I blink my eyes shut, and then I open them again. “What did I just see?”

Moving closer to the airplane window, head now touching, trying to squeeze a panoramic view into a double, plastic-plated hole, I am looking beneath the night skies to an endless sea of pink. That’s not a sunrise, nor a sunset, though it could be either for I knew not the time of my biological or mechanical clock, since I left the United States hours, maybe days ago. But the pink hue, delicate, yet all encompassing, stretched upon the whole earth below. It is spectacular—whatever it is.

Then the pilot comes on and tells us in several languages—thankfully, one is English—that we have passed into the airspace over the continent of Africa and we have now begun our trek over the Sahara desert. An exclamation points in my mind, “The desert sand is pink!” I stare for many minutes and many miles.

My mind spreads out many images from stories of the desert. The beauty of De Saint-Exupery’s *The Little Prince* and its crash landing in the wild and imaginative Sahara. The adventure of the movies and the Middle Eastern battles with kings, queens, swords, and charioteers. The danger of dry, sand-stinging terrain with mirages appearing and disappearing in the crazed minds of desperate and dying men and women, dragging themselves through the desert.

So for many miles and many minutes the airplane glides across this pink sea beneath the black night. I never pictured it like this. And with both my inner and outer journeys, I now know I am going deeper and deeper into a foreign land.

I want to share with you treasures that I brought back from this foreign land called Ghana. The bag I returned with carried humility, trust, beauty, and knowledge. All four were jewels that glittered before my eyes wherever I turned in one way or another. And almost always, unexpectedly.

Hours after first encountering the Sahara, our plane is now making its initial descent into Accra. The pink is gone. It is about 9:00 in the evening there and its incredibly dark over this capital city of Ghana in West Africa. The lights are florescent and the contrast of white and black is stark and eerily different than other cities I have seen at night.
Getting off the plane, we walk into this shadowy light, more like the starkness of a parking lot. The pungent smell of burning fills the air. People are jammed everywhere and my apprehensions are growing. Gratefully, I am walking with a colleague from the States whom I met in Amsterdam before embarking on the second leg of this long trip. We are being pushed by the crowd, and people are coming up to us offering us help (we had been warned not to accept assistance from strangers even if they identified themselves as baggage claim attendants).

Then we see this man with a ICPCC sign (International Congress on Pastoral Care and Counselling). He introduces himself as Peter. I was never so glad to see someone looking for me. He directs us to stand in a certain place as he hurries around looking for other international visitors to the conference in Ghana. Eventually we assemble and work our way through the crowds, making it to a dirt parking lot and a old beat-up jeep or van.

Bumping along the roads across the city, I spot several fires burning on the side. Men are gathered there, doing what I am not sure. But now I know the source of the smell of burning that I noticed when disembarking the airplane. The parading van and taxis pull off the road into a dark, dusty parking lot and we hear that some of our number will be getting off at this “hotel.” Thankfully, I am one of the party continuing on to GIMPA, the government owned buildings where the conference will be held and where most of the participants are staying.

When I get to my room and close my door, I look around at the cot with the canvas covered mattress and the single low-watt light bulb and the worn and faded drapes. I venture into the bathroom and check out the low level of water in the toilet, the rusted and stained shower with a drop-drop of precious water. I turn the hot water faucet—an empty and silent turn. I turn the cold water faucet to a small single stream of water, then turn it off quickly. I look around at the tile floors, and though somewhat dusty, I can see the sweep marks of the care that went into preparing this room for me.

I lock the door, throw down the key, and breath a sigh. I am here. I am safe.

And then after a few minutes I realize, I’m not smug, I’m in total denial. The next morning I run into Steve Ryan and after a few moments of catch up he whispers, “I didn’t know it was this bad.” I quickly respond, “Oh, I have been to a developing country before, so I expected this.” No sooner did I hear those words come out of my
mouth than I thought, “how smug.”

The reality of the evening before hit me. I was petrified. I was like a small child who clung (at least with my eyes and fast-moving feet) to Peter, our ICPCC guide. I had hardened myself into believing that I have been to a developing country and so this would not be a shock to me. But the truth lay beneath my protective thinking as again I am confronted with living conditions, at least on the physical level, that shock me to the core.

