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Try Leaving Your Comfort Zone — You Might Learn Something About Yourself

By Bruce Janz

UCF Forum columnist

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I'm in Cape Town, South Africa, as I write this. I've been heading to South Africa about once a year or so for a while now, and before that I spent a fair bit of time in east Africa – Kenya, mostly, but also Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania. In September, I was in Nigeria for the first time.

Why do I go to African countries so regularly? I could say that it is related to my academic research, and that would be true, but it wouldn't capture the whole story. Some might think that it's just a holiday in disguise. That's not it either – I don't usually have the time to do much sightseeing, although I have done some. I'm not looking for my heritage – I'm a white Canadian/American, and as far as I know I don't have any recent heritage in Africa. If we go far enough back, of course, we all come from there, but according to a recent DNA test I'm pretty solidly northern European.

I'm also not going to fulfill some moral mandate. I'm not trying to help anyone, at least no more than someone from South Africa might come here to help us. I don't have the answers to their problems, and even more importantly, I have no interest in defining what those problems are. That's their business. There is, in fact, nothing noble about me going to South Africa, much less exotic. I have no higher purpose, or more accurately, I have no higher purpose in going than I would in staying in Orlando.

So why go, then? The short answer: to be pushed outside of my comfort zone. The world, my world, is pretty much constructed for my benefit and convenience, as a white straight male. You know it's true – most people in power look like me and talk like me. If I didn't actually make the effort, I could make my way through life dealing with the myriad tasks and challenges I have, but without ever really having to think about myself in the midst of that.

There are those who live outside of their comfort zone pretty much all the time. There are women who are abused, and who can't yet find a way out of their situation. Some never do. There are African Americans who live in fear every time they walk out their doors, and every time they look at the news. There are transsexuals who worry about who's around the corner, who's watching which bathroom they enter, and what it all might mean for their safety. There are those who are in all sorts of threatening situations on a daily basis, at home, at work, just walking around. These people do not

need to learn to live outside of their comfort zone – they already know it intimately. That doesn't mean that those in precarious places can't benefit from being outside familiar places as well.

But those of us who aren't regularly subject to the systematic and structural forces that make the world a precarious place, we need to take the risk of finding a space where we don't already know everything that will happen, where we can't predict every action of everyone around us, where we have to think about the effects of our actions on the world around, because they might just be misunderstood.

We carefully construct safe and predictable places for ourselves, as much as we can. Sometimes what seems safe turns out not to be – people are abused at home, gay and allied youth are murdered in a club – but we at least strive to make our places safe, by making them predictable. There's nothing wrong with that, but there's also value in unpredictability.

My answer is to travel. That's not everyone's answer – but what's yours? Do you have a way of thinking about your own place at arm's length, rather than from the inside? Where would you go to step out of your world, and experience another place for a moment? And, what do you think you might learn from that experience?

That's why I go to various places in Africa. There are good people there, who have entirely different hopes, fears and histories from mine. When I learn about them, I also learn about myself – and in the process, learn what it means to empathize with someone who isn't in my world.

What I bring back to the classroom, to my research, and to my relationships is incalculable. Learning to empathize and understand is like using a muscle – if you don't exercise, you'll lose it. So, find a new place – you might learn something about your own familiar place in the process.

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