


# NEVER GIVE UP



VIGNETTES FROM SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA IN THE AGE OF AIDS

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IN THE AGE OF AIDS

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## YOU'VE GOT TO COME IN RIGHT



Noted journalist and CNN's African bureau chief, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, presented a series of lectures titled "New News Out of Africa" at Harvard University in the spring of 2003. Over the course of three lectures, one single comment by Hunter-Gault jumped out and grabbed my attention.

Hunter-Gault was recalling the start of her career as a young writer for the *New York Times*. As one of the few African American reporters working for the newspaper in the 1960s, she was sent to Harlem to cover a meeting of the Black Panthers. At the time, the Black Panthers were feared by many Americans as a radical and violent movement determined to overthrow the U.S. government. Condemned by politicians and wiretapped by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, the Black Panthers had reason to be suspicious of anyone who showed up at a meeting—including a black woman who was just there to cover the story for the prestigious *Times*. Denied entrance by a member of the Black Panthers who was guarding the door, Hunter-Gault insisted that she be allowed into the meeting. She explained that she was a cub reporter who could not go back to her boss without a story. Hunter-Gault, very early

in her career, exhibited the persistence and determination that would make her an accomplished journalist.

It must have been an interesting encounter: two African Americans in the 1960s meeting at a door in Harlem. One was a Black Panther, tired of seeing his movement criticized by the press and instructed to keep reporters out of the meeting. The other was a young reporter determined to go back to her boss with the story she had been sent to get. As anyone who has followed Hunter-Gault's career (be it at the *New York Times*, or public television's *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, or now at CNN) could guess, she got into the meeting and got her story. Before relenting to her cajoling, the Black Panther gave the young reporter a piece of advice. He said that he would allow her into the meeting, but he told her, "You've got to come in right."

In telling the story nearly forty years later, Charlayne Hunter-Gault remembers knowing exactly what the man meant. He was admonishing the reporter to set aside preconceived notions—to forget about stories she might have read about the Black Panthers or rumors she might have heard about their activities. He was instructing the reporter to enter the meeting with a clear head and open eyes. To observe. To listen. To be receptive to what she was going to see and hear. To learn. In order to do all of those things, she would have to "come in right."

For three days I had attended Ms. Hunter-Gault's lectures and the follow-up question-and-answer sessions. I sat with a notepad on my lap, ready to record information or new insights into life in South Africa to better prepare myself for my time in the country. It was the story she told about the Black Panthers, the specific quote, that grabbed

my attention. It was the best piece of advice I had ever heard about how to enter a new country. I immediately wrote it down on the inside cover of my journal: “You’ve got to come in right. Charlayne Hunter-Gault, May 15, 2003.”

Later, when I arrived in South Africa and found an apartment, got a phone, and opened a bank account, those essentials—my address, telephone number, and bank information—were added to the inside cover of my journal. Every time I opened my journal to find a PIN, I was reminded of the advice handed down from a Black Panther to Charlayne Hunter-Gault to me. “You’ve got to come in right.” My challenge was to figure out the best way to come into South Africa.



We all know the reputation Americans have around the world. We are “the ugly Americans.” I arrived in South Africa just months after the United States attacked Iraq in our country’s first “pre-emptive” war. George W. Bush’s foreign policy did not make it any easier to be an American abroad in 2003.

In traveling internationally, my experience has always been that people in other countries don’t hate individual Americans; they hate our policies that have direct and often negative consequences for their nations. During my time on the African continent, I never felt personally attacked because of our government’s positions, but being American was often an issue.

A South African nun said to me: “I like you, even though you’re American. I’m going to tell people you

are my Canadian friend.” And she referred to me as her Canadian friend every time I saw her after that. Other Africans told me they would never visit the United States. To do so, they said, would show their support for a nation that had no respect for the developing world.

When I first arrived in Cape Town, I stayed in a small flat owned by the friend of a friend. My friend’s friend was eager to rent the apartment, but was hesitant to rent to an American. She only agreed to my staying there when my South African friend assured her that I was not a Bush-supporting, right-wing Republican. Months later, when my friend’s friend had become my friend, she confessed to me over a bottle of wine one evening that until she got to know me, she had referred to me as the “fucking American”—as in, “I can’t believe I agreed to rent a flat to a fucking American” or “That fucking American who is staying in my flat arrives tomorrow.”

