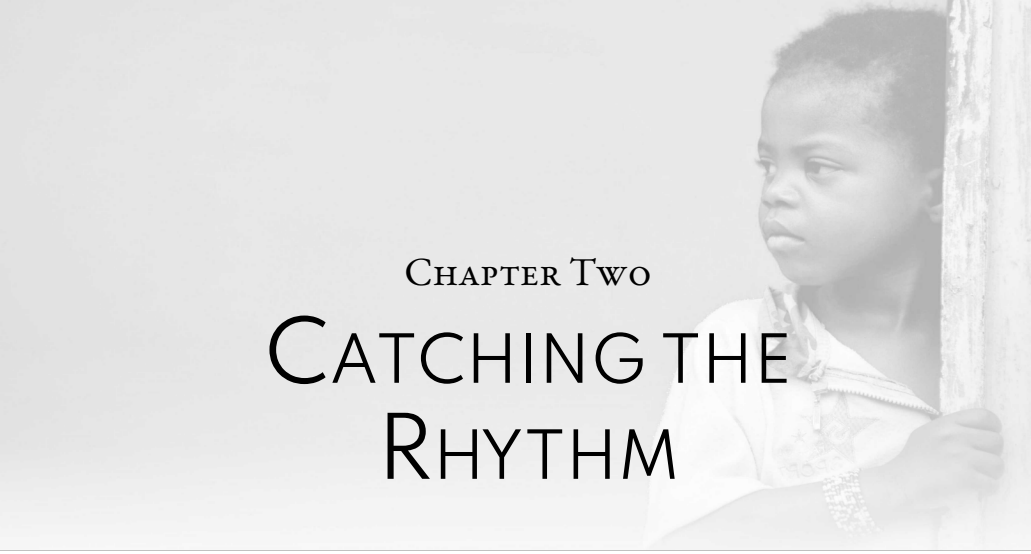

Chapter Two

Catching the Rhythm

Music creates order out of chaos: for rhythm imposes unanimity upon the divergent, melody imposes continuity upon the disjointed, and harmony imposes compatibility upon the incongruous.

Yehuda Menuhin

Kinshasa is the capital and largest city in DR Congo. It may seem like any other city, with its bustling downtown, traffic jams, skyscrapers, air-conditioned offices, and posh restaurants filled with businesspeople and politicians. However, despite its population estimate of twelve million, Kinshasa is more like a village.

I realized Kinshasa was a village one night while walking outside in front of our house. We lived at the top of a slight rise in the road, with a partial view of the city. Suddenly, an eruption of cheering interrupted the tranquil silence of the evening. The city had become a giant stadium.

There is no city in Canada like Kinshasa. When a soccer game is on, you'll find small groups of people huddled outside around community TVs

scattered throughout the city. When Congo scored a goal against Nigeria, there was hysteria. I couldn't see the game, but I was caught up in the spirit of the game, along with millions of ecstatic cheering fans, as you might hear in a Canadian stadium.

You see, most people in Kinshasa live outside. Sure, they sleep inside their one-room apartments with the rest of their family and a few relatives. But life occurs out from under the roof. When it rains, people rush for shelter, and life comes to a standstill. School is cancelled, taxis stop running, and businesses close their doors. Sick people don't even bother going to the clinic. People are forced under a roof, and life is on hold. Unlike the Pacific Northwest, where I live, the rain eventually stops, and people emerge from their refuge. Water is fetched, the manioc is pounded, fires are lit, the water is boiled, and life begins again.

Here's how it works. Take a typical Kinshasa suburban street, with its uneven sandy surface, small collections of stagnant water, mud here and there, and scattered plastic and organic garbage. Imagine the people, lots of them: kids playing soccer with a ball made of twine, grass and pieces of plastic, women carrying marketable goods on their heads, young ladies washing clothes at a local tap, uniformed kids returning home from school, and men sitting under a tree discussing politics.

Now, picture a white guy walking down this street. One of the men sees the white guy and comments to his colleagues, embellishing the remark with humour. A neighbour overhears it, finds it amusing, and passes the comment on to his neighbours, who, as I mentioned earlier, are outside, like everyone else. The message is passed along by casual conversation, a yell to someone across the street, or someone passing on a bicycle. Along the way, the original comment is modified and exaggerated until it finally reaches the other side of the neighbourhood. In this fashion, you can get a running commentary on a passing white guy miles away.

In Kinshasa, news of a catastrophe can spread within hours or even minutes. In the year 2000, the ammunition depot at the airport blew up. Congo was in a state of war. You can imagine how a big village might have perceived

an explosion. The airport is at the far eastern edge of the city. We lived on the city's west side, yet within minutes, information was transmitted to us, not through the radio or TV, but by word of mouth.

The first reports we received were misleading. Initially, we were told that the enemy had attacked the airport and an invasion of Kinshasa had begun. The next update indicated that while the enemy had blown up a building at the airport, they hadn't actually landed. Following that, we heard that they had managed to sneak in and blow up the ammunition depot at the airport. After an hour or two, we finally learned that during the unloading of ammunition, a soldier accidentally dropped something that led to an explosion. This explosion destroyed several planes, shattered windows at the airport terminal, and, tragically, resulted in the deaths of over a hundred people, with another two hundred injured. Each wave of information that flowed through our neighborhood became more accurate, resembling a natural process of self-correction.

