

Untangling the Intercultural Knot With an African Colleague

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Mukasa and I were stalled at an interpersonal intersection. After several years of working together, he as the Director of a human rights organization and I as the Director of NGOabroad, a "volunteer-sending" organization, we hit a knot. {mosgoogle right}

It was clear that we were not just talking about a volunteer's gripes and revising protocols. We were mired in our own perspectives and having a hard time understanding the other's position.

Why Do You Need Money? I did not understand why his group was not out pounding the streets 24/7 discussing a person's right to vote and the right to have an opposition party without being harassed.

Likewise, I did not understand why someone else in his town had not launched her domestic violence program. She kept telling me, "We don't have the [financial] resources." My response, "Services here for battered women were launched on pass-the-hat-at-fiery-feminist-meetings-in-the-80s money. You don't need money. You need passion and commitment."

When Mukasa said, "We cannot operate without funds," I knew that I was missing the same thing that the volunteer missed. Mukasa patiently explained, "We cannot just go to educate in the villages every day. It is a long journey on the bus. We do not have a vehicle and we do not have gas money." "Could you do programs in the town?" I asked, thinking it was an easy answer. "We do not have funds." "How much does it cost to stand up on a bully pulpit soap box?" I thought.

Then I could catch a glimpse of some of the tangle. 70% of the population lives in disperse rural areas, so their human rights radio show touches lives in four contiguous countries without having to pay gas money to do it.

While it may not cost money to gather a crowd in the States, Mukasa said that he must pay people's return transportation if they turned out. An American political organizer who previously worked with Mukasa said that everyone in the audience was given a phone card to thank them for turning out. Sounds like a bribe to me, but such culturally-determined opinions are what created the knot.

Have-Not & Have-Lots I realized that despite our deep friendship and respect, Mukasa and I come from different sides of the world's Have-Not/Have-Lots divide. I keep missing the need for program funds because I live in a place that has abundant resources. Most days, Mukasa and I bridge that gap. Today it was like trying to jump a crevice when the snow bridges have melted: impossible.

I realized that we were hitting unspoken assumptions, beliefs, and feelings equipped only with words. Representing the privileged, the international-volunteers-which-I-send and I, often have a rescuer mentality.

Victim-Rescuer-Perpetrator Triangle Most Africans take a victim mentality. The volunteer who left prematurely was aghast at what she described as selfish and unfriendly attitudes. "I've seen bits of this 'Me, me, me.' Or 'Gimme, gimme, gimme.' This is the motto of Have-Nots. It capitalizes on the Have-Lots' sense of guilt and Marie Antoinette complex. What will happen when the Have-Nots, 7/8ths of the world, rise up and demand their share of the resources? Where do we begin to untangle the inequities in the world's resources?"

We were encountering a classic Victim-Rescuer-Perpetrator triangle, a phenomena outlined by Claude Steiner in Transactional Analysis. What is the way out of this conundrum? Inter-acting as adult equals. Own my own bias, blind-spots, and assumptions.

"This is really a boundary issue," I thought. "When someone is the Rescuer, they are encroaching on someone else's competence. When someone is the Victim, they have not stood tall in their shoes."

I think that well meaning volunteers and myself unwittingly offend and incapacitate. "Here, let me do that for you," is the implied message. "No, I'd rather do it myself," is what an increasingly self confident Africa is saying.

Will the Real Africa Please Stand Up? Africa is tremendously romanticized. Swarmed by celebrities and in the spotlight with Bill Clinton and Bill Gates, Africa has a new glamour. Many people are drawn to volunteer or in some way help in Africa. I have no complaint about such service. The concern is the "projection"—seeing Africa as we want this vast continent to be, rather than what Africa really is.

Mea culpa. I am guilty of this idealization. At the heart of our knot, I was having my nose rubbed in what Africa really is, not what I want it to be. It is like finding after the honeymoon that the woman that you had swooned over and then married wears curlers.

At a Crossroads We are at a crossroads. In years past, inter-cultural mending was done between East and West—between capitalism and communism. Now people are stretching across the gap between Have-Lots and Have-Nots. Where citizens are making inter-cultural bridges is the harbinger of where important cultural changes will occur.

I realized that I could give up and ignore the knot, or I could take this opportunity to learn something and deepen a relationship that stretches across the gap.

So after mulling on it all day, I wrote to Mukasa, "Mukasa, thank you for once again teaching me about how things work in your country. Is there anything else that I have totally missed or not understood? Will you tell me your point of view: how things happened with the volunteer? I should have asked earlier. Sorry for the oversight."

Peace By the end of the day, I had let go of my point of view. It no longer seemed important. It was far more important to me to make a bridge. Peace is only as near or as far as we are to each other.

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