

Rachel Heckroth
Newsletter 6
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Saying Goodbye to Senegal



Learning how to roast cashews was so much harder than I anticipated!



Our final retreat was spent in the Lompoul desert. Beautiful scenery and the perfect place to debrief our YAGM year

Well this is it, the moment I've been dreading, my final newsletter. All of my goodbyes have been said and I have been home in Seattle for the past few weeks. I'm sorry this last newsletter has taken its sweet time getting to you all. If I'm being completely honest, I have been avoiding it like the plague. Once I send this newsletter, I am officially done with my YAGM year. I already miss the life that I had when I was in Senegal. I miss walking down the street and shaking hands with everyone I knew. I even miss rolling my eyes at the boys who shouted "toubab" at me on every corner. I didn't always know what was going on during my year in Fatick, which was difficult to get used to at the beginning. But I've found that being home, I am equally unaware of what is going on. I am having to rediscover who I am and what my place is now that I am back. While I am still new to this journey of self-discovery, I know that my main task is to find a way to take everything I learned and find a way to organically shape my life with these ideals.

But first...an appreciation post



YAGM Senegal 2018-2019 (left to right)
Zeb, Rachel O, myself, Maddie, Hannah, and Andrew

I would like to start off this last newsletter with a shout out to my amazing cohort. I've been so incredibly lucky to have them stand by my side this past year. From venting about our challenges with the patriarchy to ABBA dance parties, these five people have been there for me through it all. Despite all of our obvious differences we were able to create a family from our diverse backgrounds. The intricate tapestry of love and relationships we created will forever be one of my favorite memories of my YAGM year. For the rest of my life these five weirdos will be the only people who truly understand everything I went through this year, and I wouldn't

have it any other way.

The transformations I've witnessed have been inspiring. The strength I've seen Rachel, Maddie, and Hannah live into will forever remind me of my own strength when at times I may forget. The understanding and grace Andrew and Zeb showed while being pushed to confront their privileges gave me hope that there may be a day in the future when women will be treated and viewed as equals. While I found so much joy within my host community during my time in Senegal, my cohort was my best support system. All of our transformations did not come easily. Some were bloody battles that required us to look inside ourselves and confront some demons that we would have much rather ignored. But the love and grace my cohort showed me gave me the courage to keep fighting my battles and come out a better version of myself.



Saying goodbye to all the girls of the women's center at their graduation



A walk in the neighborhood with all my siblings on my last night.

Rachel's Book Corner

Stand Your Ground: black bodies in the justice of God

-Kelly Brown Douglas

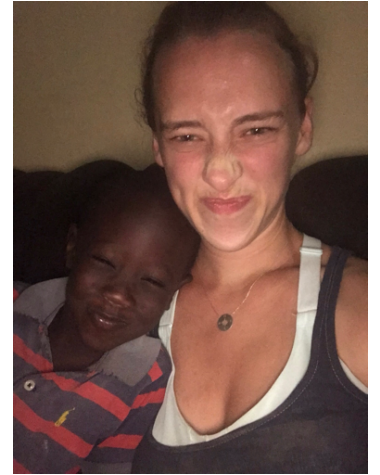
Toxic Charity
-Robert D. Lupton

The Bluest Eye
-Toni Morrison

You are receiving a different Rachel...

I feel like I should warn you all that the person you will be receiving will not be the same Rachel that you sent off back in August. While the prospect of relationships shifting because of this change terrifies me, I also want to say that I have never been more proud of the woman that I am in this moment. I've spent the past year living and loving in a way that I didn't even know was possible. My biggest desire is to find a way to take all the lessons I learned throughout this past year and weave them into my life back here in the States. When I left Senegal, I promised myself the one goodbye I wouldn't say was to Diboor Ndour, the person I was when I was living in Fatick. She was a strong, goofy, independent, and vulnerable woman who was committed to speaking out against the injustices she witnessed and who wasn't afraid to ask difficult questions, even when they were directed inward. These are all qualities that I am working so hard to carry with me into this next phase of my life that I am building. Senegal will forever be a part of my heart.

I've been dreading this final newsletter so much, because there are so many things that I want to share with you all and so little time and space. There just never seems to be the right words to express all the gratitude and joy that I feel. I wish I could implant the beauty of Senegalese culture directly into your hearts. Though I wouldn't be authentically telling my story if I only shared the love and joy I experienced. There was also a lot of heartbreak and loneliness that I felt during this past year. Impactful change doesn't always come easily, in fact it rarely does. I witnessed aspects of life in Senegal that I was previously sheltered from by my life in America. Some may say that makes me lucky and privileged. Of course, I am in no way denying the privilege that I have so blatantly benefited from my entire life. But what I would have to disagree with is the belief that I am lucky for my previous ignorance. The phrase "ignorance is bliss" sounds like a nail on a chalkboard to me now. The bliss that I previously felt by remaining in the dark to the struggles of everyday life for billions of people around the world now makes me sick to my stomach. What I previously thought was blissful ignorance pales in comparison to the bliss that I felt when I



Prosper and I making silly faces together on my last night in Fatick.



One of many tearful goodbyes with my host mother, Ellie.

was living alongside and accompanying my Senegalese family. The joys and struggles that we went through as a family brought me more peace and joy than blissful ignorance ever could.

I know that in my future travels I won't always have the opportunity to understand people and their culture in the profound way that I did with the Senegalese. But because of my journey through YAGM I know that those kinds of relationships and experiences are possible. That fact, more than anything else, gives me hope for the future. That these relationships and experiences don't have to be once in a lifetime, but rather they can be my template for how to continue building genuine, authentic relationships for the rest of my life.

Love always,
Diboor Ndour
Rachel Heckroth (I guess I should get used to using my real name again)