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Reflection Paper.

All my life I have been dreaming about visiting places so distant and exotic that they would open a new perspective on the life in general and on mine in particular. I imagined myself embarking on these spectacular journeys from which I would come back, but never fully the same. I would see how other people live in the places so different from the ones I know, what they care about, talk about, and think. This fascination with the life of others coupled with strong desire to help people led me to pursue the Public Health Science degree. I planned on specializing in epidemiology and working internationally. My recent trip to Ethiopia, however wonderful it was, made me reconsider some of the decisions I was planning to make and gave me some new outlooks on life in general and human nature in particular.

The first thing that astonished me right after leaving the airport in Addis Ababa and stepping outside was the smell in the air. The capital of Ethiopia, Addis Abba, translates in Amharic as “new flower” and rightly so. The air had a rich earthy green smell of vegetation and what seemed like flowers with no equivalent that I can compare it to. One would expect the capital, the biggest and most populated city in the country to have the aroma of car fumes and hot concrete, but it was not so.

Another thing that surprised me in Addis Ababa was connected to the country that I came from. I knew that Ethiopia was socialist in a past, lived through a Red Terror and used to have economic and political ties to USSR, but I was still astonished to see so many LADAs of a first generation in a city. My father used to drive one back in the days! I asked a local driver about it,

and he told me that these cars are valued for their durability, cheap maintenance, gas usage, and are used as taxis. The remnants of the past were in the most unexpected places. As we went to the local primary school deep in the country, I noticed the same glass panes that my grandmother had in her old home. The evidence of past Soviet connection was all over Ethiopia.

In addition to the relatively recent socialistic connection with the country that I came from, Ethiopians and Ukrainians share similar religious beliefs through Eastern Orthodoxy. This means that we use the same Gregorian calendar and have corresponding religious holidays that both of our cultures like to make a big hoopla about.

Just like the rest of Orthodox Churches in the countries where they are dominant, Ethiopian Church wields a lot of power. It was abundantly evident when we joined the multiday celebration of Timkat, the celebration of Jesus' baptism. The army was staying guard to protect the select few who had the privilege to witness and participate in the elaborate ceremony inside the stone-walled church courtyard. People were desperate to get in! They would risk their lives and well-being by jumping the fence or trying to push through the crowds to get to the stale green water of the man-made pool in the middle of this courtyard just because the priest "blessed" it. No one seemed to care about potential risks of splashing into the water that has been sitting under the hot Ethiopian sun for months. The water thought to be magical with superpowers now. Back in Orthodox Ukraine, we would have similar ceremonies that are potentially dangerous health-wise, but are carried out and anticipated anyways, just because people believe they would get clean of their sins and be physically purified of the current diseases and ailments. A lot of money flows to the Orthodox Church during these holidays that seemingly has no problem with acquiring earthly possessions and privileges. The worst of it is that people are absolutely oblivious to it and are eager to supply to the church.

In addition to tendency for extensive celebrations and relaxed attitudes toward ones work, Ethiopians and Ukrainians share the common enemy- corruption and economic disparities. Being in Ethiopia and seeing these similarities and their possible outcomes made me think that maybe Max Weber was right in his theory that Protestantism was the driving reason behind the success of capitalism. Protestantism values hard work and doesn't offer repentance in this life unlike Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. The adherents of this particular branch of Christianity have to prove while on this Earth to be worthy of the next life. They tend to be highly driven to get work done and done well. For Protestants cleanliness is next to goodliness as popular saying goes. Those highly useful qualities do not seem to be widely cultivated in Orthodox societies. I certainly noticed the carelessness towards ones appearance, general lack cleanliness of the living conditions, and body hygiene even on the holydays. While this might not be true in all parts of the country, lack of personal hygiene can be noticed in many parts of rural Ukraine.

I have never experienced the contrasting nature of human beings so profoundly as on this trip. Being out of their comfort zone, tired, and irritated, people were showing their dark sides. There was less need for the usual US-standard niceties and the raw, unadulterated emotions and behaviors were coming out without much shame or remorse. In addition, I witnessed what kind of things people are capable of when faced with a survival need. We like to talk about high morality of modern societies as opposed to our behaviors and attitudes in the past, but in the conditions that people in Ethiopia survive, anything goes. High religiosity seemingly doesn't have an effect on the very deeds that the Bible or Koran considers being a sin. And why bother with behaving when one can go to the religious ceremony and get clean from all the dirt and grime of the past.

Despite my still evident desire to help others, this trip made me evaluate some of the career choices that I was planning to make. While I still consider the field of Public Health Science in its international aspect, I need to reconsider my specialization in epidemiology. During our trip I realized that health limitations that I have might not allow me to be successful in this particular segment of the field when employed internationally. In addition, I realized the importance of the environment we create for ourselves in our daily lives as well as people we surround ourselves with even more deeply. This trip really made me appreciate how far I came as a person, and how deeply I value all the great people I have in my life.

Overall my goals were achieved. I had travelled to an exotic country that gave me a new perspective on my personal, social, academic and professional life, made me re-evaluate my behaviors, attitudes, and choices. It gave me a glimpse into the life of others in the environment different from my own as well as second look at the life that I'm familiar with.