

Human Connection and Social Development: Lessons Learned from a Summer in Ghana

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I had the opportunity to spend the majority of the summer of 2010 interning in Ghana with an organization called Disaster Volunteers of Ghana. I lived with a host family in a village called Sogakope. I was one of three white people in the entire village, the other two being the friends I went with. I spent my days teaching at the local school that also housed the orphanage; depending on the needs of the day I taught anything from kindergarten to junior high. After the school day ended, I played with the kids and helped them with chores and homework. I spent every afternoon entertaining children without television, video games, bikes, fancy sports equipment or computers. It was quite the challenge. Before my internship in Ghana, I idealized the concept of service. When my plans to work in an orphanage with children all summer were cemented, visions of smiling, laughing, joyful and adorable children danced in my head: inspiring all fundraising and preparation efforts, leading to the negation of any realistic mental preparation for the challenges and hardships that were sure to be faced. Living and working in Ghana for seven weeks was an extremely unique, valuable and educational experience. I left the country knowing infinitely more about myself, the world, and what I am 'supposed' to do during my time in this world than I did before.

As a double major in political science and family studies and human services, I hope to be an advocate for families and individuals within a community; invigorating public policy and law with concern for and understanding of the wellbeing of the public. I'm especially interested in working with children in poverty, and ensuring that social institutions and programs are established with the betterment of the children as the first priority, even if that is not the most cost-

efficient path. Having a knowledge of human development and first hand experience with poverty-stricken children is crucial for policy makers and civic leaders , and receiving the Morse scholarship allowed me to deeply further my knowledge about this area. I was able to spend my summer immersed in Ghanaian culture: developing relationships with those I was surrounded with, and being involved in educational and social welfare institutions on a structural level. The knowledge and insights that this experience led to, while not always uplifting, will be extremely valuable to me as I continue my education at Kansas State University and then begin to pursue a career. I am responsible for paying my tuition, and without the support from the Morse scholarship I would not have been able to spend a summer abroad because of the financial need to work and make money for the fall semester. I am deeply grateful to be given this assistance and opportunity.

One of the most prevalent themes during my time in Ghana was the resilience and beauty of the human spirit. I spent my days with children who have experienced more suffering in five or six years than I can fathom. Children who live in the orphanage not because their parents have died, but because they have repeatedly tried to sell them into sex slavery. Children who, if born in the United States to an affluent suburban family, would be diagnosed with autism and given special attention and individualized educational opportunities, but because they are orphans in a developing country are considered freaks and sit in the corner of the classroom all day everyday. The circumstances they face give these children every right to be angry, to be rebellious, to be depressed. And unfortunately, some of them are. But I think of Courage, a beautiful five-year-old boy whose parents repeatedly

tried to sell him. His capacity for joy and laughter is unmatched, and he reminded me that all of the efforts to better the world, to better someone's life, however small they might be, are worth it. Human beings are worth it. Taking more time and money to significantly and lastingly impact one person's life is more valuable than setting up schools and orphanages and policies to just make do for the masses, to do enough to ensure survival. Our responsibility to the other members of our human family goes way beyond survival. My time in Ghana made me more fully aware of our connection to one another; the children in Ghana are my brothers and sisters.

I learned the importance of investing in people, especially the weaker and more vulnerable members of society. In a society obsessed with being bigger, better, and faster, the idea of spending significant amounts of time and money on a small group of people without seeing immediate results is not a popular one. But I'm firmly convinced that this is the only way to ensure the wellbeing of weak and vulnerable members, and in turn, society as a whole. The children of Living Faith orphanage were provided for. But they were not mentored and supported. They attended school daily. But they were not being educated. In order to ensure a healthy and prosperous future for at-risk children and orphaned youth, sufficient resources must be allocated, individuals with knowledge of and passion for this population must be employed and be allowed to dream, expand and create within their programs and surroundings.

As a non-profit leadership minor at K-State, the opportunity to work with an international non-profit organization was very unique and beneficial. I was exposed to the daily grind of non-profit organizations, and learned a lot about what works

and what doesn't work. Partnering with DIVOG deepened my appreciation of the education and values that drive the non-profit organizations that I am involved with in the US. The relationships that I formed in Ghana were beautiful and life-changing, but the way that the non-profit was operated left much to be desired. Details were not clarified, roles were not explained, and the mission and values were not always clear. Experiencing these hardships only increases my desire to learn and implement my ideas and visions for non-profit work; turning somewhat negative experiences into positive outcomes.

I'm striving to become the kind of individual, the kind of professional, who puts the relational needs of people first, who develops programs and policies for the good of the weak and defenseless, however difficult and potentially unpopular these things may be. The lessons I learned during my internship in Ghana, as well as the knowledge I continue to accumulate during my educational career at Kansas State University, will greatly and positively impact these future goals.

