

Two Chairs

a story out of Ofrica: changed lives and cultures



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The related books in the Ancient Passages series contain story-based passages that can collectively help the reader imagine a new way to live, achieve clarity in understanding, and find insights for personal application.

The methodology encouraged for study of the wisdom contained in those books is the *Discovery* approach or individual meditation.

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Our Thoughts:

Sometimes an experience can have an unexpected impact, a troubling, stirring, or even unintended consequences that set us up for change. The change can lead down a path toward goals and a future we may have always wanted, but never expected.

Beginning in <u>Two Chairs</u> and with <u>The "Discovery" Approach</u> you may find what could be a new path to new potential. It happened for Gary and me in...

... Two Chairs

When we landed I stepped out into what I expected, a third world country, one of the poorest. What I was not prepared for, in a very dark night, was the pressing humanity — thousands of people in the dark shadows, constant shouting, motorcycles revving to a high-pitched scream, and racing threateningly among the throngs of people.

The humidity slapped me in the face and the smells were somewhere between stale and a stench. We were escorted to and from customs by a petite Sargent wearing a large gun on her right hip. The gun looked even larger on her. Our luggage was brought into a rope-fenced area that was lit by a floodlight run by a smoking generator. Immediately men stepped from the darkness into the edge of the light around the fence. I learned later they were part of the Sargent's security team.

We needed a bathroom. In her acquired British accent she explained that she could not secure our safety in the darkened outside public restroom area. Instead she led us to her house about a block and a half away from our luggage. She wanted all of us inside. She lived in a stand-alone building about the size of a standard American garage. There was an animal skin rug on the rock floor beside a bed, a small table, a lamp, and an open pantry with some canned goods in it. That wasn't the only thing that was open. The toilet was just sitting in the room. There was a small sink with running water. We were told we would need to put water in the tea kettle and pour it into the toilet to flush. She turned away toward the door.

I could now see her face in the light. She had a determined look about her. She was beautiful and the scar across one cheek did not mar her beauty. I asked her if she had lived in her home long and she answered that when she was promoted to lead the airport security teams she had been given this place to live, always near her work, and she was privileged to have a place to herself. As I took my turn at the toilet, her soft conversational tone changed to a commanding voice as she spoke loud enough for everyone to hear, "Finish what you have to do, but I have orders to keep you moving."

Our travel gear had been moved into the back of two vans and the security team, a ragged looking group of men in street clothes, very different from the smartly dressed Sargent, were standing by. They were intimidating, looking intently out into the darkness, and it occurred to me that they were probably battle-hardened from the horrors of the latest war, a war that devastated the entire country.

As the vans pulled away, the Sargent held up her left hand and waved slightly. I thought she was looking at me. We went through narrow streets and finally onto a version of a blacktop highway. As our driver sped away I checked my watch. Most of us had been traveling for 15 to 18 hours and we had a four-hour drive ahead of us.

As we sped along I estimated our van's stopping distance to be well beyond where the driver could first see even a reflector in the driving rain and total darkness.

There was another problem. There were no reflectors. I was wondering why our driver was driving in the middle of the road. The answer came quickly. A large black truck that was stopped in our lane materialized out of the fog, rain, and darkness. There was no warning, no lights, no reflectors, nothing. Our driver swerved hard and never had time to even touch his brakes. I don't know how we cleared the truck, but our troubles weren't over. As the van shook and swayed, we were tossed about. When we were back in the middle of the road I saw the second van had also cleared the truck. The driver of the second van began flashing his low and high beams and our driver pulled over and stopped.

I saw the second driver in the side mirror as he ran up, pulled our driver out of the van and began screaming at him as they pushed each other back and forth on the asphalt. Finally, our driver dropped back and the second driver continued to scream at him. One of the men with us had lived in the region where we were going, and he explained that the second driver was telling our driver to slow down, that he could kill

himself if he wanted to, but he was not to endanger us.

When we pulled out our driver reduced his speed for a few kilometers, and then increased his speed again. I turned to the man who had spoken and whispered just above the noise of the van, "Say something to him." The man whispered back, "He is obviously a good driver. I think we should take our chances with that and not rile him again." I nodded, and we continued our drive in the darkness.

I was still awake when we pulled off the highway onto some rough roads. It was just before 4am when we arrived at a compound. As they were opening the gate, our trip coordinator came from the second van to explain that these were the best available accommodations. Our housing for the next several days would not be available until the next night. We would each have a room, and we were to be packed and loaded before breakfast at 7am.

The best accommodations looked like a previously bombed-out reconstruction that had never been completely rebuilt. The generator was off for the night. The only light was from our LED headlights. After three hours of trying to sleep we grabbed some fruit, bread, and instant coffee.

