Defining Assistance: The Complexities of International Aid in Lesotho

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A sense of calm overwhelms me as I peer over a picture book to address the small faces before me. Seated on a circular rug next to a highly coveted space heater in this, Lesotho's only Family Art and Literacy Centre, wide-eyed neighborhood toddlers and elementary school kids in thin sweaters beam up at me. As I read aloud from a donated American book, they tickle and poke each other, revealing attention spans as short as any American child I've worked with. With the story's end, it becomes someone else's turn to usher us through literary time and space, and I place the little girl sitting next to me into my lap so that she can read us through Winnie the Pooh's journey to the honey pot. But as I place the book in her hands she begins to visibly squirm.

"*Aussie* [Ms.] Lauren, Dinkle cannot read," another child chimes in. His words carry no malice in the present tense, but they hold heavy weight over Dinkle's future. English is an imperative skill to boast in this former British protectorate. Lesotho was under indirect rule by the United Kingdom for almost 100 years, referred to as Basutoland until its independence in 1966.[1] Its national identity as an annexed nation and a recipient of aid money from every major international donor has driven learning English to the top of many people's priority lists, where it will surely stay as long as Lesotho's relationship with aid organizations remains intact. Years after achieving independence, Lesotho is currently unable to function entirely on its own, heavily supported by organizations including the European Union, the United Nations, the World Bank, and the United States.

As of now, 43 percent of the population lives below the international poverty line, surviving on less than $1.25 a day.[2] And yet parents from the highlands to the city spend scarce money on school uniforms and books in order to educate their children. British Christian missionaries devised Lesotho's national school system in the late 19th century, and the nation now boasts a total adult literacy rate of 82 percent.[3] Along with school uniforms, the British brought English into their school system. Dinkle's countrymen will harshly judge and ostracize her if she does not master English. I've come here to work on creating literature in Sesotho, the national language of Lesotho, but it's beginning to feel irresponsible not to try to equip these children with a working knowledge of my native language.

We go through the entirety of the short story before she sighs with relief at its ending. The other children have left the room now, and Dinkle and I are left to enjoy one of the largest collections of children's books in the entire country – 300 books in all. As an exchange for her hard work, I pull out a book written in Sesotho and begin to stutter and stumble over the unfamiliar words.

As my tongue trips over itself and I fail to employ any appropriate inflection, Dinkle begins to look at me in astonishment. Here I am, a *Lahua* [White person], and there is something I cannot instantly master. Dinkle soon becomes impatient with me and after I mispronounce each phrase, she repeats it correctly and with authority. Soon she is pointing to words and reading them to me, and suddenly this supposedly illiterate child is comfortably narrating the story of Palea and her fruit basket. Listening to Dinkle smoothly trod along in her own language, I am struck by my own ignorance. Just because this child cannot read in English doesn't mean she cannot read. Her teachers and parents may overlook her fluency in Sesotho, but I cannot. That reaction is a byproduct of the enormous amounts of foreign aid filtering into this tiny country. For a moment, I had become so overwhelmed by what I thought she should be learning that I had forgotten the purpose of my visit here—to make picture books in this child's traditional language. Her Sesotho literary achievements are nothing to scoff at, but rather are exactly what I came here to foster. Through addressing the challenges of running this literacy centre in Maseru, stoop-side conversations with coworkers, and interactions with my neighbors and host family, I am constantly forced to reexamine my definition of the role of an international aid worker and what it means to be of assistance.

Lending a "Helping" Hand

While sitting with Dinkle, memories from before my trip to Lesotho float through my mind and my brain flashes back to my first interview with my supervisor Jane Hale.

"I hope you don't think you're going to Lesotho to help anyone,"[4] Jane tells me, sitting squarely at her oak desk at Brandeis University.

"Of course not," I respond briskly. *Then why am I going?* I ask in my head. Africa is, after all, a continent with problems worth solving.

"Working in a developing nation is about skill sharing," I say, mentally crossing my fingers. Jane nods thoughtfully and I sigh with relief. It seems I've passed this ideological pop quiz.

But the concept still doesn't sit well with me. 50 percent of the world's poor reside in sub-Saharan Africa,[5] and the region remains the poorest region on the planet.[6] What can we do besides attempt to redistribute wealth through monetary donations to poorer countries? Furthermore, 50 percent of the region's population is under the age of fifteen,[7] due in large part to the debilitating effects of widespread Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). In Lesotho alone, 23 percent of the population is living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).[8] How can we address this crisis aside from flooding those nations with medications and medical professionals? Billions of dollars of aid is pouring in through organizations ranging in size from the United Nations to grassroots fundraisers, but it is clearly not reaching its intended destination. There is corruption, there is violence, and there is massive death. What can I do as an American student in Africa besides help?

