

I spent the first two weeks of August 2010 with Peter and Janice in their home in Freetown. We decided that I should write about my stay there, so here I am.

First of all, I need to say that I have never been in Africa before. And I did not have much knowledge or even curiosity about the continent. Since the decision to visit Freetown, I have read and talked a lot about Africa and I am a bit more informed now. I am also enthusiastic in learning and discussing about African countries and people, and this blog I am writing is a way of doing that.

People

I want to start with a dialogue I had with a woman from Freetown while I was still at Heathrow. We were waiting to be called to leave the departure gate and we talked a little bit. She had spent a month in London and was returning home. I asked her what she had missed most and she answered “Warmth.” Then I questioned her if she meant the climate or the people and her answer was “Both”.

After a couple of weeks in Freetown and then back to my hometown (in Porto, Portugal) I cannot say that I miss the hot and rainy season I experienced there, even if I miss the green, but I do miss the warmth of the people from Sierra Leone. I miss the “Hello! How are you?” way of interacting with people, not that we became friends with the people we greeted on the street, even if we eventually could and sometimes did chat a bit, but we had the most pleasant feeling of being in an unthreatening (I owe this adjective to Peter) and welcoming place. And that feeling accompanied me throughout my stay in Freetown, a place where human beings are friendly and also visible to one another, so why not greet each other?



Children are specially warm and affectionate. And they smiled at us, touched us with their hands, played with us, and wanted to see themselves in our photographs.

Once, on a walk with Peter, we passed a man who was listening to the radio, it was the news about the trial of the former president of Liberia, Charles Taylor, at the International Court for Human Rights in The Hague. Peter and I got interested and stood to listen to the news, watching the man’s comments and non verbal reactions. It may sound excessive but I felt that the three of us were communicating, were sharing feelings and ideas, and that happened because that man

“allowed” us to stand there, let us share his time and space for some moments and he did not feel invaded or uncomfortable by our presence. For Peter and me, it was an enriching moment because we were aware that we and that man were quite different listeners of the same news.

I consider that all I have been describing is warmth, warmth that I miss too. My own experience with people from Freetown is described in this way in the Bradt Guide of Sierra Leone: “politeness and warmth can be found in bucketfuls.” It was also interesting to know that in the World Giving Index 2010 published this September, Sierra Leone comes on 11th place, a subject Peter and Janice are going to write about in a future blog.

Of course in talking about the way people connect with each other, I am not talking about relationships. This was something that was not possible in a couple of weeks, however I know that African people tend to have a wider net of relations than Europeans or Americans, life is much more communal and much less ‘on your own’.

For me this communal way of living is something that brings a lot of questions. I admit that I do not understand it very well and I need to learn much more about it. In a way, being linked to other people to whom we have obligations and duties to can lead to lack of freedom, we have to do what others want us to do and are not free to choose our own route. It also seems very difficult in the African social world to have a ‘room of one's own’. A lack of freedom and



individuality is a feature of social relations.

However, there is a dark side of the freedom and individuality I praise so much. I will give just one example. Listening to the news of some catastrophe, where thousands of people die and being told that some bodies have not been reclaimed by anyone, has made me realize how some people are completely alone in the world and how frightening that is. I think that such a situation would not be possible if we lived within a communal society as African societies seem to be.

Religion

I am starting again with a dialogue I had with another woman from Sierra Leone while at Heathrow, this time on the queue to the check in. When I told her I was going to visit some English friends who belonged to the Methodist Church she asked me if I was a Methodist. My answer was “I have no religion.” to which she replied “That is impossible, it is impossible to live

without a religion!”

It might be right that it is impossible to live in Africa and not to be religious. From what I have seen and experienced in Freetown, religion seems to pervade people’s lives.

As I am not a religious person, I do rarely attend any religious services, just weddings, baptisms and funerals. And the church I know is the Catholic Church. I do not have any particular memory of the few services I have been to.

