

THE TUNA WRAP MISTAKE, or how being a privileged Western led me to act like a total jerk

Sometimes being a westerner with resources and food that others don't have makes you stand out in a bad way. And sometimes you handle it horribly. Like really badly. And you only have yourself and your privilege to blame, because you and your privilege didn't know how to deal with the scarcity.

It was summer and I traveled to my first developing nation. I was in Liberia, a country in western Africa on the coast, just around the bottom of the bulge, next to Sierra Leone. I was there for 3 weeks, only three weeks! And I had crowd funded from my amazing friends with a big belief in me and a few dollars to spare in their pockets to complete the costs of my trip, which on the whole cost me 6000 dollars. That's a lot of money! Had I given that money to the cause I was volunteering for, I could have paid 4 kids full year's tuition to college in Liberia. I didn't give it to them though, I spent it on plane tickets, and then more plane tickets, and juice in the morning, and omlettes and gifts for my children and gifts for the children in Liberia, and on, lets face it, pastries in Morocco on the way home. I'm leaving some stuff out, but lets face it, it was mostly (save the tickets) stuff to make me feel comfortable. Hey, my money, my right. My crowdfunding platform wasn't, "Hey lets make Tara as uncomfortable as possible for 3 weeks of international travel." So I don't feel so guilty for my choices in how I spent my money.

But here's the thing, maybe I should feel guilty for those choices. Since I am now that I have returned to the states, I am suffering from privilege guilt in a serious way, I may as well be upfront about why I'm writing this piece: I didn't know what to do in a scarcity environment. And for all my supposed savvy as a person who thinks I can McGuyver or Bear Grills my way through any circumstance, I flat out failed the test when it came to how to handle myself with others who clearly had less.

Here's what happened.

I went to Liberia as a theatre teacher. A guide. Someone with a bunch of ideas about drama and teaching children who have never even seen a play how to create a physically realized character for a play. Over two years I had worked hard to produce the materials for students to have success in this endeavor: I designed masks, I made training videos, I made workbooks to go with the videos. I gave workshops, I communicated with folks about the work I made for them, I tried my best to provide the ideas a context for what the children will have already experienced to understand what I wanted to give them. I wanted to give them the joy of playing characters. The happiness I have found acting and the freedom mask play and dramatic arts have given me. I wanted to add that to their important work of making their own plays so that they could tell their neighbors, government and parents what they need in their country.

Children's voices are not valued in countries like Liberia where the lack of infrastructure leaves people without safe drinking water and in constant conversation with sickness and death. Understandably, family's think of their children as either work assets or liabilities, as well as being gifts and blessings. Maybe that's not so different than here. In Liberia children's basic needs seem to be the same as the adults' needs with the exception of a few things that are exclusively children's issues: the value put on education, and child protection. Kids work like adults in Liberia. Everyone needs to contribute money if they can. Schools are unfunded, so even the ones that get to a school, there's no certainty that the school will be consistent. But put it back into context: there's no certainty that the roads will be drivable

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tomorrow either due to torrential rains in the rainy season. Nothing should be taken for granted here, nothing.

But for those who do not get parents who value school, life is spent trying to make money to get by from an early age: gathering food stuff to sell on the big road through Red Light, making rock piles, selling sticks of gum, washing cars at a nearby stream next to the road. Whatever makes the cash.

Some kids want to go to school but get tricked into essentially slavery by family members in the city who lure the children away from their homes to work for their uncle under the guise of 'providing access to school'. Many girls aren't expected to go to school of any sort. And once a young woman in Liberia has given birth to a baby, she is expected to stay home and care for others instead of going to school. That's a lot of pressure keeping a child out of a learning environment.

The non-profit with whom I came to Liberia is an arts education organization, so we came not to provide food or money or jobs, but to teach music and theatre and dance, cultural activities all but lost in Liberia. We were one of only 2 arts education organizations for children in the country. I learned quickly that it was important to approach our students, about 120 of them I worked with in person over the course of my visit, holding the work of 'learning' in great regard. I had to hold on to that regard myself, I had to teach it to them through example because in their world, there is not always an implicit value for learning in their home environments.

Westerners especially are seen as wealthy, benevolent and impervious to problem. I saw plenty of folks at the orphanage who brought goods and distributed them. The excitement was in the giving and revealing of the gifts: We're giving you plastic recreation balls! We're providing a bag of rice a month to your kitchen! The joy didn't seem to be in the knowing of one another. The relationship was expected to be one directional: I give and you accept. Then one walks away and back to a very difficult daily life while the other goes to a fancy hotel and shovels in a Lobster special at the restaurant downstairs as a reward for doing something "good".

I didn't want to be that person. I wanted to have exchange with my students- learn about them, and help them learn about me. Offer what I have but not harbor expectations. But I found being someone without material goods, rather intellectual ones, and this required a different relationship with the young people than that of the 'gifters'. This is where my big mistake was made.

For an educational setting, it is integral that students show up day after day of training, and to do that they must value what I offer, else when I stop giving things they will stop showing up. I have to ask that students value that theatre stuff I'm teaching UP FRONT, and then somehow maintain that value and prove that there's usefulness worthy of them to make that effort of creating theatre in their lives.

If instead I chose to say feed these kids each day, some of these kids being those that rely on the orphanage for food daily and they get but one meal which happens whenever it happens in the day, (read that as dinner bell time unknown,) then I make my usefulness to them one of survival. They must eat, and their growing kiddo bodies require them to eat, so instinct going first, they would come to me for food. Food trumps knowledge, plain and simple.

