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### Travels Through Liberia

Frank Wasser

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# Travels Through Liberia

Frank Wasser  
University of Georgia School of Law  
Global Internship 2010



“Adventure is a path. Real adventure — self-determined, self-motivated, often risky — forces you to have firsthand encounters with the world. The world the way it is, not the way you imagine it. Your body will collide with the earth and you will bear witness. In this way you will be compelled to grapple with the limitless kindness and bottomless cruelty of humankind — and perhaps realize that you yourself are capable of both. This will change you. Nothing will ever again be black-and-white.” —Mark Jenkins



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## **My Last Full Day in the States**

### **May 23, 2010**

So... this is my first ever blog post... I'm a blogger now...

This is me... blogging...

After an incredible goodbye dinner with the family at a nice restaurant in downtown Atlanta (incredible largely because we were comped after waiting for an hour – and, lets be honest, free food is almost always a little better) it's time to dust off my old travel backpack, begin throwing in my stuff, and start sorting out the final details of my trip. Left on my "to-do" list is a trip to REI to get bed netting and some more quick dry clothing, a trip to Radio Shack to find a charger for my sweet new international cell phone (its orange, and, I'll say it, really makes the hair "pop"), and a lot of visits to the extended family to say goodbye.

Then, tomorrow evening at 10:35, I'll hop the first of the four flights necessary to get to Liberia. Tuesday I'll arrive in London where I'll be staying for two nights. Then Thursday I wake up bright and early, fly to Amsterdam, switch planes and head over to Ghana for another two nights.

In Ghana, I'll be staying at a hotel owned by a gentleman I found online named "Uncle." The upsides of the hotel in Ghana are that, for \$15 a night, I should be getting my own hotel room, airport pick-up by Uncle himself, and, if I'm not mistaken, continental breakfast. The downside of my hotel in Ghana is that the guy's name is Uncle and, lets shoot from the hip here for a second, typically your "non-familial Uncles" who go by "Uncle" sort of cast out that creepy "I drive a panel van and maybe spend a little too much time in the Chuck E Cheese parking lot" vibe. Needless to say, I'll be sure to keep this updated as that part of the trip unfolds. Then finally, come Saturday, I catch an afternoon flight from Ghana to Monrovia, Liberia where the real adventure begins.

So, with that, I'm about to get out of bed, start trying to assemble the last of my things for this trip, and more importantly, conclude my first ever blog post. Hopefully, the next time you hear from me, I'll be in the air somewhere between Atlanta and England!!!

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## **Pass the Mr. Bean Dip....I've Arrived in London**

### **May 25, 2010**

While the sun may have set on the British Empire, that does not seem to be the case for Delta flight 10 from Atlanta to London, where, as the kid sitting behind me intent on playing with his window shade was quick to observe, our overnight plane was almost always flying directly into the sun. Trigger-happy window-shade kid aside, however, my flight from Atlanta to England was remarkably pleasant. The eight-and-a-half-hour flight went by fairly quickly thanks largely to the woman sitting next to me – a lady who had been to 52 countries and was quick to remind me about what it is that makes this sort of travel so exciting.

After landing in England, it took me about ten minutes to find my hotel, the Park Inn Heathrow. The hotel is a fairly rundown looking building from the outside, while the inside has a more

modern “yea, we shop at Ikea” sort of vibe. The fish tank in the front lobby was of particular interest to me, as it was filled with a couple piranhas and one lonely goldfish. For better or for worse, I think this might be the one and (hopefully) only time I find myself relating to a goldfish ... I totally get how he’s probably feeling right now.

My sympathies for the goldfish aside, the remainder of the day is looking fairly relaxing. Since I didn’t really get much sleep on the plane, my plan is to finish my lukewarm beer (apparently the national drink of England), take a quick nap, and then get a little exercise at the hotel gym before hopefully meeting up with some friends for dinner. I’ll then have all day in England tomorrow before catching my next flight to Ghana Thursday.

Wish me luck.

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## **Tragedy Strikes London May 26, 2010**

As Billy Joel once said, “only the good die young.”

Few stories illustrate that principle more accurately than the tragically short life of Goldy the feeder fish, a stoic young swimmer who seems to have lost his life to the piranha at the Park Inn Heathrow at some point between my arrival yesterday afternoon and my jet-lag induced 5:00 am workout this morning. In honor of his short but meaningful life, I abstained from eating lox at my free hotel breakfast (I did however, eat tuna for lunch...sorry Goldy).

Today has been relaxing, but, perhaps as my attention to the hotel feeder fish indicates, somewhat of a slow day. After waking up in a fog at 4 am this morning, I hopped on skype and called a number of family members and friends...all of whom seemed less interested in the fact that I was in London, and more distraught by the fact that I had yet to put on a shirt for the day. After heading to the gym, and eating my free breakfast in the hotel lobby, I hopped a ride into the nearby town and did a little exploring. For better or worse, the city by Heathrow airport is not exactly what one might call touristy (I’d liken it to touring any of the suburbs outside of Atlanta) and so most of my day was spent puttering around town and talking to anyone who seemed interesting (i.e. anyone who would listen). Unfortunately, the temperature dropped fairly substantially and it was actually a bit cold. According to one gentleman I spoke with outside a florist in “little Heathrow” it was “14 bloody degrees outside”. Granted, I have no idea what “14 bloody degrees” Centigrade translates to in Fahrenheit, but based on the way it felt in shorts, chacos, and a t-shirt; I’d imagine it is somewhere in the neighborhood of -30.

Right now, I’m sitting in the hotel lobby drinking a cup of coffee (read: gin and tonic) and preparing for tomorrow. As I mentioned previously, tomorrow will be my longest full day of travel. I’ll leave the hotel at 7 am, fly to Amsterdam, switch planes, and head over to Ghana (my first ever experience in West Africa!). I heard from Uncle (the manager of my Ghanaian hostel) once again this afternoon, and he could not have been more helpful. He assured me that a driver would meet me at the airport in Accra tomorrow afternoon with a “Wasser” sign, and that he

would drive me directly to my hostel just outside of town. He also gave me a number of additional points of contact in and around the airport in the “unlikely event that my driver does not show or is late.” Hopefully this won’t be the case. On the bright side, if it is, it could make for some interesting blog posts.

My plan for the rest of the day is to put up my things, walk over to a small sandwich shop about a mile from here, grab a quick bite for dinner, and head back to the hotel to get some sleep before what will inevitably be a somewhat exciting (though exhausting) day tomorrow. As I wrap this up, I invite you to take a second out of your day to mourn the tragic loss of Goldy by piranha...

Sleep well my aquatic companion – this post is for you.

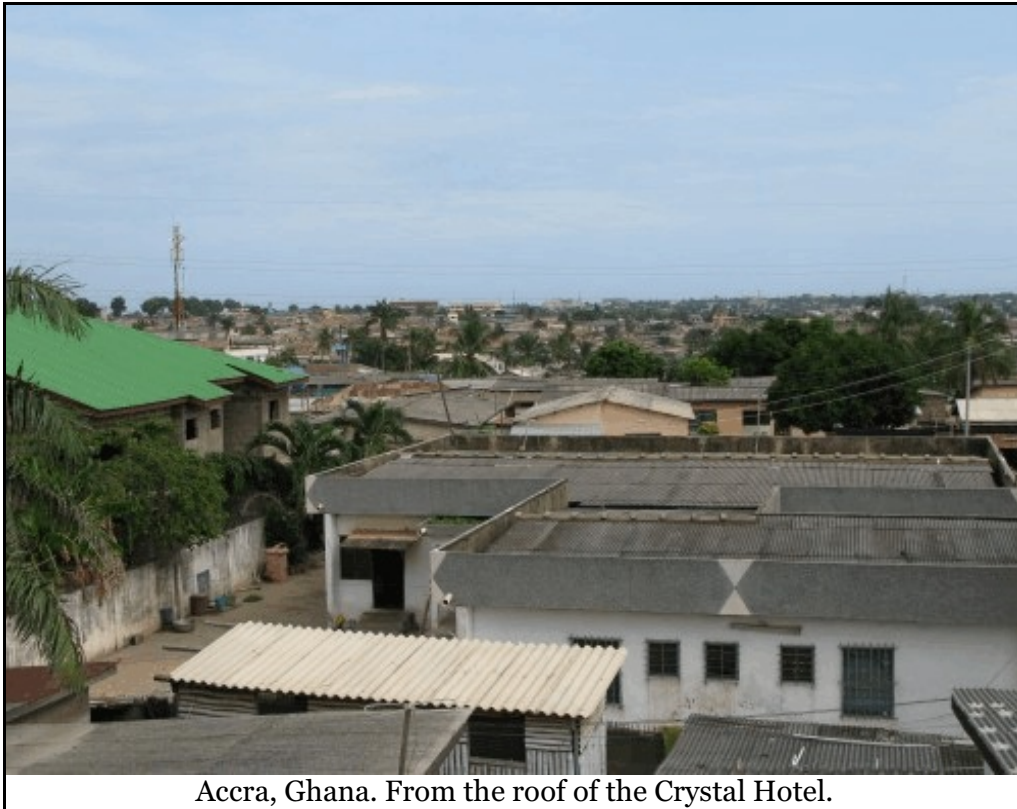
Update: Just spoke with my Dad and it turns out Goldy may be alright after all, apparently he’s just on a farm outside of Atlanta with my first dog Toffee and a nice family that is using him to help with the herding of sheep

Update II: I’m getting bored in the airport hotel

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## **Welcome to Town – You’re Never Ghana Want to Leave**

**May 28, 2010**



Accra, Ghana. From the roof of the Crystal Hotel.

