

Instituting Unvisualized Change: Trusting the Faith Walk

Michelle Dennis '18



Act One

Opening: Arriving to Atonsu, Kumasi

It was finally time to leave behind the rigid but cushioned seat that had gradually given my muscles small aches over the five-and-a-half-hour bus-ride from Accra to Kumasi; to leave the sweet middle-aged woman, Ms. Theresa, who was kind enough to let me use her phone to call Mr. Dao; to pick up my belongings and finally be immersed in the city of my internship.

Mr. Dao had told me, “Debby is a Light for Children Volunteer. She will be waiting for you when you arrive at the station. Look for a young woman in a yellow shirt.” I held my book bag, my carry-on, and snacks given to me by Akwasi and Kwame in Accra. With my hands full, I descended the steps and was met by a swarm of taxi drivers reaching for my bags to guarantee themselves a passenger. Aghast by the sudden attention and confused by their words that were in Twi, I gripped my belongings tightly and continuously shook my head “no” as I looked for Debby. I didn’t see the young woman in yellow anywhere; I stood alone in the crowd, lost.

I walked along the side of the bus, trying to continue my search for Debby and retrieve my two large suitcases all the while wondering, *How will I possibly carry all of this?* As the bus aide passed forward my second turquoise suitcase, I heard my name being called. I stood erect and turned to see a beautiful woman in a bright yellow shirt. I was too grateful to be found to wonder how she identified me. She later told me, “Only foreigners carry suitcases that large.” But in the moment, I did not care about the reason. I saw the yellow shirt, and saw rescue.

Debby scanned the taxi drivers, turning to select one who then grabbed my suitcases. He seamlessly placed the largest bag on his head and used his other available hand to roll my second suitcase to his car. I offered to help to no avail as he marched onward.

After Debby and the taxi driver negotiated a price, we got into the taxi and Debby explained that we were headed to Mr. Dao’s apartment, my long-anticipated summer home. Upon arrival, we managed to take the luggage across the sea of rocks to the apartment building and up the three flights of stairs to my new home. A man named Papa opened the door and introduced himself as a housemate of Mr. Dao. This stranger who eventually became like an older brother to me took my luggage and led me down the entrance hallway to my room.

Directly adjacent to my entry door was a second door in my room. I had never had a room with two main doors, so I was drawn to open the second. It led to the balcony where I felt that I could see most of Atonsu: its tin-roofed houses, its compound style of living. Underneath the view of hanging laundry, I could see a group of kids playing and dancing. I was uncertain if there was music playing or if I was too far away to hear it, but I was entranced as they moved their tiny bodies. I leaned on the banister, watching the kids move so deftly in a way that signified maturity despite their young age. *They were dancing already; what could I possibly teach them?*

When I was applying for the Sorensen Fellowship, I contemplated my purpose for teaching ballet in Ghana. After much introspection, I realized that I wanted to complement, not change, cultural ways of self-expression. I hold the opinion that our



"From my balcony," M. Dennis, June, 2017; A panoramic capture of Atonsu where I would watch town members and their children move about.

bodies can be viewed as a place of residence. One can change or alter their physical body to better suit who one is as an individual. However, in one's lifetime, a body is the single home that a person cannot move out of. Therefore, it is of importance to create and/or develop a sense of ownership of our bodies. I believe that while learning different forms of movement is not the only approach to accomplish this, nonetheless it is one of significance.

Dance has the potential to manifest bodily ownership by encouraging individuals to physically translate mental and emotional processes, effectively enhancing modes of self-expression. Whether taught by an instructor or self-instructed, many individuals who dance learn where and how to place their body to articulate a particular curvature, an elongated line, a certain isolated popping motion, with the

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understanding that each gesture signifies a different message. With time, novel steps become familiar, and with the growing insight of body placement, the dancer begins to understand how their body moves and the messages communicated in the absence of words.

The intersection of cross-cultural learning and dance movement, I believed, would make possible the ability to bend, fold, and turn in more ways than my prospective students previously knew. Ballet could challenge them to intentionally engage in the creative medium of movement where, from my experience, it is possible to engage in the most impactful ways of learning. It would be mistaken for me to believe that everyone I encountered would share the same opinions of the potential for dance to foster many socially relevant qualities. But my simplest hope was that the elements of ballet would add to my students' movement repertoire as a mechanism for self-expressive practices.

