



POSITIVE PRINCIPLE

Nobody has Nothing

“Donnez moi cent francs!” is a common phrase heard on the streets of Kinshasa. What they’re really saying is, “I have no money. Have pity on me.” When I meet with impoverished communities in Congo about their challenges, the response is similar, “Pas moyens”. In other words, “We have ‘no means’ to do anything without your help.”

This is a learned response. Children, whether poor or rich, can’t wait to put their ideas into action. Once the light bulb goes on, they scramble for materials and ask friends to join them. They’re proud of what they accomplish. No matter how elementary, it’s done with their own sweat and ingenuity. Kids begin from the naive premise, “I can do this somehow.”

In impoverished neighbourhoods, the instinctive inner drive fades quickly because a subtle but persistent message infiltrates the community. “You aren’t good enough. You can’t do it. Why bother even starting?” A subtle but effective barrier is raised between having an idea and acting on that idea. If I come to understand I’m poor, I lack the ability or I don’t have the intelligence, my world will be viewed through that same negative lens: the lens of poverty. When presented with an issue, the voice in my head will insist, “You don’t have the means.”

The voice ricocheting through an impoverished community reminds them of their failures and low social position. It colours their worldview and encourages them to embrace their shortcomings and seek handouts. The challenge is helping people expose the inner dialogue of lies.

I got to know ‘John’ on a Yamaha 125 motorbike. He acted as my guide so I could find my way to a remote village clinic. On the way back, the motorbike broke down. This led to hours of pushing it through sandy grasslands. Stuck in the middle of nowhere with a common purpose of getting home led to interesting conversations.

John had a college degree in agriculture and his passion was to create a network of farmers he could advocate for and provide technical advice to. I asked him why he hadn’t yet started. He said he never thought he had the means. I couldn’t help but express how much I loved his passion. I insisted he get started anyways despite the barriers. Several months later when I visited he couldn’t wait to announce what he had begun. By merely walking and talking he had created a network of twenty farmers he visited regularly.

I had a similar experience with Congolese colleagues, ‘Dave’ and ‘Ben’, who I got to know while they were in medical school. About a year after graduating, Dave invited me to come with him to one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Kinshasa where he and Ben had established a clinic. I asked why he hadn’t told me of the clinic earlier. After all, we saw each other regularly. He said, “I didn’t want to tell you because I wanted to prove to myself I could do this.”

Over the years John, Dave and Ben have gone on to influence their communities for positive transformation. They recognized the negative inner dialogue as spreading lies, then intentionally moved against it with a ‘can-do’ spirit. This is the starting point for the most fundamental element of development in an impoverished community: the Positive Principle.

The Positive Principle begins by answering the question: who am I? Every human has worth that transcends their economic standing or repertoire of skills. By investing time merely listening to John, I communicated respect for his dreams. I valued Dave through our casual visits, we got to know each other as friends. The common element



of both stories is the room we gave each other to share our passions and hopes for the future. The environment was one of mutual respect because we recognized each other's intrinsic value.

In the earliest creation myths, such as that of the Sumerians in 4500 BCE, it was believed man was created as a slave and was therefore expendable. In contrast, the intrinsic value of man is one of the central themes of the Genesis story. Genesis is unique in telling us man was created as an agent reflecting God, and therefore possessed great worth. The Positive Principle leans into the Genesis story insisting, "You're not a slave! You're a reflection of God, the creator of the universe!"

The Judean story culminates in Jesus, whose sacrifice, according to the early church writers, was the ultimate sign of human value. From God's point of view, humans, along with their dreams and passions, possess innate worth. This is the basis of the Positive Principle; you did not earn your value, you had intrinsic value the day you were born.

The Positive Principle then asks the question: what is my purpose? Some say our intelligence separates us from animals. I believe it's the human quest for purpose that sets us apart. The Positive Principle recognizes that humans are innately curious. We reflect the grand creator by our desire to discover and our dreams to create.

The Positive Principle echoes the Genesis story, asserting there is indeed a point to your existence: "Your purpose is to reflect God!" This is not about religious ritual. It is simply the ritual of us acting upon our desires and dreams. The temple is the world around us. If we are a reflection of God, then our desire to discover and create is our purpose. By doing so, we reflect God in community. The result is, the lies of insignificance are exposed. True community is restored.

Finally, the Positive Principle insists that, if you truly have value, and if your purpose is to reflect God, then you possess the tools and assets needed for restoration, no matter how plain the tools may appear. You may see your cup as half empty. The hope of the Judean story is, your cup is really half full. Begin by looking at your own hands.

On one of the outer columns of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi was inscribed, "Know Thyself". In other words, if you are coming to this temple seeking restorative change in your family or community, begin by looking at yourself. Who are you? What is your purpose? What is it you have in your hand? This summarizes the Positive Principle well. It isn't about your problems or the barriers. It's about recognizing the value of who you are, what you already have and what you are already doing. It is that little something in your hand that carries the seed of community transformation.

Biblical Readings - :

- Genesis 1:26-27 (made in image of God)
- Ephesians 4:23-24 (he sees us as righteous and holy through Jesus)
- Galatians 3:29 (adopted into his family as children of God)
- Luke 15:4-7 (parable of lost sheep)
- John 3:16 (so valuable he gave his one and only son)
- 1 Cor 12:1-7 The Message (given many gifts)
- 2 Corinthians 2:18 (being transformed to the same image from one glory to another)