As my internship progresses, I will learn just how much Jane loves to help people achieve their dreams and how integral it is to her that people learn to help themselves. The Family Art and Literacy Centre (FALC) was, after all, created to provide the people of Lesotho with the means to explore their own traditional culture and background in order to proceed in a world of foreign concerns. As I learn to weigh the pros of cultural preservation and autonomy against large influxes of foreign money, I begin to understand some of Jane's hesitation to traverse the world in order to "help."

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Spick-and-Span

Just on the other side of the impressive hills and valleys that lend Lesotho its national identity as "The Mountain Kingdom" the sun is rising over the country's capital city, Maseru. A hub of governmental and metropolitan activity, Maseru's paved streets are speckled with electronics shops, ministry buildings, and people from all walks of life enjoying the advantages a day in town has to offer. Walking down the street side by side are men in business suits and boys on horseback, girls in fashionable Western clothing and women in calico pioneer dresses who have made the journey into town to visit relatives or conduct business in the city's main market. As citizens and visitors roam in and out over the South African border, which hedges up against Maseru's northern limits, they trade vegetables, fabric, and culture across these peaceful national boundaries.

During my first day on the job as an intern for the FALC in Khubestoana, a suburb of Maseru, I am just beginning to take in all of this scenery. Still suffering from jetlag after a 48-hour journey, I head unsteadily toward the iron-barred wooden door sporting a welcome sign that reads, "Family Art and Literacy Centre!" From the stoop, I can hear the hustle and bustle that has already begun within. This morning marks both my first day and the opening day of the centre. I can feel the muscles in my neck tensing with anticipation as I work up the courage to go inside. Breathing deeply, I pull my shoulders back and open the door.

Before I can catch a glimpse of my surroundings, words fly at me from all directions. "Lauren, grab a mop! We're running out of time!" yells Jane. She is standing on a metal chair in the corner of the art room, her gray-white hair pulled back and fleece vest covered in dust—a supreme, if reluctant, authority figure suspended above a whir of chaos. "No speaking. Just cleaning!"

Glancing around, I quickly see what's upsetting Jane. The centre is in a state of severe disarray, not nearly ready for the celebration it's scheduled to host in a few short hours. While Lesotho boasts one of the highest literacy rates in Africa, today will be the first time many of these children have seen or touched literature in their own language. 91 percent of females and 75 percent of males are able to read here,[9] but few families can afford to keep books in their homes, making a personal relationship with reading difficult to cultivate. Literature is reserved for classroom use only, and teachers are often supplied with material that is both outdated and culturally irrelevant. If we can be ready in time, today's celebration will mark a hopeful but uphill battle against the notion that learning is relegated to the classroom.

Under a barrage of directives from Jane, everything is overwhelming to me in these first moments. But even through a haze of sensory overload, what makes this place so special is immediately clear. School is not always a safe space for the children of Lesotho—corporal punishment is completely acceptable, and teachers may hit children in the head with a closed fist for producing incorrect answers. But to my right and left, children are exploring books and taking ownership of a space that is entirely theirs.

Education here stands in stark contrast with the child-driven, nationalistic model I grew up with in the United States. In a country whose imports vastly outweigh its exports, the nation's education model has been accordingly shipped in from Britain. Countrywide standardized tests called the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate Examinations (COSC) are administered at the end of every year based on British curriculum. Teachers are pressured to teach toward these exams, as students cannot graduate from high school if they fail, which they frequently do. In rural areas unqualified teachers are often the norm, and it is not unheard of to find a person teaching grade seven who never passed grade six.[10] The goal of this centre is to provide a space in which children can freely explore their own culture under the directives of passionate teachers, but that exploration can't even begin if we can't take care of details like organizing bookshelves.

A mere glance around the room I've wandered into proves that the philosophy of this centre is vastly different from Lesotho's educational norm. As children organize supplies and rustle up a ribbon to tie around the front door, they peek inside books that have been carried here by the suitcase load. Their eyes light up with momentary curiosity before ordering the stories in neat rows and I wish I could sit down with them. Instead, I pass through the main room where Peter, a 24-year-old artist and the manager of the FALC, and other local artists house their artwork as it waits for a buyer, any buyer.

At last I reach a storeroom and finally find the mop and bucket I'm meant to retrieve. Around me, small hands are still scrambling everywhere, sweeping floors and organizing picture books as dust flits in and out of our faces. Little children accomplish tasks I've never seen American students attempt. A three-year-old uses a broom twice her size in the corner and a group of six-year-olds is busy assembling an entire party tent outside.