Well, I've made it to Ghana. I think my malaria drugs are making me a bit sick, as I've been a little nauseous, which, when coupled with the heat and humidity, feels like arguably the worst hangover of all time (Note to my Mom: I don't actually know what a hangover feels like because, as I've told you, I never drink in excess, but my brothers have described it to me on numerous occasions). I'm currently sitting on the roof of my hostel in Accra, I ordinarily write my blog postings directly onto the internet, but because of monsoon season most people here (including my hostel) have very spotty power coverage, so my plan is to head down to an internet café and email this to my girlfriend Hartley in the hopes that she can post it for me(Thanks Hartley!)(You're welcome).

So, where to begin. Ahhhh the plane ride. Both of my flights, the one from London to Amsterdam, and the one from Amsterdam to Accra, were packed. On the first flight, however, I was insanely pleased by the fact that out of all the rows on the plane, mine seemed to be the only one where of the three seats mine, (which may I add was the middle seat) was the only seat occupied. My dreams of stretching out and snoozing in and amongst my sardine-esque traveling companions were quickly quashed by two Ghanaian ladies of fairly generous proportions who stepped aboard right before the door to the plane was closed and sat on either side of me. Once that first plane landed, I had two hours in the Amsterdam airport before hopping my last flight of the day, from Amsterdam to Accra. After about three hours into that flight, I opened my window and looked out only to see deep red craters, we were flying over the Sahara, but, from my window it looked as if we were passing over the moon. Thirty minutes later the craters began to move, and a swirl of color emerged beneath us, the sky turned a dark blue and, what I can only imagine was a sandstorm began to develop. I wish I could have taken more pictures. The colors were incredible, deep reds, mixed with a royal blue sky among thick fluffy white clouds, it was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen.

When we landed in Accra, the first thing to hit me was the overwhelming heat and humidity. As the doors to the plane were opened, the Ghanaian climate came rushing into the cabin like a bull headed towards a matador. It was overwhelming. In the span of 20 seconds the cool dry airplane cabin was transformed into a sweatbox of heat and humidity. As I stepped off the plane, I listened to the two people behind me discuss how in the past, they had needed to "grease the palms" of the customs officials in order to be allowed into Ghana. I hadn't yet thought about that, and the prospect of needing to bribe a customs official made me a bit nervous....what would I do if the person on the other end of the desk decided to solicit payments? I decided to deal with that obstacle if and when it arose, and, lucky for me, it never did.

It took about 45 minutes for me to clear customs, though most of that time was spent waiting to get to the desk, my actual time with the customs agent was probably under a minute. After collecting my bags, I watched as the people around me were stopped by various security officials, but for whatever reason however, I was left alone. As I walked towards the airport's exit I was relieved to see a man standing there with my name on a piece of paper; apparently he'd been waiting there since noon (I met him at about 8:30pm). As we emerged from the doors of the airport together, the rains began. These were not the type of rains we get back in Georgia however. Here, the rains fall in sheets, bucket upon bucket of rain, quickly filling the streets with water as the lightning and thunder began. "You made it just in time for monsoon season," my driver announced. "You wait here and I will go get the car." Meanwhile, almost as soon as my driver stepped away, a crowd of 10 guys swooped in trying to sell me drugs. I tried to convince them that I was not interested, when, just as I started to get a bit nervous, the driver came speeding up in what looked to be a Camry, with leather seats and sunroof made of saran wrap. It was at that point, that my situation fully began to settle in... I was officially in Africa.

The driver and I proceeded down the airport road in and amongst lots and lots of people and cars. Almost as soon as we started to drive down the street, I began to notice large amounts of people walking amongst the torrential rains balancing all sorts of objects on their head. When we stopped at our first traffic intersection, many of these people ran up to our car trying to sell us things. One of them was a young man trying to sell us toilet paper off of an outfit he had fashioned to hold it (his arms and legs were covered in roll upon roll of toilet paper). The driver assured me that we would be at my hostel in no time. "It's only 8 kilometers away," he promised.



Accra, Ghana. Street View from Crystal Hotel.

An hour later, we arrived. With two honks of his horn, the massive metal doors of the hostel's courtyard opened up, and, amongst this shanty town on the outskirts of Accra, was the relative tranquility of an open courtyard. Through the downpour a nice young woman in her early 20's came to greet me as my taxi sped off in the opposite direction. She yelled something to another woman standing on the inside of a nearby home about "a torch for their guest" and within moments she had led me into room number nine – a small room with what looked to be two double beds and a refrigerator standing on egg crates. The room was sweltering hot and as the lady began to head back to her house I asked, "sorry ma'am, but where are the lights... Is there air-conditioning in here?" From across the walkway outside of my room she yelled over the rain that because of the storm all of the power was out. "Use your touch," she said. "Hopefully the power will be back soon." and with that, I was alone in my room, once again a bit taken aback by the fact that I was actually alone in Ghana.

The next thing I knew it was 3 in the morning and I was awoken by somebody singing into a microphone at what must be a nearby bar, coupled with the “click, tic, tac – click, tic, tac” of a fan over head, and the buzzing of the light bulb hanging from the ceiling. The good news was that my power was back on, the bad news was that I could not figure out how to turn off the lights... “Screw it” I thought to myself, if I can sleep on a plane I can certainly sleep under a buzzing light bulb”... Seconds later I was back asleep.



At 12:30 pm I awoke a second time, this time to the sounds of somebody sweeping outside. I took a quick shower under what was essentially a hose connected to a shower head, and opened my door only to hear a wince and a loud yelp. I had inadvertently clobbered the stray dog sleeping on my front steps. I felt bad, but reminded him of how much worse it could have been (think about Goldy). I wandered around the courtyard for a bit until my Nigerian neighbor emerged from his room. I asked him where I could get some bottled water and a bit of food, and he sent me to the kitchen of our hostel. From there I met Uncle’s wife. She gave me two bottles of water and put my name on a sign out list for whenever I want anything. I asked her for some food, and she gave me about 40 cents of Ghanaian money and sent me to a nearby shack to purchase some bread. When I returned with bread in hand, I began talking with my Nigerian neighbor more about his impressions of the hostel...

“What are you doing here?” I inquired. “Hiding” he said. “Oh god.” I thought to myself, “what could this guy be hiding from”, after a bit more inquiry however, it turned out that what he



meant by hiding was that he had come here to get away from the distractions of Lagos, Nigeria while he studies for his CFA.

So now I'm here, sitting on the roof of my hostel, drinking a cold Sprite (maybe the best cold Sprite to have ever existed in all of human history), and soaking up the atmosphere of Ghana. Tonight, Uncle's wife has promised to make a dinner at around 6:00pm, so my plan is to explore the neighboring community a bit, come back for dinner, and then tomorrow I will head to the airport for my final flight to Monrovia, Liberia. For now however, I'm off to take another cold shower.



These lizards are all over Accra. And they do not seem to be intimidated by people.



Everyone in Ghana is friendly, this spider hung out in my shower, presumably to make sure I not only rinsed but also repeated

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## **I've Made it to Monrovia – Ooo Wait the The Ivory Coast – and Back to Monrovia May 30, 2010**

The past two days have been about as unique as any two days I have ever experienced. Yesterday morning at about 7am I was awoken by a girl from Amsterdam who was also staying at Uncle's place in Accra. Because I was so jetlagged I had asked her to come by my room to insure that I was awake in time to leave for my flight to Liberia. After a quick and very cold shower, I walked into the village outside of Uncle's hostel and grabbed a small loaf of bread for breakfast. I then said my goodbyes to Uncle and asked him for his help in finding a safe ride back to the airport. A quick note about Uncle – he was probably about as good a human being as I have ever met in my life, if you ever need a hotel in Accra I highly recommends the Crystal Hostel on the outskirts of town.

As I waited for my ride to the airport to arrive, I probably should have guessed that Uncle's idea of a reliable ride, and my idea of a reliable ride would be a bit different. Five minutes later I met my new driver, a friend of Uncle's (everybody seems to be Uncle's friend) who drove a car that appeared to be from the early 1980s. My driver, who was very friendly, also seemed to have a bit of a hot temper (though I'm not entirely sure, as he spoke very little English). As we zipped through the streets of Accra, he grew increasingly enraged by the speed at which we were being passed by other drivers. "They all go toooooo fast," he continuously muttered. I looked down at

his speedometer to see how fast we were going. It had apparently stopped functioning towards the end of the Reagan administration.

As the driver and I continued on our way to the airport we encountered road construction. "They build bridge here," he said. Without missing a beat, the driver waived to someone in a helmet and did a u-turn around all of the other cars, he then pulled into the construction zone, as he and I followed heavy machinery to the other side of the road. Just as I started to think about how amazing it was that all of these very old cars still seemed to function, ours began to sputter to a halt. I tried to maintain my cool, but in my head I was already beginning to freak out a little. If the car broke down, how would I make it to the airport? This however, clearly was not the first time this had happened. "I'm sorry," the driver said, as he got out of his car in the middle of traffic. He popped the hood, and as if by magic, produced a wrench from his pocket. Feeling some obligation to help, I too got out of the car. Granted, I'm no car expert, but, if our automotive problems required the checking of an oil level or the gauging of some tire pressure, well, and I'm not trying to brag here, but I pretty much had that on lockdown. Luckily for us however, whatever the problem was, the driver was able to fix it with a couple turns of his wrench and a few bangs on the hood.

