

SOJOURN

Allan M. Winkler
December 20, 2010

It sounded like a good idea at the time. My wife Sara, the science librarian at nearby Earlham College, wanted to lead another foreign study program in East Africa. This would be her seventh such effort, the third for the two of us working together. She had done one program by herself three years ago, and the semester-long separation wasn't a good thing. This time my schedule was more flexible, and so I agreed. We decided to take a combined group of students from Earlham and Miami, where I teach, and that way each of us could remain on our own institutional payroll. We also decided to visit both Kenya and Tanzania, countries that we know and enjoy. Our only worry, once we recruited the necessary students, was Sara's Parkinson's Disease.

Five or six years ago, Sara had been puzzled. She noticed that one arm didn't swing normally when she walked, and she was also concerned about her handwriting, which was getting smaller. Her personal physician referred her to a neurologist, and the diagnosis was clear: Parkinson's.

But Dr. Alberto Espay of the UC Medical Center assured her that she had "the good kind of Parkinson's Disease" and encouraged her to do whatever she wanted to do. Indeed, three years ago, she had handled the sojourn abroad well, and had every confidence that this time would be the same. Because she was

now taking Levadopa four times a day, we got insurance clearance and bought all the pills we needed to bring with us – more than 900 as I recall – along with other medications. And on July 1, we headed for East Africa.

It's a lot of work, taking 21 college age adolescents overseas for a sixteen-week semester. It's easier to get ready than it used to be, what with e-mail and the Web, but it's still necessary to make all kinds of detailed arrangements in advance, and that means on-site visits to every place we wanted to go. For about five weeks, therefore, Sara and I traveled all over Kenya and Tanzania, usually for two or three days at a time, planning where we would stay, how we would get there, and what we would do. It was exhausting, and I was healthy. For Sara, it proved to be more than she could handle.

We managed to get everything done before the students arrived toward the end of August. But in their first weeks in-country, it was clear that she was struggling. New symptoms began to emerge. She got loopy at the end of every day, and looked as though she had been drinking, even though she hadn't touched a drop. She began to have intestinal troubles she couldn't shake. I began to worry.

When we were up in Iringa, a 14-hour bus ride from Arusha where we began, she got seriously sick. After 4 days of doctors' visits, she ended up in a local hospital, and began to freak out. And that was the first time she mentioned the possibility of going home.

I didn't take her seriously. After all, the notion of taking over the program by myself, when she was the one who wanted us to do it together in the first place, was almost incomprehensible. But even after she got out of the hospital, she was still fragile, and after another bone-jarring 11-hour bus ride to Dar es Salaam, she realized she couldn't go on. The next day, we told the students she was leaving. The students from Earlham – her institution – were mortified. *Their* instructor was bailing out. They insisted that the college send a replacement. I observed that there was no budget to pay for another faculty member, for Sara was still on payroll, even if on medical leave. And furthermore, there was no one available to come.

I'm pretty well-organized, and we had already decided that I would handle all the detail work and make all the arrangements, while Sara would be the empathetic presence. Now I was going to have to be Mother Hen as well, without possessing the skills at keeping groups together that she has. But I was determined to try.

And so in mid-to-late September, she flew home. She needed to be under Dr. Espay's care, and I shudder to think what would have happened if she had not returned. But I could barely fathom what lay ahead for me.

In fact, I managed quite well. Matthew, a colleague of mine from Miami, was scheduled to join us for a week in Lamu to teach a unit on Islam while the

students were in homestays with Muslim families. Having him was a treat, for I had adult companionship, and it made everything easier as a kind of transition.

