

# Reversal of Roles: Lessons Learned as a Teacher in Uganda

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“The way I live here – as if it is a temporary thing, a time-out from my everyday life – it is so different from how others live here. For them, this is it – and that is hard for me to grasp, to wrap my head around. What did I do to deserve this privilege?”

– *Journal Entry, June 13, 2013*

Being privileged is easy. Not being aware of that privilege is even easier. Being able to take advantage of all that one has been given, excelling through opportunities provided by others, and focusing on one's small place within the world, totally unaware of one's luxuries, is quite dangerous, if you ask me.

For quite some time, I have considered myself to be aware of my privilege in the United States. I realize that because of my socioeconomic status, gender, and the color of my skin, I can seize opportunities that some people, even within my own country, will most likely not be presented with in their lives. I realize that my voice is heard when I want it to be, and that when I don't, I always have a place of refuge. I realize that I will likely be able to pay off my college loans. That I will probably never be treated unacceptably by others based on my appearance. That I will be able to live comfortably, and make my own choices throughout life.

When I wrote that journal entry, I had only been in Uganda one month, just four weeks of the 12 that I was to spend there. My daily life in Kazo, a community 10 kilometers northwest of Kampala, Uganda's capital, was not categorized by the same privilege that I experience in the United States, but it was still marked by an extremely prominent and a quite inescapable one. Not only was my host

family much better off than most families in the area, but my whiteness gave me unprecedented advantages (and disadvantages) that were unfamiliar to me as an American. Thinking back, though, I was quite exposed to those privileges in America. However, I am not forced to face them on a daily basis here, whereas in Kazo, everywhere I turned I was constantly reminded that my life there was very privileged. I began to consider that the realities of my life and experiences are remarkably different from the realities of many of the people I would meet and grow to love in Kazo.

That differing reality was largely reflected in the socioeconomic status of the general population of Kazo. With the per capita income falling under US\$170 according to the World Bank Poverty Analysis in 2011, over half of Uganda's population fall below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> According to UNICEF, 38% live on less than US\$1.25 per day and therefore fall below the international poverty line.<sup>2</sup> While the poverty that I saw was severe, in reality, most of those who live in extreme poverty in Uganda (92%) do not live in rural areas like Kazo, but instead, in the countryside.<sup>3</sup> Uganda's immense poverty reflects itself in the main causes of sickness and death throughout the country: AIDS, malaria, pneumonia, diarrhea, and malnutrition, resulting in an extremely low life expectancy of 54 years at birth, according to UNICEF.<sup>4</sup> While the



Ugandan government is attempting to improve these conditions by bringing in more currency by liberalizing the economy, there continues to be a very low public expenditure.<sup>5</sup> This creates a problem in terms of public education and public health, which were shortcomings that appeared very prominently during my time in Kazo.

The descriptions that follow chart my summer's journey through my interactions with three very important people. Reflecting on these interactions shows what I have come to understand about privilege and the importance of recognizing it.

### Morning in Kazo

Every morning, I wake up just about a half hour to an hour before my alarm, which comes from my old iPod touch, when we have power and I am able to charge it to last through the night. I stretch out and slide off my light sheet, pull the corner of my mosquito net out from under my mattress, and slip out of bed as quietly as I can, although I do not have to worry about my mattress creaking like I do in my dorm at Brandeis. My bedframe here is solid wood, with a thick, foam pad over the top, sitting on a sturdy, concrete floor. It is refreshingly cool to rest my feet on after a warm night, and it wakes me up just enough before having to pull out the skeleton key from the lock on my door, twist it ever so slightly, and hope that I won't wake up any of the boys in the room next to mine. It is just six o'clock, and they won't get up to prepare for school until six-thirty at the earliest, if not seven o'clock.

I finally make it out my bedroom door, through the sitting room, and out to the front door. This is where my problem arises. I stand in my long, hand-dyed dress in front of our large, heavy, metal front door. The door keeps others out in the night, but also becomes an obstacle

when I am in a hurry to use the latrine outside of our compound while everyone else is still asleep. I try wiggling the huge bolts that hold it shut, attempting to keep quiet. I finally manage to get the door open, although the sound of the bolts moving out of place is unmistakable. The door swings open, and I am bombarded on the other side by our three large dogs: Black, Police, and the other whose name I never managed to learn. I push past them and run quickly over to the cement stalls, relieve myself, and come out only to find Mack, my youngest brother, waiting at the door smiling, knowing that it was me who woke him up and not someone trying to break into the house.

