



A Personal Journal
By
Cheryl Fabio
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On the first day of my new job at Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY), Teiahsha Bankhead, the Executive Director, invited me to join the staff on a trip across the world, destination Kenya. My role would be videotaping six days of Circle Trainings, a Restorative Justice Practice, in the small town of Thika, just outside of Nairobi. These trainings had been requested by KIMO; Wellness Foundation, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). KIMO wanted to explore restorative practices as possible solutions to the recurring act of high school students burning their schools. The burnings are reportedly politically motivated or even politically manipulated. This has gone on for some time in Kenya.



“Hell yes!” I said without much thought and no hesitation.

There’s a challenge to being in Africa. A cognitive dissonance of sorts. On one hand being immersed in solid Blackness and connecting to one’s origin is uplifting. Juxtaposed to the joy of being in the majority, is the sadness of negotiating the vestiges of colonialization.

Kenyans present as intellectual, having an ancient wisdom, and as a serious entrepreneurial culture. At the same time, the majority of Kenyans face crushing poverty. By moving as a group and talking extensively with everyone who would engage, we were able to learn a lot. Kenyans will engage with you. They will tell you their story. Proudly they share historical and political intricacies. Its ok to ask about aspirations and fears, they’ll be glad you are interested.

It was frequently, albeit informally, reported that personal aggrandizement means more to many Kenyan decision makers and civil servants than the collective well-being of their countrymen. For me this is a reminder that all people have just as much capacity for greed, corruption, and cruelty as they have for doing good. Also, foreign powers encroaching on Africa with intent to exploit rather than partner continues to be the biggest challenge that the continent has yet, to face.

Our trip was well-planned by Teiahsha Bankhead, RJOY Executive Director, Ellen Barry, the RJOY Development Director, and the administrative staff. In working through the details, RJOY took our Kenya time very seriously considering every morning, afternoon, and evening an opportunity for more and deeper exposure to Kenyan change agents.

DAY ONE – MONDAY, MAY 13, 2019

Our plane left San Francisco Airport at 4:30 pm. Seven of us boarded a Delta/KLM Flight that landed in Amsterdam ten and a half hours later. A brief layover, and we re-boarded continuing for another eight hours to Nairobi. Arriving at 10:00 pm, on May 14th, we went directly to the Sarova Stanley Hotel, for a two-night stay. This was the first leg of our journey. Seeing the entire Black staff dressed in British colonial uniforms at the Stanley Hotel, evokes that cognizant dissonance I mentioned.



DAY

Everyone hung out,

exploring, or just caught their breath. When we entered the hustle and bustle of Nairobi, the streets were filled with pedestrians, cars and bikes all in constant motion. With steering wheels on the wrong side of cars, an added visual enhancing the feeling of chaos, we'd intermittently see Maasai men herding twenty cattle through traffic jams on the highway. The cows having the right of way, of course. That scene *kinda* meshes rural life and urban - together. Passengers jump out of buses into the highway traffic, and the bus just rolls on. Cross walks, painted yellow, from one side of the freeway to the other allows men, women, and children foot access from the middle of the highway to its roadsides. There's a rhythm to moving around Kenya, maybe I just didn't know the rules.

TWO

slept late, went

Nairobi's
skyline is



downtown
tall,

modern, and urban.





There

was

excitement that evening on the hotel rooftop as RJOY's staff began preparing materials for the upcoming trainings.



The
before
Nairobi

night
leaving
for the

town of Thika, we enjoyed dinner with Mary Ann Burris, the founder of Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH). Mary introduced us to TICAH staff members, Jedidah (Jade) Maina, Executive Director and Caroline (Carol) Ngala, Program Coordinator of TICAH.

TICAH uses art, photography, and ceremony to evoke healing, activism, and community building. Near the end of our trip we visited with their staff again at the labyrinth located at the National Museum of Kenya. There's also an outdoor art space. The labyrinth and art space are a collaborative project between the Museum, TICAH, and Nature Space.

DAY THREE

On day three, we travelled to Thika to meet with Nelly Nduta Adirangu, host and Executive Director of KIMO Wellness Foundation. Nelly asked Robert, her husband, to give ride from the Stanley Hotel in Nairobi to Thika.



