

BUILDING A HOME

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Abstract

This supplemental paper provides insight into the process of using video production (planning, filming, editing) as an access point to a local community center, Be Able Community. I build on lessons that I've learned throughout my time at KSU, focusing on the anthropological perspectives I've gained and especially those that intersect with the other disciplines I've studied: psychology, trauma studies. I reflect not only on how these lessons have served me during my time at K-State, but also on how I plan to carry them forward into the next phase of life.

Building a Home

Last spring, after I had submitted my final project for Digital Ethnography, I thought I had put the camera away for good. As much as I learned and as much fun as I had, I still didn't feel like a "creative." Of course, Dr. Wesch redefined that word for me, indicating that there isn't a stark distinction between the creatives and the analytical, the feelers and the thinkers. They are not mutually exclusive. Cognitive psychology confirms this by suggesting that there are ways to cultivate creativity through idea generation, incubation, and evaluation of the ideas. In the brain, there are various neural networks that are activated during different mental processes. During creativity, there is a paradoxical simultaneous activation of the Executive Control Network (ECN) which controls attention and the Default Mode Network (DMN) which is most understood in the context of "mind-wandering." This means that as we allow our minds to wander among untethered ideas or novel solutions to problems, the ECN helps guide our attention away from traditional or "fixed" thinking; thus, practical or aesthetic novelty is born. What are the ingredients to both, according to Dr. Wesch? Curiosity and connections. According to cognitive psychology? Ideas and evaluation. A desire to explore and an ability to synthesize the ideas that come to you along the way.

This project started with desire: the desire to maintain my relationship with Be Able and share what it has meant to people. Really, though, it started with Marlon's affirmation that the first video I made was instrumental in Be Able's development and his putting faith forward that I could do it again. Faith has been a massive ingredient in all of this. When I filmed Scott Voos' (executive director) interview last spring, he said, "I have endless hope in people—I'm an eternal hoper. I know it exists because God never gave up on me." This is a statement of what sets Be Able apart: the radical belief in individuals. Of course, faith and belief have many associations,

perhaps the primary one being Christianity or other Western religions. And in my life, that's where it bears the most weight. Studying Hebrews this semester, the book of the Bible which contains the "Hall of Faith," I have begun to grasp, among other lessons on grace, what it means to have faith (belief, trust): "...faith is the confidence of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Through faith, we have an inner reality—a present-day ownership—of the hope and promises of Jesus. C.S. Lewis describes it this way: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else." For Scott and the Be Able team, faith gives them a lens to see potential even in utterly wretched circumstances. The pioneer of our faith, Jesus, endured the cross for the joy set before him (Hebrews 12:2) to embolden us to keep running the race—there's joy to come! Many Neighbors are running in the wrong direction. Others have turned their lives around and are taking steps toward freedom – from addiction, abusive relationships, homelessness, untreated mental illness or physical disability. Wherever they find themselves, Be Able meets them there. One evening, I drove to Be Able to get a shot of the exterior and found a woman sitting on the steps. She was waiting for the evening class, "Boundaries," and found that the locked building was the safest spot for her to wait. She was tired of disappointing Scott and Marlon after over a year of knowing them and continually reverting to meth to escape her problems. She was five days sober when I met her, thirty days sober the next time, and two months now. How? Because they never gave up on her.

Related to having "endless hope" in someone's transformation is having grace for when they inevitably fail along the way. As you enter Be Able from the street, there's a big sign in purple letters that reads "GRACE." Effectively, it says, "You're welcome here, as you are." It's strategically placed in the In-Take Area where new Neighbors come to tell their story. Grace is

defined as unmerited favor, but that minimizes its complexity and beauty. In the Roman-Greco world, the Jews understood grace in the context of a patron-client relationship. Those who were financially privileged or high class (patrons) blessed a client with resources and protection and received honor and gratitude in return. It's a dance of three graces: an attitude of favor (give), an attitude of acceptance (receive), and an attitude of gratitude (grace). Anthropologists define this as generalized reciprocity – the giving of a gift with no expected return or, more abstractly, the glue of society. The way we hold our community together is by understanding that grace outpoured is grace returned.

