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A Long Walk and the Kindness of Strangers

By Katie Philp
UCF Forum columnist
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We are dependent on each other, maybe now more than ever before. So we might as well walk together.



A rural area of Kenya on the edge of a rain forest, where an anonymous woman taught a valuable lesson.

I worked a few years ago in a rural region of Kenya, supporting environmental educators in a small but ecologically important rain forest. Once, after a weekend in a neighboring town visiting friends, I stepped off the bus as close as a paved road could get me to my

home and prepared to hire a bicycle taxi to take me the rest of the way on the dirt road. I soon realized with dismay that a recent heavy rain had turned the road back to my village into a red ribbon of mud.

I'd been feeling unwell on the bus but had decided it was due to the cramped and hot conditions, and that I'd be alright once I was back in the forest air. As I stood looking at the road, knowing that I was still more than seven miles from my destination, I felt as clammy and fatigued as before, with the additional dread of the journey home.

By then, I'd spent enough time with the locals to know when I was being scammed. However, when a man in a pickup truck nearby waved me over and promised me a ride back to my village for an astronomical fee, I was ready to fork over my cash. And I would have, had I not felt a gentle tug at my arm and heard a commanding voice behind me. The petite woman spoke sternly to the man in the local dialect, at complete odds with the way she carefully guided me away from the truck and pointed me toward the road.

"You are headed to Isecheno, yes?" she asked in a beautiful Kenyan lilt. I could only nod.

"That truck won't make it a fraction of the way. They will just take your money. We will walk."

And so we walked. The truck went by us not long after, but it did not even reach the bend in the road before the wheels sunk deep into the mud and began to spin. Soon, the sounds of the men shouting and trying in vain to push the truck out of the muck were behind us, but we had a long way to go.

My legs grew heavier as the sky grew dark, but my new companion stayed with me.

It was the longest walk of my life. I knew by that time that I was quite sick, likely feverish. I had no choice but to continue wading through the thick sludge that was nearly knee deep in places. My legs grew heavier as the sky grew dark, but my new companion stayed with me. Though she was older, I was slower, and I suspected she could have easily gone on ahead. Regardless, she matched my pace as I grew ever more fatigued.

We spoke very little, but her continued presence was a comfort. On and on, we walked.

It took me nearly four hours. When we reached the split in the road where my cottage was, she wished me all the best and I thanked her for staying with me. Soon, I had collapsed on my bed, where I stayed for the next four days, as sick as I can ever recall.

I never again saw the tiny woman who quietly shepherded me through the muck and the dark, and I will never know what compelled her to walk with me.

Years later, it is hard to remember details. Mostly, I remember her quiet encouragement when all I wanted to do was lie down and let the mud close around me. It is easy to wonder if I imagined her, but I still hear her sharp tongue admonishing the truck driver

for taking advantage of me in the universal language of a protective mother, and I smile knowing she was very real.

It is perhaps a wild understatement to note that we are living through challenging times. In a nation where we pride ourselves on independence, we are just starting to realize how connected we actually are, despite some very significant racial, economic and ideological divides.

We have a very long road ahead of us but, like it or not, we are dependent on each other, maybe now more than ever before. So, we might as well walk together.

I hope that we can all be more like my Kenyan friend on this journey, that we can recognize when someone is bogged down in the muck, fighting to put one foot in front of the other. We all must take our own steps, and for some of us, the walk will take much longer than for others.

But sometimes the kindness of strangers can make all the difference. Sometimes it just helps to know we aren't walking alone.

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