Mack quickly changes into his school uniform: powder blue shorts, a white button-down short-sleeve shirt, black shoes, and red socks. He leaves for school. He is in Primary 5 in a big, bubblegum pink building at the foot of Kazo Hill, just a 10-minute walk from our home. I get dressed, and before long, the sun is up. Ronald, my oldest brother, has woken up by this time, and brings me black tea and a roll wrapped in newspaper from the shop outside of our compound as I get ready to leave for school. I gulp down my malaria pill with my tea. I brush my teeth (by this time I've begun brushing with water from the spigot outside, rather than boiled water) and shout a *Siba bulungi!* – Have a good day! – to my family, and walk through the dusty streets and green matoke fields to the other side of Kazo, all the way to Lugoba Road and Uganda Youth and Women's Effort Fighting AIDS (UYWEFA) Education Centre, where I teach English, music and art.

By the time I reach the Education Centre I have already eaten two or three sombusa, a small fried snack filled with onions, cowpeas, and on a good day, carrots. If I am lucky, Mama Gerald, who sells these morning treats, has slipped some

fried sweet potato into my bag. I have also already said how was the night, hello and good morning to almost all of Kazo, shouting *Wasuze otya?, Oly otyah nnyabo?*, and Siba bulungi! to anyone who would listen. I walk through neighboring compounds, squeeze the hands of young kids in passing, and turn a corner, face up the hill, and find myself gazing at the Centre. Once I've arrived, most kids are already in their classrooms, but there are always a few stragglers running in circles with the neighborhood girls, Sheri and Shanittah, who are both too young for school. The kids who are left outside circle around me, grab onto my legs, and finally, after giving in to hugs and tickling, I usher the remaining students inside to their classrooms. And so our day begins.

### Jajja

My head is almost sticking out of the window on my first drive through Kampala; I am in the back seat of a well cared-for old car, quite a luxury in Kazo. But I don't know that yet. I haven't yet been to Kazo – it is my first ride, and Allie and Ronald have just picked me up from the airport at Entebbe, almost a two-hour ride from Kampala. I pull myself back to a normal sitting position in the seat, and turn to my right and look at Allie.

She is a 29 year old woman from Iowa, and has been in Kazo for three months so far, temporarily working as the main administrator of UYWEFA Education Centre, my internship site for the next 12 weeks, while UYWEFA continues with a job search for a Ugandan administrator. The students call her "Headmistress Allie." She is the only other American, as well as the only other *mzungu* – white person – living in Kazo. Since she has been here for quite a while already, she has been helping me prepare for several weeks, answering my many questions via email.



I have also been in touch with UYWEFA's main director, Ronald. He is a Ugandan man who founded and continues to oversee all of UYWEFA's programs. He and Allie work together very closely, but Ronald also works as a butcher in Kazo and is going to school. I will come to learn that while many Ugandans are involved in the non-profit sector, most of their involvement is on the side of another profession, and generally a more profitable one.

"I forgot to ask you...what is my host family like?" I ask Allie, ungluing my eyes from the urban areas that we are passing through.

Allie begins describing – very vaguely, I may add – an older woman named Passy. She is mostly described as "busy."

This makes me a bit nervous, because I want to be close with my host family. I let it go, though, not letting myself have any specific expectations.

We arrive in Kazo, pulling through the uneven dirt streets. The car bounces up and down, and I hit my head on the metal roof. We pass the *kisawa* – playground – where I see several groups of men playing *futbol*. Turning down a small side road, we find ourselves in the midst of the market, pass through what feels like a tunnel of *matooke* trees, which look like green bananas. I almost equate them to plantains before tasting them; *matooke* is less sweet, and also serves as the staple food in Uganda, often eaten with a sauce or beans.

Passing the *matooke*, we arrive on an even smaller street, and eventually pull up to a large concrete wall. We exit the car, but our driver has parked in a big hole and we are surrounded by mud. Ronald carries my suitcase, Allie takes my duffel, so I am left with my backpack and purse. We walk to the left of the concrete wall, pass a

series of single rooms that serve as homes for several families, and turn right through the middle of them, leading us to a large, open concrete courtyard. We have finally arrived at the compound that will be my home for the next three months.

It is beautiful, and it stands out among the other homes in the neighborhood surrounding us. I assume that this means my host family is a bit better off than others in the area. On the far side of the compound, there are two rooms attached to each other, with a huge chicken coop on the far side. Around the corner are the latrines and an open space with more *matooke* trees. I also spot two avocado trees and two other unidentifiable trees, that I am later introduced to as jackfruit. Across from the chicken coop is a large house: cement, with two large water collecting towers on two of the corners. I walk up the steps, enter the front door, and see my host family. There are three boys who seem to be around my age sitting on one side of the table, across from a woman whom Ronald introduces as Mama Betty, but whom I hear these boys call *Jajja*.

