

Growth Does Not Happen Within Comfort
By Natalie Bills

Chapter 1 - The Dress

The flowing white dress, so crisp and untouched, it should be a sin to wear. The twinkling lights that imitate the stars. The dancing between loved ones that feels like it happens in slow motion. The soft tender kisses that whisper fortunes of forever. These are dreams most little girls have from a very young age. Dreams of a perfect wedding, a beautiful marriage, and the most perfect prince charming that will sacrifice time and time again for his undying love for you. However, these dreams are dreams for a reason because they lack reality. Dreams keep the doors of reality shut so that only the sunshine of perfection can shine through. What dreams

don't include are the dark, challenging, and dismal parts of all relationships. Imagine my surprise when the bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, hopeless romantic that I am, found myself in the midst of the darkest part of my reality that it yet had to offer.

While growing up, I was always told that physical abuse is wrong. Taboo, frowned upon, inappropriate, culturally, and socially disappointing. There is never a question on whether physical abuse actually happened or if it is wrong. However, mental, emotional, and verbal abuse are socially viewed as a personal opinion and the validity of the claim is often questioned. Being the young, conservative, people-pleaser I was, I agreed with these points of view and did not think much more about it until I found myself married to a mental, emotional, and verbal abuser.

He was a wonderful man while we were dating and throughout our engagement. However, once he checked the box of being married, all effort seemed to stop. By three months of marriage, all the sunshine and rainbows of our romantic relationship had fizzled away into nothing. As a young woman I thought the lack of effort, the belittlement, the disregarding, the lack of thoughtfulness, the put downs, the emotional distance etc., was my own fault. I've bent over backwards trying to make things right and trying to please him so that our relationship could begin to heal. Eventually I opened up to my family, and that is when I realized there was a real problem. They used phrases like, "it seems like you're a shell of how you used to be," and "there isn't any happiness or light in your eyes." It was devastating to hear, but the beginning of my realization that my relationship was not healthy.

Realizing things were not right was the first step, but I still felt like I had to do everything in my power to try to make things right before I even thought about leaving. Over the next year and a half, I exhausted all efforts. I tried all types of communication, love languages, religion, and counseling. Nothing was satisfactory for him, and I always fell short. I realized that I was trying to please someone who thought I was never going to be enough, and I had to make a choice. I could continue exhausting myself the rest of my life, always fighting for a voice and any form of self-independence. Or I could love myself enough to not be miserable and beat upon the rest of my life.

I went to visit an old friend in a different state who had no idea what was going on in my marriage. We were friends from our first semester of college and the time I spent with her was blissful. It was just like old times, singing together in the car, runs to Starbucks, absolute happiness. It was then that I felt the significant difference of who I used to be to who I had become currently. Before this trip I knew I had changed, but I had never felt that I had changed. When I got back to him, my heart and soul ached for change, and I knew I could not get it where I was.

I did not talk to him for about three days because my heart and mind knew what needed to happen but did not have the slightest idea of how to get there. Eventually he approached me and asked to talk. I did not want to talk because every time throughout the nearly two years of our marriage that I had tried to talk to him, I was met with stonewalling, belittling, degrading, etc. I said nothing and he quietly, and for the first time, asked, "do you think we should separate?" In that moment, when that question was asked, I felt the biggest weight lift from my shoulders. Two years of fighting for anything seemed to come to an end. I began to cry, and he began to cry, but it was not because we were on different sides like we always happen, it is because we were finally on the same page.

After the divorce I moved to a new state with new people, more family, and tried to find myself again. My whole life I have relied on others to validate myself and who I am, but this time I tried to find self-love, validation, and confidence. I spent eight months on a personal journey of healing from the past and strengthening myself for my future. I finally got to a point where I was the most happy and healthy that I had been in years. I was comfortable and content with where I was and where I was going.

However, when you get this comfortable, I feel that the universe conspires to put discomfort in your path, because growth does not come when you are comfortable. While I knew a trial of discomfort and growth was probably coming for me, full speed ahead, I tried to remain optimistic and somewhat naïve to the idea because I was happy and did not want any turbulence to disrupt that.

I was nearing the end of my bachelor's degree at the University of Wyoming, which meant I was required to complete an internship. While I was still married, I was set on an international internship to Uganda helping with sustainable development projects within the poverty there. While feeling stuck in my marriage, escaping to the wonders of Uganda for six weeks sounded peaceful. Fast forward eight months after my divorce and move to a different state, I was in a newly comfortable and happy state. The idea of leaving to a foreign land frightened me.

