

FIRST PERSON

THE BEAUTY OF A SIMPLE LIFE



ILLUSTRATION BY WENTING LI

Living in a Ugandan community taught me the importance of being in the present and not focusing on material things, **Barbara Wybar** writes

When news of the coronavirus hit, I was in a village on a mountainside in rural Uganda, living simply, like the villagers, without electricity or running water, eating mostly beans, rice, cabbage and avocados. I had goats in the garden, chickens in the house and geckos on the ceiling.

What was I doing there? Since 2003, I have been working with Ugandans to set up a vocational school, a sponsorship program for orphans and, recently, a microfinance program for women. It was my 30th time travelling to the village of Bududa on the slopes of Mount Elgon.

I am not just a foreigner dipping in and out of this village, more than 100 kilometres from the equator at over 1,800-metres elevation. I have come to feel a part of the place. I hope I have helped the people of Bududa, whom I have come to love and respect. But now I am asking myself: What have I gained from them? What have I observed? What have I learned? What has it meant to me?

Life is simple in Bududa. But just like anywhere else, the locals have their strengths and weaknesses, their petty jealousies and their selflessness in times of trouble, their zeal and sometimes their greed or their laziness. I have been swept up in their joys and their sorrows, and I respect them.

But I wonder, now among the comforts of my Canadian home, how can they live so contentedly with so little?

When I am in Uganda, I too try to live their life. I bathe outside from a basin in a banana-fibre shelter and live as close to the earth as I can. I treasure the bright stars, undimmed by city lights, in the inky black sky. I have to admit that for me the food is boring, but I know it is good and nourishing and I do love the avocados. The pineapples and mangoes are so sweet and juicy that I no longer bother buying them in North America. I walk everywhere and if I am tired I hail a motorcycle (a *pici-pici*) to take me home from work.

Bududa has changed me profoundly, but it's hard to say how. I wish I could say that I now live simply in North America, too. I can only say that something deeper has changed. Living there for as long as I have has changed my perspective and my values.

I have had the chance to observe in detail their life patterns and the ironies of their life and mine. Being a part of that community has made my life richer. In Bududa, I walk to work in the morning, joining a throng of people going to school or taking their goods and animals to market. Most are bare-

foot and many are travelling with their wares on their head, loads such as matoke (a branch of plantain-type bananas weighing 18 kilos) or homemade pots made from local clay. These men, women and children are strong.

The locals I live and work with own little and grow crops of maize, beans and matoke. They keep chickens and goats. I was once admonished by one of our teachers because I asked a child in our orphans' program if he grew crops. The teacher slapped me gently and said, "Of course he grows crops. How else would he eat?" My mind went immediately to the grocery stores at home and the rows and variety of food available to me and millions like me in the developed world.

Nobody I know in Bududa has a car; a few have motorbikes. Nobody has running water. Water is carried in 40-litre containers from the borehole to the house or drained from rainwater on the roof. Water, like everything else, is precious.

I realize that every villager would give anything to have what I have – clothes, a car, my own house, electricity. As I watch and learn from them, they are watching me – cautiously and, perhaps, with envy.

With such simple lives, are the minds and hearts of my Ugandan friends less cluttered with the minutia of life that clutters mine? Are they better able to live in the present? I think they do – they worry little about the future. They have almost no "stuff" and therefore have less to worry about. They are connected to nature in a way that we have forgotten. And they are connected to their bodies; they move and dance at the flick of a finger.

As a child in Montreal, I learned a hymn, *There's a wideness in God's mercy*. The tune has stuck in my head, all these years and one line I've changed slightly because it suits me: "If our lives were but more simple." I still hum it. Here I am, more than half a century later, musing on the same theme.

I have learned how most people on this planet live. I am fortunate to live a privileged life and I am most grateful to have learned so much from another community. But there is nothing romantic about poverty, and poverty is hurting Bududa.

Since 2007, the non-governmental organization I work for has supported the community. In my own small way, I am trying to help Bududa find more economic security, even as I see and admire what is good about their present way of life.

Barbara Wybar divides her time between Métis-sur-Mer, Que., Philadelphia and Bududa, Uganda.