

Different Culture, Different Me, Same World, New perspective.

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I was the typical little black girl who had always dreamed of going to Africa, of visiting the motherland, of getting in touch with my “roots”. I dreamed of what it would be like to visit a country whose identity and culture had withstood the test of time. As a child, I imagined it would be full of beautiful black kings and queens dripping in gold, feasting on grapes while being fanned with banana leaves. In my teenage years, that powerful image was replaced with pictures of sickly children covered in flies, half naked women roaming the streets and a culture of poverty and desperation. As I matured, I often wondered, how could that country deteriorate so fast? How could they allow themselves to fall victim to others, again? How come they cannot pull themselves up by their bootstrap and provide for their people? What I didn't realize is that the soul of the country hadn't changed, rather my perspective of it had been reshaped by someone else's narrative.

When offered the opportunity to study NGOs in Malawi, I thought it was a perfect time to explore my deeply rooted questions and finally get some answers. I was going to crack the code of what had happened to my ancestors in Africa to cause them to change so drastically. What I found instead was a feeling of familiarity, of optimism, of hope, and unconditional love. What I found instead was myself and a new found compassion for humankind. What I truly found was a country full of wholehearted people who were willing to embrace me as their own, while teaching me to love myself and honor the earth. What I found was a different culture who sent home a different me in just 11 short days.

This experience made me think back to my first year in graduate school when I interned for a homeless women's shelter here in Charlotte. I went into that experience with my notions of what homelessness was and why it was so prevalent. My perspective was quickly changed with every new encounter. I saw how policies and procedures could work against the very population it's meant to serve. I saw how various factors such as domestic violence, generational poverty, early pregnancy, and religion played a key role in domestic homelessness. I started to shift from a mindset of sympathy to one of compassion and understanding. I began to see the value of each individual and their story. Experiencing Malawi brought those same feelings up again and I knew in that moment it was the lesson I was supposed to lean into. I was in the right place at the right time. I was meant to see the people and hear their stories. I was meant to see the beauty and strength and systematic poverty for what it was. What I was not expecting was to feel so connected to the people of a country I had never heard of prior to 3 years ago. I was not expecting their story to align so closely to mine. I was not expecting them to be so happy and at peace. I was not expecting their lives to touch mine in a way that would change me forever.

While building relationships in Malawi, I heard so many stories that resonate with my own. I heard stories: of siblings sacrificing for the survival of the group, of grandmothers taking care of children after the death of her own children, of current leaders' aspirations to change the world, of the corruption in government, of famine and sickness, of unspoken beauty and strength, of survival, of resilience, of unconditional love, of humbleness, of humility, and of courage. Hearing the stories and seeing the people of Malawi has helped me to own my truth and my story. It has helped me see the strength in my journey and acknowledge the power of my first generation college student experience. This experience has changed my life but it has also

changed the life of those who will come in contact with me in the future. I'll be a softer, more gentle, more compassionate, more pleasant, more grateful, more loving, more understanding person because of the Malawian people. This may have been a different culture, which contributed to a different me but we are one in the same with shared experiences. My left Malawi feeling that my liberation is tied to the liberation of all people and I will begin fighting for the liberation of all people from a place of unconditional love.