

ROAM Awards (Essay, Discovery)

24 October 2019

The crow of a blind rogue rooster wakes me up only moments before my iPhone alarm clock finishes the job with the same tonal ring I've despised since high school. Stumbling out of bed I end up tangled in the mosquito net that is half-draped over my worn out mattress, rendered useless anyway by its gaping holes larger than even the largest mosquito. I stand up on the unforgiving cement floor; my feet ache and throb. It's 3:30am and we're somewhere in the middle of nowhere, western Uganda. I pack in the dark and enjoy my luke-warm instant coffee I made the night before, sipping slowly out of a BPA-free metal thermos I bought last week – a sure upgrade over plastic water bottles and their leaky chemicals.

We depart the roadside guesthouse on foot at 4:01am, eager to leave the stench of stale urine behind. It's dark - the barren road slightly illuminated by a setting moon and splattering of stars. I find myself walking through a grove of eucalyptus trees. Leaves blocking the sky, each tree loses its individuality, blending into the next to form one giant organism, breathing, alive, of which I am now part. Struck by the wonder of the forest and I instantly feel in the midst of something larger than myself. My steps start to resemble the swaying of the branches around me.

I'm still in awe as the trees become fewer and I can again see the sky. I am struck by my insignificance in the universe - both a demoralizing and immensely freeing albeit thought-provoking thought. I decide it's too early for thoughts. I look around and observe things near – small clumps of soil – and far – the silhouette of a mountain in the distance. I think to myself “Damn, we're going to have to climb that later” before I recognize the thought as a thought and watch it go. I hear the whimsical chirps of the earliest of birds and the ominous growl of a diesel engine. I feel the dry breeze on my face and the sensation of the bottom of my feet moving across the Earth. I feel my breath – in, out, sat, nam – deep in my diaphragm and at the tip of my nose. I am aware of the road while focusing my attention on observing the natural world around me, which before I know it, is welcoming the rising African sun.

The sun rises above the horizon to reveal a landscape of gently rolling hills, banana trees, and vibrant villages stirring in the early light. Ahead I see commotion. A sinkhole has opened and swallowed the road which means a detour and a few extra miles of walking to avoid the broken earth. Negative thoughts impulsively pop into my mind before I ask myself why am I angry. Then a realization – in English we say “I am angry” but in Swahili we say “Niko na hasira” (“I feel anger”). Indeed, I am not the anger that I feel. This sinkhole is in my best interest; it is simply testing my patience today and making me a more patient person tomorrow. With a changed mindset, I pick up my pace.

We walk until late afternoon without any substantial break. The sign ahead of us reads Climbing Lane 4.2 KM. We ascend and my legs immediately begin to shout. Beads of sweat roll down my forehead taking with them the Ghanian shea butter I applied that morning before entering my eyes with a sting. A large truck rumbles by spewing out a dark, milky cloud of smoke into my face. 'I wish they had emissions testing in this country' I think. My mood takes a dive as I push further up the hill and deeper into the pain cave. My left heel begins to ache, then throb with every step. For a few seconds I resist the pain and it gets worse, but then something strange happens. Maybe it's the heat, or the too-many-miles of walking, but I say out loud to nobody in particular and to my left foot at the same time, 'Ok left heel, I hear ya. I give you full permission to hurt as much as you want. Now that I've agreed to let you hurt, you hurting doesn't bother me. In fact, I hope you hurt more.' And just like that...the pain doesn't reside; actually the pain doesn't change at all. What changes is my relationship to it. I feel the pain but it no longer bothers me and thus has no emotional effect on me anymore. I begin to feel good, almost too good. I walk faster, even faster uphill than I was walking on the flats a few hours ago. Embracing the pain instead of resisting it, I've eliminated my suffering. I suddenly feel unstoppable, and somewhat insane for having verbally addressed my left heel.

Ahead, I think I see a mirage, a hallucination resulting from the 22 miles we've already walked today. But what I am seeing is real – a cold Coke Zero displayed outside of a small shop! I can't believe my luck! This is the first refrigerator we've passed in days and I impulsively grab the coldest Coke Zero I can find. Standing in line to pay I have second thoughts. I ask myself 'Do I want this Coke Zero? Yes...but I also want water. Is this Coke Zero good for me? Well...it doesn't have sugar but all those other chemicals are just as bad. Did I intend to buy a cold soda before I saw this Coke Zero? No.' The more I think, the more I realize that the Coke Zero in my hand is buying me. It has hijacked my brain to trick my mind into believing I need something I didn't know existed five minutes prior. Am I really this impressionable? I return the Coke Zero and grab a 1.5 liter bottle of water so cold it has a few ice chunks floating in it like melting glaciers in a warming ocean. I gulp too quickly and by the time the ensuing brain-freeze hits, I've already forgotten about the Coke Zero.

We walk until relief finally takes the place of exhaustion as I pound the final tent stake into the ground with a heavy rock. After reaching our campsite I enjoyed a cold bucket shower, set up my tent, and now have a few hours to relax...horizontally if possible. I feel refreshed as I mingle with local villagers and neatly organize my gear on the spiky savannah grass. I reach into my pack to grab my phone and check out the news and updates I've missed today. As I feel the smooth screen in my fingers, I stop, suddenly distracted by the changing colors in the sky as the sun begins to set over the eucalyptus trees on the far side of a field more dirt than grass. On the pitch a group of boys have stuck branches in the ground as goal posts and are now racing back and forth, their bare feet churning clouds of dust up into the air as they chase a soccer ball made

from plastic bags tied together with an old mosquito net. I drop my phone back into the pocket from which it came, extend my legs and elevate my feet, feel the last rays of sunlight on my skin, and simply be.

Satisfied from dinner and drunk off of conversation I meander back to my tent. I can feel every oddly shaped rock, every broken twig beneath me; through the soles of my feet I am intimately connected to Mother Earth. I crawl under my Maasai *shuka* and wrap it around me like a confused butterfly returning into its cocoon. I begin to reflect:

When we began our 1,087 mile trek to cross East Africa - walking every step across Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda - I expected to discover new and exciting places along the way. I anticipated that the expansive terrain and physical endurance would be my most difficult challenges. Instead, the most extreme battles are taking place in the terrain between my ears. I cannot outrun my own mind, and with only a limited supply of free audiobooks at my disposal I am forced to confront my thoughts instead of search for distractions. Over the first 57 days of our walk across East Africa - through endless ancient savannahs filled with beautiful indigenous people - my most profound discovery has been the culmination of small realizations that take place every day in my own mind.

Completely at peace I drift between consciousness and sleep, semi-aware that at 3:30am my alarm will ring, my lukewarm instant coffee will be waiting in its BPA-free metal thermos, and the rhythmic sequence of another day on our walk will begin again.