



Walking With A Purpose

By Saleh Gadi

Aug 26, 2006, 00:57 PST

I often sit in the backyard of my house and see people walking as if they were ordered to walk. Judging from the looks of their frowning faces and strained expressions, you would think they were performing a duty, a compulsory obligation- they never smile, they just walk as if someone is chasing them from behind. Most are stiff and move their limbs in a funny mechanical way you would think they are made of wood or robots of some kind. Speed-walking, Power-walking, and other walks with prefixes. Exercise? I am not into sports at all; sometimes I fake enjoying a sport show to appease my son who is extremely into sports. Still, looking back at my life, many of my memories deal with walking...and I have developed mixed feelings about it: admiration for those who do it for a cause, befuddlement for those who do it when they don't have to.

Walking With A Purpose

In first grade, I found myself in class with much older students and our class monitor was someone who could run like a cheetah. Due to his incredibly fast speed, our monitor, Mohammed Bayed, had earned an appropriate nickname, Betchet Welwal¹. When he competed in the school races, you would think his feet were mounted on springs; he was extremely fast and jumped from one spot to the next while other runners had to deal with the dust he left behind. For years, he was the unchallenged champion runner until he left at a very early age to where students usually went when they felt they were adults.

In second grade, I had my first real experience with marathon walking; it was a day- long rehla, or passagio, as it was called. My teammate for the rehla was Fouzi Saad. Both our mothers had loaded us with food enough to last us for a week, though the trip was only for a day. Early morning, the whole elementary school children lined up and we walked to the Tsebab valley for the day. Tsebab seemed like it was somewhere close to the end of the world. Once there, Fouzi lighted a camel-load of wood- just to make tea. We ate fresh Camossi bakery bread, had fun and munched on a lot of guava and oranges - I don't know if Tsebab still maintains its rich gardens. At the end of the day, we marched back to school singing lazily and dispersed to go to our homes. We were very excited and felt very proud of ourselves: we had walked a whole three kilometers and back in one day.

As I grew older, I joined the boy scouts and we made frequent trips to Daarit and Qatsetai. The Boy Scout experience is probably one of my childhood experiences that I cherish most. I still remember the meaningless stupid songs, 'Ten green bottles standing on the wall... if one green bottle will accidentally fall...', and it goes on and on and on. An Ethiopian Scout master who frequently came to Keren had taught us another meaningless song: Qere-qew-chi, qereqewchi, ereqewchi, I am not sure if that is Amharic. But my favorite Boy Scout song is FiQad amlaK koynu lomis nfelale alena, felalyus aygedfenan keyakhakhebena... Much, much later, I learned it was Tigrignasized Scottish song (officially called "Auld Lang Sang" but everybody knows it as the New Year's Eve song.)



The most exciting experience for the whole scout troops was when we encountered a platoon of well-armed ELF combatants on our way to Debre Sina. We were stopped by the combatants along with tens of cars and hundreds of people. It was my first encounter with real ELF combatants; they seated us in groups and explained the Eritrean cause in great details. Most people left with a positive impression of the freedom fighters, because some had imagined them to be monsters due to the prevailing Ethiopian propaganda (soon to be copied verbatim by Isaias). Later, we drove to the edges of Mount Debre Sina and we climbed up to the rocky hillside to the shrine and relaxed after the long walk - we wondered then how the combatants managed to walk the long distances beyond the horizons- which we hoped someday we would. That was the time I was Sawa-age old only that the PFDJ was not ruling Eritrea.

A few years later, Yosief (Wedi Qtchn) and (I think) Welday Abbe, walked from Asmara to Keren in one day. The whole town was lined along the streets to cheer them as they passed. I don't remember their purpose for walking 91 Kms. but I presume it was for a cause, it could have been carried out to promote sports. Their walk became the talk of the town and they became instant celebrities. They could have been in their late teens or early twenties; but to us children in the early teens, that age seemed too far.

11 Envelopes In 3 Months

1975 is another important milestone in my experience with marching and walking. I was with the ELF then. The late Melake Tekhle had been writing letters all night. Next morning, very early in the morning, he had me summoned to the hut where he was sitting and ordered me to prepare myself. I did- in two minutes. Then he gave me 4 Birr for expenses and handed me 11 letters to deliver to different leaders in the Highlands. I set off from Barka and after days of walking arrived at Liban through Dembe Metari. From there, I chased the news of the recipients, who were scattered (and always moving) from one village to another, all over Hamassien, Seraye and Akele Guzai. It took me almost three months to finish the delivery.

