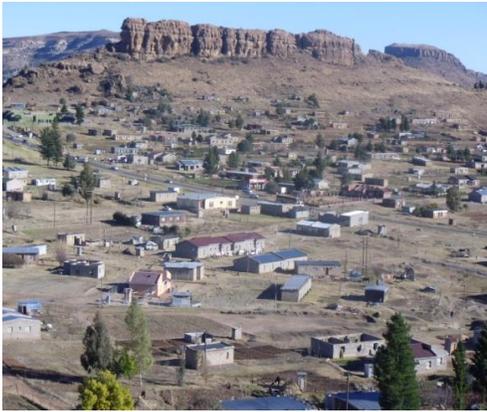


Thabang Mpokathe

The Great Adventure (from Zero to Hero)

Time was found and Moments were made



Lesotho (Home)

Transition

Canada (Home away from Home)

“Thabang Mpokathe has been invited by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and will be travelling to North America Canada at 08 August 2011 to begin his assignment at Willow View Farms.”

Happiness, confusion, and excitement came along after I read this statement from the confirmation letter from the large white A4 envelope. The imaginations about living in North America ran through my brain and I started to reminisce about those moments in Canada. I thought if this could happen, it would be more than a dream come true to be in America. Mind you, people in my country barely travel out of Lesotho and South Africa because my country Lesotho is engraved into South Africa so it's easy to go to South Africa. Even to go to Johannesburg (capital city of South Africa) is a great achievement. Only people who get chance to fly out of the country and continent as well are those who are rich, politically connected, and the few who are granted scholarships by non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

South Africa



→ Lesotho

North America was far beyond my imagination and reach. Here in Africa, the media has influenced us to such an extent that we think North America is more artificial, all “high rises” and skyscrapers, no soil but only paves, flat land, music, New York City, Toronto, Washington, and everything you can think of. Man, Paradise with no exit!!!

It was after graduation from the National University of Lesotho (NUL) that I joined a local organization called Growing Nations Trust (partner with Mennonite Central Committee) through their residential program to bridge the gap and preparation for the real world. We were a team of young fellows in the program; desire was great, and passion was seen amongst us. The motto was “to transform local communities using conservational agricultural as a tool.”



Everything was OK; we attended seminars, leadership courses, and trainings, and had devotion together. Even though we got R500.00 per month, we were happy for we thought “we have devoted ourselves to something greater than our personal happiness.” Although things seemed to be smoothly progressing, there was no personal maturity and growth. Despite being an introvert, my self-esteem and confidence was very low all the time; self-worth, and sense of involvement wasn’t felt. The management administration had some problems. One could see perfection at the far distance but there was really big chaos behind the closed doors. I felt deep inside that this is not the place I belong, but there was no other option to turn back.

Being second-born of my parent’s five children and being the breadwinner with this compensation, I got (R500), I was blackmailed by such circumstances. I had a girl friend from university and our relationship was so fragile and vulnerable. It was deteriorating day by day. But I always held myself to God. I read some self-help books and tried by all means to be content with what I had. God has to be embraced even in the darkness, not only in the light. The matter of fact, on the contrary, one will not reach to the light. John Ortberg said, “If we don’t rejoice today, we will not rejoice at all. If we wait until conditions are perfect, we will still be waiting when we die.”

One said we should rejoice in all the years we have borrowed, enjoy their nearness, and realize it wasn’t meant to last forever. Even life is a short, temporary gift that can be gone in the wink of an eye. Life is not in our hands, but every opportunity we waste and every day we don’t live to the fullest and don’t try to enjoy every moment we have is an avoidable loss and a tragedy greater than death itself.

Pocket of Hope

In the midst of this, Elmer Stobbe came on board from Canada to his seven weeks volunteer assignment with MCC at Growing Nations Trust. I spent some time with him during his stay. I had some personal friendship with him, we started to share some ideas. Firstly, I had some stereotypes about him as a “white man/Western” just like one of our coordinators. To our surprise, Elmer was exceptional and every guy wanted to spend some time with him, and everybody loved him even to the present. He is a guy you can hang with and trust. He gave me his time and he was not judgmental. He was down-to-earth, and I shared with him my problems. Every time we talked I felt motivated. Elmer was my great mentor; he showed me the potential I had and how worthy I am. May God bless him; I am now Thabang because of his major contributions.

Time flies and was limited; my friend had to leave for Canada, for his assignment was over. During his stay we had opportunity to apply for International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) Canada and U.S. by MCC of which Elmer played a big role in facilitating those applications.

