

An African Diary:  
The Impressions and Reactions of a First-Time Visitor

By Jeff Beeman

What did I know about Africa? During my formative years, the (mis)information took the form of things such as “The Dark Continent!” Gold! Diamonds! Malaria! Typhoid, and other malignant and dangerous life-threatening diseases. The Slave Trade! The Colonial Period! The Cradle of the Human Race and Civilization (“The Motherland”). Exotic, mysterious, and dangerous predatory animals, including poisonous insects and snakes. The Jungle, unbearably hot and humid, with its constant cacophony of animals and birds, falling silent only at the approach of danger, which could be found at every turn of the trail, and would often be preceded by the sound of drums (“The Jungle Telegraph”). Lake Victoria and the source of the Nile. The Foreign Legion courageously subduing ferocious marauding local bands in the foreboding, relentless desert in the North. Safaris and their pursuit of exotic Big Game, Ivory, and treasure beyond imagining.

Where considered at all, the native people were portrayed as primitive and superstitious. If the narrative required them to be hostile, they were armed with spears, bows and arrows, knives, blowguns, and other primitive weapons, which would prove no match for the intrepid white man with his superior firepower. On the other hand, if they were not portrayed as adversaries, they were viewed as docile beasts of burden to be pressed into service as an endless supply of cheap labor as bearers, to break trail with machetes, or as interpreters for “Bwana.”

In sum: this was a place fit only for exploitation because it was perceived as strange, harsh, forbidding, and unforgiving. Only the most adventurous or desperate need apply. Once there, anything done to subdue it or bring it to heel was considered only right and proper.

Some of this information came from fiction writers (who may or may not have ever visited there before putting pen to paper), early documentaries, and the back lot of Universal Studios, *et. al.*

By the time I got to high school and beyond, the Colonial Period was on the wane. Sierra Leone, for example, became independent of British rule in 1961. The subjugation of the continent by whites was being supplanted by tribal warfare and a succession of home-grown dictators and despots who were exploiting the people and resources for personal gain. The face of oppression changed, but the fact of repression changed not at all. Turmoil and exploitation continued apace.

Having traveled quite a bit, and been a formal and informal student of history, I had by now, been purged of most false notions of what to expect by visiting Africa. Moreover, I had spoken with other members of my church about what the realities of Africa were, based on their own first-hand experience. One of the main sources of information for me was the senior pastor of our church, Lyndy, who had long been involved in mission trips to Sierra Leone and had provided the impetus (as well as the infrastructure, as it was) for others to go there. Several of the people that had gone told me that, among other things, their experience had “transformed” them. While I thought that description was a bit overwrought, I nonetheless became more and more convinced that this was something that I needed to experience for myself. Of course, along with some of their glowing

reports (almost exclusively about their experiences with the warmth of the people they met), I was also told to expect that I would have to deal with transitory culture shock, see dire poverty, experience high heat and humidity, and contend with living conditions with few amenities. Living in the well-upholstered womb of America does not adequately prepare one for what the rest of the world perceives as the norm.

All this aside, quite honestly, one of my agenda items was to find out how it is possible for people who live under great privation and with few of the things that we think of as necessary for the “Good Life” still keep trying to move forward and, amazingly, continue to hope. All of this despite (seemingly) insurmountable odds? From the perspective of this spoiled, fully acculturated American, it just seemed inconsistent.

Sierra Leone is the perfect place to answer some of my questions. It is a very poor country that only about 5 years ago ended a long, bloody civil war that, as these things go, ripped a lot of the country asunder.

Started by Liberia, seeking its diamond wealth, it pitted countryman against countryman. Wholesale slaughter, sexual slavery, mutilations, and all of the other horrors attendant, were visited upon the people. Many people lost family members, limbs, homes, etc. In point of fact, no one was spared trauma and terror, victim and perpetrator alike. After all, perpetrators must suppress a portion of their humanity in order to act so callously and abysmally.

At this point, the country had recently had a national election that was conducted peacefully. The new government had taken office less than six months ago by the time I visited in late February-early March of 2008. I was looking forward to seeing a place of trauma, transition, and potential.

While not expecting to be transformed, I was eager to go there and felt reasonably grounded about what to expect.

In addition to this, just prior to leaving, my wife and I had learned of a scholarship program established to provide financial support to local students needing aid to further or complete their education. We decided to participate in this program by assisting a young lady complete her studies to become a teacher. I brought money along to give to her for this purpose, along with a letter from my wife addressed to her. I made plans to meet her, as she lived near Makeni, where we would be staying.

Since our church was not fielding a mission team for awhile, I was able to link up with a Medical Mission Team under the auspices of another church leaving February 28, 2008, and returning March 15, 2008. The plan was for several medical and non-medical personnel to go to a small village east of Freetown, Sierra Leone, to provide medical care to the villagers. This village had been the site of other medical mission trips, so we were not “breaking trail.” Additionally, when mission teams are not there, this clinic is staffed by several local volunteers one day per week.

These volunteers were to assist us by providing interpreter services, in addition to their usual medical clinic duties.

Having undergone the requisite immunizations, I left Minneapolis with the rest of our group (9 total; 3 of them had been there before, including Pastor Don, one of our group leaders) on Thurs., February 28, 2008 on a direct flight to London where we would connect with a flight to Freetown, the capitol of Sierra Leone, on the western coast of Africa, on the Atlantic Ocean, about 7-8 degrees above the Equator.

We arrived in Freetown late Friday evening. Clearing customs was somewhat of a hassle; in addition to our luggage, each of us had a trunk carrying medical supplies. Customs is always looking for any kind of contraband entering the country, and so our trunks aroused their suspicions. The customs inspectors did make us open two of the trunks to satisfy themselves that they contained only benign items. Their demeanor was decidedly brusque and no-nonsense. Finally, they let us pass.

Travel from the airport to Freetown presents a challenge. The city is on a spit of land jutting out into the ocean, across from the airport. There are three ways to make the transit: Ferry, road, and helicopter ferry. The ferry runs intermittently and can take forever. The road, likewise, can take forever because of its long, unimproved, serpentine course. The fastest, albeit most expensive, means is by helicopter. Fortunately, we took that route to the helicopter ferry terminal, which turned out to be fairly close to our hotel.

This was also where we first met Abu. He was to be our driver, guide, interpreter (where needed), etc. In short, our all-around go-to guy who proved to be nothing less than an invaluable resource for us. People who had been there before had sung lavish praises about him. Their assessment proved to be completely accurate. As I will later relate, I spent more time with him than did others of our group and always found him to be completely genuine, sincere, honest, and possessing a lively sense of humor.

After collecting our belongings, Abu and his cousin Emmanuele ferried us to the Cape Sierra Hotel, where we would spend the night. The "road" to the hotel was my first introduction to some of the roads I would ride on during my stay. Parts of it were unpaved and not graded level, and some of it looked more like a narrow alley than a road. I saw many similarly unimproved dirt roads during my stay. I could only wonder what these were like during the rainy season.

The heat and humidity had greeted us at the airport and never left us during our entire stay. Afterwards, I told people back home that I didn't stop sweating until I got back to London. This was only a slight exaggeration. Our hotel rooms didn't appear to be air-conditioned, until one stepped outside of them. Parenthetically, the hotel and our van were almost the only places that were air-conditioned while I was in Sierra Leone. The only other exception was the restaurant in Freetown where we had lunch. The hotel was pleasant enough, but not what spoiled Americans were used to. The shower, for example, although warm, was just a trickle. We were told that earlier groups had

stayed in much more austere surroundings while in Freetown, so we were being coddled, I guess. We were also informed that this was the only hotel open during the war. This is where journalists stayed. Welcome to Africa!

