

Africa Calls Me  
by Cheryl Walker  
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I feel pulled between two worlds, two loves that I haven't figured out how to fit together. Over the years, I've struggled to find my true self in both places: Canada and Congo.

*As I landed in Ethiopia on my way back to the Republic of Congo, in November 2016, the sight of the rough, earthy terrain from above brought back that light in my bones. I was connected to Africa. It had been eight months since I'd left Congo, after having lived there for a four-year stretch. This was the connection with Africa that I'd felt since my childhood, though I only set foot there for the first time in my early twenties.*

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We first moved to the Congo in 2004, when my Congolese-born husband, Lambert, got a job in Pointe-Noire. We had met while he was studying in Montreal, where we married and soon started our family. For this move, we had packed everything we owned into a container and, with our three young sons in tow, set off for the land that I had dreamed about my whole life. However, the high of anticipation that I'd felt as we were preparing to move was quickly brought very low after arrival. We had moved there with a full container and three children, and returned to Canada one year later with only travel bags, a few belongings and one more child on the way. It's true that that year was a failure, a disaster even. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong – we were robbed, I fell ill with malaria three times in six months, our son was hospitalized and our marriage almost fell apart – not to mention the culture shock and difficulty of living in such a different world.

But it wasn't long before Africa began calling me again. I first felt it about six months after we'd gotten back to Canada. Africa was in my bones. It was a feeling hard to explain to anyone who had not lived there and fallen in love with it. That year was hard for me socially in Canada, because I felt that no one understood me, even friends I had known for many years with whom I had previously had so much in common. It was a lonely time of soul-searching. Then, when I went back to Congo for a research trip, in 2009, in hopes of starting the charity, I remember sitting there looking up at the sky with papaya trees and mango trees on the horizon, and I noticed for the first time that I felt love for the place. This falling in love was what told me that was where I belonged. That was how I knew and it is what gave me the strength and courage to face another move to such a difficult place to live, now with four children in tow.

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*In the Ethiopian airport, I can smell that I'm in my beloved Africa. The smell of people. Real smells. Urine and sweat. I don't really like it, but a part of me does. It's comforting and real, nothing masked. The washrooms are shipping containers with three stalls, with a black string to flush the toilet and a water bottle open on the counter with some pink liquid in it. Mosquitos are flying around me in the stall, and when I lean on the door that I had locked, it opens and I almost fall out of the stall with my pants down. I laugh. There is no Wi-Fi and the disconnectedness is refreshing and raw. I love the bare-bones simplicity. I feel free again – free and grounded to focus on what matters and not be pulled in every direction. My stomach begins to release its first-world knots.*

*I feel at one with the lady and the baby on her back, with the man wearing African cloth pants, with the people wearing sandals with the thick orange socks that were provided on the plane because it's surprisingly cold, with the man wearing the traditional hat and a white dress. We're all together waiting for the flight to my beloved Congo. We have a bond. We are in Africa. We are home.*

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When we decided to move to Pointe-Noire for the second time, in 2012, everyone was against it. They reminded me of all that we had lost the first time, eight years earlier. It was understandable that people thought we were crazy to do it again. But we saw it differently. The first time was a learning experience. Now we knew how to live in Africa, in a third world country. Now we knew what to bring. We knew to be careful about trusting people with our money, that people could be desperately opportunistic. We knew how to protect ourselves from diseases now. This time would be different. *(But who knew that I would soon become pregnant again, this time with twins!)*

These were my reflections as I watched the movers pack up our home in the Montreal suburb of Pincourt. I watched them squeeze everything we owned like a three-dimensional puzzle into the 40-foot container parked on our driveway. They wasted no space. It took six weeks for our stuff to cross the ocean and another six to clear it from the port in Pointe-Noire. Meanwhile, I suffered through cooking outside on a charcoal fire, sleeping on my sister-in-law's old mattresses and trying to do homeschooling on a small plastic table in the sweltering heat while my husband was at work. I longed for my stuff. Living without a fridge changes everything about the way you live your life.