The doors on the van Robert was driving jammed, except for the back hatch. Here's Kat Culberg, RJOY's Program Director, climbing through the back of the van.

to

our

us a

The time in Thika was well spent. We got to know more about Nelly and Roslyne and RJOY staff shared about themselves as well. We walked to the Eaton Hotel where the trainings would begin the next day.



John, is Eaton manager. We met see what details

be addressed. Teiahsha Bankhead, RJOY, asked John for accommodations in support of our Circle processes - like removing tables, food set ups, and timing for meals. At first John thought the requests odd but once he understood he was onboard!

Hotel's with him to needed to



While RJOY these

we elected to stay in Ruiru, a small town forty minutes outside of Nairobi and fifteen minutes away from Thika. We chose the Verona Hotel and Conference Center as home base. Located in Spur Mall, the Verona Hotel has been open for six-months and the entire development is owned by a Kenyan couple.

conducted trainings,



While waiting to check into the hotel, Malachi Scott (RJOY) started a game of charades with co-workers. Playful moments like these cement the sense of teamwork for RJOY. It's a demonstration of our connectedness. The RJOY staff members are experts at traveling in a group. There's an expectation that you'll manage your temperament and they talk through the bumpiness. Even the tense moments get smoothed out.



The rooms
modern.

were
comfortable and
The food was

simple but good. We started each day with Dawa a hot ginger tea with lemon and honey. Customer service was excellent and Helen Mathu, the hotel manager, helped us understand, challenged us and we challenged her back. She treated us like long-time friends. She was gracious. At the end of our stay, Helen gave us a going away party. We sat in one of the rooftop restaurants while she ordered specialty foods. We ate and laughed and shared stories in the night breeze. I was particularly excited that Helen brought us homemade honey wine, that tasted like Kombucha and had been blessed by Kenyan elders. It was delicious! What a fun night.



DAY FOUR

The trainings began at 9:00 am. The first training was for KIMO's Board and staff. Each training lasted two days (KIMO, then School Administrators/Teachers, and finally, high school and University students). Restorative Justice is an alternative to Western responses to conflict. For instance, in criminal justice we ask: What laws have been broken? Who did it? What punishment do they deserve? A restorative practice would instead ask: Who has been hurt? What are their needs? Whose obligations are these? For a simple read on restorative practices read: *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Circle Processes*, Kay Pranis and Fania Davis' *The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice: Black Lives, Healing, and US Social Transformation*.

RJOY's trainings covered Restorative Justice philosophies, elements, outcomes, and exercises that practice facilitating Circles. At this point, I put away my still camera and switched to video.

Spiritualism is a core value in Kenya. Today, much of that spirituality is expressed in Christianity. RJOY's staff was asked about our tattoos, hairstyles, a bit about age, and some homophobic references came from our KIMO hosts. Those conversations were candid, though, and became the foundation for a fairly honest and growing relationship between RJOY and KIMO. It was clear that Kenyan's are just as enthusiastic about understanding us, as we are to know about them. In the end, we earned new friends and a KIMO family.



Over the next
RJOY trained

six days,
one

hundred fifty people. Each training was an adaptation of the same curriculum. Usually there are ten to twenty people in a training which allows everyone to have a chance to be heard and participate. But the word spread through the surrounding educational community and RJOY trained forty administrators and teachers and over sixty students.

This presented a challenge to the RJOY Circle Keepers that generated excitement and exhaustion. Circle keepers understood that historical memory was at play. It wasn't lost on the trainees, either. The first day of the teacher's training was held on Saturday. Teachers had been summoned, the night before to come to this session. There was so much appreciation from teachers that RJOY focused on the trainees' needs; including starting with breakfast, doing check ins, and other small demonstrations showing that we cared, that at the end of the day, teachers took a vote to return on Sunday to complete their curriculum. It meant that they gave up their entire weekend on very short notice. During trainings, many of them shared stories of how their grandparents and ancestors used circles to solve problems. Also, there was so much heart felt singing and movement. Most were eager to become keepers of their own Circle practices. RJOY Circle keepers have received email updates that many trainees have started their own Circles.

DAY EIGHT

There were so many students that three Circles were being conducted simultaneously. Students took up the offer to engage in radical honesty and availed themselves of an opportunity to use their voice. Many of the students reported they felt like their youth opinions are neither sought nor valued in Kenya.

