

Heaven on Earth: The Warm Heart of Africa

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To explain how my experience in Malawi, the warm heart of Africa, affected my worldview I must start on January 27, 2017, the day President Trump signed the executive order banning travel from seven majority Muslim countries, and radically decreased the number of refugee admissions into the United States (White House Executive Orders, 2017). This day impacted me heavily because I had spent the last six months working with a local post-resettlement refugee agency, and knew many clients' from countries mentioned in the executive order whose hopes of family reunification had been crushed with the signing of the document. I sat with families as they cried and asked questions like "Why does everyone seem to hate us?" and I struggled to answer those questions.

I struggled because I had always identified as a Christian, and while I had spent the last six months learning about the beauty of different cultures and religions, my fellow church goers had been supporting a man who had just signed a piece of legislation that had deeply hurt people I knew and cared about. I was disheartened by the direction other Christians seemed to think God was leading them, and was at a point where I wondered if I even wanted to associate with Christianity or the church anymore. It was at this point that I was also preparing for my first trip to Africa.

On February 24, 2017 I flew to Uganda to spend two weeks working with local non-profit. The organization operated in a small, rural village by providing a HIV testing clinic and home-based care. During my time in Uganda I was able to see the operations of the clinic and go with the workers to individual homes to check on clients and ensure they had access antiretroviral medications. One day, after visiting some clients we took a break and visited a large rock overlook. Sitting high above, looking at the most exquisite beauty and extreme poverty I had

ever seen, I quietly called out to God and asked him to speak to me so that I would know he was still there... I heard nothing. I had gone to the village with the hope that I would somehow reconnect with the God I had always grown up believing in, but he did not answer me. A few days later it was time to return to the US, and so I left Uganda feeling rather hopeless. The problems facing the village in Uganda seemed overwhelming and insurmountable. Furthermore, I had suffered a loss that was part of my identity, and I had seen and experienced things that I could not explain, rationalize, or even begin to process.

A year later, as I was preparing to go to Malawi, I was hoping that I would learn what I could do as a social worker to affect change internationally, and gain new perspective on my experience in Uganda; but I learned so much more than that. The first day in Malawi was spent in Ntchisi, building relationship with the people who lived in the village on the outskirts of the Ntchisi Forest Reserve. I learned about the school and the church, I played with the children and shook hands with the village elders, and I felt happy and at peace. The next day, we took a guided tour through the forest discussed the impact of global warming on the dry seasons causing fires to ravage to forest, which in turn effected the village people who depended on the forest for their livelihood; the same people that I had just met the day before. I began to see the interconnectedness of everything, and I felt my own fire starting inside.

The theme of connection continued as we journeyed to lake Malawi. We learned how people were creating alternate fuel sources out of recycled materials that were more cost effective than firewood, and also helped protect the trees that we had just seen in the forest. People in a village 4 hours away were having an impact on the forest we had just left. We also spent time with families in the village cooking a meal. This experience was humbling for me because I was fully dependent on the people around me, which is not something I am used to. I learned that even

though I may have better access to resources, I have no idea how to best utilize them. I learned it is not necessarily what you have, but how you use what you have. The people on Lake Malawi are using what they have to its fullest and are sustaining an entire community.

Finally, we went into the city and we worked with organizations that provide peer mentoring for people who are HIV positive. I was amazed by the work that these organizations do in their communities. During a visit to one particular organization we heard a presentation from one of the UNCC faculty about stigma in America placed on formerly incarcerated black gay men who were HIV positive, and how that stigma limited the access to care and resources. It was during this presentation that everything came full circle for me. I had been traveling to foreign countries to find meaning, but I learned that meaning is found when we profoundly connect with other human beings. I learned that God exists in the beauty of our environment, in the relationships we form, and in the love that we share. I learned that I am not alone because there are people across the globe who feel the same, and that we are all working together to make a better world for others and ourselves, to make heaven on earth. I found my heaven in Malawi, the warm heart of Africa, but there is still work to do in my own back yard.

## References

White House Executive Orders. (2017). Executive Order Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States. Retrieved March 14, 2018 from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states/>