We would not be able to leave the hotel until Saturday afternoon as there was a National Cleanup Day, and travel was not permitted. Once we left, I saw little of Freetown on that end of the trip, and that almost exclusively from the windows of our van. What I did see looked crowded, chaotic, tumultuous, and teeming with people; the analogy of an ant hill comes to mind. We made several stops in Freetown. One of our stops was at the local Methodist Conference Office to report in. We also stopped several places to get various needed supplies, including bottled water, and to have lunch. Each time we stopped, our van was surrounded by people, many of whom were beggars, trying to get our attention. Many had limbs missing, or were, otherwise, obviously handicapped. At least some of them were victims of the war. Sadly, the best strategy was to ignore them completely. Making eye contact only encouraged them. To help even one, we were told, would only create a mob scene. It was unsettling to be approached and then have to avert one's gaze as if the person didn't exist. Since we were the only white people about, anonymity was not an option. To see such dire need and then to ignore it as a defense really unsettled me, even though I knew I had to do it. Occasionally, we would get out of the van to stretch our legs, etc. At once, we would be surrounded by people with their hands out. Interestingly, they never got "up in your face" with their beseeching. They kept a minimal distance, but we were still surrounded. Although it was wrenching to have to see people in such straits that they had to beg in order to survive, I had seen such on an earlier visit to Asia. But, never on such a large scale. The one thing that helped me keep my perspective on all of this is that these people did not deliberately choose their lot in life. If they had other options available, I'm certain they would have pursued them. Who among us would not choose a very marginal survival by begging if faced with similar circumstances?

How to describe the street scene? Vehicular traffic was endless and seemingly chaotic through very narrow streets choked with people. Parking spaces were catch as catch can; there seemed to be no traffic control. I saw very few police officers directing traffic in Freetown, and none anywhere else we visited. Traffic seems to operate on the honor system. What traffic signals? I never saw a functioning traffic signal in Sierra Leone, and only a very few stop signs.

At the edge of the street there were gutters to sluice away the water during the rainy season. Woe unto anyone who forgot this when attempting to park; there was no curb to stop one side of the vehicle from dropping in. What we would consider illegal parking/stopping went on all the time, including our van, when necessary. On the narrow sidewalks, vendors of just about everything were cheek-by-jowl. Foot traffic was just as chaotic and random. The sights, sound, and smell of all of this nearly overloaded the senses with this endless din of people and traffic coming and going in no discernable pattern. I fully admit that I was looking at this from the vantage point of an outsider, and perhaps was beginning to experience a bit of culture shock.

We had been cautioned not to take pictures in Freetown; some people would take offense. As a result, we got few pictures there. I did take some pictures while on the hotel grounds and from

the window of the local Methodist Conference Office. Aside from that, my camera stayed stowed until we got to Makeni.

One of the tasks we needed to do was to exchange our U.S. currency for the local Leone. At that time the exchange rate was approximately 3,000 Leone/\$1.00 U.S. The exchange was handled this way: Abu pulled the van to a stop on the street. Two young men approached our van, and Abu spoke briefly with them. Eventually, local currency was brought out and exchanged for our dollars. No bank, no ATM, just two young men with a pocket full of Leones to exchange. Had Abu called them beforehand? Or did he just know where to find them? I have no idea. They just appeared, and after what I assumed was some negotiating and horse trading, an agreement was made. I also saw this process take place while we were in Makeni, and it was identical in form to this first transaction. As a matter of fact, I didn't even see a bank in Sierra Leone until well into our second week. They certainly exist, but they are not critical in the daily money exchange business, if my experience is any indication.

By late afternoon on Saturday we were ready to leave Freetown. Traffic was bumper to bumper, stop and go at best. We didn't realize until about two hours had passed that a truck was broken down ahead of us, blocking traffic. I was told later in our trip that there are only two tow trucks in all of Freetown! I don't know if this is accurate. But, I have no idea how a tow truck could have gotten through the narrow crowded street, had one even been available to make the attempt through this maelstrom of cars and foot traffic on the street. After what seemed like an eternity, we finally got out of Freetown.

On the way over from London, I got "saddle sore" from prolonged sitting. The long and bumpy ride to Makeni in the close confines of our van only exacerbated my discomfort. Throughout my stay, extended rides on marginal roads in a crowded van, coupled with thin seat padding (both my own and the van's) was very uncomfortable for me. When such would occur, I could only "tough it out" until we would stop and I could get out. Standing was no problem, nor was short-term sitting. However, extended sitting in the van was always a problem for me.

By the time we reached Makeni, incipient culture shock and problems with extended sitting did not bode well for my trip. Despite the late hour of our arrival, we were cordially welcomed by Pastor Ed and his wife, Aminata. In addition to being the minister at the local church, he is the District Superintendent. In that capacity, he oversees several churches, including the one in Manonkoh, where the clinic is also located. His wife is one of the nurses who regularly staffs the clinic as well.

We would be staying downstairs from the parsonage in a large open room, where we set up our respective sleeping areas using provided 4" foam mattresses in a dorm arrangement. We had each brought bed nets to put around our mattresses to protect ourselves from mosquitoes carrying Malaria. The nets provided the only semblance of privacy for sleep. We had also brought sheets and pillows for bedding. Blankets were completely unnecessary. I was later told that March is the hottest month. While unpacking and setting up, I made a horrifying discovery – the battery-operated

personal fan I had brought had been damaged in transit and was unusable! Just what I needed! Culture shock, saddle sore, and now this! There was no possibility of a breeze in our quarters, and the bed net mesh was too fine to admit even a zephyr, if such were available. I was relying on the fan to help make my sleeping area a bit habitable. Apparently, I was to be thwarted. My mood was becoming less than jovial by the moment. After we were set up, we had a late supper that had been provided by our hosts. Then to bed with trepidations. What would tomorrow bring?

This inauspicious beginning aside, it behooves me to comment on the particulars of our accommodations since this is entirely relevant to our adventure. There was only about two hours a day when we had electricity, about ½ hour in the morning, and 1+hour in the evening. Electricity was provided by a gas generator; we bought gasoline from time to time to feed it. Sierra Leone has no power grid. There was one large oscillating fan around which we perched in a semi-circle to catch a breeze in the evening, looking as if we were supplicants facing an altar, which wasn't far off the mark, beseeching the Fan God for a bit of respite.

There was no running water. Water for showering and flushing toilets came from 55 gallon drums, which were filled by our hosts daily. We did add bleach to the water to reduce the likelihood of infestation by parasites. Water for drinking and brushing teeth was always bottled water, which we provided. This was a necessity and not, in this case, just a middle class extravagance. "Showering" in the "Shower Room" (so named because of the floor drain) was handled in the following manner: a bucket of water (decidedly not heated beyond room temperature) was filled from the drum and carried into the shower room. A "dipper" (a water bottle with the top cut off) was used to anoint one's body. After this, soap, and/or shampoo was applied, and rinsed off with another dipper, or so of water. Crude? Yes! Primitive? Of course! However, after adjusting to this technique, this "Helmet Bath" actually got the job done. I am pretty certain that the smell of bleach stayed with me until I started sweating again. The room temperature water was a welcome "cool down" for me. The rest of our group showered in the evening. I, however, arose early to shower before setting out for the day, which is my usual habit back home. I don't know if this helped me, but I never had any issues with chafing or heat rash the entire trip. (Given that I sweat profusely, these can be problems for me.) Showering in the A.M. also provided me with another "plus." When the electricity came on, I was usually finished with my shower, and could sit in front of the fan alone to cool off before completing dressing. This became a time of quiet and contemplation for me to help prepare for the day. Early on, this was particularly helpful for me in adjusting to my surroundings and reducing the effect of culture shock. Throughout the day, one never really got down time. We lived communally and were never alone the rest of the time. So, this time was very valuable to me, and I both treasured and jealously guarded it.

