

Engaging with Our Environment This Christmas

Travelling between Mongu and Lusaka in Zambia one needs to travel through the Kafue National Park. Journeying through this Park one can encounter many animals such as monkeys, a variety of different deer and impalas, and sometimes elephants.

One day I was going from Mongu to Lusaka through the Park as the sun was breaking through and heralding the new day, I was halted on my journey with an amazing scene of three elephants standing and drinking on the edge of a waterhole. This picturesque scene empowered me. I was engrossed in it. I was absorbed by what I was seeing - the elephants at the water's edge as part of this peaceful picture were in their natural habitat, and I was the visitor. I had a strong feeling of being invited into their lives. The elephants were peaceful and enjoying the natural surroundings at the waterhole, receiving nourishment from the water. What added to the peaceful surroundings was the breaking of the sun behind the elephants. Silence was evident.



I immediately stopped the car and sat. I was absorbed in the scene. There was a strong feeling of invitation. I was drawn into the scene by leaving the vehicle and sitting on the grass, to become part the scene before me. There was a peaceful, silent atmosphere and an awareness of being part of the mystery of God alive in the beauty of creation. It was a precious moment of encountering the beauty of God alive in our world. I was alone but engrossed in the silence of the natural world of God's beauty - the rising sun and the elephants in their environment, each respecting the other but part of the whole picture.

Being in Zambia I have been fortunate to often encounter life in the beauty of God's creation and the joy and reality of people who are part of my experience of life here. There is a contrast between beauty and the struggle for survival.

As I enter the season of Christmas, how can the ordinariness of life bring hope and joy and expectancy through my interactions with life around me?

Through the experience of this scene with the elephants as the new day burst into life I was taken into this mystery which allowed me to touch joy and love of life. I sat there in a trance - totally absorbed. I was an outsider yet part of the beauty. There was a oneness in this silence. Each creature was at home with the other and I was at home in contemplation.



Life in Zambia has opened many surprises for me as I encounter diverse aspects of engaging with its life. The beauty in the harshness of life reveals itself in my surroundings and in people I encounter.

As you travel to Western Zambia the harshness of the land is evident, yet people live and survive in these areas. The soil is sand and stumpy vegetation. When the wet season comes the environment changes. Greenness takes over from the brownness and dryness. The Lozi people are busy planting their maize. There is a busy-ness in life. The rains bring life, purpose and energy. As I prepare for this Christmas, I ponder what energy and life do I create? Am I in touch with my local environment and surroundings that give me purpose? Do I spend time being part of my environment or do I run through life and miss the opportunities that are alive around me?



Mongu is situated on the edge of a flood plain of the Zambezi River. The Zambezi is a large river and the plain is enormous. This oasis appears from the sandy and dusty surrounding environment. To walk or to sit along the banks of the Zambezi is to encounter life. Contemplation is being present to life and to the Divine. Just the natural beauty of being there opens one to the environment – the strong flow of the river with its natural twists and turns, the various moments of the currents, the variety of birds, the animals - cattle, pigs, poultry, the variety of greenness in the vegetation, the different colours in the water. There is so much beauty to engage with by just sitting or walking in the surroundings of the environment. It is gift to spend time in the picture. This contemplation enriches my life and energizes my inner being. It is an invitation to be part of God’s creation. Yes, it is evolving and changing. The sky can provide a degree of variance – the dark/black clouds that bring the shadow of rain, the grey looking horizon, and then later, the clear blue sky or the distant white clouds all add to the richness of God’s creation. There are magnificent sunsets with their many colours, but mainly they are bright red. It is a gift we can take time to embrace and to absorb its beauty, allowing myself to become part of it and immersed into it.

As well as being absorbed in the beauty that the River Plain is inviting me into, there is much activity:



- People walking at different paces,
- Cars speeding past,
- Canoes going from one side of the river to the other,
- Single houses or groups of temporary housing so that people can only live there during the dry season,
- Men fishing from their canoes,
- Women selling fish on the roadside,
- Children playing in the vegetation and in the water,
- People greeting each other,
- The bicycles with people taking produce to the market or returning from the city - Mongu.

Within the setting of the Zambezi River there is much activity and life. The river provides livelihood for the people. It is a source of energy and enjoyment. The environment provides reason to engage and enjoy.



I have a strong memory of my first encounter with the Zambezi Plain. It was such a surprise to encounter its beauty within such a harsh environment. It was a gift of life – and a mystery of the God who is active in that life. The river has its own beauty and treasure as well as providing much life and energy for the people and the environment

When I am at the Mongu Mall the local taxi drivers recognise me as the man who walks along the Kalabo Road on the Plain. I was surprised I was known. The encounter with these men provides a connection. We have a conversation about the life around the River and the treasure that is part of their life and existence. They want to converse about it and have invited me to be part of the conversation. The natural beauty of the life of the birds, the water and environment is all part of the story which has come to be part of me.



Most afternoons I walk. It is probably not the best time of the day to walk because of the heat but it keeps me from sleeping or dozing. And it is a productive time for me. As I walk I encounter and interact with different people. I am amazed how conversations develop. My use of the Lozi language is very limited but the excitement of the people I converse with when I use some Lozi words is tangible. They want to continue the conversation in Lozi. When I convey to them my limited knowledge of Lozi I ask them to teach me a word or two and they are delighted when I am able to say the word the next day.

One afternoon two men were seated not far from our house. I greeted them and they responded. Soon the question was asked: 'Can you give us a job?' This is not an unusual question. It is quite common. As the conversation developed I sat on the ground opposite them. We talked about many things – the difficulty of seeking employment, the weather, the economy, the government, and how Zambia was changing. The conversation was engaging and inspiring. There were a variety of topics and I was surprised by its length as well as by the many topics about which we talked. It flowed with ease and I found these men very engaging and wanting to spend time with me. As I was about to leave, and moved to stand, both men rose instantly and we embraced and shook hands. It was a telling and graced-filled moment - we were present to each other!

This conversation was life-giving for me as I felt the warmth of welcome from these two men. Yes, there was an early question for employment but we moved beyond that initial question to many other matters. They accepted me and invited me into their lives, sharing aspects of their lives with me also. I was overcome with how they

were able to speak English and articulate their interests, concerns and feelings. The more I reflect on this conversation I am amazed at how being present to each other develops relationship.



As I come to the end of another year of life I contemplate the gift that Zambia has been to me - the beauty and the harshness of the environment and its animals, as well as the gift of the people and how I have been gifted by them. Life is full of invitation. How do I embrace these gifts? Do I drift over them or do I engage with them? Life has many aspects and I am encouraged to be alive to them.

As we engage with our world this Christmas season through reflection and contemplation on our lives, may each of us be engaged and alive in welcoming the stranger and the people around us into our lives, as well as engaging with the beauty in the environment in which we find ourselves. Christmas celebrates the birth of the Word in our world through love, relationship and compassion.

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From the Editor: *This simple and beautiful reflection on the ordinariness and innate beauty of life around us comes all the way from Africa. It draws us into the harsh beauty and surprising gifts in the environment of Zambia – its landscape, its fauna, its people. The reflection invites us to enter into, to engage with and become part of our own environments, whatever they may be. In doing this we build relationships and networks, and when relationship is there, compassion can flow, and healing can happen. As we sit in contemplation between 4.00 and 5.00 pm each day in these pre-Christmas weeks, let us be mindful of the powerful means we have of giving birth to networks of compassion and healing in the desert places and harsh beauty of our world today. Our network is expanding and we are building something beyond our imagining...together...*