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Digging for Medicine

During my first week as a Peace Corps volunteer in Southern Tanzania, I joined a group of doctors from my local district hospital on a rural outreach drive to provide treatment to AIDS patients in remote villages. Whilst humble crowds of wasting women and their children hobbled out of their homes to wait endless hours for our arrival, we heartily piled into the hospital's white land cruiser and tore out over the nearly impassible terrain: roads cut out of dry river beds, smoke enshrouded corn fields, up over the steep plateaus and into "the bush." I gripped the seat in front of me, white-knuckled, jaw agape at a mixture of the panorama and our sheer speed as we whipped through bush and branch. I watched some of the most exquisite African scenery I have seen laid out before me in its hallelujah chorus, make-you-weep kind of glory— and in its stark and staggering contrast to the sheer, gut wrenching atrocity of the disease and destitution robbing an entire continent of its people.

I met an old woman at the clinic with her ten year old granddaughter. The child looked like her soul had been sucked out through a straw. Her eyes were old and infinitely joyless. She was strangely pretty in her tattered, ruffled dress, but no longer a child, possessed by a grief she should not be old enough to comprehend, and existing only as a crumpled shell of human life, a virile host for disease. She contracted the virus through her mother, who is dead, as is her father. Her twelve year old brother died last month. Her grandmother, wrinkled, drawn, and enshrouded in traditional cloths, reached her long, hardened hands out to me and begged for mercy as though bent beyond breaking in some sick universal game of pea-knuckles. She was only the first patient of the morning.

It went on like this throughout the day. At each clinic, their eyes seemed to hollow a little more, faces sinking deeper, it seemed toward their graves. I wondered how many of the patients that I saw would live beyond my two years of service. How many would make it to the next month, the next day? I fumbled through lists of funding sources, grant guidelines and deadlines, attempting to identify the miracle solution that would, like the fabled Rumplestiltskin, help me to spin grains of desperation into gold. I remained conscious of the days of the calendar ripping away like the branches clipped by the land cruiser as we floored it back to Masasi Town, vials of infected blood bouncing up and down in the lunch cooler in back, holding tight their secrets. *Will we ever find a way to stop this?*

Kuchimba Dawa is a Swahili phrase that literally means, *digging for medicine*. It is the euphemism that many Tanzanians use in reference to relieving themselves in the bushes. This phrase generally arises on unyieldingly long bus rides, when one must request the bus driver to stop so one can "dig for medicine." The euphemism stems from the medicinal plants found deep in the bush, where one typically takes cover to relieve him or herself. But in my mind, the phrase connotes so much more. *Digging for medicine* is the purpose that drives throngs of foreign aid workers to Africa, attempting to claw their way through the bloody histories of imperialism, genocides and wars, deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and mythologies, and shocking economic destitution, in an attempt to find some sort of cure-all treatment for poverty and

disease. Much of the time, they are barely scratching the surface. Even more of the time, they are bleeding away a pool of private and federal funding digging, under the proverbial "wrong tree."

It is a basic principle that much of a community's health and prosperity is tied to its individuals' access to basic survival requirements: shelter, food and water. Providing these basic needs, however, does not prove so simplistic. Throughout my two years as a volunteer, I worked closely with a support group for People Living with AIDS (PLWA). The group leaders, an inspirational HIV positive couple, raise chickens, goats and pigs, and rely heavily on subsidizations from the local government, national AIDS relief programming, and international donors. Although the couple lives meagerly in a crumbling mud hut, all of the money that they receive is funneled directly into their community work. They are the absolute model of a *non-profit* organization, although they do not hold official status as such. Due to their immense network of influential contacts, their steadfast motivation and their organizational skills, this group is poised to be self-sufficient: a model of sustainability. *So why, to this day, aren't they?*

I involved the PLWA group in several capacity-building seminars. I wrote grants to solicit funding and provided high quality trainings that fell short of only one crucial element: the continuing funds for these groups to continue their work independently. Perplexed by this conundrum of the "education as sustainability" philosophy falling short, I looked to the PLWA for an answer. They wanted to dig a well.

Water shortages are prevalent in Masasi Town, particularly during the long dry months before the rainy season. Without water, there is no hygiene, and disease becomes rampant. Without water, there is thirst, and hunger. And for a person living with AIDS, even the smallest deficit poses a dire threat. A strategically placed well would create a solution to the drought. It would also generate income: water comes at a price, and a group with a properly sealed hand-pump well can charge 50 shillings per bucket to the general public. This is the equivalent of an American nickel, but is significant in its power to buy food, medicine, and other needs. So we would dig, literally, for their cure. The serendipity was almost too poetic, so I mobilized my networks and raised private funds in excess of $3,000 USD to dig a 4-meter deep hand-pump well for the group.

Over nine months after the start of the project, the $3,000 and hundreds of dollars more beyond that have been spent. While there is a gaping hole in both the earth and in my bank account, the project has fallen short, mirroring so many partially finished structures that ubiquitously dot the Tanzanian landscape. The well is half as deep as required to secure water year-round and install the pump. In its current state, water is accessible for nine months of the year. Without proper closure, however, cultural superstitions about well poisonings by way of witchcraft prevent the group from charging a fee and generating income. The masses will fetch freely from the watering hole until it runs dry in September. Corrupt engineers, environmental challenges, and unforeseen illnesses all contribute to the failure to finish the well. The true missing link, however, is not tangible, but rather it is the constant question mark threaded throughout development projects that make us ask repeatedly if we are taking the right approach, doing the right thing. I am constantly wracking my brain for another paradigm that will illuminate the way to navigate the deep cultural divide and complete this project with my finite resources and its infinite challenges. If only in my searches I could unearth a treasure-map, yellowed and crisp with age and clearly indicating the correct path with an iconic "x" to mark the spot, then perhaps the complex question as to why Africa remains poor and why disease and famine continue to spread could be answered once and for all. What is the root, so to speak, and how do we not only identify it as the origin, but also exhume it from the earth,

peel away its layers, and boil it into an organic remedy without disrupting the natural order of life suspended within its twine-like grasp?

I embarked on my adventure with Peace Corps as an educator, a community organizer, a capacity-builder, and a cultural ambassador; but what I became, in addition, was in some ways more vital. It was a role from which there would be no escape: I became a witness. I was a witness to the boundless joy and beauty of human nature and kindness. I witnessed ancient traditions, the creation of spectacular artifacts, and the accomplishment of incomprehensible feats of the human body and spirit. I witnessed the splendor of Tanzania's natural resources, and the scope of its devastating national crises. While in two years time I couldn't heal a nation, or a village, let alone solve an enigma sealed over centuries like the sharp folds of an onion's skin, I created impact where I could, and fostered the most unlikely of friendships that will both inspire and haunt me throughout my life. But the journey is far from over. Everything that I have watched and learned, loved and despised, feasted upon and forgone during my service in Tanzania has sent me forth on a trajectory—a proverbial journey to the center of the universe, where driven by these experiences, by the steadfast spirits of the Tanzanian people, and by the accounts of so many other witnesses to the African plight, I will endlessly ask more questions and continue digging for medicine.