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Take a Seat: What God Might be Telling Us: *A Testimony* by David Niyonzima

I was traveling from Kenya to Ethiopia as part of a series of face to face (F2F) meetings with our Doctor of Ministry Global Missional Leadership cohort this past October. At the airport in Nairobi, prior to travel, I had a small incident concerning my entry visa to Ethiopia; I was supposed to have a visa for Ethiopia prior to travel. This was quickly resolved by an Ethiopian airline agent handing me a form that waived my authorization to board and take a seat.

The two and a half hour night flight to Addis Abeba Bole International Airport was uneventful. With the interesting chats with my fellow cohort members reflecting on our Nairobi F2F presentations, visits and lectures, I was not ready to ignore them and sleep as I usually do on smooth night flights. Also our lead mentor Dr. Jason Clark, was not feeling well and as a person living in the region where the F2F sessions took place, there was that somewhat nagging sentiment that my environment had not treated him hospitably in a way he would want to come back.

I disembarked the plane with mixed feelings. Feelings of physical fatigue from not having slept since the previous day, worries about our professor Clark who was already being pushed in a wheel chair and a concern about what the signed waiver form meant for me upon arrival. The inside of the airport was cold regardless of my three layers of warm clothing and a blanket-like scarf wrapped around my neck.

At the visa section, I queued up like everybody else. When my turn came to hand over the travel documents, the visa agent took my passport. I watched with a psychologist's eye, trying to analyse his face as he read and flipped through it endlessly. He looked at me and said: "Where is the visa?" I said: "I am getting it here as everybody else in my group." He replied: "Do you have a letter of invitation?" I answered: "No, Sir, because I am a student and I am here with my fellow students and professors from George Fox University, USA." I thought that by mentioning the US, I would gain his favor because all of the US citizens ahead of me had received the entry visa. The official was not listening as I talked but kept on flipping my passport as if there was a hidden page that he wanted to see. He looked at me again and said: "Take a seat."



Addis Abeba Bole International Airport.

Visitors to Addis continued to arrive as multiple airplanes landed and the visa section queue seemed to never end, as if the number of landings were unusually high that day. I thought that the one who told me to “take a seat” had forgotten me. After about 30 minutes, together with Dr. Loren Kerns who had come to sit with me and support me, we stood up to talk to the official with more details about our reason for entry. He looked at us and said: “Take a seat.” We sat but this time we seemed to have put pressure on him to attend to our issue. He finally got up with my passport and said he wanted to explain the matter to his supervisor. Loren and I followed him to the other side of the visa section where he looked for his superior who was nowhere in sight.

He finally found a lady in uniform who appeared as if she supervised the process of people lining up to get entry stamps in their passports. He handed my passport to her with some explanations in Amharic, the official Ethiopian language, and without knowing what he told her, we supported him with more explanations about our travel. She turned to us and said: “Take a seat.” We sat and watched her handing my documents to another man in uniform who seemed sympathetic but apparently not in authority because we saw him consult with another man in the same language. This other man did not pay attention to my cause but simply continued doing what he was doing, which appeared to be keeping an eye to any who would try to enter with no permission. I saw him sign more documents, authorizing people to proceed to the visa counters and get entry stamps.

Meanwhile, Loren and I had started to make several calls to the GFU contacts in Addis for help. We stood up as the person holding my passport spoke to the contact that Loren succeeded to reach with his mobile phone, but it looked like there was nothing he could do; instead, he told us: “Take a seat.” We took our seats and Loren and I took turns to go to the restroom. Before he left, he took a picture of me on the hard seat I had taken and posted it on Flickr. As we sat and wondered what to do, to our great surprise and joy, Dr. Steve Delamater appeared. Steve did all he could to negotiate and plead on my behalf with the official who held my passport. Finally, the man who seemed to be superior to him came to discourage both Steve and Loren from helping me and, with what looked like an unkind and disrespectful manner, other officials literally ordered them to leave me. The first official returned to me and told me to take a seat.

