



Remember, Remember the 9th of September!

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I wish you were there! How I wish you were there!

It was the 9th of September. A day I will always remember.

A glorious day when Dulles Airport became Bole Airport, for 3 hours. Dulles was awash in the green, yellow and red. It was a day of joyous celebration. It was a day of pride. It was a day of triumph. It was a day unlike any other in the history of Dulles Airport. In the history of Ethiopians in America. No dignitary of any country, no rock superstar, no one but no one, had ever received such a massive reception in the history of that airport, so said the airport policeman on security detail. They were baffled. They had never seen so many people at the terminal waiting to receive passengers. Never!

A burly police officer asked me, “Who are the people waiting for? Some kinda of African kings?”

I chuckled. “No, they are no kings,” I said. “They are the truly elected leaders of Ethiopia.”

“What is it? All of you guys haven’t seen’em for a while or something?” he followed up.

“No, we haven’t. They have been in jail for the last two years,” I explained.

“Didn’t you just tell me they were some kinda elected leaders. Why were they in jail,” he asked logically.

“Because democracy is a crime in Ethiopia,” I replied. “If you win elections fair and square, you go to jail,” I warned him.

“Man, that’s really messed up!” he said as he turned around to attend to his security duties.

He really has a point. It really is messed up!

I wish they were there too. You know who “they” are. They were probably there. Skulking behind doorways and support beams. Stealing a glance here and there. I wish they could come out in the crowd and feel how it feels to be loved by the people. How it feels to be respected. How it feels to be honored. I wish they were there to see and feel the power of popular love, the respect and admiration of ordinary citizens -- raw, uncensored and irrepressible.

There was electricity in the air. Ethiopians -- younger ones, older ones, of all backgrounds, together in one place -- waiting anxiously for their heroes and their heroine. Men and women screaming in joy. Sitting. Standing. Walking. Talking. Singing. Taking pictures.

I saw a young man who stood alone in the corner sobbing by himself as he clutched the Ethiopian flag close to his heart. I felt I should try and comfort him. “Steady, man. Steady. (Ay zoh, berta.) Get a hold of yourself,” I said, to distract him. “But I am trying,” he answered. “I am really trying. I just can’t stop my tears.” I knew exactly how he felt. I left him alone.

We waited anxiously and the minutes lapsed with hopeful anticipation. And people kept on pouring into the terminal. I was so proud. The crowd was disciplined, very well behaved. People followed the instructions of the police officers who were a bit nervous at the beginning facing such a huge crowd. I chatted with the cops, and they were very accommodating. Mostly, they observed from a distance with studied curiosity.

I spotted an elderly lady in the crowd. I did not know her, but decided to congratulate her anyhow. “Emama, enkwan des a lot (Mother, congratulations).” “Well, my son. There is no end to the miracle to God’s work. They are here today,” she said. Indeed, they are here today by the grace of God, I thought to myself.

As passengers trickled out from the rear of the terminal, people in the crowd would crane their neck to see if THEY were coming out. (Wetu, wetu!) Some would break out in spontaneous applause, but THEY were not to be seen. The anticipation was building up, and people were besides themselves by the minute, by the second.

A reception line was formed at the passenger exit door. And we waited somewhat nervously. There were six children holding flowers for our honored guests.

I started a little conversation with them. “So, how do you feel,” I asked. “I am happy. I am excited,” replied a little girl. “But why are you happy and excited,” I followed up. “Because we love them,” she said. That was good enough for me. No further questions.

As I stood in the reception line and looked into the countless hopeful eyes in the crowd, I thought about the day. “What a glorious day the Lord has made!”, I thought to myself. I was overjoyed. A lot of things were racing through my mind. I tried to read the mood of the huge crowd, in a sort of detached way. But I couldn’t. The atmosphere was too electrifying. People hugging, kissing, embracing, singing and congratulating each other, unstoppably.

I felt like I was at huge family reunion. And there were the relatives I knew, and a whole boatload of distant cousins, and relatives and neighbors and their uncles and grandmothers I did not know. But they had all showed up for the reunion. It did not matter.

Then I thought of all the people in the crowd. I asked myself how many of them knew these leaders. I have never met them any one of them before, at least in person. But I did know them. Really. I knew them through the story of their suffering. I spoke to them while they sat in the Zenawi’s dingy Kality prison. Oh, yes, I knew them as I followed their story in Kangaroo court. I knew them when they faced bogus criminal charges brought against them by a bogus prosecutor in front of bogus judges. No doubt about it, I knew them well. We just hadn’t met in person.

And in minutes we were about to meet. I thought to myself how I would feel when I first see the faces of TRUTH. And courage. And valor. And defiance. And fortitude. I thought about how it would feel to stand by the side of real heroes and a heroine. Just how does it feel?