In Freetown, I went to three Sunday services. What struck me most was the joy of the people at church. That joy was shown in the singing, on the dancing, on the way people greeted each other, and their dressing. As a newcomer I was asked to present myself, something I have never been asked before at church. I did feel welcomed.

I had the privilege of being in the baptism of Ali, a friend of Peter and Janice. Ali came from a Muslim background and had decided to become a member of the Methodist Church, having worked as the President’s driver for more than ten years. It was a beautiful and moving ceremony.



Ali allowed me to live another special moment in Freetown. Ali was feeling ill and Peter and I paid him a visit. Ali rents two rooms in a house inhabited by other people. The house is located in an area in Freetown like so many others: precarious housing, all cramped, with poor, if any, sanitary conditions. To get to Ali’s place, we had to pass several other houses and saw people cooking or doing their washing. We greeted them and did not feel we were seen as intruders. On the way to Ali’s home and at his home, I felt the dignity of those people in the midst of poverty. While at Ali’s, Peter asked us to pray and for a few moments, I believed God was there. Well, at least love was there and if God is love, as Peter said to me a long time ago, maybe God was too.

Believing in God helps people to cope with their daily life which is so hard in so many ways. Talking to a colleague of Peter, I asked him if people in Freetown were happy and he said that they were. I could see this on the streets and people would say to me “Tell God thank you”.

The links between religion, wretchedness and happiness have been discussed for a long time but reading about it is very different from seeing it. And I feel divided between a critical perspective and admiration and even respect. I find difficult not to acknowledge that the way people

experience religion may promote acceptance of the unacceptable. At the same time, I see the dignity of their lives and I cannot but be in awe of the way they manage to live.

War and Peace

Sierra Leone had experienced a brutal civil war which came to an end in 2002. From my understanding of what I have heard from some people in Freetown, peace is the absolute value. Even if people have to live with the physical and psychological scars of the war, even if people have to be neighbours to someone who had killed or



raped a relative or friend, even if people's homes were destroyed, peace must be maintained because war is far worst.

During the war, several people had their limbs amputated. Today, there is a football league of amputees. I saw them playing on Lumley beach. They were graceful!

What can I say about the way people in Sierra Leone lead their lives after the war? Does God help them? Is there a Sierra Leone genotype? Have they learnt that peace is priceless? Can we learn with them?



Scenery

Freetown has far exceeded my expectations about its beauty. The sea, the light, the hills, the views, the beaches, the trees – especially the cotton trees – make Freetown a stunning place.

All the walks Peter, Janice and I did together were spectacular. I miss those walks!

Peter and Janice

Peter, Janice and I did some calculations and we realized that we met in 1992 when they were living in Porto. It has been a long and very interesting friendship with a lot of sharing: we share thoughts, books, movies, photographs, recipes...

And of course they have shared their present experience in Freetown with me.

I had the opportunity to attend a Sunday service conducted by Peter and Janice at Mercy Ships, where they meet with other internationalists from different denominations, once a month, for a service. On that Sunday, it was Peter and Janice's time to prepare the service. And they prepared it! They dramatized a dialogue between Jesus and the apostle Peter and they were really good. What struck me most was their involvement and preparation even for a simple ceremony in a simple place with not many people. I see the same involvement and preparation in their blog too.

The three of us had some interesting discussions about Africa, Sierra Leone, the civil war in Sierra Leone, the meaning and types of marriage in Africa, the meaning of what it is to be a "person" in African culture. We watched some movies about Africa, read bits of books and articles. And I know we will continue to do all this through their blog, emails, texts, other meetings – that is a feature of our friendship. It is a demanding feature, I am aware of that, that enriches and challenges me and, I hope, them too.

And all this wrapped up with Janice's cookies, BBC World Service and some good laughs!

For all this and much more I feel deeply privileged and grateful.

Rita Estrada, Portugal, September 2010.

--

Posted By Peter and Janice to [ClarkServInSalone](#) at 9/15/2010 04:45:00 PM