

TURBULENCE IN ZIMBABWE

Turbulence. I don't like turbulence, but ,as my KLM flight heads into New York from Amsterdam, we encounter a bumpy ride. I've flown more than three million miles since 1989 and you would think that I would be used to turbulence, but I'm not. I try to picture riding in a car over a rough road and tell myself it's no worse than that. Yet, my mind knows that I am bumpy at 39,000 feet and that's a whole lot different than being bumpy on a road at sea level.

I am heading home to Pittsburgh from yet another trip to Zimbabwe, southern Africa. I counted fourteen different Zimbabwe visa stamps in my passport, which is two and a half years old. I have spent half the year there for the last four years and half the year in America. I try to tell people that this qualifies me to be an African American, but alas, they know that I am lily white.

Why do I keep going back to a place that has the world's fastest shrinking economy? Why do I go back when I've had one computer stolen and another attempted theft? (It was 5 AM and I was driving through the Mbare area of Harare on my way to the airport. When he smashed my window, I had the car in gear and off I went, briefcase intact in the back seat, but kicking myself that I was stupid enough to actually come to a stop at a traffic light turned red at that time of the morning.)

Why do I go back and add another mouth to feed when the citizens are struggling to feed themselves? Why do I go and drive a car when there is barely enough petrol (we call it gas) to go around as it is?

The answer is simple: I love Zimbabwe. No, let me be more precise. I love Zimbabweans. I never go that I don't have a chance to admire their resilience, their

resourcefulness, their creativity, their broad smiles sometimes revealing teeth in various states of disarray. Yet their smiles are always genuine and I regularly hear someone say, “Welcome home!” As strange as it sounds, at times it feels like home.

I love doing business there and a lot of business is being done. Don’t ask me how, but it is. I have friends who started businesses just this year and, in the midst of all the craziness, they are doing well. People earn enough to send their children to private schools, even out of the country to university. I don’t know where they get the money to do that. I don’t know sometimes where they get the money to pay me, but I don’t ask. You never ask where or how. You just accept payment and carry on with business as usual in a land where business is anything but usual.

SOME PAST HISTORY

Zimbabwe was once known as Rhodesia and it was once home to many white people like me. When Cecil Rhodes (of DeBeers diamonds and Rhodes scholarship fame) moved north from South Africa in the 1880s, he borrowed (all right, he stole) lands from the natives and named the country after the man most worthy of such an honor—himself.

Whites first settled in the western lands where the tribe and language were Ndebele (African words often have two or three consonants at the start of a word. Each one is pronounced, so you say Ndebele, *en-de-be-le*.) Eventually they worked their way east and settled in that part of the country as well where the language and tribe were Shona.

The white fathers (a funny name for imperialists, don’t you think?) chose a capital city in the eastern section and named it Salisbury and went about building a culture

similar to the one they had enjoyed in South Africa. All went well for about 100 years (all right, there were some massacres, resettlements and oppression of the natives, but white supremacy in Africa always came at a high price – for the natives, that is) until the African people decided that enough was enough. Starting in 1956 in what is known today as Ghana, Africans began to take back their land, countries and dignity.

Rhodesia was among the last to gain independence from their British rulers and, when England actually tried to force it a little quicker than the white government desired, England declared sanctions against Ian Smith, the prime minister, and his country. While Smith defied England, the people whom Rhodes had victimized rebelled and a bloody war of independence occurred that ended in independence and the removal of sanctions in 1980.

Robert Mugabe, who had led the war for independence, was selected the first president of the renamed nation of Zimbabwe and he has served as president ever since. Some people don't like him (I did not want to use the word hate) and others still see him as their liberator and are loyal. I don't take sides as to who is correct while I am a guest there or I may not be a guest for very long.

SOME CURRENT EVENTS

I started out talking about turbulence and there is plenty of it in Zimbabwe these days. How did things get this bad? Who is to blame? What is the remedy? I wish I were smart enough to figure it all out. I hear all kinds of remedies, solutions, diagnoses and cures. I know that my president, George Bush, isn't very popular there and our ambassador, Michael Dell was told on state radio to go to, well, you know what rhymes with Dell. I try to hide the fact that I am American, but the people know. I guess it's

because every now and then I drive on the right side of the road for me, but the wrong side of the road for them. Old cultural habits die slowly.

I don't like the turbulence in Zimbabwe any more than I like it in the air, and I hope and wait for the day when things will turn around. Yet every time I go back, conditions seem worse. Just when you think they can't get any worse, they do. Now there is a shortage of Zim dollars and a shortage of foreign currency. So people don't have enough money to buy some money so they can buy some food. Plus, there's not much food to be had.

Having said that, I went to a restaurant the other night in Harare (my favorite called Coimbra; they serve peri-peri chicken along with chips, or French fries as we Americans call them) and I could not get a table. The place was full.

There is no heavy traffic, but there are plenty of cars with more than adequate representation from Mercedes Benz and BMW. And this is probably the key to the strength of Zimbabweans and why, at the same time, the current chaos could go on a long time.

You see, Zimbabweans are resourceful, as I said earlier. If their path is blocked, they quickly find another path. Once I was conducting a workshop and introduced an exercise that was to show the futility and frustration of rules and regulations that restrict motivation. It was a list of math problems, yet I changed all the rules with absolutely no explanation. The plus sign represented multiply, division was minus, times was now addition and so on.

No one was supposed to complete the exercise. They were *supposed* to throw up their hands and complain, demanding to know why I had imposed such foolish rules.

Instead, three or four finished the exercise, getting all the “correct” answers and expressing satisfaction in their ability to work things out. Such is the mindset of the typical Zimbabwean. They seem to recover and adapt to almost any, I know I’ve said it before, turbulence.

The turbulence has stopped in the plane, but it continues unabated in Zimbabwe. President Mugabe has declared elections for March, 2008. Things can get violent in Africa around election time so everyone is bracing for more, well, more turbulence. I can fasten my seat belt and ride out the turbulence on this KLM flight, but Zimbabweans have no such luxury as the winds of inflation and fiscal confusion buffet their ship of state. The next three months should prove anything but dull for that crazy, wonderful, confused and colorful land that I have learned to love.