The Universal Village of Women

Discovering Sisterhood in Ghana

By Robin Enright

A circle of women are dancing underneath a mahogany tree, undulating freely, clapping their hands and stamping their feet in the red dusty dirt, wearing bright, beautiful, hand-made batik outfits with wrapped turbans on top of their majestic heads. The Ghanian women in Kologu, a village in northern Ghana, have features that sing of eternity. Deep and dark crevasses outline their eyes and there is an ethereal beauty in their movement that eerily balances me between the present moment experiencing their lives in a village without plumbing and minimal electricity, where the schoolrooms burst at eighty students per room without any windows to open and close, and my contemporary life in Colorado, where I can turn on air conditioning should I get too hot, or let the tap run until the water is warm enough for my shower.

I am in Ghana as a journalist and photographer compliments of Routes to Africa (*routestoafrica.org*), a nonprofit that my dear friend Chris Bierbrier founded to help improve the lives of children in Bolgatanga by providing them with a secondary education. To date, 24 students have matriculated thanks to her efforts.

I have spent most of this trip shell-shocked and destabilized. I am also embarrassed. I left my hometown of Boulder excited and ready to strike out on an adventure and embrace a new experience. I left to the sounds of friends and family saying, "Have a great time," and instead all I've done is wish for home. I feel lost here without my usual routine, comforts, and connections.

We arrived via car, accompanied by our host, Donald Amuah, who is Chris's contact in northern Ghana. We have spent the day visiting students who have directly benefited from the efforts of Routes to Africa and touring Donald's homestead in Kologu. Donald is the respected elder of the village, and the man whom villagers turn to for advice.

As we step from the SUV, the women's celebratory mood intensifies and, when we move toward them, I am grateful for my oversized sunglasses because I am startled to tears by the joy in the air for reasons I continue striving to emotionally unpack and understand. I longed to climb the magnificent and gnarly mahogany tree in front of me to observe unencumbered, to not be a part of this at all, wishing I was invisible, and I begin to see that this is a large part of who I am, what I am—this woman who does not always jump in with abandon and who needs to watch, understand, and feel safe before she can participate, though she wishes she could just let go and stop fighting herself. I do sometimes feel I fight against myself, perhaps against my authentic soul, the part of me who longs to put on a colorful skirt and sway her hips and sing to strangers while looking into their eyes without fear. I remember how I took salsa lessons after my marriage collapsed and how my instructor would implore me to "feel the music, just feel the lovely rhythm," and how I was only able to do that in the privacy of my own home unencumbered by another's expectation or observance.

The women carry two plastic chairs over their heads toward us and place them on the dusty and tree root-covered ground and gesture for us to sit. They continue to dance, their song slowly fading, before the greetings begin once again as they come to us one-by-one and graciously bow, taking our hands in theirs as they smile. My body rebels against remaining seated as they stand and make their way around us, feeling that this greeting is subservient and an undeserved gift, but it is the way respect and welcome are demonstrated in the northern part of Ghana. One woman—her face lined with canyons and punctuated with crooked and damaged teeth but her eyes

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playfully sparkling—points to the blue beaded bracelet on my right wrist. I cannot understand what she is saying, but she motions over and over again and I become concerned that I have somehow offended her with my jewelry choice. I wear blue beads around my wrist for the tactile comfort they provide, and cannot understand why this concerns her until I turn to Donald, and ask, "What is she saying? I don't understand," and he speaks to her in their native dialect and then turns to me with a smile. "My sister is saying she likes your bracelet and you should give it to her," he says. "She is joking with you." I am relieved. I smile at her and I do not give her my bracelet—though, today as I write this, I wish I had.

But like so many of my moments in Africa, I am caught off guard, my processing power slowed and my ability to respond delayed and, as I will discover when I return home, I walk through most of this experience in culture shock, in a bit of other-worldly drift, not feeling the ground beneath my feet. I sense the reality of death here, and it's not due to the physical struggles I see everywhere, struggles that at home are effortless and thoughtless privileges, like transportation, WiFi, trash disposal, clean water, or hygiene. I feel in many ways that I have died here, knowing that who I was before this trip is gone. I have been stripped of creature comforts and familiar people and the ease of my life, and this has had the unexpected result