

Chapel Talk
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As Mina and other members of M dorm would love to explain to you, I'm not what you might call "touchy feely." I've never been one to reveal my emotions much. Mary Craig suggested yesterday that she "earns" smiles from me. However, I must attest that my happiness depends on my relationships with the people whom I love. These people certainly include my sisters, parents, friends, and students—they have all taught me so much. That said, my identity has also been shaped in incredible ways by people who have passed through my life. I'd like to pay tribute tonight to several people who taught me without knowing it. I could not invite them here because I don't know them well enough. Our relationships were ephemeral, yet their faces, voices and words persist in my memory.

The first two encounters both come from my visit to Africa two summers ago. I joined a fellow teacher from Blair, plus 6 high school seniors, on a two-week trip through Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda.

We had arrived on a plane in Nairobi, Kenya just two days before this first story begins. We were spending that night a few hours west of the capital at a hostel on Lake Victoria. After a long, bumpy van ride, we reached the hostel, dropped our backpacks, and hopped on bikes to ride around the town. Within moments we found ourselves at the base of a hill. Upon the hill, looming over the sparkling lake was a small village. A trashy dirt road formed the central vein of the village, and on either side of the road were weary houses and stores with wildly patched roofs, and open windows. Children poured out of every orifice to greet us, but adults poked their heads out to stare. While others in the group laughed and played with the squealing children, I found myself locked in the gaze of a teenage boy. He must have considered himself too mature for the children's squeals but too curious for the adult's reserve. As he waited for the right moment, he chewed intently on a chunk of sugarcane. Gabrielle's teeth, like the sugary strands of the

sugarcane, were cloud white, but his intentionality conveyed real hunger. He looked into my eyes as he chewed, teeth moving but eyes locked. I was new to this place, this village, this country, this continent. I knew that I should introduce myself, so I did. I was Penn; he was Gabrielle. I must confess that I remember this now as his name, yet I cannot be sure if my memory is accurate. It could simply be my name for him— Gabrielle, angel, stranger with a message, I don't know.

Nonetheless, he and I talked for sometime. In slow but deliberate English, he told me that he was an orphan who had traveled for days to reach this village. They had taken him in, yes, but he had no money and no job. He longed to go to school but lacked tuition money.

I was a schoolteacher, a teacher of literature I explained. I loved Shakespeare, I said. He loved him too, he professed with a smile. I wonder now if he knew any Shakespeare at all—had he even heard of the poet? Perhaps my genuine excitement in presenting the name had clued him in—this kooky, rich American teacher loves this *Shakespeare*, I should too! Regardless, in that moment, standing there in his temporary home, it did not matter. No talk of Othello or Hamlet would resolve his real problem. Gabrielle was hungry.

The story doesn't end as well as I'd like. He began to ask for help—a job, some money, a scholarship. I felt helpless there even as I offered encouragement. I held my digital *camera in one pocket but had no cash on hand*. I had offered a few moments of my time, but the group was leaving now. I left that afternoon, to bike back to our hostel with real beds, running water, and warm beer. Others joked that Gabrielle was sure to return to propose to me, but as we chuckled I felt sick with regret. This man who may or may not be named Gabrielle, who may or may not have been an orphan, was a human being. He had asked for my help, and I hadn't had the courage to give it. One might assume that Gabrielle's face and words would slip away—in two weeks we met hundreds of Africans who asked for help. But I remember his eyes, his sugarcane and his smiling at my

mention of Shakespeare. I hold onto his memory not only because I hope for his success but also because it reminds me of my own privilege.

About one week later, I met a second person whom I will never forget. Her name is Harriet. She's appeared on CNN and Oprah, but she calls Kigali, Rwanda home. She feels attached to her people. You might wonder how a woman of the Tutsi tribe, decimated by the genocide in Rwanda, feels any attachment to the nation that slaughtered her mother and father, most of her cousins, and many of her friends. How could this Tutsi woman live so happily with her child, Michaela, a product of her own rape? When asked why she stays, she shakes her head. She can't explain in words her attachment to this seemingly loveless place.

Most tourists avoid Rwanda. Its roads are fine and its lakes and mountains beautiful, but its people are damaged and its history is heart breaking. We choose to visit the country in hopes of better understanding its social climate a decade after genocide. With this goal in mind, we traveled first to the genocide museum in Kigali.

Remarkably, Harriet works at the museum—as if living in Rwanda is not reminder enough of her past, she also has chosen to educate others on the country's tragedy. After meeting her at the museum, she invited us to dinner at her house that night. As her daughter made dinner outside, she shared pictures with us all. She pointed out relatives and friends, many of whom died during the genocide. As I sat in her house and listened to her stories, I continually asked myself: How does Harriet persevere?