I had to spend three months to deliver 11 envelopes.

Nowadays, in the age of radios, e-mails, and text messaging I look back towards 1975...and I console myself with: it was slow, but there were no alternatives in 1975. And it was purposeful.

Fast forward to 2006, on the other side of the world, witnessing purposeless walkers. Once I crossed paths with a guy who looked very tired and about to collapse from exhaustion. I pitied him and offered to drive him home, he refused! He said he has to walk home even if drops dead doing that. 'Are you Jebha? Are you delivering letters for Melake Tekhle?' I asked. He didn't even hear me. Why would he kill himself like that? Exercise, he was dying to avoid death.

But then there are...



Crazy People

Last year, when I heard of Tekle and Samuel walking 1200 kilometers (use your kilometer/miles converter) from Rome to Brussels, I thought they were crazy. They must be! Why would you walk that distance while you could sit in one of the PFDJ centers—which are by the way affectionately called *bet tsehfet*, literally *The Office*. Why not? Eritrea is “this country”, the dictator is “the man” and his indoctrination center is “the office.” You can sit and get fat by drinking a lot of beer and soda. There is a lot you can do in these centers – you can hear numbers being called and play bingo. You can drink yourself to a stupor. You can hold playing cards close to your face as if you are reading the signature on a postage stamp. You can watch Eri-TV and watch indentured servants carrying rocks. Imagine how beautiful it must be to bury your conscience and laugh in reaction to any bad news. Your heart gets as hard and as cold as a block of ice, your tears dry out and your emotions are switched off and you walk like a zombie- once you bury your conscience, you don’t care what happens to your people. Why walk when you can conveniently deafen your conscience with all the indoctrination of *bet tsehfet*? Why worry about anything at all? Why waste your time walking for miles and worrying about some people who are languishing in jails? What jail? They are in a guest house!

The crazy people from Europe have initiated the Walk for Freedom. Their madness is dangerous and now they have managed to convince tens of Eritreans to run with them. They have brought a contagious disease to the USA. Walk for Freedom 265 MILES? FROM NEW YORK TO DC? Fly all the way from London, Italy and Germany to walk 265 miles? And some Eritreans have really joined them in their craze? Can somebody please show them the way to *Bet Tsehfet*? Can’t they go there and relax and watch Eri-TV and marvel at the number of Big Micro Dams being built? Never mind if you can’t understand what “a big micro dam” means, it is like carrying a big small rock.

If you go there, or even visit for a short lapse of time, you would know that Eritrea is free; the *Halal Meret* is dripping of milk and honey. You would be reminded that in Asmera, you can sit in “the palm tree lined avenue and sip an Italian cappuccino.” If you are lucky, you would see the *tegalalay* president in his humble plastic sandals on his way to ... wherever that is he goes to every night.

And no body guards- until a few years ago that is.

Meanwhile, the “Lion of Nackfa” is marching gloriously from Asmara to Massawa. He is on a mission to identify another suitable location to build a hotel for more Eritrean guests which the marchers are shamefully calling prisons. They are guests of *The Man*, gusts of *Mokria*²—is there a crime against being a host? Can’t you people stop your fabricated stories of jails and prisons in Eritrea! There are no jails but guest houses.

*Walking For A Cause*

My dear readers, help me in giving a round of big applause for our colleagues who are Marching for Freedom. Help me thank Tekle and Samuel for giving us an opportunity to renew our vow to the cause of freedom in Eritrea. Help me thank Dania and her two young sons for their loyal friendship and sacrificing their time and efforts for the cause of our prisoners. Help thank Tsedal for flying from the UK to join the March. Let me thank Solomon Sengal, Yacob Saleh and Hiwet for taking the challenge and for leading the way in this worthy endeavor. Indeed, this world is one; it flourishes or perishes together. I am proud of all the colleagues who are involved in this project- all the silent participants in these project from Europe to Australia. From New York to DC to Dallas and everywhere else. For the rest of my compatriots, and friends of Eritrea in the Dc area, please help us make this March for Freedom a success. We need to bring the cause of our prisoners of conscience to the open. We need to work harder to bring an end to the suffocation of our people. I urge all of you to be part of this worthy cause- if you can't March for Freedom with your feet, find some other way of marching in it. Be Part or Be Apart.

comments: negarit@awate.com

¹ Tigre phrase loosely translated it means 'carried by the wind as an egg shell'. Mohammed Beyed joined the ELF at an early age. I saw him last in the seventies; his hand was almost disabled due to a battle wound.

² One of the nicknames of the PFDJ capo.