



Living & Learning to [Adapt]

Cross-cultural learning endeavors team with new experiences and new relationships, some easier to adapt to than others. Welcome to the mind of a student and her struggles to cope with life abroad.

“Has your view of the world *really* changed?”

Our class soaks in this question posed by our vibrant and witty African Literature Professor, Susan Kiguli, as we sit in an old conference room at Uganda’s own Makerere University.

And for some reason my answer is an instant and solid, “Yes.”

The question was born of a book discussion we were having dealing with cultural difference and changes in Africa, especially in the shockwaves directly following the dawn of western colonialism

The conversation that followed centered on anecdotes from our group’s – an eclectic entourage of 13 attractive American girls – interesting and at times painfully awkward experiences with African men and their eager quests to win a Mzungu (white) bride.

My thoughts, however, lingered a bit longer on Professor Kiguli’s question and its answer.

“Yes.”

And it’s a serious yes. A reflective yes. A revealing yes.

I’m currently weathering the home stretch of my three month study abroad experience in East Africa, and to say my view of the world has changed is like saying I was only a little surprised that my home state’s Colorado Rockies made it to the world series this year.

My worldview has exploded. I’ve been exposed to

and submerged in a culture almost completely unlike the one I’ve trekked through for 20 years. It has its own issues, joys and confusions, and it poses sometimes annoyingly unavoidable questions, all new to me.

More than forcing a dynamic worldview, though, this interaction with people and a new place has, as is expected, forced me to look at myself in relation to all of it, the peoples’ difficulties and heartaches, and my ability, or a lack thereof, to work and thrive in a developing culture. Cross-cultural learning is difficult, and I found myself, for a large

The Beginning

part, without that extensive and imperative quality called adaptability.

As a sophomore at Greenville College I experienced my poverty epiphany and it’s subsequent “save the world syndrome,” which was perhaps God’s loving cuff in the face. For the first time I understood that not only is there plight in the world, which in its wake is poverty and unimaginable physical and spiritual hunger, but that those people suffering and dying were my people, my family, my best friends, me.

Frederick Buechner says that “unless there is peace and joy and freedom for you, there can be no real peace or joy



Rwanda the Beautiful:

The view from FHI Rwanda's guest house. Rwanda is known for its hill-laden landscape.

or freedom for me," which is a message of humanity and connectedness that carried the weight of my convictions and fueled what was becoming an obsession. People were dying because they didn't have the table scraps I threw away after every meal. I needed to participate, I needed action.

The following fall I hopped on a plane to Uganda, hoping that with the help of Go ED.'s education and promises of cultural immersion, I might actually learn something, and maybe even help some people.

It was adventurous and I allowed nothing but incredible expectations to guide me.

Romanticism, however, is not particularly conducive to an intense cross-cultural learning experience, and I quickly found myself wishing to be back in the country I spent a year criticizing. I wanted home, I wanted an escape from the blatant hunger and poverty that lived, quite literally, everywhere, and I wanted to be understood in

Crossing Cultures

a way that this place and culture, in all its differences and educated-starved communities, could not afford me.

Culture shock, or any difficult experience for that matter, often reveals

our worst selves to us, and I realized this semester was not going to be the same kind of venture I was expecting.

Every Go ED. student is required to spend a month in an area doing field work and facing head on the realities of cross-cultural development work and living, an experience they like to call practicum. I spent mine in Kigali, Rwanda doing research on what makes a successful practicum and internship program for organizational assessment purposes; to help FHI Rwanda/Burundi improve theirs.

I learned about the realities of cross-cultural experiences, including the different stages of culture shock, as well as tested patterns of coping and successful living in and amongst another culture. I discovered the necessity of certain personal competencies, which are categories and combinations of different strengths and abilities, favorable in working within diversity.

I also took an entire course on aspects of African Traditional Culture and Religion that differed significantly from my own cultural perspective, but it wasn't until I was tested by those things first hand did I comprehend the true difficulty of melting into newness and assimilating.

Though I experienced unreadiness in meshing with the culture

Welcome to Rwanda

Country Rwandese Republic

Capital Kigali

Population 7,229,129 (July 2000 est.)

Languages Kinyarwanda (official) universal Bantu vernacular, French (official), English (official), Kiswahili (Swahili) used in commercial centers

Literacy

60.5% total, 69.8% male, 51.6% female

Religions

Roman Catholic 65%, Protestant 9%, Muslim 1%, indigenous beliefs and other 25%

Life Expectancy 38.58 male, 40.13 female (2000 est.)

Government Type republic

Currency 1 Rwandan franc (RF) = 100 centimes

GDP (per capita)

\$720 (1999 est.)

Labor Force (by occupation)

agriculture 90%, government and services, industry and commerce

Industry cement, agricultural products, small-scale beverages, soap, furniture, shoes, plastic goods, textiles, cigarettes

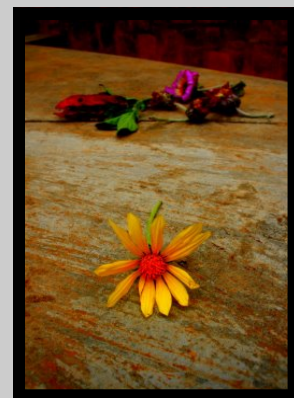
Agriculture coffee, tea, pyrethrum (insecticide made from chrysanthemums), bananas, beans, sorghum, potatoes; livestock

Arable Land 35%

Exports coffee, tea, hides, tin ore

Imports foodstuffs, machinery and equipment, steel, petroleum products cement and construction material

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Paul

throughout the semester, it was most persistent during this practicum experience because it was the time in my semester where I was the most independent and spent the most time out of the classroom and on the field.

Meet Paul.

