

ASSIMILATE OR GO HOME: DISPATCHES FROM THE STATELESS WANDERERS

DLM is a home-schooled pastor's kid, a real life Bible-college educated evangelical in the middle of Portland, Oregon. Currently living in low-income housing with a bunch of Somali Bantu refugees, a husband, a baby, and a very cranky cat, DLM writes about her missionary dreams and cross-cultural schemes while ardently striving to put the "fun" in fundamentalism.

"The devaluation of the human world increases in direct relation with the increase in value of the world of things." — Karl Marx

Usually the conversation comes up because I have painted my nails or put on some colored lip gloss. The Somali Bantu girls that I work with look at me clinically, eyes narrowing in on my decadence. They sigh, usually while we are baking something, and tell me that I am going to the place of fire. "Oh really?" I ask, intrigued to be on this end of the conversation. "Yeah," they say. "Our father told us so. Everyone in this country is not written in the great book, and so they will all go to the place of fire. Because of the nails and the dancing and the clothes." They gesture at the TV, dark and looming in the living room, so they don't have to explain it all.

They don't look gleeful or even sad as they tell me about the fate of me and everyone I know. It just is the truth, remembered from the mouth of their now-deceased father. I wonder how much he talked about me, personally, going to the place of fire. If it made him sad, or gave him pause, or if there was a sort of security in it.

Sometimes I lie awake in the night, wondering: *why don't they ever try to convert me?* It is a lonely thought, that maybe I am not worth saving.

Which brings me to the giant elephant in the room: I am trying to convert the Somali Bantu. This is what makes me write under my initials, makes me wary of sharing the column with people who work with me, etc. It is a delicate, tricky subject, drawing fiery responses from otherwise mild-mannered people. It affronts those who fancy themselves free of organized religion, and unnerves those who wonder at their own shaky faith. How can a word seem so horrible and so irrelevant at the same time?

Historical reason why it is not that big a deal: the Somali Bantu were forcibly converted to Islam sometime in the last century or so (they were animists before that). If history teaches us anything, it is about the cycles of conversion. As literacy and education grow in the Somali Bantu community, shouldn't

they be allowed to make a decision about what they believe?

Christian reason: Sin. Heaven. Hell. Grace. Justification. Predestination. (insert other really expensive theological words). You know, big-picture stuff.

Real reason: We are all being converted, all the time.

Perhaps you don't believe me. But conservative estimates put the number of ads the average American sees in a day at around 3,000. Exhibit A: The apartments of my refugee friends. Once bare, they are now a museum of weird American tchotchkes (tiger figurines, fake christmas trees, Bratz dolls still in their packaging), indiscriminate paper decorations taped onto walls (school papers, calendars from the Asian grocery store, bills from 3 years ago), and a sort of faux-persian luxury: velvet posters of Mecca, ornate glass-and-gold tea sets, huge gilded couches that take up two walls of the room.

It is the couches that always fascinate me. Somali Bantu bring up the topic of couches quite often. They have become a signifier of sorts, the closest cultural equivalent to a bride price. The couches are imported, uncomfortable, stiff and velvet. They cost thousands of dollars, and are given to the mother of the girl getting married.

Not long ago I sat on one such couch, and I missed the girl for whom it was given. Her mother was next to me, watching two TVs side by side. There was a video of a Somali wedding on one screen, somebody from Texas, I think, the same slow shuffling dancing and blaring music filling up the room. On the other screen was PBSkids!, some sort of cartoon about math or phonics. There were no children in the room, and I didn't know why this one was on. For company, perhaps?

The younger sisters came home from school, banging doors and throwing their heavy bags on the floor. As they fixed themselves a snack, they released an entire day's worth of pent-up information, the words spilling out of their mouths as they spread peanut butter on old hamburger buns. They told me they wanted iPods, that they don't understand why Gotye is so popular ("in the music video, they just stand around and *are painted*") that they went and saw *The Hunger Games* ("What was it about? I dunno. I think it was like the Olympics or something"). They settled in next to me on the couch, switched one of the TVs to the Disney Channel, and we watched it for awhile.

And I realized that 3,000 ads a day is a very conservative number indeed.

In the beginning, I was scared of fundamentalism, which grows dark and deep in places of fear and alienation. But now I am more scared of comfort, of busyness, of self-importance and the preoccupation

with consumption of our culture. Materialism, like it or not, is our biggest export. This is the rust destroying our bodies and our planets and our souls, the devil rejoicing in our corrosive pursuit of more.

I believe in hell, the place of flames, and I believe in hell, the place where I am pretty much ok with the fact that so many people are suffering. And while our entire culture strives to convince us otherwise, this is a great evil. Besides the kingdom of God, Jesus had the most words to say about money (and comfort and entertainment are not far behind):

Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your reward. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep (Luke 6:24-25).

Woe to us then, woe to you and I. Our obsession with consumption, full of bleak immediacy and unsatisfying indulgence, is not as harmless as we want to believe. In reality, it has robbed us of any interest in our neighbors, allowing great evil to reign (indeed, the world has only seen an increase in violence and suffering innocents in this, our most prosperous century). Does anybody believe that we are evolving into better people anymore? Does anyone else still believe that technology is neutral, that we can live without a communal code of ethics, or that we can continue to commodify and devalue human beings without experiencing dire consequences?

When asked what his version of the gospel was, Jesus said: love God and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. And then he took it a step farther and went and modeled how ridiculously hard this is. He was crushed on a tree and forgave those who nailed him there, and in doing so he taught us how love always involves dying to ourselves.

It takes great courage and imagination to live like this, to slough off the great lies we have swallowed. It takes great discipline to barrel into a life lived for the greater good without retreating into fortresses of fear or being lulled back into cycles of self-pleasure. But it is the only answer for a world where we need both individual and systemic models of ethics. A world where our neighbors are suffering great injustices, and I am not so sure we are happy ourselves. This should come as no surprise, but I have found my answer in Jesus. I have heeded his woes and am learning to listen to his advice: we need a God of love, and we need to love others in order to experience it ourselves.

It is hard, but I am trying to convert to this way of living all the time; I expect I will be to the end of my days. And please forgive me, but I am trying to convert you along with me.