But I needed to go. Completing my internship was not optional and I had already financially invested so much into this trip to Uganda. In my current state, I mentally and emotionally did not want to go, but knew that I physically had to. All I could do was try my best to prepare and hope that the six weeks would be the fastest six weeks of my life.

Chapter 3 - The Arrival

The journey to Uganda was awfully long and seemed to never end. Due to the pandemic the last year and half, traveling has become more of a nightmare than a luxury. The journey began by missing my first flight because my COVID test results did not come back in time. The stress of trying to get rapid tests done and paying over \$500 in COVID tests in hopes that I would make that flight... it seems impossible to describe that feeling. I felt like I had an elephant sitting on my chest and anxiety and panic was running rampant throughout my mind. I have traveled quite a bit in my life, but this was by far the most stressful and exhausting experience.

I have traveled to Mexico, Peru, Fiji, and even Africa before (Ghana). And all those travel experiences were undeniably positive and life changing. Therefore, I had grand expectations going into Uganda. I wanted the beautiful and eye-opening travel experience that I have always had before. However, I got something completely different and something for which I could have never prepared.

After rescheduling my flights and finally making it to Uganda, I thought all the pain and trouble was over, but I was wrong. Customs checked my visa, passport, health forms, etc., and then they asked for my COVID vaccination card which I did not have. The COVID vaccine is something I see necessary for a lot of people, and I see the protection and safety it has given many. But personally, I had not gotten it yet. I had nothing personal or political against the vaccine. Either way, the US embassy and Uganda's department of health stated that the vaccine was not required for entry into the country. After stating that I did not have it, they told me to follow a particular alley way. When I realized that the alley I was following was different from where everyone else was going, I started to panic. It was 1:00 AM in the middle of Uganda all

alone. Thankfully, I spotted my internship coordinator through the fence that separated me from everyone else and shouted for help.

My coordinator tried to argue with the police and airport staff to let me go because I had four negative COVID tests, but that was not enough. I was shipped off on bus to a clinic to get tested. I have never felt that alone, physically, mentally, and emotionally. It took around three hours to get my results and by the time I got back with my group it was around 4:00 in the morning. I was beyond burnt out. I remember crying myself to sleep because I wanted more than anything to quit and go back to the comfort that I had just left.

Chapter 4 - Evaluations

After a few hours of sleep, we made the five-hour drive from Entebbe to Tororo, a very small rural town in Eastern Uganda. Through all of the chaos, I was able to appreciate the beauty there. Uganda is very green, lush, and has lots to offer. We stopped a few times along the way and tried different foods and met different people. Whenever we would pull over, crowds of people would rush to our car shouting, “Mzungu! Mzungu!” which means white person and would hold up a wide variety of goods they were selling. It felt wrong, the fact that we were being swarmed because of our skin color. The driving was a bit frightening. There seems to be no traffic laws except don’t hit one another. But we eventually made it to our final destination.

Once we got to our house in Tororo, I felt a sense of peace. It was a small fenced in home that was on the south side of town. It had a lot of western amenities such as running water and electricity, but they were not reliable like they are in the United States. It just felt nice to finally be where I was physically meant to. We got settled, unpacked, changed, and walked into town. It was about a 25–30-minute walk, about a mile long. Something extremely unique about the Ugandan culture is that dress is very important. Women are to always wear dresses or skirts and men to wear button up shirts. It was culturally inappropriate to wear the casual day wear that us Americans typically exhibit. We exchanged money, about 3,500 UGX to every \$1.00 USD, and had our first Ugandan meal. The food there is all very dense. Rice, chicken, beans, a dense banana mash called Matoke, flour mash called posho, etc. Ugandan’s will typically eat fewer but more dense meals. Whereas in the US, we eat smaller meals more frequently. Needless to say, it did not take much to fill me up. I went to bed around 9:00 PM but woke up at 3:00 AM and could not fall back to sleep until 5:00 AM. My body was struggling with the 9-hour time difference.

The next morning, I still felt a looming sense of fear and unfamiliarity. It was difficult to get out of bed, but I did not have a choice. We left to get breakfast and then attended a church service. Downtown Tororo is busy and distracting. The main traffic circle is where everything happens. You hear the motors of the Boda drivers rushing by, people bartering on food prices, and cat calling from taxi and Boda drivers. The Church we attended was just a room. There were not very many people, but they were all nice and you could feel strength was present there. Afterward, we rode Boda's back home for the first time. To say I was scared was an understatement. Boda’s are simply motor bike drivers that take you around, like a taxi. The whole group rode individually which made me nervous, but it was the normal thing to do. I knew I would have to get used to this fast because it is the main source of transportation. The over-thinker in me automatically went to, “what if I get taken? kidnapped?” I knew I needed to assimilate quicker, but I felt like overthinking was justified.