Mama Betty, also known as Passy, also known as *Jajja* – grandmother – is my host mother. Everyone I speak to calls her a different name, and at first, I am confused about what I should call her. I begin by calling her Mama Betty, but since this literally means "Mother of Betty," it feels too formal, so I quickly alternate to Mama or *Jajja*, both of which fit. Her warmth makes it feel comfortable for me to call her both mother and grandmother, and she does not seem to have a preference.

I look at her with wonder. She looks up at me briefly, but is very focused on the task at hand: decorating a half-globe cake to look like a *futbol*. She is piping little black lines of icing into circles, around the white ones that are already there. The cake sits on an aluminum foil-covered cardboard

circle, and her grandson Mack stands next to her holding a photo of what the cake is supposed to look like. After finishing the last line, she puts the icing down and stands up.

"Hannah! Welcome." She extends her arms and hugs me.

We go over to the sitting room with Ronald and Allie. The exhaustion that I am experiencing is evident in my inability to pay attention. We make plans for the rest of the day: I am to take a shower, then go over to the Education Centre. We make small talk. *Jajja* tells me about how she bakes cakes to sell for weddings, birthdays, and other parties. I look around, but don't see an oven. Then I see that outside, there are two huge sheets of metal set up carefully over two charcoal stoves, creating a giant, makeshift oven. I am immediately impressed.

As I settle in and the weeks pass, I see that every few weekends, *Jajja* goes through this same process of mixing for one night, baking the next morning, letting the cakes sit for one day, and decorating on the last night. During my three months, I see several *futbol* cakes, as well as truck cakes, guitar cakes, and dozens and dozens of miniature, fancier-looking white cakes with ribbons tied around the sides and sweet messages across the top.

At times, girls will come to the house and buy these cakes from her. Other times, she will bring baskets full of cakes to the grocery store and sell them. She is an incredible entrepreneur. Not only does she bake and sell, but she also has a shop in town by the *kisawa* where she sells used clothing, as well as jewelry and what she calls African "free dresses" (meaning they don't have a pattern or shape, really). She also rents out large tents and chairs for weddings and funerals. She sells the water that she collects in the rain-gathering



towers next to our house. She sells chickens, and also raises pigs to sell.

Despite the fact that Jajja lost her husband quite a while ago, she has been able to work and provide a wonderful life for herself and her family.

Ronald, Mack, Pius (three of her grandsons), Jajja and I all live at Jajja's house. A boy called Guida also lives there for my first month and a half, afterwards leaving for school. The rest of her grandchildren attend boarding school fairly close by also, so most weekends at least one will come home. Some weekends all of them come home, and there will be 11 of us: three more girls, three younger boys, four boys around my age, and me. It is the norm for children in Uganda to move in with their grandparents or other relatives who live close to the city, because this is the best opportunity for children to get a good education. While there are schools in villages, I am told by my host brothers that their quality often doesn't compare to schools near the city.

After meeting everybody I get a tour of the house, because all of the grandchildren have gathered this week (not because it is the weekend, but because they are on a holiday from school). It is four rooms, modest by American standards: Jajja's room, my room, the boys' room, and the living room/dining room/kitchenette, which is a big open space.

I feel at home amongst Jajja and the boys. She makes me comfortable by asking questions about my life in the United States. Every evening, I sit with her and we talk, while she watches soap operas and I knit. The boys are entranced by the television.

While in our compound, I am constantly reminded about our relative privilege compared to other residents of Kazo. We

watch television, we have a refrigerator, and we often have electricity. Every evening, we set our big, beautiful table with a tablecloth and placemats, have our own water, and a tap inside from which we can bathe with privacy. I have my own room, a big bed, and the safety of an enclosed compound. No matter where in the world I am, I know that these circumstances mean that I am lucky. I aspire to provide for myself and my family all that Jajja is able to provide for the boys and me, and her children and other grandchildren before us. Her success is substantial and it inspires me. Jajja's limitless work ethic, even in her old age, seems greater than that of the common role models I see in the U.S.

One night, as we sit in the living room, I with my knitting, and Jajja decorating her cakes while watching a soap opera, she looks at me with a weary smile.

"Jajja, you look so tired. Won't you go to sleep? Or at least rest for a while?" I ask.