To accomplish what you want to do, you need to recognize that Kinshasa is a big village. If not, you'll see and hear, but you won't connect. Despite your sweat and toil, success will be elusive—one step forward, two steps back. The city will take advantage of you, trick you, force you to detach, and burn you out. But you can save yourself if you catch the rhythm.

It's imperative that you catch the rhythm. It is unlike anything you know or expect. Yet, surprisingly, if you take the time and effort to listen, you'll be rewarded with an unfamiliar experience. And if you walk to the beat, you'll begin to uncover its uniqueness and appreciate its beauty. If you let yourself flow with the music, you'll be delighted by what you discover. Your Western rhythm isn't the only one playing. To get anything of lasting value done in this city, you need to swing to a new rhythm.

An excellent example of the Kinshasa rhythm is the scheduling of meetings or the lack thereof. The best meetings are unplanned encounters. Despite the city's immense size, it's remarkable how often you run into people you know on the street, in hallways, or restaurants. The impromptu conversations that follow are fruitful.

Planned meetings are restrictive to the point of ineffectiveness. They focus on official agendas, internal hierarchies and power structures. Meetings like this need preparation, which in Kinshasa often means appearance, not substance. Pomp and fanfare are the priority; matters of significance are set aside.

Westerners forced the quick and efficient formal meeting into the African context. It was like trying to fit a round peg into a square hole because Kinshasa prefers to plan its own meetings. They will happen, not on your timeline, but on a timeline even so.

On one of these impromptu occasions, while walking down a dusty side road, I ran into Dr. Delphin Kapasa, a recent medical graduate I knew from the church I attended. After the necessary pleasantries, he asked me if I wanted to visit a clinic. I can't tell you how many times I've been asked this kind of question. I was repeatedly made aware of clinic projects, typically at formal meetings, along with an impressive and well-prepared document.

In Kinshasa ideas are a dime a dozen. This is the logic: "I need an opportunity, and this guy is a doctor." A need for an opportunity, combined with a doctor's financial resources, equals a clinic project idea. After all, everyone knows healthcare is a problem in Kinshasa. Engage a friend who has a computer and type out a document. Westerners, of course, love documents. In the end, if it isn't accepted—no big deal. But it would be foolish to miss an opportunity like this.

In Kinshasa, everyone claims to be an expert. If your car breaks down on the road, you will be immediately surrounded by five people who know what the problem is and how to fix it. You can't tell the experts from the con artists. The logic is: "If I succeed, I'll get the benefit. If I fail, what's the loss? There's no harm in trying."

In Kinshasa, people bend over backwards to adjust themselves to your rhythm, not knowing exactly what it is but trying nonetheless. It's like a dance where no one knows the rhythm. If you find yourself in this kind of dance hall, get out. The ebb and flow of life in Kinshasa doesn't come as a project.

Delphin continued, "Pierre and I have been struggling to build up a medical clinic over the last year in Camp Luka, and I think we are now far enough along for you to come and visit."

"'Far enough along,' you say?"

"Yeah, we wanted to be sure we could start this on our own without your help. That's why I haven't told you about it before."

At the time, Delphin seemed to be talking to me about something more than an idea. I was intrigued. The next day, I went to Camp Luka and visited their one-room clinic. The unplanned nature of the encounter sparked a shift in my perspective on people experiencing poverty. I was beginning to feel and hear a rhythm.

I had already concluded that a compassionate approach to poverty was more than a simple emotional reaction—not to discredit emotional reactions. Naturally we feel deep sadness and heartache for those who are suffering. When the earthquake destroyed Port-au-Prince, who didn't cry out in compassion, "What can I do?" Who didn't want to run out and save the child stuck under the rubble? We cry when we hear heart-wrenching stories from Adiyaman, Turkey and Kesennuma, Japan, where people were found days after the earthquakes through the tireless efforts of the community. These are stories of compassion triggered by emotion.

However, poverty is unlike the earthquakes in Port-au-Prince, Turkey, or Japan, which have a clear beginning and end. An earthquake doesn't keep happening. It stops. If there is someone to save in the wreckage when it stops, you need to act now. Poverty, though, keeps happening. There is no beginning and end to poverty.

One thing Live Aid 1985 taught us was that sending food shipments to Ethiopia didn't solve an issue that kept repeating itself year after year. Soon it no longer interested the celebrities. It was like trying to blow out trick

birthday candles that keep relighting themselves. At one point you tire of it and stop blowing.

Poverty has something trick candles don't have: rhythm. You must stop what you're doing and pause a moment to catch the rhythm. Take it in. At first you'll be distracted by the ambiguous starts and blurred finishes. Still, if you're patient and committed to hearing and understanding, you will find a rhythm. Admit the models you are familiar with that make sense to you, muddle the beat. There is indeed a rhythm, and listening to it is the heart of compassion for the impoverished.