

Africa...an Opening!
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I have recently returned from my first trip to Africa. What strikes me after a few days of readjusting to our time, is that this was my first real voyage out of my comfort zone. Inspired by friends, who had ventured to this distant continent in a volunteer capacity, I felt drawn to a similar experience. My discomfort began the moment that I started to consider such an adventure for myself. I know now, that the simultaneous feelings of being called as well as the anxiety, and excitement, that I might experience, can point the way to something that I will ultimately find very satisfying.

After considering Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Mali and Senegal, I settled on the latter. A neighbor described, in glowing terms, her semester abroad experience with a lovely family in Dakar. I saw her pictures, considered my own long relationship with the French and France, of which Senegal had been a former colony, and wanted to explore further. Through a cultural center in Dakar, the Baobab Center, I became aware of the 10,000girls.org program in Kaolack, in the center of Senegal, and its director, Viola Vaughn. When I learned that she had been born in Detroit, as I had been, I felt that something was, indeed, calling me to this locale.

Like many volunteer programs abroad, 10,000girls.org offers volunteer possibilities in teaching English, supporting health education awareness and helping with small businesses, which, in this case, is a pastry shop. I was open to helping where they might need me. Upon my arrival, I learned that I would be assisting the woman from whom I would rent a room, in the organization of computer clubs for the girls in the program. The girls were willing to make a time commitment during the summer and into the school year, to learn skills vital to communication in our world.

When I told the last check-in person in Paris my destination, she replied: "Vous avez de la chance, Madame!" Five hours later, when I heard Bass, one of the family members of my only connection in Dakar, say my name, I knew that she was right. Pulling away from the airport, I saw, felt and smelled a different world. Beaten up cars filled the narrow road that led into town, where I would spend the night in a hotel, before heading out to my worksite. People were everywhere, by the side of the road, walking, standing, hanging out, next to or on other broken-down cars....and we were listening to Senegalese music...a music that would soon begin to fill my soul.

During my ten-day stay in Senegal, I felt a continual sensory overload. The numbers of people, along the roads, in the marketplace, selling mangoes, asking for small change, speaking to me because I was foreign, reminded me to turn to a very helpful meditation! The heat, typically around 100 degrees with high humidity, left me perspiring, profusely at times, all day long, and very ready for the cold-water-only shower. The absence of garbage cans in this town of 200,000 staggered my sensibilities. The eternal bargaining for anything in the marketplace, including taxi rides, left me

frustrated and in admiration of the Senegalese who so skillfully navigate their way through one of their own forms of socializing.

At the same time, my heart was overwhelmed by the openness of all of those people whom I encountered in my daily life in this Muslim culture. The large family with whom I lived, consisted of a mother, originally from Morocco, several sisters, brothers, and their families. They described their family relationships, reveled in being photographed with my digital camera, and laughed heartily as we discovered commonalities in our humor.

The women who run the 10,000girls.org program have found their way there for a variety of reasons. Some were married unwillingly or with little awareness of the implications at a young age. Some have families. Many had little training in running a school or being involved with a bakery. All are determined to create better lives for the girls whom they are helping stay in school and for themselves as well.

Now, when I look at my photos of the girls who came to the computer club meetings in those far away towns and villages, I see their beautiful smiles, the lovely vivid colors of their summer clothing, and the sweetness in their souls. They are fortunate to have this program as a way to connect to the world and I am fortunate to have spent the time that I did with them.

The opening that my voyage to Africa has created for me is already apparent in profound and small ways. My heart aches when I notice....almost all of the time right now...how clean our sidewalks and streets are. It seems unfair that we have a milder climate than our fellow planet-dwellers do. I am more tuned into what is happening and where it is taking place in our world. While family has always seemed important to me, it seems even more so, after my experience. The friends whom I made during my journey reminded me of the importance of friendship, at home and across the world. So I am grateful, for the opening that I followed with my heart, and want to share that with family, friends and the wider community.