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CHAPTER 1

The Power of Moments

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As part of a leadership seminar, I recently read the book *The Power of Moments* by Chip and Dan Heath. In this book the Heaths state that “we all have defining moments in our lives—meaningful experiences that stand out in our memory” (p. 4). Such moments ultimately shape who we are, what we perceive ourselves to be, and how we view the world. Not all moments are defining moments. There are lots of things that happen in our daily lives that are meaningful but not necessarily as impactful.

Another distinction the Heaths make is that defining moments can bring feelings of extreme pleasure or joy. They “rewire our understanding of ourselves or the world” (p. 13). Defining moments happen when we achieve something, we never imagined ourselves doing. And during a defining moment, we feel a connectedness to others. For the Heaths, connectedness is social in nature. The defining moment is shared with those who are in the moment with us. I would further argue that this connectedness could also be transcendent and exemplified through a spiritual connectedness in

that moment to the “other,” whatever the “other” is for the individual.

In the summer of 2019, I was fortunate to spend three weeks traveling through parts of Ghana and Togo as a member of the Global Education Seminar Cohort. I left West Africa with a reinvigorated research agenda and potential academic partners. I could see various pathways of discovery about justice and the human condition. Now, as I reflect on the GES trip to West Africa and its impact, I think of this travel in terms of defining moments—moments that affected me then, affect me now, and likely will continue to have an impact well into the future. I would like to share a few of those with the readers of this volume.

Elevation

Moments of elevation include those times when we as faculty must “stand and deliver” and respond to questions from the audience that challenge us. We feel great when these responses go well and we have successfully conveyed our thoughts. It’s even better if we can generate agreement in the room. Many faculty likely think of these moments in terms of our classes, community presentations, conference presentations, and job talks. As part of this GES cohort, my goal was to find potential research and community partners for criminal justice collaborations via meeting with faculty at the University of Ghana, University of Cape Coast, the University of Professional Studies, and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. I knew that reaching this goal would not be a simple task. Why? Because the faculty who study criminal justice topics and the people who work with at-risk populations around the world are often skeptical and hesitant to work with newcomers, much less with someone from another country. To make matters more complicated, I often did not know who would be available to meet. I couldn’t even be sure that we would speak the same criminal justice language—or even if English would be understood in Togo. Still, I went into meetings with a strong agenda, a spiel, and justifications for why they should want to work with me.



I would like to tell you that I gave a great talks during those meetings, but to be honest, in every meeting with department heads or faculty, I broke the script. To break the script is to defy people’s expectations of how an experience will unfold (Heath, 2017, p. 87). I likely asked more questions than I had answered. I never made it through the full prepared spiel. I lost my way in a desire to find out more about their academic efforts and their concern for human dignity and rights.

But what I can tell you for certain is that I left those meetings with a feeling of accomplishment. This sense of accomplishment didn’t have anything to do with my initial agenda; it had everything to do with academic kinship and a thirst to understand the work of colleagues abroad. I enjoyed those conversations so much that I would love it if they asked me to partner on their projects rather than on my own.

Insight

Cultural Sensitivity

I left Ghana and Togo with a greater appreciation of the art, culture, food, and history. In Togo, for instance, I had a wonderful conversation with artist Souleimane Barry about his life and his contemporary art. As he had recently held an art showing in Arizona, we discussed his experiences in America and my experience in West

Africa. He conveyed in this incredibly creative way the beauty of Africa as well as its failings, both in his paintings and in our conversations. On one occasion we had a very lively conversation about his experiences traveling across the U.S. as an African male. He wanted to know my thoughts about what is and is not appropriate to do. He wondered what was acceptable to say and what was not. In his experiences, he discovered that certain words could freely be said by anyone, whereas other words were conditioned upon race. In our exchange he was interested in learning about my experience traveling in Ghana and Togo. As we talked, I realized that, just as he had preconceived notions that had been debunked by his travel abroad, I too had arrived in West Africa with perceptions about life that needed adjusting.

I found out later that Souleimane Barry is a very accomplished international musician. Wanting to share his breadth of talent, I have noted a few links to his videos on YouTube. He also has an upcoming art show scheduled at a gallery in Tuscon in 2020.

‘Tripping over the truth’

I confess here that travel to Ghana and Togo changed me in ways that I never had imagined at the outset of this journey. I was forced to think about what it meant to be educated, African American, female—and the descendant of slaves. The foundations of the transatlantic slave trade were made real to me in a way that I still cannot put into words at the time of this writing. There were moments when I was so moved by a cultural excursion that it was painful, so painful that all I could do was just breathe. Only as I perused the works by W.E. B. Du Bois did I begin to think through not only how far we have come, but also how far we as a society have to go in order to achieve racial justice. To have seen persons of color in positions of leadership throughout all aspects of academic administration, government, and industry in western Africa was wonderful; at the same time, it was a poignant reminder of the lack of persons of color in leadership positions in the U.S.