Yet in the moment as I watched those kids dance, my purpose was not so easy to remember. I was so absorbed by what I was seeing and by my own thoughts that I forgot I was standing on the balcony. Papa's emergence from the apartment surprised me as he came to keep me company. He began explaining the area and identifying the different buildings within it. A small distance away was a three-story, mint-green building.

"On the first floor, that's the Light for Children office. I'll walk you there tomorrow morning."

Pas De Deux: Mr. Dao and His Commitments

Light for Children (LFC) began 12 years ago in Kumasi, Ghana and was co-founded by Mike Owusu and Sebastian Lindstrom. My program advisor for the summer was Mr. Dao. The nonprofit organization prioritizes the development of orphans and vulnerable youth in many arenas that include physical health and advancement through education. In the Kumasi area, LFC works to improve literacy by asking volunteers to assist students with reading in the local libraries. They administer student workshops on sexual assault and child abuse. They facilitate health clinics in the Northern Region, where many patients find themselves long distances from care. And also in the Northern Region, LFC conducts outreach to local communities informing citizens of the importance of child immunizations such as Hepatitis B. It was their physical health work coupled with their recognition of different mediums for youth advocacy that enticed me to the organization. LFC's values matched my ideas of holistic well-being. I intended to intern in the organization's clinics at local schools and teach ballet.

Mr. Dao seemed to singlehandedly oversee each program of the organization from the small Light for Children office. The demands of the day-to-day logistical work consumed much of his time and attention. The position required him to occasionally travel to assist volunteers at the satellite locations of the clinics in the Northern Region. When he was in town, he would often go to the office around 8:00 am and return to the apartment around 9:30 pm. He owned two functioning cellphones. I initially thought one was for business and the other was for personal use, however time showed that both were used

for business affairs. I rarely saw him without one of the two phones attached to his ear – speaking in Twi, English, or a combination of both.

I remembered what it was like to be on the other end of the phone call before my arrival. Our emails and Skype calls gave me the impression that Mr. Dao was a man of few words and vague explanations. I would try to be conscious of the number of questions I would ask Mr. Dao, so as not to annoy my (then) future supervisor. But even the questions I did ask remained mostly unanswered at the end of our conversations. One week prior to my arrival in Ghana, my host family was not yet selected, I still needed clarity about the logistics of balancing the school health program with teaching ballet, and I had not received much indication about Mr. Dao's expectations for me as an intern. I convinced myself that our communication would improve once we were in each other's presence.

It was not long before I realized that Mr. Dao was simply a quick-paced, busy-minded person. He was the type who would lose his glasses because he forgot that he had placed them on his head; the kind of person that would search for a particular piece of

paper in a pile of many by hurriedly shuffling through them, skipping the details, as opposed to systematically searching through the stack. He was effectively a staff of one person for an organization that served a few hundred; of course a few tasks went awry. But unfortunately, I often felt that what was forgotten was me.

Whenever I was not teaching, I would situate myself in the square LFC office, where I periodically found myself without assigned tasks, so I established my own. Occasionally I would draft lesson plans that refined the goals for my students based on their progress; at other times, I transcribed Mr. Dao's meeting notes or funding reports to an electronic format, or assisted Debby with organizing and filing documents in the office. I knew very little about LFC's fundamental needs, so the lack of given responsibilities in the office was disappointing and occasionally infuriating. Nonetheless, those sentiments were difficult to sustain, because I knew Mr. Dao's circumstances and admired his commendable, tireless efforts to manage LFC and its many programs. In a mahogany, wooden frame hanging on the wall above Mr. Dao's desk was a quote. "All children smile in the same language." I felt that Mr. Dao continued to do this form of service

work, no matter how much time it took, because he made it his mission to diminish any forces that would interfere with a child's reason to smile.

