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Studying Abroad, Toilet Paper, and Other Exercises in Missing the Point

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Studying Abroad, Toilet Paper, and Other Exercises in Missing the Point

Abstract

I have been in Ghana only for a few days, and I can already tell I am going to love the place—the people, the food, the environment, all remind me of my home country, Sierra Leone.

However, I don't think I can adjust to the constant uttering by some of my peers about how this experience "makes them appreciate how much they have." In the past four days, I have heard that same phrase over and over again. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Ghana, study abroad, appreciation, reality, human necessity

Disciplines

Community-Based Learning | Inequality and Stratification | Place and Environment | Race and Ethnicity | Regional Sociology | Social Psychology and Interaction | Sociology of Culture

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](http://www.gettysburgcollege.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

STUDYING ABROAD, TOILET PAPER, AND OTHER EXERCISES IN MISSING THE POINT

February 11, 2014

I have been in Ghana only for a few days, and I can already tell I am going to love the place—the people, the food, the environment, all remind me of my home country, Sierra Leone.

However, I don't think I can adjust to the constant uttering by some of my peers about how this experience "makes them appreciate how much they have." In the past four days, I have heard that same phrase over and over again.

Modest houses.

Lack of air-conditioning.

Potholes in the streets.

Access to the internet.

Toilet paper.

It all makes them appreciate what they have.

I must acknowledge that this appreciation is said with the best of intentions; however, it is also clear evidence of the little to no thought given to the implications of these statements. While I agree that many encounters have made me feel grateful and appreciative, the attitude and reasoning behind the utterance of this phrase feels troublesome.

I (and possibly the Ghanaians who overhear the conversations) interpret the remarks as, "thank goodness I live in America," or "thank goodness I'm not them." By failing to recognize the impact of environment, opportunity, and history, we completely miss the mark. The purpose of studying abroad in Ghana (or elsewhere for that matter) is not to make us feel superior to those with less privilege. It is to learn about the historical and contemporary circumstances that have shaped a society and the complexity of our increasingly interconnected world.



By using another person's life as a mirror to remind us of our privilege we continue to place ourselves above others. We are just validating the skewed belief that we are superior, that because of our economic and military dominance, we have the solutions. It absolves us from having to consider how our country's cultural and political influences have contributed to the disparity. It also absolves us from thinking how we, as individuals, have been conditioned to believe that we are 'normal' and therefore others are not – that we set the standard to which others should aspire.

One of my peers described how she never appreciated toilet paper until she arrived in Ghana. She even went on to sermonize that people of Ghana should protest and demand for toilet paper as a "human necessity". Obviously, she failed to recognize that most people across the world are just fine without toilet paper—not to mention that people lived for thousands of years before its invention. She also failed to acknowledge something even greater – that as members of a dominant society we often have distorted perceptions of ourselves and we exaggerate our sense of the rightness.

To my fellow students who are studying abroad this semester, I hope our experiences teach us more than to just be appreciative of what we have. I hope we can understand the interconnected reality between us and our host communities. I hope we can learn how to challenge the lens with which we see the world. I hope we can begin to understand how being American has heightened our sense of importance. I hope we can work to clarify our thoughts, assumptions, priorities and misinformation. And, most importantly, I hope we can learn how we impact each other.

Finally, [maybe we can all learn, with Elaine Benes](#), that there will not always be a square to spare.

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