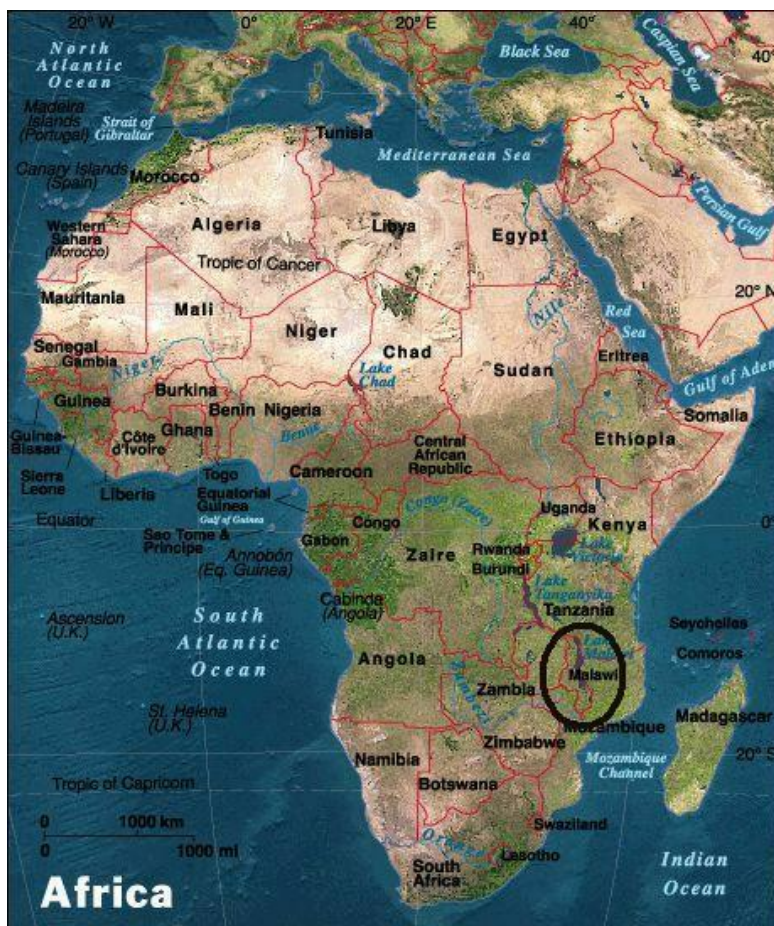


Susan E. Ray

St. John's University

Digital Portfolio



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### **Living and Working in Africa: 2000-2001**

In the spring of 2000 I was the recipient of one of 36 fellowships from a US AID organization to teach education courses at a college in Malawi, East Africa. Three short months after receiving my notice, I was on 23 hour plane ride across the Atlantic to a country I would come to learn, offered beauty, challenges, multiple threats, and lasting lessons.

Malawi boast that it has not been in war (unlike many of its neighboring countries) in centuries, and is trying to build on the beauty of Lake Malawi to attract tourist (and money) to this small republic landlocked between Tanzania, Mozambique, and Zambia. About the size of Tennessee, Malawi is the one of poorest country in the world with an average annual family income of \$800. Malaria, HIV, anemia, and malnutrition are serious health threats. Only 4% of



Women bringing wood for the cooking fire.

the entire country has electricity, and clean water is available to only 40% of the population. The average life span is 40 years, and Malawi ranks as one of the worst countries for children's survival rates.

Education in Malawi is highly valued, but the illiteracy rate hovers at 40%, with most people receiving only 3 years of formal schooling. Schools are often conducted in abandoned buildings with one teacher who has one book, and the class commonly enrolls up to 100 children. Some schools are merely classes held under a tree. In my neighborhood of Lilongwe (the capital city), no children went to the school that was located 12 miles away. To make the situation worse, the year I was in Malawi, the minister of the Department of Education embezzled \$34 million allocated for public education (he was eventually found, did not repay the funds, kept his beautiful house and Mercedes, and was reassigned as the minister of Transportation; he was the

President's brother-in-law). Because of the funding loss, schools (as they were) closed in February and did not reopen until January the next year because the government could not afford the \$55 they paid teachers each month.

