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To develop a broader vision we must be willing to forsake, to kill, our narrower vision. In the short run it is more comfortable not to do this – to stay where we are, to keep using the same microcosmic map, to avoid suffering the death of cherished notions. The road of spiritual growth, however, lies in the opposite direction. We begin by distrusting what we already believe, by actively seeking the threatening and unfamiliar, by deliberately challenging the validity of what we have previously been taught and hold dear. The path to holiness lies through questioning everything².

— M. Scott Peck



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¹ Ann Douglas, *Zenos It Transformation Blog*, 2012, Website Title, accessed November 9, 2014, <http://blog.zenoss.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Open-Source-The-Road-Less-Traveled.jpg>.

² M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled, Timeless Edition: a New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*, Anniversary ed. (Touchstone, 2003), 1.

³ Richard Gibbs, *Gakuran.com*, 2013, accessed November 9, 2014, <http://gakuran.com/i-took-the-road-less-traveled-by/>.

Preface

Arrogant, rushed, distracted, and self-absorbed—that was my starting point as I landed in Cape Town. While there was a small measure of anticipation of what this advance was going to be like, of greater concern were questions like “What will my cohorts be like?” and “Will I fit in?” My self-absorption outweighed my excited anticipation. I felt rushed and distracted; back in Texas—literally the other side of the world—my elders and I had just made significant leadership decisions at church as we reworked our vision. Not surprisingly, there was fallout and confusion, which prompted the question in my head—“Can I really take all this time off to travel for a couple weeks and study for a couple more weeks? Certainly not now!” If I wasn’t so self-absorbed I would have been concerned about the negative impact my absence may have had on my family, but frankly I wasn’t thinking about them. I was more worried that I didn’t have the intellectual ability or the margin to keep the pace of coursework that would be expected.

In hindsight, I was incredibly arrogant. I came to South Africa with all the cultural sensitivity of a typical American tourist – “no big deal”. I’d been there before; thirty-two years earlier on a summer missions trip to Port Shepstone, SA. I remember how beautiful the country was, how pristine its cities. I remember the unbelievable contrast between the largely “white controlled” cities and the “black” townships; we foreigners called them shantytowns. During our travels in the summer of 1982 we were escorted by a representative from the government, a gregarious fellow who spoke fondly of South Africa and acknowledged that it was changing. Deep in my memory I also recalled the segregated restrooms, drinking fountains and train cars. Back to 2014: I’m rushed and distracted, assuming I know this place and what to expect; knowing and not really caring – so very arrogant.

Personal Interests

The advance was unnerving and disrupting. As every hour went by I recognized more and more what I didn’t know. I didn’t know much about South Africa, and I didn’t know about apartheid at all. I didn’t know the country’s history nor its’ present. The internal pressure from what I didn’t know was met with grace from my new friends in cohort five. The grace from our advisors, our administrators, and our mentor; and even from Deon Kitching, our tour guide,

allowed me the freedom to quietly become what I should have been all along: a student, a learner.

⁴ The shift from distracted, self-obsessed, self-important minister to humbled student was solidified as I sat and at the feet of Mary Burton⁵. Mary Burton, a political activist and human rights lobbyist, spoke to us from a District Six museum, prime Cape Town real-estate where starting in the 1960s almost 60,000 people were eventually forced out of their homes because the government had rezoned it “white only.” In 1965, while District Six displacements were beginning, Ms. Burton joined the “Black Sash,” an anti-apartheid organization that was made up of mostly middle-class white women. Mary recounted the activities of the Black Sash, their protests, the abuse and objectification of blacks and coloreds under apartheid, and its eventual abolishment, culminating in the election of Nelson Mandela. She spoke with dignity, candor, passion and regret. As a commissioner on the “Truth and Reconciliation Committee” she had listened to hundreds of stories of abuse and violence; their committee recommended compensation for those abuses and losses. Her regret was that the government failed to act on those recommendations, reinforcing widespread government mistrust.