It's easier said than done. Dr. Saucier, professor of Social Psychology, says—perhaps cynically—that the two human truths are that people are lazy and people want to feel good. We want to distance ourselves from things that make us uncomfortable. One way we do this is by blaming the victim. The other is pretending an issue doesn't exist. In the video, Scott puts it this way: “People want to help, they want to volunteer, until it is presented in their face.” Similarly, Dr. Paul Farmer, Infection Disease physician and medical anthropologist says, “Poverty... is difficult to personalize. If it's in front of you, it has a reality” (Kidder, 2003, p. 279). We know from research that the first step to prosocial or, specifically, helping behavior is *noticing* – seeing the injustice. What we maybe don't realize is that things could've gone differently—that poverty of a place or people is a social construction, determined by the systems and structures that we've created. That's not to place blame, but to communicate that we have a responsibility to see it and then do something. I felt indignant when Be Able was pushed further into the outskirts of Manhattan. It felt like a callous and calculated move to marginalize the marginalized. With my video, I hoped to help people *see*.

Initially, I wanted to show off the new place which, despite my initial vexation, was exactly what Be Able needed to grow their ministry and provide a hub for other community services on Yuma Street. The project was supposed to be quick and painless. But pain, as I learned during my last project with Be Able, is inescapable. In fact, this idea informed a portion of the last video's title: *Suffering in Solidarity*. Ursula Le Guin, author of *The Dispossessed* puts it poetically: "Suffering is the condition on which we live... Of course, it's right to cure diseases, to prevent hunger and injustice, as the social organism does. But no society can change the nature of its existence. We can't prevent suffering. This pain and that pain, yes, but not Pain. A society can only relieve social suffering - unnecessary suffering. The rest remains. The root, the reality." For me, it was growing pain, but it was also visceral empathy: "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated *as if you yourselves were suffering*" (Hebrews 13:3) Needless to say, after three drafts and a great many hours of editing in the media lab of Hale library, I had finally honed the video to something worthy of representing Be Able: a home.

Dr. Farmer was a champion of the poor—his life's work was predicated on a "preferential option for the poor" or O for the P. He helped design a revolutionary public health system in which patients received medication, yes, but also other basic needs including support in the form of a community health worker: "Giving people medication for TB and not giving them food is like washing your hands and drying them in the dirt" (Kidder, 2003, p. 34) Be Able has, unknowingly, adopted this model in their service to prisoners, the poor, and the physically or mentally disabled. As they attack the primary illness (of body, mind, or spirit), they surround the Neighbors with resources and, importantly, love. Scott comments on the fact that Be Able didn't initially have "Community" in their name; that was an addition that took hold somewhere

down the line to emphasize the mission of intimacy, dependence on one another, and kinship. Dr. Farmer felt most at “home” in Haiti, amidst the suffering and life change. Scott Voos and the team at Be Able are rebuilding a home on 5th and Yuma that houses hope (for the hopeless), faith (in transformation), and love; “but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

As I embark on my next adventure, in pursuit of my home (that is, my place of service), I think of the script that I initially wrote for this project. In our first four or five takes, Marlon said and did what I had prepared for him. And it fell flat. It lacked depth and authenticity. On our sixth take, guided yet unrestrained, Marlon’s personality made the brunt of this otherwise “informational” video worth watching. (My personal favorite line: “...even a bag of potatoes if you want it.”) With everything that I’ve learned through the phenomenal faculty at K-State, my own story post-graduation will also be guided yet unrestrained. I am free to create, to make mistakes, to laugh, to feel pain, and to run toward the hope set before me. Through my lessons, I’ve honed my values into three guiding principles:

- 1) **Walk with humility.** Humility has the same Latin root word (humus) as earth. An exemplar of humility, Jesus, came “down to earth” and used his gentle and lowly power to bring hope and healing—to make things new. Knowing this, I can claim no superiority or boast in any of my accomplishments without acknowledging the source of it all—and the many, many allies and mentors that I’ve been blessed with along the way.
- 2) **Be committed to service motivated by joy and love:** “If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3). The “issue of altruism” is that motivation cannot be

empirically verified, but pure love and joy is difficult to fudge. Both must be present for healing (wholeness) to happen.

3) **Choose optimism.** It's a moral choice to have hope. Despair will only destroy.

Pessimism will prevent us from seeing any solutions or even seeing the problem to begin.

Dr. Wesch once said that creativity starts with curiosity and is born through connections. Connections, in my case, was the incubation and synthesis of ideas, but, more than that, it was the sweet “connections” that I made along the way. It has been a true honor to interact with, observe, and build trust among the volunteers, staff, and Neighbors at Be Able. Gratitude overflows that they entrusted me with their story and that K-State gave me the opportunity to tell it. Be Able is just getting started and they hunger for more. As do I.