Walking Between Worlds

By Aynalem Adugna

Your Excellency, distinguished leaders of Addis Ababa University, faculty, honored guests, friends, and members of the Ethiopian diaspora here and around the world—
thank you for gathering to witness the inauguration of a book that, in many ways, has been writing itself inside me for more than half century.

Walking Between Worlds is not simply a memoir. It is a ledger of scars and possibilities, a map of the roads that shaped me, and an offering to the next generation of Ethiopians and the diaspora whose lives straddle multiple identities.

I am deeply honored—and moved—that **Addis Ababa University**, Ethiopia's oldest and most revered institution of higher learning, has recognized the value of this work and expressed its willingness to **publish this book**. For me, that affirmation is not only literary; it is personal. It signals that the stories of ordinary children who walked dusty village paths matter. It signals that the struggles of a family scattered by circumstance deserve a place in Ethiopia's intellectual life.

[I. THE UNIVERSITY THAT RAISED ME]

Before speaking of the book, I must honor the institution that raised me.
Addis Ababa University is not just where I earned degrees—it is where my final growth spurt happened, literally and intellectually. At Bedemariam School in 12th grade, something awakened in me. I arrived an uncertain young man, shaped by loss and instability, but Bedemariam and later the University became the soil in which I finally grew straight.

At Addis Ababa University, I found structure, rigor, and purpose. It shepherded me through my undergraduate studies, then my master's degree, and ultimately sent me abroad to pursue a PhD. Everything I later did in state government, in academia, in research, and in diaspora community-building was built upon that foundation.
This University raised me. It believed in me before any other institution ever did.

[II. WHY THIS BOOK EXISTS]

The book begins with a walk—
a fourteen-year-old boy walking alone toward Nekemt,
dust rising beneath shoes that were too old,
hope rising beneath a heart that was too young.

As the Preface recalls, *"This book begins with a walk… a road older than any argument the adults could explain to me."*
That walk was not an escape. It was a search for breath when the home meant to protect us became the site of pain, silence, and confusion.

Across its pages, the book traces the early fractures—
a mother's sudden departure,
the arrival of a stepmother whose voice cut sharper than any discipline,
a father whose police uniform carried dignity outside the home but failed to protect within it.

These stories are not written to indict. As the Preface clarifies, "*What follows is not an indictment and not an alibi. It is an account.*"
They are written to bear witness.

[III. THE ROAD FROM CHILDHOOD TO RESPONSIBILITY]

In the Prologue, I ask readers to picture the road:
"*dust lifting in the afternoon… a boy counting steps because numbers made more sense than promises.*"
That road, and many after it, shaped the discipline that carried me through school in Ethiopia, into seventeen years in American classrooms, and eventually into a life of service inside the California Department of Public Health.

But the road also taught a deeper lesson—
that survival is not an act of heroism.
It is the quiet labor of placing one foot after the other when every sound in the bushes reminds you of danger, when every adult decision reshapes your childhood, when silence itself becomes a kind of weather.

This book returns often to that walk because it seeded the questions that would guide the rest of my life:
What does it mean to endure?

Who shoulders the burden of adult choices?
How do children adapt in the absence of justice?

[IV. THE DIASPORA AS "HINGE"—NOT HERO]

If this book were only memory, it would not deserve the attention of an institution like Addis Ababa University. But *Walking Between Worlds* turns memory into a lens—one aimed at the next generation of the Ethiopian diaspora.

As the opening note emphasizes, the diaspora are "*a hinge on which transformations can turn*… carriers of a double literacy—one civic, one ancestral."
They hold tools from abroad and obligations from home.

The book speaks directly to them—
in the Fireside Interludes, in the counsel threaded through the chapters, and in the closing reflections urging them to serve as bridges rather than battlegrounds.

