

Reflections & Responsibilities

August 11, 2010

My passport is officially full. Six years after first stepping east of Utah, I've made it to thirty countries and five continents. I've been so lucky to have had so much of the world at my fingertips, yet Kenya was the first place in my travels where I felt truly at home. I left with 30 words of Swahili on my tongue and four weeks of dirt road caked on my feet. I saw so much poverty, corruption, and misogyny, but I also learned to love the people, the culture, their overall way of life. For a month, I lived and breathed East Africa...and it was spectacular.

The people in the Nakuru slums literally live in a dump. They dig through the trash alongside dogs and pigs; when a dump truck arrives the men race to get first pickings. Using some of the money my mom and my students' parents donated, my friends and I were able to distribute soap, sanitary napkins, and a week's worth of food to them...but it's not sustainable. They still returned home to a dump.

Places like this make even the most vehement optimist question how humans are going to solve the global problems—political, social, and environmental—confronting us...if people are still forced to live like this.

As horrified as I was by these conditions, though—and as weird as it sounds—I also marveled at their perseverance. The women sell beautiful purses made from trash; malnourished children create soccer balls from the same. They find a way to make it happen, and it's a reminder that it's in the most challenging situations that we learn how strong we really are. Humans adapt. We survive. The human spirit is indomitable.

That spirit is what allows a kid in the KCC slums who lost his leg six agonizing months after being hit by a bus to still play soccer with a smile. It's what ensured that so many pieces of African culture survived a trans-Atlantic journey and three hundred years of slavery. It's what brought the dozens of volunteers I met to orphanages, refugee camps, hospitals, schools, and HIV clinics half a world away.

Granted, humans shouldn't have to adapt to living at a dump, nor to violence. Nor should we adapt to seeing others do so. Despite what my emails might seem to imply, I don't believe in passive hope, that we can sit around and just wait for things to get better. I believe in optimism that's informed and hope that motivates us to make that change we want to see, that reminds us of the daily responsibility we have toward others. As the author Wes Moore said in a speech recently, "All we have to ask ourselves when we leave a job...or a school...or this earth...is 'Did I make an impact?'"

Despite all that I've seen and read about in my twenty-eight years, I still truly believe we're going to be okay. It's just going to take a lot of work, a lot of sacrifice, and a lot of kindness. We all need to make that impact.

Let's go.