Portions of her speech⁶ can be previewed and downloaded from the following link, for best results please copy the link into your browser:

https://www.dropbox.com/s/3717xbszjxcmjpp/Mary_Burton.m4v?dl=0

⁴ Mary Burton, *Photo Album, Dminlgp Cape Town Advance*, 2014, District Six Museum, accessed November 9, 2014, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gfes/15701376625/in/set-72157648141981376>.

⁵ “South Africa History Online: Towards a People’s History,” accessed October 29, 2014, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/mary-maria-burton>.

⁶ Mary Burton, “Apartheid Through The Eyes Of A White Expat Woman” (lecture, District Six Museum, Cape Town, September 25, 2014).

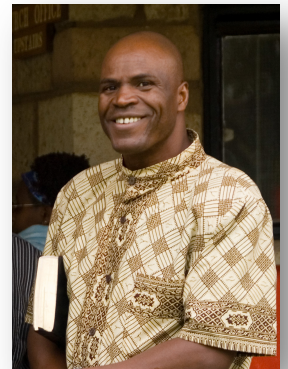
New Knowledge

Beyond the in-depth and multi-faceted exposure to apartheid, its history and its long-term, far-reaching impact on South Africa, I also became a learner because of the gracious community I stepped into. As simplistic as it might seem, the greatest ministry-impacting skill or takeaway from the Cape Town advance for me was becoming a learner. I'll cite three brief examples, presentations that were much more than teaching. Each presentation did more than communicate knowledge; each one did surgery on my assumptions, each showed me something I thought I knew – but really knew only with a myopic perspective:



⁷First, I thought I knew the story of the Levite and his concubine, but I quickly realized that I didn't. Dr. MaryKate Morse immersed us into the vulnerability of women. I sat there horrified as she, with great sensitivity, expounded on Judges 19; she took us into the violence against women, the horror of rape, all of which starts in a mind that objectifies a person and opens up the possibility of using and disposing of a vulnerable people.

⁸Second, Dr. Patrick Murunga spoke on short-term missions (STMs). This at least would allow me to regain my equilibrium after Dr. Morse's disturbing talk. Ego could be stroked again because if anyone has experience with STMs it's me! I have gone on many short-term missions; led others to experience them, and recently sent my thirteen-year-old daughter half-way around the world on a STM trip. Instead of a kindly pat on the back, Patrick's message felt like a drive-by shooting with an Uzi. I thought I knew STMs, but I never considered the dynamic of "toxic charity," the dependency they create, or how "mission" communicates "agenda" to the recipient.



⁷ MaryKate Morse, *Photo Album, Marykate Morse Gfes*, 2014, Seminary - Shella's Retirement, accessed November 9, 2014, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gfes/15701376625/in/set-72157648141981376>.

⁸ Patrick Murunga, *Photo Album, Dmin Lgp*, 2008, Nairobi, Kenya, accessed November 9, 2014, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gfes/3778625587/in/set-72157621916080268>.



⁹Third, I took an immediate liking to Dr. Conniry; his opening remarks to cohort five showed an easygoing, approachable man who could lead a seminary, yet remain genuinely humble. So when he shared a presentation on “servant leadership,” I was engaged, then confused and finally humbled. “Servant-leadership” has been promoted widely as Christ-like action to the world on behalf of God, right? But Dr. Conniry advocated that

Jesus’ ministry wasn’t “*to the world on behalf of God*” but rather His ministry was “*to the Father on behalf of the world*”¹⁰. It’s not simply the “serving” behavior that makes you a servant-leader like Jesus; it’s whom you serve that counts. Without that focus the wrong master may be served. This amiable man just exposed my own ministry as subtly shifting away from “to the Father.”

Becoming a learner was disrupting. I’d like to think it was because I had not been a student in decades, but as I reflected, the disruption had more to do with lazy pride. I think I had become comfortable in my knowledge, comfortable with the boundaries that I had created and maintained. Becoming a learner meant opening up to “not knowing.” It’s not just not knowing, but the vulnerability of admitting you don’t know. I can’t imagine becoming a true learner without the gracious community that I stepped into.

