

Susan A. Ross, Loyola University, Chicago, with Melissa Browning



Susan A. Ross is a professor of theology and a faculty scholar at Loyola University, Chicago, where she is the chairperson of the theology department. Ross received her PhD from the University of Chicago and has taught at Saint Norbert College and Duquesne University. She is the author of For the Beauty of the Earth: Women, Sacramentality, and Justice (Paulist Press, 2006);

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nt Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology (Continuum International Publishing Group, 1998); numerous journal articles and book chapters; and is the coeditor of five books and journal issues. She is a recipient of a Louisville Institute sabbatical grant, the 1999 Book of the Year award winner from the College Theology Society, and a winner of the Ann O'Hara Graff award of the Women's Seminar of the Catholic Theological Society of America. Ross serves as vice president and member of the editorial board of

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. She is currently at work on

Seeking Light and Beauty: A Theological Anthropology for Liturgical Press.

On a Saturday afternoon in early July 2009, five American and five Kenyan women, including myself, walked out of the entrance of a former British country club in the hills surrounding Nairobi in a symbolic exit from colonial space. All of us are students of theology at stages ranging from predoctoral comprehensive exams to junior faculty to veterans of nearly thirty years in the classroom. We went to an open area a few hundred yards from the armed security gate and engaged in a ritual of song and dance. We recited the names of our foremothers, both familial and educational, and ritually enacted our new connections. After four weeks of living and studying together, the eight students and two faculty members had begun to explore similarities and differences, and the ritual was a celebration of our experiences.

This project had begun two years earlier when some of my graduate students at Loyola University met to talk about how to engage other cultures in their scholarship and teaching in a way that went beyond reading or polite conversation. They began to plan for a learning experience that would help them become better teachers (and continuing learners) by engaging with students in similar circumstances in Kenya. I was drawn into the project as someone who had traveled to Kenya twice before — the first on a faculty/staff immersion trip and the second as a guest lecturer — and I worked with the students to help make their plans for a cross-cultural learning experience in Africa a reality. We wrote numerous grant proposals, most of them unsuccessful. At one point, we nearly decided to abandon the project altogether. But the AAR was the first successful grant received, and with that support, we were able to obtain more grants. The Kenyan immersion trip took place in June and July of 2009. The collaboration begun in that experience continues today, as plans for a book are ongoing and various presentations to professional conferences, both in the United States and in Africa, are in the works or have already taken place.

The celebration at Brackenhurst was genuine, but the tensions of cross-cultural learning were also part of the whole experience. A week later, at one of our group sessions in a weekend devoted to assessing and concluding the experience, some of the Kenyan participants challenged the process by which the American participants wrote the grants and obtained funding before inviting the Kenyans to join. In this conference room in Amboseli National Park, surrounded by African artifacts, where morning and afternoon game drives bookended our group meetings, where a baboon challenged one of the faculty members for her banana and where we watched families of elephants move slowly across the horizon below Mount Kilimanjaro, we had an honest conversation, and politeness gave way to a difficult, painful, but necessary exchange. We came away from that conversation knowing ourselves and our new colleagues better, and determined to keep the collaboration ongoing, open, and honest.

