interested working in partnership with us to contact us for discussions on the same.

Fredrick Ouko

Co-Director,

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