

Masukani- Be Free

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Masukani means, “be free” in Chichewa. These words were highlighted throughout my journey to Malawi and I have interpreted them into my own life: Be free to accept; be free to experience; be free to learn; be free to be happy; be free to love.

When I was a young child, I can remember seeing the face of a young, African girl on the television. Confused, I asked my parents, “Why is she not wearing a shirt and why does she look so sad?” This was my first lesson about cultural differences and of western culture’s perception of extreme poverty. Little did I know that this would spark my interest in helping others and create a desire to go to Africa. Looking back, I would say that at the time, my interests were naïve and biased. Since then, my opinion about international aid has dramatically changed after studying human rights, cultural diversity and ultimately changing my career path to human services. After my studies, I thought my opinions and worldview were fairly mindful and less naïve. However, when I was finally able to visit Malawi this past spring break, not only did my viewpoints change, but my entire life changed.

We are constantly bombarded by the negative images and stories that highlight struggles and differences between cultures. Constantly hearing the phrase, “there are people starving and dying in other countries,” can desensitize people from the realities that are occurring throughout the world. Another phrase, “Save Africa” can create a negative interpretation towards this beautiful country. Additionally, it can create a biased viewpoint that Africans are “primitive” and are “in need of saving.” There seems to be a focus on choosing the correct culture for many to adapt to. When concentrating on

choosing the right culture, acceptance is often cast aside and diminished. Be free to accept.

A special person in Malawi said, “We may look different, but we are the same, with the same blood.” This eases pressure for finding the perfect culture, and creates a bond that all people share- we are human. Although we have different backgrounds and cultures, we should work together to become more connected. In Malawi, communities work together to overcome stressors that affect families and children of the community. It was humbling to see the success of people working together with very limited resources. This emphasized that people have the ability to help themselves and work hard to achieve goals. Be free to experience.

It has always been a passion of mine to help others, however I realized that constantly giving does not create sustainable change. This trip has taught me a more efficient way to help others: Be free to help people help themselves and be free to learn from them. By focusing on this concept throughout our trip, our group made decisions about where to donate items and allowed Malawians to choose how they were used. Our goal was to create sustainable relationships with the communities and agencies by helping the communities help themselves. To my surprise, many agencies and communities continued to show interest in building relationships throughout our entire stay and after our departure. This aided me in the redefining of my role when helping others. Be free to learn.

Although we worked to help others, it is challenging to express how much they helped us. I met a little girl that was both deaf and blind. Being cast out from her family, she is learning how to live, but more importantly she is teaching others how to live as

well. She is being taught basic foundations to ensure a longer life, but she is teaching others to live a quality life. I was instantly connected to this young girl because of her positive personality. She is bright, funny, and constantly had a smile on her face even though she was living with a disability and in poverty. This little girl really put things in perspective for me. Through western culture's definition of success, she would seem less fortunate than me; however, she was so much happier than me. Be free to be happy.

Genuine happiness was a constant theme I saw in many children while visiting Malawi. Although many children had HIV/AIDS, did not have parents, or had another disability, constant joy was still on their faces. Additionally, many of these children became the caretakers for their younger siblings. Through a Western culture's perspective, many would assume that their situation is hopeless. There is no doubt in my mind that the current plight of these children is difficult and is challenging for me to accept. However, we had time to play and interact with these amazing children and we developed a close connection with them. Having the opportunity to hear their stories of resiliency and appreciation towards life was eye-opening and life-changing. Be free to love.

Sometimes we get so caught up in our own culture, we forget about the challenges people face everyday and the strengths they have developed. Although western culture is flourished with materialistic items and definitions of success, sometimes we miss the importance of compassion and genuine happiness. Traveling to Malawi helped me redefine compassion and happiness and brought these two concepts back into my life. Many people would believe that we are so lucky to live in the United States, which in many ways we are. But how lucky are we, really? Part of my heart will always be in

Malawi with the wonderful children and families that we met, however my memories, lessons, and experiences will always be kept close. Masukani.