Our time that day and much of our time over the next days was spent going to various villages. We would be ceremonially welcomed and offered rice cooked with a vegetable, and sometimes a meat or fish. Some of us were initially cautious in eating the food, but we all learned quickly to eat only a small portion and generously thank the people who had prepared it. That simple meal was an extravagance prepared for us, but whatever food was left was all these people would have to eat that day.

It was in the villages that we saw peace reining between people of conflicting faiths and factions. We met men and women of influence who had opened the door for discovery studies to be started and accepted in their villages and we heard their stories. These people were always individually introduced to us as a 'Man or Woman of Peace.' The introductions were lengthy, and everyone applauded as they were being introduced. There was an evident pride on their part as they stood in their formal and colorful clothing to be acknowledged.

We observed the groups each time reading an ancient passage, asking the same simple questions, and following a pattern of guidelines that could easily and rapidly be reproduced in other groups. It was explained to us that there were no leaders in the groups. Everyone took turns asking the questions. No one ever told anyone else in a group what to think, what to believe, or what to do. Each person either discovered for themselves from the passage or from the discoveries shared by others in the group. We had been told that the groups build a greater sense of community and accountability. We saw both and

sensed that was happening. We were there when a group of one faith opened their meeting area (a concrete platform in the center of the village) to be used by a group from another faith.

We saw people of great joy who were living in the midst of great hardship and caring for others without prejudice — others who did not share, or no longer shared their traditions, and no longer worshipped their god or their gods.

We did things that were very different from our world, like walking across a narrow, jagged bamboo bridge with no side rails, crawling at times to maintain our balance, with continuous warnings from our interpreters to not fall from the bridge to the crocodiles in the water below.

We saw schools that had been built by one faith for the children of another faith. We saw water wells that had been dug by one faith for the use of another faith. We heard the stories of one faith putting their bodies and their lives between attacking members of their own faith to protect the lives of another faith. We saw rice, cooking oil, and medical supplies being stockpiled at great sacrifice by one faith to save and sustain the lives of another faith in what would quickly become a devastating national disaster.

We saw what we no longer or very rarely see in our own countries: a belonging to each other, people serving the best interest of others that superseded the descent and differences that had dominated previous generations for centuries. We saw hope and support for diverse people in one of the most unlikely places on the planet. I began to wonder if this could happen in our home countries, and, if so, how?

After that first short night we were staying in a twostory brick building in an open compound on a hill in the city. I later accidentally discovered that we had displaced families who normally lived where we were staying, and they were living communally on mats in a large covered concrete area. I was given a larger room on the second floor. From the window I could see the shed where the generator was housed, the open area where the women cooked our meals, and the trail that led down to the well. Water was carried up to the compound.

On the first night all of us were exhausted. I inflated the rolled up sleeping pad I had brought, and laid it over an ultra-thin mattress supported by rough handhewn bed slats. At 3am I woke up and went over to the window. The rain was coming down in dense sheets, more like a waterfall than what I had ever experienced in a rainstorm. It was difficult to see the generator shed, but when lighting flashed I could see a shadowy figure standing under the eve of the building and looking out to the trail and the open area behind the building.

The torrential rain was pouring from the brim of his hat and I wondered how he could see anything, but he

was there. It occurred to me that he was there to guard the generator, but I learned later that there were several night guards stationed around our building.

The population was dense in the city. Many more people lived there, but most lived much like the villagers. In the late evening the smoke from a myriad of open cooking fires could be seen on the mountainside across a valley. The traffic was insane and intense. None of us could figure out the rules, if there were rules, and we all agreed that none of us would have survived driving ourselves.

Our breakfast before we went out in the morning was mostly fruit and some kind of porridge with Nescafé instant coffee packets. Maybe because it was the only coffee available, but I started really liking the coffee before we left. We were assured the fruit was carefully washed in good water and all of the water we consumed was bottled. Contrary to stories we had heard, no one got sick. The days were long. Lunch would be very little in a village, and dinner was later after we returned. The dinner meals were very good and always included chicken.

One morning before breakfast I went outside with my Nescafé. There were two chairs under a tree and Gary Jennings was already sitting in one of the chairs with his coffee. A pesky, aggressive rooster was pacing around the chairs crowing continually. As I sat down, I looked at the rooster, and said, "What about this one?" Gary looked at him and said, "I hope he makes

it to our dinner table tonight." I said I doubted if he would and we sat in silence for some moments except for the rooster who did not want us there.

Gary took a sip and looked up from his coffee. He was pensive as he said, "I did something this morning I have never done before. I often have some kind of reflective study or quiet time in the morning, but this morning I did a different kind of meditation. I took one of the passages they use in groups here and went through answering the questions with what I was thinking about and discovering for myself." I said, "I did the same thing for the first time and realized this approach is not just for groups." Gary then said what I was thinking. He asked, "How do we get this to happen in our home countries and communities?" I said, "I don't know yet." He said, "I don't either, but I am committing myself to help make it happen."

