

## Insights on Grace from the South Pacific

Contributed by Susan Lanae Burkholder, MSW

Peering through the palm fronds, I spied on Hefu as he tottered sideways on one foot like Pooh Bear. In his sixties, Hefu had decided to cease the day's opportunity and catch a butterfly with his sulu, the traditional Fijian wrap-around skirt. As I lingered in the moment with him, my heart was steeped in his capacity for sincerity. {mosgoogle}

Previously, I had lived in Fiji for half a year in 2005 and half a year in 2006. During those times, I was wooed by the people, topography, and culture of this exotic South Pacific island nation. Once in graduate school, I managed to finagle the opportunity for an independent study in Fiji during a summer session. While academically I was providing court advocacy, conducting interviews, and gathering information on Fiji's international adoption policies and laws, personally I was saturating myself in quality time spent with friends and the joys of communal living. I would have never witnessed Hefu's mid-day rendezvous had I been isolated in my own home or exercising independence from the workings of daily village life.

Hefu never knew he had been under surveillance, and later that day I wrote this in my journal:

One reason it's so easy to love [the people of Fiji] is because they don't seem to practice skepticism. [A friend] mentioned earlier that they make great party guests because they're easily amused, they entertain themselves if there's dead space, and they have a unique willingness when it comes to cleaning up afterwards. A huge determining factor in this is that, whether 10 or 60, their hearts are young. I watched Hefu, a grown man, pounce around after a butterfly today--there was no reserve, no shame, no insecurity; just simplicity and raw sincerity. Skepticism says, "I'm too good for that; too cool; too old; too afraid I'll look like an idiot in someone else's eyes." To be genuine is so refreshing and beautiful! Make any suggestion to [Fijians] and their response is typically one of two things, if not both: laughter and an attitude of "okay--let's try this" with 100% personal investment. These people know what it is to live in the moment. These people know what it is to be alive!

Likewise, Hefu could never guess and will never discover the extent to which his life affected my ability to (more) objectively perceive my interactions with others.

As I reflect on my experiences in Fiji, I inevitably come to rest in the significance of the relationships forged within my Fijian community. As alluded to in my journal entry, I believe this to be a direct result of the Fijians' authenticity. Those invested in helping professions often embody similar personality traits and in particular appear to be drawn to the intricacies of communication, social interaction, and physical presence. For this reason, I assert that genuine expressions such as Hefu's caught me off guard because, "Superficiality is the curse of our age.... The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people" (Foster, 1978). How true, that in the business of my daily routines I fail to stop long enough to offer something of myself, to consistently be real with others. A new longing for deep and meaningful relationships swelled from within my core.

Grappling with this novel paradigm, which mandated re-evaluation and revision of my worldview, I gritted my teeth at my choice. I could either wither from the challenge and safely remain unchanged, or I could face the risky process of personal growth. Ironically enough, I had just scribbled this quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes in my journal the day before: "A mind stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions." Therefore, I determined to allow myself the vulnerability to learn from these beautiful people.

In the midst of my self-inventory, I needed an outlet for peace and security. I needed a safe place to think and a safe place to escape. For me, there was something magnetic about the ocean--spending time at the seashore or taking long boat rides across the Somosomo straight. In particular, my eyes danced at the sight of teal spilling into blue, which signified the presence of reefs or sandbars. From my perch on the bow, feet dangling overboard, I could trace the sunrays as they cut the water's surface and directed my eyes to the occasional shark or sea tortoise swimming below. I was so inspired that I wrote this poem in my journal:

### Rest for My Soul

Life was meant to be explored through these colors  
experiments in hues of blues  
and greens  
spilling into one another.

I was meant to live through these Fiji waters  
a sense of identity paired with consistency  
ushered along  
by playful yet gracious lulls.

Of raw senses, unrefined and purely preserved  
igniting awareness in tidal proportions  
honest, untainted  
be it high noon clarity or alkaline haze.

And like the security of an old friend's hug  
 so the South Pacific waves, unwielded in charm  
 sun-pierce my heart  
 their churning currents enwrapping me in love's constitution.

While the ocean served as my refuge, it also encouraged and compelled me to bravely face probable internal changes. As I processed and connected concepts, I realized that the underlying mechanism resided in my personal system of extending grace. The constructs of grace and judgment are paradoxically close. In the context of an individual's behaviors and social interactions, judgment scrutinizes while grace, even if recognizing the potential fault, concedes to the extension of freedom in personal choice. Translated through the NASW Code of Ethics (1999), offering grace in place of judgment establishes the worth of a person by honoring self-determination.

If I had been in the United States and witnessed a 60-year-old man sincerely chasing down a butterfly, I know several thoughts would have been racing through my mind, none of which would include the preciousness of his vulnerability, vivacity, or sincerity. I was disturbed that my response to the same situation was so completely opposite depending on geographic location. Being the quote connoisseur I am, I thought of something our 16th president had once said. In the margin on a page in my journal, I had scratched, "We have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and persevering grace." If President Lincoln recognized this need so early in our country's history, what can we, as United States citizens, say of our daily routines and social norms today? Over time, have we not become more independent, thus, according to the former president's words, heightening our inadequate pursuit of grace?

This led me to another self-discovery. Mulling over human capacity for authenticity, grace, judgment, skepticism, and living in community, I desperately sought a common denominator. In one of those surreal, lightning bolt moments, I knew that the basis for my response to others was rooted in my biases—my self-constructed expectations of individuals. I tend to pass judgment when people fail to meet my expectations of their behavior. The interesting thing about expectations, though, is that they are often impossible to fulfill. This is especially the case when I hold others accountable to some invisible standard that they are unaware even exists. Not only have I booby-trapped the relationship (because behavior is unlikely to change if expectations are not communicated), but I have simultaneously blamed that individual for my disappointment.

My ability to interact so graciously with Fijians stemmed from my lack of expectations for their behavior; having no previous exposure, I had no established biases. I was culturally displaced. As a guest in Fiji, I had shifted into a non-assertive, yet active role of learning about and respecting their culture. The ethical principal of cultural competence took on a profoundly fresh meaning as I consciously incorporated this transformed mentality into my self-awareness.

Although I will never perfect this concept, I hope to intentionally perceive each individual through an expectation-free lens. I want to extend grace impartially; each person has his or her own culture, and I should reserve my opinions until after I've taken the time to be a student of that culture. Being culturally competent requires continuous examination of personal expectations placed on others, which ultimately serves to honor the worth of each person.

Although my personal growth found roots in my expectations of others, the chain reaction began with sincerity, followed by beauty, skepticism, meaningful relationships, and grace. I depicted the people of Fiji as beautiful, which I ascribed to their sincerity, their overall lack of skepticism, and their deep (often communal) relationships. To defer to one last quote, I have cherished these words and adopted them as a personal mantra: "A woman of true beauty offers others the grace to be and the room to become" (Eldredge & Eldredge, 2005). How fitting that the attribute of beauty was appointed to the one who extends grace. However, the result of that grace should not be overlooked; grace allows people to grow and to change. Just as my Fijian friends granted me the room to become, as an individual in a helping profession, I want to provide others with that same opportunity.

## References

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Susan Lanae Burkholder, MSW, is a 2008 MSW graduate of Radford University and also holds a Bachelor of Science in Outdoor Education with a minor in Environmental Studies. Cultures, people, languages, and places are her passions, so she travels whenever possible. She also enjoys sharing her experiences with others through photography and storytelling.