

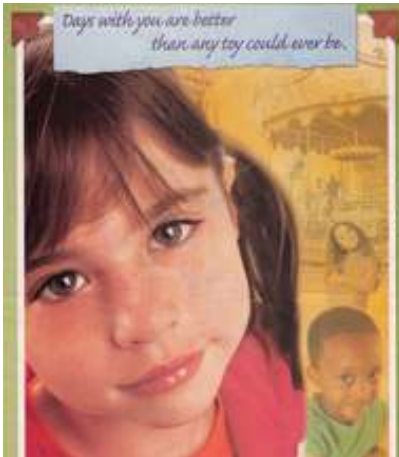
Back Home, 2/22/06

The Senegalese People Remind Us That Life Can Be Real

by Debby Kern

(U.S.=Blue, Senegal=Green)

I've been meaning to write a journal extolling all the sensible and joyful aspects of the Senegalese culture, but I just wasn't sure how to explain it all. I wanted to talk about the pureness and simplicity of the life we observed there, but how do I explain the importance of reality in your life, the knowledge of where you belong and the confidence that your neighbors stand beside you always? How do I describe my culture shock on our return - the excesses of our malls, the foolishness of our media, the feelings of alienation that is causing depression among our youth?



Then, this morning I was waiting in the chiropractor's office and I picked up a copy of a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine (Feb. 2006) and my whole journal was just handed to me. The first page I turned to was an ad for Disney world showing the beautiful face of a young girl who was saying, "Days with you are better than any toy could ever be." That's it! As I see it, the folks in Senegal direct the bulk of their energy towards paying attention to each other. What a

concept! They don't have a wealth of things, but they are ever so rich in personal support and attention. As we walked through any village and glanced at what folks were doing, we saw them working, playing, laughing, arguing, drumming, and dancing together. No one was sitting by themselves staring at an electronic game (although cell phones are becoming more common).

The next page I turned to in the magazine was about a retired couple who built a bench in their back yard, "planted in the meadow, it invites communion with nature and each other." Voila! They are trying to bring back what the folks in Senegal do all the time - taking time for each other and doing it in a natural atmosphere. At least in the villages, people are always close to the earth



- running on the sand on the beach, sitting on the natural rocks, resting in the shade of a tree, chatting with neighbor women as they cook dinner together outside.

The next article I saw was all about exercise - going to the gym to keep those bones healthy. Well, guess what? The folks in Senegal have exceptionally strong, healthy bodies, and incredibly graceful posture. How do they do that? By carrying bowls of water on their heads down to the beach to do the laundry, stacking cement blocks to build another room onto the school, drumming or dancing with unbelievably high energy. Exercise IS life, not something to schedule.



Here comes the next page - an article titled "Healthy Family." To quote, "...at school your teen probably picks at a chocolate muffin, guzzles a diet cola, and calls it lunch." The article goes on to advise parents to concentrate on providing a healthy breakfast to "offset the nutritional deficiencies of those school lunches." Do what?! When we visited the school in Yene, several women from town came around at lunchtime with bowls of food for the children. You

guessed right - there were only healthy food in those bowls - oranges, meat, fish, carrots, peanuts, and bananas. And not one kid complained that there weren't any Little Debbie's or ice cream sandwiches or frosties being offered. They were just grateful that they had a few coins in their pockets to pay for some food to fill their tummies.

Oh, here's my favorite. I find an insert in the magazine called "Smart Moves: Simple Ideas for Living Well" brought to you by, ironically, PepsiCo! One mother is quoted as saying, "I teach my kids that fruits and vegetables aren't only good for you, but fun, too. To do this, I give foods nicknames. Cannellini beans are 'cowboy beans,' and orange juice is 'astronaut juice.' I find that fun-sounding names make the kids want to eat the foods." How far from reality and nature can you get? How about if we just remove all those bags of chips and cookies and candy from our homes and school cafeterias! Then if you're hungry, you'll eat real food!

Then there's the article called, "For the Nature Lover" which details 'natural-like parfums' that mimic orange blossom, sandalwood, clove, and musk. It takes me back to our visit to the Senegalese market where we were surrounded by the scents of REAL fruits, spices, and flowers. It reminds me of our kind friend who brought us a homemade salve to clear up our reactions to insect bites. It brings to mind the various flavors of "toothbrushes" available at the market - we could pick the tree branch that fit our taste.

Here's the last article I saw entitled "Your Last Nerve." It says, "You're using the counting-to-ten trick...to help calm you down and take the tension out of your parent-child conflict. But before you get to ten, remember this: 'Misbehavior usually happens when a child feels disconnected from a parent, and the fix is to reconnect.'" How true! I never heard a baby cry the whole time we were in Senegal. Babies are literally "connected," carried on the backs of moms or older siblings throughout the day. Older children work beside their moms and dads doing daily chores or out on the fishing boat or running errands at the market. There's no need to create artificial connections in this side-by-side environment.



I still have a few minutes, so I pick up a *Seventeen* magazine and browse through it. There's not a page in there that DOESN'T show an ad or an article telling girls how they can make themselves skinnier, make their faces more sculpted, fix their bodies through exercise or procedures or even operations, be more popular by choosing skimpier, skin-showing, revealing clothing, or learning the 'right' thing to say or do to get a boyfriend! What ever happened to

knowing your true self? I think my favorite aspect of Senegalese culture was the clothing. Traditional clothing for men and women is loose and flowing. Why do I love this so



much? First of all, it's comfortable! No chafing and rubbing of tight belts or straps. Second, it doesn't matter if you're wide or skinny or how curvy you are or are not. Third, people are free to go about life without even thinking about their body image. No one spends any energy making sure their tummy isn't sticking out or noticing if anyone else's is. It's hard to imagine, but true. I don't know for sure, but I bet there's no anorexia there.

Whoops - I just saw a "PNC Growing Up Great" commercial on TV advising me to let my child pick up an object (shows a colander) and see what else she could use it for (a hat). Again, this would be just a part of daily life in Senegal. Hardly anything is ever thrown away. Instead, the people find a way to re-use. For example, an old plastic bag, fringed, makes a great dance costume, bottle caps make great jingles on a musical instrument, or a worn out dress serves to wrap the rings on a drum.

As I write this, I hear a preview for a morning show where they promise to show us how to balance our busy, busy lives of work and family. Since I've been home, I've been fighting getting back into having every minute of my day scheduled with some important activity. In Senegal, time was open. Things happened when it was time to happen. This left time for surprise, creativity, and adventure in our lives. Frequently we found that the unplanned moments of our days were our most valuable learning, growing, relaxing, creative play, composing, and bonding times. Our kids here in the US - our adults here - hardly ever experience that glorious freedom! Flowing from that concept, people had time to notice what their neighbor needed and to help them with it - like constant "Random Acts of Kindness." Often it was absolutely uncanny how someone seemed to read your mind, determine what you were hoping for, and deliver it up.

So, maybe the kids in Senegal don't all have brand name sneakers, a cell phone of their own, or even hot water for their bath, but they do know they are loved, that they belong, that their family and friends are close and ready to listen and help them, that nature is close, that they are perfect just the way they are, that life is real, and that they have time to think about how they want to live it. That's as rich as you can get!