A wonderful summer in Paradise

By Coach Berhane Andeberhan,

This summer I was in my mystical home and it was simply heavenly! Seeing family and friends, enjoying perfect weather, eating the most delicious food ever, drinking the best cup of tea every day and everywhere and seeing a people living in harmony with so much obvious and subtle beauty are among the reasons for my pride and joy and almost unreal reactions to visiting home. I was so thoroughly happy, at ease and at peace and full of joy for the short month that I spent back in Eritrea this summer that I cannot fully express the feelings and I did not want it to end.

I would like to deal with the small things that remind us of who we are and what makes us tick without reference to big issues! Like the overwhelming majority of us I am proud and impressed and often speak of the heroics of liberation and the feats of building the nation! But this travelogue will focus on a sampling of the seemingly small things that affirm ones identity and what bring joy and pride in it.

When one meets and greets older relatives and acquaintances there is the overflowing bestowment of inspiring flowery blessings and good wishes. Any perception of your doing something worthwhile is rewarded a thousand fold with blessings and appreciation and good wishes and words of approval. You get treated so well and so warmly for just the simple act of stopping by to say hello! It makes one experience such positiveness and encouragement and acknowledgement that the heart is filled to the brim. That must be one of the ingredients of pride and self assured identity and part of the essence of us.

You really get to experience love almost in a tangible way! Hugging my Dad as if we would never let each other go was so delicious! While that is obvious the wonderful murmured niceties and good wishes and expressions of joy (“welcome blessed son, how great to see you, how are you? so glad to see you, what a blessing it is to see my children!”) are subtle but with a warming and deeply felt effect. As you hug and kiss your relatives not only close relatives but even neighbors and people who just tangentially learned that your parents have offspring living overseas express such joy to see you and meet you for the first time. They seem to be genuinely happy for my father as they expressed their congratulations to him.

Was spaghetti with meat sauce invented or perfected in Eritrea? Be it Asmara, Massawa or Keren; be it at home, relatives’ homes or in restaurants my taste buds were consistently assaulted with such indescribable wonderfulness. Is the food that delicious? Or is it just that the love and generosity of the people made everything so much better because they put you in such a positive frame of mind and elevate your senses? I don’t know but it is truly enjoyable!

The inevitable visits to relatives’ and neighbors’ triggers generosity seemingly without limit. How is it that tea is so amazingly delicious at home or at the tea room? Truly there is love in the food and drink! It is definitely offered with such indescribable goodness oozing in the words and demeanor of people who offer their best with such humility and generosity as if you deserve nothing but the best.

**Massawa**

After taking the bus to Massawa, I rested for a couple of hours and set out to go look around. I went to the front desk of my hotel and asked the young lady in front which way to walk to get to some stores to pick up water and some refreshments. In a very kind and deeply concerned manner she said “No! no! we are having ‘Sumum' right now! You cannot go out till after 6:00 pm” Unintentionally exposing that I have been away from home for too long, I asked “What is ‘Sumum' “ and learned that it is the extreme heat that sometimes is common at the Red sea coast in the middle of the day! I stepped out the door for about 10 seconds and quickly learned what she was talking about! To realize our people have learned to survive and thrive in that environment and have done so while maintaining the gentle kindness that is pervasive at sea level or at nearly 8,000 feet above the sea is simply impressive.

**Keren**

My cousin drove me to Keren and I finally got to see the famous Libby Tigray! This was a crooked, scary and impressive at the same time. Now my brother can no longer tease me about never having seen Massawa or Keren. On the way back around Elaberrid there were some teenage girls offering small baskets of guava for sale. We stopped and spoke with them as we bought some fruit. They are gifted with so much gentleness and respect for each other and they were so elegantly persuasive as they offered their fruit for sale. They were more inclined to cooperate and support each other than compete even though each of them had some fruit for sale! Of course we bought more than we could consume!