If I stayed above the clouds in my thinking processes, I would never have seen the beautiful pink hue spread across that foreign land in the life and breath of her people. If I had not felt the shock of these social and economic conditions, I would not have felt the love, warmth, and joy of these African people, especially the Ghanaian people, who welcomed me on this now beautiful Sunday morning in August.

Steve Ryan’s honesty woke me up. A first glimpse of the beauty of humility. I smiled at the crumbling of my past experience of “developing countries.” Now I can be free to let this experience open before me.

Humility as a virtue by definition is a power. And if we can be empowered by humility, I think it is the power to smile. Humility is a gentle virtue, I think. Many more times over the week would I and my colleagues be confronted by humbling experiences. I guess it is humility when we recognize our clay—humus—and perhaps humiliating when we do not recognize our clay. The smile softens the clay.

Later in the week on a field trip to the swinging bridges in the jungle, we had to line up because only one person could go across at a time. It was painstakingly slow. And for the many of us on the two buses who opted to go, it would take the better part of the afternoon. Waiting in line was a sight to be seen. All these chaplains, CPE supervisors, pastoral counselors—professionals all—now all of a sudden becoming irritated, watching to make sure no one was cutting in line, complaining about the logistics—worse than children fighting at recess. I wished that someone had a cam corder.

The power of humility is the power to smile.

Prior to leaving the bus, the tour director had told us that we were to be back on the bus at 12:30 p.m. for we had a lunch scheduled at a restaurant. We did not get to the bus until 3:30 p.m. and we had to make the “Castle” (the horrific place of the slave trade) before it closed at 5:00 p.m. Consequently, we arrived for our lunch at 6:30
p.m. And they served us! Oh, and that was the open-air restaurant with the alligators running outside. That was the day I heard someone say, “Americans have watches, Africans have time.”

The power of humility is the power to smile.

One of the first mornings at GIMPA, I went out for a walk on the grounds and I noticed paths in the trees that went to nearby homes. A little boy of perhaps 10 spotted me walking and he watched me from a distance. I continued to walk, but when I turned I noticed he was following me. One time when turning I waved, and he waved back with a huge smile. This sort of cat-and-mouse went on for a while as my eyes traversed back and forth from the scriptures to the boy.

Finally, we were closer and he yelled, “What is your name?” “Joe,” I responded. I waited and he came over to me and said his name and shook my hand. He said, “Can I be your friend?” “Sure, I said, a little patronizingly, I am afraid to admit. “OK, can we go to your room?” he says extending his hand. I froze. I stammered out some excuse why we couldn’t. “Then can you give me your address, Joe?” The warmth and innocence of his eyes still could not calm my unnerved self. I said something about seeing him later and that I had to get going. For good measure, I waved back, and he paused a bit, then waved. And smiled.

My mind was racing with thoughts. And one of the first was one I would never have thought 20 years ago. “I can’t take a boy to my room.” I couldn’t believe the distancing that I was experiencing in myself. Are we such a pedophilia-obsessed society? He seemed so perplexed at my quickened reaction to what I presume was his innocence.

And then the thought, “What does he want? Is it money? Why does he want my address?”

That encounter hovered in my consciousness the rest of the week. Am I (are we) so guarded that trust is a relic of the past? Obviously, I would not bring a child to my room (I guess that is obvious!), but what was disturbing was my reaction.

Though still uncomfortable, I worked at trying to be open and trusting of the children and adolescents who came around GIMPA and visited us. The wide smiles and beautiful eyes of these people matched the warmth and welcome they engendered in inviting relationship.
From the children, I saw the glitter of trust. A trust many of us adults have lost, or at least partly lost, in our adulthood, perhaps even especially, in our North American/European culture.

Our hosts in Ghana could not have been more welcoming, more trusting. From Peter at the airport to our own NACC member, Father Alex Bobby Benson, to the men and women who waited table, cooked our food, cleaned the areas, there was no guile to be seen. It was like they were always there waiting to be at your service, and always with the warm Ghanaian smile that was so wide that it crossed continents.

One afternoon a group of us went down to the markets. Ghana is known for the outdoor markets and the practice of bartering. I had been told that the selling and buying was not only an economic activity but a social one as well. I was in the midst of a dramatic interchange for a wood carving of the Last Supper, when the man said his price was final. I held my own. “Nope, all done.” “No, come on,” he says, “give me your final price.” “You got my final price,” and I walk off with feigned indifference. He didn’t follow me this time as he had in the past. I thought, “Damn, I wanted that carving.”