When I finally arrived at the airport the boarding process went by fairly smoothly. The process of screening my checked baggage consisted of a security official smiling at me and then writing something along the lines of "OK" on the side of my bag in orange chalk. As I stepped aboard Kenya Airways flight 508, I was almost overjoyed by the fact that the plane was covered in Swahili. As an undergraduate I took three years of Swahili, and, for the first time in my life, I would finally get to test out my knowledge in a real world setting. Shortly after I sat down, the flight attendants began their pre-flight safety instructions in Swahili. Not wanting to miss an opportunity to show off my Swahili skills, I was very tempted to turn to the person next to me and say, "how's about whatever she just said regarding children and exits, huh" (yea, it's no big deal, but I knew those words).

Moments later the plane began one of the most turbulent flights I had ever experienced. As the plane jumped and dropped, leaned and tilted, the passengers aboard quickly transformed from ordinary people into fairly accurate James Brown and Al Pacino impersonators. Within moments it seemed as if all anyone could say was "hoo-wah..... Good God". Turbulence aside however, the flight seemed to be on course to arrive in Monrovia on time; and, at 3:15 I was very relieved to see the runway gradually getting closer and closer beneath us. Just as I thought we were about to land however, I heard the engines roar and our plane began to head back skywards. Lacking any real direction from the cockpit, none of us really knew what to think. A few minutes later, the captain came on and made an announcement in Swahili. "Something about feathers," I thought to myself. I'm fairly certain my Swahili may have failed me here because when the captain translated his message to English he said that, because of the weather, we would be unable to land in Liberia. Instead the plane was being diverted to the Ivory Coast.

An hour later, we landed in the Ivory Coast, a country which, at this juncture in time, is not exactly known for its hospitality. The pilot then told us that, we would either stay there over night (my biggest fear as I did not want to be alone in the Ivory Coast), fly back to Ghana, or make another attempt at Liberia when the weather cleared. We waited and waited aboard the flight, and three and a half hours later, the pilot finally told us that we would be making another attempt at landing in Monrovia. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure if that flight was smooth or

not as I fell asleep shortly after the pilot made that announcement and only woke up moments before we arrived in Monrovia.

When I got off the plane, customs in Liberia fairly easy to clear, and within 15 minutes I had claimed my bag and was preparing to leave the airport. At this point, I began to worry that my contacts in Monrovia would no longer be waiting for me at the airport. For all intents and purposes I was running 5 and a half hours late, what if they had decided to leave? I was preparing myself for the potential that I might need to find a hotel in Monrovia until I could contact them, when, Jarrett, an employee of LIPA, emerged from the crowd and took me to his 4×4. Apparently, he and three other people from LIPA had been waiting at the airport all afternoon! I couldn't have been happier to see them, and despite having spent their entire afternoons at the airport, they were all very nice.

The next thing I knew, we were headed down the dark and rainy streets of Liberia towards Monrovia (Liberia still does not have a central power grid since the war ended in 2003 and so almost all of the electricity in the city is created by private generators). Approximately 45 minutes later, we pulled up to what will be my house for the next six weeks – a cement compound with barred windows and doors, surrounded by a cement wall and razor wire. Inside the compound are a number of smaller buildings and a private home where the owner, Mr. Norman, lives. After everyone helped me move my stuff into my room, the night security guard came and brought me over to Mr. Norman's house. Inside, the staff had made me Spaghetti and meatballs, probably the best spaghetti and meatballs I have ever eaten considering what a long day it had been.

Over dinner Mr. Norman gave me more information on the way the property is operated. From 9:00am to 1:00am the generators are run. At 1am the power is turned off. Although none of the property has air conditioning, it does have numerous fans, and, as I quickly learned last night, things get very hot after 1am.

This morning, Mr. Harris, one of the heads of LIPA came to the compound and picked me up in his 4×4. Together the two of us drove into town where he began to give me a tour of Monrovia and we purchased a new sim card for my cell phone (email me for my new Liberia number). Now, I'm sitting back at my new home trying to stay hydrated and sweating under the welcome breeze of an incredible fan. Either tomorrow or Monday, I will get a mobile internet connection and that should hopefully allow me to continue updating the blog daily. In the meantime, I'll be continuously adjusting to life in Liberia.

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**A Street With A Record**  
**June 3, 2010**



My new home in Liberia.

Well, slowly but surely I'm beginning to adjust to life in Liberia. I've now fully settled into my compound, and am starting to get the hang of things around the office. Yesterday I joined a google group for expats in Liberia, and, after sending out a feeler email to inquire about finding a gym in Monrovia, discovered a fairly barebones facility at the World Food Program headquarters down the street from my office. I went there during my lunch break today, and although it doesn't have much, it was a nice way to let off steam in the middle of the day.



The entrance to the compound from the inside.



The main house on the compound, which belongs to the Norman family.



My room inside the compound.

On the way home, I tried to buy some bread from a street vendor and inadvertently paid him double the price he was asking (3.00 instead of 1.50). He was very nice and explained my mistake before giving me the extra money back. I was very impressed by the whole situation – until I learned that he seems to have told every single person in Liberia about the dumb American who accidentally overpaid for bread. I'm not exaggerating here when I tell you that he seems to have gotten a hold of my 50 person office, and every other person who walks up or down his street. At this point I wouldn't be surprised if upon reading this, he'd already told you the story.

Meanwhile, after a couple meetings with the staff at LIPA, I'm beginning to get a better sense for what I'll be doing over the next few weeks. As of now, the plan is for me to go to the Liberian Criminal Court and observe a few days of judicial proceedings. From there, I am to contemplate why the courts have become so inefficient over the years, interview the judges and attorneys, and make a series of recommendations to the Chief Justice of the Liberian Supreme Court, along with the staff at LIPA, about policies that could be implemented to make the system run more smoothly.

As I begin to set-up the necessary contacts for this project, one of the most important things I've come to appreciate here is that Liberia operates on Liberia-time. Like most people in the states, I'm used to being in complete control of my schedule – if I need something, I go get it. And if I want to be somewhere, I just hop in the car and go. But in post-war Liberia, few people are afforded this sort of luxury.

As a result of the war, most people do not have the personal freedoms that we take for granted back in the US. One example of this can be seen in my morning commute to the office. In order to get to work every day, the director of LIPA, Prof. Mongor, picks me up from my compound on his way out of his house (he's also my neighbor). From there, we stop along the way, picking up

other employees of LIPA and friends of his who don't possess their own means of transportation. Because so few people in Liberia have cars, it is not uncommon to see those with cars picking up perfect strangers who need rides.

Although the drive from my house in Paynesville to my office in Mamba Point – the diplomatic enclave of Monrovia – can take up to 45 minutes, I've come to look forward to this commute because it gives me an opportunity to learn about Liberia in terms of the various landmarks we pass along the way. Unfortunately however, many of these landmarks often have tragic histories. This morning for example, as we pulled down my street, Prof. Mongor somberly exclaimed "This is a street with a record."

"What do you mean, 'a record'?" I pressed.

He was quiet for a moment and then said that during the war, rebel groups put a pile of bodies at the end of the street – as the pile got bigger they found it more convenient to simply have people walk over to it, where, upon reaching the bodies, they were shot as they stood in front.

It took me a moment to fully grasp what he was saying. As I contemplated the implications of his story, I began to wonder where I was while all of this was taking place. In a lot of ways, what I find most horrific about stories such as this one (and most Liberians have similar stories) is not that they actually happened, but rather, that it happened while we as American citizens were carrying on with our daily lives – completely oblivious to the atrocities that were taking place here. On the one hand, America can't be expected to intervene in every conflict that takes place on a global scale. But, at the same time, having occurred right on the heels of the genocide in Rwanda, why wasn't more done to get this story out there? Worse yet, what about the places where things like this are happening now, places like the Sudan, Somalia, Guinea and Sierra Leone. Five years from today, will there be people in those places who are forced to reflect on their landmarks with tales of similar tragedy?

If I did not know better from firsthand experience, I would have thought that, because it suffered such a recent and traumatic loss, the emotional atmosphere in Liberia would have been much more depressing and sullen than it actually seems to be. In point of fact, one of the things that most continues to amaze me about the people of this country is the resiliency of their collective spirits. Although the urban landscape has been almost completely destroyed by nearly two decades of civil war, the people of Liberia seem energized, and motivated to rebuild the country.

Note: If you have not seen the online documentary the "Vice Guide to Liberia" then I recommend you check it out. It's very much worth taking the 50 minutes necessary to watch it (if the whole 50 minute-long video is too much for your computer to load in one go, it can also be found in parts starting with part 1 of 8 here). This afternoon I began the process of scheduling an interview with a former rebel leader turned evangelical preacher who is prominently featured in that film named General Butt-Naked. He called himself General Butt Naked because he used to fight naked. As you watch the documentary, let me know if you think of anything you'd like me to ask him. It is my hope that I will be able to videotape our conversation and post it to the blog.