I didn’t mind the moniker. In fact, I appreciated the fact that my new South African friend told me about her preconceived notions of Americans, and I was grateful to have the opportunity to dispel some of those beliefs. That was, it seemed to me, one way to “come in right” to South Africa: to be proud and open about being an American, and to engage with people in conversations about all aspects—good and bad—of our country. I refused to be like some Americans I met during my time abroad who told me they were embarrassed by our nationality and who always hoped it would not come up in conversations. How could we begin to change other people’s impressions of America if we weren’t even willing to admit where we came from?

There were times, however, especially when working with some American visitors in the townships, when I understood where the expression “ugly American” comes from. I even understood why some of us are referred to as “fucking Americans.”

Very few Americans who visit South Africa spend time in the townships. The majority who travel that far come to enjoy the natural beauty, the beaches, the food and wine of a spectacular and somewhat mysterious country. Any American who goes into the townships, even on one of the brief township tours, is to be commended for making an effort to try to understand a country in its totality.

Those whose primary motivation for traveling to South Africa is to better understand the legacy of apartheid, to see for themselves what life is like in the townships, and to assist efforts to improve the lives of people living with poverty and disease, are deserving of even greater accolades. It is no vacation to spend time with children who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS or whose families have discarded them because they have mental or physical handicaps. It's no day at the beach walking through hospitals or hospices with bed after bed filled with patients who may be dying in front of your eyes. It isn't fun to talk face-to-face with a young woman who was gang-raped and became infected with HIV, or to discover that the only place a man dying of AIDS has to sleep is in the outhouse behind a cousin's home.

People should be applauded for using their vacation time, for paying a great deal of money to travel to Africa for this purpose, and for being willing to allow these experiences to potentially change their lives in dramatic

and often disturbing ways. But even with the sincerest intentions, these people still have to “come in right.” Unfortunately, many of them don’t.

The first damaging story I heard in Guguletu was of an American woman who stood up at a community meeting and announced that she had met a couple of children in the township whose college educations she was going to sponsor. Of course the community cheered her announcement and thanked the woman, who then returned to the United States. The community, thinking the American would honor her commitment, assumed when there was no money forthcoming for the children’s educations, that the officials in Guguletu had absconded with the money. They hadn’t.

Once the American returned home, she was never heard from again. Telephone messages and e-mails to her went unanswered. It cost the community plenty for this American to visit. Young people whose hopes had been raised were disappointed. The officials who were wrongly accused of financial impropriety had their reputations damaged.

This woman didn’t intentionally mislead the community. My guess is that she was overwhelmed by what she had seen and experienced, and in a moment of compassion announced something that she was simply incapable of following through on. She wasn’t a bad person. It just would have been better for her to “come in right” or not come in at all.

Other visitors to the townships didn’t do as much damage as this one woman, but they didn’t always think before opening their mouths. At home, with our friends

and families and at our jobs, most of us think twice before saying something that could be taken the wrong way or that might hurt someone's feelings. We have the ability to edit ourselves and phrase questions and comments in an appropriate manner. For some travelers, this skill seems to get lost somewhere over the Atlantic on the long flight to South Africa. Perhaps it gets left behind on the airplane with the in-flight magazine. Oh, how I wish that the lead flight attendant would make a special landing announcement to well-meaning groups of people arriving to do relief work. The message we all need to hear is:

*Welcome to Cape Town, South Africa. Please remain seated with your seat belts secured until you have really listened to the following advice.*

*For those of you traveling to South Africa for the first time to see the townships, to learn about the history and culture of this country and the legacy of apartheid, and to meet with people living in poverty and dealing with issues such as HIV/AIDS, crime, unemployment, and lack of access to education, health care, and clean water, thank you for coming and sharing your humanity.*

*More than carry-on luggage and other objects may have shifted during the flight. You may feel tired, disoriented, and confused. Please take a moment to look around and make sure you have your wits about you. Remember that you are a guest in this country. You are here to listen, to learn, and to possibly respond to the issues facing this nation if you feel so moved. You are not here to judge or to intentionally or uninten-*

