

Life Lessons and Experiences from the Trip of a Lifetime by Haley

When asked about my trip to Tanzania with the Toledo International Youth Orchestra, there is only one thing to do: smile and say, "It was amazing." Granted, that doesn't even begin to cover my experience in Africa, but I'm sure many others who accompanied me on this amazing adventure also understand the overwhelming feelings and emotions that occur whenever the trip is brought up. The people, the animals, the architecture, the jokes, the smiles, the music, the culture; everything comes back when reflecting upon the trip and creates a bubble of happiness and contentedness. With all of the preparation, the stress, the medications, and the money that made this trip happen, I'm sure every person who went with the TIYO and TIMU team to Africa feels that this trip was worth every sacrifice.

With that being said, often, my next question to the person asking about my trip would be "Have you checked my Facebook pictures?" This is because, of course, I've been uploading my trip onto Facebook so that all of my friends can see, learn about, and reflect upon the experiences I went through in Africa. The saying that a picture is worth a thousand words is absolutely true when it comes to describing our trip to Tanzania. Whether it be the tiny boats off the coast of Zanzibar, the bus with our luggage mountain on top, or the Masai dung huts, there is no way I could express each new experience or view in words. However, not only do these pictures offer a window into the African culture, they offer me some type of organization in which I can better tell our stories. By going through the pictures, memories are triggered, such as the sound of at least twenty roosters calling at around four in the morning accompanied by the Muslim call to pray or the tall, skinny, tropical trees all bending in the salty wind. Leafing through the pictures, one by one, allows me to express my views on each experience without blurring ideas or going out of order. I then fill the captions of all my Facebook pictures with these stories, saving the memories so that I can come back in a year or twenty and remember all of these quirky things that made the trip so unique.

However, I often forget how the images look to my friends and family who have never experienced anything like the trek to Africa. The dusty roads, dirty buildings, primitive villages, and worn clothing of the locals trigger sharp responses from many people viewing my pictures. My grandma says, ever so subtly, "The people just don't live the same life," and friends say, "Wow, that looks so uncivilized." Yes, it's true that they have nothing compared to us lucky Americans, but that is no reason to look down upon the African culture. Personally, I felt silly bringing a music stand and fragile instrument out into the Tanga countryside. This seemingly everyday American idea of music was turned upside down when placed in a different society. Granted, we were educating so many people about Western musical culture and history, but right away one could see just how out of place our sheet music was when a swift breeze knocked all of our pieces into the sand at our first concert. This cultural exchange is the next, most important topic of what I try to explain to people when they ask, "How was your trip?"

The easiest way to describe the African culture to my friends and family is summed up in one short sentence: "Life is simpler." People live with the animals and the earth, they don't try to avoid or separate themselves from it. An example of the simpler culture can definitely be seen in the houses there. Most people live in extremely small homes, because they don't treat homes the same way as we do. Homes are for sleeping,

avoiding the weather, and sometimes cooking, but life in Africa is meant to be lived outside. Sometimes, the simplicity creates chaos, as seen in the roads lacking speed limits, signs, or traffic signals. However, the phrase that seems to reach into every aspect of African culture, “Hakuna Matata,” (meaning “no problem”) allows differences found in the chaos to be settled without arguments and permits this simple lifestyle to flourish.

Tanzanians are proud people. They are so happy to be able to own small homes or farms, create jewelry or clothes. As the mayor of Tanga said, they are proud of what they have. So instead of looking down upon the culture or trying to change it into an acceptable society according to Western standards, we should live and let live, learning from others while being proud of our own way of life. This is definitely a lesson I’ll bring back to the States. In America, we are always striving for what others have while also thinking we are doing everything the right and only way. We are never satisfied with the present; we are always looking towards the possibilities of the future. While this is generally an acceptable way of living life, I challenge my friends to be more open to new ideas and possibilities when looking through my pictures from the trip. Don’t look down on others just because they think differently or live a different lifestyle.

With all of that being said, you may be able to see why I feel that this is such a difficult trip to explain or talk about when simply asked, “How was the trip?” It is obvious that I have many strong emotions about my experiences and have learned so many lessons throughout our Africa tour. So much went into this trip and I have to thank all of the parents, all of the TIYO management team, and all of the businesses who sponsored our trip. The summer journey to Africa definitely has shaped how I view the world and how I interact with people. I can only hope that TIYO will continue and possibly gain more support from the community, therefore allowing kids to experience the same culture shock I went through during the first few days of the trip. As St. Augustine has said, “The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page.” TIYO allows us to experience the real world and continue to learn and grow from every new culture we meet.