Mr. Dao's time was occupied with projects, meetings with donors, and meetings with volunteers, yet he managed to cement valuable relationships with many adults and children in Atonsu. There were three neighborhood kids in particular who adored him. Most Saturdays and/or Sundays, they would routinely come to the apartment to play games, eat, and then repeat. Junior, Brubi, and Seth, ages 14, 10, and 9, were my first instructors of Twi, the local language, and popular dances. During my first weekend in the apartment, Mr. Dao was reading an article on one of three brown living room seats and allowed Junior to play music from his DVD player. As the music played, Mr. Dao hummed the songs while Seth and Brubi began dancing in one corner across the room. I asked for them to come teach me their moves but only Seth came forward. As Junior translated my words to him, I realized that Brubi did not speak English. Seth engaged his small muscles and began to push the two other brown seats away from the carpet to create our dance floor. This became our bonding place.

Seth was my predominant dance teacher, as he was apt to start dancing at any moment. He would shake his head in dismay at my attempts to imitate his movements. Brubi would laugh tirelessly, and when he would finally collect himself, he would make a remark to Seth and Junior in Twi. I always assumed Brubi to be a comedian, as Seth and Junior would sometimes refuse to translate and only respond to Brubi with heartfelt laughter.

Mr. Dao, who was occasionally present, encouraged the boys to ask me to teach them bits of ballet, but they never did.



"And hold..." M. Dennis, June, 2017; Students stand at their "barre" maintaining their passé balance until the end of the combination.

Beginning With the Plié: Cultivating Ballet as an Additional Tool for Self-Expression

Well-rested and in high spirits from my first weekend with the boys, I arose the morning of June 5 anxious but prepared to work. I would be teaching at five schools: Hybrid Montessori, Rojel Montessori, High Academy, Future Leaders, and the Careeken School. Thus, there would be five headmasters to meet – all on my first day! What a way to start an internship. I would enter each meeting unsure of the questions they would ask, how often I would work with the students, or even the age of the students I would be interacting with. Knowing that I had many meetings ahead, Mr. Dao considerately offered me advice about a breakfast that would give me endurance for the day. I accepted his guidance, and went into the small kitchen adjacent to my room to prepare a scrambled egg, half of a tenderly ripe avocado, a slice of fresh bread, the sweetest mango slices, and strawberry-flavored tea.

With an overly satisfied stomach, and a water bottle, journal, and ballet slippers in my backpack, I was off to the office to meet Debby.

For the 15-minute commute to the office, I walked along the edges of the road to avoid any unintentional interactions with honking drivers. I passed the fruit and food vendors, the tailor and hair parlors, the wandering roosters and hens, and the small convenience shops with many packaged snacks and bottled water. I walked alongside adults walking to work with purpose but, oftentimes, without haste. I passed men playing dam, a board game, to pass the time. Amidst the morning bustle were many children walking to school in their uniforms that differed in color and style to indicate their school of enrollment. As I was nearing the office on the main road, Debby noticed me and began to wave to an oncoming *tro tro*. We would be taking the ride to attend our first school, Hybrid Montessori.

Once settled in our seats, Debby tapped the conductor's shoulder, "Mate, mepakyew, Aputuogya junction," informing him where we would like to get off.¹ I spent the ride capturing mental pictures of everything we passed and listening to the local music that the driver was playing from the radio. I was elated and hoped that the mental pictures and music would remain keenly in my mind as a documentary of the first day of my internship. The *tro tro* passed through many other towns and eventually came to a stop in front of a long and narrow cement school building with a vast dirt field behind it. On the field seemed to be 200 students in their uniforms: mustard yellow polos, brown bottoms, and black shoes. Most of the students were focused on an ensuing fútbol match. Because we got off the *tro tro* in front of this school, I assumed that these athletic students were mine for teaching. In my soft-soled sandals, I followed Debby's steps as she walked past the unnamed school, around the playing students on the field, and towards another dirt path.



"Showtime," M. Dennis, July 2017; A student in orange stood close to the performers as they danced in front of their peers and parents.

We arrived at another, gated school that had a multicolored tiled courtyard and a playground set instead of a field for recess. The school was quaint and seemed to be built with ivory stones. Behind the gate sat a security guard, whom Debby greeted. "Mepakyew, we are working for an NGO, Light for Children, and would like to speak with the headmaster." And without any follow-up questions, the guard opened the gate and pointed in the direction of the office.