Since often boys and girls are separated in schools, this co-ed experience was a joy.



DAY NINE

One evening we visited schools in the rural areas. Nelly made arrangements with administrators in the trainings and Gilbert Gachau a KIMO board member, took us to his alma mater.







School was out at Muri-Ini Mixed Day School, but the principal talked with us, answered our questions, and graciously served us arrowroot, tea, fresh cow's milk, and honey.



The administrators selected students from their student body to attend RJOY's trainings. When we arrived at the schools, classmates were eager to see the strangers they had heard about.







We spent most of our time at Githumu Boys High School, Gilbert's alma mater. Githumu has over 1000 Boys enrolled and a long waiting list. School fees are high. Even though Githumu isn't just for the wealthy, you still have to *pay to stay*.



Strategically placed inspirational messages are all around the campus.



Every school had some type of Peace Zone or Peace Corner – schools just needed to re-activate those spaces!



Imagine what it looks like feeding 1000 boys, 3 times a day.



The boys chop the wood!



This is both the cafeteria and the auditorium.



Pans for bread baked daily!



RJOY's biggest discovery during the school visit was a young man named Emmanuel pictured below - center. He was quickly selected by his principal from all 1000 school boys, as a promising student who was struggling financially. Emmanuel entered the principal's office in tears thinking he might be sent home because of his bill. RJOY offered to pay his school fees before Emmanuel told us that his mom's illness caused such distraction that his GPA slipped from A to an A-. It was Emmanuel's junior year. Once he understood the situation, he was thrilled!



Gilbert is on the right (KIMO), Nelly the left. The principal and assistant principal are in the back. Manuel is flanked by Ellen & Teiahsha, his new RJOY family.

Returning to the car to leave, we met with these excited faces from a neighboring elementary school.







The best Kenyan tea grows in high altitudes.
Rural Githumu tea fields are lush and beautiful!
The passing landscapes are breathtaking.





You can buy almost anything on the side of the road.



Read the writing on the walls as you pass. This sign gave good advice, "Beware of Conmen, this plot is not for sale."

DAY ELEVEN

Once the trainings were done, RJOY staff moved back to Nairobi, checked into The Double Tree, Hilton Hotel in Hurlingham, and started the final leg of the trip.

Ellen and Teiahsha had arranged meetings and activities. The meetings were with like-minded Kenyan NGO's. We also explored and had episodes of fun.

We shopped at every Maasai market we could get to in Hurlingham, almost addictively. For me, the aggressiveness of the vendors was a bit much, even though I'm pretty good at bartering.

DAY THIRTEEN

We also visited a Maasai family in Ngong Hills:



Daniel, Dad



Neighbor



Daniel gave his son, Emmanuel, the opportunity to choose his own bride – Emmanuel herding the cows, says, “fighting a lion is easier than talking to a woman.”



Mom told us, “practicing birth control gave me an opportunity to become a businesswoman.”
With only two children she makes and sells beaded jewelry.



Baby sister joins big brother, neighbor, and mom - the olaranyani or song leader in a traditional call and response harmony that the Maasai are famous for.



They sang generously, to the delight of RJOY staff.



Part of the day was getting to make a beaded bracelet.
It took us over an hour to bead a single-strand.



This manyatta, is where we made our bracelets. It's the traditional home of Maasai. The manyatta is built by women, made from cow dung, urine, and grass and it's made to be impermanent. These huts take a year to build. Female family and friends are recruited to help because building huts and caring for family are the domain of Maasai women.



Men's work is hunting, herding animals, and protecting the compound.
We learned a practical lesson, if you see a buffalo climb a tree.
That's Naima, BiJon, and Hip - in that tree!



The land above, belongs to the family and that's the house they now live in.

The Maasai traditionally own large plots of land for grazing their animals. Also, their traditional monotheistic worship of Engai or Enkai has been replaced with Christianity. It's no coincidence that as the Maasai begin to accept Christianity they've begun to sell their land. While some buyers are Kenyans, most often, the land is bought, way too cheaply by European buyers. The divestment of Maasai land will likely result in devastating financial outcomes for the tribe. But today, the day was focused on making bracelets, hearing stories about ending female mutilation (FGM), sharing food, singing harmonies, and then, heading back to the hotel.