I involuntarily “tripped over the truth” while in Ghana. I thought that I understood slavery and its impact. I thought that I was well

versed in what needed to be done. The undeniable truth for me is that I did not and could not fully appreciate and understand the problem and impact of the transatlantic trade on America and West Africa—

Until I walked through rooms where slaves bled and died.

Until I stood where there was no light and air.

Until I looked at the place where African women were taken up through the floor to be raped.

Until I stepped through the Door of No Return.

Until I explored the shelves of W.E.B. DuBois.

Until I was surrounded by faces of success that resembled my own.

Pride

Some events become defining moments because we accomplish something we never imagined ourselves doing. On June 4, 2019, I had one of those moments. For months before, I had prepared myself to sit this scheduled activity out. I would not participate. I would go with the group, but not fully put myself at risk. It seemed clear that this activity was not the one for me. What was this thing that I would not do? The Kakum National Park Rope Bridge. I researched it. I found it listed on Google as “the world’s scariest bridge,” as the “most terrifying bridge in the world,” as one of the “10 scary bridges you’ll have to see to believe” or “20 of the world’s scariest bridges that we bet you would never cross.”

I confess that I was afraid just looking at the pictures. I do not like heights. Bridges make me nervous. I could not even enjoy a walk with my family around the rim at the Grand Canyon when I was much younger. I took a seat right there on the ground and told them that I would be right there sitting on the ground when they returned from the summit.

So, on day 17 of the GES trip, I woke knowing that I would hike through the park with my colleagues but would not tackle the bridge. I remember thinking the entire ride over to the site that a person had to be crazy to want to walk that bridge. Again, I had every intention of staying the course and sitting this one out.



Even now, I cannot really say which thing made me change my mind. Was it the fact that Dr. Amin said last year’s entire group had done it, resulting in a rise in my competitive spirit? Was it the fact that our guide, a much older woman, urged us all to give it try? What I do know is that somewhere during the long, hot and humid, uphill climb, I had an epiphany. West Africa had changed me. I felt connected to the people, their history, and to the land. This bridge was just one more historical challenge that could be overcome. Though I never looked down, up, or around during the walk, and though I remember continuously yelling “Go, go, go...” to everyone in front of me—I felt empowered.

Connections: Moments in Time

Experience has taught me that international travel is rife with the unexpected. Even the best laid plans can go awry. The travel to Ghana and Togo was not different in this regard. Whether it was the torrential rain and flood on our first stop during Dr. Nenonene’s presentation, or our inability to get up the hill on our way to Asheshi by way of van, or the illnesses experienced by members of the team,



or the rough roads that reduced our travel time, or the fact that time simply got away from us during meetings, we had to adapt and recover.

In Togo, for example, we experienced a language barrier; yet somehow, we found a way to connect with the Marianist Brothers, Marianist Sisters, and the children who attended the schools. I was humbled by their openness and acceptance of our interruption to their daily routine. Though I did not speak the language, I felt a sense of home as we shared a repast and conversation flowed. We could not and did not prepare for every eventuality. We shouldered on; we laughed at our missteps. We became more accepting of each other and the culture of those around us. I like to think we took a little part of West Africa back home with us.

As for my fellow GES travelers, I don't think that I will ever see them in the same light. Their generosity of spirit and their interest in connecting with the people of West of Africa—and with each other—was unparalleled. During the academic year, our time together had been more about our individual academic pursuits and learning about the history and culture. But from the moment we all

met at the Dayton airport; the trip became more than just the sum of its individual parts. The cultural immersion experience brought us closer together as UD faculty members and as a team. When meetings did not go as planned, there was always someone on the team to commiserate with or to lighten the moment. Whether doing yoga in the mornings, taking walks along the beach, going to the markets and haggling together, trying new and unknown foods, or ending long days together by gathering for a nightcap and discussion of our day, we found ways to connect outside of our academic pursuits. It empowered us to do things that we never would have imagined doing. For example, even though most of us were afraid of heights, every member of the group, including myself, conquered the Kakum Canopy Bridge Walk. We have returned to the US not just as better-informed academics about our internationalization agendas, but also as better and more supportive UD community members.

Conclusion

The Heaths' book that I used to structure this reflection essay was written for business professionals about the importance of creating moments for employees and customers. In reading this book, I realized that the University of Dayton had been in the business for years of creating global defining moments for faculty through the Global Education Seminars. Moments characterized by shocking and perhaps painful personal insight. Moments that built shared meanings across global lines. Moments that deepened faculty ties to the university and at the same time connected cohorts with others around the world. At the end of it all, I was left with one thought. How might the university and our community be different if we all had memorable global defining moments?

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