

THE FACE OF BEAUTY

One day in Addis Abeba my friend Birku said to me, “Do you want to see the other side of Addis? The one that is hidden behind the tall buildings they are constructing everywhere?” Of course, I said, “Sure. Let's go.” And off we went into a shantytown not too far away from where we started out on one of the main thoroughfares.

The road into that world quickly became a path, and the paths we walked snaked through structures and buildings of all sorts. Given our world at home we would never consider this anything other than a slum. But these were the dwellings of real people, with real lives who were doing their very best to survive in what can only be described as unacceptable and deplorable conditions for contemporary human beings.

I had, of course, been in similar regions of many other cities. It was not unlike India or other parts of Africa, but on every occasion it was nonetheless shocking, and a wake-up call from surroundings we call “normal.”

How can people live in such small spaces and with so little? How can they survive, raise families and even thrive without what we call, “the amenities”

of modern life? How is it possible to exist in such surroundings today? How do people do this? How can they get from there to somewhere else? What was I really looking at? How could I understand this world and my responsibility to it? Such an experience is always instructive, putting everything else in perspective. We who have so much (even Ethiopians who have more than this),

live next door to people who have virtually nothing and can barely feed their families or pay their bills—if that, if that.

The tendency is to rush through and get back into a safe comfort zone. It is easy to push it all aside and get it out of your mind so you don't have to think too much about what it must mean to live in these circumstances. But Birku, an engineer, wanted me to see, and I am glad he showed me this part of the city—this contrast to



our world, so I would not forget, so I could witness it anew for myself.

In our half hour walk, something extraordinary happened. We were passing through these warrens and greeting people and children that we met, saying our “Salaams” when we walked right past a

dwelling that literary “jumped out at me.” It was lined with flowers. It had flowers and plants growing up the walls. They were beautiful, and that was what struck me— BEAUTY exists and can exist everywhere, and someone cared for and loved the beautiful even there, and took care to protect and nurture it.



told him about the house and what I had seen. I asked him if he could retrace our steps and find the dwelling and he did. I asked him to take pictures send them to me. He did and I received them gratefully. They are treasures to me now, and icons, and a deep teaching about this world, and about the human spirit and the presence of beauty.

I had witnessed beauty in what we would otherwise call ugliness. I saw powerfully that beauty exists everywhere. Behind many of these walls was the beautiful, residing in the hearts of the people who lived, loved and cared for others there (their children and the aged) for example. Beauty can be broken and

occluded, but it lives and humans know it and given half a chance they show it.

I was stunned into awed silence. I was behind Birku, and my other friend Sinte, when I saw this and they were walking on. I stopped to look briefly and then I too went on, but the images were now completely in my mind, and I pondered what I had seen for hours. Who was this person? What did this mean? I had not taken any picture and so I had no “proof” of what I had witnessed, but the images lived in my mind for days.

Later, after getting home. I wrote Birku and



Another truth hit me. People can have nothing and yet love the beautiful and maintain their humanity and their dignity

despite everything—even in the worst of conditions. We who have so much often lose our dignity in the mundane and in the vulgarity of our abundance. Throughout my whole trip I was amazed at how clean and full of pride people could be even when there was such hardship and difficulty all around them. I was amazed and humbled and glad to have witnessed the strength and beauty of the human spirit. It was another icon and manifestation of the beauty of the divine face everywhere.

