

Spiritual Journeys through South Africa

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Let me begin with a story, for what is life but a series of narratives in which I am both author and character? This story begins at my darkest hour. Suffering from severe depression, I am questioning the value of living a life without apparent meaning. I cannot see past my pain, neither can I bring myself to plan an escape. I am forced to choose between utter despair and the possibility of a better future. I decide to give it two weeks. By waiting, I have in fact made a decision. I've chosen to live!

Fast forward six years. My life looks different now. I am twenty: on scholarship at Drake University, volunteering with anti-poverty organization Oxfam, and preparing to study abroad for five months at a university in South Africa. I've come a long way in these six years. I am ready to engage with the world and all it has to offer. I am free.

Upon arriving in South Africa, the first thing I notice is the fences. Tall and topped with electric or razor wire, they surround every home and business of value. Crime is a daily reality in this country. I'm told it is driven by poverty, a culture of entitlement, and a high social tolerance for violence. This reality is driven home for me every time I go out to buy groceries. The way to the mall is lined with beggars. Some have homes and families to support, others have been on the streets since childhood. They try to make do on the generosity of the affluent. Most people walk on by, seemingly oblivious to their presence. I make a point to talk to them and to greet them respectfully as people.

One man, who goes by "Mr. Rubbish", is particularly friendly. He is always curious how my studies are going. He often cautions me to be safe and only occasionally asks for some groceries for his family. Yet there will always be barriers between us. In my short life, I've had opportunities that Mr. Rubbish can only dream of. I have the opportunity to be educated, to work at a decent job, and to travel abroad. Mr. Rubbish dreams that one day his children will experience these opportunities. It is not too late for them.

I have never felt as "White" as I feel on the streets of Pietermaritzburg. Whites are a minority in South Africa, but as a White man I retain the identity of a colonizer. While I didn't ask to be privileged in life, I benefit every day from my Whiteness. These benefits of privilege are two-sided. I can access opportunities that people of other races and genders are excluded from. However, as long as the implicit assumptions of my identity go unchallenged, I will lack the ability to learn from the identities of others.

Like many White American men, I haven't had to think much about my identity growing up. I was more inclined to think of everyone as "just people". This is partly right and partly wrong. All of us do share a common human bond, but eliminating others' cultural and gender identities from consideration too often leads me to consider them solely in terms of my own White Male identity. Seeing myself in this way, as a "default" that everyone else must be judged by is dangerous if I want to grow in a truly multicultural, multiracial, multi-gendered world. My experiences engaging with multiple beliefs in our UU congregation make it easier for me to adjust to the multiplicity of identities that is newly brought home to me by my status as a foreigner in South Africa.

My religious perspectives are brought to the fore early in my stay. The second Sunday of my trip I visit the local Pentecostal church. In an unfortunate incident, I am forced to call-out the youth pastor when he asks if anyone doubts his proof of the existence of God. "Haven't you assumed the existence of God and then proven his attributes?", I ask. Fortunately, he takes it well, and we proceed to have a good conversation about the meaning of worship. While we agree that worship is about service out of reverence for something, we disagree about the way that worship should be approached. His tradition approaches worship as something that stems from certainty in the truth of the doctrines of his form of Christianity. While I could acknowledge a need for God within me, I was not in the least bit inclined to worship out of logical compulsion. I tell him that I would worship if I understood that it was the morally correct thing to do. He asks me if I would consent to worship a God that did not create me. I can tell that he is still thinking in terms of compulsion- if God didn't create me, he would have no power over me. I tell him I'll get back to him on that one.

Meanwhile, classes begin and I am plunged once more into the world of academia. I thrive off the constant discourse around development. While community development is seen as more or less an aside to education in the United States, it is central to the academic discourse in South Africa. I realize this early in the semester, when I am speaking with my floor-mates. They are curious why I came to South Africa to study and are initially not impressed by my explanation that I came to learn about my own culture. To them, education is the pathway through which the student's entire community is uplifted, and they don't see why I would come from a rich country to study in a poor one. I explain that the United States is not uniformly wealthy and that many people who do have enough materially are struggling to find meaning in their lives. After a half hour discussion on life in Iowa, I am rewarded with one of the most gratifying experiences of my trip when he says "I guess you

Americans are ordinary people after all". "That's why I came here," I think to myself.

I am fortunate that one of my classes arranges opportunities for me to volunteer with social justice groups. The first group, the KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council, advocates for policies that allow poor communities to regain control of their destinies. Poverty is far more than a deficiency of material things. Poverty is about power: the power to feed one's family, to work in a dignified environment, and to express ones views in society. My experiences of powerless during my frequent bouts of depression leads me to empathize with people who lack the power to do even the most basic things for themselves. Like depression, poverty is a treatable condition that can be reduced in most cases through the actions of the human community.

One of the assignments that I receive is to develop policies that will enable people to feed themselves through gardening. In a poor country like South Africa, poverty or illness often means starvation. The government is supposed to prevent this with a handout, but often the donations of food or money arrive too late. Many communities would like to take matters into their own hands by growing some of their own food. I visit a local women's group that is starting a garden to grow vegetables for children, the elderly, and people with AIDS. I share my knowledge about watering and mulching vegetables, and they share their recommendations for how the government could support their work. I combine their information with further research and draw up a set of policies that they can use to lobby government officials to support community gardening. By challenging the prevailing notion that views poor people as little more than objects of charity, I open up a space for them to asset their power.