Our applications were accepted (Moliko, Keke, and me). Each one of us was very excited and saw this was real. We gave each other hugs and from there, we become to speak one language, applied for visa together, made paper work together. We built intimacy.

Our assignments were to serve in Oregon, Winnipeg, and Abbotsford, B.C., respectively. My assignment was on the farm (Willow View Farms working with Murray Siemens), exactly what I had applied for. Elmer Stobbe found both workplace (sponsor) and a host for me, what a real blessing for me.



Moliko



Keke



Thabang

Visa!!! Visa!!!!

Let me introduce a belief in my community and hence my family; once something great has happened, one has to thank the ancestors through slaughtering of animals and brewing traditional beer as a sign of gratitude. I didn't do it. Keke and I had trouble with Canadian visa. So the pressure came from my community and family that it's because I didn't make sacrifice for ancestors. But I knew that Jeremiah 29:11 says the Lord has got plan for us, plans not to hurt us but to prosper us. Scripture says no man shall close the door the God has opened. So I was encouraged by this and knew that if it was God's plan, it shall come to pass. Praise God, finally we got our visas! Our term was over at Growing Nations Trust, and we were graduated and ready begin new adventure, experience new life away from home!!

Transition (Liminality)

The journey, they say, is not yet begun until you board in the plane. We boarded the plane to Toronto for a week orientation where we met our fellow IVEPer friends and went to our different assignments. We were welcomed by a nice lady, Sophie Tiessen-Eigbike by name, who was our coordinator who took us to our respective hosts. This is where transition started; the period when security was taken away which I would refer to as liminality.

I left behind the old structure of identity and security, had new encounter with God and sharpened the sense of longing of looking forward to the alternative of promised destination. This had to deal with the need to let go, leave behind, and or even forcibly expel from old ascendant forms of self-definition and identity so that maturity and self growth can be achieved.

Life in Canada

I was staying at Short Road with the Veer family. It was so wonderful to have found such a family. I arrived in Canada with extremely positive attitude, but very weak in the areas of confidence, work ethic, and initiative with the combination of cultural differences between time/work/relationship/values and lower self esteem. My friend Elmer Stobbe was away at his son's house in Winnipeg and everybody was a stranger and the world was entirely different. My host tried by all means to make me feel at home and I also made an effort to settle in. Language was hindrance as my grammar was poor. My host mom was very fast and a busy talker: at times, I was not understood and also did not understand them. My supervisor Murray Siemens was very busy during my arrival and we barely saw each other. Frustration came upon. "Elmer, where are you?" I asked. I needed somebody whom I thought I knew who could advise and insinuate me into this culture.



I have always had fears initially of racism. My father who was an ex-mine worker perpetuated that fear. My dad worked in the South Africa mines during the harsh time of apartheid and racism. He had experienced difficult time where white and black people could not share everything. Before I left, he said to me, "Son, I am very happy that you are going to fly and experience a world that none of our family or our ancestor had, but the great fear is that of racism. But you are a man!" These were my dad's word and he could not resist tear rolling down his cheek.

Sophie Tiessen-Eigbike, our IVEP coordinator, was always there at my side. She would always try to connect us with other IVEPers because we were also strangers to one another even though we spoke the same language. It was so easy to connect with each other because we were always in planned activities together, had devotions together, we were brothers and sisters. My work placement family was very busy too because it was very important time in their business and they did not want to settle for less. I become connected with my IVEP friend to a point where we met every evening after supper. I had little time with host family and even at work I was always looking forward for 4:30 p.m. (time-out) so that I could meet my friends, and paint the town red.



I couldn't function well at my work place. I wasn't meeting the expectations at all; I couldn't fit in all day-by-day job description. I was frustrated and felt worthless. *God, please come to my rescue.* I needed to come home but I didn't know how to tell my coordinator. I thought that would be a disappointment to me, my family, my community, and my country.

Sophie acted as intermediary between me, my hosts, and work placement family. I will never forget her; she is also one of the people close to my heart. This remind me of the statement by Parker J. Palmer that says

community does not necessarily mean living face to face with others; rather it means never losing the awareness that we are connected to each other. It is not about the presence of other people – it's about being fully open to the reality of relationship, whether or not we are alone.