As I bend over the mop and begin to squeegee the floor, wide eyes filled to the brim with curiosity turn my way and then suddenly retreat out of respect. While I move the broom back and forth across the floor, Peter asks one of the older children to read aloud to the rest of us who are working, and together we move through the process of cleaning up this opportunity.

Unpacking Someone Else's Knapsack

Unfortunately, not every day at the Centre brings a positive revelation. As I sit on the stoop outside the center on a different, less inspirational morning, I rub my face compulsively with my hands, attempting to rid it of the wrinkles I know this day has carved. Elbows on the knees of faded jeans I've worn to work every day for a month, I struggle to reign in the watershed of tears building up behind my eyes. Today, yet another project has fallen through the cracks of time, never to be addressed or finished. I can't be sure why none of the artists with whom I work here are making progress on the book we're supposed to be creating. Some days I show up to work and I legitimately feel like I'm accomplishing something. Today I'm staring at the ground and wondering why I have come.

Into my pity party of one walks the landlord and co-owner of this operation – Thabo. We've just had an argument that I am not prepared to continue in full earshot of the centre's neighbors, and I can't imagine why he is here. Replete in a black track jacket with blue graffiti splashed down the front and black tapered jeans, my 28-year-old "employer" sits down next to me and places his own hands on his knees.

"Lauren, what's wrong?"[11] Thabo asks. We've had a few heart-to-hearts since I've come to Lesotho. Thabo is the person who used his connections in the neighborhood to help me find housing when I first arrived. He walked me home every day during my first week to ensure my safety and shared stories with me from his childhood to teach me about life in Lesotho. Despite the way he's opened up, I have never completely trusted him. His facial expressions are often blank and difficult for me to read, and he tends to break his promises.

"I'm frustrated," I explain. "We are supposed to be working on this book, and no one is doing anything. We need to meet our deadline to keep our grant money."

Deadlines have been a source of concern at the centre since before I arrived. Our organization runs on money that has been allocated until the end of the calendar year, and if it isn't utilized by then, it will be lost to us. More than that, explaining the importance of sticking to a deadline to my co-workers has been very difficult for me. There is little sense of urgency in relation to making the most of this opportunity, and I can't understand why.

"Let me tell you something about Black people, Lauren," Thabo says. I have no idea where he intends to take this conversation, but I'm instantly uneasy. "Black people are lazy. They don't get things *done* the way that White people do. You can't expect these things from us."

I'm stunned. Black people are *lazy*? I've come all the way to Africa to work on a literacy project in an AIDS-riddled country with an HIV infection rate as high as 40 percent among men and women aged 30-39,[12] and this is the response I get from a supposed local forbearer of change? I've taken sociology courses on the ideology and pedagogy of the oppressed. I have analyzed and discussed my own Whiteness and its effect on my interactions with people of other races in the United States and have tried to engage in conversation with people whose life experiences and opinions challenge mine. If I've learned anything from these discussions, it's that race is a social construct and cannot be defined by character traits. I do not want to sit on a stoop and listen to an African man tell me that Black people's laziness is what's keeping children's books from being written and published.

"Thabo, what are you saying? How can you call an entire race lazy?" I ask, scrunching my eyebrows and pushing my face further into my hands.

"They are just...lazy people. They don't get anything done! You see those men, standing by the road?" I glance at the same group of prominent neighborhood men I always see standing near the same patch of ground.

"Yes, I see them."

"They are talking about fixing the road. Do you know how often they talk about fixing the road? They talk about it *every day*. But they don't finish it."

"And this makes Black people lazy?"

"Yes."

I have no response. Growing up in an almost entirely White suburb in Ohio, the topic of race was rarely on the tips of my teachers' and peers' tongues. Once I arrived at college, I learned about my White knapsack of privilege[13] and the ease with which it allows me to meander through society. Peggy Mcintosh writes in her article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," "I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group." Until moving to this all-Black nation, I've always been lumped in the majority where skin color is concerned, but I have been trying to educate myself and expand my conceptual horizons. I can't figure out whether Thabo's proclamation is a direct affront to everything I have learned or an affirmation that what I learned is important.

