



Small victories and simple pleasures

Dispatch

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In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), most everything is in disrepair, broken, or simply worn out; a condition that is as pervasive as it is contagious to the human spirit. Many of the locals and some of the long-term United Nations staff have succumbed to this condition. Those afflicted have become so accustomed to a state where nearly everything is dysfunctional that they cope by resigning themselves to their circumstance and make little effort to change their surroundings.

Not much can be done to correct the big aggravations such as irregular supplies of electricity and water. These inconveniences cause an underlying stress but are easily dealt with by a slight adjustment of habits and lifestyle. It is however, the perpetual barrage of nuisances and interruptions that accompany each task that can drive one to indignation.

For example, every printer and photocopier that I used while in the DRC jammed regularly. A simple 10-second task of printing or reproducing a document often involved 10 minutes of hand feeding individual sheets of paper into the machine, clearing the inevitable paper jam, and reprinting the document. For every paper jam, each device went through a series of tests and gyrations to confirm its condition before creating the next jam.

When life on a day-to-day basis presented these types of perpetual challenges, small victories and simple pleasures became their own reward, and I found an increased satisfaction in tasks or events that under normal conditions would be mundane.

Occasionally, I was able to enjoy the small victory of finding that my 20-page document had emerged uncrinkled from the printer on the first try.

When I arrived in Kinshasa in July 2005, my colleagues in the Aviation Section surely thought I was mad when they saw me wandering around the office in an attempt to identify the source of a continuous chirping sound to which the long-term staff had become oblivious. Each U.N. office is equipped with multiple electric smoke detectors, and when the backup battery dies, the alarms emit a loud chirp at two-minute intervals. Without exception, in every office in Kinshasa I found a chorus of twittering smoke detectors crying out for a replacement nine-volt battery.

I eventually silenced the eight units in our office by submitting a request to the Engineering Section to have the dead batteries replaced. I enjoyed this small victory because it gave me a sense of control in an environment where I knew I had none.

Later, I took the same madness to the town of Bunia, in Ituri, where there was a buffet of damaged chairs, old computers, and a leaking roof in our operations center to keep me busy when I was not performing my regular duties. I gradually came to be on a first-name basis with Bunia's Engineering Section and IT as I claimed one small victory at a time.

A typical day in the Aviation Section is filled with chaos and distractions as daily flight schedules are prepared, military operations are supported, and medical evacuations are coordinated. Following the



Contributed
A crowd of Congolese gather near a United National helicopter.

disorder of the workday, there are a limited number of options available for recreation in Bunia. Correspondence courses are offered through the U.N. and some people study language skills, but at the end of an 11- or 12-hour day, the motivation to do more "work" can be hard to come by.

The end of the day was a time when meals, a book, or a good night sleep became simple pleasures. Since cooking in my domicile was not possible, I had to choose from three other reasonably safe options in Bunia to obtain dinner. Two were local restaurants, and the thought of even looking into their kitchens was a little disquieting. The third was the U.N.'s recreation house. I normally chose the latter. It had been recently built to keep the U.N. staff distracted from the local girls who were not allowed inside. The food was good, but service was slow, and it normally took about an hour for the server to bring my order. In this case, however, that was an added benefit because it prolonged my "dining" experience.

Normally, I would meet up with a small crowd of regulars who were in the same predicament as I was or who did not feel like eating at home. We enjoyed relaxing conversations over a beer or soda water. The eventual arrival of the food was not quite an event, but it did end the anticipation and marked the beginning of the simple pleasure of relaxing over a hot meal.

Since it was dark by 6 p.m. and I usually did not finish with dinner until after 8:30, I had to find a ride back to my residence. The U.N. had secured half of the town, but the militias controlled the other half, and it was not a good idea to walk in Bunia after sunset. After successfully hailing a ride in a U.N. vehicle, and following a short trip through town, I would be deposited in front of the local convent where the nuns charged me a very charitable rate of \$10 per night for an individual room.

My first room was very basic and had neither a toilet nor shower. I later upgraded to a room with both of those amenities but had no hot water. My second room was just a little larger than a one-car garage and had the same type of smooth, cement floor and walls, which amplified every sound regardless of its origin. This was especially apparent when the mosque down the road used its loud speakers to announce prayers at 4:15 and 5 each morning.

The furnishings in my little parking space consisted of a chair, desk and a short narrow bed with a footboard, which I wrestled with every night being that I am six-feet, five-inches tall. Normally, I kept my feet, which hung over the end of the bed, wrapped in a sheet and blanket, so the mosquitoes couldn't feast on the exposed skin that might stick out under the mosquito netting. This tactic also helped me avoid contracting malaria. During my first rotation in Bunia, the simple pleasure of a good night's sleep evaded me.

I have always appreciated reading, but far away from home it took on a new meaning. At home, I normally read books and stories about far away places. The opposite was true in the DRC. Simply reading about a familiar environment and people going about their daily business provided a mini vacation and a link to home. Even an average book that was set in a familiar environment provided a brief escape. In addition to reading, I also enjoyed writing about my experiences. Time passed quickly while I was working on a newsletter that I e-mailed twice a month to friends and family, so along with reading, writing was included in my list of simple pleasures.

The DRC is a place where everything is complicated, nothing is easy, and anything is possible. As long as I approached the usual inconveniences with this understanding, it was easier to deal with the things I could not fix and helped me to appreciate the small victories and simple pleasures. VT