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Keep the Stories Alive

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It is impossible to remember a time in my life when I was not passionate about Kenya. There has always been a calling to that continent for me, a connection that lures me to the rhythm of her music, the beauty of her people, the untouched richness of her savannas and deserts and forests. Beginning with Joy Adamson's *Born Free*, which I read when I was eight, I have read any literature that described what it is like to live in the country of lions, Samburu warriors, and Jomo Kenyatta. I dreamed of and yearned for Africa, until one evening, at a Christmas dinner where I chatted with strangers, a woman said to me, "Heather, the only way you will ever get to Africa is to just go." She was right, and so I went. I was forever changed.

It is also impossible to remember a time in my life when I was not passionate about Scotland. Home of my ancestors, Scotland calls to me through bagpipes, mystical stories of kelpies and selkies, legends of the missing heart of Robert the Bruce, the midnight escape of Bonnie Prince Charlie through the Hebrides, and the stolen Stone of Scone. My father told me of the 600-year-old Kisimul Castle that belongs to our clan, and I dreamed of and yearned to walk its halls, following the footsteps of my ancestors. So I journeyed to that country, too, and walked not only the halls of Kisimul, but also raked cockles, "lifted tatties" (dug up potatoes), and visited a cemetery lined with tombstones engraved with my last name. I was forever changed.

The purpose of both of these adventures was not only to fulfill a dream, but also to collect stories. I wanted to sit by a peat fire, or inside a mud and dung hut, and hear the tales that have been told by the people, one generation to the next, in the language of their creation. I wanted to see and feel and hear and touch the worlds in which the stories were born, so that I could pass them on to my listeners in libraries in the United States. So now I have been to Kenya twice, Scotland twice, and Greece and New Zealand once each, and all for the purpose of listening to, and passing on, stories. I have written about these experiences in several other journals, as well as in my books, *Hyena and the Moon: Stories to Tell from Kenya* (Libraries Unlimited, 1995) and *The Celtic Breeze: Stories of the Faery World from Scotland, Ireland and Wales* (Libraries Unlimited, 2001). For this article I would like to answer some of the most frequently-asked questions I have heard from students and adults over the years.

Is it difficult for a woman to travel alone in Kenya?

What is difficult is the perception that Americans always travel in clumps, hanging out of Land Cruisers with their cameras and binoculars aimed at the people or the animals. The Kenyans were puzzled by the fact that I was not part of an organized safari, and that I had no problem with making my own time schedule so I could visit with them in their homes. My translator, Gitema Kagathi, who was Kikuyu and a master of diplomacy, always accompanied me. He explained what I needed, arranged a price, translated the stories, and made the people comfortable with "Mama Mzungu," white (or European) woman.

Were you ever frightened in Kenya?

Yes. I was frightened when Kagathi was "arrested" by soldiers because we had supposedly gotten too close to a family of cheetahs in one of the reserves. Other tourists were there as well, but for some reason they chose Kagathi to harass. They threatened to take away his license as a safari guide, and to send me back to the United States. Kagathi walked away with them into the bush, and after about fifteen very long minutes, he had them laughing and slapping him on the back. I'm sure there was also an exchange of money. I was also frightened when a black-maned lion charged us. He came up out of the grass, roaring and running straight at our van. It was, shall we say, memorable.

What is your favorite memory of Kenya?

There are so many. Looking into the eyes of a leopard at sunset, as he lolled in the branches of an acacia tree, not more than six feet away. Listening to stories told by Samburu warriors as we sat around a bonfire, while off in the distance we could hear a lion and a hyena arguing over their feast for the night, and the sparks of the fire melted into the canopy of stars. Sitting in a Samburu hut with a child on my lap, while the blind mzee (elder) grandfather told stories. Having a picnic surrounded by wildebeest. Watching a Maasai warrior and his cattle appear from out of the early morning fog. Watching a baby elephant smack himself on the forehead as he tried to figure out how to get a trunk full of water into his mouth. But I think the most powerful memory of all was walking up Mt. Kenya with Kagathi. This is where Ngai, their god, created First Man and First Woman. It is a holy place, and Kagathi's reverence for the wildlife, the plants, and the legends was a gift he gave to me.

