

Living on an Edge

A personal reflection from Zimbabwe

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Some days ago, I was walking my dog in my neighbourhood in Harare (not on the white dust roads of Kufunda Village) when I saw two boys, around 8 or 9 years old, roller skating. The skates were bright pink and, in another world, probably meant for a girl. There was only one pair of skates, so each boy was wearing one skate and using it like a scooter and pushing off with the other foot. The tar road is full of potholes, so part of the game was dodging them. The boys were laughing a lot and having a great time. Clearly, it was so much more fun being two and sharing the skates, rather than being one skating alone. They brought a smile to my day and seemed to encapsulate some of the spirit of Zimbabwe at the moment; deprivation and lack of material goods but, at the same time, resurgence of spirit, resilience and an ability to make a plan for any given situation.

This is why it has been difficult to articulate what it is like to do this work, to live in this time in Zimbabwe and on our planet.

Right now, Zimbabwe is a place of paradox. In the last few months, the last few weeks, it feels like we get closer and closer to an edge. A friend who has been splitting her time between her home in Zimbabwe and her recently-married daughter in the UK writes an online diary. Reading her latest reflections, I am struck by the darkness of the place she is in. Hope is receding for her. She is overwhelmed by a visit to a once-thriving rural school in Zimbabwe, where now grass is overgrown up to the edge of the peeling buildings, the children crowded into the dormitories are sharing beds or sleeping on the floor, the windows are broken, the curtains are shredded. The water supply is dependent on power and power cuts are frequent and long-lasting. During her this trip, she reached the end of her tether. She no longer wants to endure the searching and queueing that making a plan involves and has chosen to leave Zimbabwe, this time taking her family photographs with her and wondering how long it will be before needing her “Africa fix” forces her to return.

A couple of weeks ago, the whole country was without power. It went out at 8pm on a Saturday night. We soon realized this was nation-wide and not just the daily “load shedding” we have become accustomed to. Power was restored Monday afternoon but, that evening the lights flared briefly and died. Yes, two weeks later it is back again. But it is shaky. We don’t know for how long or what is keeping us going

We are living on an edge. I have had no water at my home for three weeks now. Other parts of Harare have had no water for over 2 months and people are collecting water from open wells in the nearby “vleis.” Since the power has gone, the reservoir levels have plummeted and most of Harare has no water at all and even boreholes (deep narrow holes drilled through the ground to the water table) don’t pump water without power. School children in the city are asked to take 10 litres of water with them for the school day. A friend visiting from Britain had to discover that an adequate body wash could be had with 4 cups of water.

In the meantime, we are enjoying a record-breaking rainy season. More than record-breaking, there is water everywhere. The plentiful rains have led to a feeling of more abundance. The earth is gentler at the moment – the grass is lush and green, the forests are full of wild mushrooms and the fields bursting with edible greens and young crops. Lorraine Muuya, who works in Kufunda's herbal programme and helps with office administration, usually has a half hour walk to Kufunda and has to cross a river. Right now, the river is in flood and would be impassable except for the enterprise of two young men who have set up a crossing system for the adventurous made of a rope and an inner tube. One strong young man on each bank of the river will haul you across, as long as you can hang on to the tube! Cost? Z\$500 000 each way. Lorraine made this crossing with her two youngest children while her husband watched anxiously from the opposite bank and is now staying at Kufunda until the water subsides.

Yesterday, a man braved the river to come to Kufunda to seek treatment for an ailment. On the return journey, he was too weak to hold on to the tube. He was swept away in the raging flood waters.

In Zimbabwe, we are also witnessing the collapse of a cash economy. Most people live a life where they do not earn enough even to cover monthly transport to and from their place of employment. We are bombarded by the official line that the economy is booming, that agriculture is about to turn around, that people are happy and healthy, that the official exchange rate is Z\$30,000 to 1US\$. Yet we live coping with the day-to-day reality that people are starving, that manufacturing and industry have virtually collapsed, that the average life expectancy is now 34 for women and 36 for men, that infant mortality has increased tenfold in the last 5 years, that an estimated 3 million economically-active Zimbabweans (out of an adult population of little over 6 million) live and work outside the country. Our reality is that that even the official exchange rate is 30 million times what it was in 1980 and the unofficial rate, which is the rate at which most trading and business occurs, is currently Z\$3 million to 1 US\$. This is three billion times what it was in 1980.

I wrote the above paragraph a month ago. The exchange rate now is Z\$5.5 million to US\$1. A week later, as I finally finish this article, it is 6.5 million. By the time you read this, the rate will have probably reached Z\$10 or 12 million to 1US\$.

The pressure on the people of Zimbabwe has been relentless over the last few months. Inflation is now estimated at over 150,000%. Almost no figures make sense. We have just printed a \$10 million bill that was worth US\$2.50 when it was printed a couple of weeks ago and now worth just over \$1.50 People have been queuing outside banks since early December to try to withdraw their money. There is simply not enough cash in circulation to go around.

