

Excerpts from the Book

Title “WHAT I LEARNED FROM WALKING ON FIRE”

Urs Jakob

Kidnapped in Mali

“While we were in the middle of the first shoot, a police truck pulled up to our hotel. Several police officers stepped out, grabbed our guide, pulled him into the truck, and sped off in a trail of dust.

A half hour later, another police truck arrived. The officers demanded that I come down to the police station to answer questions. I would certainly answer any question they had I said, but I would – under no conditions – meet them in the police station. Once you are there, it is very easy for them to lock you up and prevent you from communicating.

I demanded that if the captain wanted to talk, that he come out to see me.

Lots of shouting ensued before the officer got on his radio and the captain arrived ten minutes later.

“Where is my guide?” I asked him.

“We are holding him in prison until our problem is resolved. My cousin says that you have not paid for the rental of the jeep.”

“He is not correct.” I pull out the rental contract and receipt.

“He wants extra money because you are taking the car to Mauritania.”

“That was understood, the contract does not limit where we take the car.”

“You will pay me 7000 CFA francs.”

There is no point in arguing...”

CFA’s are just play money to me.

Last Stand Whore House

“In NDB Mauritania, there were only two restaurants that did not serve exclusively camel meat and couscous. They were both Chinese, catering mostly to third world sailors.

Upon visiting the toilet, I heard a lot of clacking coming from a back room. I went to explore. I stuck my head in and discovered a dozen women playing mahjong. They were older – 40s and up. I realized the pathetic situation.

The Chinese mafia had sent these women to NDB – the end of the world – as they were too old to work even the industrial towns of China. They probably would die in NDB...”

Bunking with Al Qaida

“I feel everything, and I feel nothing.”

The clank of heavy metal doors slam shut behind us as faceless guards march me down a dim concrete corridor in Dar Naim Military Prison – known to the Mauritanian locals as “Happy Place.” It’s dark. I am afraid. I do not know what is happening to me.

There are no windows. Water trickles along the floor, and I step on something soft. I hear screaming from somewhere down a corridor to the left, and the screeching of metal against metal. There’s yelling in languages I do not understand. My stomach feels as if it is being churned by an electric eggbeater. My back feels like it is being welded together by an acetylene torch, joint by joint. I fear that I may never step out through those locked doors again.

I want to turn around and run. The two military guards one on each side of me hold me firmly by my upper arms. I realize that I have just lost the two people in my life

that I truly love. The only things that really matter in my life – my girlfriend, Sylvie and my son, Cedric. They are on the other side of those locked doors...”

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“...A toothless Arab wearing a stained beige robe stands up and asks me for something, holding out his hand. I see his lips move, I hear nothing, I am too stunned to hear what he is saying.

I don't belong here. The government bringing me here is sick. Absolutely sick. I am an American-Swiss entrepreneur, philanthropist, and explorer. I have done nothing but help this country. I have financed women's coops in the desert here and built hospitals in West Africa. These are ignorant and sick people.

I feel like grabbing onto myself, and hugging – holding myself for security, for warmth, for strength. I want to hold me, I want someone to hold me, I want someone I know to hold me. I need to be held right now.

How am I going to survive this?

... The overwhelming shock and terror is that no one knows that I am

here. The US Consulate does not know, Sylvie does not know, my son Cedric does not know, nor do any of my friends in Mauritania...”

GENERAL DA'S DEN

General Da counts his money again and separates the ouguiya into two. He reaches over and hands half of the ouguiyas my guard. As I understand, Da splits his pillaging profits with the Army guards for bringing me to him. They control the outside of the prison; Da controls the inside. The Army has no power inside this prison.

I fade

I am startled by...

Flickering blue lights towards the front. There must be a television in here. Everyone's head is pointed to the other end of this coffin. I can't see much through the cigarette fog and people's heads.

There is yelling, and I hear gunshots being fired.

Between the haze and the back of heads, I glance at the TV.

Men running. Someone is hit. It's in English – the sound of action, violence...it must be an American program.

I can't hear the dialog over the African rap song playing on the ghetto blaster somewhere. Oh shit no, it's a prison movie, a prison movie in this prison. I feel truly nocuous,

Happiness

“One thing that I have learned in my travels is that there is a biological upper limit to happiness. This is a primary law. It is not possible to be happier than happy. If you eat one piece of sushi, and you are truly happy, then eating 20 pieces of sushi will not make you any happier.

