

When your work speaks for you: An anecdote of a weekend well spent

By Onen David Ongwech

After a traumatic experience with two dentists who had conflicting recommendations for a procedure I'm supposed to undergo – for which I'm yet to seek a third opinion, I decided to reflect on the week in style. It was a Saturday evening after a small get together with colleagues in the Gender & Sexuality Programme discussing a best practice model [*Screen, Refer, Support, Document*], when on my way home, I decided to avoid a rather unusual Saturday traffic jam by doing something more productive rather than just sit in the long stream of endless bumper-to-bumper drive. "What a relief!" I said to myself as I ordered for African tea double spiced with fresh ginger and honey in one of the restaurants along Hoima road.

It was one of those moments when I reflect on how my week was, ponder through what worked, things I could have done differently, areas to focus on in the coming weeks, and generally how to manage the constant bustle of life – a selfcare exercise I do quite often to mull through my professional and personal developments.

Sitting quietly and diagonal to the main entrance as I sipped my medicinal tea, and with a clear view of the entire garden, I saw a group of 7 youths between the ages of 22 and 28 years old of which 4 were females. Full of energy, I saw them walking rather straight to where I was, and with smiles on their faces, I was astonished to see a group seemingly coming to me. "I told no one about this sudden stop-over" I pondered as the group drew closer.

Soon after, I saw a sudden diversion. "What a relief! Now I can focus on my tea" I told myself. In a blink of an eye however, I saw a dramatic U-turn – the group began re-arranging the neatly placed compound chairs and tables, each holding a chair and coming towards me. "Mind my personal space!" I shouted quietly and wishing I could amplify that voice without appearing rude. Of course, some people need lessons on the need to observe and respect other people's spaces – perhaps psychologists can help on this.

Barely 2 meters away from me, the group happily sat – each on top of their voices as if they were reciting scripts for a horror video shooting. I looked around hoping my eyes would stumble on a camera holder or a drone hovering above us. However, '*wanga odugu nono*', an Acholi phrase literally translated as '*my eyes returned empty*'. "Why not unleash the Anthropology in you and do a rapid mini-ethnography?" I contemplated. "Oh yes... every situation presents an opportunity." I reckoned further. Rather frustrated that I couldn't shift right away not appear rude, I decided it was a study time.

"Epic or Etic moment? "Participant observer or observer participant?" I asked myself while wondering whether I still remember the concepts clearly enough to apply them at that time. The discussion topic was related to refugees and forced migration – both my interest and work. At this point, I remembered that one of my new year's resolution, which has been a

herculean task to adhere to, was to listen more and talk less in 2018. Certainly, it was the right moment to eavesdrop into the conversation which was brought 2 meters away from me.

“May I call the meeting to order?” I heard a voice speaking rather authoritatively, and suddenly, and the mummering seized within seconds from the group. It was a rough male voice sounding rather respected by the group members. “Can’t you see others are enjoying their weekend and yet we are making noise?” the voice added. “So, you have a feeling you are indeed noisy and messy?”, I asked quietly wishing I could say that loudly.

“So, who are refugees?” a lady from the group asked as she pulled out a pile of long A4 ruled papers and a nice clear pen – the kinds I last used a decade ago while I was at Kyambogo University for my undergraduate. She appeared to be the group secretary as she continued scribbling down the answers from the group members. I wondered what had unfolded till that point. Bit by bit, I realised that those were a group of students discussing an academic assignment. Weaving through their conversation, and as expected, others appearing more informed than others, I kind of enjoyed listening carefully as they deliberated on key concepts including refugees, asylum seekers, deportees, irregular movers, non-refoulement, etc.

Firstly, I was impressed that such concepts were being taught, and secondly, by the level of heated conversation that was initially dominated by 3 of the group members, of which the most vocal were 3 ladies who teathed through the conversation which later ended up being an intellectual battle of ladies vs gents – again, this provoked the gender in me and at that point, I was about to say “Excuse me lads and lasses” as I was carried away by the ‘refugee’ turned ‘gendered’ provocation. I still sat quiet, calm, and collected as I continued observing.

As perhaps expected, my attention span dropped, and I was swayed away by a dramatic event when ‘a teenager looking boy’ driving a V8 and swept off a Premio’s side mirrors as he tried in vain to demonstrate his ability to park reverse while keeping his dark tinted glasses up. I wondered whether the UAY V8 was his parents’ or his 18th birthday gift, and whether he succeeded through an on-job training for driving or he simply paid his way through a fraudulent process of acquiring a driving permit. It was long since I last witnessed such a dramatic fury and gross generational argument between an excited and arrogant lad, and a calm and collected pater following the destruction of the side mirror.

In that state of confusion, I was drawn back to the conversation of the students as I heard the phrase ‘Refugee Law Project’ being one of the sources the students were citing. “Fantastic!”, I said to myself. At this point, I wanted to proudly introduce myself and perhaps ‘help’ on some of the concepts they were struggling with.

Slow as I was to decide on whether to ‘pick a fork in the road’, I again heard “Dr Chris Dolan’ and “Onen David”. *Santa Maria!* I shouted... and this time loudly... The rest is history.

What a weekend!

Onen David Ongwech

Twitter: @ongwechd Website: www.onendavid.com Email: onen@onendavid.com