"Hannah... Look at all of these nice things we have. I can't rest. I have to finish. Or else we won't have anything."

### Margaret

I arrive a few minutes late to school, just in time for Monday morning assembly. The children go through their routine of singing the Ugandan national anthem, and then the Buganda anthem, honoring the tribe native to the Kampala area. Most of our students at the Centre belong to the Buganda tribe. I notice three new faces: Margaret and her older brother and sister, Michael and Michelle. I learn from Ronald that the three were here last term but are coming so late this term because their mother has been unable to pay their school fees. Ronald doesn't have it in his heart to turn them away.

He tells me about their family. Mama Margaret (this is how a child's parent is

referred to, using *Mama* for mother and *Tata* for father) is very sweet and has good intentions but, because she is uneducated, she is unable to get work in Kazo. Instead, she stays at home and cares for her eight children, all of whose Christian names begin with the letter "M." (This makes me smile.) The little money that they have comes from her husband, the father of all eight kids, when he comes around. Ronald tells me that he is not very present in their lives, but he also has numerous other wives, and has seven additional children at our Education Centre alone. He claims to have many others, who are not yet of school age.

I try to digest what Ronald tells me, but the words don't sit well. Studying anthropology at Brandeis has prevented me from being quick to judge polygamy and other lifestyles that differ from my own, but I can't help but frown upon this man's numerous relationships and even more numerous children, most of whom he cannot provide for. Forget school fees – most of the time, he doesn't supply Mama Margaret with enough money for food. As an outsider, though, I question my right to feel the way I do. But sitting to watch while

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The best part: UYWEFA was founded by and is run by Ugandans within this community.

The Education Centre also hosts children who are not affected by HIV, like Margaret. This is part of an attempt to de-stigmatize the virus within the Kazo community. The Centre has made it so that it is impossible to tell which kids are positive in that group of 130 lined up in rows at morning assembly, all wearing the same bright orange uniforms fashioned by a tailor down the street.

children are looked at as trinkets on a shelf to brag about, instead of humans that need care and attention, strikes me. Weeks pass, and Margaret teaches me so much in a very short amount of time about the reality of many children in Kazo. It makes me sad to realize the difference between her reality and that of many privileged girls her age, just because of the conditions that she was born into. The fact that an extensive education is almost impossible for her to obtain, other than the benefits she is receiving from UYWEFA, makes me think about lost potential. Especially when I realize the extent to which many children in the United States fail to appreciate the benefits that they receive. It also makes what Margaret does get from UYWEFA mean so much more.

One morning, when Ronald is creating student profiles in the office at UYWEFA, he asks me to bring Margaret from her class. He asks her name, where she lives, and her favorite class. The questions have been created to give potential donors a background on each child. He reaches a question that troubles me.

“What would you like to do in the future, Margaret?”

“I would like to be a doctor, Mr. Ronald,” she answers.

Ronald holds eye contact with me, and we silently share the disappointing sentiment that obtaining this goal is almost impossible for Margaret.

Many students at UYWEFA face situations similar to this one. In fact, this is what inspired Ronald to start the Education Centre in the first place.

Uganda Youth and Women’s Effort Fighting AIDS (UYWEFA) was founded in 2007 as a small, grassroots non-profit aimed at de-stigmatizing HIV/AIDS in Kazo and in the greater Nasana Town Council (a regional group of NGOs). It began with HIV-positive women in the community reaching out to local schools and giving talks about living with HIV. Then, in 2009, it turned into a small nursery school for orphans and vulnerable children affected by HIV. After a large fundraising and expansion project in 2011 UYWEFA raised enough money to expand the Centre to include two of the three Nursery levels offered in Uganda (Baby Class and Top Class, omitting Middle Class), as well as Primary Levels One, Two, and Three. It is the aim of the Centre to expand one level every year, until it offers up to the highest Primary level, Level Seven. UYWEFA has developed to offer its students, now numbering 130, opportunities that their families could never have imagined before.

Among the dozens of smiling faces in those bright orange uniforms the one that brightens my days the most is Margaret. She is one of our youngest students, and is in Top Class (the second level of nursery at UYWEFA) with Teacher Catherine, despite the fact that her petite four year old self doesn’t look a day older than two. Her short legs move more slowly than the other students’, but Michael and Michelle are patient with her and never leave her behind while walking to and from school. All three siblings are shy, but, despite her initial hesitation, Margaret and I become great friends. I so look forward to her little round face and enormous, contagious smile peeking around the office door to check if I am there, waiting for her.

