

## Fireside Interlude 5

Pull your chairs close. If there isn't enough room, make some—knees touching, blankets shared. Imagine the kettle is already on and the light is low. I want to talk to my four—Bethlehem, Abel, Amerti, and Andreas—and to all of you who carry Ethiopia in your bones while your mailing address says North America, Europe, or Australia. Consider this a conversation, not a sermon. I'll keep it plain, and I'll keep it close.

### 1) Names Are Maps—Walk Them

We named you for places and promises: Bethlehem, a city of story and stubborn hope. Abel, a quiet strength with an old lineage. Amerti, goodness as a practice, not a performance. Andreas, steady and brave.

Names carry instructions. Live so your name is a path, not just a sound. Say your elders' names carefully, too. The way you pronounce Ato Aklilu—the great-grandfather who sat in our living room teaching prayers and Amharic—tells the room what you stand for. Language is not “heritage only”; it's a bridge to grandparents and to the parts of yourself that don't fit on a form.

To the diaspora kids: keep two tongues alive if you can. One to move through airports without friction; one to open the door to aunties who will decide whether you belong by the first three words out of your mouth.

Language here is not ornament but anchor— *Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.* — Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

### 2) Villages Can Fit Inside Apartments

Bethlehem's crib taught us this. A tiny Vallejo living room turned into a whole village when aunties came with soup, uncles came with tools, church elders came with blessings, and neighbors knocked because they knew new parents forget to eat. Don't wait for perfect circumstances to build community. A one-bedroom can host a life if what's inside is predictable kindness.

Practice it: answer texts; bring chairs; learn to arrive with food and leave with dishes. Diaspora family is built out of reliability, not blood alone.

What we were practicing had another name too—love as a disciplined civic habit— *Love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust.* — bell hooks

### 3) Clinton's America, And Your Era Too

When Bethlehem turned two, it was 1993; when she turned seven, it was 1998. The backdrop was “Clinton’s America”: expanding economy, dial-up tones, The North America Free Trade Area - NAFTA debates, welfare reform, a crime bill with long shadows, California’s Prop 187 trying to make public services conditional on papers. Big words, yes—but in our house those words became librarians who learned your name, clinic forms we could actually read, and teachers who tried—sometimes clumsily—to pronounce “Aynalem” and asked us for the right way to do it.

Lesson: politics show up as the school nurse, the bus pass, the library card, the clinic copay. Pay attention. Be kind at the counter and fierce at the ballot box. Ask institutions to match their brochures with their hallways.

And when forms and offices try to rename you, remember— *Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined.* — Toni Morrison

#### 4) Milestones Matter; Rituals Make You

You’ll remember graduations and job offers; what will shape you are the rituals: Friday groceries with two-language produce, Saturday coffee ceremonies where you learn to wait for the third round, Sunday clothes laid out the night before because respect is a habit.

Keep your rituals portable. If a semester or a job moves you, pack the coffee grinder and your prayer words with the same seriousness as your laptop charger.

Rituals are how we make an ordinary life large enough to live in— *It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end.* — Ursula K. Le Guin

#### 5) Two Truths About Paths (Bethlehem & Abel)

Bethlehem, you walked a straight, steady line: Vintage High’s homecoming queen because kindness counted; UC Santa Barbara; then work that put you within shouting distance of President Obama—“my family from Ethiopia loves you,” you yelled; “hello, family,” he answered. The echo of that moment still hangs in our house. At Stanford you turned equity from a slogan into a schedule—chairs arranged to face each other, not the door; names pronounced correctly like it’s policy.

Abel, your brilliance flashed early— with questions adults save for midnight. Then adolescence blew in. Peer gravity is a real force; some of us learn wind-work the hard way. You’ve taught me this: gifted is not the same as ready, and a detour is not the same as defeat. The measure I use for both of you is honest effort today, not somebody else’s timeline.

To every parent and kid listening: clap for the child who soars. Open both hands for the child who stumbles. It’s the same motion—applause and catching—seen from two angles.

#### 6) Houses That Change Size (Amerti & The Leaving That Is Love)

When Amerti arrived, the house did that immigrant trick—it grew and shrank at once. Mesfin and Yene got their own keys; Sirgut and Teddy moved south; Genet found her place with her son Biruk whom she welcomed half a decade earlier, straight from Addis. The kitchen got quieter, yes; our purpose didn't. At three, Amerti announced, "Take me to school." At twelve, her grades turned to letters and never left the A-line. By eighteen, valedictorian—ambition sounding like service, not performance.

Then came the MCAT, the hospital scribe shifts, and that humbling word, waitlist. She chose the older courage: do the inputs, honor the day, serve while you wait. When a seat opens, step in.

