

Emma, age 30, worked for 3 weeks in the rural Ndebele community of Mapoch in Gauteng, South Africa.



I want to talk about just one, unexceptional, day I spent in South Africa.

It started off normally except we were out of orange squash. No big deal, I took water. As I was walking to work, Elizabeth caught up with me, slightly out of breath, and handed me a small flask, explaining: "It's your orange juice for your lunch. I'm so sorry it's late. I noticed last night that we had run out of orange juice in the lodge so I planned to get some from my house and give it to you this morning, but you are quicker than usual. You see, I know that you are here alone and that must be difficult – we need family and friends. It's my job to look after you and to be your family, so I wanted to give you juice from my home just for today."

This was the start – someone would consider me friend in this town where I had only been for 2 weeks.

The walk to work was also normal. Children waving excitedly at the crazy white girl, some calling my name; women bowing slightly as they passed; skinny cows, grazing where there was anything at all to graze at. I loved this walk every day - always feeling warm and welcome, occasionally even overwhelmed by a sense of comfort, of belonging, of this place slowly becoming my place.

There wasn't much going on in the shop where my work was based, just some guys hanging out and playing pool. Peter, my project "mentor" and local Pastor, vegetable seller, carer, Bike Shop owner, tour guide, friend to all, was on Pastor duty and would be delivering a service in the church later.

'Sticky Fingers' came in while the boys were playing pool. Sticky Fingers was three and lived in the shop next to the bike shop. All she seemed to eat was sweets, crisps, biscuits and lollypops. She constantly had sticky food and consequently her fingers were sticky. She would hold hands with me often, and so I had sticky fingers too. I worried about her. Her parents paid very little attention to her – keeping her quiet with whatever food she asked for and allowing her to wander alone a lot of the time, among the boys, the tools, the bikes, the heavy equipment. When she was around, I kept my eye on her.

Suddenly, one of the boys mis-hit the cue ball and it jumped off the table with force and speed. It went directly for Sticky Finger's head, missing by millimetres. I don't think she noticed, and the guys just got on with their game, but the shock I got was huge and moved me to tears. I gathered her up and took her outside to play, as much to calm myself as to protect her.

Not long after, Peter came to get me as I was going to attend his service. We had spent hours talking together – about South Africa, apartheid, life, and more – through Peter I started falling in love with this country and her people.

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Peter and I come from different worlds and have different perspectives. But I could understand why he had needed a God and why he now had a faithful loyalty to this God – God had served him well. He believed that in spending my time, money and energy to work in Mapoch, I was proving that I had a God too. The way he put it was that I was like a gift from God, and therefore it didn't matter if I was a Christian, because he knew God was with me, even if I didn't.

We were both happy, I think, with this conclusion, which is why I wanted to attend and be a part of Peter's service – for my cultural learning and experience, as well as my understanding. I also wanted to pay this respect to Peter who had done so much for me.

The first job was to get me dressed appropriately – I needed to wear a skirt, cover my shoulders and hair and minimise the skin on show. Not that I was dressed revealingly, but I had no skirt and it was 30 degrees! Once dressed in a LARGE skirt, hair shawl and scarf, and equipped with bible and beads, I was escorted to church where the 2 hour service had already begun. My preparation had involved 5 elderly women who spoke no English, treated me gently and kindly, giggled a lot, and made me feel welcome and comfortable.

About 50 people came to the service, men on one side and women on the other. Peter introduced me to the congregation, to my pride and embarrassment, saying: *“Emma, the white lady, is a wonderful person who has given her time and her money to be here with us – Praise Be the Lord”* (chorus of praise from the congregation). *“Emma has come a long long way from the country of Ireland. Ireland is a cold place, which is why her skin is the pale white colour. Emma cares and wants to know and be with us and help us all. Thank you Oh Lord for sending us Emma”*. (chorus)

There was singing, chanting, praying, standing, sitting, kneeling, bowing, clapping, joy and pain. It really was emotional, and something quite unique to be a part of.

After the service, and back in my own clothes, I went back to work. But as I approached the shop there was quite a crowd inside around Nathi – one of the guys I'd worked with – who was looking stunned and dazed. His face was covered in blood, and there was an old toothless man standing over him, praying and chanting, congratulating himself for saving Nathi and scolding Nathi for inviting the devil into his life.

I wanted to go to Nathi and make sure he was ok, but I had been warned that I should go nowhere near blood if I saw it – the HIV rates in this community were unknown but suspected to be as high as 40%. I wanted to scream at everyone to get out because the crowding was not helping, and I wanted to grab the old man by the scruff of the neck and kick him out the door.

