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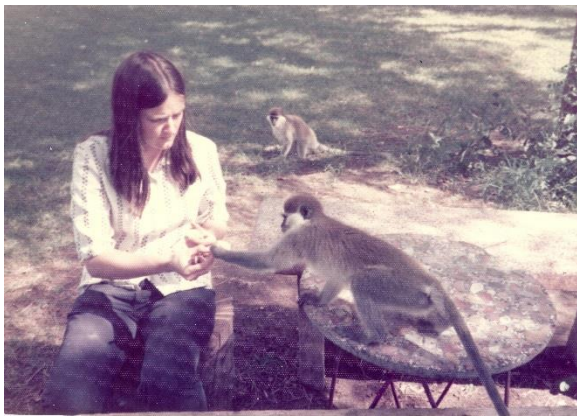
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Intersections: Ethiopia, Peace Corps, and a Fulbright Experience

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I don't remember the exact moment I decided I would join the Peace Corps. I just knew I would go. Somewhere. Anywhere. Imagine me, small town girl from small town America off to see the world. When I received the formal acceptance my senior year of college, I tore open the envelope and read that I would be going to Ethiopia. My friend asked, "Where is Ethiopia?" and I responded, "I think it's in Africa." Ethiopia, the land of ancient kingdoms, the Ark of the Covenant, its own written language, castles and obelisks, rock-hewn churches, majestic mountains, thirteen months of sunshine, and never once under a colonial power. Ethiopia has touched my life in immeasurable ways and, once again, I have returned home to Ethiopia, this time as a Fulbright Scholar.

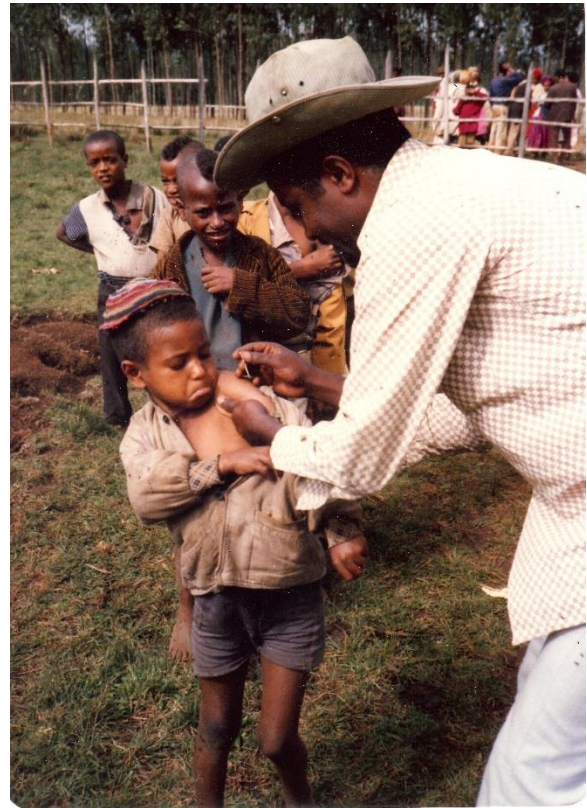


Janet Lee serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the southern part of Ethiopia

Maria Thomas, author (*African Visas* and *Come to Africa and Save your Marriage!*) and a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, Ethiopia, herself, probably said it best: "If you've ever lived in Ethiopia, you never really put it behind you. You follow the news, any you can get, avidly. You look for people who have just been there. You find Ethiopians on the outside, or they find you. You collect stories. You wait for any chance to go back."² Like Maria (pen name for Roberta Worrick), I served in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia

in the 1970s, in my case the village, Emdeber, among the sebat bet (seven house) Gurage people.

Since my return to Colorado, to school, to work, I have thought about Ethiopia every single day, without exception. Like Maria, I have been known to walk up to complete strangers—be they students, hotel staff, airport employees, drivers, the guy at the local sandwich shop—and greet them in Amharic, the official language of the government. The usual response is a great big smile, and who has a bigger smile than an Ethiopian? In some instances, we have become great friends, but in all cases, our days have become brighter as we share a common bond, a sense of fellowship, and shared memories.