This happens almost every morning at precisely 10:30, when the students have break time for a mere 30 minutes of their nine-hour school day. She waddles over to me, where I’m squeezed at the office’s only desk beside the only other American in Kazo, Allie. There is a plate full of *sombusa* and *mandazi*, sweet little balls of fried dough, that Allie and I share from the woman who sells snacks at a canteen outside the school. Margaret beams at me.

“Good morning, Margaret!” I say.



“Good morning, Teacher Hannah. How are you?” she responds, in her monotone voice.

“I’m fine. How are you, Margaret?”

“I’m fine,” she says, continuing in her monotone. This is the norm, until I can get her giggling.

“How is mom?”

“Mom is alright.”

“How is Baby Maddy?”

“Baby Maddy is alright.”

“*Jangu* – come over,” I say.

She comes over and pushes herself up onto my lap, and she finally giggles, truly at ease. I tickle her a little bit and she bursts into uncontrollable laughter, and she sticks her tongue out of her mouth ever so slightly, and still cannot stop laughing. When she finally slows down, she just smiles up at me, and we chat (however limited our conversations may be) for the remaining few minutes of break time.

This is how our mornings go for about the first half of my stay in Kazo. But one July morning, my first day back at school after I have returned from a week in Zanzibar during midterm week, Margaret does not come to sit with me in the office.

I see Michelle scurrying outside to the cook, perhaps to get some porridge, and ask her where Margaret is.

“Teacher Hannah, Margaret is afraid to come outside. Teacher Catherine will beat her if she plays with you during break.”

I am shocked at the words coming out of Michelle’s mouth. I am becoming aware that lately, beating is evolving into a deeper

problem than it has been in the past at the Centre. It is hard for me to come to terms with this, but even harder to come to terms with the fact that Margaret did not feel comfortable leaving her classroom during a scheduled break time because of it.

In this situation, Margaret was bringing the larger problem to light. Day by day, more and more students were coming to me during my break periods in tears. It began several weeks before, when I walked outside to use the latrine only to find Teacher Fatima slapping a Primary 3 student, Namukasa, across the back of the head for washing her hands with dirty water. Days later, a girl in Primary 1 came out crying hysterically because Teacher Rose slapped her.

Again and again I heard the same stories from students. Again this dilemma came up about whether or not I had the right to judge.

Two teachers, however, were often left out of these stories. It was they I admired most. Not only because of the fact that their names were never brought up in fear, but also because of their ease and grace with the students, their even tempers, and their ability to educate them academically and socially. These last two teachers were Catherine and Hope. So I was shocked that Catherine was beginning to beat her students, too.

As I think about my shock, I realize that it wasn’t necessarily because of my Western perspective, nor necessarily my liberal view on child rearing. Rather, it was the standards that the teachers at the Education Centre were expected to uphold.

The teachers at UYWEFA Education Centre were breaking their own rules. The rules that UYWEFA had created. By Ugandans, for Ugandans. Their contracts would be contested, should the rest of the

board find out about the problems in the classrooms. Funding from previous intern networks could be revoked, and all that we were working for at the Centre could be jeopardized.

All of this is running through my mind as I sit in the office without Margaret. I get up and begin to play with the rest of the primary classes, who are running around outside.

And then, I see less and less of Margaret at school, so I try to walk home with her, Michael, and Michelle once in a while, along with their next door neighbors, Daisy, Roland, and Deborah. We make quite a wonderful group, walking home through Lugoba, back through Kazo Central, to their home. In their compound, we find Mama Margaret sitting over the charcoal stove, cooking. Baby May, the youngest, is tied to her mother’s back with a sheet of fabric. Baby Maddy, the girl in between May and Margaret, runs up to me and is eager to touch my face, my hair. The words that we exchange are sparse, but the warmth within that compound is endless. Michelle and Michael look at me with wonder from behind a curtain, surprised that their *mzungu* – white – teacher has come to their home. This has never happened before. Margaret remains at my side, and while I can’t help but feel a sense of belonging, I also can’t help picturing her living within this compound

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until the day that she grows old enough to get married and start having children of her own.