Some in our group chose to rest in the very few times when it was an option on the schedule, but Gary and I did not miss any of the larger meetings in the city. It was in these meetings that we saw with greater clarity how reading an ancient passage, asking eight simple questions, and following ten practical guidelines could make the discovery approach not only work in people's lives, but work powerfully to make peace among people who had previously hated and despised each other.

It was back in the two chairs under the tree with our coffee after dinner that we met again on the muggy, dark, overcast night before we would leave the country. A small light was still coming from the kitchen and with that and a single torch burning in the distance, we could see each other. Thankfully the rooster was not there protecting his territory.

We again asked ourselves what we could do to see peace-making movements also happen in our home countries and communities. We talked and realized we had some ideas, but we still didn't know the answers. Those moments were very emotional for both of us. We made commitments to each other to find answers and give ourselves to seeing the change they could bring about. That was several years ago. We have never wavered from our commitment or from encouraging each other.

As part of our commitment, the books in the <u>Ancient Passages</u> series are modeled after the individual and group study approach we observed. In them you can discover life-directing answers for yourself. People around you, either alone or in a group study, can discover answers for themselves — answers that will bring prevailing personal peace and greater wisdom.

What happened in small ways in villages, in surprising ways in our own meditations, and in bigger ways in the city can happen in you and in your world. The result can be a belonging to each other and serving the best interest of others that supersedes the descent and differences that have grown to dominate cultures. The result can be hope and support among

diverse people even in most unlikely places. Non-judgmental groups can become a place of support, where healing of hurts and care for the soul are not only possible, but present and pervasive. Individuals can grow. Groups can be formed and can flourish with simple questions, practical guidelines, and ancient passages.

Each of us were impacted — changed by our time in Africa. What we saw, we are beginning to see in our home countries!

Before we made the drive back to the airport, this time in daylight, we were taken to the city center. It was just a series of small, open shops where roads merged and the motorcyclists were very aggressive. At one point I was in the right place at the right time to grab one of our group and pull her onto a curb and away from a racing motorcycle that would have hit her. The cyclist never tried to stop. As he flew by, I realized there were unexpected dangers that even our shadowing guards, a police presence, or the soldiers stationed along our travel routes could not anticipate or prevent. I searched the faces around me and wondered who our guardians were. By now I was sure of one thing. They were always close.

People would step out from their makeshift shops and our guides would say something, sometimes in a voice that was stern, and then lead us to the shops of people they trusted. No one bought much, but the region was famous for the tie-dye technique artists use to produce vivid-colored fabrics for garments and home decor. We were taken to a shop where this was their specialty. I found three gifts to take home and several others bought gifts there, but the greatest gifts we would bring back were within us; what we had seen, what we had heard, and what we had experienced.

In the airport all of us were cleared through customs to leave the country except Gary. We never knew the reason, but he was being detained in a holding area. I called our hosts and decided to join Gary in the small room where he was sitting. I could not leave without him and I wanted to be with him. I was told that if I entered the room I would also be detained. As we sat in two chairs, the only furniture in the room, our flight time was nearing and nothing was happening. As Gary and I were being observed by security officers in the next room, I realized I had really begun to love this man, his heart, his compassion, his responses to what he had seen and experienced. At one point in our time together he said, "I will do anything for you, Larry." No one had ever said that to me.

I received a call from our hosts to let me know they had reached the Sargent and a government official. As I thanked them the Sargent and a smartly dressed man in a business suit came into the room. She smiled at me as she opened the door to the inner room and she and the man stepped inside. Something in my gut tightened and hurt as I thought about her and her world. I knew I would probably never see her again.

As the man entered the room the guards snapped to attention. He walked past them to an office. Within moments we were being hastily ushered without explanation and without apology out of the room, down the stairs past the customs area, out onto the tarmac, and up into the plane. Huge smiles from our team greeted us as we found our seats. We were all going to our homes. As I put my backpack away and settled in, going home felt good, but tears formed in my eyes. I was going home, but I was leaving a huge part of my heart behind in a place where lifechanges were bringing about acceptance and peaceful culture changes. I was leaving with a deep desire to see what was happening there also happen in other places. I had never in such a short time begun to love people as I had in the villages and in the city. I was already feeling the precious pain of missing them that I thought might never go away. It never has.

As I write this, I am reminded of the two chairs under the tree, and the two chairs where Gary and I were detained. Our experience had more potential, and became more meaningful because we were in it together. I am also looking at an empty chair across from me. If you are up for adventure take a walk through the ancient passages, and see what you will discover. You could also find two chairs, ask someone to join you, and see what can happen together.