A man can bite into an apple, and, to him, it is the best fruit he has ever tasted; he is truly happy. A man dining on a \$1,000 a 12 course meal at one of the best restaurants in Manhattan, complete with caviar and truffle, can be equally as happy (or not) as a man eating an apple.

It can take very little to make some people happy.

I walked through what Amnesty International claims to be the worst “slum” in the world, more than once. The people living there seemed to be just as happy as the people I knew in my neighborhood. They did not carry sad miserable faces. On the contrary, they were smiling and seemed joyous. I believe that this was because of their close social ties. People there live in tight spaces and they help each other out.

I see this over and over everywhere I travel. Children in a mud hut village play with cars on a string made from a tin can with Coke bottle tops for wheels. They are having great fun. A kid in a developed city enjoys a large plastic car that he can sit on and steer. Is one kid having more fun than the other? From their facial expressions it does not look like it.”

Contentment is Complex

“... “I want to be happy” is a standard reply from people I know. However, I observe happiness as being fleeting. It comes and goes, and we have little control over it. It is often dependent on another person’s behavior. If someone tells me that

they are always happy, I say that they are always sick. Humans simply are not wired to be happy all the time.

I believe that it is preferable to be content.

Contentment is a somewhat permanent state of feeling good about ourselves – acceptance of the actions we have taken in the past, and the understanding that the actions we are taking in the present are in alignment with the values we hold.

Contentment has to do with our relationship to our-self, it is a deep feeling of positive acceptance of who we are. An openness to change. An acceptance of those things and people whose values are different than our own. A primary factor of contentment is positive relationships with others.

From a Buddhist perspective, contentment is found through the experience of interconnectedness, that you are part of everything, and everything is part of you.

Contentment is more of a hum than a bling.”

Meeting Evil

“I trekked deep into the Liberian bush to look evil in the eye.

I don’t mean just a “bad guy,” but true evil. A man who many have been accused of committing atrocities against mankind. A man the likes of Pol Pot and Idi Amin.

He was a man who had killed many young boys with his own hands. A man who told the BBC that he cut young boys open live and pushed his hand in, grabbed their pumping heart, ripped it out, barbecued it, and ate it. I knew that this was a fact. A man who it was said herded villagers into the church locked it shut and then burned it to the ground. I met many young boys who had their arm cut off by his command – sometimes both arms. The young men had told me stories about the general that are so sick that I cannot put them down on paper.

He was a general who led an army of children with guns. Children who fought children. Killed children. Children who were sent to kill every living thing in a village regardless of age

He would brutally orphan the young boys, and, once they had no more family, they could never go home again. The only place that would feed them was the army. The girls become sex slaves, cooks, and even soldiers with guns.

I wanted to experience this man firsthand in an effort to understand the world. To understand true evil, if it existed. What was a person who committed such inhuman acts like? What was inside him? Did he enjoy what he did? Was he a happy man? Was it even possible to be happy having committed such crimes?

Attempting to understand the world is risky. Walking up to meet the general, I have never felt so much fear in my life, and I do not scare easily. He was looking at my face I was staring at his eyes, He was thinking “can I trust this man or shall I kill him and eat him”? “I was thinking “ “I can not trust him, he will kill him and eat me” He will hack me to pieces, and no one would know, To people searching for me he would say “That Jakob guy, yeah he came through here, he went off into the jungle there, I never saw him again”. He looked at me and smiled I knew that I would probably be ok.

We sat down on the dirt; cold Heinekens came out from nowhere. I was introduced to his beautiful young wife, and to his daughter who was on summer break from a New Jersey college.

I realized he was the commander of a small sugar cane plantation. The villagers treated him with respect. I had the feeling that many were his ex-soldiers who had served under him during the war.

To my eyes, he was a man who was content. He had a family who made him feel that he was loved, a community who treated him with respect, and he seemed to be at peace with his past actions.

Was he a psychopath?

No. Psychopaths cannot be generals who lead armies. Generals are rational men. They command armies, they develop strategy, and they carry it out, and they must have people around that respect them, who are loyal.

So, what was going on here?"

At the hotel the receptionist tells me "The kids are all just a in a cartoon world killing cartoon characters till their best friend gets chopped up with a machete then they fall apart."