

Alpha by the River

"I wish I had a river so long. I would teach my feet to fly" Joni Mitchell. Alpha Woodward once lived in a float home near the mouth of the Fraser River, an industrial, satiated and muddy brown confluence of urban waste and nutrient rich soil. But in 2004 Alpha moved to Bosnia and Herzegovina where another river, the Naretva, entered her life. This tempestuous and willful raging torrent that rushes through the town of Mostar, inspires much of this blog. ...but there is more here than rivers

Sunday, September 25, 2005

'I wish I had a river – so long – I would teach my feet to fly...'

Joni Mitchell



Mostarians often ask what I like about Mostar. I think they desire to know if we foreigners have discovered the enigma of their town - the sweet mystery of this amazing place. I have come to know it better over the past year and still have trouble identifying what holds me here. I do not know this enigma by name. But neither do they.

It is so many things. There is a vibrancy here that I have not found anywhere else. It demands your attention – that you stay awake and the reward is that you 'live' – you feel more alive than perhaps any other time in your life.

I sit on a rock that tantalizes the beautiful, willful Naretva as I write this – realizing that last night- and perhaps again in a few hours – the rock I sit on may be submerged under tons of raging water, heading relentlessly for the Adriatic Sea. But for now it provides a resting place while the lazy river seduces the children and young people to jump into its frigid water to cool off from 40 degree heat. The emerald current takes them easily across to the other bank and they play in & out of the stream like the sleek, skillful otters from the rivers of my home land. Like children everywhere, they show no fear for what they know ...only joy. Maybe I notice these children because they are different. They are not whining, crying or being stubborn. It is though their innocence has been preserved. I hear adults calling out to them – encouraging them to take risks. I see a concerned young man reaching out to help one child up a dangerous bank. Tomorrow the river may not allow such activities, - but for now there is unconditional joy.



My love affair with this place may also be attached to the lack of "protective" barriers. There are no fences to block our access to dangerous river banks, or public areas. Perhaps, a war puts such extreme events into the community that protecting people from hurting themselves, or from vandalizing property is simply absurd. It also leaves us to deal with our own stupidity. Ironically, some value systems have prevailed & survived beyond the brutal civilian war because I have seen little evidence of vandalism. But how can vandalism compete with the leftovers of war – the ultimate vandalism of hulking blown up building carcasses all over the city?

On this hot day – with one foot dangling in the cold Naretva and a cooling breeze ruffling through the cloth of my blouse, I fit in with the scene - people seeking relief from the burning sun. Between writing in my journal, I follow the sounds around me and my gaze falls on Novi stari Most – the beautifully reconstructed Turkish bridge from 1566. Only this time it is built by the European international community from 2002-2004, 10 years after it was destroyed. Just as the young men have done for centuries, there is a jumper waiting to be

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About Me



Alpha By The River

I live ... for now.

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offered money from the cue of curious onlookers before he plunges 70 ft to the river. Across the river to my right there is a sheer cliff of about 50 feet where would-be jumpers are practicing or resting in the shade of an overhang.



I am hungry so I eat some fresh apricots that I bought at the market this morning – there are no pesticides, growth hormones or genetically altered produce in BiH. The fruits are honest – sometimes look puny or misshapen; not the perfect forms and colours I am used to. Maybe this imperfection appeals to me. Or maybe its the experience of being in a place where there is no comfortable veneer.



As I sit feeling the cold bite of the Nareva around my ankles, I can honestly say I feel more myself here than anywhere else...and it may have more to do with the people. It is impossible to describe a group, a culture succinctly and accurately, but the individuals I have met have taught me many things. First is about self sacrifice. Many have no hope for an economically bright future in Mostar, and yet they have put their own future on the shelf to live with and care for parents who have no income – no pension – and no other way of support. It is the aliveness I feel – even when I am alone – that is addictive. It is rare to find individuals who are fully conscious – but many people here are. Perhaps it is the war that instilled mental vigilance – or maybe they are born with it, but you cannot live here without noticing your own connection to consciousness – yours and the BIG consciousness. And in a place where the intimacy of silence is usually avoided, this is a mysterious paradox. Mostar is a Paradox... a beautiful mystery; and living here does not reveal the secret of that mystery. I have learned that I have a lot to learn about myself that I could not (or would not) learn at home. I also learned that: I have a lot to offer here – it is a place that I can be useful; everything I have done in my life is working here. But I know at some point I must move on and provoke myself again.

So my work is rewarding, and the biggest reason for staying here is to see the project survive. There is an amazing amount of creative potential where there has been a war and the Music Therapy clinic at the Pavarotti Music Centre is unique in the world. At the moment it is poised on the brink of enormous potential, or closure...an awesome responsibility. I am more involved with managing the strategic direction of the clinic than in working with the children, but I have 13 clients. In Mostar there are no social systems or programs in place – the clinic is pretty much all there is for children and youth with special needs. I am inspired by what music therapy is doing, am touched by the local directors who 'sing our praises' -- and am convinced we are making a difference here.



Yes, the Nareva helps me to reflect the good fortune that brought me here. I have walked in the magical beauty of ancient kingdoms that were here before the Turks or the Ottomans.

I love the accessibility of unexploited history. In fact, nothing is exploited in Bosnia /Hercegovina, and I feel the innocence of this place defines it more than any flag could. But the average citizen here has not had the privilege of seeing their land as I have. If they did, I think they would understand their soul connection – perhaps – is to their environment. IT is where their true identity springs from – not their ethnic differences.



And the last best thing about being here is ...the wine! Its great – and cheap!! It is not an enigma, but bless it, anyway. And bless the river ... it gives me wings so that I can fly away....

First published Sept. 25, 2004.



Posted by [Alpha By The River](#) at 4:07 PM



3 comments:

Brad said...

Great first post mom!

9:07:00 PM

Chantal said...

Hey, Alpha.

That was so beautiful. Thank you for sharing a small piece of what you are experiencing across the world. It sounds challenging and inspiring and breathtaking all at the same time. See you soon in your homeland!

Love,
Chantal xo

9:59:00 PM

nancy mcmaster said...

That fed my soul, Alpha.

All about meaning and appreciation and the natural goodness of human Beings and the gifts of Nature.

Thanks!

love, Nancy

9:08:00 PM

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