

*Lessons From My Mothers*

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The figurative mothers that have impacted my experience abroad bestowed many lessons upon me. To understand the present, it's necessary to revisit the past. My formative years were shaped by "*the Mother Organization*" a 50's epithet given by members of the new-age religious movement that I was born into. With this mom, I was taught that only real love and acceptance came from people who believed as I did. I was taught to only make friends with them. I was taught intolerance. Up until my late 20's, I navigated life through this narrow lens never really living, taking risks, or immersing myself in other worldviews.

At 29, I was finally ready to ask questions, to get uncomfortable, and to truly explore all possibilities. I left the only "mother" I'd known thus severing ties with the only community I was close to, due to their shunning policy. I had no idea what I believed anymore or who I was. I nearly had a nervous breakdown as the tattered fabric of my worldview was unraveling. Fortunately, I was able to start stitching together a new life. I soon enrolled in the social work master's program at UNCC. After rejecting my restrictive upbringing with "the mother organization", I derived new lessons from my early experience. I learned to value my own opinions as well as the opinions of others. I also started to value the importance of viewing things with a fresh pair of eyes, from a place of wonder. Those newly formed lessons primed me to seek out new experiences.

I soon came across a unique opportunity to experience social work in Malawi. The changes I was about to undergo began in the classroom. I was privileged to be instructed by Dr. Diana Rowan as well as have a mentor in Dr. Sharon Watson. In a way, I felt mothered by their example and I latched onto their guidance and wisdom, both having spent extensive time in

Africa previously. I looked to Dr. Rowan's leadership to know when and how to properly shake someone's hand (trying to remember to grab my elbow with the opposite hand to show respect). She taught me the importance of building relationships and getting terribly uncomfortable. Instead of a safe space, she fostered the spirit of a brave space-where you challenge yourself to have tough, constructive, and loving conversations with people that share different ideas and realities about the world. She taught me to embrace the pain of growth.

Dr. Watson gave a beautiful speech to some of our Malawian friends on the power of each of our stories and how we share more similarities than differences. We all have a struggle and any of our struggles could have been the others-it's just a matter of where we were born. I learned from her that we are here to support each other in our struggles as members of the human family regardless of race, creed, or social status.

My other "mother" is a small piece of the Motherland herself, Malawi. I met so many beautiful strangers, representing so many marginalized groups such as orphans, members of the LGBTQ community, and those living with a positive HIV status. Nevertheless, everyone was so happy and possessed boundless optimism even if they did not know if they'd have ample food the next day. I've learned to adopt similar optimism in my own life and through my own struggles. I've learned gratitude for the things I do have. Every single person in Malawi showed me kindness, respect, and immense hospitality. I was given the best of everything. I felt I didn't deserve it because I didn't earn it. If I wasn't one of them, why should I get this honor? They shattered my old worldview that only people who share your beliefs can show true love and acceptance. Since leaving Malawi, I've made an even greater effort to be accepting of all people. There is more that connects us even if borders and oceans or differences in opinions separate us.

Under the African night sky, I danced with the local children to the beat of the drum with myriads of stars shining down on us. I looked at the sky that night on that side of the world and tried my best to memorize that moment. We didn't speak the same language but we smiled and danced while mimicking each other's moves. We all had a blast. I learned to let go of feeling silly, to be in the moment, and to create memories without the use of a cellphone. I do not have one picture from that night and it's one of the moments I treasure most. I've learned to keep dancing like no one is watching.

I could never truly put into words how my experience in Malawi changed me. I'm still changing. The seeds planted in me have yet to be rooted and I'm sure more lessons will surface as I reacclimate back into life in the US. I can only hope that I left a mark on the hearts of those I met with, ate with, and danced with and now and forever love.

Whether traveling out of an old worldview or traveling into a foreign land, one lesson remains the same: there will be awkwardness, pain, discomfort, love, joy, and ultimately growth. I agree with the following words from the late Anthony Bourdain: "Travel isn't always pretty. It isn't always comfortable. Sometimes it hurts, it even breaks your heart. But that's okay. The journey changes you; it should change you. It leaves marks on your memory, on your consciousness, on your heart, and on your body. You take something with you. Hopefully, you leave something good behind."