Our meals were prepared for us by Ed's "entourage." He lived above us with his wife, sons, and several others, both related, and otherwise. I was told that a total of 10 people lived above us. They also did our laundry on a regular basis. Had I known how regular, I could have packed more compactly.

As to the food, I can only say that I thrived on it. There was always fresh fruit at every meal. It varied, but included pineapple, bananas, papaya, coconut, oranges, etc. Breakfast always included cassava porridge, usually hard boiled eggs and/or omelettes (which looked suspiciously like Egg Foo Yong, but were quite tasty), and bread. Lunch was usually sandwiches, either made from some meat item, or good old reliable peanut butter and jelly, which we had brought. Dinner was always rice accompanied by some type of stew prepared with local ingredients and usually containing meat and/or fish. I suspect that, in deference to us, these stews that contained meat had more meat than is typical for the average person. I ate heartily, but, surprisingly, I did lose five pounds on the trip. I have maintained this loss as of the last time I weighed myself recently. I can only surmise that the volume of fruit I ate, and the general lack of indulgence in snack foods had a positive impact. I was eating in a more sensible manner, despite the fact that I don't typically eat three meals per day at home. Also, I never had any digestive upset issues while there. I made roll call every day and was never incapacitated at all.

Also, despite the relentless heat and humidity, I cruised through this experience without incident, except as noted earlier. However, many days I was drinking three liters of water. I regularly used sun block and a wide-brimmed straw hat to shield me. Oh, did I mention that I sweated profusely and always carried a bandana to mop my brow?

On Sunday, I spoke with Abu and asked him if he knew anyone who might be able to repair my fan. He volunteered to take it and see what could be done. Two days later, he came back with it. He was able to get it functional enough that it worked the rest of the trip. Yet another reason to be grateful for his presence. He went a long way in helping salvage the trip for me.

With the exception of the nights without my fan, my sleep was generally quite restful. I had brought an alarm to wake me up in the morning. I generally didn't need it. Those first two days before my fan was repaired, I slept rather fitfully. The rest of the time, I slept without interruption. Of course, there were local roosters who crowed the dawn, as well as the local "Canine Call & Response Choir" to assist me in waking up early enough to shower.

That first Sunday, we awoke early enough to have breakfast and attend church, which was about 10 steps away from our quarters. The service was very spirited and loud from the electronic instruments accompanying the worship. Apparently, the generator had been fed for the occasion. The service was over two hour long with four offerings. Church back home rarely runs longer than one hour. Other than the heat, the length of the service didn't feel overly long. I suspect the bubbly enthusiasm of the congregation had an energizing effect on us. We also provided something out of the ordinary for them, as they seemed to be "checking" us out during the service. Sure, they are used to people from the States on mission here. Still, we are something different added to their lives, at least on an intermittent basis. This was certainly not the last time I felt that the people in Sierra Leone were just as curious about us as we are about them. But their curiosity was never intrusive, nor did it feel like they were suspicious of us. Quite the contrary, they made us feel very welcome there.

After the service, Ed and I spoke. He told me that the young lady we were sponsoring was very actively involved in working with the youth of the church. We also made arrangements for her to drop by later on. She eventually arrived and I got to meet her and took some pictures to show my wife. I also showed her some pictures I had brought along of my wife and MN. My initial impression was of a very pleasant and gracious young lady. She seemed a bit shy, as well. Not too surprising, considering that we had just met.

After she left, our group got in the van for a brief driving tour of Makeni. We visited some local Methodist schools. Every place we stopped, some unknown signal must have gone out because before we knew it, we would be surrounded by local children. The children would appear, and were not notably shy. When we walked around, they wanted to hold our hands, and were jockeying for position to do just that. If one kid let go, even momentarily, another would “ace in” to take his place. Being benignly mobbed and swarmed by friendly children was going to be a fairly normal occurrence from now on. They were also endlessly curious about us, as they typically see almost no white people. As an aside, once we left Freetown, I didn’t see more than about six other whites in country. So the kids’ curiosity was well-founded. Very occasionally, one of the children would be shy or frightened by our appearance. But, that was the exception. Overall, they immediately took to us and accepted us, and we them, as well. These children are truly the best ambassadors one could hope for. They won us over completely and very quickly. In point of fact, one would have to be terribly and irredeemably hard-hearted not to be touched by their warm-hearted acceptance of us. I count myself as someone that children don’t immediately warm up to. Apparently, they didn’t know that. Or else, they weren’t going to let that stop them. While I was initially astonished by this, I soon came to see this as an integral part of the landscape I found myself in. This was the first time, but, certainly not the last time, that I thought that if you walked down the street back home holding the hands of children that weren’t members of your family, or belonged to friends of yours, you would quickly become the recipient of much unwelcome attention. Here, it just seemed to be taken for granted. Sometimes parents and other adults would be in attendance, sometimes not. When they were present, they didn’t seem the least bit concerned about what the kids were doing. Of course, they were as curious about us as the children were. But they never made us feel like outsiders or as a threat. Contrast that with the gut reaction to strangers back home. There is a definite tendency to hold back and withdraw, at least initially. Not here. They approached the novelty with curiosity, rather than shy away from it. This was probably the most pleasant aspect of my culture shock.

Once we left Freetown, the admonition about taking pictures was lifted. As a matter of fact, most people loved to have their picture taken. However, I would usually ask, just to be sure. I was never refused. The children, particularly, would become almost insistent about being photographed. They would strike poses for the camera, and then, rush around to see the results in the preview screen. Digital cameras definitely provided immediate gratification in that respect. Adults were also willing – dare I say “eager”? – to be photographed. I took a lot of pictures!

Eventually, we went back to our quarters to have dinner and to prepare ourselves for our first day of clinic on Monday.

The next day, we left Makeni to go to Manonkoh which was about a ½ hour drive away. The main road was paved and fairly smooth, a continuation of the road we had taken from Freetown. Along the way, we saw people walking alongside the road carrying any manner of objects, often perched atop their heads. We also saw other vehicles packed “to the rafters” and beyond with various and sundry items I often couldn’t identify. At such times, several thoughts would occur to me: the stress on the suspension of these overloaded vehicles must be enormous, and these people certainly get maximum use from a gallon of gasoline and their vehicles. As an aside, I was told that a gallon of gasoline costs the equivalent of \$8.00 U.S. per gallon., a price we have yet to achieve back home. Often, there would be people standing on the rear bumper of these heavily-laden vehicles, holding onto the drip rail, or a net tied over the cargo on the roof, atop which other people would often be perched.

We left the main road that intersected with a dirt road heading south that took us to Manonkoh. The dirt road was narrow and rather bumpy. Fortunately, the distance was not great. The village was fronted along this road. I was told that the population of Manonkoh was 750-800, while Makeni is about 185,000 people. Freetown by comparison is over 3 million. The total population of Sierra Leone is about 6 million. The land area is about 28,000 sq. mi., which puts it between W. Virginia and S. Carolina in size, and 1/3 the size of MN, where I hail from. The population is, however, greater than any of the aforementioned states individually.