DAY FIFTEEN

We visited Faraja Foundation, in Nairobi. Faraja was founded in 1999 by a Swiss Benedictine Priest, Father Peter Meienberg. The organization services women, refugees, and children. As unjust conditions in Kenya's prisons became clear, the prison population became Faraja's core focus. In our meeting, we are listening to Jane Kuria, Faraja's Executive Director, as she tells us why Kenya needs to reform its criminal legal system. Kenya must begin to think differently about the "whys" of the incarcerated population's crimes.



We also visited Clean Start Solutions an NGO that gives formerly incarcerated women and girls a second chance. In 2015, Teresa Njoroge, co-founded the organization with Joss Carruthers. Teresa, now CEO, was arrested for a crime that she did not commit. In 2011, she was sentenced to a year in Langata Women's Maximum Security Prison, located in Nairobi. This led Teresa to what has become her life's work. Clean Start delivers impactful pre-release coaching programs to women prisoners. Their programs enable women to access education, training, and employment - post release. We shared experiences, our visions, a meal, joy, laughter, and they gave RJOY flowers.

Teresa Njoroge, Clean Start Co-Founder and CEO







TICAH, MAHALI PA UMOJA UNITY PLACE



Jedidah Maina explains the history of the TICAH labyrinth project.





During much of the discussion, I admit to being distracted by this little guy, running around like an unleashed dog. But no, it's not a puppy, it's a warthog! And warthog guy threatens to come and make friends with me, yikes!





Still on the Museum grounds, we visited the TICAH art space.





Before we said good-bye to the group we shared drinks and had a lively discussion about the roles women play in our respective home towns.



NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK | KENYA WILDLIFE SERVICE – SAFARI

I've never understood going across the world to see animals and not the people or their culture. But I also didn't realize that in some places, like Nairobi, these animals are roaming around in the heart of an urban environment. During this trip, I went on my first safari. Honestly, I got really excited wondering about whether a lion would try to jump up on the van, or if an elephant would chase after us, or crush the van, or something that would make a terrific tall tale. None of that happened, but this did!







We also visited, **SHELDRIK WILDLIFE TRUST**, a baby elephant orphanage.



The Trust Orphanage locates baby elephants that are orphans mostly because humans have killed their mothers for their tusks. Sometimes the babies are abandoned for other reasons. Elephants are nursed for two years or until they are capable of surviving in the wild. Then, they are released

back to live with the herds. Elephants remember everything that has ever happened to them. Often - once a rescued elephant has had a calf, they will return to the orphanage and introduce the calf to the human that took of her.

DAY SEVENTEEN

I was in an Uber when I realized that although I grew up watching my father mold clay into a larger than life bust of Jomo Kenyatta with round big eyes that were strong, and friendly, I have never had a conversation or even read about how people in Kenya consider Kenyatta's rule. The sculpture was eventually bronzed, so I was sure Kenyatta was a national hero.

On this trip, I started to ask. From my questions, I got a consensus that although Kenyatta was not himself a corrupt man, under his watch the spoils of Kenya's Independence were too heavily shared with the vacating colonialist. The Kenyan people did not prosper as they should have. Additionally, the system that has evolved created an unyielding civil service class that was put in a position to take advantage, and it has. The efforts of one man, even a president, they tell me, can't harness enough power or attention to overcome the self-interests of this civil servant sector. Representation in Kenya has been based on wealth, loyalty, and tribalism. The challenge for Kenya will be to find its strength in the world by finding harmony at home.

Kenyatta also claimed many 100s if not 1000s of acres of very rich land at Independence. The people of Kenya felt he was deserving as he accomplished the country's freedom. Now, the Kenyatta family is wealthy and it grew largely from this FREE land. Many people feel it is now greediness, when so many Kenyans have no economic security. Uhuru Kenyatta, son of Jomo, is currently the fourth President of what's still a very young country.

While it might not be the individual Presidents who are responsible for corruption, it seems clear the civil servant class is benefitting from it. A president does not have enough control to overpower the will of the civil servant class in its aggregate. So most civilians feel resigned that there's little one man can do.

