

Gods & Taxis

Nancy gets out of bed at 5:00 a.m. daily to do yoga to the plaintive cry of the Mullah in a nearby minaret. She says she finds the exotic call to prayer peaceful, a welcome addition to her meditative exercise. I lie in bed and count off my fingers, one through five. Allah Akbar!

The garden leaps to life: two towering Heliconium, or Poetical Honey as they are better known; the flowering, fragrant, Frangipani; the Bougainvillea - resplendent in crimson and chartreuse - a particular favorite of mine. They all spring up full grown like fabled Athena, sprung from Zeus's head. (there's this great video of the garden - unfortunately there is no video of Athena's famous leap; though there is said to be a fair approximation of it in the film Alien 2.)

The garden grows swiftly while all else moves, well, rather slow. Poli-poli is the Swahili word for it, once described as roughly equivalent to mañana; but without the sense of urgency. An example: I have a beautiful old Land Rover parked in the driveway where it sits awaiting plates; where it has been sitting now for for five full weeks. I am paying a guy to wait in line for me (can't complain about that deal!) and he promises the plates will be delivered; well, mañana. In the meantime I've been driving a rented taxi - an honest to god taxicab. That is how I am known around here, Dar's only white taxi driver. White hair, white skin, white taxi. Call me 'the Ghost Driver of Dar es Salaam'.

And that brings me to the subject of taxis. But first, let me draw you a picture; Okay? So you get the idea of taxis in Dar. The really crowded ones are called dala-dalas and they only cost 12¢ a ride, so you really have to pack folks in if you want to make a buck. These minivans lurch around honking and flashing lights for passengers, careening from blacktop to dirt shoulder and back again, like a drunken pig on roller skates. The main traffic control takes the form of speed bumps, or 'sleeping policeman'; as they are sometimes called, causing the dala-dalas to stand on the brakes between moments of pure acceleration and - while one can only guess at the condition of the brakes themselves - the brake lights get such heavy use that I have yet to see a dala-dala with functioning lights at all.

The lack of brake lights has been widely copied, taken no doubt as the sign of the true road-warrior. It was even-odds on whether Luke would spy ten people peeing beside the road the other day before Kate counted ten dala-dalas with a single brake light working. But I shouldn't make light of it as tragedies are all too terrible and real...

Which brings us back to God. In our seaside church - a nondenominational community affair - a lay minister was leading prayer the other day. She said she liked to use her hand to guide her prayer. The thumb, the digit closest to us, reminds us to pray for our families

and friends. Next, the index or 'teachers finger', reminds us to prayer for those who teach, minister, and heal. The middle finger, the tallest, reminds us to pray for those who lead in any aspect of our lives, that they may receive the grace they need to lead. Then the ring finger, the weakest on the hand, reminds us to pray for those in need. And finally, the pinky, the smallest and the last, reminds us to remember our own needs.

Nancy asked a Christian Tanzanian colleague what he thought about the 'call to prayer' echoing throughout the city five or six times every day. He said that he liked it as it reminded him that he too should pause to pray. We discussed it as a family and decided to try to take his sentiment to heart.

In the meantime, I wish the dala-dalas would buy bulbs..but then, when all is said and done, the transportation here isn't really all that bad here...I mean I have certainly heard of worse...