When we finally arrived at the clinic, we were greeted and welcomed by a crowd of people with a *capella* singing, dancing, and hand clapping in time with the music. Apparently, we had been expected. Parenthetically, that musical interlude greeted us every day we were there. The warmth of this welcome was much more than a handful of volunteers, with a few trunks of medical supplies could have expected to receive, at least that’s how I saw it. This was an infinitely more pleasant welcome to Africa than the heat and humidity that “welcomed” us at the airport.

Many of those awaiting our services had walked long distances from other villages to be there. Our local clinic volunteers also walked from their respective villages. They, together with Aminata and Amelia (nurse/midwives from Makeni, who rode out with us while we were there) staff the clinic one day each week when mission groups are not there, as I mentioned earlier. They provide needed medical services with very limited means beyond compassion and a sincere commitment. I saw ample evidence of their selfless giving on a daily basis.

Although the official language of Sierra Leone is English, many of the local people were more conversant with the local tribal dialect in Manonkoh, which was, in this case, Temne. The name of the tribe and their language are one and the same. As I also mentioned earlier, our local clinic volunteers provided valuable interpretive services, in addition to their other duties. They were (and are) a tremendous asset to the smooth and continuous functioning of this clinic.

Our particular group consisted of one medical doctor, three nurses, and five non-medical staff to fill in and assist where needed. Several stations were set up: Intake, staffed by an R.N., where height, weight, temperature, and blood pressure were taken. There were two Treatment Stations,

staffed by the M.D. and another R.N.. There was also a Pharmacy, staffed by an R.N. Another area was set up to dress or change wound dressings, staffed by one of our non-medical personnel.

The physical layout of the clinic resembled a picnic shelter back home. It was completely open on three sides. People awaiting treatment sat on wood benches while waiting for their turn. The whole time I was there, I never saw evidence of complaining about how long they had been waiting, and no one tried to “jump the line.” Most of the time, the benches, particularly in the morning, were filled. The level of noise was quite high because of the conversations being carried on by those waiting, or because of an impatient infant. But, it actually resembled a convivial social gathering more than anything else. At lunchtime we would break to go back to Makeni for our meal. Those we hadn’t yet seen would patiently await our return without complaint. Contrast that, if you will with people’s behavior and demeanor in a stateside clinic. Most of us have seen pushy, complaining, impatient people if they have to wait more than briefly. I saw none of that at our clinic. Maybe these people could teach us something about civility and common courtesy. That was not the last time this thought occurred to me.

That Monday, it became clear that not all of our group were needed at clinic. After lunch Dave (another member of our group), Pastor Don, who the locals addressed as “P.D.”, and myself took a walk up to the local Methodist Church to explore the possibility of getting a painting project going there. We were accompanied by local children. This was the first time I was called “Porto.” I had been prepared for this. The first white people seen by the people of Sierra Leone were the Portuguese. As a result, whites were referred to as “Porto.” This was not meant as an insult and was not taken as such. As a matter of fact, it kind of resembled a form of endearment, at least I came to see it as such. As we would walk the streets of the village, children would pour out of the houses to join us. Those who didn’t choose to accompany us, would call out “Porto!” as a greeting. Sometimes it sounded like a bunch of birds chirping. As we navigated this gantlet, we would give them a friendly wave and smile in greeting.

When we arrived at the church, it presented itself as a somewhat decrepit masonry building with a corrugated metal roof. The lettering over the door was the only indication it was a church. When we entered, the pew benches and simple cement altar did identify its purpose. Above the main door, bats had nested and the wall was extensively stained by their droppings. Masonry was cracked and many door frames were either damaged or absent. It looked completely daunting. I was less than enamored about the prospect of getting involved in what looked to be a dirty, dusty attempt to paint and repair this severely maintenance-deferred building. However, Don said that he had brought some funds along for this project. So, we measured off to determine how much paint would be needed. We also planned to buy something to remove the stains from the wall.

Abu, Don, Dave, and I drove back to Makeni, to pick up needed supplies. This was to be my first visit to the downtown area. The place we went to was owned by some Lebanese gentlemen; they sold primarily hardware items. Apparently, other mission groups had made purchases there, so a long business relationship had been established. We were greeted cordially. The store was open to the street. As in Freetown, parking was pretty much where you could find it; no signs were posted

indicating hours or restrictions. The ubiquitous ditch for rain waited to trap the unwary vehicle. Don and Abu were taking care of the ordering of supplies, so Dave and I were free to step outside to observe the street scene. I have to admit that I was starting to get used to the teeming tumult of large crowds of people coming and going who knew where, and I was even starting to find it engaging, to some extent. Local, narrow shops selling all and sundry abutted each other in an endless progression down the block and only heightened the sense that someone with a phobia for crowds would be very uncomfortable in all of this, not to mention the fact that absolutely no provision was made for anyone who was handicapped or impaired in any way. The sights, sounds, and smells only added their own measure to this mad stew. Goods for sale would often be displayed out to the sidewalk, requiring people to walk in the street as they ambled along. The energy level was positively palpable and infectious; I was starting to feel that, perhaps, some of my culture shock was receding amidst all of this.

We made several stops at other shops for additional supplies on our way back to Manonkoh, where we stored them at the home of the local Chief for safekeeping. Tomorrow the painting project begins. This evening, I got my repaired fan back, so sleeping henceforth would be more comfortable. My mood is lifting by degrees. Maybe I will survive after all.

Back at our quarters, our evenings fell into a pattern. Other than myself, members of our group would take turns in the shower. We would have dinner. Then people would journal. I usually did some reading as well. Some would assemble supplies from our trunks that would be needed for the next day. In addition to lighting and energizing the Fan God, electricity would be used to charge camera batteries, and power a laptop computer brought along to record the days clinic activities. At some point, we would gather to discuss the day just past and plan for the next day. This would segue into evening devotions. Each of us took a turn leading that based on material we had each brought along for that purpose. We also kept a daily group journal that each of us took a turn making entries for a particular day.

At some point, the power would go out without warning. Flashlights would come out to help us navigate in the darkness. There were no streetlights nor other ambient lighting. So, the darkness was nearly total. I had a Miner-style headlamp, and I would continue reading in my sleeping area for awhile before turning in.

The next day when we arrived in Manonkoh, Dave and I walked up to the church where Abu and Michael, the local Pastor, who was also one of our clinic volunteers, had engaged several local people to clean the walls prior to painting. At some point, Abu, Don, Dave, and I drove back to Makeni for more supplies. When we got to the Lebanese store, they were serving Turkish Coffee. I love the stuff, and eventually had two cups. This aspect of the trip is starting to appeal to me.

The original plan was to start the painting after lunch, so Dave and I went back to the clinic just to hang out. About 20 minutes later, Don came to the clinic to tell us that they have already started to paint. We walked up there and they had almost completed painting one of the long walls.

Moreover, Don had also contracted with a local carpenter to make repairs on the woodwork, etc. Once again, Dave and I are supernumeraries.

Now for the icing on the cake. This is a Methodist church, as I said. However, I see both Muslims and Christians working together on this project. The other thing that strikes me (and not for the first time) is how hard-working these people are. Throughout my stay, I saw a lot of hard-working people. In a country with more people than labor-saving devices or machinery, I saw an incredible number of people doing hard physical labor. This group working in the church was no exception. They worked hard, but they had time to banter back and forth with each other as they worked. The mood was light-hearted “whistle while you work” rather than gloom and doom. I saw the same cheerful acceptance of life at the clinic, as I earlier mentioned. What is with these people that they can be so upbeat and accepting of each other and life as it presents itself?

