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The Tip of the Iceberg

I'll tell you what Ghana is not. It is not a country of poverty-stricken individuals with no hope; it is not a sprawling savanna reminiscent of "The Lion King" where gazelles and leopards roam freely; it is not a country where people treat you suspiciously for being a foreigner with semi-altruistic intentions; it is not a country where you are pickpocketed, threatened, or in danger in the giant, tin-roofed cities; it is not a country where millions of children lie dying in the streets; it is not a WorldView infomercial with Sarah McLachlan's "Angel" playing in the background; it is not a country that fulfills most stereotypes of Africa (and I'm willing to bet that most other African countries would disprove many mainstream stereotypes too). I wasn't quite sure what to expect during my time in Ghana, but I did not expect to leave with the absolute certainty that I will return again.

Ghanaians are a proud people. As the first West African nation to gain independence from its colonial rulers, the Gold Coast became what is now Ghana in 1957. The nation's flag, of which every child over the age of six or seven can tell you the meaning (red for blood, yellow for gold, green for vegetation), is prominently displayed in all taxis, and is a featured motif of jewelry sold on Kumasi's street corners, and of the traditional kente cloth worn by the Ashanti king. It speaks to the pride Ghanaians hold for their country, and the future promise of Ghana as it stands in the world today. Interwoven in this pride and hope for Ghana is an honesty and joy by which Ghana's citizens constantly live.

Several times while in Ghana, Cleo, Miranda, and I ventured into Kumasi, Ghana's second largest city, located about 30 km from our tiny village of Mowire. In a disorienting maze of unlabeled streets, crowds of people, and a huge market that Lonely Planet describes as a "vast, tin-roofed alien mothership", it is all too easy to be drawn into tiny stalls and hidden street corners while shopping for 1 cedi t-shirts and fresh paw-paw. The shopkeepers are genuinely friendly and laugh gloriously when you engage in conversation and tell them your Twi name (Sarah Akua Opiesie), before sending you off in the right direction in search of, in our case, stuffed animals and soccer shorts. Most notable, however, is that the numerous times we became helplessly lost in Kumasi and asked passersby for help, many of them went well out of their way to lead us back to the central tro-tro station so we could return to Mowire. Some walked with us for more than ten minutes, and when we turned around, grateful, to thank them, they had already disappeared – no asking for money, no expectations in return, just honest Ghanaians helping the laughably lost obrunis.

Once at the tro-tro station, as we asked random strangers where the tro-tro was to Mowire (this tro-tro station must have had several hundred tro-tros in no discernible order), they would each point us in the right direction, sometimes taking us by the hand and leading us for several hundred feet, until we had found the correct spot, upon which the tro-tro man would usher us onto the tro-tro and make sure we were comfortably seated. No tipping, no hassling, just a smile. This willingness to help with no expectations in return would be unheard of in Egypt or Morocco, and I was shocked that we could actually approach Ghanaians and they would assist us with no ulterior motive. Ghanaians are proud of their country and their culture, and wanted only to make sure that we were safe and got where we needed to go. It made me inexplicably happy to know that I felt more comfortable traveling throughout Ghana by myself than I ever did traveling with Evan in Egypt and Morocco. Even when I arrived at the bus station in Accra last week, needing to hail a cab to the airport (on crutches, no less), I was anticipating being quoted an absurd price by the taxi driver (around 30 cedis) and having to bargain down to a reasonable, but still high by local standard, price. Yet the taxi driver told me 8 cedis to the airport, which was well below what I was expecting to pay – it was the local price, offered to an obruni,

because the taxi driver wasn't trying to rip me off.

Ghanaians are vibrant - full of energy, of joy, and of life. I expected Ghana to be noisy and unbearable in the cities, somber and desolate in the rural areas, but it was completely the opposite. Sitting on a plastic chair under the mango tree at school, I would regularly close my eyes for a few brief moments and listen – listen to the children laughing as they chased each other through the field, listen to the older boys arguing passionately during a game of football, listen to the girls giggling as they jumped rope, listen to the toddlers' chatter as they spun around the rusty merry-go-round with Miranda, listen to the focused discussions on ecosystems and Ashanti history as the older students crammed for their exams. The sounds of the school could have fooled me into thinking I was on a boisterous playground at a wealthy school in the U.S. or Canada – it wasn't quiet, it wasn't miserable, and the children were happy and carefree. Ghanaian schools are comprised of bare, concrete classrooms with hard, wooden desks, and students own no school supplies except for a few notebooks, a pencil and, if lucky, an eraser. Yet, they run and scream and laugh and smile as though they are rich; perhaps not rich in belongings, but rich in spirit and community. They embrace what opportunities they have with a grace and vibrancy that stands out as one of the best features of their society.

