

What I have learnt from visiting Kenya

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- This is my 5th visit Kenya since 2004. In this keynote address I want to reflect on my visits and on the impact they have had on me personally and professionally. This will be very much the story so far, of a work in progress, in which I want to underline how much I have gained from you. I will explore my learnings under the following headings: first impressions; the African spirit; the colonial legacy as I feel it; the post election violence; counselling and globalisation; what Kenyan continues to do to me and impact on my professional practice.

Cautionary Note

- I am speaking today in a fairly personal way about my impressions of Kenya, its people and counselling. It is very possible that I have misunderstood some things. If anything I say is inaccurate or God forbid offensive do forgive me and do tell me so!

First Impressions

- On first entering Kenya in September 2004 at the customs post in Nairobi Airport the official said to me ‘Can I help you?’ I was staggered being much more used to surly customs officers in Britain and the USA who act as if they are doing me a favour letting me in!

Courtesy

- Then Kenyans that I met and meet treat me with courtesy and respect and seems to have a natural dignity. This is not my usual experience in Britain where during my lifetime there has occurred a significant decrease in how well people treat strangers.
- It does lead me to wonder what are you really thinking behind the politeness but maybe it is best that I don't know!

Skin Colour

- What I am aware of is my white skin and how my 'whiteness' seems part of every interaction I have in Africa. I am not used to being so visible. In Britain or elsewhere in Europe I can more easily hide. In Africa I can't. I feel like I am caught in a caste system. Britain is still very class based, so I am used to some of this it is just so black and white here!

Online religious diary

- Last September I was invited to write an online diary for one week for my church and this was part of my entry for 22nd Sep 2007
- “I am recently back from a work visit to Kenya my 4th time and it was cold and wet in Nairobi but warmer when I went up the Rift valley for the weekend. There is so much beauty in Kenya the countryside, the people, the animals and there is so much that is not so good the poverty, the horrendous traffic in Nairobi, the HIV infection rate.”

- “Now that I have visited Kenya it is real for me, not just something on the television or in a book. I experience an interconnection not just me and God, or me and the cosmos, or me and the planet but me and the people I met in Kenya. Me and Cecilia, me and Gikundi, me and Orlando, me and that ill baby where the nearest modern medicine was a boat ride away”

The African spirit

- What I notice is your humour, energy and the exuberance. I have felt this in the Maasai dancing that sometimes starts these conferences and with the Straight Talk people and some of the younger counsellors I have met. And the not so young! I find myself having tremendous admiration for how much you achieve on so little resources and your tremendous sense of hope and of endurance.

- Colin Feltham and I wrote an article for *Therapy Today* (the BACP Journal) in 2005 based on our visit to your conference. I wrote in my part of the article:
- “I met hundreds of counsellors working with people living with HIV in conditions hardly imaginable to people in Britain – poverty, homelessness, orphans, the plight of sex workers, and a lack of medicines and other health care”

A Greek view of Africans

- Fevronia Christodoulidi a Greek student of mine said to me recently of her African friends:
- “Africans/ Africa seem to have a deeper connection to the Earth, in an era where most of Western world is operating from the head and it distancing further and further from our earth and nature, not just literally but also in spiritual terms. When with Africans, I sense the soil in them and an emotional strength that comes from a resilient spirit that resides in there in a way that has a mostly grounding and hopeful effect.”

- “The African spirit has a ritualistic flavour that creates bridges and expressions of what exists at a soulful level with simplicity, rhythm, endurance and gratitude. It seems to be carrying an echo of natural ways of being that is sadly being forgotten, if not abused, to so many corners of this world”

The colonial legacy as I feel it

- It is a pain to talk about the colonial legacy but it needs acknowledging. I can not visit your country and not acknowledge the destructive impact of the British invasion and rule of Kenya on your ancient culture and way of life. I am not personally responsible for this history, I was only just a teenager when your country gained independence from Britain in 1963. However your society and mine are affected by that colonial past and it is part of why I feel that I am in a caste system when I visit you here.

- “By the end of 1954 there were 77,000 [Kenyans]... in concentration camps... Conditions in the British detention and labour camps were grim, due in part to the sheer number of ... detainees and the lack of money budgeted for dealing with them. One British colonial officer described the labour camps thus: "Short rations, overwork, brutality, humiliating and disgusting treatment and flogging - all in violation of the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights." Sanitation was non-existent, and epidemics of diseases like cholera swept through the camps. Official medical reports detailing the shortcomings of the camps and their recommendations were ignored, and the conditions being endured by detainees lied about to the outside world.”
- (from:http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mau_Mau accessed on 15/7/08)

BUT

- But although we can not ignore this colonial history it does not have to dictate how you and I relate to one another. I am here to help counselling develop but I am also here to learn from you. I don't have all the answers even for counselling in Britain let alone counselling in Kenya. I do have some interesting questions. I am keen to hear your questions and your answers.

The post election violence

- Having visited the Rift Valley last September I became very troubled when violence erupted there and elsewhere in Kenya following the recent elections. In January this year I was in Bangalore in India for an international counselling conference and I was accessing online news about Kenya via the BBC website.

