



ANUAK JUSTICE COUNCIL

Justice, Peace and Freedom

Living in Unreality: The Disconnected World of Ethiopians

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I was recently in Washington D.C. to speak at the Ethiopian Border Commission Meeting as well as to attend the Ethiopian Sport Federation sponsored soccer games, political meetings and other Ethiopian events, all packed into one week.

My days were filled with intense political meetings and serious discussions regarding the abysmal condition of Ethiopia and what to do about it, but when I attended the soccer games at the stadium and the Union Station's Nightclub event for young Ethiopians it was as if I had entered a totally different world from the first.

Ever since, I have been thinking about the disconnections between these worlds. As I did, I was struck with the impression that we might discover some clues to finding a way out of our current mess by considering how to bridge the gap between these and other disconnected realities held by Ethiopians. My week in Washington D.C. proved to be filled with opportunities to experience Ethiopian life from various different perspectives. I will cover three groups of events in three articles or parts: 1) the stadium soccer games, 2) the youth event at Union Station, and 3) the political events.

Ethiopian Sport Federation's Silver Anniversary

This year's soccer games, sponsored by the Ethiopian Sport Federation, were held in Washington D.C. from June 29 to July 5. It marked the organization's Silver Jubilee Anniversary of its hosting of these soccer games for Ethiopians. Since the events' inception twenty-five years ago, Ethiopians from all over the world have been coming together once a year, meeting as one people in some major city in North America. It is a time Ethiopians get together, not only for the sporting events, but for family reunions, cultural events and political events.

As tens of thousands of Ethiopians converged on Washington D.C. for this year's events, Ethiopian flags, music, food, colors and sports drew young and old, men and women and Ethiopians originating from most every region of Ethiopia. These Ethiopians now live in many different cities and countries throughout the world, but they have not forgotten their Ethiopian roots. No other event has drawn more Ethiopians in the Diaspora to celebrate the beauty, diversity and joy of their cultural heritage than this one week—a week that is super-charged with **“everything Ethiopian.”**

The Building Blocks for a New Ethiopia

I was struck with the image of what a powerful force would emerge if such unity, joy and enthusiasm for Ethiopia could somehow be captured and used as the building blocks for the **“New Ethiopia”** I have been envisioning! Nowhere did I see this more than in the young Ethiopians who loved their heritage and each other without regard to tribalism, racial biases, factionalism and divisions found among older Ethiopians. This is the **“New Ethiopia”** of tomorrow that I saw on their faces.

Imagine what we Ethiopians in the Diaspora could do in tackling our problems if we could transport such unity and openness to those in Ethiopia, not only to our families, but also to the greater family of Ethiopia.

However, on the other hand, I feared they were detached from the harsh realities of real life in Ethiopia. The entire week, I rarely saw any young people at any of the political meetings. Most everyone at these meetings was over forty years of age. But at the stadium events and at the Union Station nightclub event, most everyone was under that age.

I wondered what would happen if older Ethiopians could embrace the youths' view that placed little emphasis on ethnicity, political affinity, regional divisions and racial prejudices. I also wondered how well the youth understood the level of oppression, tyranny and hardship that Ethiopians were facing back home and wondered why no young people were attending the meetings. I then decided that the best of these two separate realities could be the answer. The question is, how can we combine the best of both and act on it?

As flags were happily waved by the young people, I was overwhelmed with the hope that somehow, this love of Ethiopia, alongside the joy of living in a free country like America with its openness and acceptance of other people, could somehow be channeled into these young people deeply caring about those stuck in the TPLF apartheid regime and tragedy of life within Ethiopia. I wondered whether the gap between these two realities could come together to form a greater youth movement to free Ethiopia.

I also wondered whether older Ethiopians could learn from the youth who saw each other as **“equally Ethiopian.”** The youth were not being divided against one another based on ethnic suspicions and loyalties, regional background, political alliances, religious views and cultural backgrounds like their parents. Here in America, it no longer mattered so much. In Ethiopia, something like ethnic loyalty and achieving dominance over other groups was equated with opportunity and even basic survival. Here it was equated with competition over who would win the soccer games—two different worlds.

