

## THE WORLD AS ICON

As most of you know, I have just returned from five eventful weeks in Ethiopia. Words cannot begin to describe the fullness I have felt and experienced throughout this journey, but perhaps Tom Cheetham's title to an important book can begin to hint at a possibility for understanding these weeks (both yours and mine)—**All the World (is) An Icon**. This is an exceptional book, and I shall be using it as an interpretive lens this Fall in our work, but also it frames a way of describing what I experienced in Ethiopia every day and almost every moment. It also points to your life as Iconic as well.

So I will use this metaphor to express some of my reflections about this recent trip.

We often go on journeys to change ourselves--the way we think and feel, and to challenge our perceptions. This was certainly true for me. On this trip I decided to step out of my normative western, American setting as much as possible and enter as fully as I could into the Ethiopian world and context. I lived like an Ethiopian would typically live in various regions of the country and levels of society. As a result I was welcomed into their lives and families and felt myself becoming more and more "Habesha" (their word for themselves as Ethiopians)--though the color of my skin didn't change much, but it did often become "burnt" which is what Habesha means.

What changed were priorities. My priority was to experience their life and lives and not focus so much on my own. This is partly what it means to "lose one's self"—to step outside the ordinary boundaries and lovingly experience the "other" as the self. Often I felt myself to be an "Ethiopian" (or at least they were responding to me as an extended family member—one of their own).

All of this is "iconic" for the world as a reflection of the divine Unity of Being which binds us all together in one family. We are "one being" and to feel that I was one with Ethiopia and Ethiopians was often an ecstatic experience (standing outside the self in the "other").



Then there was the entry through the "icon" of the country and its people into something higher or transcendent to our human selves. Often, every day in fact, people and persons became iconic, and I could see the face of God shining out through them. Many times a street person, often dirty and crippled would come asking for money, and I always intended to give, and when I did everything would change and we would be "friends" and sometimes we would hug and kiss—and I remembered Jesus then, and knew it was He in the midst of us!!!

But in reality an icon, is never a static artifact. Though it may seem they are that way, actually icons are in some sense living and dynamic. We



can experience an icon as dead and static, or we can experience it as a dynamic living entity what is influencing us even in the present moment. That is the way Ethiopians think of the many icons around them. Icons are images of living agents.



Ethiopians



would then act out their iconography and I could see that they were practicing their faith iconically--being active agents for others--I influencing the lives of others by loving acts of kindness and generosity, and it would only inspire me to experience

more of the same. The film about “paying it forward” came to mind.

Suppose, then, that **All the World (including your own) Is an Icon** and that we are all active agents in such a world. My



friend Sinetayehu became a living example for me. He and I were walking to breakfast one morning in Gondar. As we walk he buys a bunch of bananas without saying anything about it, and

we walk on. Then in the stretch of two blocks he suddenly stops me and says, “stay right here.”

He walks across the street and steps behind large tree, then motions me over.

Behind the



a  
and  
tree  
is a



crazed individual that he knows and loves living under a plastic tarp and to whom he has given the bananas. Once he knows it's safe and the man can

receive a guest, he wants me to meet him. It is an iconic moment!! Again, I knew “He was in the midst” and the world became an icon.