Rule for all of you: don't worship portals. Worship consistent work, sleep, and kindness. The rest follows more often than you think.

#### 7) Twin Comets (Andreas & Beza)

Andreas, you arrived to a family already humming. Early on, your memory and curiosity made teachers say "natural." Side by side with you grew Beza—your cousin who felt like a sister. Fifth grade picked one boy and one girl to speak; the school picked you two. Later, Beza kept a drummer's discipline—top of middle school, a single valedictorian in high school, then biochemistry at UCLA. Your line bent and waved—brilliance meeting teenage weather.

Our job was not to make your lines match. It was to keep the landing lights on: praise the good we actually see; refuse easy prophecies; name detours without making them destiny. To every cousin set side-by-side in comparison: honor each other's wind. Not all kites fly the same day.

#### 8) How To Move Through a World of Hazards (SIPDE For Life)

The driving loop I taught—SIPDE: Search, Identify, Predict, Decide, Execute—is life instruction:

Search: scan the room, the friend group, the syllabus, the contract.

Identify: name the hazard—gossip, debt, a "job" with no job description, a party that starts with a yes and ends with a police report.

Predict: where does this go if nobody changes?

Decide: who are you? pick accordingly.

Execute: carry it out even if someone laughs.

Then loop back. Adjust. That's adulthood.

#### 9) Limbo Can Be a Workshop

I missed an immigration interview and paid with seventeen years of annual permits. That's a lot of patience. But limbo doesn't have to be idle. I hired driver-safety educators; I volunteered and taught at Sonoma State; I learned how to speak to kids, teens, twenty-somethings, and their parents; we bought a house with a neighbor's faith and 10% down. Keep a weekday craft and a weekend craft. Make yourself useful to an institution that writes letters. Build side doors when the front door is jammed.

When the green card finally came, it felt like oxygen, not identity. You don't wait to become yourself; you become yourself while you wait.

#### 10) Memory Must Turn into Mandate (Buraka, Not Just A Story)

Family legends are warm, but they're not enough. Buraka is not just an ancestor's name; it's a responsibility: a church raised from straw roof to sturdy beams; a road extended, a bridge financed; trees planted; latrines dug with dignity; scholarships and women's credit circles that turn small capital into big stability. We learned to give like an institution even when all we had was a ledger and nerve.

Your turn: pick one corner to better—classroom, campus, block, churchyard. Measure what changes. Celebrate without showing off. Do it again.

#### 11) Plan With Hinges

That Atlantic phone call in 1991 redrew our map in an afternoon. The plan to ship a stove, fridge, and Corolla died; a goodbye in California became the plan that mattered. I tell my students and my children the same thing: make plans with hinges. Life will swing them. Answer the phone. Tell the truth. Move your feet.

#### 12) Ten Pocket Rules (For Your Jacket, Not Your Wall)

Learn to say elders' names properly; teach others to say yours.

Keep one friend who tells you the truth gently and one who tells it plainly.

Do the unglamorous jobs well. People who notice will matter later.

Read your paperwork. Respect deadlines. Bureaucracy has a long memory.

Protect your sleep like it's a scholarship.

Carry cash for small generosity: flowers for an elder, coffee for a classmate.

If you lead, arrange chairs to face each other, not the door.

Speak up when rules hurt the wrong people; listen when you're the one who missed the point.

Celebrate often; compare rarely.

When in doubt, widen the circle.

That widening is not sentiment; it is how power works when it is shared— *Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert.* — Hannah Arendt

### **Closing The Circle**

I have stood in rooms where babies breathed and in rooms where visas decided, in churchyards where we prayed and in offices where letters of recommendation carried decades of effort in a single paragraph. Here is what all those rooms agree on:

You are the center of circles drawn by people who crossed oceans so you could stand where you stand.

You are also a circle-drawer now—make new rooms warm, pronounce new names right, and leave doors on hinges for whoever follows.

Some nights I still hear a baby breathing in a California room and remember why we stayed. Other nights I hear the Dallas theme in my head and laugh at the idea that TV once taught me American idioms. Most nights I hear cups on saucers and the low music of two languages sharing a table. That's home.

Resilience, then, was not loud; it was seasonal— *In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.* — Albert Camus

Pull the blankets closer. Finish your tea. Tomorrow we go back out—to campuses, shifts, clinics, code, studios, council meetings. Walk your names. Keep your rituals portable. Practice SIPDE. Build where you stand. And when someone asks where you're from, answer with both a country and a community:

“I'm from Ethiopia. And I'm from the house that keeps making room.”