After 3 weeks, my friend and mentor Elmer Stobbe came from his son's house in Winnipeg to Abbotsford. I am sure he was very eager to meet me and to catch up with one another and find out how life had been treating me in Canada. But I felt like I am now ready to live in Canada and I no longer needed him for encouragement, I have got friends to spend time with. I would only see him because I have known him before in my country. That was the mentality I had. Canada was becoming my native land now and the whole week we had activities planned with my fellow IVEPers: soccer, cinema, swimming, eating out sometimes, trips to Vancouver, and every fun activity one can think of. With the \$100 we got per month, we were able to sponsor these activities.

What matters!

What really matters in life is what one loves! Therefore one has to figure out what he/she loves and what God gave a heart for, and do it for His glory! I had a meeting with Elmer Stobbe, after I had been in Canada six weeks, and I told him how Canada has treated me and how we were always having fun! We spent hours together and he was very happy. But one thing he told me that really changed my life from that day on is to look back where I came from. He had been in my country and knew exactly the situation I came from. He said to me, "You have to think about each dollar you spend and how much it is worth in your country."

Elmer wasn't against me having fun in Canada but what he suggested is that I was in Canada to learn and bring back home something that would be important to me and my community. This means to balance the time for work and pleasure. This is what also my host mom Lois told me to take time to rest for tomorrow. I was more fun-oriented than future-oriented and this was a shock at the beginning when Elmer told me because I didn't realize I was spending more of my precious time having fun other than building my career. This meeting with my friend Elmer was a wake call and that night I took a self-inventory and what I really needed in life after IVEP.

But in spite of all these weaknesses, I was appreciated and loved for who I am. It was like Henri Nouwen wrote: "One of the most rewarding aspects of living in a strange land is the experience of being loved not for what we can do, but for who we are. When we become aware that our stuttering, failing, vulnerable selves are loved even when we hardly progress, we can let go of our compulsion to prove ourselves and be free to live with others in fellowship."

Time flies

I almost concluded that two days in Canada is equal to one day in Africa. Time flies in Canada! I settled in after a couple of months more especially after my self-inventory. I would still get together with my friends for soccer and other activities as long as it didn't collide with my work. I developed a "duty first and pleasure after" tendency. The fact that I was away from my comfort zone and through Elmer's support, I realized the great potential in me. At the same time I was able to realize my shortcomings. I started to build up confidence and stopped to accept status quo. Having been able to share my life story and faith with others changed me a lot.

My work became very important to me and I started to see it in new perspectives. Instead of only going to work daily, I saw an opportunity to learn a lot out of it. I had interest and eagerness to learn and gain new knowledge and understanding, learned new skills, adapted, and was ready to apply them back home. My work became fun and enjoyable. I took pride in what I have accomplished. I learned the importance of getting work done on time even if it requires extra effort. I acquired good time management skills and the quality of my work was high, even though one cannot perform beyond his or her capacity limits. But I tried harder to push the boundaries and

limits. Communication became important to me and I was always willing to talk about my problems and assume responsibility.

Joys and challenges been working with Willow View Farms

In a nutshell, I would say Willow View Farms was my other family not a workplace as such. Having the great time was very fantastic.



My work was extremely fulfilling and gave me rich experience. It has been a really enjoyable year and also challenging both personally and professionally. One of the challenges was lack of communication skills. But I first took initiative to understand what would be important and had a clear vision of what I want so I created a map. I balanced personal and professional lifestyle. My work helped me to maintain my professional identity. So it was fulfilling in such that almost everything that I was doing was in alignment with what I have learned in school. It was more practical and actionable though the biggest challenge was weather and climatic conditions.

It was hard to try to explain myself time and again over the conversation and not be sure whether the message was clear. Again time-frame was another issue. I was not used to this kind of time- or process-oriented environment.

But the enjoyable part was that all these challenges molded me into what I am today. My vocation was eye opening, not only in my career, even socially. My supervisor was so amazing in that he would always delegate; then I took this opportunity to try and fail, take risks where necessary. This actually gave me insights, diversity, and creativity. This whole year serving at Willow View Farms through MCC brought up eyes, ears, and heart open model. It brought the reflection of my country and I saw it in different perspective, I saw the need and the solution. The most interesting thing is

that I am now practicing what I have learned, merging local solution with international, hence come out with a hybrid solution.

Above all, I learned to be at peace with myself and to always swallow my pride, humble myself, and treat all the people with courtesy despite their social status and calibre. The proficiency that I acquired in my career is what solidified me to establish this farm enterprise and helped me to exercise my leadership skills. It broadened my horizons. I am now what Elmer Stobbe always called a "hub" in my community.