I had never experienced real homesickness until this point. Laying down that second night, it began to dawn on me how far away I was, and that there was no end in sight. The feeling of loneliness and number of tears only seemed to increase, and I was beyond emotionally spent, but still hanging on to the sliver of hope that this experience would make a turn for the better.

Chapter 5 - Mzungu

The next two weeks were full of evaluations, meetings, and lots of walking and traveling. We met with over 20 organizations and it was exhausting but extremely eye-opening. We started small by meeting with schools, clinics, and policymakers within Tororo. One of the first groups we met with was a youth organization that was working on education, advocacy, and reproductive health. They said 6 out of 10 girls in Uganda get pregnant. Hearing this statistic struck a passion in me that wanted to be involved in helping educate people on menstruation and reproductive health. They showed us the many steps they had taken to decrease that statistic. They showed us a booklet they created of policies and laws prohibiting forced and early marriages, appropriate workplace behavior, etc. They shared that most employers do not have their employees sign contracts so when women are violated, they cannot do anything about it. Therefore, they are working to get these policies and laws they have created, to be enforced by the government so there can be some genuine change within the political structure of Uganda. This was my first introduction to the corruption that lies within the Ugandan government.

My favorite evaluation was a 15-20-minute Boda ride to a village just outside of Tororo to a Primary school called Cream Land. The Boda ride was stunning. The openness and variety in vegetation was jaw dropping. On the ride we would hear kids all along the road shouting “Mzungu! Mzungu!” which was much more inviting coming from a 3-year-old rather than a group of middle-aged men.

The best word to describe Cream Land would be cute. They did some singing and dancing for us, and I got to dance with them a little bit. When expressing their struggles with us, we learned that they cannot take tests at their school because all of their buildings are not completely finished. Dirt floors, unfinished walls, open ceilings, and so on. So, the kids have to travel to a different school to take tests. This costs money which most families do not have, which leads to more kids dropping out of school. We also learned that only one out of four of the schools 400 kids eat lunch every day because majority cannot afford to pay for it, so they just go hungry. After learning these things, the head master and teachers fed us a large meal in front of the whole school. In Uganda, when you are given a meal, you eat until the food is gone. It felt so wrong to be eating food in front of these children when I knew more than half of them had growling stomachs. It broke my heart but we all continued for the sake of our relationship with the school.

One of our last and most important contact was East High School. Most the kids were gone taking their exams when we first arrived, but we got to talk with the few that were there, and they asked a lot of questions. This was a private school and they had nicer buildings and a computer room, but needs were still great. More than anything, they just wanted to learn anything we had to offer. I ended up creating a leadership course and we decided to go to teach twice a week.

During the days I felt fine because my brain was so distracted and trying to be present in whatever meeting, class, or evaluation I was in. But the evenings were tough because my mind

would wander to the comforts of home. The days were getting better, but it felt like the homesickness would never go away.

Chapter 6 - Village

Our focus shifted to medical facilities as we continued our evaluations. We visited a hospital and maternity ward out in a nearby city, just past the Cream Land primary school. It was a hard day for me because medical environments, especially in third world countries, makes me a bit uneasy. In the matter of hours that we were at the maternity ward, there was a still birth and twins born... We walked into their operating room where they perform c-sections and saw their pharmacy. It felt wrong to be walking around a medical facility and in operating rooms with dirty shoes and regular street clothes on. I cannot imagine having to give birth around flies and practically on a dirty floor. It was emotionally hard to be there. On the bright side, we got to see laboratories where they are doing some high-tech malaria research which was intriguing.

We had one on one interviews with our coordinators about projects and how we were doing. I appreciate that they took the time to check in, but it still felt like doing these interviews were just a box to check, not that they genuinely cared. Then we went downtown to shop for a village we were going to visit that day. We had to find fresh beans, mangos, passion fruit, rice, and some other things. After getting all of these things, we went to David's village. David is our guard for the house we stay at. He sleeps during the day and then stays up all night while we sleep. Sometimes I can hear him shucking sugar cane in the middle of the night outside our window. David is one of the most genuine people I've met. He has a big heart and wants the best for others. Showing us his home was important and a big deal to him.