I was assigned to teach education courses at the Kamuzu College of Nursing (our funding



Students at the Kamuzu  
College of Nursing

was from the Department of Health, so we completed the year). My task was to establish the protocol and curriculum for a one year education certification program, dedicated to nurses who had their B.S. Additionally, I was assigned to teach all the courses in that program. Along the way, I also assumed control of setting up the school's computer lab. Computers had been donated to the college (as was every piece of equipment, books, and supplies) and had sat in boxes for two years. No one had attempted to unpack and plug them together. This lack of ambition was a sore point I was to deal with in every aspect of my assignment.

The college was anxious to fill the void of too few health care workers in the country by certifying nurses to become teachers of others majoring in nursing. Nurses are a valuable commodity in Malawi, where there is only one doctor for every 50,000 people. The college has several campuses around the country, so I was also responsible for traveling to those sites to evaluate and guide intern teachers.



Downtown Lilongwe (Old Town Area)

The job was demanding and the travel to and from the campus each day was often perilous. I walked each morning from my small apartment (provided and paid for by the college) 2 miles to catch a van (called buses) that

crammed 20 people into space for 10. The bus cost 5 kwacha (Malawian dollars) which is equivalent to twenty cents (US). The bus did only one loop which left me 3 miles from the school. Along the way, I had to be diligent about watching for attackers, snakes, and wild animals. I walked that route each day, both directions, loaded with water bottles and tomato sandwiches.

Water, tomatoes, tea, bananas, and rice became my mainstay because all other foods were contaminated by the bacteria of the soil and water. Everything ingested, as we had been instructed in training, had to be boiled or cleaned in bleach. Food choices were slim, so my menu was pared more by availability than by taste.



Nsima for dinner. Malawians can afford to eat only once a day.

Locals eat nsima: corn that is ground to a fine powder, dried and reconstituted with water. The mixture is cooked for hours over an open outside fire and eventually turns into a mushy glob

that looks and taste like wallpaper paste. Each family grows their own corn – everywhere. I



The children were excited about real books!

would awake every day and look out over my little yard that gradually yielded to neighbors' corn stalks.

Land in Africa is not mine and yours; it belongs to everyone. It took a while for me to adjust to this concept, and it was while I was protecting *my* rights to my sole mango tree that I met the

children who would shape the other part of my life in Africa.

Fearful that the children who insisted on climbing the mango tree in my front yard would fall and injure themselves (how American is that?) I was often shooing them away, but in no time at all, they discovered I was a teacher. In Africa, teachers are held in the highest esteem, eliciting bows from everyone we pass. The children, who could not walk the long distance to school (and had no shoes and only one set of clothes) begged to learn to read and write.

Malawians speak the native language of Chichewa, but everyone also speaks a thick-accented English. I worked out a schedule so that we could have school in my little front yard.

Because of my extended walks and bus rides, I left the college early each afternoon to arrive home before dark. Being near the equator, Malawi has about 15 minutes of sunrise and sunset. After sunset, it is pitch black with no streetlights, and wild animals, wild dogs, and desperate people roam about. The mosquitoes after dark are vicious and carry malaria, so I had to be sure I was sequestered in my little home before sunset. I left the campus between 2:00 and

3:00 each day. A small crowd of children, ages 5 to 15, would be waiting for me late each afternoon as I ambled down my lane on my walk from the bus stop. Soon, I established a routine of stopping at a farm stand to buy bananas (they're small and have about 50 on a bunch) and bread. I always had some sort of jam, so the children were fed first; then we started the lessons.

In the dirt (paper is a rare commodity in a country where deforestation is a major environmental concern) we traced numbers and letters, words, and problems. I gave in and let the children climb for mangoes so we cut could dice them and learn fractions (and then eat the pieces). Even though they ranged in ages, all the yard-school students started with learning ABC-123 because none had been in any formal education. We eventually borrowed some used books and the children loved showing off their reading skills.