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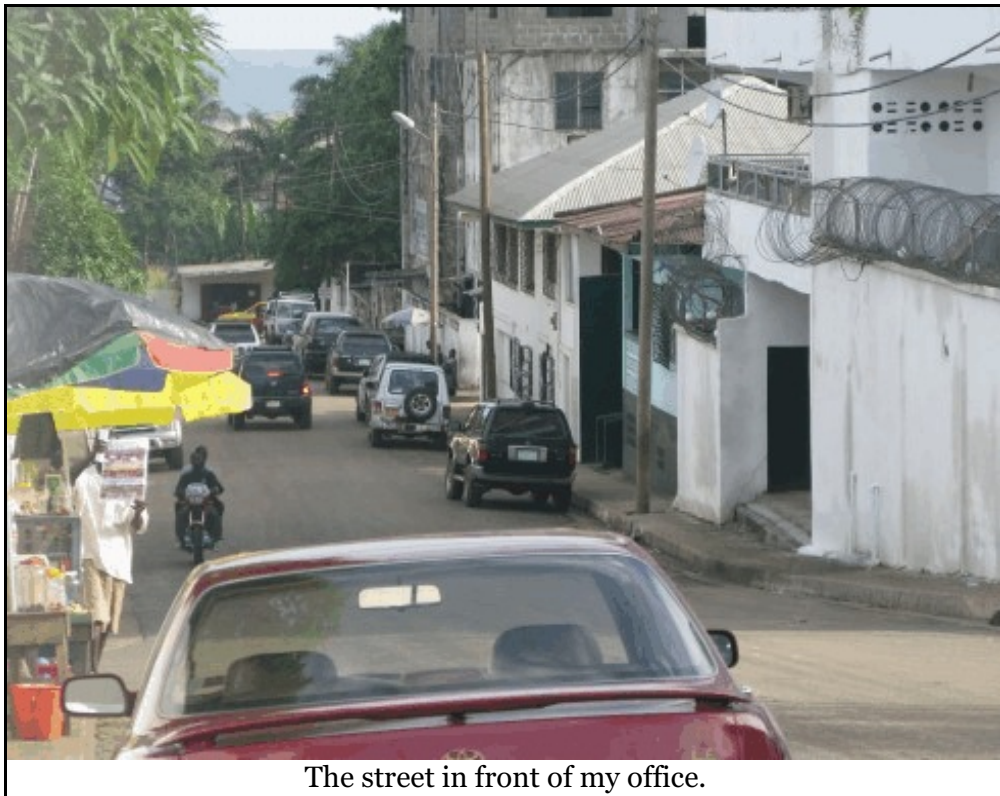
## Blame the Rooster

June 4, 2010



Front view of my office building.

A few years ago my Dad gave me a “back-up alarm clock” that sounds like, what I can only imagine, is a rooster being prepared for slaughter. I’ve kept that alarm clock for close to five years now because, no matter how tired I am, it is virtually impossible to fall back asleep after I have heard the aforementioned fowl in whatever is causing him the struggle of his little bird-life. At 6:30am yesterday, I awoke to a similar noise, so similar in fact that it took me a few moments to get my bearings. I was quickly reminded of my location however, when I looked to my left and noticed that there was an actual rooster about three feet from my open window. That... was how my day began.



The street in front of my office.

An ice cold shower and some oatmeal later, and I was on my way to work. I don't want to give my aforementioned avian companion too much credit here, but, for whatever reason, today feels like it was my most productive day in Liberia so far. At 10:00am I was able to organize a meeting with the American Bar Association Office of Monrovia, and then at 3:00pm, I met with the Carter Center Staff to discuss different aspects of my upcoming assignment. Both offices were overwhelmingly helpful and very reassuring as I continue to try and wrap my mind around the various facets of my job.



My actual office.



View from my office window.

The rest of the day went fairly smoothly until a few moments ago when, after a 30 minute phone conversation, I decided that I could probably make a late-night run to the front side of my house to lock the external gates before getting ready for bed – in nothing but my boxers. My rationale was as follows:

1. It was 11:30 and so the only person who would still be awake in the compound was the night watchman.
2. The night watchman, while a great guy, may have missed a few classes at night watchman school, as he normally sleeps in a chair at the front of the compound until he has to shut down the generators at 1:00am
3. Rumor has it that the last time the night watchman left his chair between the hours of 10:00pm and 12:30am was the night of the moon landing

Which is ironic because tonight, well Houston, tonight, we had a problem. Moments ago, as I stood on my front porch in a pair of boxer shorts (boxer shorts covered in pictures of an animated goat may I add... a purchase which I now feel may have been a mistake) I heard a voice over my left shoulder. “Good night Mr. Frank,” the night watchman said. I turned around, there wasn’t much I could do except to just play it cool. At this point I had two options, I could either pretend to be sleep walking, or I could pretend like walking around outside in your boxers is totally acceptable behavior in the United States. I went with option B. With everything I could muster I tried to stare the night watchman down, as if to say, “I’m not on trial here, pretty much everyone in the states struts around in goat boxers.” I was pretty sure my plan was working until, as I went to walk inside he said, “You need help finding pants?”. And that... was how my day ended.

I blame the rooster.

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**It's Not You, It's Me**  
**June 5, 2010**



I know what you're thinking. It's Saturday, and you're wondering about my misadventures.

Whatever happened with the rooster?

What was it like to eat fufu for lunch (a traditional African dish, check it out on wikipedia) knowing full well that Liberians are yet to become widely familiarized with the term "triple-ply"?

Well, unfortunately all of this and more will have to wait as it seems that I have inadvertently left my computer charger and cell phone charger at my office. Luckily, I'm not beating myself up over the issue too much because we also seem to be almost out of generator fuel at the "Ol' Compoundo Del Gato Tu La Bibliotecha de Frank" which,

if three years of public school Spanish serve me correctly, should loosely translate to "my house" (readers note: don't be too impressed with me, thank Riverwood High School in Sandy Springs, Ga., for my multi-cultural language skills. And also, thank yourself a little bit, that's your tax-dollars hard at work).

Anyway, I'm sorry for the inconvenience and will be back at work on this thing come Monday morning. In the meantime, please enjoy this picture of a koala and think of me as I sit under the equatorial African sun and patiently wait to once again have contact with people outside the walls of my compound.

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**Let There Be Light... And There Was Light (intermittently  
between 7pm and 1am)  
June 7, 2010**



My Only Source of Light When The Generators Turn Off

So, today I finally got both a regular source of power and my cell phone and computer chargers back. But wait, what did I do all weekend without any of the modern amenities I've become so dependent on?

Well, I'm glad you asked.

Friday afternoon I met up with a fellow grad student from the states named Drew, a PhD candidate at Berkley, and together we went to a party for local business leaders and the ex-pat community at one of the nicer restaurants in town. The party had a pleasant atmosphere (although the air conditioning left much to be desired) and almost as soon as we walked in we were given vouchers for free coffee (as usual, for those of you I do not know in a professional or academic sense, insert alcohol here).

The party went fairly well and I met a lot of interesting people, some of whom I've been in touch with regarding my current project with LIPA. As the night continued on however, my car – a ride I had prearranged days before – began to call me incessantly; and, although I continuously tried to answer my phone, I found him nearly impossible to understand.

After five or six phone calls plagued by intermittent shuffling, crackling, and dropped calls, I decided to see if I might be able to get a better signal from the roof. Drenched in sweat and

fairly annoyed with my driver, I climbed to the roof of the restaurant to see if I might get a better signal – and finally, with my “coffee”, and a plate full of free kebab and grilled vegetables in hand, I was able to get in touch with him.

On my way back down to the party, I decided to make one more quick call from the roof, and in doing so, leaned against the railing, which, as are most exterior structures in Liberia, was surrounded by razor wire. As I looked down on the city, I noticed a small flame flickering about one foot out and three stories down from where I was standing. I squinted and looked a little harder, only to realize that the flame was surrounded by a family of eight – huddled around the fire to cook whatever sustenance they were able to obtain throughout the day.

All of a sudden, I was hit with an overwhelming feeling of guilt. Here I was in Liberia, presumably there to help people, while I stood on a roof top, on an actual pedestal above the city, with free all-I-could-eat food in hand, watching people cook food I myself would not have dreamed of eating. As I stood on the rooftop, contemplating whether or not my attendance at the party was ethical, I again found myself balancing the pros and cons of my behavior. On the one hand, life as an outsider in Liberia is very emotionally trying, and a party may be exactly what most of these people needed in order to recharge their collective batteries. At the same time, however, what type of message did it send to the people of Liberia, when we, the aid workers, hovered above them picking and choosing from a free all-you-can-eat buffet?

When my ride finally arrived to pick me up, I was beyond frustrated with how long it had taken him to get there. I had made an arrangement with him to pick me up three days ago, and an hour after he had told me to go wait outside, he pulls up as if it was no big deal. To say I was incensed is an understatement. As he rolled up in his 1985 Toyota Camry I wanted nothing more than to chew his head off, I wanted to yell at him for leaving me outside only to get hassled on the busy streets of Monrovia.

A moment after he pulled up, I entered his car while giving him about as much of a death stare as I'm capable of mustering...“Where did this asshole get off leaving me standing around like that,” I thought. Seconds later I eased into his car and quickly noticed that he was missing a number of fingers on his right hand... I'm not sure if I looked at them for a second too long, or if perhaps he was so used to getting the question, but before I could get much out he looked to them and said “the war” with a quiet nod. I didn't inquire further.

As we continued on the 45 minute trip back to my compound we somehow got onto the topic of his car, a vehicle so beaten-up you would be unlikely to see it driving on even the worst of roads in the United States. It was the type of car you see in a junk-yard with the words “for parts – only \$200.00” written on the windshield. I asked him how long he had it, and his demeanor instantly changed “five months” he replied as he gently caressed the peeling vinyl on the dashboard – “It's my baby, I try to take perfect care of it so it will last for years”. I looked over to the odometer; it read 23x,xxx miles.