It was so exciting to see my relationship with my supervisor and his family flourishing and solidifying within the scope of "business and farming practices as well as building a solid relationship with the entire family." Man! I was part of the family and exercised my freedom. Even to this day, that bond won't go away; we are connected together by an umbilical cord.

I met more often with Elmer Stobbe. Visiting him was out love not because of compulsion, but I felt like it was a must! It's funny that I would sometimes pop in his house without even telling him "I will visit." I can say this is our culture or habit (we do this at home) and so was through my veins because calling him was free and phones were always available. Well, the weak character I demonstrated when I first came was now history. I stepped up to the plate in every area to grow to fuller potential. I came home a different person and that level is still rising in a healthy balance.

Life with my mentor (Elmer Stobbe)

Living in another country for the first time is very difficult at the beginning. But somebody has done it, so why not me/you? It's indeed a profound step toward maturity, confidence, and interaction with the outside world.

One of the important things is to look for someone who is knowledgeable and can mentor and guide through this wonderful adventure. It has worked for me and I would encourage everybody to do the same. The result has no regrets and the intimacy is for lifetime! Elmer was my mentor. I built trust and shared intimacy with him. I felt safe with him and he was open to me. He introduced me to his culture and let me exercise and grow on my own. He was/is really on my side and now our relationship is stronger.



He showed me that life is all about love no matter the colour of the skin. He really wanted to learn about me and life in Africa and so I wanted to learn his life. He is down-to-earth and never let stereotypes control him. I shared with him honestly everything like I was dying and he did the same, always encouraging and motivating. We built a culture bridge and came to each other.

I could write all so many novels about my relationship with Elmer Stobbe, but this one is about the success I have acquired in Canada and life afterwards. So much of the success I had is because of Elmer.

Thanks a million times! I am what I am today because of you, Elmer. I am now having great impact in Basotho's lives. My presence is being felt within my community.

God and Faith

That year, I encountered and enjoyed more intimacy with God than ever before. Depending on God on a daily basis deepened my faith, and the challenges that I faced back home made me to grow spiritually. It was during this time that my father was really sick and I had no money to take of him. Life was difficult for the family and I could feel their pain while in Canada. God was my everything and I depended on him. God neither abandoned me nor forsook me. He showed me his existence and love. Above all, the whole IVEP year was God's plan and really my relationship with God was enhanced in a profound way. Relying on him on a daily basis let God use me to accomplish his mission. His mission for me is to serve others whole-heartedly and so He gives me strength every day to fulfill it. He gives me hope and endurance.

Bible, prayer, worship, self-help books, intercession, care group, and sharing testimonies with other believers were all a help to me.

Getting home

Re-union with the family and friends was a most exciting moment. We shared news and wonders that God has done for me, as well as their testimonies of how God has been with them. So great! Everybody was very happy to talk to me, others were envious, while others kept distance. But the place I used to call home was strange for me. Re-adjusting wasn't an easy task. I was no longer in the same boat with my friends and people; our world views were not the same now. It was a barrier, and set space between us, but I always maintained the good relationship.

My dad was very sick and I was taking care of him with the little that I have saved from Canada until he died. God has got plans for us, plans not to hurt us but to prosper us. At least, he had left a precious gift for me, land. I started to farm from then until the present. I am now the center of attention and people really like to learn from me. I hold some informal training within the community on agriculture, farming, and their economical aspects.

Below are some pictures of my farm and activities!!!!



Cabbage field



Atlantic Giant pumpkin



Maize (corn) field



Cabbage selling in town



Involving the youth in farming



Happy farmer with friends

Challenges

I am very challenged by many factors in this industry though. That's why I have decided to quit for a little bit, take a break and then come back. When I say goodbye, it's not forever! I will come back very soon because farming is my calling. I have already distributed my resume to some potential employers, and I am looking forward for their reply.

I started this farm enterprise at a small scale with no assets as well. The profit that I make out of my produce does not sustain the farm because of several reasons:

- I am a breadwinner for my family of five and I sponsor every basic need of the family (food, city water and electricity, health and clothes, etc.).
- School fees (which are very expensive here) for my two siblings who are in high school are on me.
- It's very hard for banks to grant us, small scale farmers, a major loan to really start up a big enterprise and expand.
- Transportation is another big issue. I have to hire a vehicle to transport my produce to the market.
- People from South Africa sell the same products with very low prices which destroys my business.

—Thabang Mpokathe, IVEP participant 2011/2012