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## My Lesson

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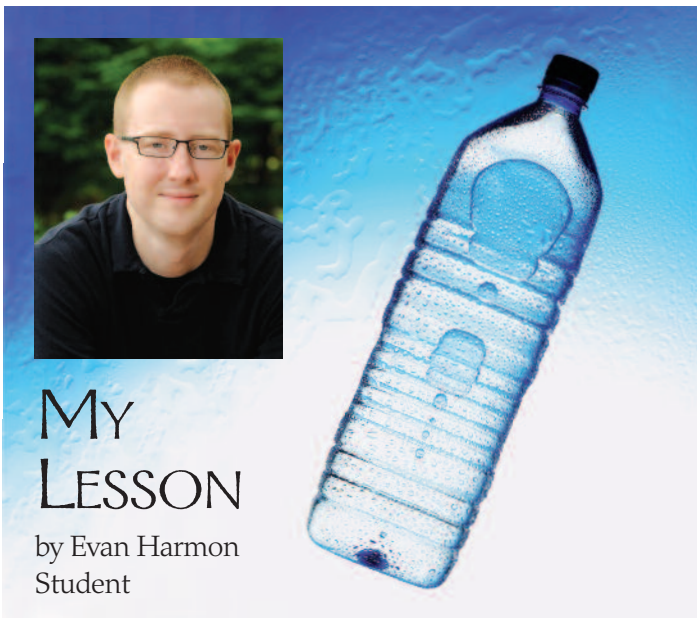
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## MY LESSON

by Evan Harmon  
Student

The decades-old van hurtles down a treacherous, dirt road, lurching violently at each bump, rut, and pothole. With each lurch I am amazed the van does not fall to pieces. I clench the sides of my seat in a sorry attempt to comfort myself. There are no seat-belts, and if there were such a thing as a speed limit, the driver would surely be breaking it. The powdery dust from the dry African savanna pours in the open windows and adds yet another layer to my already caked clothes. The radio blares, alternating between cheesy, sentimental 80's American pop music and even cheesier African pop music. I am in Ghana, West Africa, visiting my brother who is in the Peace Corps. And Ghana is soon to teach me something I will never forget.

We stop at a gas station – a few Ghanaian men sitting around a rusty, dented oil barrel with a hose sticking out. A few mud huts pepper a barren, flat landscape. It's too dry here for grass to grow, just a desert of dirt. As one of the men sucks in a mouthful of gasoline to begin the syphon, a small, barely-clothed boy slowly approaches the van. I search my pockets to see if I have any money to give him; what amounts to U.S. pennies can go a long way in Ghana. But this young boy does not want any money. He has something else on his mind. The boy meekly points to what I am holding in my hand – a plastic water bottle, barely half-full. In the rare presence of someone so immeasurably, unimaginably wealthy, his desire is simply to have a drink of water. I realize, this must be what true poverty is. This must be true misery.

Yet, through all this misery, I never met a single, miserable Ghanaian. In fact, they are among the friendliest and happiest people I have ever met. If you ever meet a Ghanaian, you are likely to be treated to the biggest, brightest smile you have ever seen. Even that young boy at the gas station seemed to exude a resilient joyfulness. He didn't let a silly

little thing like the lack of water get him down. Most everything in Ghana – its people, customs, attitudes, music – seems to exist as a kind of collective defiance of often dire circumstances. Ghana is a living testament that happiness is indeed a choice, and that success is possible in the most unlikely of scenarios.

Throughout my stay, I witnessed tragedies, saw them transcended, and experienced the character required to bridge the two. My life has its fair share of challenges, but having seen the possible depths of tragedy and despair, feeling sorry for myself is no longer possible. Third World problems expose First World problems for the luxuries they truly are. But whatever world I find myself in, hopelessness no longer makes sense.

Although it might seem paradoxical, it is no accident that a foreign culture taught me such an invaluable lesson about how to live in my own culture. It is the reason diversity matters. As a thoroughly non-diverse individual – white, straight, middle-class – it is an admitted luxury that I am rarely affected by exclusion or inequity. But for me to ignore the diversity of people, cultures, and viewpoints, that is a choice made at my own peril. That is a self-inflicted exclusion from the richness that diversity so readily offers. And I suffer my own inequity as one who is not just uniform in my demographic traits, but uniform in thought, values, and what I am able to accomplish in life.

No school, class, or book taught me this, nor could any. I knew about the extreme poverty in Africa, but I did not truly understand this until I was next to that child that was in need of something so basic. And I knew something about challenges and how to overcome them. But I was not a resilient person until I saw firsthand a culture that routinely overcomes challenges greater than I have ever faced. No one set out to teach me this, and I did not even know I needed a lesson. But just looking around once in awhile can teach you some pretty useful things.