Are you going back?

I definitely want my daughter, Jamie, to experience Kenya with me. But Kagathi was killed in a car accident the year my book was published, and somehow I cannot imagine Kenya without Kagathi, so I have not returned.

Did the MacNeils in Scotland welcome you?

Och, aye! I had the serendipitous luck of staying in a bed and breakfast on the Isle of Barra called Ceol Mara (song of the sea), which was run by Mary Sara MacNeil. She was like a mother hen, calling around the island if I was late for tea to make sure I hadn't been washed out to sea, and making arrangements with the appropriate storytellers. It is such a small island that word quickly traveled about me, and before long I was given the nickname, "Pack o' Lies."

Did you visit the castle?

I had the great fortune of getting a personal tour from John Allen MacNeil, the keeper of the keys. Since I was there during the off-tourist season, he had plenty of time to walk me through Kisimul Castle, and tell me—you guessed it—stories about its history. The castle has been rebuilt, but not furnished, which makes it cold and damp and very, very lonely. I liked it that way, for it gave me the chance to listen for the ghosts.

Speaking of ghosts, did you see any?

Whenever I visited with a storyteller, I asked if they knew stories about the faery folk. They would generally scoff at that, saying those were stories for children, and children don't listen anymore because they would rather watch television. "But have you heard about the haunted house?" They would proceed to tell me, in great sincerity, a legend about a house that was built on the graves of three sailors. "No one has ever stayed in the house more than one night. You can hear the oilskins of the sailors." I was dared several times to stay in the house, but their adamant belief in the existence of the ghosts gave me pause.

What is your favorite memory of Scotland?

Again, there are so many. Finally having the chance to walk the ancient halls of Kisimul Castle. Watching seals watch me as I sat on the rocks and waited for a selkie to appear. Spending an afternoon on Roddy Nicholson's wee boat, so he could show me the Piper's Cave and tell me the story of the piper who was lured into the Otherworld by the music of the faery folk. Dragging my suitcase across a muddy cow pasture to view the site of Flora MacDonald's birthplace. Walking the fields of the Culloden Battlefield, which is truly haunted by the spirits of those who were massacred by the Duke of Cumberland and his troops. Visiting every bookstore I could find in order to purchase obscure (and very heavy) books about Scottish folklore and the Highland Clearances. But the most vivid memory is listening to Kirsty Mackay tell me the story of "The Changeling Child." Ms. Mackay was very old and frail, but her memory of the stories she used to tell as a teacher was impeccable. She dictated the stories in Gaelic to her son, the island priest, and he kindly translated them for me in writing. She said to me, over and over, "You should have the Gaelic. The stories are meant to be told in the Gaelic."

What will your next book be about?

When I visited the Greek Islands in 1997 I promised myself I was not going to collect stories, I was just going to be a tourist and relax. But the Isle of Crete is a storyteller's paradise, and I knew when I visited the Temple of Knossos I would have to tell the story of Ariadne and the Minotaur. So that's the one that is waiting to be born. And I want to write about my experience of adopting my daughter in Vietnam.

What have you learned from your experiences of collecting stories?

The good that I have learned is that people around the world are generous with their stories, and honored to be asked to share them. Storytelling transforms strangers into friends in no more time than it takes to say, "Long and long ago there was ..." When we tell a tale we give from the heart, and we give what we love.

The bad that I have learned is that the stories are being forgotten. "Oh, I used to tell stories but no one listens anymore." I have heard that more often than I wish to remember. We cannot understand others if we do not know their stories, and we cannot know ourselves if we do not know our own stories. We must tell stories to bridge the many gaps in our lives—religious, ethnic, generational, gender, historical, and personal. We must tell stories to heal and grow and laugh and cry and learn. We must tell stories so our hearts can sing, one to another.

We must keep the stories alive. 