- I wrote on my blog (www.billionbike.blogspot.com) on January 29th 2008 from Bangalore:
- “I have met many fine Kenyans over the past 4 years which is why the news there is especially troubling for me. It is important that we don't see this as typically Africa and distance ourselves from it. We are not so far away from such troubles in Britain. Riots do happen here [in Britain], as does racial and ethnic violence. Kenyans are not some Other people to us in the West. They are just the same as us, good and bad, loving parents etc.”

- And on January 31st 2008:
- “I still remain very very troubled about events in Kenya, the word 'failed state' is being used by some comentators as a possible future for Kenya. This is my worse fear or nightmare - that all the beauty and energy of its people will get wasted. It can happen to any of us potentially, we all have our shadow sides. With some good leadership the troubles in Kenya can be turned round.”

- I had a keynote speech to make at the Bangalore conference and I talked about my research with KAPC trainers. As I spoke about Kenya I wept as I was really fearful at the time of how destructive things could get. The audience were very accepting of my tears. Later I wrote a poem about it which I am going to take the liberty of sharing with you.

Kenya Poem

- *I had to speak
At a conference
In Bangalore in India
About my research in Kenya*

*Now I've done this many times before
But this time
I kept thinking
About my friends there
About the shocking tales of violence
And the degradation of that beautiful country*

So I wept

*This is not usual
In academic keynote speeches
But my audience hearts went out to me*

I've never touched so many people before

Counselling and globalisation

- It is my dream to develop an understanding of counselling that honours and works across cultural difference and time honoured ways of helping one another. I am wondering how counselling can best be put to use across different culture, societies, communities. How can we make it fit for such a noble purpose? What kind of training and supervision would best prepare would-be counsellors in Kenya and in Britain? Is it possible to create a trans cultural global theory and practice of counselling?

Questions

- Can you tell me:
- 1) How did you care for each other before you came across Western counselling?
- John McLeod suggests that we can view modern counselling in two ways: *either* something completely new that emerged in the later part of the 19th Century; *or* a continuation and development of time honoured ways of helping people. So what were those earlier ways and are they still happening? I believe this is so in Britain and also in Kenya?

- 2) When you apply Western counselling in Kenya what subtle and not so subtle changes do you make to the model?
- I can see the point of Western counselling especially the Person centred approach as offering, if you like, a *liminal* space in which the client can step outside of their usual frame of reference (or at least experience some lessening of it's hold on them) and take a look at their life. But what happens when the client re-enters their frame of reference?

- 3) Jerome Frank (1974) in his book 'Persuasion and Healing', identified three key common factors in healing relationships:
- i) a supportive relationship;
- ii) a rationale by which a client can make sense of their problems;
- iii) the participation of client and therapist in a healing ritual.

- My friend Nick Ladany from Philadelphia in a research interview with me suggested that a model of counselling that transcended cultures would be rooted in a strong therapeutic relationship and that he thought empathy would be a key factor. What do you think? What kind of therapeutic relationships would work best in Kenya? Is empathy a universal and necessary condition for therapeutic change as Carl Rogers thought?

What Kenya continues to do to me

- Kenya is now part of my life and my daughter delights in the clothes I have brought back from Kenya for her. When I think of counselling across culture I think of my experiences in Kenya. I test my understandings against your experiences and understandings.

- I have learnt how important family is to you and how you live and work with the challenges this presents to you and this causes me to think anew about my own family. I was staggered when Gikundi introduced me here as a married man with 3 children and one grandchild at my first conference back in 2004. I have never been introduced in this way before or since! But it made me think that African see themselves more in terms of family than we do in the West?

- I was also staggered to meet some of you and discover that some of you had grown up in polygamous families, in at least one case a Catholic family!
- But I have a new PhD student in Manchester a Muslim Sheikh who has 3 wives...

- I have also been struck by how many of the Kenyans I have met are strongly religious either Christian or Islamic. The fervour of your beliefs have challenged my more liberal religious faith. But I have enjoyed more and frank discussions of my religious beliefs and of the role of spirituality in counselling, than I usually have in Britain.

The impact on my professional practice

- I find myself talking about Kenya with my students, seeking to bring alive my experiences of visiting Kenya and of how that has changed my thinking around culture and counselling. I have also shared my admiration for how you achieve so much with so little resources. Visiting Kenya has also changed for the better how I relate to people of African descent who I meet in England.

FINALLY

- “There is something special from the West that we can learn, there is something special the Westerners can learn from the East”
- Brother Matthew Panathanath, Director of Counselling Courses, Bangalore.

So

- There is something special from the West that people in Kenya can learn, there is something special the Westerners can learn from the Kenyans.

Finally, finally

- From my blog June 20th 2007:
- I want to sing a song of the beauty of Kenya; the beauty, grace and energy of the people I meet specially the younger ones - their bright clothes their exotic countryside. This is a country still with hope, still struggling with HIV but not defeated...yet!

