

## The World is a Book

As many of you know, last August I traveled to Ghana to spend three weeks volunteering with the Unite for Sight Global Impact Corps. I was able to take this great opportunity largely due to the funds everyone here contributed, which paid for surgeries performed while I was there. I was stationed in rural villages outside of Kumasi and Accra working with local eye clinics to screen for, treat, and educate about eye disease. However, I'm not here to discuss the impact of treating blindness, nor am I here to exalt the rewards of service. Instead, I'd like to speak with you today about traveling abroad to volunteer. I'll start with culture shock.

Anyone who has travelled abroad for an extended stay has experienced the three stages of culture shock. Upon first arrival, everything about your host nation is marvelous. You are in the honeymoon phase. In Ghana, we quickly fell in love with the beautiful dresses the women wore, custom-made from fabrics bought at market. Babies' heads bob happily as they snooze in slings on their mother's backs. After driving through hills painted with palm trees, you can stop at any city intersection, roll down your window, and buy from the hawkers, who carry everything from peanuts to alphabet magnets on their heads.

After a week or so, you begin to miss your home nation, and start to see much of the new culture as inferior. You have entered the disillusionment phase. In Ghana, we were introduced to a whole new concept of "on time" when our van driver, who was supposed to drive us across the country at 11am, arrived at 2:30pm and was surprised to find we weren't waiting for him. Welcome to GMT: "Ghanaian Mean Time." On our first outreach, we learned that meals were not group events at set times, but instead you ate whenever you could from whatever source was convenient. We stayed at a hotel far from any restaurants, so our driver promptly got his own dinner and then fell asleep before he was scheduled to take us to dinner, leaving us to the fine dining of the granola bars we had brought from home. When at last we had become independent, taking the chrochro – vans which operate an unofficial bus network throughout Kumasi – into town for food, we were faced

with the daily harassment of – I kid you not – male passengers asking the female volunteers to marry them, and then getting offended when we refused.

You might think that it would be best to keep your mind trapped in the honeymoon phase. But, the honeymoon phase is not realistic. You've pushed the culture out of reality and into a fantasy land, where everything is gold plated simply by virtue of existing in that country. It becomes condescending, like the people are on display for you to gawk at. If you've ever been walking on a sidewalk in DC and had a tourist atop a double-decker bus take your picture while you were just out getting lunch, you know the feeling. The disillusionment phase is equally unfair to your host country. You refuse to engage in the culture any longer, and shut out any new experiences with blinders, your mind set on bounding home. If you've ever had the privilege of spending time with a college student freshly back from their semester in Europe, now experiencing disillusionment with the U.S., you know what that sounds like. There's nothing quite like hearing them lament, for the third time, how much better the coffee tastes in Italy to make you want to put them on a plane right back where they came from. Some volunteers got to one of these stages and stayed there. But both stages are wrong because they focus on the differences between your home and your host culture rather than the similarities.

To get out, you must reach the reintegration phase, where you accept the pieces of the host culture that test your patience by realizing they're not so different from your home nation. We soon adapted to Ghanaian Mean Time; it just meant we got extra time to visit the lovely family down the street from our hotel, who befriended all the volunteers who stayed there and hosted us at their daughter's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday dinner. Eating when food was available forced me to explore and come to love street food, the stuff guidebooks strictly forbade. The street food in Ghana was ready immediately; you could see what you were getting; and vendors usually only made one or two dishes every day, so they were professionals at how to make that one meal taste amazing. In contrast, sit-down restaurants could be ten times as expensive for mediocre food that took up to

two hours to serve. And so, I learned that taste and price of a dish are not correlated. In fact, the cheapest dish I had there, a 75 cent smashed bean and plantain dish called redred, was my favorite dish on the entire trip. Finally, we lightened up and learned to joke around with guys on the chrochro trying to fluster us with proposals. My most memorable chrochro ride was a night trip into town when a tipsy gentleman asked for my hand in marriage and, when I refused, turned to the only male volunteer, Brian, and asked him to sell me to him. Brian replied, "Three cows!", to which the gentleman replied, "no, no, too much, one cow!" No one was laughing harder than the girl seated beside him, who happened to be his fiancée. All of these things – the family near our hotel, redred, and joking with strangers – I never would have found had I stuck with my home cultural norms. I had to first experience disillusionment to appreciate not only how similar my host and home countries were, but also how similar I was to Ghanaians.