Because of the financial restraints on Margaret's family it is not likely that all of her siblings will complete primary school, let alone secondary school or university. I recall when Margaret told me that her dream was to become a doctor. That bittersweet moment brought me pride in her ability to hold high aspirations for herself. It also brought me anger that she was born into a life that would not allow her to fulfill her dreams. It brought me frustration, it brought me sadness, but it brought me hope. Most of all, it gave me the blessing of never letting go of the opportunities that I hold in the palms of my hands, and never taking for granted the blessings I have been given. While I do not believe that it is my fault for having those blessings, nor feel it my purpose to treat those less fortunate as charity cases, it is my job to appreciate what I have and level the playing field on a larger scale, even if it is just a little bit, like here in Kazo. Margaret, Michael and Michelle are just like any children that I see running down the streets of my neighborhood in Connecticut, and it doesn't seem fair that while they long to be able to afford a good education, most children that I know at home would jump at the chance of a day off from school.

**Teacher Fatima**

On only my second or third day in Kazo Allie has scheduled a teacher meeting at UYWEFA. I arrive at the Centre an hour early, which is very naive on my part. The other teachers, with the exception of one, trickle in maybe an hour after the scheduled meeting time.

The exception does not come into the office to talk, or to introduce herself. Rather, she stands outside, around the

corner of the school, alone and silent. She is wearing a light pink blouse and skirt, which complement her medium-tone brown skin and pulled back hair. She looks so professional, especially next to me in my flowing, colorful clothing intended to keep me covered but cool under the boiling summer sun.

I intend to become close with her. I think, she is the perfect friend for me. From the way that she keeps to herself, it seems like she is new, so I hope that if we become friends, we will have each other to talk with at break times, and to eat lunch with. But for some reason, I am too shy to introduce myself.

The other teachers eventually arrive, and as each woman comes in, she seems more unenthused than the last. With the exception of our head teacher, Hope, everyone seems a bit disappointed that her holiday break was cut short for a meeting she does not want to attend.

As the meeting begins, it is obvious that my instinct about the teacher in pink was correct. She is also new, and is also too shy to introduce herself to anybody. She sits in the corner with her son, Arnold, who is almost two years old. Ronald introduces her as Fatima. Allie walks in holding a big tray of food that her host mother has cooked for us: curried potatoes and tomatoes with several slices of avocado each. She distributes one to each teacher. When this new teacher receives hers, she divides it in two, giving Arnold almost as much as she takes for herself.

Throughout our several planning days as a group she remains quiet and keeps to herself. I identify with her, because while I am attempting to put myself out there in my first few days, and while I feel very connected to my students already, I feel detached from the other teachers. While she is Ugandan like most of the





other teachers, it is clear that she is also a bit detached from them. I hope that the outsider status I share with Fatima will bring us together.

One day during that first week Fatima wears a beautiful matching shirt and skirt made out of African wax print. Its vivid red hue with yellow, green and white accents draws my eye. I ask her if she had it made. She says yes, and offers to bring me to the tailor who made it for her. I excitedly accept, eager to go. Little do I know it will take us almost two months to actually make it there.

This serves as a conversation-starter. “When are we going to the tailor?” I ask, day after day.

Some days she says, “This weekend,” or, “I’m busy, how about next week?” We continue to make tentative plans, but never set a day in stone.

One day, I sit down with her as the school prefects are serving lunch.

“When are we going to the tailor?” I ask.

“Let’s go this weekend. On Friday after the teacher’s meeting.” She answers.

She comes and sits next to me on the concrete step outside of the Centre, overlooking the kitchen area, a semi-permanent structure, in the yard.

“What is your favorite food?” I ask her.

“Posho,” she answers.

“Even though we have it every day?”

“Yes,” she says, “it’s so good. And it fills me up.”

I laugh in surprise. Posho is a staple food in Uganda, but it is a very bland, thick cornmeal mixture.

“Do you eat posho in the U.S.?” she asks me.

“No,” I laugh again, “they have it there, but it’s called something else. Most people don’t eat it.”

“What do you eat?”

“Lots of things.” I pause, unable to identify a staple food in the U.S. “We eat rice, like here, and also pasta and a lot of meat. But most of our food is much different.”

“What is your family like?” she asks.

I pause. Family structure, and family life, is much different at home than in Kazo.

“I have a little brother, named Jerome,” I tell her, “he is 10 years old.”

Fatima then pauses, and takes a minute to really look at me.

“Does everyone space out their children like your mom did?”

“No. Some people do, but most don’t.”

Then Fatima smiles. “I want to use family planning like your mother did. Maybe I will have another baby but not for 10 years.”

I am hesitant to tell her that my parents divorced and my mother remarried, which is why my brother and I are so far apart in age. That is not how life is in Uganda. Most people don’t divorce. Most people have several children in a short time period, or even many over a long time period. While I am not sure how much truth this holds, my supervisors at UYWEFA often account for the many large families that we sponsor by explaining that since life expectancy is lower than it is in the United States it makes more sense to have more children, even if the economic resources to care for those children aren’t available.