At the village, I got to plant 16 trees and name one after myself. I then helped dig a pit latrine, which was some of the hardest work I had done in my life. That is challenging work. After about four feet, the ground is hard clay, as hard as rock. So, it is tough to chip away. We got about a foot down and need 14 more feet to go to meet the pit latrine requirements. Afterwards, we got to eat a meal with the village. It was delicious and fun to mingle with the village people and neighbors. After washing dishes, we had a big dance party which put a smile on everyone's face. They taught us some dance moves and we taught them some. It was enriching to learn more about their culture and traditions.

Chapter 7 - Maturity in Menstruation

The next week, we had more meetings which continued to foster a lot of the relationships we had begun. That Thursday we left for Mbale for the weekend which was a bigger city about an hour and a half North. Friday, we went shopping for materials to teach a reusable menstrual pads class. We were taught how to make them from a woman named Ester. Ester was very kind and employed by a man named Saleh. If I were to compare Saleh to any fictional character, I would choose Gatsby. Not because of wealth, but because of Saleh's story of immense growth. Years ago, Saleh was in poverty much like many others in Uganda. However, he became interested in business and entrepreneurship. He took a leap of faith and started opening businesses within the hospitality industry. Now he is an influential speaker, a leader, and a big promoter of reusable menstrual pads.

We went to a Muslim school and taught the girls a lesson on female anatomy, periods, and how to make reusable pads. Some of the girls did not even know what a period was. The lack of sex education in Uganda is astonishing. One girl asked me, "are you sure I can talk to my father about this?" It was disheartening. Periods are such a shameful thing in their culture which makes girls want to hide it or drop out of school. This also leads to unhealthy practices when dealing with periods, which leads to infection. For example, girls try to hide their period, so they do not wash out their pad and then they end up with an infection. After teaching, we went to Sipi Falls which is up on Mount Elgon. We hiked three waterfalls which was breathtaking. Then we watched the sunset and had dinner.

Chapter 8 - Little Moments

The following week, we started a painting project at the Nagongera Health Center. We had decided to paint the staff housing because the head doctor said it would boost staff morale. We spent nearly 4 days painting in the hot sun with some of the locals and the kids. Besides the heat, it was enjoyable. We made thank you notes and got candy for all the staff. They are understaffed and help so many people, we just wanted to let them know we appreciate them and their hard work.

We also met with a new organization this week: Taso. Taso is an organization that works with clients how have HIV. They have over 9,000 patients and do many outreaches to different villages so people can get their medication and care. We also taught our first planned lesson at Cream Land, a primary school, for the first time. We taught hand washing which felt weird because the kids know how to wash their hands, but the teachers said it is helpful that they are consistently taught to practice good hygiene.

At the end of the week, we met with a man we were introduced to at church, and he took us to the village he grew up in. It was quite the journey there, but it was a sweet experience. We sat under this massive mango tree and a lot of the villagers sat with us and we visited. They took us to their small watering hole that services over 1,200 villagers. The watering hole was so small, and they said in the sunny season, it sometimes dries up. I felt so awful because I get thirsty throughout the day multiple times, yet these people get a sip of water a day if that. While we chatted with the village people, they told us of their struggles and how they get income. They raise cows, pigs, and chickens until they can sell them. It takes about 6-10 months to raise and then sell. It was hard for me to grasp that they get income only every 6-10 months. After the village, we made the journey home. My favorite part of the day is when we are walking home from all our activities, and I get to see and say hi to all the people I have met. There are little stands on the side of the road as we walk home, and it is the best part of my day to great and check in with each one of them. Stella has a fruit stand that has the best banana's you would ever eat. I swear her eyes shine brighter than the stars. Nora is tailor that sits on the corner from 9:00 in the morning to 5:00 in the evening, every day during the week. She must be in her 90's and uses a cane to walk, but her spirits are high. Joseph always hangs around the snack stand and I always catch him around town riding his bike. His smile could make anyone's day. Trinity is only 3 years old, but she always comes running up to me and hugs my leg. Jennifer sits at one of the crossroads and makes incredible meals, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Margot is one of my favorites. She has dared to make a new snack that is out of the normal, fried banana pancakes. Every morning that we pass, she has a line of people waiting for her delicious treats. Whenever

we buy from her, she gives us a bonus pancake which always makes me smile. When we pass her on our way home, we would throw her hands in the air and shout, "Welcome home! Well done!" Alice sits right next to Margot and sells cassava and mangos, once we helped her peel cassava, and she gave us a mango for free. She has a little autistic boy that always gives us hugs and the most comforting hello. The ladies at the shipping container that always said hi and wanted to join us on our projects. And John the Boda driver who also works at the hospital and has a heart of gold. No matter how bad a day has gone, saying hello to all those people, and asking them how they are gives my heart a sense of happiness that I know I could never get anywhere else. I am glad I have found those little bits of peace during my day.

