



On A Personal Note

a special friendship





In November of 2008, Better Future organized an open leadership experience to the Gambia. Total strangers became friends for life. Three of them share their memories in this e-mail exchange. Jaap van Dijk is a freelance advisor in the field of management development for GnOO. Pierre Mendy works for Concern Universal in the Gambia and Senegal as a program co-ordinator rural livelihoods. Judith Gunneweg is partner development leader EMEIA with Ernst & Young.



Dear friends Pierre and Judith,

Every time I think of my leadership experience in the Gambia, a picture comes to mind: Pierre holding the talking stick, addressing his “Mandela speech” at the closing session. You were truly inspiring, your speech enlightened my heart and my mind. It reflected the dreams you have for yourself and for your people, and the hope you gave me.

I experienced the leadership journey to the Gambia as a cultural and emotional deep dive. It reconnected me with my own roots and values and helped me to make the decisions that I so much needed. For me, this process was accelerated by the cross cultural role play in which I had the role of a Gambian father who decided for his son that he should get married. It was a magical experience and the words just came to me, not from reason but from my heart, flowing directly from my mouth and melting with your culture. In that moment, for the first time since long, I felt connected, to my family, my friends, to humanity.

Dear Pierre, I have a question for you. I am convinced that the intensity of the experience came to me because I was embedded in your culture, unknown to me but so very welcoming and rich. To be able to relate to you, I had to let go of my habitual thinking and rely on my inner self for what is of value. This helped me to reconnect. How did this work for you, as a Gambian in the Gambia? What helped you to find this overwhelming dedication to the future of your people and the Africa you presented to us in your speech? I am looking forward to your answer.

Warm regards and love, Jaap

Dear Jaap, dear Judith,

What a joy to read about your experience in my beautiful country. And yes, you raise an interesting question Jaap. For me, ten days of cross-cultural sharing was the best learning experience ever. Working with you all, looking at our projects through your eyes, it made a deep imprint on my way of thinking and doing. I felt I had to make my mind empty so I could take in more. To do that I let myself float like a balloon on the Bwiam river and let the waters take me to the farthest corners of my country. Those moments were my true moments of self-discovery and growth. The program made me understand I needed to be a good listener, I learned to talk less and listen more. It was empowering to realize that not one person can do it alone. We all need each other, unity will be the corner stone of our future. I know that dedication will lead to unity, will build a next generation of African leaders, and will give my people a future.

The Better Future training has made me realize that colour does not matter in life. It's all about who you are inside and the beliefs you stand for, not about status and what you have. The days we spent together sharing our experiences were indeed a turning point in my life. Jaap was like a true and loving father in our group. Judith is like the wind that blows gently on our skin; we cannot see it but we all yearn for fresh air. Since our departure Judith has always been the link that keeps the chain together, you've kept the fire burning and enabled us to feel the warmth of unity through diversity. Judith, I remember the tears that flooded the grounds of the garden and I wonder: "what do they represent?". How was it for you to return to your country and go back to work again?

Wishing you well, my warmest regards dear friends, Pierre

Dear Pierre and Jaap,

Wonderful that you're both doing well. When I was reading your messages, it was as if we were all back under that deeply rooted Gambian tree; the sun was hot yet the shade of the beautiful tree felt velvety like a touch of a breeze.

A good question Pierre, as always. When I returned home and especially to work, I initially felt totally lost and alienated from the world I thought I knew. I really needed to pull myself together and benchmark everything I had done so far: my personal relationships, my work and my belief systems in order to translate my insights to a happier and more balanced future. Not surprising in the year I will turn 50! In my work I experience on daily basis that most of our current leaders are deeply hurt from within and lack hope, heart and humbleness. I was about to become a mid-life cynic and wondered what difference my efforts make. The Gambian experience and especially the things you said to me made me realize there is no time to lose. So now I am letting go of the auto-pilot and started to reach out to build more and stronger bridges across any kind of disunity: be it an organization, groups of people at top-level or a combination of the two. I am even more courageous with the leaders I work with than I already was and the results are remarkable. In other words: I am learning to build 'sustainable leadership' from within. In answer to your question the Gambian experience has helped me to support everybody I encounter to show guts at the right time and place to create a better future that will benefit us all.

I miss both of you and the members of our group, and yet the Gambian experience is a long-lasting one. Through our case-studies and the on-going friendship, we have been able to create a platform to support each other in doing what is right: for the local NGO, for the Gambia and through this experience for my organization as well. Your friendship helps me every day to 'practice what I preach'. Maybe we need to be apart across continents to realize that our lives are a drop in the ocean yet without it, there is no hope nor a future.

Be well and do well, Judith