If Thabo were the only Basotho person who'd told me that Black people were lazy, I might be dismissing this as the aside I wish it were. But he is far from alone in vocalizing this opinion. The previous week, I attended a health problem-solving workshop a few hours outside the capital. Several prominent Basotho hospital staff members were assembled in a room and given a problem, the root cause of which we were responsible for identifying as a group. The scenario presented was a ward in which nurses were failing to properly distribute medications to their patients. The moderator of the discussion, a young White woman from Boston working abroad through an NGO, asked each of us to go around the room and declare our summations. My own response seemed obvious to me. Hospitals in Lesotho are often underfunded and access to medicine can be a real concern. Just that afternoon I'd read an article citing the possibility of anti-retroviral rationing. But my interpretation proved unique. Everyone else in the room attributed the undistributed medicine to the sheer laziness of the nurses, and Basotho people in general.

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In Lesotho, as I have been told more than once, you cannot fire people.[14] I've heard stories of professionals embezzling grant money, gardeners at hospitals giving drug injections to patients just for fun—and no consequences are given. I proposed that perhaps a lack of accountability was the reason nurses in this example weren't doing their jobs properly. People nodded, but resoundingly concluded that though this was true, the nurses were really acting out of laziness.

How did I get here, kneeling on the ground in front of a row of Basotho children? Why are rocks digging into my heels and where is this strong anger that begins in my toes coming from?

Are Basotho people lazy? Or are they being held to Western standards of work ethics and employment hierarchies and finding it difficult to seamlessly integrate the two? In the United States, we believe that time is not on our side. We're constantly racing against the clock to get things accomplished, fervently in pursuit of our to-do lists and agendas. The faster we move, the more we can achieve. In Lesotho, time seems to function in direct opposition to that theory. As was explained to me by a Mosotho woman while waiting in line for sandwiches one afternoon, "In Lesotho we do not measure time by the movements of the hands on a clock. We measure it by activities. Right now we are waiting. Later, we will be eating. That is all."[15] Here, time is on our side. After all, how fast can people move when there are few paved roads, few privately owned cars, and unreliable public transportation?

And so on this stoop with Thabo, enveloped by winter breezes and the sounds of children running through one another's yards, I am once again forced to reexamine why I am here and what I am doing. My short tenure in this country doesn't seem like nearly enough time to even begin to understand the roots of these cultural attitudes. In the moment, my conversation with Thabo is both disheartening and alarming. But with more thought, I come to realize that this conversation is exactly why I've come to Lesotho. My work at the centre is to make children's picture books, but more than that it is to empower the children I work with. The books we write are published in Sesotho, and not in English, in order to cultivate a connection with and pride for Basotho culture. The presence of international organizations does not have to equate to a loss of connection with traditional practices, and it should not mean the alienation of traditional culture.

Lahua! Lahua!

Bewildered and barely conscious of my actions, I wonder how this has happened. How did I get here, kneeling on the ground in front of a row of Basotho children? Why are rocks digging into my heels and where is this strong anger that begins in my toes coming from? As rage works its way through my veins, I can feel it hardening my heart and draining my ideals.

Quickly, I scan this morning's events in my mind, struggling to find some kind of indicator that my day would end like this. Thinking back, I go over them one by one. First, I wake up with frosty breath and brush my teeth, gingerly leaving the comfort of my heated mattress pad. Now that I have lived as a resident of Khubetsoana for a number of weeks, boys from the village no longer flock to my house to watch me wake up in the morning, and so my hygienic routine continued with few interruptions. After a lukewarm shower, I pad down the hall to the small cabinet that is mine. I pull out my standard uniform for work at the Family Art and Literacy Centre—one of the five shirts I've brought for my two-month stay and one of the three pairs of pants, as well as long underwear, a purple knit hat, ill-matched red and black scarf, and wind-proof brown gloves. Nothing seems out of the ordinary.

Wardrobe set, I veer into the kitchen where I boil water for a cup of instant coffee and scramble an egg. Before beginning to cook, I wash my hands as loudly as possible in the metal sink. This placates Nkepeneng, our maid, who knows that my white skin implicates my inability to do things like clean dishes or properly cook a meal. By making me prove that I have washed my hands, she can assure that at least I'm being sanitary. This morning, Nkepening doesn't enter the sparse, clean tile kitchen to watch me like a hawk for germs—or, as I sometimes suspect, to see dirt come off my white hands. I know she finds it fascinating because she likes to show the trick to her friends. After downing the caffeine and inhaling my makeshift omelet, I nab the canvas green rucksack that serves as my all-occasions accessory in Lesotho and tuck the ear buds of my ipod into my ears. Tugging on my slouching purple hat, I bound out the door. Heading down the pockmarked, red dirt road filled with stones meant to tame the heedless African soil, I meander toward the FALC for a half-day of reading, writing, and attempts at pedagogy.

