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From Simms to
Zanzibar—
What the Heck
Does That Mean?

Leave the comfort of the beaten path and
blaze a trail into the wilderness.
You just might discover something extraordinary.
That something may be You.

—lynn

When people read a book, they expect to find the title explained or at least restated within its pages.

You are probably clear how Simms came into the picture, but you are probably wondering about Zanzibar. In addition, you'd probably like to know what relationship the book's title has to success, Simms ... and me!

Actually, Simms and Zanzibar are both geographic locations, half a world apart.

Simms—Located within the Republic of Texas

Simms is a small town in the far northeast corner of the Republic of Texas. (Sorry, I'm a loyal Texan.)

Zanzibar is an island off the eastern coast of Africa, part of the Republic of Tanzania. They have absolutely nothing in common other than the fact that they both have played a considerable role in my life.

Although I've talked about Simms already, allow me to continue to paint a picture of the place where I went to high school.

Imagine yourself driving the back roads of Bowie County Texas in 1971. As you approach the intersection of Highway 67 and Highway 98, you see a blinking

traffic signal, a combination general store and post office, and the First Baptist Church of Simms. Fuel at the general store is 30 cents a gallon. The road sign indicates that you have entered the unincorporated community of Simms—population 230.

Along the highways, you see a handful of houses, from turn-of-the-century frame farmhouses with steep pitched roofs, to the more recent and modest, brick homes. They sit far from the roads and are tucked in amongst scores of pine, oak, magnolia, pecan and sweet gum trees that dominate the scene. Your eyes are then drawn to the large, multicolored stone building that is James Bowie School, built in 1936, and named after the hero of the Alamo.

According to the Handbook of Texas Online, the community was named for G.W. Simms, who played a major role in securing a post office for the area in 1890.



James Bowie High School in 1961, as it also appeared in 1971.



The gym before it burned.

In 1892 Simms had a gristmill, a gin, a store and a population of about 50. By 1914 the population had grown to 150. It slid back to a low of 50 in the '30s and began to grow again in the '40s. In 1982 Simms had a population of 240 and a whopping four businesses. The population through 2000 was still reported at 240—too distant from any large city to benefit from the population explosion of the '80s and '90s.

If you drive through Simms today, you will see that it boasts a modern post office, and general store that burned to the ground in the spring of 2009, but has since been rebuilt.

The town's gasoline prices have risen tenfold since 1971; the trees, which are much larger now, obscure the view of the school.

The First Baptist Church has a different pastor, the solitary traffic light still blinks uninterrupted and the high school still sports the Pirate as its mascot. The population remains at several hundred.

Zanzibar—A Stop-Off Half a World Away

Zanzibar, on the other hand, is a place that is the polar opposite of Simms. The province is made up of numerous small islands off the coast of eastern Africa. The largest island, Ungula, is the one known as “Zanzibar,” and became part of the Republic of Tanzania in 1964.

Zanzibar was founded over ten centuries ago by Arabs who used its natural harbor as a hub for the slave, ivory, clove and spice trades.

Today it is a predominately Sunni Moslem society that has a population of over one million. Its claim to pop-culture fame is that it is the birthplace of Freddie Mercury, founder of the rock band “Queen.”

The first four months of my sabbatical were spent trekking in Nepal, Tibet and on Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. After my trek up Mt. Kilimanjaro, I flew to Zanzibar for a much-needed rest and to take time to reflect on my travel experiences ... thus far.

I was traveling with no particular agenda, and I also needed some down-time to decide where to go next.

After trekking up mountains and sleeping in tents, I decided to treat myself in Zanzibar to a hotel room on the beach. Strolling along the beach, absorbing and photographing brilliant sunsets and touring the Old Town of Zanzibar were a pleasant break from my recent physical activities.

Earlier, I mentioned narrowly missing a political uprising. While touring Old Town, I began to notice an unusual amount of graffiti on the ancient walls. Unlike New York City where graffiti is commonplace, this particular collection seemed new and ... incongruous. I asked my guide what it meant, and he said that Zanzibar was on the eve of political elections and the graffiti was the opposing party's way of protesting the incumbent government.

A few days after I departed for Paris, the political riots erupted, killing 35 people, injuring many others and closing down the airport from which I departed.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the United States was experiencing its own version of political rioting called the 2000 Presidential Election.

While trekking in the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal and Tibet, I didn't have many opportunities to follow the United States' presidential election of 2000, but I did, of course, hear about the embarrassing debacle; faulty punch card ballots and missing names

on the voting rolls in Florida which necessitated an historic review and subsequent ruling by the U.S. Supreme court to halt a recount in the state. That process resulted in a victory for George W. Bush.

I was frequently asked, as the token American in most situations, to explain the American presidential election process and the reason for the calamity. My American Government class was too far in the past to remember the specific ins and outs of the Electoral College, but even so, the 2000 election fiasco was not easily explained either.

American democracy ultimately prevailed, and the new American president was declared. I watched the inauguration of President Bush from a beach bar in Zanzibar, enjoying the beautiful sunset over the Indian Ocean. The ignominy of U.S. politics was too far removed to disrupt the peace and serenity I was enjoying in Zanzibar.

Why Zanzibar? What It Meant to Me

When I wasn't touring the Old Town of Zanzibar, photographing sunsets or watching the presidential inauguration, I was digesting my experiences. The Zanzibar beach was a perfect place to take a deep breath and think about the people and places I had encountered.

I expected to be reminiscing about my extraordinary view of Mt. Everest (29,029 feet above sea level), while standing at 18,000 feet ... or the stunning photo I took of the Dalai Lama's winter palace in Lhasa, Tibet ... or the wild African plains of the Serengeti in the shadow of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Instead, I found myself remembering the school children in Nepal asking for pencils as our group walked through their schoolyard. I could not erase from my mind the smiles of the Tibetan children as we washed the thick layer of grime off their faces and dried blood from their infected ears (from being pierced for earrings). Or, the Tanzanian boy who asked me to send him an English book when I got home so he could learn our language. And disturbingly, my mind kept returning to the graffiti on the Old Town walls.

A heavy hand of sadness lay on my shoulders. I saw all the luxuries of life I took for granted flash before me. My grandfather's old house was transformed into a mansion. The outhouse suddenly looked very sanitary. The well water was clean and available. I had more pencils, pens and paper than I would ever need. My school had a library full of books.

My journey had come full circle on that Zanzibar beach. I would forever see, experience and appreciate life in a whole new way.

That was my epiphany. And that is why Zanzibar became part of my book's title.



Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.

—John Milton

English poet, historian and scholar