

# Travel



## *Shaping the Soul*

Why was I traveling back to Ethiopia for the fourth time? I asked myself this question over and over again as I felt compelled to return on this recent trip. I asked the same question many times throughout the trip and received answers on many different levels, and spent time during the trip and on the plane coming home reviewing all the answers that had flooded in. I want to share some of these, and more about what I learned this time.

Travel is always an experience in a laboratory outside the normal, safe boundaries we tend to keep around ourselves -- the zone of comfort we typically live within (the warm blanket of whatever security we can draw around ourselves. It is good, at least from time to time, to escape those boundaries and the safe zones, and put ourselves "in harms way" outside the safety that we create for ourselves, and allow our souls to be shaped, changed and enlarged by that experience

If I was to confine myself to just one answer to the question, "Why am I traveling back to Ethiopia?" that satisfied that question on a personal level, the answer would be this--to shape my own soul--to change in some fashion the shape of my interior being. It may seem like a strange answer, but the truth is, I always realize when I return that I have been changed by the journey itself. It has "re-made me" even if it is only in some small way. We travel for ourselves, not just to satisfy our curiosity about some new place we have never been, or have an adventure, or enjoy the recreative qualities of travel--but to fundamentally challenge and change ourselves.

When we get out of the norms of our own comfort zone, we challenge our values, our spiritual practice and our capacities to stay open, free and flexible in a new environment and under circumstances over which we often may have little control. That is good practice!!! And we need it. Life of course, is always offering us this no matter where we are, but traveling away from home enhances the possibility of the new and the unexpected. The question is, can I stay balanced and open and receptive and allow loving-kindness to exist when I feel vulnerable and uncertain in the unknown? Will I go into a mode protective of my ego, or can I remain more open and relatively more "ego-free?" It is good practice!!! And such practice always shapes the soul and remakes it in some way. So travel is good, just for that reason.

Of course, this challenge always high-lights where the rough edges are, where the vulnerabilities are, how far the practice has taken us in our own spiritual evolution. It's a laboratory of self-reflection that we can experience hour by hour on a daily basis. I was glad for that and for the insights it offered me day after day.

Over and over again I would step into some completely new circumstance, meeting some new person, or having some new challenge I had not experienced before, needing to fall back into the arms of trust in the Goodness of the Universe and of people and, of course, of the divine Source which holds us in space and time and in being. Do I really "live and move and have my being in God" as Paul declared in Acts? Theoretically yes, of course, but practically how does that work in circumstances over which I have little control and when my language skills are a pittance of what they needed it to be? O what good practice that is!!!! It shapes the soul and humbles it and puts it into a mode of vulnerability (or of trust) that I so need in order to grow. "Can I trust God and the Universe in this new set of circumstances?" is always the question.

Each morning when I got up, Sinte and I would walk to the local church to pray. As I put my face against the stone walls (in the old Jewish manner), I would offer the unknowns of the days into the divine Hands, and surrender myself and my vulnerabilities and my lack-of-knowing. It was good practice and it helped to shape my soul.

For all of us now the whole world is like that wall. We are all vulnerable to the next storms coming either literally or figuratively--the next changes in our circumstances, the next unpredictable political decision, and much more. Who knows what is around the next corner? Increasingly we live in new and unknown territory--but we are also always living and having our being in divine and eternal territory.

*Here are a number of other important reasons that became clearer to me as I traveled back to Africa these past six weeks:*

- I travel to Ethiopia for this fourth time to complete and extend projects that I had begun previously. I knew that if I did not give these attention and energy they would languish, and I had also been given new tools to help struggling individuals and families better themselves and their lives, and I wanted to use those tools, at least one more time.
- I was traveling back again because I needed a complete change of pace, scenery, environment -- to put things, the world into perspective, to change my own seeing and perceptions, to widen

them--like reading a novel or going to see a new movie--it changes perceptions, perspectives and puts your life in a new context. You come back with your viewpoints, your world, your identity and your priorities rearranged.

- I traveled to soften the effects of the first world's hold on me. To see my own world for what it is--a construct with immense power, and to radicalize my sense of what is important and what is not.
- I traveled in order to see how beautiful a traditional culture like Ethiopia actually is and how it is a gift to the world, and what is lost when it is lost.
- I traveled back to Ethiopia again because I wanted and needed to understand that beautiful country so that it was no longer strange, exotic and unknown, but became a known place, and even a home place. The edges of it are still fuzzy and always will be because of language (I am not now nor will I ever be a fluent Amharic speaker), but now I know it as a home place and not longer feel vulnerable, but am comfortable in Ethiopia. I wanted to be comfortable there and to understand Ethiopian culture at a much deeper level.
- I traveled because I wanted to learn to love and be wise. I needed the practice of staying open and flexible. I needed more practice in learning to drop assumptions and presuppositions and just allow the flow of life to transpire and then engage them from the level of the heart as much as possible. To stay flexible instead of rigid.
- In the world of business there is investment in resources, investment in wealth and land, investment in business. I traveled back because I was given the instruction to "invest in the lives of people." I realized I needed to invest more deeply and more profoundly in lives, by means of love in and for the future of the world--this, I believe is what it means "to store up treasure in heaven." It is also the "sowing in the winter-time" that the Gospel of Philip speaks about for the larger, higher and more Transcendent "summer-time." This was certainly an investment physically and temporally of my time and wealth, but far beyond that was the need for attention and self-giving, love for and investment in others. When their resources are so small, why not share wealth and give one's self away?
- So I traveled to learn to love in an extended way through the network of families and friends and through their loves and lives. I want to become a woven part of a deeper network of families, lives, villages, and several cultures and traditions and as much as possible part of a proud, ancient nation that I have learned to love.