A tall man, at least in comparison to me, with a boisterous voice and inviting smile, introduced himself as Headmaster William of Hybrid Montessori. "Oh, I am so happy to see you have come. Please, come in." Debby and I reciprocated his warmth in our own introductions. He allowed us to sit in his dimly lit office that contrasted with his seemingly beaming personality. His

dark brown eyes were direct as he listened intently to my responses to his questions. His welcoming aura and genuine interest in who I was and the program LFC was offering were matched by those of the headmasters who followed. Like others I would meet, he asked about my African American identity and what it meant to be black in America. Considering my heritage, many were astonished when I relayed that this was my first time in Africa, let alone Ghana.

Some of the headmasters showed that they were somewhat familiar with ballet by asking, "Is this the dance that they do on their toes?" followed by reports of seeing pointe on the internet or television. Their openness extended to skepticism about the Light for Children initiative in ballet. They wanted to know why I came to Ghana to teach ballet. This I understood. When preparing for my internship during the spring semester, I struggled with the ethics of teaching a Western-derived art form in a country that has been subjected to the ravages of colonization and is in the midst of discovering and dismantling means of neocolonialism.

Although I have been raised in a Western society, I thought that there was something empowering about black people embodying an art that has historically been elitist and discriminatory. After a bit of deciding what would be the most important part of my answer to the headmasters in our first meeting, I explained the role that ballet played in my life and my belief in the power of any dance movement for self-development. After explaining and sometimes demonstrating ballet in the confines of their office space, I found that my explanations varied and developed with each meeting. By the fifth meeting, I was truly able to articulate my personal definition of ballet – and my pirouettes were crisper and sustained, my lines and extensions felt more elongated. I defined ballet as "a westernized

dance form that teaches a form of technique intertwined with grace and elegance; synchrony with different forms of music; cohesive group work; and adds versatility to nonverbal schemes of communication."

By the day's end, Debby and I established a schedule for the times and days that I would meet with each school. Monday through Thursday I would teach at two schools a day and three schools on Fridays. At the two Montessori schools, I would work with grade one students (seven to eight year olds) and at the remaining three schools, I would work with grade five and/or six. Each session would be at least an hour. Although the days would be hectic with all the traveling and dancing, I was enthused. I was finally going to teach ballet in Ghana.

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Each of the five schools had an unroofed, concrete or tiled common area that served as a courtyard and, usually, a lunchroom. The classrooms surrounded the open space and contained thin bars that served as a physical barrier separating the area for recess from a productive learning space.

The headmasters designated either a classroom or the courtyard for my teaching purposes. This was nothing like the "orthodox" dance studios at home. At both Montessori schools, I taught outside on colorful tile floors. At the remaining three schools, the students stacked desks and removed the chairs, transforming the classroom with concrete floors into our dancing space. In place of a thin wooden barre – a tool used to support dancers when conducting their exercises – we used stacked desks and bare walls. The uniforms that the students wore for school were constricting to movement, as all girls wore skirts or dresses while the boys wore non-stretchable trousers, so they brought whatever "play" clothing they had

instead of the standard leotard and tights. I unfortunately was not able to obtain donated ballet slippers, but was relieved to discover that some students did not like to dance with even socks on their feet, opting to dance barefoot. Rethinking the standard tools demonstrated that for ballet, though it was usually accessorized with manufactured barres and store-bought attire, at its core, the only necessities were bodies and open space.

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The grace of ballet was innate to some students as they manipulated their bodies into the differing positions I displayed, able to emulate me as though they had experienced these movements before. But even the students without natural balletic ability emitted an energy of exploration as they continued to arrive to classes aspiring to progress. We danced without ballet music, or music of any kind due to electricity shortages, lack of speakers, or a combination of both. To improvise, I counted aloud and verbalized the combinations as an accompaniment to their movements.

We began each class with jumping jacks, high-knee runs, plank positions, and push-ups to warm and engage our muscles. Starting with a fun, non-ballet activity seemed to ignite enthusiasm before they positioned themselves in the unnatural shapes of the barre exercises. After each exercise, they would balance in the assigned position as I counted down from 10. As I sculpted their bodies and corrected their limb placements, my students would laugh and jokingly complain, "Madam, please, no more." The sight was comical to me. While holding their positions, they freely vocalized every discomfort they were experiencing – everything I have never had the courage to tell my own ballet instructors. They were not afraid of this experience, or of me. Instead they were immersed in

