

Some people go the movies or read novels to discover a different world. I used to be one of those people, staring in wide-eyed wonder through 3D glasses and longing to experience something new. Then I discovered something so much better (albeit a tad more expensive): travel.

Walking through the open-air market in Kampala, Uganda was a shopping experience unlike any other. It would have made an experienced mosh pit punk feel claustrophobic. As if the mass of people wasn't enough, combine that with the stench of unwashed bodies and a cacophony of shouted sales pitches. The bustle of commerce makes even Black Friday at Wal-Mart look tame!

Zoom a few bumpy dirt streets over and you'll find an urban neighborhood made of sheet metal lean-tos and plywood shacks. Kids run everywhere, and women prepare meals in groups. Religious messages are scratched into the side of every structure. And while perhaps the most striking thing at first for a naïve American is the grime and the poverty, that's not the image that stays.

After visiting a family in a Ugandan slum, the torn ill-fitting clothing almost seems like an afterthought to the vibrancy of the smiles. The people had so much hope and faith. They trusted that tomorrow would be just a little bit better than today.

They stay smiling day after day, even when they eat the same boiled mashed matooke (like bananas) day in and day out.

It made me painfully cognizant of American arrogance. In a land of extreme luxury, we still act ungrateful. I am ashamed to admit that I'm the same way. How dare any public place be without wifi? What excuse is there for a lack of hot water? Why does service take so dang long?

I was always conscious of what I was "doing without". I took provisions to ensure I lived the same padded American life I have always lived – snacks, travel-sized beauty products, video games on my iPod to stave off boredom. I may have taken a cold shower, but I dried off to go use my shiny new laptop while watching CNN on television and munching fancy trail mix.

It really made me question the American way of life, and I began to really consciously compare the differences. The best way to compare is how Americans and Ugandans answer their doors. A Ugandan warmly welcomes you and invites you into their home for tea even if they've never seen you before in their life. An American stands blocking the entrance and asks what you want, with the implication that you should go away. All of the sudden, the American way seemed barbaric and isolated.

A few days later, bouncing along a rutted dirt road with a team of local journalists, I was going to a village so small, even the local map had forgotten them. We were on our way to report about the water crisis in the area, and one woman leaned over to me and whispered, "Welcome to Africa."

In the moment, I thought she was just being friendly. I didn't know it was a warning.

Our trip into a village of mud-huts, a former Internally Displaced Persons camp, inhabited by peanut farmers started out decently enough. We got our quotes and we were packing up. I noticed a muddy

preschool-aged boy watching us, so I squatted down to say hello. As I looked at him, I came to a sudden idiotic realization – Africa is real.

Everything I thought I knew about myself shattered. It wasn't because of anything he said – we didn't even speak the same language. It wasn't the look of amusement on his brother's faces as this geeky girl tried to navigate farming peanuts (called "ground nuts" there). No. It was the way his ripped up flannel shirt fell off his shoulder and revealed his belly sticking out over his toes. I remember thinking it was a cruel irony, because he had never had enough to eat. In a sudden, idiotic moment, I came to the realization that Africa is real. Whenever someone scolded me to eat my vegetables because kids in Africa starve to death, they were talking about this boy.

I had been in country for nearly two weeks. I had seen poverty-stricken neighborhoods and people injured in the recent war. I was well aware of the dangers of drinking the water, and of the diseases carried by mosquitoes. But as I looked into the deep brown eyes of this child, it was actualized for me. When my grandmother told me to eat my dreaded carrots because there are starving children in Africa, she meant this little boy.

The village boy's mother explained that even though they have some raw vegetables, they have no way to cook because they don't have water. They haven't had a water source in that village for a decade, but she couldn't afford to move. I was incensed. I couldn't believe that a whole village could live without a basic necessity and no one was helping – no one had been helping for years.

She told us that she walks miles each day to the nearest town to buy water for her children – not even clean water, but muddy and contaminated water. It was all she could afford. She said maybe the mayor could help them.

My next stop was the local government's office. I saw the district representative to parliament and demanded to know what they planned on doing for their constituents. The woman sighed deeply and spoke carefully. She explained that the government doesn't have money either.

"Maybe an NGO (nonprofit) can help us," she said.

When I spoke to the local nonprofit leader that afternoon, he told me that he had a solution. I was ecstatic. I had conducted a piece of investigative journalism and succeeded. My heart broke as he told me that the solution cost \$11,000 – or 30 years of that Ugandan woman's earnings. No one could help the village.

I went back to my room at the hotel we were staying at and stared at the blinking cursor on my computer screen, trying to figure out how I was going to tell the story. I felt dizzy as I thought of way after way that I could help the village myself. Maybe I could sell my jeans and my laptop, and that would help. My iPod? My luggage? I realized in that moment that I would give up everything – from my laptop to my coffee addiction to my mascara – if only that little boy and his family could have some clean water.

There's a simple word in Uganda that means a lot, "kyambura," meaning "I have searched, and I have prayed, and that is all that I can do." I had my own kyambura moment that day – I had searched and prayed for answers, but that was all I could do.

So I pulled out my voice recorder and pulled every conversation I had had that day off of it. And I edited a radio story that contained my heart and soul. My voice was all I had.

When I came home, the piece played on the local NPR station. The community responded, and now my university is trying to raise enough money to give a Ugandan village a well.

But even as different as everything seemed, one thing apparently crosses all cultures and country boundaries. As a man bicycled by, blaring shrill electronic tunes from a boombox as he passed, kid's eyes lit up. In every part of the world, ice cream men are the most annoying people in the neighborhood.