After classes, or to take a break, we played limbo, tag, and soccer. We had no soccer balls, so the children fashioned one from rags. They played on a dirt field, barefooted, and used trees or whatever we could find for make-shift goals. I was always the referee and they laughed out loud at my exaggerated calls and signals.



Football with a homemade rag ball.



With a lack of protein in the diet, Malawians have resorted to extreme measures. These boys are selling field rats for 1 kwacha (less than 5 cents) each. They are eaten raw, fur and all!

Their parents (always mother and father; Malawians just do not get divorced) were like everyone I met: soft-spoken, gentle, and polite, and grateful for my work with their children.

Part of the children's education included some hygiene. Prior to our organized play, the neighborhood children chased rats and snakes in the huge open latrines that bordered our apartments. (I had a bathroom and running water; most apartments did not, and many Malawians live in mud huts with no water source.) Until I convinced them to stop, the children also enjoyed running barefoot through burning garbage. Garbage collection is not a service in developing countries, so families select a spot (sometimes right under my bedroom window) and



Children play in open latrines, chasing snakes and rats.

burn their garbage. I can still smell Malawi: smoldering garbage piles on every corner.

I wore my referee's whistle 24 hours a day. There are no police to speak of in Malawi. Occasionally there would be

a ragtag group of self-appointed guards bearing AK-47 assault rifles who would erect a roadblock so they could extract kwacha from everyone in the car or bus. My daily safety was in the hands of two very nice gentlemen the college had hired to watch over me from sunset to sunrise, seven days a week. For \$17 a month and all the food I could afford to feed them, they camped outside my front and back doors, brandished machetes (the weapon of choice and affordability), and wore whistles. The whistles were blown if there was imminent danger so that everyone in the neighborhood would come to each others' aid. I had three attempted break-in

during my stay, even though I had two guards, and bars inside and outside on each window and door. People were starving and their babies were malnourished and sick, so they were desperate. Fathers would band together and go on rampages in order to steal even the smallest items in hopes they could be resold on the black market. The pittance made from such sales might buy corn seed or other food for their family.

My guards also protected me from the wild critters that commonly roamed at night. My first night in my apartment, two hyenas had a loud and ferocious fight in my yard. The next morning I found out they were fighting over the carcass of my British neighbors' cat. My neighbors were on assignment through the British version of the Peace Corps and traveled often through Malawi.



Fighting hyenas are fearless; they will attack animals, people, even lions!

I too traveled extensively throughout the country on my assignments to meet with teaching interns. It was luxurious to travel by coach (versus the cramped buses) and sit in air conditioning. Most of the year the temperatures stayed around 95 degrees. The college paid for me to stay in bed & breakfasts, and at those inns I met guests from all over the world.

One evening, I was having dinner with aid workers from India, England, France, and Germany. At one point the Indian gentleman turned to me and said "If this country could get a dozen Americans in here working together, you could turn this country around in one year. Americans are so industrious, so creative, so dedicated. All any country in peril ever needs is

American workers.” Those comments, as stereotyped as they were, made me think differently of myself and my nationality. Prior to living in Africa, I had identified myself as an educator, as someone who worked at this school or that school. I was American, but it was never a way I identified myself. In this country I was reminded of my role and what I represented in the bigger picture.



Education offers one of the only avenues for Malawian children to escape life-long poverty.

I went to Malawi to give something of myself; I left finding out I am a bricoleur who can make do with whatever is on hand. I discovered I was resourceful and had much to offer as well as much to learn. I found I am proud of being from America and thankful for every little thing I have in my life. I have seen poverty at its very worst and realize that, although I grew up poor, it pales in comparison to the squalor many Africans live in every day, with no hope of escape.

I am more acutely aware of world politics and world economy, and have a wider, greater perspective how we fit as individuals in this world. I learned however, change is made in small, intimate ways. I went to Africa in hopes of making a mark in the world; instead Africa made its mark on me.

Whether it is in our neighborhood school, a college, or a makeshift yard school, those of us in education are in this world to make it better for the children. If we all give in small ways, this cycle never stops; in Africa, in America, everywhere.



A school just outside the capital of Malawi.

