

Finding true meaning of living

A visitor in Uganda sees the light, through the tattered lives of those around him

BY THOMAS FROESE

KAMPALA, UGANDA ♦ And now, this, from Michael J. Fox.

“If you were to rush into this room and announce you’d struck a deal with God, that the 10 years since my diagnosis could be magically taken and traded for 10 more years as the person I was before, I’d tell you to take a hike. I’d never want that life again, a sheltered, narrow existence fuelled by fear and made livable by insulation, isolation and self-indulgence.”

You’ll recall Fox, a Canadian and one of Parkinson’s disease’s better-known voices, was Alex Keaton from the hit show *Family Ties*, a rather comical TV character who once told his parents that his biggest fantasy is to roll in a bed, naked, with mounds of money.

And now? This candid quote from Fox, which I recently stumbled across during an office cleanup in my African home. Thud. It falls like reality. Fox now easily tells of his freedom, no longer “very driven and very ambitious and very consumed by outside things,” but rather into “very inside things.”

The price? Losing your health. Finding your soul? Priceless.

Days after I rediscovered Fox’s quote, John Angle, a successful banker from Los Angeles, told me, “Coming to Africa reminds me to live with less. We don’t need half of what we have.”

The price? Foregoing a luxurious holiday elsewhere. Seeing everyday simplicity? Priceless.

A little while later, in a grass hut, an American friend told me of his desire to rescue Obvious, a Zimbabwean student struggling to get even one meal a day for his family in that disastrous country.

The price? Taking a minute to hear of a stranger’s need. Knowing he has food? Priceless.

A few days later, the cops stopped me for talking on my mobile while driving, during an emergency call from Alice, our house-help who was in hospital to deliver a child.

“Tell the magistrate,” said the officer grabbing my phone, before telling me that Uganda’s floods have dislocated his family. We entered into an all-too-common dance of police bribery.

The price? Twenty thousand shillings, about \$13 Cdn, or two days police wages.

Being reminded of thousands of homeless Ugandans? Priceless.

The next day, our gardener Richard approached me, shaking like a leaf, just like last Christmas when Emmanuel, his four-day-old son, died.

He needed emergency medicine for his three-year-old daughter Peace. She’d been vomiting all night with malaria, which now kills 70,000 Ugandans, mostly children, annually.

The price? \$15 Cdn. Knowing this maybe saved a little child’s life? Priceless.



THOMAS FROESE, SPECIAL TO THE SPECTATOR

Alice Kembabozi, a single mom in Mukono, Uganda, holds Divine, five days old, with her son, Amos, 5, and Patience, 2.

That night Alice phoned, screaming in horrific pain, from her cellphone to mine. “Mr. Thom, the baby’s not coming out!”

In a surreal 911 moment where anyone can now relay their own death via mobile, I knew Alice could be perishing in childbirth, just like 6,000 Ugandan women do every year.

She survived, and I soon held newborn Divine. “Mr. Thom, tell me a prophecy,” Alice said. “Tell me she’s going to America.”

Noting that I wasn’t much of a prophet, I could only muster, “Alice, with a name like Divine, she’ll probably eventually go to heaven, a much better place.”

The price of helping Alice? Besides her transport, and that police bribe? About twenty bucks Canadian, for the gloves, buckets and cotton that Ugandan mothers supply at their own deliveries.

And holding Divine? Priceless.

This has been the first 16 days of my family’s recent return to Uganda.

And life’s beat will go on like this, interesting and disturbing, for the next eight months of our current tenure.

So, am I impressed that some 53 heads of state, and the Queen, one

of the most pampered persons on the planet, are about to arrive for Uganda’s first-ever Commonwealth summit?

credit-card culture, where someone has somehow switched all the price-tags, you can actually find the right headspace to do this.

It’s called getting over yourself.

So to Divine and those others who are heroic and true survivors, thank you for helping me to at least whisper, today,

and if I’m fortunate, tomorrow, that simple gratitude.

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Not really.

Not when you see these other folks here.

Because it’s been said that if you say just one prayer in your entire lifetime — “thank you” — that it would suffice. And here, unlike in the rich world’s

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