In later chapters, I remind them:
"*Use your advantages not to deepen Ethiopia's wounds but to help heal them… volunteer, invest, share knowledge, and advocate for peace.*"

And again:
"*Build schools, plant trees, create businesses, write books, design technologies… Ethiopia needs bridges, not walls.*"

The diaspora's role is not symbolic. It is structural:
sending remittances, building bridges, modernizing classrooms, paving roads—
but also resisting the temptations of online outrage, misinformation, and political romanticism.

We cannot afford another fifty years of division amplified from afar.

[V. ARRIVING HOME AFTER 21 YEARS]

When the green card finally arrived, it was not triumph I felt—it was disbelief.

Seventeen years is enough time for life to fold and unfold many times. But when I finally returned to Ethiopia after twenty-one years of absence, the shock was indescribable.

The country had nearly doubled in population. Addis Ababa felt quadrupled, its transformation visible in every direction.

Sidewalks so crowded that "not an inch to spare" was not an expression—it was the lived reality of a city bursting out of its boundaries. Ethiopia had grown, expanded, strained, and reinvented itself while I was away.

I returned as both insider and outsider—one who belonged deeply yet had missed two decades of transformation. This sense of temporal dislocation reverberates throughout the book.

[VI. WHAT IT MEANS TO WALK BETWEEN WORLDS]

By the book's final Fireside Interlude, the voice shifts—
no longer the voice of the child walking alone toward Nekemt,
but the voice of a father speaking to children who now speak across continents.

"*To walk between worlds is not simply to shift from Ethiopia to the diaspora and back again… it is to carry two or more identities in one heart.*"

It is to know multiple histories
and yet be faithful to truth in each.
It is to feel belonging and unbelonging
and still move with purpose.

The book's closing pages remind the next generation that their power lies not in rhetoric but in action:
"*The measure of your engagement will not be the passion of your speeches… but the schools you build, the peace you defend, the bridges you strengthen.*"

[VII. ON SPEAKING PLAINLY]

In reflecting on the arc of my career, I often return to a simple truth:

clarity is a public service.

Over the years, I have published twenty-three peer-reviewed articles—some solo, others in collaboration—

but it is six of them that I offer as proof that even the most complex statistical work can be written in a way that policymakers, practitioners, and grandmothers can understand.

These six papers were not my most technical, but they were my most deliberate: they translated regression models, exposure measures, and multi-level analytic frameworks into everyday language without losing precision. They demonstrated that plain speaking is not the opposite of rigor; it is the companion of rigor.

In a world where data often outruns understanding, I tell my students and colleagues that our responsibility is not only to build strong methods, but to speak them into the world so clearly that anyone, regardless of training, can see the human stakes behind the numbers.

[VIII. PARENTS LOST WITHOUT CLOSURE]

There is a wound I carry quietly:

-both of my parents passed away without us ever speaking a single word about the childhood that altered my life's trajectory.

Not one conversation, not one acknowledgement of the fractures, the absences, the decisions that deprived me—and my siblings—of the ordinary joys other children take for granted.

I was not looking for closure. But silence has its own weight. Their passing sealed that silence forever.
This is why the book says: "What follows is not an indictment and not an alibi. It is an account." I wrote because the conversations that never happened still needed a place to live.

[IX. WHY THE ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY CEREMONY MATTERS]

This is why today's ceremony means more to me than I can say.

Addis Ababa University is where so many of Ethiopia's thinkers, researchers, and nation-builders have shaped their minds.
To have this institution express its willingness to **publish *Walking Between Worlds*** is to affirm that the journeys of ordinary Ethiopian children—children from tin-roofed houses, children who walked dusty roads, children who crossed oceans—are part of the national archive.

It affirms that the Ethiopian story is not only written in the chambers of power, but also in the quiet corners of survival.

AAU's support sends a message to the diaspora:
Your stories are welcome home.

Your memories matter.
Your witness has a place in Ethiopia's intellectual and historical landscape.

[X. A BOOK OF MEMORY, METHOD, AND MANDATE]

Although the book is grounded in childhood, its heart lies in responsibility.

It urges the next generation to hold:

- **memory** as a compass,
- **method** as a discipline, and
- **mandate** as a calling.