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That said, I couldn't risk being devalued for not providing food all the time. I'd lose my students. I certainly couldn't provide food all the time, there were over one hundred wondering souls on and off the orphanage property that would show up to eat. To maintain law and order, it was not smart to give kids food. More would come, they might fight for what was there, they'd want it everyday (because obviously, who wouldn't ask again if something so essential wasn't available in your own environment) and me and the organization I was representing would be attended only for the food we could give. The children wouldn't pay attention. They'd follow the gifter relationship structure: take and then leave.

As an organization that asks youth to value something they don't already necessarily value, it is important to keep the message articulate and exact, I believe that. We had celebrations with food, but it wasn't part of the daily educational routine.

On the other hand, the offerings of this organization are *performing* arts education, which means performing with the body is entailed. This work that I brought to share was physical theatre, (read that as being very physically demanding activity). And these kids didn't eat before class. They had no food between dance and theatre class. They had no food till much later in the evening, if they had it at all.

I'm a mom of 2 kids, and when they've not had food, they are miserable human beings to be with. I love them! Yes! But they're the pits. And I do not require them to do demanding physical work on empty stomachs. I also do not allow them to go to school without food to sustain their brain energy. When I'm teaching, accordingly, I do not anticipate that we'll have a productive class when I have students who have not had proper nutrients. I've never done it in public school, but if I needed to, I'd bring some Goldfish or something so that they had something to supply energy for their bodies. I'd do this because students can't think when the body is speaking so loudly, and in that same vein, they can't as easily control their own behavior. Food really really helps the work in arts. Really.

But these students are used to not eating, you say.

True.

But I'm not.

Come lunch time, say 1pm or so, my body wanted food. And in transit to or from a class a dirt path walk through the rain or so to a different cement wall building with thatched palm roofing where we'll work on using my masks and the students will look at me with confusion but still respect, somewhere in that transition I'll try to grab a bite of the food I have in my back pack that was handed to me quickly. And I'll walk with my tuna fish salad rolled up in a flour pita wrap and try to hide it but not be able to with all the stuff in my back pack falling out, water bottle and hand sanitizer and mosquito spray and such. And in a moment, a student will ask me why I get food and he doesn't.

And I won't be able to answer.

I will try to put the food away, but given the bugs and the smell and the lack of laundering capacity I have right now, I won't want to put it in my back pack, it's open and sloppy and this is the only backpack I have. I will try to carry it, hidden, but I can't hide it and now all the kids are crowding around me

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innocently wanting to hear the answer to the question that was posed to me and that I clearly was trying to give a response to in all my fumbling with stuff.

I will look at the child and tell him I'm sorry, someone just gave me this and I was hungry and I'll try to relate to him honestly the way I would want to be spoken to but my guilt is now hammering in my head, just give him your food, he needs it more than you!

And now there are lots of little eyes wondering why I haven't answered his question yet, wondering if I think I am better than them, or if I think I deserve the food more than them, and my compassion is telling me that they mean no harm to me but I might threaten the integrity of the organization if I break my resistance and just hand the children my food.

This is the moment I revisit every day.

I wanted to do "good". I wanted to build the value of the education we were providing. I wanted to be a teacher. But I didn't want to be confronted with my own abundance. I wasn't able to justify it, and I wasn't able to claim it. Not to their faces. Not when I was asking them to do so much. Not when they were bringing me into their lives like a friend.

I should have given the children my food. I should have realized one tuna sandwich wasn't going to destroy our non-profit. I should have let myself respond as I wanted to respond, and just given the sandwich to whomever wanted it. I should have been myself.

Instead, I made the worst choice a stupid western could make, and it was made out of my lack of nerves, out of my inexperience with representing an organization that deals with these kinds of issues, made of my guilt as someone who has more. I panicked. So I tried to save it, but not being able to, I decided to stage dropping the food on the ground so that no one could have it.

Splat.

Where did that come from? Was this some throwback to my days of being a kid and having a pile of kids all wanting the same toy such that the teetering adult in power determined the only thing to do was remove the object of desire and quell the masses? "We can't all have the sandwich so NO ONE GETS THE SANDWICH" ... Was I punishing myself for having a sandwich in front of the kids when I knew they didn't have anything to eat that day? Or was I just making a very very western choice: when in doubt, throw it away because everything can be replaced?

Well, if that was the case, I was right, because later that night I had a glorious meal so even though I didn't have THAT sandwich, there was food for me that day, and every other day from there on out, because we had the means to have food.

But the students, they just looked disappointed. They walked on. Even some asked for the food anyway. It didn't matter that it had been on the dirt path and this was mayonnaise in 95 degree heat after 4 hours of exposure. They'd eat it. But what was important in my mind is that I WOULDN'T. I wouldn't eat it. Everything was okay again. Just remove the evidence, and get on with the day. I tossed

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the mangled remains of the tuna salad wrap into a heap of trash off the side of the path. I imagined it breaking down and disappearing quickly in the sunlight with huge black ants and lizards circling. I think of it now, I think I wanted to rid myself of the evidence of how lousy a person I can be.

Well, it didn't go away. And now I share it with you. Why? Because I just didn't know what to do. I had a knee jerk reaction that was clearly the wrong one. And I meant well, but in retrospect, I chose badly.

I think most of us in the west need to confront in ourselves the truth of our privilege, be it economic privilege, race privilege, whathaveyou. We need to confront it in order to make a some kind of choice, bad or good. After making a bad choice, I can say, I know I won't do that again. If only we all had the chance to say that and mean it, we could change the world.