

November 15, 2012

During the day the village hummed with people. No one was hesitant to yell across a distance if they could communicate that way. Whoever walked along the road was stopped and repeatedly answered the question "Where are you going?" Since cell phone reception was impossible, people talked all day about who was going where to do what. We heard conversations like these: "Have you seen Jack?" "Yeah, he went to Jerry's house to get the coconuts, then said he would pass by Ron's." Jack could then always be followed and found. Or else, "Did you find Jack?" "No, he had already left. Have you seen him?" "I saw him go that direction ten minutes ago."

At night, with no electricity, things quieted down just after dark. People ate, everyone slept early, except on evenings when there was a wedding reception or a demon ceremony to placate evil spirits. Then we endured loud dance music being played (powered by a generator) or eerie drumming, crying and chanting hour after hour till just before dawn.

It was important that we find local helpers for the massive construction and remodeling task we were undertaking. No general contractors were available; every workman had his specialty, from cement work to preparing lumber to providing hardware. Our landlord had a nephew I'll call Nathaniel who walked with a limp. He had contracted polio a few years earlier and spent six months in a Catholic hospital, then got well enough to return home. Thin and awkward, he seemed much younger than his 27 years. Colin hired him to dig latrines with our volunteers first. He always worked hard and never complained. At break time he drank tea and ate a snack thankfully, and listened as the men studied the Bible and prayed in English. His English was shaky, but he had been to school through seventh grade and seemed to be able to follow simple conversations.

Nathaniel was the closest to an agnostic we met there. Although he spoke as though there were a god, and although he behaved respectfully whether he was with Christians, Muslims or Catholics, he was a natural skeptic. He was the only local person we met who thought witchcraft could be explained away by science. Because he was naturally discreet, he did not advertise his reservations, but as we got to know him, we began to understand that what we believed was an initial interest in the gospel was mostly kind politeness and tolerance.

Nathaniel surprised us when we began to understand all his hidden connections and talents. He knew who could make us a door or a window for a new

bathroom. He would cheerfully walk from one village to the next to get an appointment for us to see a contractor. He found out which homeowners would rent houses to us, and helped us navigate the legalities. He knew what days supplies would be likely to arrive from the city, who to ask for which favors, and how long a job would take. He was happy to ask questions and even to give advice, always expressed respectfully.

Everyone knew him and liked him. Before we arrived, however, he had been an object of people's pity. The fact that we hired him for hard labor and he survived and thrived changed their outlook. The fact that we also treated him with the respect due to a purchasing agent changed his status in the community. People began to treat him with similar respect. He stopped smoking and bought some new clothes.

We all found ourselves drawing someone to Jesus. Andrew and Nathaniel spent time together; Tom began tutoring high school students who wanted to improve their English; Enoch made friends with all the shopkeepers; I welcomed children to the front porch to read Bible story books, and helped a neighbor by writing Bible verses into her notebook for her to copy. Colin had the best open door. A teacher from the elementary school came one day and asked if he could tutor him in English. Colin agreed, and they used the parallel English/Swahili New Testament as their textbook. "What do you think about Jesus?" Colin asked after they had met a few times. "He is a wonderful person," the Muslim teacher answered sincerely. Yes indeed, and in so many ways.



Colin and Nathaniel in front of a team house, just completed.