But instead I tried to stay calm and get to the bottom of it. I knew that Nathi had epilepsy. In fact, his epilepsy was the main reason he was here. He had just suffered from an epileptic seizure, which had only stopped seconds before I arrived, and the blood was because of him biting his tongue during the seizure.

Nobody around Nathi (people he spent every day with) seemed to know what to do – no one had done anything to cushion the seizure. They were very uncomfortable with what they had seen – the crowd had gathered for the freak-show that was the seizure, but now it was over, they just saw Nathi as cursed. The old guy believed that he had prayed the seizure away and that somehow Nathi must have invited it through dodgy dealings with the devil. Worst of all, Nathi seemed to believe these things too.

Once we made sure Nathi was ok, and the blood was cleaned up, Nathi went home and life got back to normal. When Peter came back I told him what had happened and sympathy swept across his face. He talked to me about the situation. Clearly, the medical care Nathi was receiving was not good enough – he had medication which he shared with others with epilepsy and it was years since he'd discussed his epilepsy with a doctor. Two other people in the area had epilepsy and all of them were in the same boat.

Nathi's seizures were frequent and extreme. Neither Peter nor Nathi knew what a seizure was, how to recognise the onset or avoid inducing them. The condition was considered embarrassing and shameful.

Peter also told me that his brother had epilepsy and many years ago a doctor had informed them that epilepsy was genetic and hereditary and that Peter could expect to develop it at some point as well. Since then, Peter had been waiting for the day when he would have his first seizure. This was one of the moments when Peter and I ended up having a long conversation about South Africa and the legacy of apartheid – the quality (or lack of it) of healthcare, education, social support and services for a large black community. Things were better now, 14 years after Mandela was elected as president, but they still weren't right, and they certainly still hadn't corrected all the inequalities apartheid had left behind.

I was angry and frustrated. As I walked back to the lodge that afternoon I decided I had to do something. So, I rang my Dad and I asked him to research everything he could about epilepsy. He rang me back 10 minutes later with the Irish Epilepsy Association FAQ website open and dictated the contents to me. Telling him the whole story, I ended up in tears, my emotions from the whole day, starting with the flying cue ball, overwhelmed me in the warmth, comfort and relative normality of the conversation with my father.

After the call, I wrote up an information leaflet about epilepsy. I took them back up to the shop and took Peter through the content carefully. I had felt that Nathi was mortified that I had seen what had happened, so I needed Peter to be the one to help him with this, as it would be shameful for Nathi to get it from me. But I also saw the relief in Peter as I told him there was nothing hereditary about epilepsy, and surprise as I explained that a seizure was a nervous and not muscular activity and didn't damage the sufferer (usually). I also explained that with monitoring and medication, properly administered, epilepsy could be completely controlled. I told him how to ensure someone's well being during a seizure, and also what might cause a seizure to be brought on.

I watched from a distance later as Peter took Nathi through these same pieces of information and could see that much of it was new information for Nathi, who had had a second seizure later in the day and was visibly dopey, embarrassed and ashamed because of it.

In those moments I felt so many things. I was so angry that a young life was so unnecessarily affected by something that could be assisted and avoided – and not just his but Peter's, Peter's brother's, even the people around Nathi who suffered with him or who were slightly afraid of him, who assumed that somehow he had been cursed with these devil attacks.

But I also felt like I was doing something which might make a difference. That was special, a rare and unique feeling.

The rest of the evening passed normally enough. I was extra watchful and grateful to the people who prepared my meal. I got extra special enjoyment from playing with the kids and helping them with their homework, and I gave them bigger hugs and kisses as they went home to bed.

I chose this particular day to write about not because it was easier, more difficult, more fun, more successful than any other day – because it wasn't, I could have spoken about the day I arrived or the day I left, the day I helped the band train, my birthday, the day we cycled 50km, the race meeting, the dance performances, the beading ... I picked this day because it's the one which I can tangibly demonstrate the thing which had the biggest impact on me when I was working in South Africa – my emotions. On this day, I felt warmth, comfort, happiness, love, contentment, anger, frustration, fear, sadness, embarrassment, pride ... and I felt them all at the same time, and that made me feel alive.

That's why everyone should put themselves out there and give up some of their time in this way, step out of the normality and simplicity of every day and challenge themselves. It's why I'm going back and it's why 3 weeks in South Africa changed my life.