The openness to each other I saw, showed a glimpse of a promising possibility—that if you **the reader**, not only the politicians, activists or educated Ethiopians, could change in this setting, we could change in another.

The Stadium Soccer Games

I have never seen any other country out of Africa, or elsewhere for that matter, bring thousands of their people in the Diaspora together the way Ethiopians have done during this week of the Ethiopian Sports Federation's soccer games. Despite the negative problems of Ethiopia, it makes me feel very happy to be part of it.

When you look around, you see a rich background of Ethiopian images. You might notice the Ethiopians flags circling the stands or peaceful Ethiopians walking—young and old—smiling, holding the hands of their young children and perhaps, wearing Ethiopian flags on their clothing. You do not see the differences of ethnicity, but instead, you see people as Ethiopians or simply, people as people—all beautiful and unique.

Ninety per cent of the people at the stadium were young, meaning under the age of 35. They were showing their patronage of anything Ethiopia—buying Ethiopian flags, T-shirts with Ethiopian images and words, Ethiopian CD's with Ethiopian music and Ethiopian food to eat.

On Friday “Ethiopian Day,” thirty to forty thousand Ethiopians packed into the stadium to watch the Ethiopian Cultural celebration where many different ethnic groups performed their traditional dances. All different ethnic groups participated, many with children on their backs. It was so moving for me to watch that I felt chill in my back. I and some spectators were brought to cry tears of joy rather than tears from pain so common to the average Ethiopian throughout the country. But here in America, everyone was overjoyed.

A Brilliant Display of the Garden of Ethiopia!

I have often talked about my dream of the diversity of Ethiopians becoming a beautiful garden. What I saw at the stadium were simply **“Ethiopians,”** not tribes, political groups or factions. What I saw was a momentary display of that beautiful garden of Ethiopia, with all its diversity and complexity. I saw the solidarity in this garden of different colors, shapes and sizes.

People frequently ask me what my wish is for Ethiopia and I can tell you, I saw it that day. **I saw the dancing and the joy. I saw my garden I have been dreaming about. I saw humanity before ethnicity. I looked at the beauty of each person as a unique human being. I saw the Solidarity for a New Ethiopia.** I temporarily disconnected from the harsh reality of what is going on in Ethiopia through participating in this celebration of our differences. When the music ended, I was brought back to reality and the joy I had experienced was replaced with the knowledge that our family of Ethiopians were dying back home. I wanted all the more for this beautiful garden to include them.

Those at the stadium all seemed to be so in love with Ethiopia; yet, there was something missing—not only an understanding of how bad things were in Ethiopia, but a lack of involvement in changing the downward direction of the country. At the political meetings, I saw no young people giving input or becoming involved. Those making the decisions for the future of Ethiopia were all older. Ninety-nine percent of them were men. I wondered where the women were?

I also wondered why a whole generation of young Ethiopians is so disconnected from what will really change Ethiopia. Their love of the country will do nothing without action. Those young Ethiopians buying Ethiopian flags should be told about their country and that the future of the country is in their hands.

Women should be at these meetings because they are the ones burying their young, the elders and the vulnerable. They are the backbone of this nation and sometimes the politicians fail to recognize their sacrifice and the value of their contributions. For me, it was my grandmother that guided me to become the person I am today. Imagine what the youth and the women of the Ethiopian Diaspora could do if they mobilized not only by words, but by action!

The Reality of a Dying Ethiopia Must Be Known by the Young People and the Mothers, Daughters and Wives of Ethiopia

I was brought back to the reality of the children of Ethiopia who are dying because of the lack of clean water, malaria, or the lack of child and maternal health care. I think of the Ogadeni, Afar, Oromo or Anuak young women or girls who have been viciously sexually assaulted or raped by the military—the same military agents of this regime who are supposed to be protecting them, but instead brutalize them with impunity.

I think of those young and old who have spoken out against such abuses and ended up in jail. Consider the reality of life for the beggar, for the young girls selling their bodies because they have nothing to eat, the crying mother because she has no food for her children and for those running from Ethiopia for opportunity, but dying on the road or in the Red Sea instead of realizing their dreams of freedom.