Sierra Leone is a predominantly Muslim country. Yet, I never saw any evidence of animosity between religions. Is it possible that they have been through that in the past and have learned to put it aside? Or, is it that they are aware of their interdependence on one another for survival and are able to put aside petty considerations? Also, from my own limited and informal observation, it appears that they have a genuine commitment to family that is more than a political buzzword. Have they intuitively broadened that phrase to include each other? These are nothing more than guesses and idle speculation on my part.

When I looked over at Michael, he was positively beaming about what was happening to his church. When I asked him if he was as happy as he looked, he was nothing less than ebullient in his response. To see this taking place before my eyes went a long way towards making me feel that I would not only survive this trip, but that I was actually starting to enjoy it.

After lunch, Dave and I went to the church where we served as magnets for the local children. Most of the children who were hanging around us were too young to be in school. Most of the rest, if their families could afford it, were attending school. Teachers in Sierra Leone are paid by the government, on an unpredictable and intermittent basis, I was told. As a result, many of them live in poverty, and work on local farms to make ends meet. The schools, themselves, are usually funded by religious organizations. However, they need to charge tuition to cover some expenses. People in Sierra Leone make great personal sacrifice to send their children to school. They truly value education and intuitively know that this is vital for the future of their children and their country. The children are tested periodically in order to progress through the system. Most of them do well on these tests. The parent’s attitude about education seems, by and large, to have been taken to heart by the children. Or else, they take it seriously because they see the sacrifices borne by their parents on their behalf. Ed summed up the value of education for his people perfectly when he stated: “Without education, the only future the children have is petty trade.” That comment transcends Sierra Leone, to be sure.

Later that day, Dave and I met Frank, a local farmer who offered to show us his farm the next day.

That evening, Don and I decided to go out and take a walk around. When we emerged, two of the ever-present kids who hung around outside our quarters, attached themselves to us and accompanied us. In addition to the usual curiosity, they had ulterior motives and asked us for things. Parenthetically, one of the items most frequently requested from us was pens. A standing rule for those waiting outside our door was that they are not allowed into our quarters unless invited, and they did adhere to this. However, when we came out, we were fair game. Various kids hung around morning and night. Sometimes it felt like we were under siege. None of the rest of our group went out with us on these evening sojourns. I certainly didn't blame them as I often felt somewhat inundated myself.

When we went out, I never carried money on me. Don, however, did carry some money and used it to buy food for some of our hangers-on. They told us they were hungry, and I had no doubt that they were. One time, when we were out, a woman approached me with a basket of food items for sale. I honestly told her I had no money. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "I don't believe you!" From her perspective, I was a white man with the wherewithal to journey here. How could I have no money? Her statement was more quizzical than insulting/insulted. I got the irony and didn't take offense. I hope she didn't either. Don and I made several forays out into this Street Theater. I got to the point where I really looked forward to these excursions, despite the coterie that often accompanied us. The energy and activity level of these people was simply infectious, and not to be missed. I have a reasonable amount of street sense and never once did I feel unsafe doing this. Of course, one of our rules was not to go out without another member of our group present, just in case. Just in case never did occur. I'm pretty sure that Freetown, on the other hand, could have the potential for being a bit more risky, based on what I was told. In point of fact, I never ventured out alone while I was in country. After all, I was a pretty visible stranger in Sierra Leone, and part of being street wise is not foolishly tempting fate.

The next day we went back to Manonkoh. We walked up to the church, where people were already at work. Some were painting, cement was being mixed to patch the walls, the Carpenter was at work on door frames, etc. The place was a bee hive of activity. One of the local women was keeping a watchful eye on the children so they didn't get in the way. But, here again, everyone was in good spirits and working hard. The plan was to complete the work in time for church services on Sunday. Based on progress thus far, I didn't doubt they would make it. In addition, the outside walls were getting a fresh coat of plaster, both for repair, and for cosmetics.

When Frank arrived, Dave and I headed out to tour his farm. He lived in town, but his fields were outside the village. We walked along a narrow, serpentine, and not always smooth walking path. Fortunately, I am in pretty good shape and was able to move along pretty well. The heat and humidity were quite high, and shade was not always certain. Both Dave and I were drinking copious amounts of water to keep us hydrated. We were shown fields in the "Swampy" areas. They were dry then, but a series of small hillocks had been built up to grow rice and cassava on top, where they would be safe from washout when the rainy season came; the low areas will channel the rain away. I was told that over 200" of rain can occur during the course of the rainy season, which lasts from May to October. There was also higher ground where different varieties of rice and cassava were

grown. All farm labor is done by hand from planting to harvest. Palm trees grow in profusion as well. The harvesting and extraction of palm oil is a major aspect of local farming. The palm also provides other things, as I would later learn firsthand. Throughout my tour, I also saw guava, bananas, oranges, pineapple, and mangoes growing. Some of this fruit graced our table. Almost all of the “fields” I saw were on land that is not level. Machinery, if such were available, would not be useful. No row crops grow here. Dave, a semi-retired farmer, asked more insightful questions than I could. His input definitely enhanced the tour. Frank was very open and pleasant to us. He is a Muslim, but, early on, he told me: “We all worship the same God.” Would that others could be so worldly.

On the walk back to Manonkoh, we met the local imam, a man harvesting palm wine, and the local blacksmith. I was told that the blacksmith retrieved scrapped car leaf springs to make machetes and other local farm tools. He was working over an outdoor charcoal fire. He showed us some of his handiwork, and once again I was struck by the amount of labor he must expend to produce his tools, which appeared to be very high quality work. By the time we got back, it was time to break for lunch. When I returned, Frank and I were getting back together to continue touring around. Dave, however, was not going to join us; the heat had gotten to him. From here on in, Frank and I got together regularly and wandered around the village and its environs. Dave would join us when he felt up to it. Frank proved to be both an affable and willing guide who spoke very good English; this would prove invaluable in translating for me when we met locals who didn’t speak English. Additionally, he would (perhaps unbeknownst to him) help me navigate through a strange culture without blundering into a breach of local etiquette. I felt extremely fortunate to have met him. I only hope he got as much out of our connection as I did. I was starting to see what my part of this mission was evolving into: To get out and mingle with the locals on a different basis than the rest of our group. This was shaping up to be so much more than I could have dared to hope for, especially considering some of my concerns at the beginning.

After lunch, at my request, Frank showed me the local Mosque. Most of the Mosques I visited in the smaller villages didn’t look different from the other buildings, and this was no exception. It was a simple rectangular building with a corrugated metal roof. There was nothing that identified it as a religious building. Inside, it was likewise fairly simple and not ornate.

After the Mosque tour, he showed me his home and introduced me to his family. Since there were quite a few people around, I suspected that other villagers were present, as well as his family. I also met his mother. He told me that she made nets from palm for fishing in the local river. Other people were processing palm for the oil. Apparently, no one is idle and has something to contribute. These are truly industrious people.

Later, as we wandered around, I saw chickens, goats, and, occasionally, sheep wandering freely around the village. Frank told me that there is no dairy in their diet – no milk, cheese, etc. The animals are all used for meat. I also saw women laying rice out to dry, and vigilantly “shooing” chickens away. Rice is a staple in their diet. Don told me that people in Sierra Leone don’t feel that a meal without rice is a complete meal.

Frank also showed me the respective Men's & Women's Secret Societies. I suspect that, like most others elsewhere, the respective genders gather to talk about each other.

Often, on these ambles, we were accompanied by other villagers and, of course, children. Sometimes, when it got too much, either too crowded or too noisy, Frank "shooed" the children away.