This is a lesson I know that we could all grow from here in the United States: valuing relationships over material things. The people in Uganda do not care about the clothes on your back or how your hair is done, but about the quality of time that you are willing to give them. What a beautiful concept.

Chapter 9 - The Returning Menace

Our last weeks in Uganda were full of COVID chaos. The president of Uganda would deliver a speech every Saturday or Sunday evening about how COVID is getting worse, so it needs to be taken more seriously. One Monday morning when walking to town, we were met with by police checking to see if people were complying with COVID orders. If you did not have a mask, you were to be arrested.

There were many confiscated Boda's and taxis and police compound. However, our guard David said that the first day the police will be strict. Then second day not so much. And the third day, there would no longer be any enforcement. And he was right, by the end of the week, no one cared. It felt scary at first though. It felt like the world was ending with how my soldiers and police were out and how chaotic it was.

Since I was the only volunteer that was really interested in teaching, I was a project lead on all the teaching projects. We taught at Cream land, and other schools such as Joy and Peace, Sacred Heart, East High, and TYDAN, the youth center. Teaching used to really intimidate me, but I do enjoy it and find it fulfilling. We started with leadership and self-esteem lessons. I liked Cream Land a lot because the teachers are really involved, and they wanted to teach us things as well. For example, they told us how no one votes in Uganda because the voting system is so corrupt. The police will follow you to make sure you vote for the right person, and if you do not, there are consequences. We never learned what consequences followed, but I was not sure if I really wanted to know. I realized that without voting, the government gets looped in this vicious cycle of corruption and cannot get out without a lot of death and harm. It makes it so difficult for the country to grow and have opportunity.

I also really liked teaching at East High. since they were older, we could go over some more advanced topics and have good discussion. We talked about leadership and what makes a good leader, and I also was able to talk to the girls about mensuration and taught them how to make reusable pads. There were only about 8 girls, so it ended up being more of a discussion than a lesson which was nice. We ended up spending about three hours with them and by the end, we were dancing, playing in the rain, taking pictures, etc. I learned that the relationships we create are so important because at least they will know that someone cares and believes in them.

We got to play football with the youth center we also taught at. Not very many showed

up to play, but people from the community joined in which was a lot of fun. This kid named Courage played with us and kept saying “I like the hard ones!” and wanted me to kick it super hard at him. It was just so fun to see them all smiling and laughing.

Chapter 10 - When the Body is Buried, People Forget

The following weekend had more COVID chaos. The president of Uganda announced that he was officially locking down Uganda due to “Increased cases.” Which meant a lot of changes were to happen. First, traveling outside of your district was forbidden unless you had a registered tourist vehicle. This was a big and expensive challenge since we did not have a registered tourist vehicle. Second, all schools and churches were shut down for the next 42 days. Which means we could not go to church, and we could no longer teach at schools. Since I was the project lead on all our teaching projects, I was discouraged and disappointed. But we tried to adjust and make the most out of what we had.

We ended up being able to still “teach” at one school, Cream Land. Mostly just teaching and discussing with the teachers. They also told us they thought things would calm down in about two weeks. They said, “everyone freaks out because someone has died, but when the body is buried and is no longer visible, they forget all about it.” Meaning the chaos would settle when everyone forgets why things were chaotic in the first place.

I really like Cream Land because they focus on relationships and the genuine interaction between us and them. They said that Africans do not like it when we just said “Hi” and walk by. It comes off as insensitive and that we do not have time to get to know them. So, I tried to take the time to talk to people more often. That is a significant difference between majority of the world and the United States. Americans seem to be rushed, busy, and very consumed in the idea of the self, instead of others.

That weekend we somehow made it to Jinja, through all the travel restrictions. It was a bigger city and more touristy. I got to look at unique art from local artists and rope swung into the Nile. It was a unique experience I will never forget.

Chapter 11 - The Place at the Top of the Hill

During my last week in Uganda, I taught at Cream Land for the last time. Their dog, Simba, ran straight up to me which was a sweet moment. We did relay races with the kids and shared a meal to say goodbye. We also did art lesson that went over emotions and why it is important to be aware of how you feel. We asked them to draw something that makes them sad, and some drew things like violence or abuse. But the things that made them happy were positive, like apples, house, school, etc.