But, how can you learn about culture in a way that forces you to experience this disillusionment period? First, you need to explore without chaperones. We learned about how to live day-to-day from previous volunteers and about the sights and adventures from asking locals and exploring. In contrast, some volunteer abroad trips are volunteer tourism, which is more like a summer camp for adults. For fear of actually doing anything on your own, you are given a few coordinators that do everything for you, including feeding you, setting up playtime with the local kids, and making sure you don't wander off and learn something. Much of the cost of these trips goes towards your coordinators and to overhead rather than to supporting the cause. In sanitizing your trip like that, you may make it less stressful, but you are also putting up a fence around yourself.

Second, you must decide when to be a tourist and when to be a member of the global community. Both are fine roles as a traveler: the first immerses you in the history and beauty of a country, and the second opens a discussion with your host's culture. When you travel, you must ask yourself: would you take lunch with a Peruvian farmer if it meant you couldn't visit Machu Picchu?

Would you spend a day with a political protestor in Egypt if it meant you never got to see the pyramids? Do you travel to look at pretty things in person, or to learn what it's like to live there?

Third, you are looking for culture in all the wrong places. I didn't get to visit all the touristy spots I wanted to, but that was never the point of this trip. I learned more about Ghana through volunteering than through going on safari or visiting art centers, the same way that someone visiting DC will learn more by taking the metro to Busboys and Poets rather than a tour bus to the Washington Monument. When you avoid the tourist spots, you will experience the real culture, not the culture the other nations have selected as important. As an example, I've brought my kente cloth. When I announced my trip, everyone told me I had to bring back kente cloth, made only in the Ashanti region of Ghana. But if you look around Ghana, no one owns kente cloth. It is given as a gift for major life events among some of the Akan people, but mostly it is peddled in shops to tourists. Instead, just down the road from those shops, buried deep in alleys and seas of pedestrians, you will find stalls overflowing with deep-toned stamped cloth that most Ghanaian women buy and take to tailors to make their clothes. Taking the chance to get lost might just teach you more than following the beaten path

If we are trying to focus on the similarities between cultures, then, why try to uncover the differences in the first place? Understanding the differences help us to adjust the methods and technology we bring with us to the conditions so that they will thrive. No technology, be it a surgical technique or way to lay pipe, is one-size-fits-all. In Ghana, the rural clinics were designed around this idea. We brought people to the clinic by paying a village coordinator to raise awareness after getting the chief's approval, as the chief's opinion and word-of-mouth are both crucial for bringing an audience. Next, we opened each clinic with an eye health talk to the entire community, as community-wide agreement is a powerful force in Ghanaian villages. Then, we gave a distance vision test based on an E chart rather than a lettered chart, as many villagers were illiterate. Finally, the ophthalmologist performed an eye exam using just a retinoscope, as that was the equipment

that was most versatile and easiest to maintain in the field. Without first uncovering these important pieces of life in rural Ghana, we would have not been able to communicate with them or treat them effectively.

Along the road to adapting to a new culture, I discovered a one poignant difference that made me question whether bridging that gap was possible. When we first arrived, people everywhere on the street were yelling "obruni" at us. The veteran volunteers told us to yell back "obibini." We figured that obruni must mean something like "hi, how are you?", and obibini, "fine, and you?" One of the nurses set us straight: obruni is a greeting, but it literally means "white person," and obibini in reply means "black person." So, everywhere we went, the first acknowledgement of our presence had always been to identify the racial difference between us as foreigners and them as natives, people who belonged here. If that was all people saw of me, then why was I even here? Was I really just a volunteer tourist all along? Could the patients relate to me as a fellow human being trying to help? If they couldn't cross this racial wall, then was I actually helping myself more than I was helping them, getting a trip to Ghana as a reward for bringing funds to the charity?

