*Names have been changed for privacy

# The Ethics of Intrusion

As a teenager, all I wanted to do was travel. I loved the adventure, the chaos and the uncertainty of new places. I had no personal money, so I was always looking for creative ways to get where I wanted to go. In tenth grade I realized that community service trips would take me to the exotic places my parents would never permit me to visit without supervision. By eleventh grade I was deeply involved with two non-profit organizations, repairing battered schools in Guatemala and digging latrines by hand in a desert community in Peru. I climbed to the top of a sand dune mountain and from my perch saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time. I traveled with other similarly optimistic teenagers who, by the end of each week of playing with local kids and learning to lay brick and mortar, would triumphantly declare that one person really can change the world.

The adventure and the raw experience infiltrated my soul like nothing in my hometown in Connecticut could. The once inaccessible human connections made me whole, built me up from a thousand separate pieces into a cohesive human being. My grandparents would praise me at holidays for being so “precocious,” and I would describe how I had observed the Catholic traditions in Mexico, and how I thought these traditions might be holding the country back from developing, as if every place should be observed through a first-world lens. I would then listen to my parents tell me how proud they were that I was a young woman who really knew where she was going.

My relationship with one of the non-profits has grown significantly over the past three years of college. I've spent my summers interning on a Lakota reservation in South Dakota. For several months, I join other staff members to run a summer camp, build highly insulated,

sustainable houses and host community events aimed at creating a sense of cohesion in a cluster of HUD homes that appears to have been randomly dropped onto the prairie. It has dawned on me recently that my life is becoming more and more about humanitarian work, something that I never aspired to as a fourteen-year-old staring at a wall map. My teenage wanderlust still lingers, but mostly in my memory. It has been slowly corroded by the realization that each of these adventures has ethical implications far beyond what I imagined.

The non-profit I work for believes that shelter, food and education are basic human rights: without these, it is virtually impossible to find a job, protect your family or focus on your children's education. As an organization, we describe this worldview to every volunteer and every potential donor as an unquestionable truth. We show pictures of Lakota children at our summer camp digging into the infertile prairie soil to plant tomato seeds. We post videos online of each milestone in building the first new house. As time goes on, I can't help but wonder about the ethical implications of the intrusion of my personal identity into this poorer world. In reality, at each of these project sites I have been a complete and utter outsider. Does the association of my racial identity and background with the resources and power of the non-profit I work for cast a shadow over the identity of those who receive the aid? I worry that the intrusion of my identity may in fact tarnish the work that I attempt to accomplish.

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We sleep in a makeshift shelter where the torrential storms seep through the particleboard walls, and the tin roof periodically rips off in the middle of the night from high winds. I curl up in my sleeping bag and cover my face with my rain jacket, exhilarated and annoyed by the drops pestering my skin and terrified by the very real possibility of a tornado. I feel accomplished for going weeks without internet or cell phone service, but then starkly alone for lack of contact with my family. I get a huge amount of love from children who have little to do in the isolated prairie

except come to our colorful summer camp. Then my chest splits open when one of those campers threatens to kill herself when I say she can’t ride in the front seat of the truck after camp. I feel confused and insecure when a community member joins us for dinner to tell us to leave or he’ll get his shotgun, but then the next day an elder ceremoniously honors the head of the organization with a Lakota name. Some days I think there really is a place for us in this community, and others I could not feel more detached from it. I have had moments of personal triumph when I see projects completed, and many more of hopelessness.

As with many non-profits, working on the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Reservation has become a serious financial and emotional commitment. I have saved up money and applied for grants to cover my expenses, slept for months on the ground or on a cot, and formed relationships that I knew would haunt my departure for home each year. I look at our plans, the hopes of the community, the resources available to us and the short time that we have each year, and then I cannot even answer for myself if I believe that the work we are doing is achieving what we imagine it can. More consequentially, I cannot quell the fear that my presence might hurt the very people I wish to help.

