

April Feng
WorldTeach
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I was a different person when I first arrived in Cape Town on June 12, 2016 - I had just spent six exhausting months interning with CBS News and China Central Television America in Washington, DC. My long-term belief that journalism could eliminate poverty was severely challenged by all the vanity, arrogance, and deceit flowing in the real world of Washington, and I was rather lost in where to move forward in life. I remember seeing Table Mountain meandering along the coastline of Atlantic Ocean for the first time and thinking to myself, maybe I could find something worth fighting for in the next nine weeks.

In the 64 days I spent in Cape Town, I stayed up all night to design a concrete plan for my 15-year-old student to travel to Portugal and meet soccer player Lionel Messi. I hid alone in a small cave on Lion's Head begging God (if there is one) for directions in life, with the bloody African sun setting on the horizon. I witnessed my 16-year-old student walking on the streets selling her body, just so that she could get "Tik", or crystal meth, for next morning, and I have seen the same girl looking into the forever-blue African sky with bright eyes, murmuring that she wanted to learn knowledge. I had a crush on one person, and I also fell in love with the entire human race, regardless of its many controversies and cruelties.

Masiphumelele, a black township on the outskirts of Cape Town, was where I was first introduced to black South Africans living in extremely poor conditions. Starting from the second week, I tutored Masi students through IkamvaYouth, a locally inspired organization that provides space and educational resources for the local high school students. During the organization's winter session, experienced tutors – both local and foreign – would tutor in subjects such as math, English, economics and life sciences. It was during the tutoring weeks that I encountered the most difficult tasks and the most challenging questions that continue to define my experience in South Africa.

The students had absolutely no discipline. They would start speaking Xhosa (the local language) with each other or even walk out of the room whenever they felt bored. The lack of self-discipline made the learning process extremely hard, since learning cannot be done without persistence. I specifically remember one instance when I attempted to teach my students how to read and write music scores. Though there are so many beautiful South African songs, most of them got lost in history since they were not written down. If the students could learn a formal way to write their songs in a language that could be understood by the rest of the world, the continent's rich legacy

could be shared and better appreciated. The first minutes of my workshop went well and the students were cooperative. But as we started the repeating the exercise of clapping different rhythms, the students got bored and some of them left the room. On the second day, nobody showed up for my workshop. Standing in front the empty class, I felt unprecedentedly depressed.

I was not sad about the fact that nobody showed up in the workshop. My sadness was over something deeper: As an international student in the United States, I understood the negative consequences of so-called “cultural pride.” It is natural to be proud of one’s own culture, but the world is dominated by the powerful and there is hierarchy everywhere in everyday life. Though one does not have to submit to the rule of the strong, in order to challenge the existing system, one must master the rule until he or she can play it better than anyone else. If none of my students want to learn about the worldwide music denotation, how can the continent move forward and be appreciated by the rest of the world?

However, it turned out that I was the ignorant and disrespectful one. One day over lunch, I asked my students they thought music is. They told me that the music of Africa is not meant to be shared with others, but simply creates joy in balancing sounds. Because of that, there is absolutely no reason for them to learn the Western style of music denotation – it does not advance their objective. The experience humbled me greatly. I learned that because people have different ways of defining things, they do not necessarily agree on how to move forward, and that is okay.

But is it really? It is okay for the already advantaged, since the world they live will continue to be what it is: the poor will continue to be poor, since they treat things differently, and the rich will continue to take advantage of the poor. But is it truly okay for the disadvantaged?

In the following weeks, I contributed more to the local community: I founded a community writing center in the Masiphumelele Library, a place for the locals to write, polish and share their stories with others. I taught students from age 13 to 20 in the LSEN School (a special-need school) in Ocean View, a “colored township” where, for five consecutive years, drug abuse and gang violence kill one person every two days. I raised money to buy a video camera and documented “Amasoja,” a youth initiative in the black township of Gugulethu. I was told that I had touched hundreds of lives and my life was also undoubtedly enriched by every single life I was fortunate enough to touch. However, the question I had from teaching music to students in Masiphumelele still rang in my head every single day. Is it really okay to love one’s pride so much that one does not love the pride of others? Moreover, should I be the one to judge?

In the movie "Out of Africa," there is a conversation between Karen Blixen and Denys Finch Hatton that always stays in my mind:

- "When they said they would like to read, how did they put that exactly? I mean did they know they like Dickens?"
- "You don't think they should know to read?"
- "I think you should have asked them."
- "Did you ask when you were a child? How can stories possibly haunt them?"
- "They have their own stories. It is just not written down."

My journey to South Africa has enriched my life in ineffable ways and it will take me years to fully grasp some of my experiences. In the end, I still could not say that I have definitely found something worth fighting for, but I was much more at ease with the fact that I had found no such thing. After all, life is so precious and time so arbitrary that every single second should be faithfully celebrated.