Ghana is far from perfect, though, and I recognized this very quickly. Beneath the joy that Ghanaians maintain throughout everyday life are basic struggles that they face. As a volunteer at Triumph, most prominent to me were the shortcomings of the country's education system. Hannah, one of the boarders, is nine years old and in Class Two. Not only can she not read, but she still struggles with her alphabet. One of the boys in Class Four is fourteen years old – whether he repeated Class Four several times or just started school later than normal, I'm not sure. George, in Class Five, is at least thirteen years old but when I asked him to read a sentence out loud during our English Comprehension class, he struggled with all but the simplest of words. Of course, there are an equal number of very bright students, but how they will succeed in an education system ruled by repetition and strict memorization remains unclear to me.

I sat in a fluorescent-lit classroom one evening during prep, helping Ernest study for his science exam. Turning to a page in his textbook and pointing at an example, he explained to me that dipping red litmus paper in a solution of NaOH would turn the red litmus paper blue, dipping blue litmus paper in HCl would turn the blue litmus paper red and, when combining HCl and NaOH, dipping either color litmus paper in the resulting solution would not alter the original color of the paper. I was impressed that JHS 2 had already covered acid-base reactions, and I asked Ernest to generalize the situations when litmus paper would change color, and when it would remain the same. He couldn't. He had simply memorized the example of an acid-base reaction in the textbook, without understanding what litmus paper was testing for (the pH of a solution). I probed further, and discovered that Ernest didn't know that HCl is an acid, NaOH is a base, and that by combining the two, a pH-neutral solution is created. I was frustrated, but then reminded myself that this is the teaching method in Ghana – dictate selected facts and examples to the students, then have them memorize, recite, memorize, recite. True comprehension isn't focused on, and critical thinking isn't emphasized; it is only important that students regurgitate what is taught. I also questioned how Ernest could even be expected to learn about and understand acid-base reactions and litmus-paper tests if he has never before seen litmus paper, never before held a beaker, and never before mixed solutions in a science lab. For him, acid-base reactions must be such a abstract concept that it shouldn't come as a surprise that he cannot explain pH, or balance the chemical reaction between HCl and NaOH.

I remember being surprised when Cleo told me about a Creative Arts class she had observed before I arrived at Triumph. We had been discussing the boxes of volunteer donations sitting in the office, and

how the crayons, colored pencils, construction paper, and glue remain unused unless volunteers incorporate them into lessons, but I figured that these supplies must at least be a part of Creative Arts. Yet, Cleo assured me that there were no crayons used, no paint, no scissors. The teacher simply drew a picture on the blackboard, and the students copied it. “Creative” Arts was not creative; it was another form of copying, of regurgitation. It seemed as if there was no imagination encouraged in the one class that should most encourage imagination. From kindergarten all the way through to junior high school, learning in Ghana occurs because you are told to, not because there is a reason to. The students are told to copy, to repeat, to memorize. They do not understand that there is a practical reason for learning about acids and bases, or about natural ecosystems and crop rotation. They are afraid of guessing because mistakes are routinely punished. They don't know how to create, how to imagine, or how to invent, because these skills, and this way of learning, is not taught. After discovering the content of Creative Arts classes, it finally made sense to me why, when we brought paper and colored pencils to prep some evenings, most kids wanted us to draw pictures for them while they just looked on, or copied.

While at Triumph, Cleo, Miranda, and I all tried to create lesson plans and activities that would inspire lateral thought, creativity, imagination, critical thinking, and teamwork – skills we were taught in primary school. In Class Five and Six English, I discussed poetry as a form of expression and the role of adjectives in poems, and then asked each student to write and decorate a name poem (write your name vertically on a piece of paper, then choose adjectives that describe you, each starting with a letter in your name). The task required individuality, creativity, and imagination, and after an hour and a half of banning pencils and sending students back to fill in any remaining white space on their paper, I had dozens of bright, colorful poems that I displayed on the bare classroom walls. To review for their upcoming math exam, I created a game of Jeopardy for Class 6. The students split into three teams and competed vigorously over word problems, fractions, decimals, and data analysis. For that hour, math wasn't just copying and repeating, it required thinking and solving, and my Jeopardy competition drew an audience of four or five teachers from other classes. In my lower French classes, we played matching games with the numbers from 1 to 20, and tic-tac-toe with the colors, instead of just chanting the information over and over. Though the students sometimes had problems grasping the concept of our activities (we're allowed to guess? we're supposed to color whatever we want? we get to sing songs in class about food?), we did succeed in introducing the students to thinking for themselves, inventing in the classroom, learning through each other, and applying old concepts to new situations.

