

New Perspectives from Grace

West from the small church, I meandered down an overgrown path that might accommodate a single, slow-moving automobile. My curiosity demanded that I take in every detail: the tall dry grasses to my right, the deeply rutted mud road now baked hard from the sun, the sudden open field to my left with green sprouts pushing through the red dirt and the heat with its clinging humidity. Zambia is one hot country!

I thought: *This is my first time coming and probably my last time to this area of the world. I've had a big case of butterfly-stomach since Grace invited me to tea yesterday after a Global Women's Forum on the outskirts of Lusaka, Zambia's capital. I am nervous and excited all at the same time.*

Around a small bend in the path, I found the house she had described: "a concrete foundation and reddish-brown bricks partially up its exterior walls." My hostess Grace stood in the doorway, bouncing a near-naked young child in her arms. A huge smile lit up her ebony face, shining in the afternoon sun. Her eyes grew large as she caught sight of me.

Her participation and presence had impressed me at the forum yesterday. Grace addressed the forty women at the Global Women's Forum with a stirring send out: "We go now to work, live and be our best for our families, our country and our world." Obviously, the other women respected her for they made a circle around her after she delivered her words and took turns saying their "thank-yous."

"Sure 'nuff," she chuckled and waved to me, "it's two o'clock and you're on time. Yes, you must be American!" (*No matter where I show up, people--other than Americans--made jokes about Americans and our obsessions with being and doing things on time.*) Grace turned and passed the youngster to an older girl with brief instructions.

"Here," she pointed, "This is a perfect spot in the shade and light breeze." She swung her large frame and nine-month pregnant girth back and forth as she unfolded and spread a colorful quilt over the hard, red dirt. She wore a simple brown and orange print dress with a scooped neckline. The fabric gathered under her ample breasts and the skirt hung full and long enough to cover whatever needed covering—be it a small child or shelled peas--while not touching the ground as she moved. Such a practical dress for her roles as mother, farmer and community leader.

"I told my friend I would meet her back at the church building at 3:30. Will that work for you, Grace?"

"We will make it work." We both laughed as we began to get comfortable sitting on the quilt and with one another.

"Oh yes!" She struggled to her feet and bounced back to the open door and into her house, returning shortly holding a cup and saucer with tiny blue flowers on a white background. "For you!"

"Thank you. But, what about your tea?"

"I'll have a cup later. So, Leah, where do you live in America? On a farm, in a city? . . . a desert? . . . on a tall mountain?"

That question launched us quickly into sharing our backgrounds, differences, things we each enjoyed doing and things we had in common. Words punctuated by giggles and even cackles flowed non-stop for an hour or more. Then I asked a question that I feared might be too personal.

“Grace, I met you and your three sister-wives yesterday. How does being the first wife of a Muslim husband with four wives work?”

“Oh my!” She reached for my cup and saucer. “I must get my cup of tea now. Just wait,” she chuckled. “I’ll tell you all about it!”

Gee, I hope I have not embarrassed her.

She quickly returned still snickering but now holding steaming tea in what looked like the same cup and saucer. *Perhaps she had but one beautiful cup and saucer, and we were simply taking turns.* She enjoyed telling me her story as much as I loved hearing of this mother of eight children, ages 16 to 2 with another on the way. Number nine and the last, according to Grace, might show up any day.

“Nine children--that’s plenty!”

Grace explained her husband visits this family unit a week to ten days monthly. Then he is off to each of his other three farms and three wives--with their own sets of children. He helps with the crops, cares for things that need fixing, and teaches his wives and her children various things that they need to know to be successful farmers. He plays with his children—five sons and three girls while he is with Grace. Together, they worry and plan their children’s education and training. Sometimes he asks Grace to visit one of her sister-wives on another farm several miles away.

“I help with sick babies or with jobs needing my know-how. I am the oldest and most experienced of his wives.”

I glanced at the list of questions that I had written down before coming to this visit. One remained unanswered. I asked Grace if she would tell me about the three posters that I had seen hanging side by side in numerous businesses in Lusaka. President Kenneth Kaunda’s picture was on the left. A middle poster listing 10 or 12 actions, like “Raise the water table.” came next. The third poster was placed to the right. It was a picture of a Zambian woman bent over the ground with a short-handled hoe digging in soil. The caption read “Women Build the Nation”.

“I am that women,” Grace said, “and there are lots of us.”

As I suspected, Grace described how the posters reminded all Zambians of their great leader Kaunda, the nation’s five-year priorities and the great importance of their women. Under Kaunda’s leadership, the Zambian government included a newly appointed and energetic Secretary of Women’s Work.

“She is doing good things for women here. You need to meet her, Leah.”

“I met a young water engineer in Lusaka, attending a water conference the day I arrived. He suggested the same thing to me. I really want to do that.” A quick glance at my watch reminded me that I should be on my way to meet Sharry.

“Grace, I’ve just spent a month leading women’s forum in villages and cities in India and now here in Zambia. You are the first woman that I’ve met that has invited me to her home. This has been very special for me. Thank you.”

“For me, too, Leah. I am happy to have an American-sister. We may never see each other again, but I will remember this time with you. I hope you remember it, too.”

“Of course, I will!”

“And, Leah, will you tell all my American-sisters we are depending on them? They must keep pushing those windows open wider to let more women’s rights blow in! Will you tell them I said every time you make a small crack in the window; it is like throwing doors wide open to greater freedoms for women like me all over the world?”

“Yes, I promise to share your words.”

At the bend in the path, I turned back to Grace and three of her young children, all vying for her attention at once. We waved and threw kisses into the air.

I need my journal and I need it now. I must write down her words before they cool in my soul . . . Doors, doors, doors again . . . I had come to Zambia to affirm women in their roles as leaders and co-creators in our shared futures on earth.

I, myself, had just received a stunning commissioning.