



ENTREMUNDOS

Ebola in Liberia

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When you step onto a Brussels Airlines flight to Liberia, you're handed the first of many "Facts About Ebola" pamphlets you'll receive during your stay. It's not like any of the health care workers in line are surprised to receive it, although the man in front of me feigns shock to a companion: "Paul, *did you know about this?!*"

The pamphlet illustrations vary in quality, from stick figures probably made in Microsoft Paint, to cartoons worthy of *The Boondocks*. The content, however, is always the same.

When Ebola gets inside you, it burrows inside your cells, while simultaneously hopping onto others to spread throughout your body. As they say in *Jurassic Park*: "you are alive when they start to eat you." Before long, it's like the virus recognizes that it's destroying its home, i.e. you. Because it starts exiting the building, fast. In the span of a few days, through vomiting, diarrhea and hemorrhaging, millions upon millions of these little guys do their Sunday best to find a new home. If you are the spurned host, it is a very unpleasant process.

Your body, however, has a fighting chance if given even the most basic palliative care. But that requires people to be near you, to touch you. In this sense, you could say Ebola targets compassion. Ebola has declared war on intimacy.

That war can be seen everywhere in Liberia, but the collateral damage is subtler than you'd think. On the streets of the capital, between shacks and huts, nobody touches. Nobody holds hands. Hugs are rare, kisses almost outlawed.

Ebola patients wait on plastic chairs, bored. Health care professionals sit by themselves, exhausted and sweaty after an hour in the hot zone. Some show off the "Ebola hug," where you open your arms, lean in to each other...but never touch. All of this is hardly surprising.

What *is* surprising is how upbeat the atmosphere inside an Ebola Treatment Unit is. A doctor jokes with a patient across a fence, nurses make fun of a cameraman filming them suiting up in triple-layer spacesuits. Several yards away from me is a man who, after surviving Ebola, checked back into the treatment center to be with his six year old son who just tested positive. Even the plane ride over is filled with a palpable sense of joy, of men and women getting ready to serve a good cause. Not even the disinfectant sprayed by masked airline employees can eliminate that.

The body count suggests Ebola is winning. The people fighting back suggest otherwise.

If you drive East in Monrovia, towards the coastline, you'll come to an old hotel sitting on a hill. Once the crown jewel of a bustling capital, it now sits abandoned, burned out after the civil war. Bribe a guard at the entrance, and he'll take you up a crumbling staircase next to an open

elevator shaft, through a hole in the wall, onto a ledge and up onto the roof. Standing there, it can feel like you're adrift at sea.

While filming the city below, a bird circled over my head. Slowly, without any great purpose, eyeing the people below. Looking for life.

I don't know if he found any. But I certainly did.