

On My Experience with Time in Tanzania, East Africa

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Mr. Punctual

All my life I've been late. I was late for class, late for church, late for doctors' appointments. At age ten I was in a swim team carpool, and I was so late that my neighbor Mrs. Norton said, "Steve's speed is so slow, it's backwards." As I got older, I always shrugged it off by saying life was too boring when you're on time. Where's the fun in leaving early so you don't have to rush? Why leave the house in a calm stroll with keys in hand and time to spare? I prefer the frenzied search for my keys, running to the car, and running every yellow light in sight.

I always hated how my German father wasn't only on time, but early for everything. If we were going to Aunt Pat's for Christmas Eve, and we were supposed to be there at 5, and it took 30 minutes to get there, we would leave around 2:30pm.

But when I got to Tanzania, East Africa, to spend a year teaching, I had arrived in the land of late. They worked on something called "African time," which is another way to say "really late." I had heard of a lot of different references to a country's "time" in my travels, and it always meant "we're less punctual than you Americans." When I was in Ecuador it was referred to as "Ecu-time." When I was on the Lakota Sioux Indian Reservation, our guide Whirlwind Soldier called it "Indian-time." Even in America I had heard prejudiced whites refer to "black people's time."

But in Tanzania, "African-time" meant *very* late, even later than Ecuadorians and the Sioux. Graduation at the high school where I taught started three hours late. A classic answer to "when will this start?" is "when everyone gets here." The answer to "when will the bus leave?" is "when all the seats are filled."

And even though I was still chronically late (10 minutes or so) in Tanzania, I was early. At the local high school where I worked, they had a running joke about my punctuality. I was the resident "mzungu" (Swahili for "white person"), and I would often hear people joke that "mzungu is always on time!" They were shocked when I taught the entire 70 minute period, or waited outside the door for the previous teacher to finish so I could begin...on time. One day I asked my colleague and friend Laizer to come to the classroom at 1:15 to take a picture of the students and me. I kept stressing that he be there *kilamara*, Swahili for "on time." I told him that for this occasion I was using *mzungu* time, not *mwaafrika* time. Mzungu time is 1:15 as stated, not an hour later. Much to my surprise, at 1:15 I heard a knock on the classroom door. In walked Laizer with a clock in his hand and he said "Mwaafrika is on time!" to the laughter of all the students.

Maybe I wasn't the lazy, spacey, late slacker I thought I was. Maybe I'd just been born in the wrong country.

Time as Nonlinear (or the Experience of No Time)

"The distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion."

- Einstein

"The sense of passing time is not keen among tribal peoples, for example, who do not mark it with calendars or clocks."

- Zerzan

As the months passed, time began to take on a different complexion in East Africa. I would notice it in small moments, maybe leaning in a doorway drinking a soda, or sitting and watching kids play soccer. At those times I had no goal, no agenda, no direction, no plans, no place to be, no place to go, and no time by which I had to leave. It was like I had finally disengaged from the train tracks I had been on all my life. It was some kind of unexpected balm I sorely needed, or an exhalation that was years in the making. It was as if linear time didn't exist.

When I lived in America, time always felt like it just marched on, as if I was plowing through every minute, aware of every marked moment. I was always aware of how long something took, how long it felt, or how long something would potentially last. But that's not quite how it happened for me in Tanzania. Instead, I existed in a timelessness. At one point I pondered the three months remaining before returning home and it seemed both like a really long time, and a really short time, all at the same time. I felt like I had just arrived in Africa, while simultaneously like I'd been there forever. It was always both and neither, one and the other, though not really that or anything at all. Time slipped away without you noticing it, but stayed with you as something permanent. Time was the present, and the present was a timelessness. I finally understood Wittgenstein's quote not only with my head, but also in my bones: "Only a man that lives not in time but in the present is happy."

Is It Today or Tomorrow?

When my volunteer/friend Valerie had a birthday, and I asked her if she had gotten a bunch of birthday e-mails yet, she said no. We figured it was because we were a day ahead of America. It was Tuesday to us but it wasn't quite Tuesday yet in the states. Tanzania was a day ahead.

A day ahead?

With my new sense of African timelessness, that seemed absurd. We were a day ahead of America? Of course not. No one is "ahead" in time. There is no ahead, there's just now. It's now here and it's now there. If Tanzania were a day ahead, I would have checked the football scores, called up Vegas and made a killing.

I felt that linear time, as I had known it, was completely arbitrary. Einstein's comment that time was merely "a persistent illusion" began to make sense. Maybe the whole "time" thing was made up. A human invention and possibly a human oppressor. There is no "earlier" or "later", no "before" or "after." No one has experienced any of those words, because there's just now. We *think* that England is a day ahead of America, but that's impossible. That's just what they say, that's just what we've all agreed upon.

And Where Are You Going to Go?

Soon I concluded that linear time was directly related to linear movement. To go from point A to point B implied that time would pass as you moved forward. But with time falling away, moving from point A to point B began to fall away too. I started to have nowhere to go, and it was just fine.

My first taste of this was with Sampson, who often accompanied me anytime I had to walk down dirt paths in the evenings.

Sampson walked slow. Really slow. When we walked home I often found him about 5 yards behind me. I thought he's actually STOPPED sometimes. But after I slowed down to his pace night after night, I came to realize what his walk was saying to me. It was saying:

"Slow DOWN, you Westerner. What's the rush? Why are you always going from one place to the next? You're on this path. Now. I bet you rush around so much that you've forgotten you're alive. Going from one goal to the next goal to the next goal, never being where you are, never living the moment. What is it exactly that you want to accomplish? Do you have to rush home so that you can rush to the next thing? And then what? You can 'achieve' more? Did it ever make you happy? When you achieve more will you then consume more? Will achievement mean more technology and a faster pace and more paved roads and more industrialization and more traffic? Will it mean more money? For another trip to the mall? For goodness sakes, slow down. You're on a bumpy dirt road, you're in Moshi, and you haven't even looked up at Mt. Kilimanjaro. The tallest free-standing mountain in the world is in your sight and you missed it because you had some place you 'had to be'."

My next experience of going nowhere was when I was talking to my mwafrika friend and colleague Bwana Mwashu. He often told me about African life, and on this particular day he was telling me how he spends his Sundays. For him and many East Africans, it's a day of extended church service, a mass spanning an entire afternoon that includes dancing, singing, prayers, conversation, and worship. He invited me to go with him sometime, but I was a bit daunted by a religion I don't believe in and a church service in a language I don't speak. So I said "But a 3 hour service? That's a long time." He cocked his head and looked at me quizzically, paused, then said, "and where are you going to go?"

His comment struck me. Where *was* I going to go?

Honestly, I had no answer. No answer on my tongue, but a Zen-like epiphany in my head. Where was I going to go? Where did I need to be exactly? Where do I always think I'm going? Where is anybody *ever* going? Do we ever get there? Are we ever glad we got there? What did we sacrifice in trying to *get* somewhere?

What about all my attempts to "be successful" throughout my life? Did it ever bring me true serenity? Did I ever have an extended period of here-and-now contentment? Why try to get "there" when I'm already "here," and "here" is rather nice?

I wondered: if I stop sacrificing where I am by always trying to arrive, I might be delightfully cradled in a somewhere. Finally. A somewhere that might even feel like home.

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