

3 Stories That Will Forever Change the Way You Look at Water

by Tyler Riewer

Tyler Riewer traveled around the world visiting countries without clean water access—and he's here to tell you what he saw.

It's hard to fathom. The idea of waking up before sunrise every morning and spending hours walking just to find a water source. Standing in line to access a muddy hole in the ground that you share with both your neighbors and their livestock. Carrying 40 pounds of dirty water all the way home on your back and then serving it to the people you love most. Constantly suffering from stomach pain and diarrhea. Losing children to water-related diseases.

It's a world most of us don't know. And yet, it's the reality for 748 million people around the world—748 million! That's nearly 10 percent of everyone living on this planet.

You and I got lucky. We're the other 90 percent. We happened to be born in places where we've never had to worry about finding water or deal with the fear that our water might affect the health of our families.

But that doesn't mean their stories can't impact us.

Over the past two years, I've visited eight countries that were in need of clean water. I've camped in rural communities, shared meals inside people's homes, and met some of the most courageous, driven, and inspiring people I've ever known.

I'd like to tell you three of the stories that stuck with me most.

1. Life in the Desert

What no one told me about Niger is that it's practically the Sahara Desert. Truly. One hundred and fifteen degrees, sandy, dry, and brutal. And there's no place to escape any of it. The only available water in a place like this lies in 100-year-old holes in the ground, and the women have no choice but to hoist it out by rope, one bucket a time. As a result, their hands are gnarly, shredded, calloused, and hard.

(Photo: Tyler Riewer)

On one of our final days, I followed a 26-year-old woman named Fadoum through part of her morning, just to see and capture what it was like. She described it for me in advance: waking up before sunrise to collect water, cooking breakfast, going to collect more water, pounding grain for lunch and dinner, and then collecting water again. But witnessing it was another story. I got to see all of the no-big-deal things that she left out: bathing and dressing her daughters, feeding her goats, cleaning her home. It was amazing. And it was also painfully exhausting.

After an hour, I asked when she got time to rest. Fadoum laughed. "There's no time for rest!"

"What's your favorite part of the day?" I continued. Without missing a beat, she looked up at me and replied in total seriousness: "Anytime I'm not pulling water."

2. The Danger of Walking for Water

Eastern Uganda is how I imagine Hawaii in the early 1970s: a less-modern kind of paradise. Lush hills thick with green. Fruit stands packed with pineapple, mango, watermelon, and avocado. It's beautiful, and just the right amount of hot.

But it's an eerie contrast to life in a rural community without clean water. Women here walk up to six miles along dense, marshy paths to reach a polluted lake that's home to snakes and crocodiles. Every person in the village knows someone who has been killed by one or the other, and many have seen it happen. Even that isn't as scary as the walk itself, which leaves women exposed to human predators (such as passing fishermen) who may be lurking in the bushes.

(Photo: Tyler Riewer)

The family we met and became close with during our week in Uganda had two daughters who had been sexually assaulted by men while walking to collect water. At 14 and 17, both became pregnant after being raped. Both chose to have their children. Both were forced to drop out of school. Both are now single mothers living at home with a very different future than they had dreamed of as young girls.

These girls were victims. But their attitudes remained incredibly inspirational. Though they live in a society that looks down on unwed mothers, their family responded with love.

And they both said that if it means other communities in Uganda will receive access to clean water and girls can live without fear, they want their story to be told.

3. The Most Inspiring 15-Year-Old I've Ever Met

By the time we reached our first village in Mozambique, a small crowd had already gathered around the water point. They were eager to talk about the difference clean water had made in their community.

At the front of the pack, neatly lined up in matching blue T-shirts, were five members of the local water committee (a team responsible for taking care of the water access and educating the community about health and sanitation). One by one, the men and women introduced themselves: a chairman, mechanic, tax collector, health and hygiene officer. And then the final introduction, which came from a seemingly shy 15-year-old girl at one end.

"My name is Natalia. I'm the President."

Ahem. I don't know what your reaction to that was just now, but I had to pick my jaw up off the ground. I've visited more than 25 communities with charity: water, and never had I met a 15-year-old water committee president before.

What it came down to was Natalia's education, leadership, and work ethic. Having access to clean water gives her more time to spend in school, and as a result, she's become better educated than many of the adults in her community. Now she's a leader.

(Photo: Tyler Riewer)

At one point in the trip, I asked Natalia's mother what she wanted for her daughter's future. "Our dream is for Natalia to become a teacher," she said proudly.

Overhearing the conversation, Natalia whipped around to respond: "I don't want to be a teacher; I want to be the headmaster!"

Over and over again, I've met people in the field who have told me that water is life. And I don't think I understood the depth of that right away. I knew that having access to clean water would immediately improve health and make life easier and safer—but the incredible takeaway for me has been that getting clean water for the first time brings the start of a new life.

Healthier kids spend more time in school. Healthier families save money on hospital bills. It's exponential. Better opportunities. Stronger economies. Future leaders. An end to poverty.

Water is where it all begins.

Knowing that...how can we, the 90 percent who got lucky, not do something to help the 748 million people who didn't?