This form of empowerment is humbling work. It requires me to sacrifice some of my control- to trust the newly empowered women to help guide our common future. As they continue to gain experience lobbying their government, there is no guarantee that they will say what I would want them to say or do what I would want them to do. By helping these women to take their place at the decision-making table, I have given up some of my power. But what alternative is there? How can I ethically say that I- by virtue of wealth and status alone- should have a disproportionate say in the direction of the world? I would rather replace this culture of dominance with one of compassion, where every person is able to participate in determining our future. I believe that we will not see the end of poverty and environmental degradation until we empower each individual person to participate constructively in the decision-making process.

After a few weeks with the Council, I begin work with a second organization. The Ubuntu Crisis Centre is an orphanage in the rural township of Edendale just outside the city. The centre provides support to orphans, poor, and abused children. Most of the 32 girls at the centre have been raped or beaten. All of the children have witnessed violence that most of us would find unimaginable at their ages. My role at the centre is to be a positive male presence in their lives. We play games, do science activities, and laugh together. One day, I help the children to make ecosystems in plastic bottles. We gather soil, plant weeds, and have fun searching for cockroaches to represent the animal kingdom. After explaining science as a way to learn by watching the world and thinking about what is seen, I set the kids loose to record their observations of the bottles. After a week, we think about our results. One group kept everything alive and considers their bottle a success. The other groups overwatered. All of the children gain an appreciation for nature and for using science to learn about the world. Meanwhile, I gain a valuable insight into myself. I discover how to use my freedom.

I think everyone discovers this at one time or another. We witness the pain and evil in the world and discover our freedom to chart our course through it. During my periods of mental illness, my sole freedom was to choose to live. As I have slowly become more free, I am able to choose how to live: what actions to take, who to build relationships with, and what path will guide the direction of my life.

I choose the path of service. I do so because for me, service to the human community is the fullest expression of my humanity and the logical outcome of my freedom. I do not serve to remake the world or to make everything better. I realize from my interaction with the girls at Ubuntu Crisis Centre that I cannot make the pain of the world go away. What I can do is be present, help when needed, and nurture the spark of freedom inherent in each person- no matter how awful their past or present.

I want to take a moment now to emphasize that community service is only one form of service to humanity. I know a woman who once expressed admiration at the degree of activism I engage in and told me how different she felt in her own life. However, this same woman brought up two children from a young age and now cares for her disabled son's young children. Surely this woman, through caring for her children and grandchildren, has done as much for humanity as I can hope to achieve through my activism. In my mind, service to humanity occurs any time we put the needs of the human community above our own immediate desires.

Which brings me back to the question of worship. Would I consent to worship a God that did not create me? A God with

no power over me? To answer this question, I must first understand what worship is. As I see it, worship has two components: an awe and reverence component, and a sacrifice and service component. The former comes from discovering something greater than myself, the latter comes in when I act on this basis. So worship has to do with service out of awe and reverence.

As I continue to speak with the minister at the Pentecostal church, it becomes clear that I would indeed consent to worship a God without power over me. Indeed, I believe that this is the only God one can worship, given our inability to prove the existence of a Supernatural Divinity. My answer comes as a surprise to both of us. Being an evangelical, the minister sees worship solely as an act of absolute surrender of the self to a higher power. As a UU, I have traditionally seen worship solely as an act of community in the here and now. To him, God was compulsion, to me, God was incidental. My truth now rests somewhere in between.

You see, one of the lessons that I learned in South Africa was how to believe in something. Perhaps as a result of my history of mental illness, I often struggle with an excessive urge to control my life. In the realm of belief, this has led me to demand absolute certainty in an ideal or a reality before I'm willing to put my faith in it. South Africans, including Mr. Rubbish and the orphans at Ubuntu, taught me another way. Facing challenges of powerlessness and pain that are similar to what I had faced, these people exercised choice instead of control. The idea that we can choose where to place our faith has had important implications for my religious journey since then.

Realizing that I had a choice of where to put my religious faith, I began to think about what path I wanted to take. The most important criteria for my decision of what religious path to take were its applicability to my situation and its potential for my transformation. The more I thought about it, the clearer my decision became. I chose Christianity- not in the sense of never doubting church doctrine, but in the sense of living as I believe Jesus would have taught me to live.

My reasons for choosing liberal Christianity are largely personal, and my faith is still evolving. Right now I will share just one aspect of my faith. I interpret the Christian teachings in a Universalist manner, choosing to believe that God's love is for all of us, and that it is more than enough to make everyone worthy as they are. This adds a new dimension to my service. I no longer have to serve in order to justify my human dignity, and I am instead freed to serve others because they share in this dignity. As a Christian and a Universalist, my worship compels me not to write any human off as incapable of growth- of salvation.

This is not about denying the existence of evil. I've experienced enough depression to know the reality of human suffering. Nor is it about eliminating all forms of pain- as if we could. Rather, it is expressed as something closer to Ubuntu- the African concept that my humanity is inextricably tied up in yours, in ours. My worship leads me to become the best person I can be through service to the larger community of which I am but a part.

So even as I am personally attracted to the possibility of God, I am unreservedly grounded in the reality of a world in need and my opportunity to use my freedom for its betterment. At times this will require me to cede power to the poor or

influence to the oppressed; as our Church has ceded its monopoly on religious truth. But one thing I've learned is that humility is the gateway to true spiritual growth. As I continue on my spiritual journey I take comfort in the affirmation that we are endowed with reason that we may choose, morality that we may coexist, and each other that we may love. This affirmation is the bedrock of my religion, and I look forward to your help in building on it. Thank you.