During one of our multi-hour weekend washing sessions, Cleo and I talked about the lack of imagination we observed in Ghanaian children. We never saw them “play”, never saw them engage in a game of make-believe, never saw them learning on their own. Though some of this can be attributed to the lack of imagination and invention in the classroom, we also realized that there is not a lot of learning that occurs outside of school. In our childhoods, informal learning took place everywhere. Our parents read to us in the evenings, we had toys to play house with, we went to science museums on the weekends, and we had sandboxes where we could build castles and forts. Due to their home lives, most children in Ghana do not have the opportunity to learn outside of school or to develop by “doing”. Students don't read for fun – partly because some of them can't read very well, partly because most or all of them don't own any books, partly because most of their parents can't read very well, and partly because their parents don't encourage reading as a pleasure activity. Children don't spend their free time playing house or building make-believe worlds – partly because they have no toys, partly because they are not encouraged to imagine or invent in school, and partly because they have an array of chores to complete when they return home from school. We are used to seeing five year olds dressing up, playing house, chasing each other in games of tag, and inventing games outside, but in Ghana, there's no such thing as pretending to be princesses or dragons. On the weekends, we noticed that unless we organized

a game or activity, the boarders didn't "do" anything – they had no hobbies (football being the exception), no activities that would help them learn and develop as children.

We questioned whether our teaching system is better, and whether our forms of learning are more productive. I believe that an emphasis on creativity and imagination is essential to constructive learning, and I was more than pleased when I walked by Class Five one afternoon and saw the students showing off their name poems to their friends, proud of their work and their accomplishments. However, it is hard to implement such a vastly different system of teaching in a culture where the ideals of copying, memorizing, and not analyzing are so thoroughly instilled from a young age. How can you change a form of learning when children are afraid to think for themselves, in case they think "wrongly" and are beaten? How can you improve students' development when they are taught to memorize, not to understand? One afternoon, when I was rather immobile thanks to my sprained foot, Ama (three years old) and some of her friends gathered around me and began chanting their multiplication tables. Sounding like soldiers ("2 1 2! 2 2 4! 2 3 6! 2 4 8! 2 5 10!"), they had no idea what they were saying, and had no idea what they had been taught; the kindergarteners had simply memorized number patterns to which they applied no meaning. Nevertheless, it must be said that at least the children of Triumph are lucky enough to attend school. Every time we headed into Kumasi – usually on a weekday since it was less chaotic – there were dozens of children selling food, clothing, and other items on the street. The students at Triumph don't have to spend their days working to earn extra income for their families, and at least they learn something every day – even if they aren't sure what it means.

The challenge in working at Triumph, with children who become your friends, is truly grasping and making sense of the realization that the background of most of the children is very different than mine. The students I spent time with did not ever reveal their struggles, and did not even see them as unfair; in fact, most children at Triumph would say they are quite happy (many told us that), and they embrace what opportunities they have. The children don't realize what they don't have, even when it is clear to me what they are lacking. Over another one of our lengthy laundry sessions, it dawned on Cleo and me that some of the kids living at Triumph could fit into a TV advertisement for sponsored children, or some other stereotypical "help the African children" campaign (there are quite a few orphans at the school, though they are not singled out as such). We had never really made this association between the "unfortunate" Africa and the Africa we experienced in Mowire because the children at Triumph, especially the older ones, are our friends. We played cards with them, we played soccer with them, we helped them study for exams, we went shopping with them into town after school, we took pictures with them, we played computer games with them, and we made bracelets with them while chatting late in the evening – they might as well be the kids down the street with whom we hang out and babysit.

The Africa we see on television and in pictures or that we talk about from afar can seem a world away from our normal lives and culture (in large part because Africa is grossly stereotyped); it is easy to disassociate "Africa" from what it really is if your knowledge is based solely on hearsay. When in Ghana, I did not feel like I was in this imagined continent of AFRICA, I didn't focus on the circumstances of the children, and I didn't dwell on feeling sorry for the children, because they never feel sorry for themselves. Rather, I treated the kids at Triumph like any other kids, who have the same likes and dislikes and dreams as other children halfway around the world. Being in Ghana closes the gap between imagined Africa and "real" Africa very quickly – it is not about poor children and elephant safaris (neither of which is a particularly accurate "real-life" image anyways), but rather about learning and talking and living and cooking and washing, about making connections with other people because they are people, irrespective of their experiences compared to my experiences. Yet, this makes it easy to forget that some of their difficulties are very real. One of the more charismatic boarders, Maame K

(real name Tracey, nine years old), went home one weekend for a church-related activity. I remember imagining Maame K at home for an instant – climbing the large, gray carpeted staircase to her bedroom, flopping down on her bed, covered in a floral duvet and surrounded by pastel pink walls – before realizing that I had superimposed her on my childhood, forgetting that she didn't return home to a big, comfortable house, but to a small, concrete building where she probably didn't have her own room, and maybe didn't even have her own bed. It's easy to forget what some of the children go home to when it's so clear that in many ways, they are just like me.

Ghanaians may not have a lot, but they do not grieve for what they do not have, and they embrace what they do have. The joy in life I witnessed at Triumph, whether it was Hannah running up the road to hug Cleo and me upon our return from Kumasi (we had only been gone about five hours), the boys jumping on their beds when we gave them their new soccer shorts, the older girls singing in the kitchen as they prepared dinner, or the youngest kids sharing food and playing in the grass during recess, never let me forget that Africa isn't a continent to pity – it's a place from which we can draw inspiration.