The prefects bring over our lunch, and Fatima and I part, she going to her classroom and me going to the office, each of us taking our bowls with us to our separate spaces.

The following weekend we finally go to the tailor. After our teacher’s meeting ends at five o’clock Fatima is waiting for me outside school with another teacher, Rose, whom Fatima has been spending more and more time with lately. The three of us begin walking behind the school and through the neighboring compounds on our way to Kazo Central, our town center. They laugh at me because of the crazy number of students and other neighborhood children skipping behind me, saying, “Teacher Hannah! Teacher Hannah!” I

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appease them, but try to be inconspicuous so that I don’t seem out of place with the other two teachers. Despite this, Rose and Fatima laugh and begin teasing me.

This wasn’t out of the norm, however – Rose and Fatima tease me for almost everything, because watching a *mzungu* live a life similar to the Ugandans in Kazo is always a laughing matter to them. Initially, I am very bothered by this. My *mzungu* identity, my whiteness, follows me everywhere I go. Walking down the streets, playing at the *kisawe*, and buying





food at the market. It doesn't wear off, despite my long stay in Kazo. For most Ugandans in Kazo, my whiteness is not only what sets me apart from them, but it is the entirety of my identity. Coming to terms with the inability to control my own identity is difficult for me. I tend to breathe a sigh of relief whenever I'm at home at the compound, or at the Education Centre, where I am far away from numerous children chasing me saying "*Mzungu! Mzungu!*" and instead they say "Teacher Hannah! Teacher Hannah!" through their smiles. I have even gotten to the point where one large group of children, far from the Centre, know my name and call me Hannah instead of *mzungu*. Rose and Fatima actually seem impressed with this small lesson I've taught the children.

We reach Kazo Central and part ways with Rose. By this time the children have gone home, because most of them are not allowed to venture that far out of their neighborhood. Fatima tells me we have to stop at her house first to get Arnold.

We turn down a path off the main road, and end up in a big, open area with some cows grazing. To my left is the original UYWEFA building, from when it was just a small counseling center. I see the original paint has faded, but handprints of all of the employees still remain next to the front door of the building. I've never been here before, but I have seen photos.

"You live here?" I ask Fatima.

"Yes," she smiles, "the old UYWEFA."

I can't help but smile as well at this coincidence. The old building has transformed from a home, to UYWEFA's office, and back to a home quite nicely. As I examine the handprints and identify them as belonging to my friends, she goes inside, brings out a very aggravated Arnold, and leads the way as we head to

the tailor. We pass the kisawa and head to the market. Walking through, Fatima spots one of our student's jajjas, Jajja Tracy. Fatima kneels before her, giving her an appropriate Luganda greeting. I have never met Jajja Tracy before, so I wander the fruits and vegetables with Arnold, waiting. Fatima returns and tells me whom she was greeting, and I immediately feel bad for not joining her. I want to be able to show my respect, just as she has. Nevertheless, we continue, and eventually make it to the tailor. I choose my favorite fabric and style, with Fatima's help, of course. I am content. I feel as though I have made friends with another teacher.

While I did have a friendly working relationship with the other teachers, there was always something separating us from each other. I did not realize what it was until the last teacher meeting that I was a part of, just three days before my scheduled departure from UYWEFA.

During the meeting, Ronald unexpectedly broke into a rant about what a tragedy it was that I was leaving. He expressed that many students, if not each student, would cry over my departure. I was overwhelmed. He delved deeper and said that if any other teacher were to leave that day without saying goodbye, no student would cry. No student would even blink an eye. But my leaving would break their hearts. I wasn't sure if it was I or they who felt more resentful about their constantly being put down by Ronald, while I was often placed up on a pedestal.

As much as I valued each of the teachers at UYWEFA, I knew Ronald was speaking the truth about the children's feelings. Of course I was flattered by the adoration of the students, but I was also embarrassed. I wasn't sure if the annoyed looks on the other teachers' faces were due to what Ronald was saying, or if they were just exasperated that the meeting had gone

overtime. Nevertheless, I questioned myself. I never considered myself better than any of them. What qualifications did I have that made others see me as so much more desirable as a teacher than the six other trained professionals at the Centre?

