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## To and From the Community

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# SHARING THOUGHTS

## To and From the Community

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I am glad to have been asked to share with the readers of Mizan Law Review, the thoughts that occurred to me at the end of my two-week stay in Ethiopia. It is difficult to express thoughts upon impromptu invitation. On the other hand, conversations like the one I had when I was invited to express my thoughts unveil one's inner voice which readily responds although words from the heart might lack the pattern and the roadmap of thoughts and memories polished through the mind.

### **Keeping and working together**

I graduated from Yale Law School in 1964, and in 1966, after two years of experience as a clerk for American judges, I volunteered to teach at the newly established Faculty of Law, Haile Selassie I University (later renamed Addis Ababa University). The law school had already started when I joined the faculty in 1966. The years 1966 to 1968 have a special place in my life. These years remind me of Henry Ford's words: "Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, and working together is success."

About eighteen expatriates, about half young Americans and the rest from Canada and Europe, formed a strong community of hardworking and enthusiastic staff. The inspiring leadership of James CN Paul, the school's first Dean, created a strong team spirit among ourselves and with all our students and stakeholders. This spirit enabled the law school to achieve a standard that was indeed exemplary. They produced a very strong and close commu-

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nity, creating for me lifetime friendships with colleagues like Norman Singer, Hap Dunning, Dean Paul, the late Daniel Haile and many others.

This was the decade that saw thousands of young Americans volunteering as Peace Corps and serving in other teaching or similar assignments. We were responding to John F. Kennedy's famous words, "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." This motto is not as idealistic and utopian as it sounds. Every person is a member of his/her community, and the benefactors from the common good are eventually the members themselves. Indeed, this marked a shift from the self-regarding times that had immediately preceded it. After all, our makeup is not for lonely existence, like leopards or sharks. Society, the need for community is a natural need and trait of ours. Like baboons, we survive, we live, we succeed in communities.

Baboon communities, to be sure, have dominant male leaders, and human history has been marked, well I would say stained, by oppressive patriarchy and tyranny in the name of 'order' and 'community.' Democracy, that is to say equal political rights, and not individualism in its *atomistic* conception, appears to be the answer. In American discourse today, republicanism and communitarianism are the names commonly associated with this view. Republicanism should not be confused with the Republican political party, the American political party that in recent years has seemed more susceptible to atomistic individualism, with its characteristics of greed and disregard for the common (and global) good. What must be joined are empowerment, liberty and freedom of the individual in the context of the common good.

This ideal is common throughout the world. The western philosopher Martin Buber expressed the idea as "I and thou." Many religious traditions celebrate a reciprocal golden rule, "Do unto your neighbor as you would have him do unto you." And the Swahili expression of *Ubuntu* which means "*I am, because you are, because we are*" also articulates the togetherness that genetically permeates us all.

This bond of community exists not only among us, here and now, but also with the generations before and after us. What we might currently see as clash of civilizations may eventually give way to a phase of convergence, synthesis and tolerance. I see my sister, as European as I am, embracing Buddhism. Since he was eight, my son has been a committed environmentalist, knowing that his life is committed to the values and protection of the natural world all of us share with all creation. Values and lifestyles coexist and converge.

As I am getting closer to retirement or extended service with a reduced teaching load, I reflect upon some perspectives from my religious heritage.

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We live through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, late adulthood and old age. Suppose, one of our holiest texts asks, we would be given two options: *either* (1) we could live eternally under the progression of aging always with our own generation and no other; *or* (2) we could give place to a new generation of renewal and energy in life such as the passion of loving, having and bringing up children, mentoring the younger ones to take your place. Is it not clear what choice we would make? Mustn't any sane person take the latter option? The succession of our lives is like a *Relay Race* in which generations come and go as members of the extended family of the humanity, and always with the hope of building greater community. Although I don't believe in oriental reincarnation, there seems to be linear reincarnation when a person continues to live physically through children, mentally through students and readers of one's publications, and spiritually through all those to whom he/she has been a role model. What is more gratifying than a community of life and aspirations with others and the next generation?

### **Community, numbers and crowds**

My first visit to Ethiopia was a lesson in how much easier community is in small settings than large. I come from a metropolis, New York City, where few neighbors know each other, and people pass in the streets without eye contact. At a party one always has the impression that people have their eyes on lookout for someone across the room who might be more interesting to talk to. Addis Ababa when I arrived was already large enough that many Ethiopians might have had the same experience. But I was part of a small community of expatriates with a shared commitment to shaping legal education in Ethiopia, with the knowledge that, at that time, all lawyers being trained in the community were being trained by us. The shared task and responsibility bound us together. Our small numbers denied us the luxury of looking across the room for a better match. Of course there could still have been hostilities or frictions that tore us apart; one of the wonders of James Paul's deanship was his skill in steering our enterprise. But life's lesson, for me, was of the depth of engagement that comes from accommodation and adjustment to the realities of our group. We learned more about each others' strengths and weaknesses, about the daily state of our minds and our stomachs, than I had experienced before.

These lessons have stayed with me, as a testimony to the values of community and friendship. Back in New York City now, teaching at a much larger school in a much larger city – a wonderful school with accomplished colleagues, but one responsible for training only a small fraction of our lawyers – I see how hard it is to maintain a community sense with large numbers. My colleagues even take some pride in their independence – that we each go

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home to a different place, have different circles of friends and activities. The anonymity of city life is a corrosive force. We are collegial, but not nearly in the sense that so blessed my time in Addis.

### **Timket, Russia Road and the Entoto-Yeka Mountains**

I had returned very briefly to Ethiopia in 1992 with Dean Paul, and now here I am again after 16 years. I see lots of changes. I am glad to see and take the pictures of the home where I and my family lived in from 1966 to 1968. My home in Addis was on continuous rental by AAU law school. Goldberg lived in it before me, and Sklar after I left it. I call it *home* because it is more than a house to me and memories rolled from the very moment I saw it on *Timket* Holiday, January 19<sup>th</sup> 2009. On Friday, January 30<sup>th</sup> Elias Nour managed to take me and Tadesse Lencho to the living room because his relatives live there. The event brought back memories that I cherish. The premises and its compound are well preserved. But I do not have to tell you readers there have been changes. The road in front of the fence (Russia Road) is about four times as wide as it then was. Addis Ababa itself is eight times as large today as it was then.

I would like to appreciate the roads and construction works that are booming. Yet, my camera has rather consistently focused on the graceful mountains of *Entoto* and *Yeka* which majestically stand green and beautiful. Thank God that they are greener than I had feared after reading the statistics that Ethiopia's forest cover had declined to 2.3 % of its land from around 16% in the early 1950s. It is the sense of community in every household and the unique culture of diversity and tolerance accompanied by the landscape, the greenery and the inexplicably unique weather that constitute Ethiopia's treasures. I hope development endeavors, including roads, buildings, industries, etc., can be accomplished without diminishing them. Awareness and commitment in this regard and a strong sense of community with every neighbor and the generations to come can substantially reduce the potential damage to Ethiopia's treasures. ■

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