Alone on my seat, I felt frustrated, angry, oppressed and unwanted. I tried in vain to make sense of what was happening until it dawned on me that I was completely denied entry into Ethiopia and that the intention of the officials was to return me to Burundi with the next possible flight. I knew there was a flight to Bujumbura that day, and since I did not want to be escorted as a criminal being deported, I went to the transfer desk to ask if they could put me on it. The lady responsible for the transfer, told me to take a seat as she calmly ate a banana. Realizing that she was not in a hurry, I asked if I could have my boarding pass but she told me that there was nothing she would do, seeing that I had booked my return ticket on KQ Kenya Airways. Asked about the luggage, she said I could not get to it without a visa. I asked another official if I could access my luggage and he said: “take a seat.” I sat and worked on my laptop for about an hour and he never said another word to me.

It was hard to wait for nothing. I decided to stand up and push for a return arrangement. At the transfer desk window, another lady working for KQ, annoyed by my presence, asked if she could help. I said that I needed a boarding pass for my KQ flight back to Nairobi. To my great surprise, she also told me to



Photo courtesy of Loren Kerns & David Niyonzima.

take a seat. She worked on the computer until I stood up to ask if she had any update on my status. She did not seem to care that much about me or my situation, but said she had booked me through to Bujumbura, Burundi. I asked for the luggage, passport and ticket for Nairobi to Bujumbura. To this, she said that I would get them at the disembarkation at the Bujumbura International Airport, but that I should take a seat again. As I sat, this time, I felt like a prisoner: I had no identification papers and no compassion from those I have been dealing with from dawn until now. It made me cry.

I was emotionally broken but spiritually alert, trying to discern what God was teaching me in that situation. I was curious what this incident was all about. I had traveled extensively in many countries in the world but this time, it looked as if it would be the first time that I would be kept out of my destination country! I wondered where God was in this whole story and what story it was. After wiping my tears, the same travel agent walked near my seat and I asked what I should do. She said: "Go upstairs and you will get the boarding pass there." I went upstairs and took a seat near the gate that was designated for a flight to Nairobi.

Taking a seat and waiting had become a habit. As other passengers started to gather and proceed to the screening machine, I followed them. At the check in desk, the agent asked for my photo identification and boarding pass and I said I was told I would find them here. Guess what she told me? "Take a seat." I took a seat easily and watched everyone pass by me. I had no problem waiting; it was as if I had already passed my test. Finally a lady who looked like a supervisor of the flight agents came with my passport, boarding pass and ticket, and handed them to me. Soon afterward I had taken my seat on the KQ bound for Nairobi. At the transfer desk in Nairobi, the transfer desk agent did not need to tell me to "take a seat," for I took one immediately and he put me on the Bujumbura KQ flight at 00:35 the following day.

Disembarking at the Bujumbura International Airport, I was told by the immigration agent stamping my passport that all Burundi passports issued before September 2, 2011 were to be renewed. That meant that my passport was no longer good, even if it had a valid US visa! I was scheduled to travel to the USA for another important three-week mission with the THARS (Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Services) partners that I could not miss. The trip had already been planned, arranged and paid for. If I had been in Ethiopia, only 5 days would have remained prior to my trip to the US, and this would not have been sufficient to apply for the new passport and apply for a new US visa.

Maybe God was telling me to "take a seat" as he worked on the necessary arrangements to get me back to Burundi in time to get my travel documents *and* to have enough time at my office to put things in order as the Executive Director of THARS before I travelled again. I found this adventure in Addis Abeba to bear God's hand. He was indeed part of my story even though I did not realize it until I got where I needed to be at the right time.

As we goes through different uncertainties, life challenges and work related situations, I am wondering if God might be telling some of us to "take a seat" as He makes necessary arrangements and creates conditions favorable to have clarity of where He wants us to be and what He wants us to have for His glory.



David Niyonzima is the Executive Director of [Trauma Healing And Reconciliation Services \(THARS\) of Burundi](#) and the pastor of Kamenge Friends Church in Bujumbura, Burundi. He coordinates psychosocial activities and interventions in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, is a part-time instructor at Hope Africa University in Bujumbura and co-authored the book *Unlocking Horns: Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Burundi* with Lon Fendall. David is a 2009 Good News Associates grant recipient. He graduated from George Fox University with a Master's in Counseling in 2002.

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