But then he went back to Miami, and I was really on my own. A 3-day period of independent travel was rough, for I stayed at Peponi's, a lovely beach-front hotel that Sara and I together had enjoyed for years. Though I did my best to keep busy, it wasn't the same. Then on to Mombasa, and Nairobi, and after that to Masai Mara, to look at the wild animals. During much of this time, I had help from Willis, a former guide in Kenya, whom I had helped come to Miami to pursue an undergraduate degree and who was now completing a PhD at UCLA. He made the experience in the Mara memorable, and then took us up to his home village in Luoland, about an hour north of Lake Victoria, near the home of Barack Obama's grandmother, whom, in fact, we visited. The students all lived with different families for 2 weeks. I stayed with Willis and his mother, in a compound that had neither electricity nor running water. It wasn't easy, but it was pleasant, and best of all, I had a little hut of my own.

During a 9-day period of independent travel in November, I had a visit from my son David, who came over to climb Kilimanjaro. He had attempted the mountain 19 years before, but had gotten altitude sick and had to come down without reaching the top. This time he was determined to succeed. He stayed with the group for a couple of days before we all set off our separate ways. While he was on the mountain, I went up to visit some Kenyan friends at the

base of Mt. Kenya, then flew to Dar, where I gave a folk music concert for about 150 folks, and after that I returned to Arusha to pick up David and take him on safari for a couple of days.

But after he left, I was on my own again. And now we were going for a 2-week stint at a private game reserve called Ndarakwai, where the students would choose an animal and study it – at close hand – and then write an extended paper about its behavior. But that meant 2 weeks in a tent, not always easy especially in rainy season.

Next followed the Maasai homestay, where the students all lived for 3 days in small Maasai manyattas, in very primitive conditions. Not only did the Maasai not have running water; they didn't even have pit latrines. I've done this a good number of times in the past, though this time, I was in a tent in compound in the village area. But it was still tough.

And so the program came to an end.

As I look back, I can't imagine I managed to complete it alone. I was worried about Sara for virtually the entire trip, even though she improved slowly once she got home. But it was still tough for her. Because we had rented out our house, she couldn't move back home, and that meant staying with friends and living out of a suitcase for the better part of 3 months.

For virtually the entire trip, I never really unpacked anything either, or settled in. It was nice to go around in shorts and sandals, or one of my two pairs

of jeans, but I dreamed of drawers in which I could spread out my things and relax.

But worst of all was the relentless loneliness. For most of the time after Sara departed, I hungered for adult conversation, but outside of Matthew and Willis, I had no one to talk to. I was on my own, 24/7. Our group was not on a college campus. We moved together from point to point. And so I was on duty all day, every day, never even aware when a weekend arrived. I played cards with the students, and hung out with them as long as I could. But I wanted and needed something more, and it simply was not to be.

And, remember, I was dealing with adolescents. Now I like students, and I've devoted the past 43 years of my life to working with them. During my time teaching at Yale, my family and I lived in one of the residential colleges, and were surrounded by students all the time. But this was different. In Africa, I was coordinator, director, teacher, father figure, disciplinarian, all rolled into one. It's a lot to have on your plate. And it gets even worse when they get drunk....

Worst of all, at the end of the program I finally realized that the Earlham students were quietly furious that Sara had not been replaced by someone from *their* institution. Without saying so explicitly, they viewed me as an imposter, complicit in the decision to send no replacement. Never mind the fact that Earlham, like Miami, is wallowing in millions of dollars of debt. They wanted *someone, anyone*, and weren't willing to settle for anything less.

And so, even though I led the best program in which I had ever been involved, and everything worked beautifully, and the students got a tremendous amount out of the experience, benefited in ways they many not fully comprehend for years, as they got ready to leave, they were disgruntled. And as I learned what they were thinking from their end-of-the-semester evaluations, I was too.

In the end, it was a bittersweet experience. I felt a combination of pride in a job well done and irritation at the little bastards for their total inability to recognize how well things had gone. Would I do it again? I can't imagine any circumstances that would make me want to go back that way. But then, at age 65, and Sara not 100 percent, there's no reason to lead such a program ever again. We'll return to Arica ourselves, of course, or with other adults. And I can only hope and pray that the students will view the experience more thoughtfully with the passage of time.