Then I had a flashback to May, 2005. I wondered, if democracy had not been stillborn in May, 2005, would I have been at standing at Dulles Airport to receive them? Would any of us? If the people’s voice had not been stolen then, where would Ethiopia be today?” Such fleeting thoughts criss-crossed my mind.

But I was overtaken by a mood of sullenness for just a moment. I thought about the 193 innocent men, women and children that were mowed down like grass by Zenawi’s security men in 2005. The photos of their mangled faces, their bullet-

riddled bodies, the sun baked blood on the dirt, all of it, flashed hauntingly before my eyes. I will admit it, my eyes welled up in tears.

I wondered what may happened to the thousands that were shot, but lived through the grace of God. The thousands more that were imprisoned, and continue to be imprisoned. And the millions of dollars that were being spent for a bogus Millennium at a time when people could not afford to buy a kilogram of beef or berbere or sugar. I even thought about Marie Antoinette who, upon being told the peasants did not have bread to eat, muttered, “Then let them eat cake.” I suppose, those who have organized the Millennium party would be saying, “If they can’t eat chicken or beef or mutton or berbere, let them eat grass or something.” We’ve got a party to attend!

A sudden burst of applause and ululation jolted me out of my “blues”, and as I looked up I could see the smiling face of Birtukan standing tall and elegant in a grey striped suit flashing a broad smile. For a moment, just for a moment, I wondered if Birtukan had just stepped off a plane or the centerfold in Vogue Magazine. There she stood beaming a smile at the crowd. The crowd went wild. Engineer Gizachew, Dr. Hailu and Ato Brook followed as the flower girls handed them their bouquets. And suddenly Dr. Berhanu joined in from the crowd as people chanted his name. It was a free for all after that. Everybody wanted to wanted to kiss them, hug them, embrace them. Touch them. You had to be there to feel it!

They took it all in stride. They were happy, but I think they had the surprise of their lives. I doubt they could have imagined such a huge crowd, such an outpouring of love, respect and honor waiting for them. In America. At Dulles Airport.

But the crowd would not leave them alone. They followed them outside the terminal. They sang for them. They assembled in the parking lot. They sang some more. They followed them on the highways, miles and miles of cars lined up in two lanes. Young people flashing the “V” sign as they sped down the highway, calling out their names and thanking them. “We love you Birtukan. Thanks Bre. Thanks, Dr. Hailu, Eng. Gizachew, Ato Brook. They followed them to the Washington Mall. And to the Mayflower Hotel. They just couldn’t get enough of them. I am sure by the end of the day “their cups must have runneth over.”

As we headed down the highway to the hotel, we started chatting. I felt like I had known them for a long time. They were people of humility. So soft spoken. So thoughtful. And what a sense of humor they have!

They were amazing. They showed no bitterness towards those who had caused them so much misery for the past two years. Not a harsh word against their tormentors. As we continued to talk, I began to sense what kind of people they were: ordinary people with extraordinary courage. Simple people with a big message. Common people with uncommon valor. Unpretentious people with rock-solid principles.

I joked with them. I asked them if they were surprised by the enormous turnout of Ethiopians at the airport. They said they had no idea that so many people would come out to receive them this early on a Sunday morning. Perhaps they felt they had caused people inconvenience by arriving so early. But I was quick to reply, “Well, if you could sleep on the dirt floor of Kality prison for two years, wake up and come to America to see us, we’d be damned if we could not get out of our comfortable beds on a glorious Sunday morning and say, “Welcome friends and thank you for everything!” We laughed, but that was the truth.

But thank them we must, Again and again. As they travel this great land to visit with us. We must thank them for suffering the indignities in Kality prison with grace. For sitting in Kangaroo court month after month and listening to perjurers and liars. For never getting down into the sewers to argue their cause with those who make a living there. For maintaining their honor and dignity against those who have neither. For their sacrifices -- the love of their families, their professions, their friends-- in the cause of freedom, democracy and human rights. For saying “NO!” to tyranny, and “YES” to democracy. For not selling out for thirty pieces of silver. For not copping out. For maintaining their sense of humor when the jerks jerk them around. For showing grace under fire. For sacrificing their freedom, and putting everything on the line, so that their countrymen and women can be free. And for maintaining a cheerful attitude about the whole thing.

So Birtukan, Berhanu, Gizachew, Hailu, Brook, Welcome to America. The land of the free and home of the brave. Breathe the fresh air of liberty. Renew your spirit while you are with US, for America nurtures all who yearn to breathe free. Feel at home here in America, for you can not feel home, at home.

What a glorious day! What a historic day!

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