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By June 15, I'd completed my second week of teaching and begun mastering my student's names as well as the *tro tro* system. Riding on the most common and affordable form of transportation was initially intimidating, but Debby was always with me. That day on our ride back to the office it occurred to me that I'd been observing an identical uniform. "You see those uniforms? Those there with the mustard yellow shirt, brown bottoms, and black shoes?" I said to Debby while pointing outside of the *tro tro* window. "Why does it reappear in certain towns as opposed to others?" She explained that the mustard yellow and brown uniforms were for students who could not afford to attend private school and therefore were students

of the public school. I recollected the uniforms of my students at the five schools: High Academy dressed their students in a blue print, the students of Rojel Montessori had colorful polo shirts with embroidery of the school's name, Hybrid Montessori had both polos and uniforms with white shirts and navy bottoms, Future Leader Academy students dressed in a mix of yellow and green uniforms, while the Careeken School, located in the neighboring town of Atonsu, wore a royal purple.

It was June 15, the end of my second week of teaching. *How did I not notice that my students were not the financially disadvantaged students I had anticipated working with?* The programs afforded by the Light for Children Organization are geared towards children of "vulnerable" backgrounds – or so their website said and my conversations with Mr. Dao confirmed. From these conversations, I envisioned my time in Kumasi interacting with students who did not have access to any art platform. When I discerned that I was working with private school students, I felt uninformed, blindsided, and perplexed. I could not decipher whether teaching the "vulnerable" demographic of children was more important than the work that I was currently invested in at the private schools. *Was the motivation behind my work complicated by my personal ideas of who I "should" be helping, and was that wrong?* There was not an immediate answer to that question. I continued the work that I'd started, with the students of private schools, confused and uncertain of my role.

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My students were quick learners with keen minds. By the third week, they had learned the fundamental aspects of introductory Cecchetti ballet technique: the five positions, the importance and structure of barre combinations, *pliés, tendus, deggages, rond de jambes, développés, and grand battements.*

I made study guides that included detailed stick figures demonstrating technique, step-by-step, and gave oral quizzes that they routinely aced. With all of the progress, I was contemplating ways to begin a transition in my method of teaching. I wanted to facilitate exercises that allowed students to synthesize their own combinations of their own style of dancing and the knowledge they'd attained from ballet instruction.

A fusion of their style with ballet could reasonably enhance their physical storytelling skills. I wanted to inquire about their potentially forming this connection to ballet, and about the lives of each student beyond our impromptu dance studios. However, I needed to find a delicate way to ask my students my questions. I found myself continuously adjusting to cultural norms, trying to find the best phrasing, and deciding, based on observations, whether informal interviews would be permissible. When talking to students after classes, most seemed to be outgoing but did not speak openly about their home lives. Hence, I felt that interviews would be invading personal privacies and never conducted the informal interviews with kids.

There were students who never had interest in learning ballet and others who stated ballet was "too hard" and stopped attending class. But for the students who remained, was it not enough that they were showing up bravely, to transform their classroom for alternative forms of learning, to indulge in this "foreign" form of movement, to trust me, a foreigner, and to push through their oftentimes uncomfortable exercises? I remember when they began to call me "Aunty Michelle," an endearing name that my own niece and nephew never address me as. And whenever they addressed me during class, they were asking for corrections, affirmations and validations. "Aunty Michelle, did I do it?" "Aunty Michelle like this?" We were developing trusting bonds in our studio. And though the students

referred to their academic teachers as “Aunty” or “Uncle,” it was a privilege to be addressed as such and I wanted to honor the way that they allowed me to engage with their lives.

Corps de Ballet: Working Collectively through Choreography and Performance

I’d tailored specific tasks and goals for the students of each of the five schools, but I did not envision choreography joining the list. I was completing a class at the Careeken School when Headmaster Alberta asked to speak with me. I followed her to the fan-ventilated office and sat in the chair across her desk. “So the students will be having their graduation on July 14th. Will they have something ready to show their parents?” I masked my bemused face with an uncomfortable, unnatural smile. Most art forms take 10 years of rehearsal to master and ballet is no exception. *I knew she was not expecting perfection, but I had only been teaching for three weeks!* If I choreographed, within the following two weeks I would need to teach synchrony, counting with classical music, body-space awareness, transition steps, formations, in addition to fortifying the technique they had learned thus far. But more importantly, if I did the choreography, I knew that I could not facilitate any methods that would encourage student-led self-expression, even without the interviews. Time would not enable me to take on both tasks. Without seeing any other option, I responded, “It will have to be a short piece but I’ll definitely make sure they are ready.”

