

## Lessons From My Three-Week Trip To Kenya

*Become a student of your own travel experiences*

**By Dennis Coyne**

**A**s we seek to balance life and work, we often think of our next vacation as one of the ways of restoring balance in our lives. In the Midwest, many of us spend weekends at our lake cabins. When I lived on the East Coast, we went to the Jersey shore.

Sometimes, we take a big trip, far away from where we live and what we do. These journeys abroad can provide rich learning, not only about the people we meet and the places we visit, but also about ourselves. Such trips are as much an adventure (looking outward), as an invention (looking inward). Travel provides us with an opportunity to be students of our experiences, reinvent ourselves, and rewrite our personal narratives. My recent trip to Africa was just such an invention.

I was invited to visit Kenya on a fact-finding mission-to learn about the needs of the country-on behalf of a small non-profit foundation. Not knowing anything about Africa other than what I had seen in the media-haunting images of starving children and desperate people fleeing oppression-I didn't know what to expect beyond imagining that the three-week trip would be difficult.

### **Even The Preparations Were Daunting**

My first task was to visit the travel clinic to learn about the risks of travel to Kenya. What I learned first was that I am not an intrepid traveler. The nurse talked about the recommended precautions to be taken to avoid being kidnapped, hijacked, assaulted, robbed, or worse; then she lined up a series of injections on her desk and calmly read through the side effects of each, which included paralysis, stroke, and death. All I wanted to do was to run out of there, and I told her so. Eventually, though, I rolled-up both sleeves. She said she would give me the most painful shots first. Somehow, that was scant comfort. When it was all over, I mumbled a "Thank you" and all too eagerly left.

Each of us took a suitcase packed with supplies-clothes, shoes, protein bars, vitamins, books-for the children we would visit in the schools and orphanages along the way. When we checked-in at the airport, our bags were overweight. But the gate agent, wanting to help the children, waived the baggage fees, as did, the fellow at the customs desk in Nairobi. I appreciated these small acts of kindness. There would be many more in the days to follow.

In country, we soon learned to drink only bottled water, eat only cooked foods, wear insect repellent, sleep under mosquito nets and drive along rutted roads. We came prepared to do all of that. But I hadn't come prepared for much of what I otherwise experienced in Kenya.

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### **Kenyans' Hospitality And Resilience Seemed Limitless**

The contrasts between age-old practices and modern technologies startled us. For example, people who had no electricity or running water in their homes asked us to correspond with them by e-mail. We often saw a woman filling a jug with water from a polluted river, balancing it on her head as she carried it toward her home for cooking and bathing, and stopping along the way to answer a cell phone tucked in the folds of her skirt. I had no idea that 21st century technology was so prevalent in such an impoverished country.

There are two other qualities of life in Kenya that I hadn't anticipated: hospitality and resilience beyond anything I had ever known or imagined.

Kenyans' hospitality met us at every turn. Each group we visited sang a greeting to us upon our arrival; each meeting began with prayers and blessings for our safe travel and ended with more prayer and song. When our van departed, we all felt the sweet satisfaction of having been welcomed and blessed.

This hospitality met us at the many homes we visited. We were always welcomed with refreshments, often a prepared buffet. Occasionally, a woman invited the eight of us to stay with her. Sabina's home, for example, was modest, with no running water or electricity. As we had traveled a long way that day, Sabina asked if we'd like to take baths. Gratefully, we accepted her kind offer. Slowly, one after the other, Sabina showed us to a small room toward the back of the house. There, we found a pail filled with warm water. The water had been heated over an open fire behind the house. As I bathed, I thought of the care and concern of the women who were tending that fire. After our baths, we were served a large meal, prepared over that same fire. That night, we slept in spaces that Sabina made available to us. I don't know where she and her friends slept that night, but it was clear that their priority was that we should be comfortable.

As for resilience, we saw it everywhere-in the many orphanages and schools that we visited, in the projects that provided potable water, in the HIV/AIDS clinics. Typically, these programs were supported locally, on a shoe-string budget. The people we met, who were faced with overwhelming odds, were generous, committed, tenacious, resilient and compassionate. The words of Ram Dass came to my mind, from the introduction to his book, *Compassion in Action*:

Compassion in action is paradoxical and mysterious . . .  
It is joyful in the midst of suffering and hopeful in the  
face of overwhelming odds. It is simple in a world of  
complexity and confusion. It is done for others,  
but it nurtures the self. It shields in order to be strong.  
It intends to eliminate suffering, knowing that suffering  
is limitless. It is action arising from emptiness.