I tried to draw personal cash out of an ATM and as I put my card into the slot, I received a tremendous electric shock. Although there was no cash available, I was still asked for my pin number and had to endure numerous more shocks to conclude the futile transaction.

We have reasons enough to be despondent and none of us can keep buoyant indefinitely. Yet Kufunda provides a peaceful refuge and a sacred space amongst the timeless rocks and trees which allows us to breathe, to gather our strength and sense of community. There is a sense that

within this collapse is a real chance for rethinking how we live and that Kufunda allows us the space to seize this opportunity and work with it. There remains a strong spirit of welcome, of hospitality, of hosting, of living – simply living with what is – here and now.

Bev Reeler, a wise woman who sits on the Kufunda Board of Trustees recently shared this with a circle of friends:

Are we strong enough?
To walk this journey?
For this is where we find ourselves

Some times you just have to cry

Flickering through this darkness
is a spirit which holds us in a moving flow
a sense of love
buried for times, then rising again to the surface
as we watch our friendships and communities transform
as we hold the space for the real things
of life and death and gratitude and vision

called to pay attention to what is right and good and beautiful in our lives

sometimes,
when we can rise to the surface,
we see
that these challenges are precious to us
they have drawn us together
and taught us our frailties and our resilience
and inter-dependence

We at Kufunda are not free of panic. This month, no Kufundee has been paid. It has taken almost a fortnight for a transfer to reach our bank. So we have no funds. What do we do? This week, we decided that, instead of having our weekly communal lunch, we will spend the cash we have on buying maize meal in the market so that each family can continue to cook and eat.

In all of this uncertainty, the gifts we are discovering are the gifts of time, of caring, of love. It takes time to collect wood, to prepare a fire, to heat water for a guest to bathe. It takes time to gather mushrooms in the forest, to carefully clean them and present them ready to cook. It takes time to grind the maize or the wheat, to cook the sadza or bake the bread. We take time to visit people and listen to them about their lives, their children, their illnesses, their fears, what keeps them awake at night, what happens to their families and children if they die. And we take time for the slow preparation of herbal remedies; the herbs steeping in alcohol, preserving their healing properties, to be captured in beeswax, oils and lotions.

Increasingly, we bring and share and exchange. I have lots of mangoes and bananas in my garden. Lorraine has avocados. Allan's mother has a wheat crop. Fidelis has maize. Sikhethiwe

and Sophia gather wild mushrooms in the forest. The Kufunda permaculture garden has spinach and beans. Tsitsi and Ticha have bright yellow cherry tomatoes and lots of mint. We buy butternuts and cucumbers from the next door farm, peanut butter from one of our community members, milk from Marianne's mother.

In Zimbabwe today, we are learning how to live with the collapse of infrastructure, of institution, of many formal systems. The formal education, health delivery and the banking systems are all starting to crumble. We are supposed to have an election in March, just 7 weeks away from now. Logistically, it is hard to believe Zimbabwe has the capacity to hold an election, never mind such a huge combined one, fielding a total of around 3000 candidates, requiring over 300 polling booths (many of them in remote rural areas currently rendered inaccessible by flooded rivers), the printing of 4 separate ballot papers and thousands of election officials.

Yet with all of this, when I spoke to a friend on the telephone, a writer and filmmaker often given to bouts of dark depression, she was almost ebullient. "It's amazing," she said. "We are living a special historical moment. This must be how it felt just before ..."

I didn't hear the end of her sentence on the bad mobile phone connection but I filled in the gap from my own imagination; and sense of possibility: before what? Before the Berlin Wall came down, before the routing of Milosevic.

Something is about to happen. Perhaps it is. Today, the edge feels closer.

In November, we visited one of our partner rural communities with some visitors from South Africa. There is nothing like the hospitality of a rural home. Water is drawn from the well and carried to the open fire to be heated so that you can wash in comfort inside the reedwalled bath house. For me, it's the ultimate luxury, hot water in the bush. Tonight, it feels similar at home. In the afternoon, we managed to pump water into the geyser and the afternoon sun on the solar panel is enough to make it nicely hot. We didn't have to heat it on a fire, but it's the same kind of feeling of comfort and community. There's a lot of love in those simple preparations. So we ate outside in the light of a full moon, we washed in candlelight in soft water with frothy suds and afterwards lay a bed with clean sheets. Very simple comforts. Our strength is in looking after each other.

We don't know what to expect here, but we offer a place of learning where the paradoxes, the divisions, the big questions are closer to the surface. Formal systems are in a state of collapse. Every day, we have to deal with what that means and find alternatives. We can't deny the uncertainty. It is visible to us every day. We can see how the cutting of trees dries up our rivers and erodes our soils. We have to work out sustainable ways to eat, to produce energy, to manage our waste, to keep our water clean.

And it is this work which gives us strength, and also hope and the path to continue walking.