Within minutes he’s back; we go at it a few more times, and finally he sells it to me for my price. I go to give him the money, but I don’t have the right change so I throw in an extra 1000 cedees (his last offer). I motion for him to keep it. He looks at me as I am leaving and we both smirk, then smile, then laugh and laugh. It’s the relationship for these people, not the almighty buck. Or at least not always.

I took home a wood carving and I took home a piece of trust.

The beauty of Ghana, especially her people, is the most precious treasure. The beauty is in the color of their skin, the white pearled smiles, the gorgeous colors in cloth, and the circles and lines in the designs. The beauty is in the endless stretch of movement in dance, the beckoning rhythm of drums, cymbals and horns, and the unleashed cries of voice in song.

We experienced worship led by youth groups and adult groups who came offering their own beauty in body, cloth, dance, music and song conjoined into the highest form of prayer and worship. We experienced the formality of the opening procession for the Congress with all its dignity and decorum. We experienced human beauty in its own culture. And for many of us, if not all of us, this culture was beautiful.

My final treasure was knowledge. It was the knowledge of good and
evil.

The trip to the “Castle” wherein the African peoples were transported against their will and made into African American peoples, though without dignity, or even name, slaves that they were, until perhaps the generation of this group of African Americans who were making this return trip.

And that is only the few thousands and thousands who made it. Not to mention the many thousands and thousands who died cramped in these horrific underground storage areas piled one on top of another in horrible heat, disease, starvation.

I walked along this somber and sober tour, a pilgrimage really. Beside me was a colleague from Germany, a Lutheran pastor and CPE supervisor. At one point I turned to her and remarked, “This is the American holocaust.” I had a sense of the collective horrors that any race can inflict upon another. Sin is original, not to one people, but to a whole creation fallen in our genesis story.

Walking along further, I found myself standing beside this tall, stately African American whom I know just to say “hello” to. A quiet stillness lay in the air as we walked out of the dark of the women’s part of the “castle” into daylight and toward the passage that led to the open ocean and exile and slavery. My heart ached for the pursed look of pain as he stared straight ahead. I reached over and put my hand on his shoulder and said, “I am sorry.” Not turning his head he stoically replied, “It’s a fact of history.” I quickly added, “but a terrible fact.” He nodded.

A few minutes later I went looking for my friend Theresa, another African American colleague. I went up to her, hugged her, and asked her how she was doing. “I’m depressed,” she said. “Yeah.” I then continued, “I am sorry.” She said, “Joe, your people didn’t do this.” Interestingly, I had already thought that one through, but it makes no difference. I inherit both the good and the bad before me. I am part of a dominant culture that bears some responsibility collectively, if not individually.

But I took back the knowledge not only of the evil, but of the good. I experienced not only the ruins of a castle of an evil empire, but the building blocks of a castle of less dominant voices of a growing empire of intellect. A power resides in these voices whose experience has often in the past not been validated as worthwhile or meaningful.

It is very different to have grown up hearing only the measured time of the piano, for example, and then all of a sudden to sit up and hear
drums, horns, strings and other instruments that create the human whole. I think for many of us in North America, that’s the only, or most often experience in our attendance at educational events with the dominant voices of Caucasian academics.

In Ghana, we attended plenary sessions led by academics from the Congo, Kenya, Ghana, India, and Brazil. These men and women of color offered insights from theology, psychology, marriage and family therapy, anthropology, and other disciplines. So I brought home a treasure of knowledge unlike I have generally been offered in the past.

And for this particular gathering, no piano played.

I learned humility from a North American voice. I learned trust from the eyes of a 10-year old Ghanaian boy. I learned beauty in skin colors, broad smiles, brilliant clothing, voices and body movements from African peoples. I learned knowledge from the relics of history, but more importantly, from the intellect of women and men who do not, nor purport to be, from a greatest nation on earth. And yet they constituted—the people from the Congo, Ghana, Kenya, India, and Brazil—a gathering of the some of the greatest of God’s nation on earth.

Isaiah—a Middle Easterner himself—wrote a truth about the God of the less dominant voices in his time approximately three millennia ago:

\[
\text{I will give you treasures out of the darkness} \\
\text{and riches that have been hidden away,} \\
\text{that you may know that I am the Lord your God} \\
\text{and that I have called you by name.}
\]

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Ghana is no longer hidden away from the international pastoral care and counseling movement.