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Consider, for example, a young girl living in the desert in Peru. By World Health Organization standards she is living in poverty, but she is likely unaware that realities exist other than her own. Every day she helps her mother wash clothes and maintain their humble dwelling, and each night her family sits together in remarkably close quarters and goes to sleep when the sun sets. Out of nowhere comes a group of white, American teenagers, of which I was one, and they help to build latrines and they form relationships with her that are soon to be a memory. Money appears seemingly out of thin air to make these projects happen; money that this girl never knew existed at such a scale. The volunteers spend a week building these structures and

then leave in their wake a flurry of questions that rocks the foundation of this child's upbringing. Not having the maturity or life experience to understand that having money does not make you a superior human being, the girl begins to assume that the only reason that her parents and community members couldn't build these latrines themselves is that they must be inferior. The concept of money and what it can do is foreign to her, and doesn't logically explain to her why suddenly there are aluminum latrines scattered like shiny pennies across the desert. So instead she associates these latrines with the identity of those who built them, because that is what is right before her eyes.

I have been hesitant to stop and question the ethics of this kind of intrusion because, for years, I have been seduced by the positive impacts. When a struggling family has a new roof over their heads, it seems petty to harp on the negative implications. Yet it is such a critical question, because non-profits do substantial, highly informed work all over the world. There are many ways that non-profits work to empower people without significant intrusion: micro-lending is an excellent example of this.

Over time I have concluded that projects must be looked at on a case-by-case basis. The reality for me, though, is that at each of these projects that *I* have been involved in, *I* am an outsider. I am a white girl from Connecticut who spends months every summer living on a Lakota reservation with the optimistic goal of trying to solve problems that were created by my ancestors. The NGO brought me there. I was not selected by the community to run their children's summer camp or declare their HUD homes unfit to live in. By most people's standards they *are* unfit to live in, but how am I even remotely qualified to comment on the way another person lives?

Thinking again about the young girl in Peru, from my observation, her privilege was in the strength of her family and her community. Most in the Western world would use different

words to describe the way that she lived, and would agree that it is a “good” thing, on an ethical level, that a group went in to help improve the sanitation infrastructure. There is no question that it was well-intentioned work that improved the physical quality of life for that community. I wonder, though, about the trade-offs. This child now associates Americans with capability, strength and improved living conditions, and is newly aware that some races are actually faring better than others in this world. She would learn this later in life, but, as a child, can she possibly have the emotional maturity to understand that this is just the way that history went, and not a true superiority? Will she really stop and consider that privilege comes in many different forms? The introduction of money and outsiders into the equation may have devalued the privilege that she already experienced, and elevated a Western mantra that physical and economic growth is the most important objective. There was likely a way to empower her and give her the confidence and pride in her own people that would one day help lift her community out of poverty, but I wasn’t promoting that possibility through the model that I participated in.

The project was based on the ethic that the developed world needs to address the quality of physical life of third-world communities. Furthermore, the countries that promote this ethic certainly perpetuate the idea that everyone should be able to buy whatever they want when they want it at the lowest price. Does this standard consider mental quality of life? Emotional quality of life? Who is to decide whether a high living standard is more or less important than confidence in your identity and your place in this world? The two are not mutually exclusive, but they can be when one group imposes its standards on another.

I often tell myself that, as an American, I have an ethical responsibility to help fight for Native Americans living in this country; my connection to the residents of La Plant, South Dakota is certainly stronger than to a small child in Peru. The diminishment of Native American identity from continued mistreatment and marginalization is a poverty of the spirit. It is not a

poverty I would ever wish to contribute to. The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Reservation is located in one of the poorest counties in the United States, and the unemployment rate in La Plant, the town I have been working in, hovers at a staggering ninety-nine percent. The implications of this are far more than economic: boredom and isolation are palpable in La Plant, which is located 35 miles from the nearest grocery store or gas station. The suicide rate is seven times the national average, with a remarkable number occurring by children.

More striking, however, is the vibrancy that persists in these conditions—that Jack*, one of the most active summer camp participants, would spend each day of his precious summer break helping us to build a house. After working all morning he was often the first to rally the kids for an afternoon baseball game. I watched admiringly as children who often ignored my instructions at camp would gather behind the community center with bats and mitts and strike balls across the plains that felt so vacant before. Driving the kids home after the games each evening is meditative. I mull over the passing comments I overhear from children who have a remarkable awareness of their situation and that of their community members. I count the number of times I heard a self-deprecating remark that day from a child who shouldn't even know what it means to consider self-worth. This awareness lingers, and I wake up each morning and lie in my cot desperately strategizing about how to convince more children to come to summer camp instead of sitting in their over-crowded, disintegrating homes.