While I was in Ghana I kept a blog chronicling my experiences. Below are excerpts from some of my entries. You can read them in their entirety at

<http://erinwhite.tumblr.com>

Wednesday May 26th 2010

i'm here! the village of sogakope, ghana. internet access is much slower and harder to access than i thought it would be-therefore i'm probably only going to be able to blog once a week. things so far are good! the first few days were hard, harder than i thought they would be. admittedly, i'm very naive and idealistic going into experiences like this. life just moves a lot slower here, especially without wi-fi and DVR to help pass the time. relationships are valued above all, and the majority of time is just spent sitting and talking. We all three felt sick the first day, but that was remedied with an evening trip to

the lakeside resort, where you can sit and enjoy the breeze and view (our favorite spot in sogakope). Also beer-there's no drinking age in Ghana. Monday we traveled to the capital, Accra, to pick up Beeta's lost luggage. So thankful that was found only three days after we landed. We spent three hours driving around the city trying to find a modem compatible with a Mac, but no such luck. Ariel and I are working at an orphanage called living faith foundation orphanage home, which houses 18 orphans and educates countless more needy children for free. They are moving into a brand new building on Friday, and are spending this week preparing for the commission ceremony. But on Monday when the children start school again, we'll be teaching. They are giving us textbooks tomorrow so that we can prepare; we'll be doing math, English and some social studies. So during the day we'll be teaching and we'll be spending the afternoons and weekends helping with homework and playing with them. We met most of them today, and helped fit them for new clothes and taught them rock paper scissors. They sang songs for us and wanted their pictures taken. I only cried four times! The connection is too poor to post pictures and videos-but I promise to overload when we get back.

Our host families are incredible. Beeta and I actually get to live together, with Nancy, Aku and Chachu. Also there is a three-month-old baby named Paula! Adorable. Ariel is right next-door with Paul, the town dentist, and his wife Lillian. We are beyond blessed with electricity and running water, and living so close to each other. It's making the transition much easier.

That's about all for now. I apologize if this is too long, or poorly written. When you have to wait ten minutes for a page to load you lose motivation to make your bog post a literary masterpiece.

Hopefully more next week! Love to all. Prayers much appreciated :)

Friday June 4th

I never thought I'd be so thankful for mediocre Internet connection and a high-powered fan. We're currently sitting in the main office of disaster volunteers of Ghana, in the town of Ho, about 2 hours from the village we are living in. we're here to meet everyone at the office and to go to a waterfall and monkey sanctuary tomorrow. This week has been eventful. I've taught students from age 3 to age 20, conducted an 1.5 hour lesson with a total of 20 seconds prep time, wiped countless kindergarten bottoms, taught a 6th grade class how to calculate area and volume, learned Ghanaian songs and dances and games, played football and tag. I've also

been scammed on bus fare several times, and marriage proposals abound. I've had hard conversations with the teachers at the school about the importance of lesson plans and following a curriculum, things that aren't advocated here. Some of the teachers won't show up, so entire classes will just sit for 45 minutes. We've had conversations about discipline, and why I won't use the cane to hit students who misbehave as all of the other teachers do. I've had to witness the educational experience of a mentally challenged first grader, who of course is not specially catered to with special education classes and professionals, but who sits in a corner drawing with chalk during her class time. There is so much beauty and joy and light in the children here-but there's a systematic darkness and evil that's so tangible. I'm praying daily to have a positive impact here, hoping to find that space that I can fill. Because the void, the need here, is huge.

Friday June 11th

Learning more about patience, contentment and simplicity daily. The lord is teaching me to truly lean on Him and rely on Him and Him alone for sustenance, strength and joy. I taught the 1st graders the past few days. And when I say taught I really mean that I did my best to ensure that they didn't kill each other. The teacher decided not to show up for two days, and of course didn't leave any textbooks or lesson plans for his class. 30 kids were left completely unattended, wandering in and out of the junior high math class Ariel and I were teaching. Eventually I went into their room, to discover the most beautiful, joyful children brutally attacking each other. And how are they punished by their headmaster for their violent behavior? By being beaten. I can't even begin to comprehend it.

But luckily, these are the children that I have been playing with during breaks for the past few weeks, so they know me and are somewhat willing to listen to me. We wrote sentences, practiced addition and subtraction facts, and of course learned the hokey pokey (their new favorite song). It was utterly exhausting, but I loved it.

What breaks my heart is the fact that Ghana is a developed country, compared to the rest of the continent. And if the educational system in one of the more developed countries is so primitive, so lax, what does that mean for Mozambique, for Malawi, for

Somalia and Sudan? Education truly is the key to development and equality-but it has to be good education! Children can't sit in a classroom alone all day and be expected to succeed and prosper in today's globalized economy and society.