As I sat in the car slowly but surely realizing how unreasonable my anger had been, I began to consider the implications of my one lost hour. Here I was, being driven around by a guy who had lost his fingers to war, in a car he cherished, a car that was literally older than me, while I sat stewing, righteously indignant about my wasted time. Who knows why he was late – in the end it doesn't really matter. I was headed home to sleep and a wasted hour was no real sweat off my back.

At least I still had ten fingers.

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## **Uh Is the Number 3 Still that Clear Grape Flavored Purple Drink With Saltines.... Yea, I'll Be Having That Please**

### **June 8, 2010**

Well, I can't say I'm surprised that it happened, with this sort of travel it isn't really so much a question of "if" as it is a question of "when" – and in my case the "when" was yesterday..... that's right, I've finally got it.....food poisoning.

It all started yesterday afternoon when I went out for lunch with one of the legal advisors to the state department. She was the type of person who you could tell loved her job and having lunch with her helped make me feel a bit more enthusiastic about my own work. For lunch we went to the restaurant at the Mamba Point Hotel, arguably the nicest restaurant in Monrovia. She showed up with hundreds of papers that she thought might help me with my work; and even went so far as to invite me out to lunch again today so that I could meet more people that might be of assistance to me.

By 3pm I began to suspect all was not well. It was at that point that I started to feel ridiculously cold in my ordinarily sweltering office. If a person in Liberia ever feels cold, like at any point during the year, that person is, without a doubt, sick. And, as I learned yesterday, I am no exception to that rule. By 3:30 I was nauseous, and by 5:00 I had a fever.... it was going to be a rough night.

Getting sick like this is just sort of a part of life in Liberia, and, not wanting to seem like the woosy American, I decided to try and suck it up until the end of the day. By 6:30 I decided I couldn't do any more work and so, I rested my head on my desk as I waited for my boss to be ready to leave (remember, he drives me home everyday and is almost always the last person out of the office).

7:45 rolled around and we were finally out the door. As usual all 5 seats in our jeep were full as my boss made the rounds dropping everybody off at their respective homes. As we progressed down dirt roads, I sat there, increasingly miserable as my complexion changed from pale to green..... When you're already feeling nauseous.... travel on the pot-holed roads of Liberia is something of a nightmare.

At about 8:15pm, I couldn't take it any longer. "Excuse me, do you think you could pull over for a second," I sickishly groaned. No response. "Pull Over!" I said again, this time with the urgency and force of a man who clearly needed out. Moments later I found myself leaning against a building alongside a busy junction, heaving, as people walked by without a second glance.

As I got back in the car, the remaining passengers began telling me stories of times when they had gotten equally sick. Most of the stories were fairly recent. This sort of illness is one of those things that is fairly prevalent throughout Liberia. Its one of those things that you read about, and you know will likely happen, but, until its actually happening to you, it is hard to fully grasp what a miserable experience it is. And, more then anything, it's frequency here is clearly a major hurdle on Liberia's path towards development.

As I've mentioned previously, Liberia is a country without a central power grid, a functioning water system, and adequate sewage treatment facilities – the obvious consequences of which are frequent illnesses among the population.

What I realized yesterday, and about four (soon to be five) times today however, is that it is impossible to do much else when a person is this sick. Luckily, I'm feeling a bit better this morning. My fever is on the verge of breaking and I was able to eat some bread a couple hours ago. However, what makes my experience different than that of the typical Liberian's is that I came with medicines to treat this sort of thing. I was prepared. If my circumstances were ever particularly dire, I even have access to my own medical evacuation flight.

Most Liberians however, are not afforded this sort of luxury. What I've realized is that the basic amenities we take for granted (things like power, water, and sewage) – they are not just a convenience, they are a necessity. And, for Liberia to change its course on the path towards development they badly need addressing here.

In the meantime, please pass the ginger-ale.

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## **The Three Liberias**

### **June 13, 2010**

Well, the good news is that I finally have work to do, lots and lots of work. The bad news is that it means I've had much less time to work on the blog. So, to get this thing caught back up to date I've decided to write this post with subheadings.

#### **The Job**

On Wednesday I met with a guy from the American Bar Association to discuss how LIPA might best serve the judicial branch of government with regards to improving the current case management system (or lack thereof). He gave me a list of all 400 court administrators working in Liberia that was compiled by UNMIL to assess their qualifications, age, and length of service. Over the next few weeks my job will be to interpret this list and determine who exactly is working in court administration and what their skill level is. After I finish I will then be synthesizing a case management plan that was created by the group Pacific Architects and Engineers but never adopted by the court system. The ultimate goal will be to compile a final report based on the current skill set of the court administrators which outlines a list of classes LIPA might be able to offer those people in order to help increase their capacity regarding the adaption of PAE's case management plan. Upon completion of my report, I will then submit it to Prof. Monger (Director of LIPA) who will present my findings to the Chief Justice of the Liberian Supreme Court.



## The First of Three Liberias



Aza In The Front Yard of My Compound

Friday afternoon I arrived home to find four children playing in the front lawn of my compound. Since it was getting dark and the generators had not yet been turned on, I was forced to work on the front porch so that I could utilize the last few remaining bits of sun light. As I began to study one of the reports I had been given I heard a quiet murmur over my shoulder. I looked back and Aza, the youngest of the four kids, a boy of about 8, was standing behind me trying to read the document. I handed him the report so that he could have a better look. He took the booklet from me and began reading, well, sort of. Unable to actually read the words, Aza simply stated aloud each of the letters he encountered. “S-U-M-M-A-R-Y” he began, he took a breath and then continued “R-E-P-O-R-T O-F T-H-E U-N-I-T-E-D N-A-T-I-O-N-S L-I-B-E-R-I-A..... R-U-L-E O-F L-A-W R-E-T-R-E-A-T”. As he continued, I quickly realized that our champion letter identifier had no intentions of stopping anytime soon. Intrigued, yet still not wanting to hear him read the entire 80 page document, I decided to change the subject and asked him who his parents were. Having never seen him around before, I just assumed he was one of the children of someone who worked on the compound. What I later came to discover was that Aza and the three other kids were “special needs” orphans who occasionally stayed at the compound in order to provide them with a break from life at the orphanage. In Liberia however, “special needs” is not a term used to refer to children born disabled. These kids were all born 100% normal and healthy. Rather, here the term “special needs” is used to describe children who were profoundly traumatized by the sight of their parents being murdered during Liberia’s civil war. As I continued to talk with these kids, the impact of their loss was still readily apparent. All four of the kids avoided eye contact, they kept their heads down, and, when asked a question tended to reply in a voice that was barely audible. These kids, and the majority of the population that continues to survive on less than 1.85 per day here, comprise what I call “the first of the three Liberia’s”. These are the masses, the people who live

in huts and shanties – houses constructed from scrap metal, spare wood and shipping containers. The first of the three Liberia's comprises most of the population.

### The Second of the Three Liberias



The second of the three Liberia's is comprised of Liberia's wealthy and elite class – and, as I quickly learned Friday, life for this class of people does not even resemble the manner in which the rest of the country lives. Friday night, I went out with my friend Joe. Joe is the grandson of Liberia's former president, a man, who was killed alongside Joe's parents in 1980. As Joe and I went bar hopping on Friday night, I was shown a part of Liberia that few of the locales are ever afforded the opportunity to observe. This is a Liberia comprised of high-end night clubs, bars surrounded by parking lots of Mercedes, Acuras and BMWs, within concrete and razor-wire walls. As we walked into these clubs, we were frequently greeted by a small staff of people who were quick to guide us into various VIP sections overlooking the dance floors. As the night progressed we continued to see the same people and/or their relatives over and over again. The elite in Liberia are a small but very wealthy subsection of the population whose lives bear almost no likeness to the lives of everyone else. In Liberia, there is no middle class. Either you are a member of the elite, or you live in abject poverty – there is no in-between.

## The Third of The Three Liberias



The third of the three Liberia's is the section of the population which is comprised of the standing UN presence and massive population of Aid Workers. Liberia is said to have the largest standing UN presence of any county in the world. Although most of the aid workers socialize almost exclusively with one another, I am not often afforded this luxury because my office placed me in a part of the country that is 45 minutes outside the capital. Last night, however, I went to a party in Mamba Point which was held at a friend of mine's house, a fellow intern with the UN Peace Keeping Office. The interesting thing about the party was that although there were probably 45 people there, there did not seem to be a single local person in attendance. In point of fact, the aid community, like Liberia's fiscal elite, seems to exist in its own separate social sphere. In talking to a number of people at the party last night, I quickly came to the realization that my living conditions are very different then the conditions in which most of other aid workers live. Most of the time, my house does not have power, it does not have air conditioners or hot water heaters, and my windows are made from screening. The rest of the aid workers I spoke with last night however, seemed to have it much better. Many of them described houses with 24 hour generator driven power, air conditioning, and even swimming pools. Bearing in mind the fact that much of Liberia's violent past was based on the perception of gross fiscal inequality between Liberia's different classes, it has been interesting for me to observe how little things have changed in this post-war atmosphere.