Practice

Since the advance I have consciously tried to continue as a learner, which is challenging when most people perceive you as a teacher or professional who should have the answers. I need to practice a form of contrite learning and listening; yet I can’t deny that in my community I’m

⁹ Chuck Conniry, *Photo Album*, *Churck Conniry*, 2014, J L Zwane Presbyterian Church, Cape Town, South Africa, accessed November 9, 2014, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gfes/15376330006/in/set-72157615007844329>.

¹⁰ Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 40-41.

looked to for answers. For example, on the one hand, I'm a beginner when it comes to theological study—there is a mountain range to be explored and I've only gone up one hill. Yet, within my community people come to me all the time and want my perspective on what amounts to theology. I want to be a learner, and yet I'm looked up to for answers. That's the tension I brought home with me to Texas. Here is an example of how I've approached this tension since the advance.

While it seemed risky, I wanted to offer a different kind of spiritual formation group to my community, one where I'd be a learner too. We would meet at Cork Grinders, a trendy coffee and wine bar, strategically chosen as a public venue because I hoped it would help people with the perception of theology as a church-only affair. Together we'd read through ¹¹Ford's "Theology: A Very Short Introduction"¹². That book's content is different from our norm; while I believe the author has an orthodox personal belief, the book's tone is academic and reaches broadly. I took a Socratic approach, sharing a brief quote from the book, posing a question, then going around the circle asking participants to address the question and encouraging friendly debate. For example, a recent question was "Can our prayers manipulate God?" That opened up a rich discussion about our relationship with God. Last night's discussion centered around how a good and just God allows and even uses evil.



Within this group I offer my view less often than is comfortable, but the conversation becomes rich as I encourage the opinions of others. The group poses questions and offers observations, sometimes well-reasoned and biblically-based answers come from the group without my prompting. Sometimes answers aren't needed. Recently, one group member brought up her discussion with an Islamic co-worker. Instead of giving a definitive answer to her question about witnessing to him, the group engaged in a discussion of the differences between

¹¹ *Cork Grinders: Wine and Coffee Bar Logo*, 2014, Baytown, Texas, accessed November 9, 2014, www.corkgrinders.com.

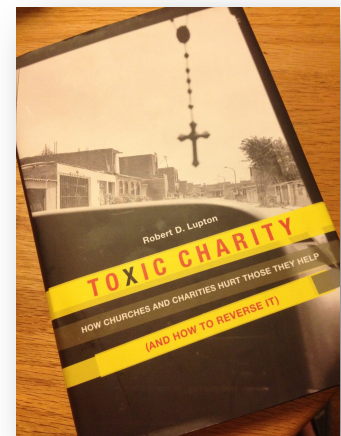
¹² Each Monday night we would meet for about one and half hours discussing a chapter of this book. David Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)*, 2 ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Islamic faith and Christianity. The conversation seemed very helpful to her. At times in this group I'm a learner sitting around the table with them, but I'm always their shepherd – always keeping an eye out for any wayward teaching.

Application

Reflecting back on Patrick Murunga's presentation¹³, I'll admit to a knot forming in my stomach. As mentioned, his presentation was disrupting; Short Term Missions trips (STMs) have been a major part of my spiritual formation. I've become a big advocate and I've recently inspired my own daughters in that direction. However, I had never thought about the negative impacts that these STMs can have on the host. Moreover, my own church, Alliance Bible Church, had recently started its planning for an STM in the summer of 2015. What was I to do? The church expects to do a STM in summer of 2015, something we do every three years and 2015 is the year. But I'm having doubts about our approach. I decided to chat with the lay-leaders of this effort, come at it from the perspective of something I recently learned at my advance, something that may impact our efforts.