As I earlier mentioned, most of the houses in the village front on the main road. However, Frank and I often went behind the buildings so he could show me other things of interest.

On one of these explorations, we encountered a very pregnant woman. She saw us and said something in the local language, with a sly smile while lowering her skirt and raising her top, but, maintaining her decency the while. I asked Frank what she had said. He said that she was asking if women in my country get that big when they are pregnant. I replied that they certainly did, while nodding my head. I don't know if it was the look on my face, or what it was, but she started laughing, and just seemed to be amused by the whole encounter. As a matter of fact, we all shared a chuckle. The openness of these people never ceased to both amaze and please me. They also seemed to be quite aware that I was just as curious about them as they were about me.

On our way back, I saw a man making baskets used to separate rice from chaff. I asked Frank if he might be interested in making smaller baskets for fruit or bread that I could buy and take back as souvenirs. He agreed to talk to him while I inquired if other members of our group would be interested as well. It turns out that three of us wanted a total of nine baskets. The man was agreeable; the deal was made.

In addition to showing me around, Frank and some of the other locals were teaching me some useful phrases in the local language. I provided them with some mirth when I had difficulty either pronouncing some of the words, or remembering phrases. But, it was all good-natured kidding around. Their overall good-nature and easy-going acceptance won me over. I never before felt more comfortable in a strange group so soon.

One of the things our group purchased locally was a cell phone for the purpose of making brief calls back home. In Sierra Leone, no one has a cell phone contract; one buys a card with a specified number of units. Once those units are used up, you buy another. That is the reason that the main road has billboards advertising various companies competing to sell phone cards. Your only loyalty is to price. I had tried earlier to call my wife with no success. When I was able to make contact, because of the distance and connection issues, there was a lag between speaking and receiving a response. But it did work. I felt better that I was able to assure her that all was well.

The next day was Thursday and we took a day away from clinic to visit other areas. We went to Magburaka which is south and east of Makeni to visit the Peace Monument. A long, punishing ride re-activated my sitting issues. But, the trip was certainly worth it once we got there. This is the place where the contesting sides of the Civil War finally decided to end it. The monument was built

by Bangladesh, so its flag flies alongside the U.N. flag and the flag of Sierra Leone. A very important site for the country.

After that, we went north and east to the Bumbuna Falls Hydroelectric Project at the foot of the Sula Mountains. The dam across the Rokel River is expected to provide sufficient electricity so the excess can be sold. We were told that the dam is expected to be fully operational by December, 2008. However, this project has been under plan and construction since the early 80s. Hopefully, this will finally come to pass as it will be an undeniable boon, as well as a moral victory for Sierra Leone, as it seeks to improve itself.

Ever since seeing the man harvesting palm wine, I was curious to try it. I asked Don if he had any objections to this. He had none. I posed this idea to Abu and he said he would check around. Since Frank is Muslim, I didn't want to get him involved in something that might compromise his principles.

That evening, bolts of material produced by local Methodist women were dropped off. Batik and tie-dyed patterns were available, I bought a tie-dyed piece for my wife. There was also a wood carver displaying items outside our quarters. Here again, I bought several hand-made items for my wife, daughter, and son-in-law.

On Friday, one of the nurses elected to stay behind to recuperate from the heat. Dave and I were pressed into clinic service for the first and, as it turned out, the only time. We were assigned to intake with two of the local clinic volunteers, where we recorded height, weight, temperature, blood pressure, and pulse. Dave did the recording. One of my tasks was to weigh infants on a Balance Beam Scale. Some of the infants were frightened, but one just lay there and, while I was adjusting the scale, reached out and grabbed my nose, not hard or painfully, but it did get my undivided attention. After my initial startle, I started to laugh and the mother, standing nearby, as well as anyone else who witnessed this, joined in. These were small, serendipitous moments that I could never have predicted, nor choreographed, yet were becoming an integral part of the many great memories and stories I was starting to amass. Culture shock, by now, was only a distant memory.

By the way, Steph, the M.D. on our team told me that two most common medical conditions encountered in clinic were due to malaria and intestinal parasites (*i.e.*, worms). There were also a large number of patients with high blood pressure; the high intake of palm oil is probably a strong contributing factor.

Frank came down to the clinic after services at the Mosque. He was still dressed in the garb he wore to services, a long, dressy-looking, but tasteful gown type of garment, plus a hat. He was accompanied by his brother, similarly attired, and I got pictures of them both.

By 3:30 all patients had been seen, so Frank and I walked down to check the progress on the baskets. Frank told me the basket maker was having problems with his back. He wanted to go to

clinic but couldn't afford it. The clinic does charge a very nominal fee that allows people to maintain their dignity and not to be perceived to be receiving outright charity. However, no one is refused service on the basis of cost. Some of the money collected is distributed to the volunteers as a small stipend, which really amounts to a pittance. None of the volunteers is there for the money, you can be sure. I told Frank to send the man to clinic on Monday and I would make arrangements to pay the charge myself. Later, I told Aminata what was going on, and that I would pay for the man to be seen.

A permanent medical clinic is slated to be built up by the local school. Frank and I walked up to check the area out. As we passed the local church, I noted that the work was nearing completion. The transformation was nothing short of amazing. There was no doubt that it would be ready for Sunday Services.

On Saturday, we headed back to Manonkoh, which would be our starting point for a goodwill tour and visit to three nearby villages where our local volunteers hail from. In each case we were greeted by a *capella* singing and a welcome by the Local Chief, or some other functionary. Don made a short speech expressing our gratitude for their welcome and hospitality to us. We were also given a short tour of each of the villages. It should be noted that the government also has medical clinics in the area. However, the cost is prohibitive for many of the villagers. As a result, most of them rely heavily on our clinic.

After lunch, we piled into the van to visit the sugar cane refinery near Magburaka. Locally harvested sugar cane is processed into molasses. There is also an ethanol plant on site. We passed large fields where the sugar cane is grown. In contrast to what we had seen earlier, these fields were fairly level, and amenable to the use of farm machinery, which is extensively used. This refinery is managed by the Chinese; many of the signs are in both English and Chinese. Apparently, the Chinese are developing quite a presence in Sierra Leone and other places; they are making substantial investments in many countries in pursuit of both friends and access to resources. When we first arrived, they were reluctant to let us tour the facility, but after carefully scrutinizing our van and us, they graciously gave us a full tour.

That evening, Ed's daughter, carrying a drum, and several others ("Linda & the Kitchen Crew") came to our quarters to give us an impromptu concert. We were certainly having no shortage of serenading, and we were loving every minute of it.

A cynic could easily counter that since we were part of a religious group, everyone we met was on their "best behavior." However, I wandered around often enough and spoke with others who had been there before. No one that I spoke to reported any crack in the facade of their gracious welcome. I certainly saw none. I will concede that in a country of 6 million people, there are certainly people that exhibit a different attitude. This country would be rare, indeed, if they completely escaped that. I was told that the country does have drug problems. Crime and other ills do exist, to be sure, given the wide-spread poverty. At the same time, I refuse to focus on that aspect. My experience was overwhelmingly positive. That will be my biggest take-away.

One of the things I was told is that our presence there is a signal that outsiders now perceive the country as a safe place to visit, which was decidedly not the case during the Civil War. While we do provide some needed resources to and for them, they are just as interested in knowing us and having us get to know them. In the final analysis, isn't that what most people want -- to be known and accepted as they are, despite superficial differences? Under those conditions, barriers between people melt away. It's a lot harder (or, at least, it should be) to hate someone who has become a friend and is no longer "The Other." Forgive me for seeming to preach. However, these are things that I do feel passionately about.