“From the top!” I yelled. It was July 13, one day before their performance. The students of the Careeken School, who were very chatty that day, organized themselves into their starting positions. It usually took them a while to settle down to rehearse the dance again, but on that day, we did not have a minute to waste. Tomorrow would be the performance for their graduation.

They would be dancing in front of friends and family members, as well as Headmaster Alberta, who had not seen any of the classes or choreography. My voice, hoarse from the continuous loud speaking, tried to hurry them, “Ready? 5, 6, 7, 8.” I began to sing my own rendition of Sir Edwin Elgar’s “Pomp and Circumstance” as there was no electricity. “Lights out.” I was hopeful that the electricity would be restored by tomorrow.

Where’s the record button on this thing? Found it. Is everyone in the shot? Perfect, all 14 of them are standing in the “V” shaped formation, just as we rehearsed. All bodies are finally still? Check. Standing in first position? Check. Hands on their hips? Check. Smiles on everyone’s face... Kojo! Please smile Kojo! Why am I so nervous for them? Inhale, exhale, they’re going to be fine.... “Okay, they are ready. You can play the music.” The DJ queued the music and as he did so, I prayed that they would move in unison. And they did, jumping in perfect coordination as a single moving body, at least for the first eight counts of the routine. The entirety of the dance was not as timed but they performed their best effort, correcting many of the mistakes I had told them about the day before. Once the dance concluded and they struck their final poses, the audience responded with light applause. I’m not sure if their parents enjoyed the minute-and-a-half piece, but I did. The biggest congratulations may have come from me.

Intermission: Costume Changes and Mental Processing

I remember the moment Debby explained the differences in the uniforms that mirror the nuances of socioeconomic status. And by teaching private school youth, I didn’t feel that I was assisting social change. I remember the meetings where Headmasters asked me to choreograph for their schools’ end of the semester ceremonies. But by teaching choreography,

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I felt that I was passing off steps in place of tools for students to create their own artistic works. And I remember waiting weeks for Mr. Dao to inform me of my starting date with the health clinics. But by the end of June, that hadn’t come to fruition. Reflecting on my summer, I realized that I had mentally written the narrative of my internship before I’d even arrived in Ghana. And that was dangerous, because it led me to have difficulty recognizing the vitality of my work, the vitality of dance, as I was matching my reality to my expectations. I felt ashamed

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to admit that I was searching for validation of the importance of my internship, and I'd forgotten that the principle and strength of art learning was validation enough.

I arrived in Ghana intrigued about physical health and the influence of the arts on self-expression. With ballet instruction not going as I'd hoped, the idea of more direct impact was appealing, and it led me to conclude teaching ballet and begin volunteering at a local hospital for my last two weeks in Ghana. I knew this was a significant shift, but the clinical setting was my comfort area as I'd worked in clinics and hospitals at Brandeis and in my hometown. After submitting my resume, cover letter, an appeal for partnership with the hospital from Light for Children, and an informal interview with the head of Human Resources, Ms. Doloris, I was permitted to volunteer at the hospital. The decision to change the focus of my internship was distressing, but it couldn't surpass the difficulty of saying goodbye to my students. I had become quite attached to our interactions. Although my students weren't always easy to work with, they added cultural learning, humor, and unexpected happiness to my life; I hope I contributed in some way to theirs.

On the final day at Hybrid Montessori, we had a freestyle dance party to the tracks of Mr. Eazi. When it was time to depart, I was tackled with hugs by my students who were half my height. Walking away from that cherished moment caused me to revisit the questioning of my decision to leave, but I continued walking. The next day would be my first at the Hart Adventist Hospital. Ms. Doloris had not informed me of which department I could intern with, but she said we would figure out those logistics the following morning at 8:00 am.

