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Everything happens for a reason. It was no coincidence that while leading a Yoga and service retreat to Peru over Christmas and New Year's a year ago that the bus that was supposed to take my group of 25 students to Machu Picchu was several hours late to arrive. The potentially frustrating delay was in fact an intervention of fortune that opened the door to a conversation that would change my life - and lead me to help change the lives of others.

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Also waiting for the bus to Machu Picchu that day was Dr. Frank Andolino, a retreat participant and founder of Kageno Worldwide. During that long and fascinating wait, Frank told me about his work with Kageno, whose mission is to transform communities suffering from inhumane poverty into places of opportunity and hope. In that moment, Frank invited me to travel with him to Rwanda, to teach yoga in an extremely remote village where the non-profit foundation has been working for many years. Having spent a few years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Peru and two additional years volunteering in East and West Africa, my longing for wild adventures is always alive. Without batting an eye, I immediately signed on to take an expedition to Banda Village, Rwanda.



Although I had spent over 15 years participating in and leading service learning projects throughout the world, nothing could have prepared me for the dichotomous adventure that would soon unfold before me. In Banda Village, as in so many other Rwandan communities, I would quickly learn that the boundless beauty and radiance of the people is heavily shadowed by HIV/AIDS, extreme poverty, lack of education, a dearth of safe water, rapidly deteriorating ecosystems, and last but certainly not least, ethnic genocide. But the real Africa is the story of the light of its people, their zest for life and sense of humor, their individual struggles for a better life despite all of the odds against them, and at its truest essence, Kageno -- "a place of hope."

After only one month of preparation and anticipation, on a freezing February day in New York, the jet engines revved, the plane gained speed, and we lifted off the ground ready to embark on a journey that was not even imagined a month prior. A warm enthusiasm and wonderment surrounded my entire being as I felt held and supported by the revelatory power of Consciousness that lead me to this impromptu trip, which in reality I knew I had been preparing diligently for my whole life. Lifting out of New York, I was ready to step into the next turn of my evolutionary dance of existence. The fire inside of me for years has been fueled by my dedication to service, which is the highest yoga, and in those moments leaving New York, that flame was burning brighter than ever!

Immediately upon landing in the Rwandan capital of Kigali, I visited the Genocide Museum to learn more about the 1994 atrocity in which 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus were brutally slaughtered. I prayed for hours at the nearby mass graves of genocide victims, and that night exhausted and deeply moved, profound nightmares kept me awake until dawn. It is still hard to fathom that every family in Rwanda has been scathed by the genocide, and the following morning as the sun lifted over Kigali, every cell of my being could feel the deep despondency in the air. I was truly confused, conflicted, and perplexed about what I could possibly offer, and had no idea what I was going to do.

During my morning meditation, however, my perspective shifted. I realized that the story of Rwanda is an amazing epic of hope and healing, a chronicle that demonstrates the radical self-transformation of a shattered and shell-shocked country into a vibrant, safe, prosperous and energetic nation. The impressive courage and dignity of the genocide survivors as they diligently worked to rebuild their lives over the last



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two decades is proof of the extraordinary strength, beauty, bravery, energy and determination of Rwanda and its 8.5 million people.

I was flooded with gratitude to be in one of the most gorgeous countries in the world. My emotions shifted from sadness and confusion to softness and spaciousness. Having been in Rwanda for only 24 hours, I was imprinted with a fresh perspective and an expanded worldview. I had deeper clarity about my highest dharma: to serve this planet unconditionally with dedication, love and light. I was ready to head out to the bush and start learning from the villagers in Banda, the small gem on the periphery of Nyungwe Forest National Park.

It may have seemed strange to offer yoga to a village that was suffering so many complex and deeply rooted issues -- the epidemic of HIV/AIDS, astonishing poverty, no health system, and worse. But I had hoped that the power of the practice could offer the people a therapeutic tool toward overcoming the debilitating and disempowering effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, and in turn empower them. Much to my delight, my intuition turned out to be correct.

After spending a few days getting acquainted, it finally came time for the first yoga class. Everyone gathered on the village's makeshift soccer field, surrounded by the jungle and nearby, a roaming cow or two. I paused, shut my eyes, went to the dwelling place of the heart, and without fear, trusted infinitely that whatever I was going to attempt to present would be openly received.

I did not speak Kinyarwanda, but I was able to teach energetically with my eyes and heart -- with every one of my senses and all of my emotions, for that matter. Distilling the meaning of yoga to something translatable, comprehensible and meaningful came more easefully than I imagined. (Having a translator really helped!) I taught the villagers that we do yoga for the fun of it, to get and stay healthy and to develop community. Everyone who participated responded with joy and delight. We moved together, breathed together, and laughed together, supported and held by the practice of yoga, sharing for the pure enjoyment of it. People of all ages, men, women, and children, and often women with children artistically strapped to their backs, were all supporting each other and trying to do their best. As always, when I teach the art and science of yoga, I was as much a student as they were. Each participant taught me about the power and resiliency of hope and community. I was honored to present a practice I so deeply love as a small token of appreciation for what each smile and embrace offered me.








Each second of the journey filled me with gratitude for the teachers who have inspired me to manifest my heart's truest delight and I will always be grateful for having the people of Banda village as my teachers as well. Like all brilliant educators, they showed me, simply through their actions and lives, some of the most important lessons I have ever learned, including what it means to personify true hope and appreciation. The community and the landscape made it clear that in a nation torn by genocide and suffering, beauty still abounds. Every smile reminded me to always see the underlying unity and celebrate the diversity, because one common spirit pulses through us all. The villager's voices, actions, and reality reminded me that life is short and we need to live with breathtaking intensity. Also, I was reminded that Africa and her people will always be awesome, complicated, and inexplicable, so why should we be different.

The community's enthusiasm for practicing yoga, along with the infectious expressions and hugs I received from everyone left me longing for more adventure, further creative expression, and deeper connection with the people of Banda. So, once again, I returned five months later, for my third trip to Africa this year. This time around, I arrived with a group of my yoga students from New York City, ready to embark on a retreat I appropriately called "Radical Expansion Yoga and Service Experience in Rwanda!"




We were greeted by the villagers of Banda with open arms and hearts! For a week, our group left behind


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our comfortable NYC living to sleep in accommodations with no electricity, running water, or bathroom. Although we didn't have the "things" that normally make us feel comfortable at home, we had community, time, conversation, reflection, friendship, cultural exchange, and perspective. We worked alongside everyone in the fields to prepare the land for planting organic gardens that would help sustain the orphan-feeding program. We practiced yoga alongside the community in classes that drew over two hundred people by the end of the week. We laughed, cried, made crafts, played, danced, and celebrated, while sharing in a cultural exchange that is valuable and rare.



The retreat went well, and the people of Banda taught us more than we would have ever imagined. Together we accepted the invitation of yoga, the invitation to step into the light of our hearts, and to share that beauty lovingly and playfully with the world!



Each voyage leaves me deeply inspired to infuse yoga and service into every aspect of my life, as the journey of love always continues! I am committed to offering more yoga and service opportunities to come in the future, and if this type of experience inspires you, please come join me. The next upcoming journey will be a Make the Holidays Sacred Yoga and Service Retreat to Peru for the New Year 2011-2012!



Also, I strongly urge you to look close to your own home to see how you can make a difference right there. Who in your community, your city -- even among your own family - could use compassion and support -- could use some of the strength and heart you can offer? Where is there suffering you would like to see eased? What are you going to do when you get off your mat and into the world today, tomorrow, and everyday?



Need some ideas? Check out www.jordanmallah.com and kageno.org.

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