On Sunday, we went to Manonkoh for services in the transformed local church. The painting, plaster work, repaired wood work, and new painted signs had turned this formerly foreboding space into a bright, inviting worship area. Like everyone else, I felt buoyed by what I was seeing. Ed and his wife Aminata came to join in the celebration. Early on, there was singing accompanied by some percussion instrument I was unable to locate. Eventually, I spotted a man spiritedly playing a home-made triangle. Since the church has no electricity, this was the only instrumentation. His percussive contribution added just the right touch to the musical proceedings; he moved it along without becoming intrusive.

We were immersed in a very spirited and moving service of celebration. It was obvious that everyone was really proud of the revitalized surroundings, with ample justification since they contributed all of the labor to make it so. Michael was also lavish in his gratitude to one and all. There was so much good feeling and goodwill in this entire service that the length (2.5 hrs., with several offerings) didn't feel excessive. Frank showed up at the service and later told me he would come back again for services. Of course, one of his two wives is Christian, and she was in attendance.

Eventually, we headed back to Makeni for lunch. Afterwards, we went to visit the local Amputee Camp. During the Civil War, many were captured and were punished (for being caught, I suppose) by having either their hand or lower arm chopped off by machete. After the war, those who survived tried to return to their villages. Many were ostracized because they couldn't contribute their share to the needed labor. Camps were set up for them. Support for them is almost non-existent. As a result, many of them are reduced to begging as their sole means of survival. When we visited, many of them were downtown doing just that. According to the ones in the camp (primarily other family members, including children), many of them had not eaten for two days! We brought a 55kg. bag of rice for them; this will help, if only briefly. They were very grateful for what we brought. Despite the very difficult conditions they must live under, they were very gracious to us. They gave us a tour of their camp, including a bakery they were hoping to make operational to give them some opportunity for self-sufficiency. I was both absolutely horrified by their plight and humbled by their determination to somehow improve themselves against overwhelming odds. I could only keep asking myself: Where does their hope come from? Maybe the only answer is what choice do they have? I was really brought low by seeing this place. There was nothing that I could find within to justify how things like this are allowed to continue. No one deserves to live like this.

And yet, these people didn't reflect my dark mood at all. Rather, I saw people smiling and being friendly. The children, as usual, were outgoing and accepting.

After we left there, we went to the Nutrition Center, where we saw an example of the great need of this country being addressed in a small but, significant way. Starving infants and their mothers, who couldn't produce sufficient milk were both fed to the point where they could be discharged after 4-6 weeks. This is crisis intervention of the highest order. The Dutch are currently running this through a foundation out of the Netherlands, with support from UNICEF. We met the Doctor in charge, and he gave us a tour of the facility, including a new portion being built to increase the capacity of the facility. Again, we saw people in dire personal need showing great spirit and courage. Under the shade of several trees, a large circle of women were sitting around, most with children on their laps, singing to the accompaniment of drums. In the midst of their unfortunate circumstances, they still were able to find balm and camaraderie in spirited, even joyful, singing. Here again, we brought a bag of rice to help them.

Our final stop was an orphanage run by Abu and his cousin Emmanuele. Again, we brought rice. There are 11 children living there. They put on a little program for us. They looked well cared for. Their facility, which we toured, was clean and well maintained. They are building a new facility closer to Freetown, which we visited on our way back. They will own the new facility, which will eliminate some problems in their current arrangement brought about by being in rental property. Of all the three facilities we visited, this orphanage was the one that presented the least undercurrent of sadness simply because it looked the least like pure crisis intervention, although it certainly was that. In some respects, this looked the most like people who were moving forward, rather than patching up before they could move forward. This did not blind me to the fact that all of these places are there because a real human need is present that desperately needs to be addressed.

On Monday, Frank and I, joined by Dave, visited Muslim and Christian cemeteries and learned about local burial customs. I also saw a palm nursery, where young palm plants are started before being transplanted.

The baskets were ready, so Frank and I went up to talk about the price. When I asked the cost, the reply was "no charge." I said (through Frank) that we fully expected to pay for them. I asked him to name a price. After he and Frank parleyed for awhile, they came back with a price of 5,000 Leone per basket; 45,000 for the lot of nine. I asked Frank if the maker was happy with this price. He said that he was. I told him: "If he's happy, I'm happy!" I walked up to the clinic to tell Judy (one of the members of our team); she was going to pay for the baskets. Dave and I would settle up with her later. She and I walked up together where she paid him and we collected the baskets. Only later did I learn that she paid more than the agreed-upon price because "it seemed like the right thing to do." I certainly couldn't argue with that. As far as we were concerned we had all won: We had a souvenir, at a very reasonable price, hand-made by someone we knew who had received the full proceeds for his honest efforts.

Later on, when I asked about the charge for the Basket Maker's visit to the clinic, I was told not to worry about it. I was never charged!

Tuesday Frank, Don, Dave, and I walked to the local river, the Ceko. We were accompanied by the local children, inevitably. They were particularly attracted to Don, who was often surrounded by them in clinic where he engaged them in songs or word games, which often involved simple math problems, etc. He and they never seemed to tire of each other's company.

At the river banks, we saw sand that had been dug out of the banks and put in several piles. Contractors come out from Makeni and buy the sand to use for cement for construction. The river is also partially blocked, creating a narrow channel where fish can be netted. Frank told me that fish are a very important part of their diet.

Shortly before we broke for lunch, Frank approached me and asked if we would like to try some palm wine. As I mentioned, I had posed the idea to Abu. So, I told Frank to check with him. The plan developed that after lunch, we would get the local man (who I had seen earlier) who collects it to take me out to get some. After lunch, Frank, Abu, the man who will "harvest" it, and I headed out. Three other villagers decided to join us, so six villagers and one "Porto" headed single-file down the path. As we were walking along, one of the villagers with us said something in the local dialect that I didn't understand. I asked Abu for a translation of what he said. He told me that what he said was: "He (meaning me) doesn't walk like an old man." I started to laugh at this, and before long we were all chuckling. I also realized that I was, indeed, the oldest one in our group. Here I was the only white out in the bush with six Africans and I was having the time of my life, again realizing that this type of experience was another example of the delightful serendipity that had become the norm of the trip for me. I felt a level of comfort and familiarity with these people as if I had known them a long time.

Finally, we reached the tree where the man climbs up and collects the palm wine in a large bucket. He came down and filled my 1.5 liter bottle. The wine is already carbonated and ready to drink. Apparently, wild yeasts produce the wine directly from the tree. Fermentation will continue beyond harvest. I had to periodically loosen the cap to "bleed off" some of the carbonation so the bottle wouldn't burst. The others with me had a drink from the bucket, after which they said: "From God to Man," which I suspect is their analog to "Cheers!"

Later that evening, several of our group tried the palm wine. For those who are curious, it looks and tastes a bit like carbonated grapefruit juice. Since we didn't have facilities to chill it, I didn't know how it would taste chilled. It was agreeable anyhow. Since we drank less than half the bottle, we gave the remainder to our kitchen crew.

That evening, the girl we are sponsoring came by for her final visit. In addition to pictures and a letter for my wife, she brought some African clothing items for us; a shirt for me, and a dress for my wife. These gifts were completely unexpected, and I was moved and deeply grateful for her generosity. We exchanged email addresses and plan to continue to correspond that way. Email is

available to them, although because of a lack of reliable, regular electricity, they don't always have Internet access. However, there is an Internet Café near our quarters, which some of our group used. So, contact is feasible, if intermittent and unpredictable.