Smallpox eradication in the countryside outside my village during my Peace Corps service

Who are the influencers in our lives? How does one touch another's soul? Need the acts be deliberate and intentional or can they be random, a single word or touch? Did a Jesuit education open me to finding a mission or was I already predisposed? Must one travel far and wide or can we be part of the solution through our everyday activities? How do we lead lives that matter? I can't say that I really spent a lot of time thinking about these questions. I can say that the answers to these questions are a part of my everyday life.

In my lifetime, I have witnessed ordinary people doing extraordinary things. I recently spoke to the Ethiopian Deputy Ambassador to the United States. He came from a nearby village some thirty kilometers away and attended the school in which I taught as a Peace Corps Volunteer. At the time, I would have recognized him by the sweater he wore. He probably walked barefoot to school. He would have lived with a group of boys who brought provisions from home for the week. He would have studied by the light of a paraffin wax candle. And here he was the Deputy Ambassador to the United States. The power of education and opportunity, of dreams and resilience.

And there is Marta, the first female senator under the Emperor. When the Derg (The Committee) came into power and the Emperor overthrown, she and her immediate family traveled overland to Kenya, resided in a refugee camp, and ultimately sought asylum in the United States. She founded a nonprofit organization and has returned to Ethiopia where her organization, Project Mercy, has built a hospital, elementary and secondary schools, and an experimental farm that teaches modern agricultural techniques and husbandry.

I was in Addis Ababa the day the Emperor was deposed, September 12, 1974, the day after Ethiopian New Year. I recall walking up Churchill Boulevard feeling invisible as thousands of young men marched up the street in celebration, chanting, "Haile Selassie, the thief." Just weeks before I witnessed His Imperial Majesty (HIM) exit from a church, coming from prayer. Though small in stature—the tip of his hat was level with his limousine—he was majestic. There was a bond between HIM and Peace Corps; volunteers were often invited to the palace. We were the children

of Kennedy, serving in the remotest part of the country.

After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the Emperor Haile Selassie attended the services, representing Ethiopia. Sargent Shriver, brother-in-law to the president and the first director of the Peace Corps, orchestrated much of the services and attended to the protocol, including greeting heads of state. In recollection of the solemn ceremony, a colleague of the elder Shriver recounted to Shriver's son Mark:

The first person he greeted was Haile Selassie, the emperor of Ethiopia, who was just over five feet tall. Selassie was crying when your dad handed him the card and said, "Your Majesty, I want this card to be a memorial of President Kennedy, who loved your country very much."

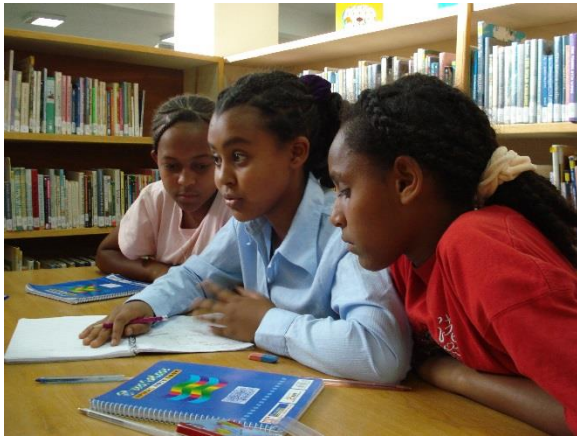
Selassie said to him, "President Kennedy needs no memorial in our country because he has three hundred of his children working there today," a reference to the Peace Corps volunteers.³



A rural school outside of Butajira with Project Mercy

Years after my Peace Corps service, I have had several opportunities to return to Ethiopia: once to visit Project Mercy near Butajira, also in the Gurage Zone; the next time to set up a school library in memory of a colleague; and later to set up a children's library in Mekelle, Tigray, during a five-month sabbatical in 2010. Through word of mouth and the internet, a noted author and storyteller, Anne Pellowski, approached me about

conducting children's book publishing workshops in Ethiopia, and we joined together and set up workshops in Addis Ababa and in Mekelle. As a librarian at Regis University in Denver, Colorado, I was able to take the opportunity to meld my profession and my passion into one: libraries and literacy in Ethiopia. Each time I returned to Ethiopia I knew I was returning home.