This brought me to consider whether developed nations should reach out to developing ones by sending over volunteers in the first place. First, there was the cultural barrier. In one village, we were unable to bridge that gap, and the clinic was a failure. The men of the village could not accept that these outsiders, even the Ghanaian doctor who simply spoke with a different accent than them, were more qualified than their local traditional medicine man. The women of the town were terrified of us, and stared through bewildered eyes as we tried to explain how to use eyeglasses in broken Twi. I'm not surprised that they were distressed by being treated by foreigners speaking a language they didn't know examining and treating them for problems they didn't understand. Of a thousand villagers, only forty came to the clinic. All but twelve refused medication, and everyone refused surgery. Second, there are plenty of qualified people in Ghana

who would be able to do our job for less. In one village, we were surprised to see four hundred patients, nearly all of whom spoke fluent English and were college educated. After the eye care talk, the villagers spent nearly two hours asking pressing questions about the finer details of ophthalmology that even I wouldn't have thought to ask. Given this pool of people well-versed in the culture and knowledge they needed to communicate and treat, perhaps the work we did could have been done better by paying the salaries of more nurses and local coordinators.

Still, bringing volunteers from abroad does have its advantages when done properly. First, regular rotations of starry-eyed volunteers bring a much-needed injection of hope and spunk to an otherwise thankless task. Some days, the nurses got so frustrated with the situation – be it a low turnout or patients answering their cell phones during eye exams – that they would leave, but we were always there to cover their place. The hundredth time that a patient can't understand the spatial concept of "which way is the E pointing" is enough to make anyone want to quit, so there was an unspoken gratitude when a volunteer could step in to hoist a plastic chair over their head and repeat "which way is the E pointing? This way!" until the exam could continue.

Second, volunteers can bring funding with them in a way that empowers the people who need it, with minimal overhead. One example is microfinancing. Since microfinancing allows the people who need funding to direct how it is invested, it often works better than projects conducted independent of the people who will benefit from it. A common story you hear from charities here is that they have built a school in Africa. I passed many schoolhouses and libraries in rural communities that were branded with their parent charity, yet were half-finished and abandoned. Just because you build it does not mean they will come.

An even better investment, perhaps, is knowledge. We can share our knowledge via health innovations, such as low-cost cataract surgeries or, a recent invention, glasses that self-adjust to a prescription using water. We can also share our skills, training locals to use the materials we provide to build schoolhouses or treat a patient. Even better, we can use the materials available in

the country to design a solution to a problem, and then build the solution with the people, teaching them how to repair it with local supplies and how to build their own after we've left, an approach which Engineers Without Borders takes on their projects.

Finally, volunteers can travel to become cultural ambassadors, carrying the torch of a shared cultural understanding back home with them. They can inspire others to volunteer or demonstrate just how different we really aren't, inching us back towards that theoretical Tower of Babel, when everyone could participate in a global dialogue without prejudice.

This trip has forced me to reevaluate my perspective of service. Instead of an act of compassion that deserves gratitude, it is an act of support to help others lift themselves up. I've come to learn that a frustrating experience is just an opportunity to expand my worldview. I went to Ghana to give others sight, but in the end, who helped whom see?

So go volunteer abroad. Pack your enthusiasm, your dependability, and your humility. Let your map be getting lost and going beyond your comfort zone. Get ready for the occasional chaos and disappointment. Get ready to accept that your way may not be the best way, and that just because your host nation uses a different technology doesn't mean they don't get the job done just as well. But, most importantly, don't let the feeling that you aren't helping ever stop you from trying to contribute to a sustainable solution.

I titled this sermon after a quote from St. Augustine: "the world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page." However, I will leave you with a quote from someone slightly less famous. At one village, I met a taxi driver named Kwaku, who was from, of all places, Silver Spring, Maryland! He had moved there after attending a chemistry class in his home village taught by Peace Corps volunteers. He describes himself as a "Peace Corp baby", and his daughter, a "Peace Corps grandbaby", worked for Peace Corps herself in Malawi for two years. He summed it up nicely: "God didn't make Americans. He didn't make British. He didn't make Ghanaians. He made human beings."

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