

Introduction to Overwhelming Simplicity

The clouds grew higher and began to merge causing their color to change from a light grey to a deep grey-navy blue. I felt a light breeze blowing, which gradually became stronger. The storm developing cooled things down as I walked along the dirt road lined with walls of green forest on either side. I was on my way to the first HIV prevention and awareness meeting I would be conducting in the small village of Ntuuti. Twenty-two and ambitious, I had a drive to get a project started within the first week of my service as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Uganda. After recently completing ten weeks of training, I found myself walking confidently in my ankle length skirt as I entered Ntuuti. I looked for Grace, the Ugandan woman who was assigned to work with me and help me start community health projects in the area. She was in her early forties, tall, with big round brown eyes, and a slight overbite. I looked for her as I walked down the main dirt road that divided the village in half. On one side there was the local restaurant made up of a rectangular mud shack with a thatched roof with just enough space for a table and chairs to fit inside. Next to this was the kitchen, a circular mud structure with a gap between the walls and the thatched roof that allowed smoke to escape. The other side of the road had two buildings about ten feet high made of bricks and mortar with iron sheets as the roofing material. One building was divided into four spaces, each having a door that opened to the front of the building. A dry goods store and a family's apartment occupied the two outer spaces, with vacancies separating them in the middle. The other building was divided into two spaces, with one being a "beauty salon" and the other was another family's apartment. I saw Grace talking to someone outside of the dry goods store and went over to her.

"Hello Grace. How are you?" I said.

"Hello. I am fine. How are you?"

"I am fine."

"The people were informed of the meeting yesterday and should be coming, but they fear the rain so some may not attend the meeting today", Grace told me.

I said, "Okay. Well, we will wait and see how many show up."

"Also, Megan, these people live by Ugandan time, and so even though the meeting is scheduled for one, they may not arrive until two or three."

I did not completely believe Grace, but we waited for almost two hours before the first two people arrived. As we set up some benches in the one apartment next to the "beauty salon", three other participants arrived. As we all entered the windowless eight by ten foot room, the wind began to pick up and the heavy clouds blocked out the sun dimming the light outside.

I introduced myself to the group of five in the local language and told them, "I am here to help you understand HIV and to help you live healthy lives."

I had them introduce themselves and then began to teach with Grace interpreting for me. I presented the facts on how HIV is contracted, what the virus does to the immune system, and

what people can do to prevent the spread. While discussing this information I developed a feeling that I was not doing the right thing. In my mind this seemed like such valuable information, but to these people, all very thin and exhausted from the walk to Ntuuti, it seemed worthless. I was about to continue with my teaching, but decided to stop. I wanted to hear what they had to say. I wanted to develop a better understanding of what they thought would be helpful. Grace interpreted this to the group and a silence followed. We sat in the dark room with light only coming in through the front doorway and listened to the gusts of wind that caused the metal door to clank back and forth. Then out of the group of four women and one man, the youngest woman in a yellow dress began to speak. She spoke for a couple of minutes before Grace began to interpret,

“She said that her husband, who had three wives, became sick and passed away. That was when she decided to make a trip to the health center to get tested. When she was told she was positive she did not believe the nurse. She was so sad. She felt like she was given a death sentence. She knew if she told anyone about her positive results they would not want to be around her anymore.” Grace stopped talking and the woman continued to tell her story.

“She has lived with the disease for a year and has accepted it. Her two children are what she lives for now. She tries to provide for them, but it is hard. Her strength is beginning to decline and she no longer has the energy to dig a large garden.”

She then finished her story, “What she needs is food, money for school fees, and medicine for her and her children when they get sick.”

There was another period of silence before the older looking woman in a purple dress and a red headscarf began to speak.

Grace interpreted for her, “She also became sick from her husband. Even though she knew he was with other women she could not ask him to wear a condom. She knew if she did ask him he would become angry and possibly beat her. She has been sick for over three years and is so weak it is hard for her to do anything, including walking to this meeting.”

The woman concluded her story, “She says that it is hard being sick with this disease because she does not have support from anyone else. The people are scared of getting the disease from her. She needs food and money to buy things for daily living.”

At that point we began to hear a few rain drops come down onto the iron sheets. The man in the group, wearing a blue buttoned up shirt tucked in to black slacks, spoke up not telling us how he contracted the disease, but that he also needed the same help.

The other two women in the group stayed silent as the rain began to come down harder. It hit the iron sheets above us and made such a loud sound that we could no longer hear one another. It was as if someone was pouring truckloads of little stones down on to the roof. We all sat there in silence looking out the door watching the rain come down, making the ground muddy, and forming large puddles.

In that moment I realized that my idea of having meetings with only HIV positive people, teaching them about ways to try to stay healthy, was not practical.

What are you doing here? How can you be telling these people how to live their lives? I asked myself.

They didn't care how they got this disease or how it attacked their immune systems. They were just trying to make it to the next day. They just wanted things that were so simple, so basic. I couldn't imagine living in a developing country and then being diagnosed with HIV. I then understood why so many people did not want to get tested. A positive result would just let them know that they were dying. They didn't have access to the medicines that would slow the progression of their disease, much less the food required to take along with all the pills. They would be treated poorly by anyone who knew they were positive and would not have the support they deserved.

It rained for almost an hour and when it finally stopped, we decided to end the meeting. Some of the people had much longer walks than I did to get back home. They all thanked me for the teaching. As I thanked them for coming, all I could think was, *Sorry I made you walk so far for nothing.* It was still overcast outside and cool with a soft breeze. Grace and I began walking home together along the muddy road.

"That was a good meeting Megan, but there is much that needs to be done", she said to me.

As we walked back to our village I felt overwhelmed and lacked confidence. They wanted such simple things: food, shelter, and medicine. They gave me the answers, but I had no idea how was I going to develop a sustainable project that would help them. At the same time, I had learned one of the most valuable lessons of my Peace Corps career: the importance of listening to people before acting and doing what I thought needed to be done.