**Football**

Football remains the great passion I remember from childhood! Finally our leagues have been re-established and are making progress. I had the pleasure of attending a few games in Asmara Stadium. The passion among the players as well as the spectators is still high even though understandably the level is not where it was and will soon be. The folks in the stands were giving their comments of appreciation and criticism as the games were going on and in the midst of all that I was impressed and amused by the friendly arguments between fans about Barcelona and Bayern Munich and whether Messi was the best player or was Cristiano Ronaldo better. It was fun to just listen to such hot unresolvable arguments! The sport was highly developed in Eritrea before the Struggle for Liberation. The freedom fighters prevailed on the people to postpone football till after liberation as the enemy tended to use football to attempt to divide us. Unfortunately now after liberation, the progress has been somewhat inhibited by those who have opted to undermine the sport by linking it with the shameful human trafficking that is plaguing our part of the world. But this is just a small hurdle and like all things that too will be overcome.

**A Walking Adventure in Asmara**

When speaking to my brother back overseas on the phone, he reminded me to bring back pictures. This made me realize that I, as usual, had not taken any pictures even though I had packed a nice camera when I travelled home. So after some discussion I tried to do my touristy duty and started at the main Asmara Mosque. I proceeded to take several pictures at the Mesgid and realized a beauty I had not fully appreciated before. I walked from there to the nearby Coptic cathedral Inda Marian. It too was beautiful in so many subtle ways I had not realized before. From there I proceeded to the famous Cathedrale which is majestic and readily recognizable. I kept walking and saw many other religious houses of worship. The overwhelming realization was that these and many other houses of worship were within proximity of each other. This brought to mind the fact that our people of various faiths live in harmony! My only disappointment was that the Adventist Church I attended as a kid while still standing was in disrepair as it had been confiscated by the Dergue and had been converted into a storage facility and had not regained it original function after liberation. Despite no longer being a member of the church, I experienced lingering sentimental memories.

Anytime I went for a walk in the beautiful boulevards of Asmara one thing invariably caught my eye and made me smile. I would see people of all ages walking hand in hand and arm in arm! I once saw a little girl of about eight gently holding and helping her brother of about six along. Apparently heading to school as they were both wearing the colorful school outfits. In the morning one would see youngsters heading to school wearing beautiful school outfits of varied colors. Often young teenage girls would block the sidewalk as they walked in youthful abandon and occupying the whole space, but in loving unison. I loved this too! The best example of this, and I wished I asked them to take a picture, was about seven beautiful teenage girls who were immaculately dressed and linking together arms on each others shoulders and owning the whole sidewalk. What was even subtly beautiful was that while all of them were immaculately dressed in modern outfits, approximately half of them were wearing recognizable Muslin headdresses and all of them seemed aware of nothing but their friendship and closeness. This was the most beautiful and subtle symbol of love and harmony I experienced and it warmed my heart!

***The writer is an Eritrean-American Berhane Andeberhan who recently traveled to Eritrea where he spent some time. He is a member of the Cal State Los Angeles Golden Eagles Athletic Hall of Fame and a former US Staff Coaching Schools instructor and U20 Women's National Team coach .He has over 30 years of coaching experience including at the youth, the high school, collegiate, regional and national levels. He served as a coaching instructor at the US Soccer Coaching schools from 1976 -2001. He coached the men's college soccer team Cal State Los Angeles and women's college teams at Stanford and Cornell. He led Cal State Los Angeles to National Ranking and was an NCAA finalist in 1981. That year he was named NSCAA Metropolitan Far West Coach of the Year and earned four CCAA Conference Coach of the year honors. At Stanford he also served as the Director of Soccer overseeing both men's and women's programs and was a World Cup 94 liaison at Stanford University. As a member of the US National Coaching staff, he coached the Women's West Regional Teams to Olympic Festival gold medals in 1986, 1987 and 1988 and a silver medal in 1985. He also served as the senior amateur West Regional coach for both women's and men's teams.***

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