



# Rafiki

*Joseph C. Shenk*

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"Don't fret about me, brother. In a few years I might heal inside and be ready for some more of Africa." These words of quiet hope from Joseph C. Shenk to his brother-in-law, Omar Eby, terminate nearly twenty years of correspondence. Captivated by his honest, joyous and painful narrative we expect more-perhaps the ending of a novel. Or wouldn't that be less-some fictional typing up of all loose ends?

Instead, we follow Joe's unfinished trek through the wild beauty of his Tanzanian homeland as he teaches at a secondary school in Musoma and then at a theological college in Bukiroba from 1963-1976, interrupted only by a year back in Pennsylvania. A desk job in Nairobi from 1976 to 1981 brings with it the freedom and comfort of a modern city. His great joy: "no one intrudes" upon the family.

Excerpts from the 238 letters in *Rafiki: Letters to Omar* draw the reader more deeply into Joe's life, defined by impossible conflicts born of missionaries, the home office, and a new African church. No wonder that he confesses, "I repent of trying to find a solution to our problems." Decades before diversity and peace building evolved into fashionable cliches, Joe was witness to the psychic costs of internalized conflict. "I am two different people. I try to keep both parts of me honest," he writes.

But that whole mixture of agony and ecstasy, captured in a thousand details of American money, African protocol, a father-son relationship with the African Bishop, mud roads, flat tires, safari landscapes and tsetse flies-all that yields to hope born anew and nourished by small moments.

Great chunks have been omitted from Joe's letters to Omar, to protect the "living and the guilty," the editor writes in the Preface. All references to Eby's life have also been eliminated. These letters reflect solely the inimitable Joseph C. Shenk, the Joe of his young second-generation missionary years: his musings on being a husband, a father of four daughters, a teacher in a theological college, a student of the African psyche, a confidant of the first African Mennonite Bishop in Tanzania. Here, too one reads of Joe's delight in motorcycle safaris and his joy of being in village Africa. Wrote all this to one good friend. Omar Eby feels he is a most fortunate recipient of Joe's confidence and grace.

In the conclusion to his Preface, Eby writes: "I am keenly aware that the full dimensions of a person are not manifested in correspondence with only one person. May no one take offense at anything Joe wrote. He did not know that one day others would read his letters to his rafiki, Omar. If the reader is angered, blame Joe's editor. If the reader is blessed, give thanks that once there was a good man who believed in a friendship worthy of letters."

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