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One World

“I would love to go to Africa one day.” This thought first struck me in college and soon took hold thereafter. I loved the idea of going to this place that was bound to be so drastically different from everything I knew. The Africa I imagined could be unforgiving, but always magical. My feelings only intensified after meeting Sister Brigid while serving with the Red Cross during my term as an AmeriCorps Member. Sister Brigid had traveled and lived all over the world, bettering it through relief efforts such as digging wells in Haiti. When I asked her what was her favorite place she had been, I knew the answer before she could even voice it. Africa. She told me there was just something about Africa, “It could chew you up and spit you out but you will never find another place like it.” Just what I had imagined. “I would love to go to Africa one day,” I dreamed out loud. “I know” she said, “I can see it in your eyes.”

From that moment on, I knew I had to go. But where? You see, it is not enough to say “I would love to go to Africa one day.” Africa is not a country. It is a continent made up of 58 countries, each with their own laws, culture and language. North Carolina natives are often irked when told by non-natives that North Carolina and South Carolina are one in the same. Why would we then not owe the same courtesy to Africa and its many diverse nations? So when a chance to study abroad in Malawi arrived, I had finally found the country. Malawi was it.

Before leaving, I had certain expectations for myself and for the journey I was about to embark on. These expectations had been cultivated long before Malawi. With each journey to a new location, I long for personal connection with the people I meet in the short time I am there. I place so much significance on this objective that it can make or break the trip for me. These thoughts I had before leaving hardened into goals on the long flight to Malawi.

My initial thought of Malawi as we drove by van to our first destination was just how beautiful

the landscape is. Having no prior knowledge of the topography apart from what Hollywood had shown me, I was surprised to discover green, rolling hills and tall mountains. Malawi is also graced with a large, clear lake that acts as its eastern border to Tanzania and Mozambique. Seeing this gorgeous landscape made me think America's perception about Africa and how often we get it wrong. Along with grouping diverse nations into one representation, we tend to think that Africa is an exotic and wild place. However, looking at these mountains I thought something different: while they were new to me and unlike any I had seen back home, they were familiar and welcoming.

Our first leg of the trip was not in the mountains but next to Lake Malawi in a fishing village. It was here that we experienced moments that would resonate for the rest of our journey. These moments happened when we were given the extremely fortunate opportunity to visit a family and cook a meal with them in their home. This was exactly what I wanted from the trip, a deeply moving personal connection. We were going to in groups of two, accompanied by a translator. Before leaving, we were warned that we might encounter some emotionally taxing situations. I was ready. In fact, I welcomed the idea of going into this home and being completely emotionally spent but feeling euphoric. The expectation was set and the stakes were high. This could make or break my journey.

With our translator, Rejoice my teammate Sarah and I were graciously ushered into the home of Tamala and her grandson, Moses. Malawi is one of the poorest nations and this is reflected in the housing, but only by America's standards. The houses in the villages are usually made with brick and have thatched roofs. However, this housing was not "less than" our homes here in the states, only different. It was evident that Tamala took pride in her home. Her possessions, although not great in number, were kept tidy and organized. She even brought out a straw mat for Sarah and me to sit on so that we did not have to sit on the ground. As we chopped vegetables and passed questions to Tamala through Rejoice, I kept waiting for that emotionally raw moment of connection that I was seeking. That moment never came. What happened instead was a change in my world view. What I wanted was for this moment to be incomparable to any I have felt at home. What I got was even better: this

moment was utterly relatable. Sitting on the mat on a beautiful sunny day, I could have been with my grandmother in Shelby frying okra. Or sitting with a neighbor just enjoying her presence without much conversation. The time we had was not wrought with emotion, but rather pleasant and relaxing. It was just nice and that is all it needed to be. I experienced a shared sense of humanity with a different setting. Malawi is not so far from us, so different from us. They are us.

I learned a great lesson that day, on multiple levels. I learned to let go of expectations and be in the moment. I learned that our world is both vastly diverse and significantly similar, simultaneously. The simple moments of humanity are what bring us together. Just as simple as preparing a meal. Whether in Malawi or the United States, we all have our struggles and moments of joy. Now when I go through the day-to-day of my life, I will think of the people in Malawi and elsewhere doing the same. There is no third world, no first world, only one world.