

Beyond Our Goodwill

As one slowly becomes enmeshed in the practicalities of practicing medicine in a developing nation, the perception of a life lived simply, beyond the grasp of the minutia that plagues “western life”, fades away. Harrowing bureaucracy and unspoken cultural forces easily befuddle a newcomer. The complexity and nuance with which the factors of government policy, economics, nongovernmental organizations, international aid, academic institutions and medical personnel engage, expose the exceedingly complicated balance that exists within the global healthcare system unbeknownst to the ingénue. We come to these countries as bearers of goodwill, but are often woefully unprepared for the cultural differences and varied interpretations of priority. Moreover, you come face to face with parts of yourself you did not know you carried. For me, this moment came on a day that began as any other: in total darkness, with an hour’s drive toward a remote village in Rwanda.

The sun climbed over the mountain’s edge, revealing a dense mist lying low like fingers unfurled in the valleys between. As sunrise blossomed into a full dawn, the mist slowly receded, relinquishing the land to the day. The scene was majestic. As our journey took us deeper into rural life, women perfectly balancing garden hoes on their heads populated the side of the road along with children working toward home with their yellow jugs in tow. The children scurried with their load for about 10 paces before dropping the container and resting for a beat, making their way in fits and starts. Sometimes they would make a game of it with other children charged with the same task. To the passerby, the sunrise lent a romantic glow to what is surely an exhausting existence.

Once within the mountainous village, locals get quite a kick out of watching us trudge up the trails between clusters of homes, gasping for breath and grabbing for bottled water after a mere twenty foot ascent. The children erupt into fits of giggles as they lithely scramble around us. Their mothers scold them, while hiding a grin of their own, and give them grilled corn to offer to us. Grateful for the caloric fuel, we munch on the gifted corn as we make our way from house to house. In accepting their food, entering their homesteads, and allowing their children to accompany us as we lumber along, we’ve

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inherently become a part of their community for the day; there is an uncanny charm in the ease with which the community envelops you, wordlessly decides without deliberation that you are their charge for that day.

On this particular day, in this particular village, there was a house like any other. It was made of a mixture of mud and manure. A cow stood on the side, enclosed in its rudimentary pen. There was a man sitting on a hand-carved bench, which was judiciously placed in the patch of shade created by his residence. The man wore slacks that were ragged at the ankles and shredded at the knees. His button down shirt was threadbare and stained. His chin was resting on his folded hand, and his head was bent low over a well-worn book. The book was thick and large; from afar it had the hints of a once - formidable textbook, it's intimidation factor worn away with time. In Kinyarwanda, we asked to test his vision. He happily agreed and placed his book beside him. I took the moment to glance at the text. To my astonishment, the book before me was a textbook of astrophysics, written in French. As our conversation moved beyond niceties, he told us of his former life as a physics professor at the national university. Time and circumstance had caused him to move back to the village in which he had grown up to care for the family that remained after the genocide. In a short while, it was time to move on. But after our parting, I remained haunted by my astonishment at meeting this man. Why had astonishment been my visceral reaction? The encounter forced me to acknowledge that hidden somewhere beyond my goodwill and enthusiasm to "make a difference", I held presumptions about the intellectual curiosity and the level of education of the people I came to serve. While this realization induced within me a wave of shame, it also created an invaluable awareness of the subconscious misconceptions that we carry with us when we travel to foreign lands.

When someone speaks our native language poorly, there is a tendency to subconsciously correlate this with less education or poor understanding. We often fail to remain cognizant of the fact that the people with which we are speaking are doing so in their third language. When logistics do not

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follow a course that is predictable to us, we presume it to be less efficient, rather than considering that the course taken adheres to local etiquette and customs. When their houses are made differently, we correlate this with poverty when in fact wealth is measured differently than in our own culture; in livestock and land rather than stocks and bonds. It is instinctual to collect subtle situational cues and subconsciously interpret them within the context of our native culture. The resulting presumptions can become an obstacle to building relationships and accomplishing the goals at the forefront of our minds. We must remain vigilant to our minds' misconceptions. It is essential to enter into a relationship with those in the developing world with the presumption of mutuality rather than the presumption of need. Only in this way will those whose lives we strive to engage and empower receive the dignity they so deserve.

While we won't see each other again, I know I'll always be grateful for having met that man on a bench with his book. I could never have imagined what I would learn from him in a moment's interaction—and he will never know how his casual afternoon read changed the way I view his world, as well as my own.