

Crossing Borders: Where I Found Freedom

Since being in Malawi, my worldview has changed in ways I would have never imagined. What I learned while studying abroad in Africa can be explained by the South African spiritual belief called “Ubuntu,” which means I am because we are, I’ll get back to that further on. I would like to share something that an older acquaintance said upon my return that helped me realize how much my worldview was broadened.

When he asked me how my course in Africa went, I opted for the simple reply, “It was truly life changing.” His response was, “Oh, I’m sure it really makes you appreciate being able to walk around here in the free world.” His interpretation of my answer threw me off, because it was only while visiting Malawi and sharing experiences with the locals there, that I felt freer than I have since childhood. Here’s why I think that is; we live in an individualistic society. Many people are only concerned with their own lives, their material possessions, and keeping up with the latest and greatest; all while worrying about what others think of them. We hide behind tinted car windows, locked doors, and privacy fences. We race against deadlines and time trying to accomplish all that we can. Are we truly free, or are we prisoners to our items and our obligations? It’s not entirely our fault, this is simply how we have been socialized to behave. Simply put, it is how we fit into the systems and constructs of our society. In doing this, we may actually be binding ourselves up in the chains of constant pressure and excess.

Many Americans have an ethnocentric monocultural point of view. This means that we judge other cultures against our own as the standard while placing our culture above others. In doing so, we’re missing out on important lessons that other peoples could teach us. We are

taught that sharing our vulnerability is a bad thing. We are misled into believing that we all can achieve anything if we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, ignoring societal factors that might be against some people. We are taught to trust no one. We are taught that relying on another person for help when you need it is a sign of weakness. In Malawi, they seem to have it right. Though they have what we would view as many deficiencies by American standards, what they lack in infrastructure and possessions, they make up for with a deep sense of love and community. Their simplistic way of living allows them to be free. The Malawians seem to operate among an invisible web which connects and cares for all individuals, this is Ubuntu. This web connects people across various cultures, borders, race, age, religion, and socioeconomic status. They function well in their collectivist society, they recognize little divide between themselves and others. They rely on family and neighbors without feeling shameful, it is simply understood that everyone needs others in order to thrive. Being in the rural villages brought more meaning to the phrase we hear all too often, "It takes a village". As Americans, we say that frequently but we fail to live by it. Perhaps Ubuntu, this wonderful philosophy, is why we were able to quickly feel connected to the individuals we spent time with there. It must be mentioned that their hearts are wide open, they care about those in the community, they give what little they have without thinking twice, and they are humble enough to also seek and receive help. There are so many lessons to learn from other cultures, such as the lessons that the Malawian people shared with us, perhaps unknowingly.

Additionally, the Malawian people are exceedingly resourceful while respecting the earth and what nature provides for them. We met a man of 75 years old in Ntchisi Village, which is settled on a mountain that is home to a rainforest. This incredible man's name is Estin, he is so in tune with nature and humanity. He is dedicated to preserving the forest for future generations

while educating visitors of its importance to sustaining life. He led our team on a hike to the top of the mountain, through the beautiful rainforest. Saving a forest is no easy feat, but Estin takes it in stride, day by day, with passion and hope. His drive was a source of encouragement for me and will continue to shape me as a social worker. Prior to the course in Malawi, I found myself frequently discouraged by the many social problems that our country faces. At times I have wondered why I would even take on such a difficult lifestyle of seeking solutions to such daunting issues. However, meeting Estin renewed my passion and gave me a new lens from which to view social problems. Just being in his optimistic presence was empowering. Not only did my worldview change, but the way in which I view my own potential has shifted and has been revitalized.

Overall, in the grand scheme of things, freedom is not equivalent with which country an individual is born into. Ultimate freedom occurs when you step outside of yourself and serve others. When you take care of those around you-those around you will in turn take care of you! Our professor, Dr. Rowan introduced us to this quote by Lilla Watson at the beginning of our course, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” Though I had an abstract idea of what the phrase meant, it was not until being in Malawi for a few days that I began to truly understand the power and meaning behind this quote. My experiences in Malawi led me to discover that true freedom can be obtained when you advocate for and empower all walks of life to be free as well.