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### **I Needed A New Way To Understand My Experiences**

During our stay in Kenya, my experiences often overwhelmed me. At the end of our first week, I found myself feeling anxious and uncomfortable. As hard as I tried, I had no rational construct with which to organize and reconcile age-old practices and modern technologies, or generous hospitality and undaunted resilience amidst great suffering and abject poverty; I couldn't sort, sift or reconcile all that I was experiencing. In the midst of this dissonance, I felt myself withdrawing. Slowly, I realized that I might do better if I didn't rely exclusively on analysis to guide me. Instead, I could incorporate my mind, body and spirit as my guide. Because I've studied for years with Richard Strozzi-Heckler, I came to rely on his words from *Holding the Center: Sanctuary in a Time of Confusion*:

What we actually have to offer one another is the simple but daring contribution of our genuine presence. Techniques and theories abound and we can learn half a dozen in an hour, but it is in the pulsating contact between living things that healing and beauty take place. Presence is being present—a state impregnated with an open-minded curiosity, relaxation, and power that comes from seamlessly knitting together one's mind, body and spirit.

As I became more centered and open-minded, I was better able to feel fully engaged during the remaining days in Kenya.

On the eve of our departure, we were thanked for coming. Those in our group who had visited before were especially thanked since so few people return to Kenya. We were also thanked for our donations that helped to sustain several projects. Above all, we were thanked for visiting their homes and accepting their hospitality. Never before had white people done that, and it meant a great deal to our hosts. Hearing that, I was stunned. I had spent so much of my time wondering how we might raise money and help them with their various initiatives that it had never occurred to me that the most important thing we had done during our three weeks in Kenya was to accept their hospitality.

### **My Lessons Are On-going**

Our trip home was tiring. Though we were glad to step back into the comforts and routines of life in the United States, the transition was not seamless. A few days after my return, I unexpectedly found myself organizing the shirts in my closet by color: long-sleeved shirts on one side, short-sleeved on the other. I also sorted through my pants, separating the winter from summer weights. Never before had I done anything like this. What was I doing? I think I was simply trying to bring back some order into my life. Although I didn't know how to line-up my experiences in Kenya, I did know how to bring order to my closet.

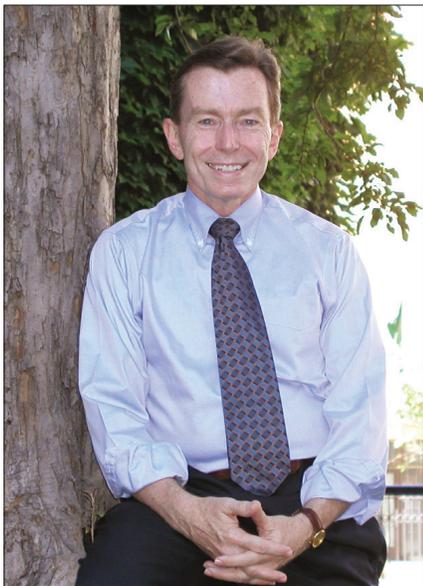
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Many well-intentioned people asked us about our time in Kenya: "Did you have a good trip? How was it? Was your trip difficult?" I answer by talking about the terrible roads in Kenya, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the countless orphans there, and the unfamiliar food that we did not like.

But I soon realized that I was unwittingly perpetrating common stereotypes of Africa rather than describing the richness of my experience in Kenya. Nor was I honoring the people I had met. I've begun, instead, to talk about the virtues of the Kenyans we met and what they've taught me about resiliency, hospitality, and compassion in action. That's a true story, and worth telling.

I encourage you to be a student of your travel experience. Consider where you've traveled and who you've met along the way. Has your travel caused you to reconsider who you are and what you value? How has your personal narrative shifted as a result of your travel adventures? Sometimes, buying the airfare is the easy part. The challenge is to remain relaxed, curious and open-minded on your journey. That certainly was my challenge, and I am glad to have stepped up to it.



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