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## **Something Different**

### **June 14, 2010**

I will not be blogging today, instead, I am posting a link to Nicholas Kristof's blog. The entry I'm linking to highlights a short fictional piece about the current conflict in Darfur. Although the actor's involved are completely different than the people who were involved with the war in Liberia; the essence of the story, like the story of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, or Rwanda is essentially the same – people committing senseless acts of violence against their former neighbors, colleagues and friends as they get lost in the mob mentality that defines modern warfare

<http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/tag/chad/page/2/>

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## **Excuse Me Mosquito, But I think Your Proboscis is Making Me Sick**

### **June 16, 2010**



So, as you may remember, last week I got what I assumed was food poisoning. It got better for a bit, but I never felt completely well – I would have a day where I felt reasonably healthy and then the next day I would feel lethargic and weak. This continued throughout the weekend until Sunday night when I got markedly worse and my throat began to hurt. Convinced it was just a cold, I had resigned myself to walking it off. Yesterday, however, I continued to get worse. By this morning, I was feeling a bit healthier, but still weak, and so at about 11:30 I decided to get some fresh air and go work on the porch of a nearby hotel that overlooks the ocean. As I sat at the hotel trying to work, I began talking to the man sitting next to me, an epidemiologist. At some point during the conversation I told him my concerns regarding my health. “What were the chances that I could catch malaria, even though I take malarone (a drug used to prevent malaria in travelers) everyday”, I asked. All of a sudden the man got very serious, “malaria is not something to be messed around with” he said, “with your symptoms you should really be getting

checked out today”. He asked for my number and told me he would call me back with the name of a reliable clinic where I could be screened.

My new epidemiologist friend then left the hotel, but, sure enough, 30 minutes later he called me with the name of a clinic that could test me. Ordinarily, I’m not one to spring to the doctor’s office at the first sign of injury or illness, but, I had decided that if he thought it warranted finding me a clinic, I might as well go get tested. Armed with the name of a hospital in-hand I approached the front desk of the hotel and asked them to find me a car. “Are you a guest with us” the lady asked, “uh, yeah, sure I am” I quickly replied (I was not, but I decided my circumstances demanded a small lie). The hotel parking lot had two Mercedes parked out front and an early 90’s 4runner that looked like it could also use a visit to a hospital. Naturally, the car I was stuck with was the 4runner. Moments later, Emmanuel, my new driver, and I were barreling down the streets of Monrovia headed for the “S.O.S. Clinic”.

Just as we arrived at the clinic, the daily Liberia rains began, and buckets of water started falling from the sky. I looked around the parking lot and saw four doors. Door #1: Security. Door #2: Kid’s Clinic. Door #3: Unmarked. Door #4: Office. I decided to start with door #4. As I approached the office I could hear lots of noise emanating from the doors and windows, a mixture of crying babies, groaning adults, and bickering administrators. I opened the door and stepped inside. There was almost immediate silence as everybody turned and looked at me. For whatever reason, I apparently stood out a bit – I’m not sure, but my theory is that they’d never seen a guy as comfortable rockin a pink shirt as I am.

I approached the lady closest to me, as she stared in my direction like I was completely oblivious to the fact that I had an entire burrito wedged between my front teeth. “Um excuse me,” I began, “this may come as a bit of a surprise to you, but I’m actually from out of town, and I think I need a malaria test, and I’m not entirely sure I’m in the right place”. She was quiet for a second. “Come back tomorrow and make an appointment”, she said. Not wanting to waste the car I’d already procured for the afternoon (in Liberia, taxis operate on a \$5.00 per hour rate), and not wanting to deal with a system where I had to come back tomorrow just to make an appointment, I asked if there was anywhere else nearby where I might be able to go get tested. As I finished my question, a man walking past said, “go across the street to JFK Hospital, to be honest it’s a better clinic anyway”.

I went back outside, hopped in the 4runner, and off we went to the emergency room at JFK. JFK is Liberia’s largest hospital, and as my driver pulled up I was immediately overwhelmed by how many people there were. The scene was chaotic, the lines looked long, I had no idea where to begin, and I was a bit unnerved by the condition of the facilities; more than anything though, I couldn’t stop thinking about one thing, “man this is going to make for a great blog entry”.

As the rains continued to fall, I hopped out of the car and ran to the front entrance of the hospital, a metal awning under which lots of people seemed to be aimlessly milling about. As I stood there, taking stock of my situation, I looked to my left just in time to see a woman in a white lab coat standing next to a guy who was incredibly focused on a cell phone game. Just as she and I made eye contact, she slapped the cell phone guy on the back of the head with the type of force that probably made him glad so many doctors were nearby, she pointed at me, and the guy walked over as he gingerly rubbed the back of his head.

“You’re sick?” my new hospital Sherpa asked, “follow me” he then said. As we walked through the long corridors of the hospital I found myself plagued by two constant and somewhat repetitive thoughts. Thought 1: Man this place seems disorganized. Thought 2: Nothing sharp is about to touch me unless I watch whatever it is being unwrapped from paper with a label along

the lines of “Super, Ridiculously Sterilized – This Needle is Absurdly Clean”. We made a left and entered a room with one doctor surrounded by about 8 patients, a number of mothers with babies, and a man in a wheel chair who, every so often would let out a very disconcerting groan. On the far side of the office was a desk with three men sitting behind it. We started there, where one of the men behind the counter asked me to fill out an index card on which he had written:

name?:

age?:

problem(s)?:

I filled it out

name?: Frank Wasser

age?: 24

problem(s)?: I’m having a difficult time finding my cell phone charger, I’m embarrassed by the fact that I enjoyed an Enya song this morning, and, I think I may have malaria.

That’ll be 200.00 dollars the man said. I reached into my wallet and started to count my cash. I wasn’t entirely sure I even had 200.00 dollars on me, and since nobody in Liberia uses credit cards, I was starting to get a bit panicky. “How much for one of my kidneys?” I began to inquire, just as I noticed the patient next to me handing over his money. It turned out, my trip to the Liberian ER was not going to be 200.00 US, but rather, 200.00 Liberian, which equates to a little more than two bucks in US currency – talk about a deal.

Next, my guide and I headed over to the doctor on the opposite side of the room. He looked at me and pointed at the chair to his left. He then wrote something on my index card and said, “I’m going to order a test for typhoid, malaria” (and something else that was inaudible). He pointed to the sherpa, “follow him to the lab”. After another long walk down the dark and narrow hallways of the hospital, we entered a room labeled “Laboratory”. We opened the door and inside there was a lady who motioned to a small desk, like the type of desk you’d see in an elementary school classroom with an attached table – she told me to have a seat. She went across the room and grabbed a needle. As I arched my head trying to follow her every move she looked at me and said, “relax American, they’re sterile”. “Oh, of course they are” I replied, “I never would have suspected otherwise, I just, I’m considering an alternate career in phlebotomy, and I was trying to learn”. She totally bought it.

She pricked my finger, and drew a little bit of blood which she applied to a slide. 15 minutes later she handed me a pink piece of paper that had been folded over and stapled. The guide and I headed back down the hallway to where the doctor was sitting surrounded by patients. He motioned for the paper and opened it up. “So much for confidentiality” I thought, as the woman standing next to me intently listened to what the doctor might say. For the first time since I’d arrived at the hospital I saw the doctor smile. “You have malaria” he said. “Thanks a lot Patch Adams” I thought to myself, “I’m guessing you were absent the day they taught bedside etiquette huh?”

I could continue on from here, about my trip to the pharmacy, the ride home, telling my office I had malaria, or taking a sick day today, but, to be honest, I’m still not feeling so hot and I think I’m going to try to go to sleep. The moral of the story though, is that, I caught it early, I took the medicine to treat it and I should be better in a couple of days. Like everything else, my experience with Malaria has helped me appreciate the luxuries I often forget to appreciate back home. While an appointment valued at 2.00 American dollars may not have seemed like much to me, to your typical Liberian, that amount of money constitutes more than a day’s labor.

Factor in the additional \$20.00 I paid for my three prescriptions and you're looking at the better part of a month spent on one trip to the doctor. Because of this, Malaria kills more people than any other infectious disease worldwide. A shocking realization when you think that the treatment for most cases is \$8.00 for 8 pills taken once, coupled with a couple days rest. It may sound bizarre, but even though I have Malaria, in a place like this I'd be hard-pressed not to still appreciate just how lucky I am.

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## **Grieving from Abroad**

### **June 23, 2010**

I woke up yesterday morning feeling almost 100%. Since I hadn't written a blog post in a couple of days I decided that I would head to the hotel near my office and post a quick entry about my recovery from malaria and a recent trip I'd made to the local market. As I sat at the hotel though, working on what I'd originally envisioned to be this post, my phone rang – It was my Dad.

I knew something was wrong before I even picked up because he was calling directly from his cell. I answered and the phone kept breaking up, but I could tell by his voice that something terrible had happened. Through the static, I heard the words “grandmother, bleed, headache and hospital”. I asked him to repeat himself, but I already knew what had occurred. My grandmother had suffered a sudden stroke overnight; she was not expected to make it through the day.

The last time I talked to my Grandma was Sunday afternoon when I called to wish my grandfather a happy father's day. Grandma answered. “How's Timbuktu?” she joked. She told me she'd been reading my blog. We talked about her upcoming trip to Russia, and about my family's annual trip to Hilton Head Island, a trip that my entire family (now more than 30 of us) have been making every year since I was born – and sadly, a trip that I missed this year for the first time in my entire life.

As soon as I hung up with my Dad I called Delta. I wanted to know if there was any way they could get me on a flight back to Atlanta in time for the funeral. Although there is an overnight flight from Ghana to Atlanta on Thursday, nobody can find a way for me to get to Ghana in time. There are only two available flights from Liberia to Ghana, both of which are full. Meanwhile, travel by land is impossible because it is the rainy season and the roads are flooded.