My only answer this night came, oddly enough, upon eating a fruit. Avocado-like in both shape and texture, the fruit did not appeal to us Americans at first. Upon hearing its name—"blood fruit"—I felt even less interested. It was late, I felt exhausted, and the electricity was out (as was typical in Kigali). But Harriet insisted that we try these funny looking fruits. She sliced several open at their tops, then demonstrated how to eat them. She squished the bottom of the fruit to squirt the blood red contents into her mouth. Even

the bashful among us tried the blood fruit. We squealed at its tart, then smiled at its sweetness. We loved the fruit, despite ourselves.

My fruit consumption seems trite in comparison to other moments—after all, we continually witnessed Harriet’s love for her daughter and her friends. The bright green walls of her living room, the outdoor kitchen, a few jovial guests, and the glow of the candles were enough for Harriet. I saw glimpses of her happiness but felt overwhelmed by her suffering for most of the night. Tears had welled in my eyes, until the blood fruit came my way. I sucked in the juicy tarty sweet pulp and smiled. The taste and touch of this fruit would make this place last for me, I thought. Harriet bore so much more pain than I could ever imagine feeling. Yet to my delight, we shared this moment, this fruit, and this laughter together.

This evening ended on a lighter note. When we finally felt nervy enough to ask for a ride back to the hotel, Harriett sighed. It was too late for taxis, we’d have to stay with her... unless, of course, her friend could help. We shrugged, imagining her calling a neighbor or cousin. But upon hanging up the phone, she announced that the British ambassador to Rwanda was on his way. Apparently, the British Ambassador felt the same love for Harriet that we did. We giggled with relief as he drove through the night and attempted to explain the merits of fox hunting: “Of course, the dogs need exercise,” he said, “and if they happen to kill a fox or two, then so be it.”

As emotionally charged as possibly any other day in my life, this day in Rwanda is one that I’ll never forget.

Now I must pause here to remind you that flying to another continent is NOT a prerequisite to meeting amazing people. While I admit that my addiction to travel stems partially from the allure of such encounters, I also believe that you bump into people who have the potential to change your life each day. Moreover, they appear in literature, films, paintings, and other forms of art. I met one such literary character in Mrs. Roach’s IV form English class. I have counted Janie Sparks from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

as an inspiration ever since. This extraordinary heroine encounters racism, sexism and jealousy in an American South that scorns black women. Her discovery of love, and ultimately her understanding of her self, moved me so intensely that my encounter with Janie Sparks in Room 19 has endured.

I envision Hurston's final image of Janie often. It reads, "Here was peace. She pulled her horizon in like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" (193). Unlike the people whom I have met in real life, Janie is easily found and revisited. I need only allow myself a bit of time to reread, in order to be moved again. Janie Starks is ready.

Let me close with one last example from closer to home.

Far from Africa but nearby St. Andrew's I met a Super Shuttle driver; he brought me back to St. Andrew's on a January day in 1996. A big man with large hands stationed at 10 and 2, he held my full attention from the Philly airport all the way back to Moss dorm. After discovering that I had returned for basketball practice, our conversation immediately turned to my play that season. Yes, I started at forward, I told him. Sure, I scored a few baskets a game, grabbed a few rebounds. But these vague answers weren't good enough. He was the sort of man who demanded real and accurate responses—when I said "a few points," he demanded to know my average. I guessed that it was 8 points a game.

Ha, he slapped the wheel and hit the gas. I could score more—he knew it.

Okay, I said, eager to maintain my calm despite his Nascar-like accelerations and raised voice. For the remaining 50 miles, he drilled me on my post moves, my box out technique, my outlet passing, and my transition defense. This man knew the game, very well. Now keep in mind that I grew up in North Carolina. If you grow up there and have an inkling of interest in basketball, there is PLENTY of advice offered. But most of these

tips had been given to me in passing, by a family friend who loved Eric Montross or an older neighbor who worshiped Jimmy V. This driver turned coach genuinely wanted to *understand* and *teach* me. Few had ever been so generous in their teaching.

In the people's gym during our first practice (just an hour after my arrival), I explained the driver's tirade—I poked fun of his officiousness publicly—it was easier that way. Privately, I ran through his teachings often. He'd suggested that I could easily score twice as many points with a better jump shot from the top of the key. I took this charge to heart. Although it did not double that winter, my scoring average grew and so did my confidence. A stranger had pushed me in a way that others hadn't.

I feel somewhat selfish about my momentary encounters with these strong men and women—did I offer them anything in exchange for their inspiration? I worry that I may have cheated these people, for in my moments with them I lacked the wherewithal to express appropriate thanks. However, I hope that I honor and celebrate their generosity of spirit as I remember them, and as I live and teach here at St. Andrew's. In a moment we'll sing together the hymn "I sing a song of the saints of God" with these folks in mind. I hope that my sketches of Gabrielle, Harriet, Janie, and the driver compel you and me to bear our souls more often, to allow ourselves to be shaped and inspired by friends and strangers alike.