The non-profit I work for has a remarkable mission and labors tirelessly in La Plant. Yet I can never aspire to be more than a visitor there. Because we don't have the resources or the infrastructure to be on the reservation year round, there is a flurry of activity, money and optimism during the summer, and in its wake a void that carries through the winter. There are occasional visits, a Christmas party and frequent phone calls, but the nature of the work means that staff members have to fundraise back on the East Coast for a significant portion of the year

just to make the summer happen. Volunteers who make the trek out to the projects also spend time fundraising, a duty that seems a privilege to those on the reservation for whom such travel would be a financial burden.

Would they be wrong? When someone asks me what my father does for work, or I accidentally mention that I have been to Europe, a kid says, “Wow, you must be really rich” and physically takes a step away. And then there I stand, the blonde, white girl who came to the reservation with the non-profit that caused the new houses to appear and who may also be personally well off. And there are the children, who subconsciously piece together my race and my identity with the fact that they think I’m rich, and I feel like I have done a disservice to their sense of identity and self-worth simply by showing up. I leave for the summer because I am going back to a school whose mission is to prepare me for a successful career, and the kids stay right where they are, hoping that their teacher shows up for class on Monday morning. Most of them would say that they really like the summer camp and the new houses, but do they feel these are positive changes that they personally contributed to? In truth, someone else—a white, more privileged outsider—delivered these changes. In a place where self-worth is already so precarious, protecting the confidence of children in their identity seems to me one of the most empowering tools.

To introduce the concept of privilege to an isolated girl in Peru is to remind her of privilege she never dreamed of. To pay the same visit to a resident of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Reservation is to remind him of privilege lost long ago. The intrusion of outsiders who bring resources and solutions to “reservation problems” is a constant reminder of who really has the money and the power in this country. I strongly believe that Americans should recognize and find ways to address this persistent issue, but I cannot help but question the ethics of *my* intrusion, of *my* identity. Do children in La Plant question the value of their heritage more when it is

always white, European Americans who show up with the money to "solve" their problems? Is it ethical to jeopardize the long-term psyche of the new generation in La Plant, or are the friendships that we form enough to help us all understand that we are all simply human?

Jack killed himself in November of 2012. He hung himself in his home only seconds after he and his father had been working on a project together outside their house. Ben*, his father, said he had been bullied that day at school. It was close to the one-year anniversary of the suicide of his best friend. I was asleep early in the morning in my bed in Copenhagen, where I was studying abroad at the time, when my boss called me. When I heard his voice and looked at the clock, I knew exactly what he was going to tell me without knowing which child had been lost.

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In some ways, I believe that after spending enough time in any given community you can become a part of it. Whether or not you are accepted, are liked or are wanted there, you are a person who is present, though it may not be the type of presence that you imagined for yourself. There are several residents in the town of La Plant whom I feel very close to, and I think that over time our racial and socioeconomic identities are less present in our interactions. Realistically, I probably would not have formed the relationships that I have without the non-profit as a vehicle. To try and put a value on these friendships would be impossible—I only learned how to be human when I saw the consequences of raw, uninhibited human emotion in Jack, and when I failed to find words the first time I saw Ben after Jack's death. Those experiences are invaluable to me, but is that selfish?

With money and power comes tremendous responsibility: this is something I've heard over and over, whether at home or in the history books of my childhood classrooms. But it is not just about how money is spent or how power is used. I believe one has to stop and consider who is spending it and where they come from—what their perceived identity is, regardless of who

they are on a more substantial level. In a perfect world, people would be able to separate the race of others at first contact from their attributes as a person—their values, their worldview, their unique experiences. Yet we all subconsciously make associations between race, social and economic power, and identity because of a complex web of learned history and personal observations.

I believe that there are many humanitarian needs that *should* be addressed through human-to-human contact. Taking responsibility for your own community, for example, can build trust and bridge the gap between socioeconomic and racial strata. It is the ethical responsibility, however, of those coming from the outside to always consider the implications of their identity through their association with power and money—and ultimately what it might mean for them to walk away.

Outsiders with resources can do a lot of good by finding people on the inside to lead the charge—people who can strengthen the identity of those they work with rather than throw it in to question. For myself, I must always consider where my standard of ethics is coming from, particularly as an American. I was raised in a country that believes that it has a responsibility to share its values with the world, which many consider an intrusion. There are times when intrusion of ideology or values can do a lot of good, but this is not the *only* ethical standard. It is my personal responsibility to find a time and place for the values that I find important—to understand when my intrusion is harmful, and subsequently when it has real value.