¹⁴We discussed how STMs had created an unhealthy reliance on American churches, how "charity" can become toxic.¹⁵ We explored together how sometimes our American attitude toward doing mission feels to those who receive it as "we have an agenda;" we come to do something for you, even if you can do it yourself, we subtly but arrogantly imply that we can do it better. As it turns out, these lay-leaders had some of the same concerns but didn't know how to voice them in a constructive way. During this meeting we



¹³ Patrick Murunga, *Rethinking Short Term Missions in the 21st Century*, 2014, GFES Cape Town Advance, accessed November 3, 2014, <https://www.dropbox.com/s/exctack4kxbdt0e/Murunga%20-%20Rethinking%20Short%20Term%20Missions%20In%20The%2021st%20Century%20Presentation.pdf?dl=0>.

¹⁴ Photo: Billy Williams, *Chanchanchepon Toxic Charity by Robert Lupton: Review*, 2013, accessed November 9, 2014, <http://chanchanchepon.blogspot.com/2013/01/review-toxic-charity-by-robert-lupton.html>.

¹⁵ A concept that is the basis of the book: Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help, and How to Reverse It*, 9.2.2012 ed. (HarperOne, 2012), 1.

discussed not wanting to just do a short-term mission because we always have. We agreed we did not want to create toxic charity. We then discussed our desire to create a genuine partnership with a local church with whom we could do ministry together.

This approach may be unsettling for some in the congregation; some have the expectation that we'll soon begin promoting our next STM trip, but instead we're actually back to the drawing board. We're discussing what our priorities should be when we do an STM, what should our attitude be, what does a ministry partnership even look like for us, for them? Being a learner comes with the promise of new possibilities, but it also opens the door to being criticized for backtracking and losing momentum.

Synthesis

Since I joined this learning community, GFES' LGP5, I've gone from arrogant to vulnerable, a path I'm on with my church as well. It is the vulnerability of being at the table as one of the group exploring theology and not having all the answers. It is the vulnerability of going into the missions meeting and not pushing forward with our next trip, but instead backtracking and asking a lot of questions about why we're doing this in the first place. Even my preaching is being impacted. I just started a new series on Colossians and in my introductory message I set up the series as going deeper into our Christology.¹⁶ I stated my desire that we



sharpen our theological thinking, with examples of honest questions about who Jesus is. I said that theology doesn't come from running off to seminary, but it comes when a pluralistic culture pressures the church and it responds in a Christ-like way—like in Colossae, or in Baytown Texas.

I'm becoming a learner, learning to think more critically and theologically. As a learner I'm asking a lot more questions in my ministry. I'm not quoting the miniature guide to critical thinking, but it's obvious that it has caused me to ask questions on relevance, depth, breadth, and

¹⁶ David Young, "Rooted and Built Up: In Our Faith." (Video of sermon, Alliance Bible Church, Baytown, Texas, October 26, 2014), accessed November 4, 2014, <http://abcbaytown.org/media.php?pageID=15>.

fairness, such as the ones mentioned above regarding STMs¹⁷. I'm encouraging that questions be asked to help discern our own bias. While I haven't been carrying around McGrath's "Christian Theology: An Introduction," the section on Christology¹⁸ gave me valuable background for a series in which I'm asking the congregation to deepen their own Christology. I still wouldn't have had the courage to model this new series on deepening our theology if I hadn't seen its clear missional purpose. As Grenz and Olson put it, "*good theology sharpens our understanding of the gospel. It helps us clarify the meaning of the story of God at work in Christ. Theology does this so that we might declare the good news in a manner that people today can understand.*"¹⁹

Frankly, becoming a student has been incredibly difficult in regards to the workload; I thought I had enough margin for the demand of scholarly work, but losing time from home and ministry has been frustrating. Many times I've considered quitting. I've discovered two compelling reasons not to quit: first, I believe that completing this program is going to make me more effective in the kingdom work God has for me now and in the future. Second is how God has already been changing me; exposing my arrogance and my self-absorbed myopic perspectives. As a learner, I'm pushing past what I thought I knew toward what I don't know. As a learner, I'm vulnerable but I'm also growing, and that's why I started this D. Min in the first place.

¹⁷ Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking-Concepts and Tools (Thinker's Guide)*(Dillon Beach: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2009), 7-9.

¹⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 265-294.

¹⁹ Stanley J. Grenz & Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 44.

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