He's a 24 year-old Rwandese who spends hours every day of the week maintaining a shop owned by the mother of a former school friend. My friend and I met Paul while exploring some shops in downtown Kigali, and he quickly won us over with his kind eyes and unusually good grasp of the English language, something fairly rare for young people in Rwanda.

Paul offered us friendship rather than instant nuptial motives, as well as a window into the hub of Rwanda's youth culture in all its awkward glory. He also unwittingly gave me my opportunity to swim through the often painful discrepancies natural to relationships between those of differing worldviews.

Concepts of time and, more significantly, the perspectives on intensity of relationships quickly revealed them-

selves as the most difficult cultural differences I would face as far as my relationships with Africans.

Paul wanted a lot of our time. He wanted to take us to his favorite places and treat us to an authentic Rwandan experience. Balancing this and other relationships was not easy, however, as visits that we had planned to last only an hour would span to three and four hours. There were times where one of us would end up in tears because we were with Paul, but an hour and half late for another date.

This may not sound consequential, but it made obvious the impact our tendency to keep strict schedules, respecting actual time on the clock over relationships had on our interactions with others; it showed us what we really valued. This created nearly impossible rifts to overcome in our relationship with Paul.

Even more uncomfortable than the time struggle was the comparative differences in expected reciprocity in relationships. Paul really cared about us.

Though we never doubted his authenticity, this aspect, as well as its appearance in other relationships with Africans, spurred new difficulty, a new need to adapt.

After spending three weeks in Kigali, Paul professed his love to a member of our team. As we suppressed heartbreaking laughter, Paul stared at us with utmost serious-

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This is Paul.
Our relationship revealed to me my difficulties adapting.



Paul and the Kids

The last night in Rwanda, Paul and I visited some neighborhood children I'd been trying to connect with, but none spoke English. Paul helped me to finally communicate with them.

ness in his face. He is a very passionate person who does not settle for halfway; he was dead set.

Also uncomfortable was Paul's consistent lavishing of compliments on me, especially since I spent the most time with him. I tried to do helpful things for him, bringing him snacks and Fanta (that's what they call all soft drinks), but I

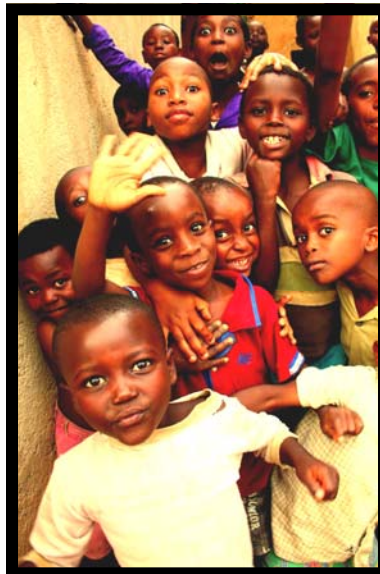
also tried to offer him a genuine relationship, despite my apprehension in spending time with him.

Paul would tell me constantly I was like the sister he lost in Rwanda's 1994 genocide, expressing to me familial love and reassuring me that if I ever needed anything in Rwanda, he would do his best for me. He expected this in return. There were certainly differing perceptions of the kind of relationship warranted by the amount of giving in the relationship. I would give Paul some food; he would think I was giving him the love of a sister.

Though unequal attachment in relationships isn't singular to African culture, but I experienced it many times

Lessons! Lessons!

over during practicum. People constantly wanted my email, my phone number, a visit to their home, love. All of a sudden I understood my wimpy



capacity to love, be patient and truly desire to take the people and their problems into myself.

I wanted to go home. I wanted relationships I understood, in which I could give back the same affection I was receiving.

I suppose there has to be a moral to this experience, a lesson learned; something useful to give to my home community that's waiting and willing to lend gifts and talents overseas. So what did I gain from this? What can I offer to you?

I learned that as Christians, we should never write people off.

My final night of practicum in Rwanda was redemptive. After much prodding, Paul convinced me to meet with him and hear his story about his survival and the genocide. I was extremely apprehensive at first, convinced

it was a ploy to, if nothing else, win my pity. But Paul taught me a few things.

He described to me the day his whole family died before his eyes, how his family's murderers tried to kill him by throwing him down a well-like hole used for a mass grave. Paul climbed up the bodies of his loved ones and returned to his home where he found and covered his mom with a blanket until he could buy enough time in the night to bury her. A lady from the group of killers returned and stole the blanket, Paul's last offering of dignity to his mom.

My heart sat in my mouth as he described this all with a perfect balance of sobriety and emotion. Paul told me that he is alive for a reason, and that he simply wanted me to know that he was grateful for all I did for him. I did nothing, especially considering the kind of pursuit he showed me, yet he was so genuinely pleased with me. He said I gave him the hope in people he'd lost in the war, and he felt vigorous about pursuing good and helping others. Life was a gift to him and he, perhaps unknowingly, was offering me a big part in that.

My pretenses melted away and all of a sudden trudging through all those cultural differences and struggles to adapt seemed completely worth it. Paul became one of the most significant relationships of my African experience.

If nothing else, know that it's okay to be an American. And it's also okay if you don't want to interact and love the culture as much as you think you should. It's okay. My biggest difficulty stemmed from a willingness to help, to *want* to love the people, to *want* to love the culture, to *want* to learn and clothe myself in the experiences caught up in African living. Sometimes I just couldn't muster up those desires.

I desperately wanted to fix those unloving things I thought were wrong with me, which led to unnecessary guilt and shame.

Perhaps the important thing is that you try and when you realize you're human, give yourself the grace that Christ does and try again. Sometimes you get lucky enough to experience great and tragic stories, writhing with redemption and grace, like the one Paul told me. And you might even get to that place where Christ transcends all and you can really do some things with this life. ■

(All Photos by Caitlin Daniel)