I'm going to miss my Grandmother's funeral.

As hard as it is for me to admit, I know that my grandmother would have told me to stay here. If it were anyone else's funeral she would have found a way to make miracles happen. In point of fact, she's the type of person who would have sent a plane had she known had badly I want to be with my family, but for her funeral, for her she'd tell me to stay.

She'd tell me to quit crying. She'd say the tears make my face wrinkly and that if I don't pull it together, my face will get stuck this way. Then she'd remind me that in the event that does happen, “Dr. Papadopoulos can always fix it, after all” she'd say, “he's an artist”.

Grandma would tell me to enjoy myself over the next week and a half. Although she may have had a tough time seeing the glass half-full in her own life on occasion, that was never the case when it came to any of her grandchildren. Things would always be ok, because she could make them ok. And, if she were here now she'd tell me not to worry about anything (then she'd

remind me that going to law school doesn't mean I can't still become a doctor afterwards).

My grandmother would have done anything to make me happy, and the idea of me grieving alone in Liberia would inevitably have driven her crazy. To be honest, my mere presence in this country was driving her a little nuts.

Unfortunately though, I can't get home in time for anything, and as hard as it is for me to admit, it's a reality I'm going to have to come to terms with over the next few days. My grandmother was about as good a human being as a person can be. Although I'm going to miss the opportunity to give a eulogy at her funeral, perhaps this, in a funny sort of way, is my own personal alternative.

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## **A Funeral in Liberia**

### **June 24, 2010**

It's hard to describe what it's like trying to come to grips with the loss of a loved one from a place as far away as Liberia. It still doesn't seem real – maybe it never will. My grandmother lived a little more than a mile from my childhood home and has always been an integral part of my life. She was a special breed of person, who as I've already mentioned, would have done literally anything for my brothers, cousins and I.

Shortly before I left for this trip, Grandma called me to see about grabbing lunch. From as far back as I can remember, sushi has always been my favorite food, and so, she was very insistent that we go to the nicest sushi restaurant we could find. Why in the midst of the stress that entailed getting ready for this trip would my Grandma insist on lunch at a fancy Japanese restaurant? It was because she hated the idea of me going without anything, and the notion of my having an unfulfilled desire (even for something as insignificant as sushi) would have driven her crazy. Her concern was that I wouldn't be able to find "quality sushi" in Liberia, and so she was going to make sure that I had the best that money could buy before I left. I know it sounds crazy, or even cliché perhaps, but these really were the types of things that kept my grandmother awake at night. She could never have enjoyed her life until everyone she loved was absolutely happy in their own lives.

For all of my Grandmother's loveable eccentricities, and there were many, she really was/is the glue that holds together my Mom's side of the family. As bizarre as it may sound, there are few things in Liberia that don't remind me of her. Grandma was born in Cuba, and what I've noticed is that the food she used to make and the food that I've been eating here are remarkably similar. Yesterday, a few hours after I heard the news, I went to have lunch at a restaurant outside the University of Liberia. I sat down and the waitress brought me the only thing they were making that day, the African equivalent of arroz con pollo and plantains (a meal my Grandmother made frequently). At some point I'll need to extend my apologies to the chef, as I have a sneaking suspicion it wasn't good for her culinary self esteem to have seen me immediately burst into tears at the sight of her plantains, but such is the process of grieving in a far away land.

Last night, in honor of Grandma's love for the finer things, I ended up staying at the only nice hotel in Liberia. My entire family was meeting at her house to work on developing a collective eulogy that the oldest of the 19 grandchildren, Lauren, will be reading at the funeral a few hours from now. Because of the time difference, and because the generators at my house are only on for a couple of hours every night, I spent most of my evening sitting up at the hotel, drinking



coffee, and waiting for a scheduled 1:00am call from my brother so that I could help contribute my part to the eulogy. Even though they undoubtedly had it covered with 18 people there, I needed to know, for my own sanity, that I was somehow a part of this process.

I ended up not getting to talk to anyone until 2:30 in the morning, when I was finally able to connect with my brother Keith and my cousin Lauren – they were still at my Grandmother’s house working on the speech. We talked about the funeral while everyone tried to help keep each other from getting too emotional about the task at hand. We’d tell a quick story about Grandma, and then just as someone would start to cry, there would be another story about her occasional use of colorful language, or about how devastated her make-up artist, the matrede at our favorite restaurant, her dry cleaner, and our dentist had been at hearing the news. I’m sure people inevitably say this at every funeral, but in the case of my Grandma, there are few people who were at all involved with her life that will not be profoundly impacted by our loss.

This morning, I woke up and went downstairs to the hotel restaurant. The waiter brought me a cup of coffee and I was immediately reminded of how, when I was a little kid, Grandma would make me coffee con leche (the recipe for those of you interested in trying this diabetic cocktail is, a teaspoon of coffee, a gallon of milk, and eight pounds of sugar). Yet again, the thought of her coffee-drink left me on the verge of getting embarrassingly emotional and I promptly stepped outside to take a breath of fresh air. As I stood on the porch of the hotel restaurant, watching the waves of the Atlantic roll in, it occurred to me that although I’m in Africa right now, I was looking at the same Atlantic Ocean I’ve looked at with Grandma every summer of my life from the beaches of Hilton Head, SC. This was the ocean she loved taking my family to, the same ocean she’d regularly go boating in with my Grandfather, and undoubtedly the same ocean she’d probably played in as a child in Cuba. I quickly realized that if I can’t be at her funeral there is no better place for me to be at the time of her burial than sitting by the surf of that very same ocean.

So that’s where I will be this afternoon. When her funeral begins, at 9:00am back home, and 1:00pm in Liberia, I will stop what I’m doing and sit by the Atlantic Ocean to mourn the loss of one of the most incredible people I’ve ever known, my grandmother.

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## **A Lazy Saturday June 26, 2010**

If you are reading this blog it likely means one of four things. Either you were looking for the german pianist Frank Wasser (he’s real, he’s the link above me when you google my name), you are somehow affiliated with the University of Georgia School of Law and meant to click on Karen Tanenbaum’s website, you are my Mom, or you are the one German gentleman (or gentlewoman – yea, I voted for Obama) who found my blog four days ago and continues to translate it into their native tongue (this is actually not a joke, my webhost gives me statistics with all of that information and someone really is translating my blog into German – if that’s you, let me just say “Wie Geht Es Ihnen?” – it is both an honor and a privilege to have you as a reader). And in the event you are my Mom (hey Mom), you know that while I certainly make plenty of social blunders on the regular, one thing you taught me growing up, is that no matter how terrible somebody’s cooking is you always tell them that it was fantastic (even if it means you have to feed most of it to the dog). (Note to my Mom – Your cooking really is fantastic, and for the thousandth time, no, I still don’t understand how Zoe continues to gain weight while on Kibbles and Bits for Less Active Dogs).

Unfortunately however, what I had failed to appreciate about this social rule (until this trip) is that when that person is a cook, lying may not be your best bet. Case in point – this morning the cook on my compound made “eddoes with gravy” for breakfast as a “special treat” just for me. I first had eddoes with gravy (or as I call it Nemo Parts on Mush) three weeks ago when all of the locals at my compound began telling me how amazing it was. The cook, hearing our discussion decided to make it for me the next morning. For those of you unfamiliar with this Liberian delicacy, eddoes with gravy is comprised of multiple boiled yams coated in a very salty fish sauce that is consumed at room temperature for breakfast. Anyway, the first time she made this dish, I, not considering the repercussions, ranted and raved about it. I’ll be honest – I laid it on real thick. “Oh its soooooo good,” I grunted through the noise of my churning stomach. “Ill have to learn how to make this back home,” I flat out lied through my teeth.

And apparently, I was convincing. Because this morning, I awoke to what must be my fourth or fifth experience with this “delicacy”. Needless to say, I left breakfast hungry.

Now in the US, when food is terrible it’s no big deal. On the way home from your host’s house you run into Willy’s and you’re no worse for the experience. Here however, when food is terrible you’re pretty much s.o.l. Here’s why:

First of all, Liberians like to eat the same thing for lunch as they did for breakfast – bad news when it comes to Nemo Parts on Mush. And second of all, there are no grocery stores or restaurants anywhere near my compound (and even if there were, Liberia isn’t exactly the type of place where you just go strolling around).

So, now that you understand my feelings on eddoes, I want you to picture this for a moment. Two weeks ago a missionary (who has actually been wonderful to have around) and her ridiculously cute two year old daughter moved onto my compound. Since normally I have to get up very early for work, I don’t often have the opportunity to eat breakfast with them. Not so today, however. Since it was Saturday I slept a little late and when I finally ambled into the breakfast room it was just as my two new housemates were finishing up. “What’s for breakfast?” I said with the type of anticipatory glee that only a man still unaware of his forthcoming meal of unidentified fish parts can muster. “Eddoes”, someone yelled from the kitchen.

I sat at the table and began picking at my food when all of a sudden I heard the 2 year old chirp something unintelligible yet still adorable. “What?” her mom said. This time, the two year old spoke a little more clearly, “I have to booboo” she yelled. And with that, she made a noise that I can only compare to a recent episode of “Planet Earth” I’d seen in which the narrator stopped talking so as to allow the viewer to hear the sounds of a blue whale seeking a mate. It was a deep guttural noise that did not appear to emanate from the child’s mouth. The combination of the fish parts and my flatulent though surprisingly adorable dining companion was a bit more than I could handle. So, you can imagine how delighted I was when, right as I stood to head back to my room, the compound manager announced that she was going to the market.

