

# A DAY IN THE LIFE<sup>1</sup>

I have been hearing the roosters for hours but they now bring me slowly out of sleep as the interval between their episodes of crowing grows smaller. By the morning's early light I see the mosquito net arranged about me and the bed in which I now stir. I blink to awareness and my surroundings – ah, Gweru, Zimbabwe!

The cool early morning air is perfect for some additional sleep but I have training to provide later to a group of Peace Corps trainee (PC/T) educators who will one day soon be full-fledged math, science and English teachers at various locations throughout this country in southern Africa.

Later, as I begin my morning 'bucket' bath, I mentally review the fundamentals of Evidence Based Methods of Instruction (EBMI) or EBMI – the teaching methods and arrangements I am to present on to the PC/Ts later on. As a Peace Corps Trainee myself (in addition to staffing for World Literacy Initiative, Inc.), I am privileged to have been invited to participate in the training of my peers.



Indigenous musicians greet  
Peace Corps Volunteer-Trainees  
in Harare, Zimbabwe  
(Aug. 31, 2001)

Although this early opportunity to share EBMI is an unexpected blessing I give thanks for in my morning prayers, there are many other blessings I give daily thanks for in this country with greater appreciation than ever before. Food, shelter, health and safety are all quite high on this list.

Here, it is obvious early on that not everyone enjoys these things. My prayers begin now, "*Dear Ungulungulu . . .*" *the Ndebele word for God.*

My breakfast of cereal and bread is punctuated this morning with a banana purchased the preceding day from one of the many street vendors (uthengisi) in downtown Gweru. Breakfast and an accompanying cup of tea gulped down, my host family 'brother' Mitchell and I head for the street where we will catch a "kombi" for a commercial lift into town.

The "kombi"s arrive at irregular intervals to take riders to town for about \$18 (Zim) each way. At the official exchange rate, this puts the cost at about 35 cents (U.S.). Because of economic conditions however, this amount represents perhaps 20% of an average *employed* person's daily take home pay and so the practice in our family is reserved for

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only the ride IN to town in the morning while we are still fresh and clean. This afternoon, we will walk the 3 or 4 kilometers or so back home.

On this morning, 14 adults and 3 grade-school aged children somehow crowd into the 11-person 'kombi' van. With music blaring, it pulls away with my U.S.-based concerns regarding safety, seat belts and my homespun awareness of body odors quickly fading with every additional trip made.

We head into town careening past the many who commute by walking. It is a minor daily miracle that pedestrians somehow avoid being hit by the speeding 'kombi's'.

Once we are part way into town, the 'kombi' does a u-turn and expels its passengers readying itself to head back out to collect another load of riders. Mitchell and I straighten ourselves after collecting our belongings and head on foot to the south side of town where I will do my training. He heads on to where he attends college as a student of accounting.

Mitchell and his family are considered upper middle class in Zimbabwe because his mother, Sylvia is employed. Since her husband died from complications arising from his diabetes some 8 before, Sylvia is the only source of income for 3 sons, 1 daughter and 2 other extended family members in addition to *this* Peace Corps Volunteer trainee. She works as a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at a local school where 50 children look each day to her alone to provide the education they will need to survive in this strange world that is a curious mix of 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies and ancient tribal customs and beliefs.

Sylvia is perhaps the finest example of self-empowerment and self-actualization I have ever known. Matriarch of a large extended family, she is the primary breadwinner, cleaner, cook, spiritual advisor, problem solver and maternal glue that keeps her family together. Her exceptional cooking skills are even the subject of a book she has begun on Zimbabwean recipes and cooking methods.

Just 3 years my senior, this product of a cross tribal marriage between an Ndebele woman and a Shona Seventh Day Adventist minister, Sisi (sister) Sylvia rises before I do each day, works harder at more jobs only to find her bed *after* everyone else is fast asleep. Still, she remains positive, upbeat and hopeful throughout her family's many tribulations and predicaments not least of which are the growing number of funerals members have been attending these days due in no small part to the massive AIDS epidemic here. It takes only a short while to discern the source for her magnificent strength and insight as the abiding faith in Ungulungulu she maintains.

The 20 PC/T peers of mine and the half dozen or so PC staff who are indigenous Zimbabweans have already begun to assemble as I walk the last kilometer or so to the chapel at Chaplin High School. This is where we have been meeting each day for various Peace Corps training activities. These have included language, culture, medical,

safety and technical skill building topics. My presentation this morning is slated as technical skill building for those of our group who will teach (most of them).



Peace Corps Volunteer trainees while still in Harare

Still recovering from our shock and fear in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the United States, the mood of our small band of 21 Americans has been sombre yet bravely determined. New tidbits of news still move us strongly though with each new Voice of America broadcast or email received.

The extent of the planning and determination of the terrorists is frightening enough but fear also grows regarding what will happen next. Mostly, we simply do not know. We try to move forward with our daily assignments and classes yet it is difficult to concentrate at times knowing that another attack may loom or that we are on the brink of a holy war against the United States and its citizens.

My talk regarding the merits and relative ease in arranging EBMI methods and principles in a developing country's classrooms is well received. Because it is a set of arrangements that can be made independently of the curriculum and favored presentation style of the teacher, most are easily persuaded by its many merits. Some indicate they will even attempt to use these methods once they begin teaching. I am quite pleased.

More promising still is the response of the Peace Corps staff who ask me to initiate a draft chapter for inclusion in the PC/Z educator training manual. There has even been some talk about including EBMI at the regional (South African) 'train the trainer' conference sometime next calendar year so that Peace Corps trainers from all over this part of the African continent can become informed and knowledgeable regarding EBMI and its many possible applications.

By lunchtime, I am unusually hungry (again). Despite eating more than I ever did in the U.S., my full appetite returns every meal. The slowing growth of my hair and nails is a tell tale sign of my reduced protein intake however even though I eat much. I choose to eat while studying the new language I am learning (Ndebele) under the shade of some beautiful trees.

Spying a lone white person under the trees, the students of this high school have been approaching me to inquire about who we are, our mission and the United States. Today, I am not disappointed and a group of 14 year old girls comes over. They are beautiful young people intelligent, inquisitive, respectful and polite.

What is it like in the U.S. they ask? Where will I work while in Zimbabwe? What do I think of their country? How do I and the others feel about the terrible attack? Their questions answered (at least until tomorrow), they head off while I finish lunch and

studying. My afternoon of cultural and language lessons speeds by and I soon find myself on my way home.

The sun is nearly extinguished in still another spectacular African sunset when I arrive home. Being so much closer to the equator, there is little variation in length of day throughout the year and mostly, it sets around 6 pm give or take 15 minutes all year long.

My Sisi Sylvia is already preparing dinner for us all when the power goes out. Because one never knows how long it will be out and there is no way of determining this, she does not hesitate in building a fire in the backyard and finishes the meal of fish, vegetables and sadze (made from maize) over the open fire. Sylvia is from the rural area of Zimbabwe where 75% of the 12 million Zimbabwe people still live. There, mostly there is no electricity and so cooking over the fire is a way of life.

Dinner finally done, I help one of the brothers with his math and then the family reads from the bible, sings hymns and prays to Ungulungulu in thanks for His many blessings still somehow bestowed on the members of their family's household. These prayers are as heartfelt as I can remember experiencing anywhere. Then, we all sleep like rocks until the roosters once more rouse us up and on our ways.

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