"*Fix the denominator… map the gap… build the bridge.*"
These phrases recur throughout the Fireside Interludes because they are tools.
Tools for public health, yes.
But also tools for citizenship, leadership, and reconciliation.

The last chapter reminds readers:
"*Ethiopia's fracture lines are not destiny… they are challenges placed before you.*"

A nation is not healed by heroic speeches.
It is healed by consistent, quiet acts of service.

[XI. INVITATION TO THE NEXT GENERATION]

So today, at this inauguration, I want to leave the next generation with three invitations:

First, claim both your roots and your wings.
You belong to Ethiopia's beauty and its heartbreak.
But you also belong to the world that shaped your education and your imagination.

Second, refuse the romance of fury.
As Bertrand Russell warned, *"War does not determine who is right—only who is left."*

Third, be builders.
As Alan Kay reminds us, *"The best way to predict the future is to invent it."*

Let your future be measured by what you created—
schools, technologies, communities, bridges across divides.

[XII. CONTRIBUTIONS TO TEACHING AND LEARNING AT AAU]

Walking Between Worlds is not only a memoir—

-it is a teaching instrument.

Its architecture of narrative chapters paired with Fireside Interludes offers a dual curriculum that AAU can use across four disciplines:

-sociology, social work, public health, and English.

Each chapter grounds students in lived experience—poverty, displacement, migration, kinship, resilience—while each Interlude distills portable tools such as fix the denominator, map the gap, make measures legible, and co-locate services that students can apply in real policy and community settings. These elements make the book a natural fit for AAU's classrooms, where theory and practice must meet in ways students can carry into ministries, NGO work, and local communities.

In sociology and social work, the household portraits—of children navigating step-parent dynamics, of siblings balancing fear and duty, of diaspora families reconstructing belonging—

-give instructors rich case studies for understanding social structure, inequality, and coping systems. Students can pair scenes from the memoir with sociological concepts such as social reproduction, migration trajectories, and resilience theory. Social work students can use the Interludes as ethical prompts for reflective practice, role-plays, and client-centered communication.

In public health, the book directly supports AAU's evidence-based training agenda. Its method sections—drawn from decades of work in U.S. systems—

-teach students how to translate data into legible tools for policymakers. From California's health equity indicators to the "harvest I bring" plain-language method summarized in the pitch deck, students see how advanced statistical or epidemiological methods can be explained clearly to communities, administrators, and legislators. The book becomes a model for public-facing health communication: count well, explain simply, and tie every number to a human story.

For the Department of English, the book functions as a multi-genre laboratory. Chapters can be used for close reading, rhetorical analysis, and craft study; the Interludes for argumentation, audience awareness, and public writing. Scenes can be translated into policy briefs, op-eds, or reflective essays, giving students practice in genre transformation. Multilingual passages offer opportunities for translation studies, fidelity analysis, and explorations of voice across Amharic and English. As the pitch deck notes, this memoir is inherently teachable—

-its narrative clarity, ethical stance, and linguistic precision make it a living textbook for writing that is at once literary, civic, and practical.

Across all four fields, the book strengthens AAU's mission: to prepare graduates who are grounded in Ethiopia's social realities, equipped with analytical tools, and capable of communicating with clarity and integrity. It is scholarship that travels—

-across regions, disciplines, and generations—and it offers AAU students something exceedingly rare: a bridge between lived experience, empirical method, and public service.

[XIII. CLOSING]

As I stand here today, I think of the boy on the road to Nekemt—
hungry, afraid of hyenas, uncertain of his future—
and I think of how impossible this moment would have seemed to him.

But as the book says in its final lines:
"*The fracture lines of Ethiopia are not destiny… The circle closes but does not end; it opens forward into your lives.*"

Thank you, Addis Ababa University,
for opening this circle even wider—
for giving this story a home,
and for allowing the boy who once walked alone
to return today not alone,
but surrounded by a nation willing to listen.

May we continue to walk—
between worlds,
toward one another,
and toward a more just and peaceful Ethiopia.

Thank you.