“I’m coming!” I yelled without ever stopping to consider that I might not be invited. “Are you sure you want to come?” the manager said, still a bit surprised by my enthusiasm, “this market is a bit rough – if you are going to come you need to leave anything of value in your room”.

45 Minutes later we were off to the market. As we pulled up and climbed out of our jeep, I was immediately taken aback by how many people there were. The market was packed. The colors, the smells, the noise, it was all very overwhelming. The first thing we had to do was buy meat, and so the two of us headed over to a giant and very dark warehouse (remember there is no central power grid here) where all of the vendors sold various animals (both alive and dead).

Just as we walked into the building I saw a girl of about 16 hacking apart a pig with an ax. I looked around and the building was full of people doing this, massive pigs, either hanging or splayed out being hacked apart by people wielding small axes. It was quite a scene.

We continued to walk through the building and soon we were in the seafood section. As I looked around I saw a number of vendors selling live crabs while others had fish laid out that were already starting to smell. There was not a cube of ice anywhere to be found and it was easily 85 degrees outside. All of a sudden I was feeling very secure in my decision to avoid this morning's eddoes gravy.

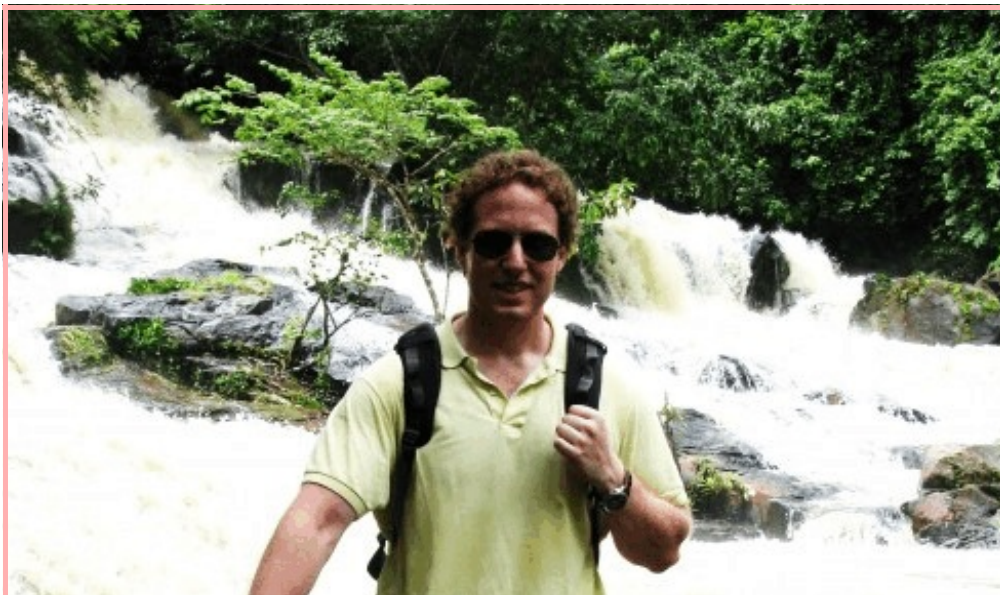
We continued to get deeper and deeper into the market as I grew more and more amazed by the variety of goods people had for sale. At one booth I saw a guy selling gently worn t-shirts, toothpaste, furry handcuffs, one dvd, and some assorted bedding. It was a lot like shopping in a costco, if instead of kindly retired people, costco were staffed by teenagers and former combatants, it was definitely a unique experience.

About 20 minutes into our trip a young child began to follow me from booth to booth. I could see he was smiling, but every so often he would make a very serious face and then burst into laughter. "What's so funny?" I finally said. The boy grew quite. And then, with a burst of energy he squealed "you are whiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiite."

I pretended to be shocked, as he laughed hysterically..... "I'll be here all week" I told him. He stopped laughing and ran back to his friends. I meanwhile, packed my bag full of bread – bread which I'll keep stored away in my bedroom until I'm yet again confronted with a surprise "just for me"..... more eddoes.

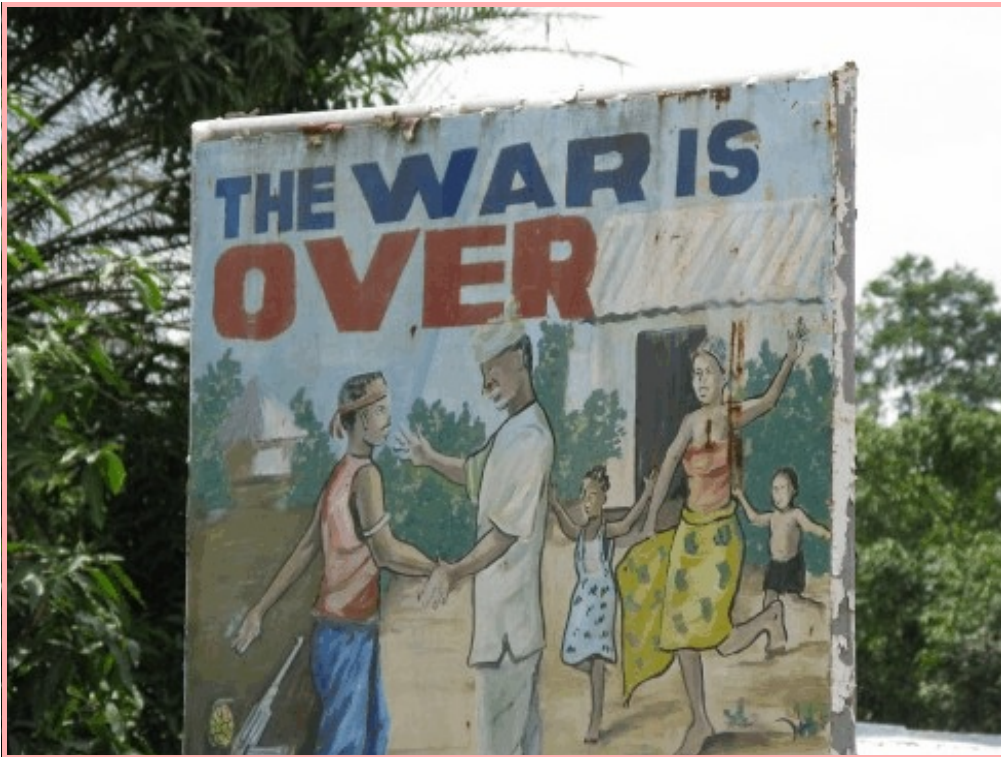
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## **Making Up for A Lazy Saturday June 27, 2010**



Well, I'm pretty exhausted right now so I'm going to keep this posting short and sweet. Hired a driver today with three friends and made a 7hour round trip drive into the Liberian bush to go hike up one of the most amazing waterfalls I've ever seen. The landscape was pretty incredible, but the drive was long and relics from the war were still all over the place. I'll post more on my trip later on, but below are a couple pictures from my adventure. Moral of the story though – Everything is so much better now that I no longer have malaria.





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## **Goodbye, Liberia**

### **July 2, 2010**

Well, unfortunately, it happened again, I got caught up doing work and didn't get a chance to update this thing for a couple of days. Tonight though, is my last night in Liberia. Tomorrow I will hop a plane to Ghana, spend one night there (back at Uncle's place), and then head off to Atlanta at 1am on Monday morning. Over the last few days I went to the Magisterial Court in West Point (one of the largest slums in all of Africa) and paid a visit to the Monrovia Central Prison where I interviewed pre-trial detainees alleged to have committed murder and rape (most of whom have been in prison for two to three years and seem to have been all but forgotten about by the outside world). Since I'm getting ready to go say my goodbyes to a few more people however, I'll post about my experiences in those places upon returning back to Atlanta (there are also a number of pictures I will put up when I have a faster internet connection).

Ultimately however, leaving Liberia is bittersweet. On the one hand, I can't wait to be back home. I want to take a hot shower, eat American food without worrying about the extent to which it will make me sick, have a cold drink, sleep in an air conditioned room, and quit worrying about the constant malaria risk. On the other hand though, in a lot of ways, I've really come to love Liberia. For all of its flaws and institutionalized injustices (many of which I'll post about once I'm back home), I get the sense that Liberia really is on the path towards change. It's an exciting time here. Modern technological innovations are being rapidly adopted (the first ATM's were only just recently installed) and people seem genuinely excited about the prospects for the future.

Today my office had a going away lunch party for me. We went to a local restaurant where I was presented with three traditional African shirts and a pair of customary sandals. As we sat around our massive plates of rice and soup it occurred to me how much I've really come to admire and respect many of the people that I've had the privilege of working with here. It seems like forever ago that I got off the plane in Liberia and rode down the streets in the dead of night to go to my compound for the first time. The whole experience was completely overwhelming.

Now though, just five short weeks later, what was once completely overwhelming is beginning to feel more like a home away from home. I've developed many close relationships here, most of which I hope will last well into the future.

I could go on and on about what an amazing adventure this has been but unfortunately, the generators at my compound just broke and I am rapidly running out of power. To add insult to injury, tonight I will be selling my computer to a friend in town (because electronics are all but impossible to come by here) and so will not likely be able to write anything again until I arrive back in Atlanta. Until then, wish me luck on my journey home!