That night we got a brief rain shower, the first I had seen in Makeni, although we did see evidence of night rain a couple times on the way to Manonkoh.

Wednesday, we made a farewell visit to Manonkoh, where we were officially thanked for our efforts by several village functionaries, etc. I bid farewell to Frank and promised to send him some reading material, as he likes to read. I also planned to do likewise for Ed. It was a bittersweet parting from some of the kindest and most hospitable people I had ever met. I came to a continent of mystery, populated by strangers. I left with a whole new group of friends. I also left with a greater appreciation and awareness of how people can rise above tremendous daily adversity simply by choosing to do so. I felt truly blessed that I had the chance to see and experience this first-hand. I am ready to come back.

I came to the realization that Africa is relatively easy; I came here for a bit longer than two weeks, and I was heading home soon to my pampered existence. What then? I asked Steph, our M.D. who had been here before, if any of these lessons, feelings, etc. were retained when we get home: Does anything really change once time and distance intercede? She told me that her experience was that they can and do have a lasting effect. That's profound and gives me hope.

Later that day, Abu drove me down to the local Mosque in Makeni; I had seen it before, but wanted to get some pictures. It is the main Mosque for the local district and looks more like a Mosque than the ones I have seen to this point. There is no mistaking this one; it is large, impressive, and very photogenic. I got several pictures from the outside. He also drove me by the house and compound being built by the President of Sierra Leone.

That last evening, we got our final serenade of the trip. I will really miss this special treat. It was always gratifying and thoroughly enjoyable, as well as touching.

The next day, we loaded the van for our return to Freetown. There was again a small rain shower in the morning. On the way back, we stopped in Lunsor where a crowded Methodist school is going to have a new building constructed by subsequent mission groups.

We also stopped at the site where Abu and Emmanuele's new orphanage is under construction. It will be a larger and nicer facility with more amenities.

Finally, we returned to the Cape Sierra Hotel for the night. It was interesting that things that seemed annoying about the hotel on the way out were mostly taken in stride on this end of the trip. Hmm.

The next day, Abu drove us along some of the beach area. The country had a tourist industry at one time and is in the process of trying to rebuild it around the beaches. Even though the major benefits of tourism don't always accrue to the average person, I asked Abu if he thought it was a positive. He said that he thought so. I suspect that anything that helps provide some employment would be seen as positive. Unemployment and very low wages are certainly very real problems for the country. Moreover, the return of tourism will be an additional signal that they are perceived by outsiders as a stable and safe enough country to visit.

Earlier, we had gone to a local market where I had purchased a Hematite necklace for my wife, using my remaining Leones. The price started at 30,000 Leones. After some haggling, I got it for 15,000. When I asked Abu, he told me that the price I paid was about right.

We passed the prison where Charles Taylor, the former president of Liberia who had fomented the Civil War, was held before being transported to The Hague.

We also drove by the U.S. Embassy Compound. It is a large and very nice-appearing facility from the outside. We only drove by and did not stop for a visit. This facility is in direct contrast to some of the other areas of Freetown we had driven through, including the area immediately surrounding it. In point of fact, it didn't look like it fit in at all.

Abu dropped us at the helicopter ferry. Again, bittersweet farewells were exchanged. He waited until we were airborne on our way to the airport.

The airport was hot and crowded. However, we had a "minder" (provided by the local Methodist conference at both ends of our trip) who accompanied us and helped us navigate through customs, etc.

Before we were allowed to make final boarding, customs inspected our carry-on and "patted" us down. We were then allowed to board the flight back to London, our last stop before getting home.

Several months have elapsed since my return and the completion of this document. I have had ample time to let some of my impressions sink in and percolate. That was deliberate. The first flush of return had me full of the fervor of what I had seen. I wanted to wait a bit to give me some of the perspective that time and its leveling could provide. So, where am I now? What have I learned? What impact did it have?

To begin with what I saw, in brief summary and recapitulation: I saw the evidence and manifestations of relentless poverty continually displayed throughout my visit. From beggars on the street, through children and infants, particularly, with little to eat, and many children without shoes or suitable clothing. I saw people that appeared to be living literally hand-to-mouth in very marginal housing. As one example, when we visited the Peace Monument, the man who maintained it was reduced to asking for money to use the local squat toilet as his only visible means of support. Early

on, these were some of the things I found myself focusing on. Fortunately, at some point, I stopped seeing poor people living in, in many cases, the most dire and heart-rending circumstances. I was, eventually able to put this aside and see the richness that transcended this depressing vision. What came to replace it was an awareness of several things. I became aware of how industrious and hard-working these people are. They utilize the meager resources at hand in a creative and sophisticated way. I also observed their general acceptance of each other and willingness to co-operate in a manner that appeared to be more than superficial. Their open-hearted acceptance and goodwill was extended to outsiders like myself, without reservations. I had fun with these people! I hope they did, too. Given the laughter we often shared, I think they did.

During my visit, I had several wonderful conversations with Ed. He was both candid, and informative. At one point, I asked him if he thought the current government was going to be able to do what is needed to keep the country stable and moving forward. He was cautiously optimistic. In contrast, when I asked Philius, a journalist, who came out from Freetown one day to accompany us to Manonkoh, the same question, he gave a more reserved, “we’ll wait and see” opinion. Both men are intelligent and well-informed. Whereas Ed is a minister, and Philius is a journalist, their disparate positions may reflect their respective orientations. In point of fact, the future will probably lie somewhere between them. The birth pangs may be painful, but the overall thrust will hopefully be in a positive direction. That latter statement reflects my own hope.

Along that line, a disclaimer is in order. Everything I have said that ventures a personal opinion is based on what I extracted from what I saw or was told to me directly. I do not pretend to speak for anyone else, nor would I wish to. Where I have quoted others, I have tried to be as accurate as possible. However, I do take full responsibility and make no apologies for the entire contents of this article.

Since my return, I have not been idle. I have made plans to return next year. Hopefully, this will be an annual trek. Additionally, I have sent a box of clothing items, etc. to Sierra Leone. Twice a year, my church becomes the staging area for a truck which is loaded with items to be shipped there. If you are in a position to send needed items, contact me for full particulars. There is no charge to you for shipping.

My wife and I have also sent additional funds to the young lady we are sponsoring. We have also sent money to help support the Orphanage and Amputee Camp. We plan to continue our financial support. Anyone who feels similarly moved can contact me and I will put you in touch with people who are active in collecting and disbursing funds. You can be assured of several things: 100% of the funds will go where needed; there is no overhead, and there is a mechanism in place (both locally, and in Sierra Leone) to make certain that the funds are used properly for the purpose stated, with no frivolous diversion. The need is great, and no amount is too little. Tax deductions are also available. Truly, a win-win situation for all participants!

In closing, I would like to humbly make several dedications. First to Lyndy, my local Pastor who showed the way and continues to lead by selfless example. Secondly, to Don (A.K.A. “Pastor

Don,” and “P.D.”) who patiently listened to some of my concerns early on and helped me get over some rough spots. He was also supportive as my part of the mission evolved and throughout its duration. Finally, I want to thank the people of Sierra Leone for their open-handed and open-hearted acceptance of, and unending hospitality towards me. Bless you all, even if you weren’t named herein. You have provided me with many valuable, irreplaceable memories, as well as great yarns and stories that could last a lifetime. Transformed? I’m not sure. But, you certainly touched and moved me in a way that feels profound. In my estimation, that is, as they say, sufficient unto the day.

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