



November 2022

Adjusting to Change

Adjusting to change requires space and time. Eight-year-old Addie reminded us of this reality one night at bedtime. Seated on the hard, tile floor, she took out crayons. With quick, forceful strokes, she pressed bright pigment into white paper. Her emotions flowed from heart to hand, layering page after page with wax colors.

“Do you know what the colors mean?” she asked.

Shelvis and I listened attentively.

“Blue and purple mean confused. Orange are all the bad feelings going on in [my] mind... the blue and green mixed are the things I miss from back home. The blue and brown is that I am sad. Green is that I am happy, and there are very little places where there is green.”

Taking a breather from her vigorous coloring, Addie began to recount the things she missed from North Charleston. Friends from school, her cousins, and the neighborhood Halloween parade topped the list.

Next, she shared things from our time in Oxford. “I miss our house,” she stated, “it was so cozy.”

I smiled in my mind at the description of our house as “cozy.” Whereas I thought it was a tight squeeze for our big family, she felt close, warm, and safe. I guess it is all about perspective.

The Oxford memories continued: “even though I don’t remember my friends’ names, I still miss them... and there was ice on everything, and you could slip on it... And I miss pizza Friday.”

Surprisingly, she then took a step even further back in time, to Arua, Uganda, where she lived from ages 3 to 5. “That is when I first started learning my left and right ... I just miss it.”



Addie expressing her mix of emotions about our move to Kampala with crayons.

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“Everything is just so confusing,” she cried in a loud, cracking voice. Tears flowing down her cheeks, Addie grabbed the purple crayon, symbolizing “confusion.” She pushed down hard, scribbling on a new page.

What was left for us to do but join her?

Shelvis and I reached for the crayons.

Shifting countries comes with difficulties, but I trusted we would settle in over time. The recent Ebola outbreak, though, made me question that plan. In September, a case of the deadly virus was identified about 3 hours away from us. The government later put two districts in lockdown to curb the spread. More than ten cases were identified in Kampala, where we live. Would those lead to lockdown or evacuation? Would this mirror our stint in Oxford, where we planned a two-year stay that a global pandemic cut to six months?

To express my deep sense of confusion, I picked up the purple crayon and shaded my page.

Although we have lived in several places, in the last two years I built friendships and a community in South Carolina. I miss being in the same time zone as family, the daily interactions with parents and teachers at the kids’ school, our chatty neighborhood group... the routines and relationships that got me through a season of being long-distance from my husband.

I picked up blue and green and mixed them together, acknowledging the things I missed.

Like Addie’s, my paper filled with swaths of colorful emotions, but Shelvis’ looked completely different.

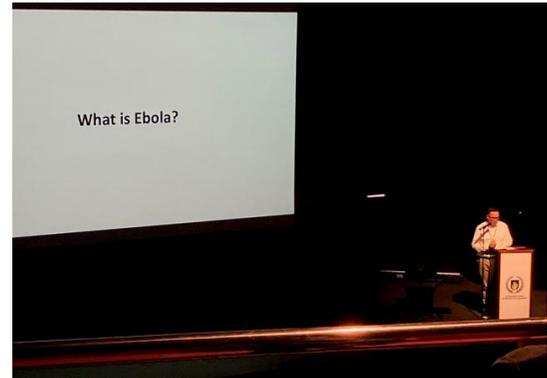
Pink stars crossed the top of his paper. Smiley faces and wobbly lines formed below. “The stars represent me feeling calm,” he explained. “The squiggly lines going downward symbolize me holding back emotions that I am afraid will bring me down. The purple is the uncertainty underneath my thoughts; the yellow, hopefulness in the midst of uncertainty. The smiley faces are our family. I am glad we get to experience all these things together.”

While Addie, Shelvis, and I expressed ourselves in color, Jordan put black letters on a white screen. In his typed, school journal, Jordan recorded his feelings about our move. He included details from each leg of the journey, his love of airplanes featuring prominently:

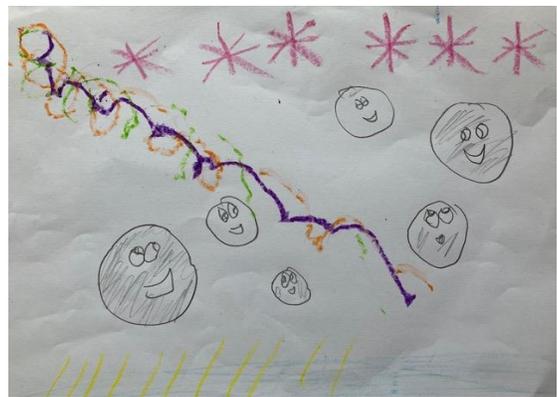
“I watched the sunset over the Atlantic Ocean. The credits had just rolled on the movie I was watching. I was beginning to feel my eyelids droop. I realized this was probably the reason they called Boeing 787s dreamliners.

“My heart hurt as I thought about the Boeing factory in Charleston, where they made the majority of the 787s. Then I thought about the Atlantic Ocean below me. I remembered playing in the surf at Folly Beach and eating

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The kid's school explained the Ebola Virus at their weekly assembly, letting the kids know they would start temperature checks and other precautions.



Shelvis and I joined Addie's spontaneous art therapy, and this is Shelvis' drawing :-)

shrimp burritos. I remembered Mama Lou's house, and the day she got Poppy (her dog)... I thought about Mama Lou (my Grandmother) hugging me and walking out of the airport this morning...

"... Then I thought of tomorrow. I also knew when I woke it would be a new day with a new home, new friends, and a new chapter in my life... A chapter where there was a chance to do stuff I never thought I'd do. There was a world of possibilities... Thoughts swirling in my head, I fell asleep, the dreamliner coasting into the sunset."

Each of us is processing a big life change. While the emotions are heavy, mourning the loss of our previous way of life is part of a healthy transition. It helps us embrace the new.

Seated on the hard, tile floor, Shelvis and I focused intently on our crayon drawings. After we shared aloud their meaning, Addie picked up the green. "This is making me start to feel happy," she explained, adding large patches of green to her page.

Finding another green crayon, I started adding happiness to my page, too.

There is something healing about sharing and hearing emotions together.

Thank you so much for your support of our family and the work we get to be a part of in East Africa. Your willingness to accompany us, and our South Sudanese siblings, encourages our hearts, adding green into our lives. Thank you!

Nancy and Shelvis Smith-Mather