These junior high students are so incredibly smart and respectful, and yet who knows how many of them will have the opportunity to go to high school, to complete university. So many kids in America have these things handed them, despite laziness and ungrateful attitudes.

I'm praying daily about how we can help, how we can maybe fund a student's high school education, a student who wouldn't be able to obtain higher education otherwise.

Monday June 21st 2010

"I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful *in its time*. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." Ecclesiastes 3:10-11.

I am constantly drawn towards this passage, every time I witness a child being beaten at school, when I interact with the beautiful girl who is mentally disabled, when I get so discouraged by the need and primitivity of the educational, economic and medical systems here, when my heart is broken by the tears of an orphaned boy being purposely excluded from a game of soccer. These are the burdens. Injustice, poverty, and inequality-the burdens we perpetuate with greed, with selfishness, with arrogance and ignorance. Yet we have a Creator that loves us fiercely through, and I would even say because of, our vast inadequacies. He promised us that we're not alone; that He will dwell in us. In our spirits, in our work, in our play, in our relationships. I trust that He is good, and that He is for restoration and wholeness and beauty, and He will take our good intentions and our desires to seek and further His Kingdom and make all that is ugly in the world beautiful; make all that is lackluster shine.

A Jewish audience would have understood the word 'eternity' or 'eternal' to mean 'life to the full'. A life to the full, a life completely saturated with the presence of God, a life devoted to knowing and serving and loving God and His creation. Solomon claims that God has set eternity on the human heart. I think this means that at our core we are all created to crave things of the Lord; justice, love, compassion, beauty, restoration. But we know that so many things aren't right, we sense this deep in our bones. So we come together, we unite with the Spirit, we unite with each other and we stumble through life on the Earth, doing the best we can to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven, God's ultimate reality. This Kingdom, I'm learning more and more daily, is completely unlike anything on Earth. It can't be measured, it's not tangible. There's no way for me to know what good I'm doing, what purpose I'm serving, in Sogakope, Ghana. Which kills me at times. But I'm desperately trusting God, knowing that "no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end."

Am I doing good? Am I learning? Am I constantly being transformed into a more loving, selfless, servant? I hope so. And I'm praying for it. But above all I'm trusting that God is my Father, He is strong, and He loves me. He can take care of this. He takes all of my

meager, weak attempts and infuses them with His grace and love, and I'm so thankful for that.

Tuesday June 29th

"laughter is carbonated holiness."-annie dillard.

Divanna. The little girl with special needs in named Divanna. And today as I approached the school she ran towards me, beaming, and literally leapt into my arms. Still there has been no words, no introductions. Only laughter and touch and tears (on my part). Yet the connection I feel with Divanna is stronger than anything I've felt in a long, long time. We just sit, her on my lap, and look at each other and smile and giggle and she plays with my hair and tries to figure out what the heck is attached to my left hand pinkie, and I am reminded every, single day about all that is beautiful in the world.

Today I learned her name and spent 20 minutes just sitting with her, laughing and holding hands. If those twenty minutes was the sole purpose I am here, I'm completely satisfied with it.

Laughter also grounds me after a hard day. On days where I arrive at school to find kids being beaten for next to nothing, when I hear another story about how a child ended up in the care of living faith orphanage. I come home, and I am with one of my favorite people on the entire planet and we laugh about nothing and we laugh about everything and we keep the entire house awake at 4 in the morning with our stories and laughter. And it reminds me how good this all is. How good life is, how good God is, to create us to love one another and laugh with each other. An interaction with another human being, another bearer of the divine light of Christ, is something so incredibly sacred. Laughing with another is a glimpse into heaven.

Tuesday July 6th

"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed." Luke 14:13.

When we reach out, when we go beyond our immediate surroundings, when we intentionally place ourselves in situations where we will be the outsider, we are blessed. I don't think that means we are blessed as in we are rewarded for our "good deeds"; I think it means we are blessed with the gift of expanded capacities for empathy, compassion, humility and love.

It's easy to know what this looks like in Ghana. I spend everyday with children who own nothing, who don't have parents, whose educational level may never exceed junior high. It's obvious where to go to find the poor, the needy; going beyond boundaries and intentionally pursuing challenges and opportunities for growth is easy; and it's the obvious choice.

But what about in two days? When I'm home? When need, although still very much in existence, is less tangible? When poverty and homelessness is 25 minutes away? This is

not at all to say that only those that are impoverished and homeless are in need; we all are. Everyone carries around burdens and hardships and struggle; loneliness, despair and depression can be every bit as crippling as poverty.

So what will intentionally placing ourselves among the poor, the needy, and the hurting look like? I'm not sure. But let's journey together to figure it out, because if there is one thing I know to be true it's that in order to truly live you must give yourself away. It is in dying to ourselves that we are awakened to new life.