Eighty percent of Kenyans live in poverty earning less than two dollars a day. In a month, their wages are twice the cost of a single room in both Ruiru and Thika. Still a family needs water, food, clothes, school fees, uniforms, books, and even the school desks to sit at, if there are children in the home. This accounts for just a few expenses of Kenyan urban living.

I was told by my Uber driver that the smartest thing a Kenyan can do is work hard, amass a bit of money, leave the country, and invest from overseas. The business climate in Kenya, he felt, favors outsiders.

Kenya is known for its teas, coffee, pineapples, limestone, soda ash, salt, gemstones, fluorspar, zinc, diatomite, oil, gas, gypsum, wildlife and hydropower. Dole Pineapple controls the pineapple industry. Coffee is owned by Europeans, who have Kenyans harvest the beans and the wealth is exported. Kenyans buy back an over processed, highly priced, product in the form of instant coffees, like Nescafe'. Very little of the wealth of this or other natural resources are realized by Kenyans. Buying a cup of whole bean Kenyan coffee is easier in California, than in Kenya.

OUR LAST DAY! Tuesday, May 28th

The last encounter before packing up for home, was a meeting with Boniface Mwangi a former photojournalist, now arts activist and socialist political party founder that ran thirteen candidates in the last election. He was incarcerated days before our arrival for leading a protest of civil disobedience. His group *pawa245*, activates public spaces, and lifts up the advocacy skills and voices of young Kenyan artist organizers.

Boniface, now 36, nurtured his interest in photography with a ten dollar Kodak point and shoot camera bought by his mother. Boniface wanted to document the poor conditions at his boarding school, to fight a pending expulsion that he was facing. At the time, Boniface's mother was paying eight dollars a month in rent and she was a single mom. Boniface's pictures proved his case, and he won.

In his book, "UnBounded," the activist paints a grueling story of growing up poor in rural and urban Kenya. We see him go from innocence, to photojournalism, then activism, to becoming a cultural icon. It was after a year of covering the 2008 post-election violence perpetuated on disadvantage Kenyans, that Boniface began to travel an exhibit of his photos throughout Kenya. The response launched *Picha Mtaani*. The exhibit drew more than two million visitors. It became a platform for individual reflection, honest dialogue, interpersonal healing as well as community reconciliation. That first-hand experience of photographing that amount of death and violence left Boniface with PTSD which why he left his award-winning career.

Boniface begins his book with a picture of himself, the lone person standing at a political speech, in protest of and to highlight the human rights abuses a group of activist wished to end. After months of planning, when Boniface stood up no one joined him. The captioned reads, "...there

are two most powerful days in your life. The day you were born and the day you discover why."





BACK AT HOME

There is an intensity I felt in Kenya which is helped by this writing. In addition to the quick pace of a trip with so much in motion, and beyond my own newness to a fairly cohesive group, were

those early memories of mine that had become activated and intertwined with what I was seeing.

Boniface summed up my internal conflict. “In Kenya,” he said, “you are encouraged to become ‘smart cowards,’ because cowards go home to their families. Silence,” he continues, “is the second language of Kenya.” Boniface’s *pawa254* that fosters young artists ([www.http://pawa254.org/](http://pawa254.org/)) has become a stirring conglomeration of youth finding creative ways to break that silence.

Our dream of Kujichagulia, self-determination, hasn’t yet been realized in Kenya but the country shows promise. When those who have been disenfranchised and their amplifiers address injustice with compassion, courage, recognition, and in calling out the fact that *any injustice is too much injustice*, we learn no one has the privilege of silence.

i KIMO translation - in Swahili it means depth, height, length, **altitude**. In Hawaiian it means James, warrior or soldier, and in Japanese it means mental.

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A project of RJOY
Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY)
173 Filbert Oakland, CA 94607
510.931.rjoy
rjoy@rjoyoakland.org

Teiahsha Bankhead, Ph.D, LCSW, Executive Director
Katherine Culberg, RN, PHN, Re-Entry Project Director
Ellen Barry, Fund Development Director
BiJon J. Barnes, Communications Coordinator
Gary “Malachi” Scott, Re-entry/Community Restorative Justice Coordinator
Louse Kahara, RJOY Administrative Manager
Lauren Wingate, Administrative
Naimah Shalhoub, Sister’s circle
Mustafa Solomon, Black men’s circle
Interns:
Ona Wang
Julian Ward

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