Passing the houses, cows, clothing lines, and sheep that accent my 25-minute walk to work, I greet my ever-friendly neighbors. "*Lumela Ausi. Ho Joang*?" I ask the shy, tall girl who watches unruly younger brothers in her yard. "I'm doing fine," I reply in Sesotho to the group of young men who frequent the cracked and peeling plastic chairs in front of the corner store. Given more time, I would buy doughnut holes or french fries from their shop. But today I keep walking, past the shop, past the lady who asks me whether I want to hire her to do my laundry every day despite my consistent respectful declines. I wave and smile at everyone as I wander toward the Centre, my safe haven.

But halfway up the path that winds through my host grandparents' backyard, I find myself here in this spot. The interaction has begun smoothly enough, hasn't it? Strolling along the road with ears filled full of American music, I hear a voice I don't recognize calling my name from the side of the road. This isn't unusual because, as the only White person living in this village, many more people tend to remember me than I could keep track of ever having met. I turn my head automatically, prepared to greet with friendliness someone I probably don't know, when I see six small children ordered in a neat row. "Hey *bana* [kids],"[16] I say.

One child mysteriously puts a hand over his eyes and holds the other out in front of him, mumbling something I can't quite understand. I ask him to repeat himself. Upon my request the other children put out their hands and say, in unison, "We are blind! Give us money!"

I am stunned. These children live in the best area of the neighborhood. They have shoes and pants that mostly fit and even sweaters without holes in them. What's more, they are only holding out one hand, when everyone in Lesotho knows that to respectfully request anything a person must stretch out both arms, hands cupped together in humbleness and gratitude. Why are they doing this?

"What?" I reply, shocked and a little confused.

"Money, *lahua*, give us money!" they cry, using the Sesotho word for White person. As they giggle and elbow each other in the line, my stomach sinks into the soles of my shoes. This is hardly the first time I've been asked for money. Friends and neighbors and strangers in the street often tug at the fleece I wear or my purple hat and flatly tell me to give it to them. After all, couldn't I simply buy another one in the States? Aren't my pockets bottomless pits ready to pour out gold coins for every Basotho person I meet? Isn't that why I came here?

That's how I find myself kneeling on the ground in front of these children. I cover my eyes with one hand and hold out the other toward them. "I'm blind," I say. "Give me money."

Kea Leboha (Thank You)

The moment I felt settled in Lesotho, I had to leave. In mid August I waved goodbye to my African friends and family and boarded a plane headed for Boston via Amsterdam. Since arriving back in the States 48 hours before school began, my transition back into a life of library tables piled high with books and mass quantities of food has been smooth but sad. After nine weeks of working at the FALC, living with my host family in Khubetsoana, and spending time with my co-workers, settling back into a dorm room and life on campus felt impersonal and lonely. For the first few weeks I couldn't bring myself to put anything on the bare, white walls of my standardized room, eager to view it as transitional space. The often-painful challenges I faced while grappling with life in Southern Africa were gone. Instead of relaxing, however, I found myself missing their presence.

I missed the chaos of the center and the creativity that accompanied it. I missed the children in whose neighborhood I lived and the intense bonds I shared with my host family. I missed conversations with Thabo that shattered my worldview and forced me to think in ways I could not have anticipated. My summer uncovered many more questions than answers, and it was only upon returning that I realized how much I still didn't understand. My goal in traveling to Lesotho for nine weeks was to learn something about another culture, and teach people something valuable about mine. I tried to earnestly pay attention and to honestly reflect on what I saw in Lesotho. In that respect, I tried to keep my conclusions brief.

My fundamental view on international aid has not shifted. I still believe that aid should be structured in terms of skill sharing and not filtered through "assistance" organizations that really aim to impose their opinions on other societies. This experience reinforced my belief that aid shouldn't be about fixing the world.

To forcefully change the world would be to impose my conception of progress onto someone else. I can't cure HIV/AIDS. I can't hug every child close to me, no matter how much I want to. But I can listen, and I can teach them to read. I can urge them to open books and teach themselves about the world. And if I teach them to read and encourage their educational development, then maybe they can make their own change. And that is a progressive movement I would do almost anything to see.

NOTES

1. Encyclopedia of the Nations, "Lesotho – History," accessed November 14, 2009, http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Africa/Lesotho-HISTORY.html.

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11. Field notes, July 6, 2009

12. *Lesotho Health Sector: A Rapid Donor Survey*. Boston University, Babich, Nthunya, and Bicknell, 2006.

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14. Field Notes, June 20, 2009.

15. Field Notes, July 8, 2009.

16. Field Notes, August 2, 2009