We also visited the Iteso Village again and taught them how to make reusable menstrual pads. It was the best lesson I had ever done. They were so engaged and eager to learn. One of my fellow volunteers said, “Nat, you’re such a good teacher!” I had done a lot of teaching in Uganda and felt like I was slowly developing a talent for teaching.

We also worked again on David’s latrine at his village. We worked with a local engineer to lay the foundation. My body was sore, but it was so rewarding to do physical labor. It makes

you feel accomplished. I mixed a total of eight loads of cement. I was also allowed to ride the village bike to their well to get water.

Toward the end of the week, we built a chicken coop for our chickens. It was interesting trying to figure out the African way of building things and utilizing odd things like a dried-up corn on the cob for stabilizing a nail. Lastly, we visited to John's village. John was a Boda driver I had a few days prior, and he had asked us to come to his home village to teach how to make reusable menstrual pads. It was another good lesson. Their village was placed at the top of a hill that overlooked a very lush, green valley. I remember taking a moment to overlook that scenic view. The quiet peace that came with that moment was settling and beautiful.

Overall, it was a good last week. We said our goodbyes to all our friends on our walk to town and the partners and organizations we had worked with. It was bittersweet, for I had never met such genuine people before. Yet, I was ready to be home and back to the comfort that I had left so abruptly.

Chapter 12 - Safety

The journey back to the United States was less chaotic, but just as anxious and stressful. I was worried I was going to have the same trouble I had when arriving in Uganda. Especially when we first got the airport and were yelled at by a female officer for not addressing her as we walked by. But thankfully, we successfully made it through all eight checkpoints in the Ugandan airport to get to our gate. They checked the validity of our COVID tests, passports, health screening forms, boarding passes, etc. It was intense, intimidating, and thorough. However, we made it onto our flight and out of Uganda. I did not think much about leaving Uganda. I was eager and ready that I pushed all emotion aside.

We made it through all checkpoints in Amsterdam, through customs in Seattle, and home safely in Salt Lake City. I felt so many overwhelming emotions, happiness, excitement, safety, and relief. I was welcomed home by my dad, grandparents, brother, sister-in-law, boyfriend, and dear friend. I felt the most love and safety I had in two months.

I dove right back into normal life. I was begging and eager to get back to work, hanging out with friends, and being happy. I wanted to start right where I left off. But after trying this for two weeks, I found myself extremely unsatisfied and depressed. I did not understand what was going on and why I was feeling the way I was. "You are home, why are you feeling the way? Everything is back to normal, stop overthinking," I would think to myself. I got to the point where my lack of understanding of my emotions would physically shut me down. I had to call out of work a few days because I physically I could not put myself together emotionally.

I contacted my therapist again and started going back to her in hopes to process what was happening. I learned that I was feeling a lot of different emotions, but my brain was not processing all of them. First, all my previous travel experience before Uganda were incredibly positive, structured, and life changing. I have always held them really close to my heart and put them on a pedestal. I had the same expectations for Uganda; however, these expectations were not met in the way I wanted them to be. I was grieving over expectations that, in my mind, were never met.

Secondly, whether I like it or not, my experience in Uganda changed me. Because I am changed, I can never go back to who I was beforehand. I will have to learn how to bring in who I used to be, with the lessons I learned in Uganda, to find confidence in the person I am today.

Third, running away from what happened, sweeping it under the rug, and ignoring it because it is uncomfortable, does not do yourself any favors. Unfortunately, the best way to overcome a hard memory or situation, is to go through it. Processing it fully is the best path to healthy healing. I have learned to ground myself, remind myself I am home and safe, reframe my time in Uganda as a growing experience, neither good nor bad.

I have now been home for over a month and am still working and fight each day to process my time in Uganda and know that this will take time. I have learned to be thankful for the experiences I had, the lessons I learned, and the people I met. While I often wished the uncomfortableness would go away, I cannot deny that it was beneficial for me.

I know sharing a story like this is interesting, but why should it matter to other people? I feel like there are too many people in this world that get hung up, and give up, over the roadblocks that life throws at them. Roadblocks are simply detours that help you experience and learn things that you would not have been able to otherwise. If you only drove straight forward, on the road of life, you would never see or experience anything different. Although the unexpected turns we take are uncomfortable, they are the reason we grow. Next time you have an unexpected turn in your life, you can think, “what can I learn from this?” instead of, “why is this happening to me?” You will learn more than you ever expected and relate to people in a way that is simply indescribable.