Having to buy groceries day by day, cooking on charcoal twice a day and many other things during that very hard time in my life made me realize what life is like for most Africans. They only buy what they need for today. This has a major effect on their mentality and outlook on life. They live in the present and don't plan much for the future. They are also very generous when someone is in need, to the point that they may share all they have today and have nothing for themselves tomorrow. It is because they are accustomed to only worrying about one day at a time. There is something to be said about that!

Moving back and forth to the Congo, combined with living there, has really given me perspective on belongings. They really don't matter. You can always get more stuff. I have discovered that you don't really miss the stuff you think you'll miss when you leave it behind. Our things often hinder us from living our lives to the fullest. In 2011, the year before going back to Congo, I started to see our house in Canada as a big box that we were living in and living *for*. We were working so many hours to pay for it, and the stress of something going wrong with it was always in the back of our minds. The house took up a lot of my time because of all the housework it entailed and how much we had to work to pay for it and what goes along with having a house. Precious time. My precious life.

I had a destiny, a dream in my heart that I wasn't living out because I was so preoccupied with the everyday things in life. I could have entertained the thoughts that I'm too busy to do more and accepted that maybe I would never live my dream because life was in the way. But I knew that the menial tasks we do every day did not amount to life. It was just clutter. True life was doing what I was destined to do. I decided I would make changes and not let this clutter keep me from my *living* my life. I didn't want to allow my belongings to become a comfort for me and especially not a factor in how I make decisions.

In 2010, we founded Mwana Villages as a registered charity with the goal to help vulnerable families, mostly orphans and abandoned children, and with a focus on holistic care and family preservation. I didn't have it all planned out before starting and I didn't know what to expect or even what steps I would have to take. I just put one foot in front of the other every day and tried to be wise when requests for help were presented to me every day.

For the first few years, we were mainly helping children living with a grandmother or with a mother who had lost her husband, putting children in school and giving grants for small businesses in the hopes that these women would become self-sufficient.

In 2014, we decided to open our Refuge for abandoned babies. The same week that our organization was approved and that we opened our doors, we were called to go receive two newborn baby girls. I named one of them Zola, which means *love* in Munukutuba. Zola was dark like ebony with long, thin limbs and fingers, beautiful, soft lips and a strong nose. When I received her from the children's court, I fell in love. She was wearing a stained and ragged T-shirt that was much too big for her. She was tiny, weighing only about five pounds. As I walked to my car with her wrapped in my arms, I could feel her weightless and fragility. I climbed into the backseat of the car, staring at her beauty, like a mother who was blissfully seeing her baby for the first time. She was rooting for the breast, as newborns do, turning her head from side to side and opening her mouth wide and, since I was still nursing my twins and had milk, I instinctively gave her my breast. I was high with the maternal love I felt for this child I had just met whom I had not carried in my womb.

I called my husband at work and told him about her. I explained how her mother had thrown her away in the bathroom of a bar. I begged him for us to adopt her. He tried to be sensitive to my desire and stated the practical: "How will you manage with three breastfeeding babies?" and "You can't adopt them all, Cheryl..." and "How will you help many if you're too busy with seven children of your own?" I knew he was right. I have had to resist that temptation many times over the five years since we opened the Refuge. Every child is so precious and unique, and each one longs to be loved and to belong. We are thankful that we've been able to reunify some with their families and to have found awesome adoptive families for others.

When I think back to the decision to leave my comfort in Canada many years ago and what we gave up, and when I think about all the children who had no hope, whose lives are now full of joy and who now have the security of belonging, it makes me so grateful to have had the opportunity to leave my old life and do this.

These are things that never fade. Every face of every child will always be bright in my eyes and in my memory. Alongside, of course, my very own children, these children are gifts in my life and have added joy to my existence. Everything else fades – the hard-earned diplomas, the carefully chosen furniture, the shiny new cars. It all fades or disintegrates. But the sense of having given someone hope, brought joy to their life or shown them that they matter always remains no matter where you are. You can bring these gifts with you everywhere because you carry them in your heart. They are what leave a true legacy after you're gone.

*Cheryl Walker is the co-founder of Mwana Villages, a grass-roots charity that exists to serve vulnerable children and mothers through practical and sustainable ways, creating long-term solutions with a goal toward preserving the family. Check out her organization's website to learn how much has been accomplished since Cheryl first took that leap of faith:*

[www.mwanavillages.org](http://www.mwanavillages.org).