I wanted to say that the difference was my passion, my charisma, my urge to spend every possible moment encouraging and supporting my students. While this may have been part of Ronald's reasoning, I knew deep down that it wasn't the driving force. In truth, I assumed Ronald thought that I was a better teacher for the Centre because I was appealing: because I was a loving American. I helped to give the Centre a good image. Because I spoke English, wore pretty clothes, took photos of the children, and taught them how to sing American songs. The teachers, whom I considered my colleagues and, at times, my friends, saw me in the light that I really deserved – not necessarily a bad light, just a truthful light. They knew that while my education may have been more extensive than theirs, they were better trained for the circumstances in which we were working. They were more accustomed to the system, and were more qualified for it.

While this gap may have been created by my being American, it did not stop me from attempting to break it down and become closer with my fellow teachers. This is why developing a relationship with Fatima was so important to me. As many times as I tried to strike up a conversation and connect with them, our differences continued to emerge, which is why, ultimately, attempting to forge a substantial relationship with Fatima did not make much of a difference in relation to my place at the Centre and my standing amongst the other teachers.

As much as I tried to befriend these coworkers, to gain their respect, it did not



stop Fatima from laughing every time I completed a typical task for a Buganda woman: washing the dishes after lunch, using the latrine, or sweeping our yard. It did not stop Rose from giving me sullen glances when her friends visited the Centre and stopped to talk with me as well. All the others at UYWEFA and in Kazo seemed to welcome me in. But while I was invited out, and taken to the market by my fellow teachers, I was still an outsider to them.

Even after 12 weeks, sitting among them, squeezed into tiny, student-sized desks at our meeting, restless after a long week of teaching, I was different. This was not something that I wanted. But it was not something that I could change.

### Evenings in Kazo

Three days per week I stay after hours at the Centre, helping make candles with HIV-positive women involved in UYWEFA's candlemaking program intended for women's empowerment within the community. I help break up blocks of wax, after which we can melt it down, dye it, pour it into molds, let the candles cool, and package them. I mostly help with the packaging. I cut out sheets of plastic, and melt the edges together around the candles with a UYWEFA label inside, sealing them to be sold to families all around Kazo.

Other days the boys (and one girl) involved with the youth empowerment program at UYWEFA come, and I serve as a DJ while they practice their breakdancing for local performances and competitions.

And every afternoon I play with my best friend, a girl named Namukasa who has come to call me her sister. She not only lives next door to the Centre, but is the star student of my Primary 3 class. After school she quickly runs home, changes out of her uniform and into one of her outfits (most

often a light-purple nightgown covered in black cat cartoons) and we play until dark. Some days Sheri and Shanittah, as well as others come. Other days she tells me stories, touches my hair and pretends to place it on top of her head (she is required to shave her head for school), and teaches me words in Luganda: *ndi musanyufu* (I'm happy), *ndi munyiivu* (I'm sad), *sekoka* (turkey, because of the turkey that her neighbor keeps outside), and *musomesa* (teacher). I have pages and pages of her handwritten words in the back of my journal. When it is time for me to go home she walks through the back paths of Lugoba with me, through compounds and winding dirt roads, to a small tree at the edge of a property, right next to a charcoal stand, the marker of what is Kazo Central. It is here that we part, for it is the farthest that Namukasa is allowed to go.

"*Sula bulungi*, Hannah!" she calls after me.

"*Sula bulungi*, Namukasa – goodnight!" I call back.

By the time I make it home it is dark, and Jajja comments that I shouldn't be passing through Kazo Central at night. But I know enough people along the way that I feel safe. At times, friends from UYWEFA even walk me all the way home to my compound.

I come in to the house, exhausted from a long day at school, to find Jajja frosting some of the miniature cakes she is making. She has been saving, and this week she bought a small oven with a stovetop for inside the house. I have never seen one before in Uganda. But it is almost identical to the one that my American host family had when I lived in South Africa for a semester, almost two years earlier. Since she has bought the oven she has been baking and baking – almost every night – making dozens and dozens of cakes.

"It was a long day, Hannah," she sighs.

I put my bag down in my room, and then run out to use the latrine before it gets too dark, where Black, Police, and the nameless puppy greet me. After coming back inside I go into my room, change back into my long dress from that morning, and sit with Jajja at the dining room table. I pull out my black book, and begin writing.

\* \* \*

*"It's as if I'm dreaming. What is my reality, anyway? I wrote earlier that a hard aspect of being in Kazo was realizing that for my friends and loved ones there, that is their reality. [Mine is so different.] But, it doesn't have to be that way. Everything is a choice. [Their reality can change, and so can mine.]"*

*– Journal Entry, August 6, 2013*

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### Notes

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