I was brought to the reality of Meles making Ethiopia landlocked and then giving Ethiopian land to Sudan and Djibouti. I think of how he has sent Ethiopian young men by force, with no choice, to die in a foreign land—Somalia.

I thought about the lack of acceptance between Ethiopians when someone will not like another Ethiopian simply because they are Oromo, Tigrayan or of some other ethnic background. I then thought about the divisions between leaders in our political organizations, religious organizations, and civic institutions who will not agree to disagree for the sake of a better Ethiopia. The reality of living with such hatred is that it robs us of our joy and future as a country.

All of these realities hit me so much harder after I saw the solidarity. This brought me to the reality that the purpose of living in this world is to live to the fullest of our purposes that God has given to every person. That nearly always means living with compassion and commitment for the well-being of others, going beyond a selfish existence where we focus only on our selves, those close to us or our families.

This reality of life for Ethiopians in the country is vastly different than the Ethiopia being celebrated in the stadium. That “stadium” Ethiopia is an illusion and any shreds of reality still attached to it are further disintegrating. As I celebrated with the bright and hopeful faces of young Ethiopians, I celebrated their solidarity and joy as I mourned in my heart for my people back home in Ethiopia. I was reminded why I am doing what I am. I yearn for the two worlds to come together.

Wake up and Join the Struggle: Young People and Women are a Powerhouse

These young people at the stadium already have the mindset of freedom, democracy, the rule of law and equal rights between a mix of many people. They have gone to school in the West and have adopted the thinking that has formed the West. It now comes naturally to them without the baggage of the past failures of Ethiopian society. They know some American people sacrificed in America for them to enjoy the freedom and opportunity in the countries of the West. If this huge group of well-educated Ethiopians could become engaged in changing Ethiopia, they would be a formidable force for good.

It will take a mindset that is willing to bear another’s burdens as a God-given opportunity to stand in the gap for their fellow countrymen and country women. Do they have the compassion and commitment to join the struggle for the future of Ethiopia? I think so, for if they do not, the Ethiopia they celebrate in such solidarity will continue to only be an illusion of what could have been.

If they join their elders, along with the women, and challenge these politicians with what is really on their minds and hearts or if they tell them to stop this division or if they confront leaders who are going in the wrong direction to change or to step aside, they would have a tremendous impact.

At the same time, these new attendees could learn about the real Ethiopia and what happened to wreak havoc on Ethiopian society. It would open up the possibility of creating the solidarity of the stadium in Ethiopia. We have much to do if we are to create this healthy environment at home.

Even think of simple first steps. Imagine if the 20,000 or more attendees at the stadium would give just one dollar for the advancement of Ethiopia or to the starving children in Southern Ethiopia right now!

With a group effort, they could build provide food, agricultural support, clean water, a hospital, a school, an orphanage, invest in developing private enterprise opportunities in the country or advance human rights and democracy in Ethiopia.

Young Ethiopians should not underestimate themselves. There is so much they could do to build respect, unity and reconciliation between people. They should consider taking on the cause of justice and human rights.

This is not about taking political sides. The youth can help older Ethiopians understand the meaning of working together in harmony without prejudices. Those older in the community should not protect them from the truth of the situation. Only then will we be able to realize the dream of a **New Ethiopia! May God guide and empower us to serve others.**

The next article in few days will be about my experience going to Union Station where nearly three thousand Ethiopian young people came together to meet, have fun, listen to music and to dance. I surprised many by attending. I met many young Ethiopians there. As I talked to them, I learned much from them. It was the highlight of my trip.

I cannot get it the idea out of my mind about what could happen if this young, talented, energetic and well-equipped group of Ethiopians awakened to take part in our struggle for a **New Ethiopia**. My question was, can we help them bridge the gap between these two disconnected worlds—Union Station and Ethiopia?

I am sharing these thoughts with you so that we, with help from our Almighty Creator, might bring these dreams into reality in Ethiopia, transforming a barren and harsh desert into a lush, spring-fed garden that could bring long-lasting sustenance and tranquility to the soul of Ethiopia—**we the people**.

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Isaiah 44: 18-21

This is what the LORD says—Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chose, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

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