Act Two

A Little Variation: Working at Hart Adventist Hospital

I arrived at Hart Adventist the next morning at 7:30 am. My excitement and nerves reminded me of my first day teaching ballet. I was starting anew. I intentionally arrived early to demonstrate my professionalism and interest. I entered the building and climbed the steep marble steps to the third

and highest floor of the hospital – to be greeted by a locked door into the human resources suite. After looking around I realized I was the only person on the floor. *Well, I am early, but where is Ms. Doloris? Maybe I could give myself a tour of the hospital.... Maybe not. At least not on the first day.*

I walked back down the steps to wait in the empty lobby area where the nurses were placing chairs for anticipated walk-in patients. I sat directly in front of the automated main door so as not to miss Ms. Doloris when she arrived. I pulled *Americanah* from my satchel to pass the time, occasionally looking up to observe the system of service. With not many patients around, there wasn't much to watch and although I loved Adichie's writing, I was ready to get the day started. The hospital didn't seem to be a large building but I could imagine the possibility of another entrance existing. *Maybe Ms. Doloris entered through another door, I thought to myself. Fifteen minutes later, I closed my*



"Medicine in Atonsu," M. Dennis, July 2017; The plain three-story building filled with warm health professionals; Hart Adventist.

book and trekked back up the steps to find the door, which remained locked, and the HR suite, still empty. I sulked back down the stairs and told myself to sit idly, but I couldn't. I watched as the nurses dressed in forest-green gowns walked back and forth conducting their morning rounds with the inpatients.

After 30 additional minutes, I stopped a woman wearing a white lab jacket. I knew she didn't know who I was, but her demeanor appeared friendly and I figured she was a member of the staff. "Excuse me, hi, do you know if Ms. Doloris, the woman who works in Human Resources, will be in today? I was supposed to meet her at eight this morning." Instead of answering my question, the woman sat next to me and asked where I was from and what I was doing at the hospital. I explained that I was an intern and shortly after, she swiftly grabbed my hand in a warm grasp and began to give me a tour. In that moment, I was assured that this woman would be my supervisor. I didn't see Ms. Doloris until three days later, but I was no longer searching.

Esther, my hospital supervisor, is a biomedical lab technician who allowed me to work with her. She was a sweet and caring person as she was a mother of two, nonetheless, she taught very quickly and expected excellence on the second attempt of any protocol. After she gave me a tour of the hospital, she proceeded to give a tour of the small lab. She defined the abbreviations the hospital used to label tests, followed by explanations of which tests the hospital conducted and which had to be sent to outside labs with a greater source of funding. On that first day, she gave a crash course for obtaining miniscule blood samples for malaria, random blood sugar (RBS), and hemoglobin tests; vein invasive blood samples that were often used for a variety of tests such as examining for STIs (Hepatitis B, Syphilis, and HIV), white blood cell counts, and identifying blood groups or sickle cells; and for conducting

microscopic urine analysis, urinalysis reagent strips, and *H. pylori* detection tests. I went home the first day and immediately began studying so that I could be prepared to perform any test she asked.

My shifts normalized to nine to 11 hours a day, and I was enjoying the busyness of the work. Hart Adventist tends to citizens of varying income in the surrounding community and makes an effort to make medical care affordable under the National Health Insurance Scheme, a commitment of the government to attaining universal healthcare. Under Esther's supervision, I would document the test(s) that the doctor requested for a patient. I would write the test names into a bound notebook and input the information into the data system. There needed to be both an electronic and manual copy for days the electricity would not be reliable.

When engaging with the patients, it was hard to make conversation as outside of the schools, many citizens preferred not to speak English. Over the course of my six weeks in the Kumasi area, I managed to learn common phrases of Asante Twi, however, my medical vocabulary was exceedingly limited. Esther eventually taught me how to give one set of instructions in Twi, "Please, go to the bathroom, urine into the cup, and bring it [the cup] back." Even when I would recite the sentence as instructed, I was sometimes met with laughter and puzzled faces at my attempt. Esther would repeat the sentence, with the correct accent, and then the patient understood.

Esther incorporated me into many of her daily responsibilities, whether it was tending to outpatients or inpatients. I felt like I was another employee of the hospital. But one day I was reminded that I was not. It was a Wednesday, the time was approaching noon, the morning influx of patients had finally slowed, and Esther was getting hungry as it

I'd been working in the laboratory for a week and I suppose she felt comfortable leaving me alone to run the lab if any patients came along. She reasoned that it was the middle of the week and the middle of the day thus it was less likely for a patient to come. "You'll be fine." Esther was normally right, but not that day.

was time for lunch. Normally, Esther would summon a student nurse and give them money to purchase her food. But that day, most student nurses were preoccupied. I'd been working in the laboratory for a week and I suppose she felt comfortable leaving me alone to run the lab if any patients came along. She reasoned that it was the middle of the week and the middle of the day thus it was less likely for a patient to come. "You'll be fine."