In the Segenat Library in Mekelle during my sabbatical

Over the years, many Ethiopians have immigrated to Denver, where I live and work. I remember when the first restaurant opened and I was able to introduce my young sons to the joy of Ethiopian food and eating in the traditional manner with their hands. Now there are scores of Ethiopian restaurants that line Colfax Avenue and other nearby vicinities. Twenty-two years ago, Denver Sister Cities formed a twinning with Axum and a few years back, nearby Aurora, Colorado partnered with Adama. Mayors of all four cities have had opportunities to travel to and from, encouraging tourism and economic development. The Ethiopian community in Colorado comes together for the Taste of Ethiopia, Ashenda (a girls festival), and New Year (September 11). The African Community Center, which reports to the Ethiopian Community Development Council and is located in Denver, serves the needs of refugees from the four corners of the world, including the most recent refugees from Syria and Myanmar.



On Denver Street in Axum. Denver and Axum have been Sister Cities for 22 years

This leads me to my most recent opportunity to travel to Ethiopia, August 2017, to the historic city of Axum. My eldest son, himself a Fulbright Scholar in the Philippines, was perusing the Fulbright site and noted that the University of Mekelle was actively seeking scholars in a variety of areas, including Information Science. Although my time in Mekelle was fulfilling, I investigated options in nearby Axum, the site of the Axumite Heritage Foundation Library, a community library that was undergoing a significant building project. While I was on sabbatical in Mekelle years earlier, I met Dr. Tsehaye Teferra, founder of the Ethiopian Community Development Council, who visited the library in Mekelle. He and I kept in touch and I followed the progress of the Foundation Library. Each time I was in Ethiopia in the interim, I took the opportunity to visit Axum and the library.



In front of the Foundation Library

With less than a month to put together a viable proposal, I contacted the president of Aksum University, requested the necessary letter of invitation, and received a positive response within 24 hours. Considering the instability of internet connectivity and the frequency in which the government shuts down communication, I was amazed. It was as if it was meant to be. In due time, I was notified that I had received the Fulbright Scholar award and was assigned to my choice of Aksum University. Along with fellow “Fulbrighters,” I arrived in Addis Ababa, attended orientation at the American Embassy, and received credentials at immigration in late August. Three of my colleagues were placed at institutions in Addis Ababa and three in Gondar. I was the sole Fulbright assigned to Axum, and I was quite comfortable with that arrangement. The only other American in the community was a Peace Corps Volunteer who had extended for a third year. He, like I, chose to live within the community and not be part of a large ex-pat circle isolated from the day-to-day life of the country.

For ten months, I split my time between the university and the Foundation Library, one almost being the extension of the other. I investigated open access journals, set up a computer lab, cataloged books, advised on library operations and collections, was part of a team that saw the grounds of the library transform, and provided workshops in other parts of Ethiopia on children’s book publishing in local languages. But more importantly, I became part of the community. Staff at the hotel where I was staying frequently remarked that we were family. I joined in

celebrations such as Timket, Gena, Fasika (Epiphany, Christmas, Easter), and christenings. Never once did I spend a holiday alone, but was part of my extended family of co-workers, library staff, shopkeepers, university faculty, and hotel staff. We fasted together and broke bread together. Axum is a small community and I knew that not only were people watching me, but they were watching out for me, whether it was the announcer at the airport who took me under his wing when the last flight of the day was canceled, the stranger who interceded when a transient became too aggressive, the soldiers who watched over me at a distance when there was a disturbance in town, the man who literally picked me up from the cobblestone sidewalk when I tripped on a curb and took a bad spill, and the guards at the hotel who not only watched over me as I waited for my daily ride, but became my friends. Not a week went by that I wasn’t offered a free ride by a Bajaj driver concerned about the heat of the day and intensity of the sun. Although I didn’t drink coffee, the buna ladies greeted me daily on my walks to and from the library or the field of stelae, the sculpted stone monuments for which Axum is famous.



During the Meskal (Finding of the True Cross) celebration in Axum outside St. Mary of TSION church.

There were some low moments such as when the government declared a state of emergency and shut down internet, social media, and data plans, but lifelines in Axum and far away Denver brought me comfort. Tragedy also struck when a student was killed while at university in another region; a small boy was hit and killed as he crossed a road near the hotel as I listened to the blood-curdling scream of his sister; and the unexpected death of the four-year-old son of a co-worker. Faith and community pulled together to comfort the family and friends.