*tionally insult or disparage people whose lives you may never completely understand or identify with. You are not here to “fix” anything. Please do not attempt to put what you will see and experience into an American context. You are no longer in the United States, and viewing Africa through that lens will frustrate you and may insult your hosts, the people of South Africa. You are encouraged to ask questions and engage in active, meaningful dialogue with the people you meet. That is one way—though not the only way—to learn about life in the townships. For those of you who like to talk and ask a lot of questions, we ask that you occasionally shut up and listen. For those of you who say little but may have valuable contributions to make to discussions, we encourage you to speak up. At all times, be respectful of our people, cultures, and ways of life.*

*Again, welcome to South Africa. We hope you enjoy your stay and that you come in right.*

That is part of the message that all of us do-gooders who travel to other parts of the world need to hear. What I have found, however, is that we do-gooders think we know all of this. We think we are different from tourists who are just on vacation. We know we are sensitive, well-intentioned people who want to make a difference in the world. We know our hearts are in the right place. We know we aren't “ugly Americans.” And so, knowing all of this, we open our mouths, and sometimes ugly comments and disrespectful behavior are the result.

One man, having spent all of a few days in the townships, asked the following question based on his breadth of

knowledge of South Africa: “Why is it that black women do all the work and all black men do is drink beer?”

A white woman, after keeping three people waiting for more than an hour for a scheduled meeting, walked into the meeting laughing and said, “I guess I’m just on African time.”

An American minister suggested that some people with HIV/AIDS were more deserving of our support than others who had contracted the disease through “promiscuous sex.” It seemed to her that there was an HIV/AIDS compassion hierarchy, with “innocent” children and “victimized” women at the top of the pyramid (those being the ones most deserving of our support) and drug-using, alcohol-abusing, sex-addicted men at the bottom (those being less worthy of our support). Therein was the lesson for that day.

Then there are those visitors who can only put what they see and experience into an American context. It’s easy to see how this happens. For many, their own culture is their only frame of reference. They have left the comfort and security of their lives in the United States. One day, they are in Minneapolis, Atlanta, or New York, and a day or two later they are in Guguletu, South Africa, and suddenly things no longer make sense. They have left a black-and-white world and arrived in one made up of shades of gray. They are unstable in their new surroundings, and in reaching for some stability, they grasp on to how things operate in the West and how they as individuals operate within that world. Unfortunately, much of middle-class life in U.S. cities does not translate to a township like Guguletu.

Waiting to meet with a representative of the South African government one day, I listened to a number of American academicians in the reception area who were talking about implementing an American model to address prostitution in the townships, and thereby reduce HIV infection rates. The American model would stress self-esteem and empowerment for these women.

“What about women who don’t identify as prostitutes, but who engage in transactional sex for survival?” I asked. “What about women who trade sex for food, or to pay for their children’s school fees, or to just have a roof over their head that evening? Does your program offer jobs training, skills building, or education that could provide women with an alternative to survival sex or prostitution?” Although I’m simplifying their response, the answer was basically that this program had been shown to work in the United States and could be replicated in South Africa.

How did they know that? Had they met with prostitutes and women and girls engaged in survival sex? Had they listened to them in forums where the women and girls themselves had identified self-esteem as their greatest issue? Did it ever occur to them that it’s not just women and girls who are engaging in these activities? That South Africa has rent boys doing the same thing? More important, did these American academicians not think that South African social issues should have South African solutions, and maybe that our role as outsiders should be to assist with those efforts instead of exporting social intervention models from the United States?

I don’t claim to know the right way to come into South Africa or into any country that is new to us. I’m

certain it's different for everyone. But having struggled with my own "coming in" and having accompanied scores of Americans experiencing townships for the first time, I offer this advice:

- ♦ *Listen more than you speak.*
- ♦ *Ask more than you tell.*
- ♦ *Behave like a guest in your boss's home.*
- ♦ *Resist the temptation to fix things; you might not have the tools to do so, and the thing might not be broken in the first place.*
- ♦ *Cast off your American lens and look at the world through different eyes.*
- ♦ *Don't look for simple answers for complex problems.*
- ♦ *Don't implement complex solutions for simple problems.*
- ♦ *Live with your experiences.*
- ♦ *If moved to act, ask what is needed. Don't assume you know.*
- ♦ *Be willing to make a leap of faith.*

It all boils down to what the Black Panther told Charlayne Hunter-Gault in the 1960s: "You've got to come in right."