Esther was normally right, but not that day. A woman in her mid-30s entered the lab shortly after Esther left. She was an outpatient, present for her first antenatal care (ANC) visit which is a combination of screenings and diagnostic tests. I had seen Esther perform ANC tests on several occasions but never had I conducted this test alone. I made small conversation, but it was shortened due to language differences. I asked for her hospital identification card, as standard, and recorded her personal information slowly in an effort to delay the test until Esther returned. *Okay, maybe*

I am not sure how I temporarily forgot that the emotional needs of any individual are not always visible and that they are indiscriminate of person. I will never know the exact impact teaching ballet had or what elements my students found applicable to their lives, if any.



“Aunty Michelle, don’t go!” Anonymous, July, 2017; Held down by a few of my students on the final day of teaching.

Esther will be back within 10 minutes. Don’t be nervous. Just do the simple parts of the protocol. I decided to begin with obtaining the miniscule blood sample for the malaria and RBS. I wanted to avoid invasive parts of the tests; therefore, once that was completed and recorded, I recited my one sentence to instruct her to bring a urine sample. To my luck, she understood me and went to the washroom while I waited in the lab, hoping that Esther would return in time. There was a short wait for the woman, but Esther arrived in time to retrieve the intravenous blood sample. She laughed, saying I was capable of obtaining the sample but I knew I was not properly trained. *I’m not a phlebotomist!*

During my second and final week, I was walking to the hospital one morning and ran into one of my students from Future Leader Academy. “Aunty, Aunty! Where have you been? Will you be coming back?” I was surprised and ecstatic to see one of my students so close to the date of my return home. I gave her a hug and reminded her that I had completed teaching the previous week. There wasn’t much time to talk but we hugged, once more, and I asked her to say “hello” to her classmates for me.

Coda: Battling with Savior Complex

Every element of arts advocacy has purpose. Every. Element. Of. Arts. Advocacy. Has. Purpose. That’s a statement that I wish I ingrained in my mind before teaching ballet this past summer. *When your experiences are not what you expected, what do you do?*

Under the self-inflicted pressure to have an experience that positively affects others and abstains from the perpetuated “American goes to save Africa” narrative, I didn’t know how to answer that question. In my confusion, I lost faith in the mission of my internship and I doubted my work because I feared the invisibility of art’s impact. My role in arts advocacy this summer was experienced

through dance instruction, through teaching. And because I couldn’t see the immediate effects of dance instruction, I was uncertain if the ideology of dance had real, universal, power. Nonetheless, it’s interesting how distance via time and space has permitted me to gain a different perspective. As I reflect on my internship, the idea that every element of arts advocacy has purpose has transformed into a fact and is engraved in my heart.

If I had the opportunity to repeat my internship, there are a number of things I would do differently: bring my own portable speaker, and be more intentional in my preparation for learning Twi – but more importantly, I would tell myself not to be fearful of life’s surprises or my own mistakes. In my interview for the Sorensen Fellowship, one of my notes from an interviewer stated, “She could meet failure head-on and not be discouraged,” or something to that effect. I am not sure how I allowed myself to become detached from my core belief in the intrinsic freedom that dance brings. I am not sure how I temporarily forgot that the emotional needs of any individual are not always visible and that they are indiscriminate of person. I will never know the exact impact teaching ballet had or what elements my students found applicable to their lives, if any. But as Professor Chu has told me, that’s what teaching is. It’s a faith walk. Many times you don’t know what your students took away and must hope that your time together was, at the very least, useful.

The “failures,” and reflections on my experience, allow me to believe more now than I did before that dance is a performative art form that is not solely for its audience members. There’s a mental release that is embedded in the physicality of dance; that’s why so many cultures do it. Dance tells our stories when words aren’t enough.

Notes

1. *Mepakyew* [meh-pa-cho] means “please” in Twi.