I went on walks every day throughout the neighborhoods, the nearby hills, but most frequently past St. Mary of TSION church, where the faithful believed the Ark of the Covenant was housed, and to the stelae fields, or to the Queen of Sheba bath. I marveled at my fortune to live in a community with such historic treasures. I frequently stood in awe at the wonder that is Axum.



In the children's library at the Axumite Heritage Foundation

Books also brought me comfort and time for reflection. Regis University, my home institution, had chosen *Across that Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America*,⁴ by Congressman John Lewis of Georgia as its One Book, One Regis selection. Lewis was a young pioneer during the Civil Rights movement in America, a time of hope and despair, tragedy and joy, hardship yet a promise for the future. The book is an excellent look at faith, truth and reconciliation and is a testament to the power of nonviolence to affect social change. I thought at the time that this would be an excellent book for the university

students to read together as protests were occurring, a state of emergency declared, and universities shut down. I saw many parallels to that time in U.S. history with the growing unrest occurring in Ethiopia that ultimately led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and the election of His Excellency, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. In the 1970s, I was in Addis Ababa when the Emperor was overthrown and witnessed the turmoil that led to the Red Terror. This time I bore witness to the peaceful transition of one Prime Minister to another, symbolically demonstrated by the handing of the Ethiopian flag from Prime Minister Hailemariam to Prime Minister Abiy. Once again, I was witnessing history.

On a more personal note, another book, Helen Thorpe's *The Newcomers: Finding Refuge, Friendship, and Hope in an American Classroom*⁵ resonated with me as I struggled to learn the Fidel, the script used for the Amharic and Tigrigna languages. *The Newcomers* is the year-long study of immigrant children studying in a Denver-area high school. As a Peace Corps Volunteer, I was not taught the script and made it a goal during my ten-month stay to learn to read and write Amharic. A lofty goal in which I made modest progress, perhaps at the first grade level. I have to admire these students from all nations who immigrated to the U.S., specifically Denver, and learned to adapt and succeed despite great odds. It was an opportunity for me to "walk a mile in someone else's shoes."



In Debre Birhan at the Ras Abebe Aregay Library and Bookstore, introducing the African Storybook Project

Literacy and libraries were what brought me to Ethiopia in the first place as a seventh-grade English teacher in the Gurage Zone and later as a

librarian in Mekelle and a scholar in Axum. I was fortunate these ten months to have an active



Janet with Asbenafi Kebede setting up the Chromebook Lab at the Axumite Heritage Foundation

network that allowed me to travel to libraries in Adama, Debre Birhan, Bahr Dar, Gondar, Dire Dawa, Harar, and Wolaita Sodo, sometimes for a library visit and other times to present workshops on first language publishing of children's books. I received a small grant from the Colorado Association of Libraries in support of work with the [African Storybook project](#) and another from the American Library Association to set up a Chromebook Lab in the Axumite Heritage Foundation Library. I was also privileged to work with [Midako Publishing](#) and I contracted to have a book about the battle of Adwa translated into Tigrigna. A colleague and I were successful in publishing a book with the African Storybook project, [Abebech, the Female Bajaj Driver](#), which has

Notes


¹ Maria Thomas, *African Visas: A Novella and Stories* (New York, NY: Soho Press, Inc., 1991); Maria Thomas, *Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage and Other Stories* (New York, NY: Soho Press, Inc., 1987).

² Maria Thomas, "A State of Permanent Revolution: Ethiopia Bleeds Red," *Harper's Magazine*, (January 1987): 53.

now been published in four languages: English, Amharic, Tigrigna, and Kiswahili. A deep sense of fulfillment has settled in.



With my "crew" at the Aksum University library

Ten months seems like a long time, but the time went quickly, too quickly. Leaving Ethiopia was one of the hardest things I have ever done. What do you do when you have fallen in love? ...with a country?with a people? I may have returned home to Colorado, but I have left home as well. 

Janet Lee is the Dean of the Library at Regis University in Denver, a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, Ethiopia, and a recent Fulbright Scholar.

³ Mark K. Shriver, *A Good Man: Rediscovering My Father, Sargent Shriver* (New York, NY : Henry Holt and Company, 2012): 22.

⁴ John Lewis, *Across that Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change* (New York, NY : Hyperion, 2012).

⁵ Helen Thorpe, *The Newcomers: Finding Refuge, Friendship, and Hope in an American Classroom* (New York, NY : Scribner, 2017).