

A terrifying start leads to gifts of peace and grace at Circle of Peace School by Connor Fitzpatrick Charlton

After Turkish Airlines mistakenly unloaded my bags in Rwanda, I found myself stranded at Entebbe Airport in the middle of the night with no wallet, no phone, no laptop, and no clothes. Even worse, an immigration officer seized my passport because I couldn't pay the visa fee. I felt lost and frightened, having no idea what this would mean or what would happen. All I had to my name were the clothes on my back and my guitar.



Connor and Abdul Bbaale enjoy a chat while sorting beans. Bean sorting, reports Connor, seems to be a never-ending task at COPS!

I finally was able to make a deal with the authorities to let me out of the airport with a makeshift visa. Outside, I was met by three Circle of Peace School (COPS) staff and Bbaale family members: Farook, Abdul and Abraham. I told them everything that had happened and asked them what to do. Farook, the Busar at COPS, rubbed his chin and said, "That is crazy, man. You need to sleep. Let's get out of here." His was the voice of reason and wisdom.

My first dreamlike visions of Uganda were from the open windows of the COPS van, as we drove to Kampala that otherworldly morning: fruit stands and banana trees, huge stork-like birds watching from trees, salvaged motorbikes (boda-bodas) crowding the streets where no stoplights directed traffic.

I met the community that is COPS that morning. In relaying my unfortunate tale, there was not a trace of anything but complete welcome, acceptance, and measured concern on their faces. COPI board member Liz Jordan was there, finalizing the adoption of her child, Lyla. She told me, "It's a week for miracles. Just pray and believe." I prayed extensively beneath my mosquito net, and then I slept for I don't know how long... a long time.

I woke to Headmistress MaryLove knocking at the door. It was the airport on the phone. My bags had arrived.

Before they drove me the hour's journey back to the airport (with not a trace of hesitation or complaint), the school loaned me 360,000 shillings to get my passport back. Three hours later, I returned to COPS with my bags, my passport, all my money, and peace of mind. It was as though

the previous twenty-four hours had hit a reset button on my Americanism, and had allowed Africa to get into me first.

The following month was unlike anything I've ever experienced, unlike anywhere I've ever been. And I will always be a better person because of it.

Although there is always something to be done at COPS, no one has to tell anyone to do anything. Because my own culture has such a "what-am-I-getting-out-of-this/for-this" attitude— it was bizarre to see the school community functioning like organs of the body, a school of fish, a flock of flying birds. Things got done because they needed to be done. People did them – and did them happily.

Also I noticed immediately the openness. I could spend time with anyone, talk to anyone, and there was never a sense of unwelcome, or "too-busy-for-you" demeanor. This behavior was not naïve or born of idle hours – very much the contrary. These people always had things to do, they just made time to be with one another. They know full well – too well – the hard realities of person-to-person interaction in this world. They are simply some of the best people I've ever known. I cannot think of a finer place to support and cherish than COPS. It is so much more than a school, it's truly a way of life. They are instructors of goodness, in addition to the more obvious scholastic instruction they provide their students.

I spent time getting to know the pillars of COPS: Grandmother Amina; her daughter MaryLove; her sons Charles, Abraham, and Solomon; my spiritual brother Farook; and the incredibly special relatives and boarders who were there during my visit: Sliman and Elijah, Irene and Isaac (little and big Isaacs), Abdul, Moses, Masaba, Teacher Eddie, Hassan, and all of the others.

I compiled data and wrote reports for COPI on the state of the chicken farm, the construction projects, the Annual Report, the financial report. I travelled to "the village" to see where the crops are grown and to breathe in the spirit of Uganda.

The guys took me around, quizzing me on the types of trees, telling me stories. Farook and I rode boda-bodas around the city. We decorated and set up the Christmas tree and I had the blessing of spending Christmas with such people. We attended a rowdy New Year's party. We sat around the fire and discussed life, the future for our burgeoning global generation, how we wanted things to be in this world.

Ultimately, through a kind of spiritual osmosis, I received the gifts of peace and grace --simply being around the special souls that make up COPS; people who with so very little possess so very much in their hearts. I cannot thank them enough.

And from the bottom of my heart I thank Joanita Senoga for her work, determination and vision to make COPS a living reality. I thank the rest of the COPI board for doing all that they do to support and give of themselves to such a special place.

I'm very happy to have made the journey.