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Elon should be involved more with Africa

Phillip Crook
Columnist

My friend Lindsay says Elon is really big on Africa, and I'm starting to believe her. It seems as if every time I turn around I am encountering something that has to do with Africa.

It all began with Francis Bok's "Escape from Slavery," the freshman common reading this year. It then extended to the author's two-day visit and address here at Elon. Then, last Tuesday I watched "Hotel Rwanda."

Continuing at the football game over Family Weekend, a group of students gathered to raise money for iAbolish. Finally, on Sunday evening I went to see the African Children's Choir perform at Antioch Community Church.

To be honest, I don't really know that much about Africa. Appalling to say the least, I know. To think, I call myself an educated human being and here I am, almost completely ignorant about an entire continent.

And that's another thing: isn't it interesting how we (and by "we" I am referring to the typical Elon student: a white, upper-class American) commonly consider Africa to be more of a country than a continent. Practically no one, at least in my experience, speaks about Ghana, Zaire or Namibia independently of the entire continent. We are willing to generalize Africa into one entity

and yet I've never heard anyone casually say "North America is so lovely this time of year ..." etc. In reference to someone's heritage or ethnicity for example, we say African-American, not Sudanese-American, as we might for a Chinese-American or Irish-American.

Now, a large factor in this issue is, of course, the history of slavery in America. We don't often say Sudanese-American because a lot of the time the person in question does not know from which African country he or she originates. For hundreds of years countless people were torn from their tribes and nations, with no record taken to individually document a single person. Thankfully exceptions to this fact exist, where people have been able to trace their lineage all the way back to Africa; but for the large part, this is not the case.

That said, we must ask ourselves why this generalization of Africa occurs. And if you are lucky enough to take sociology you will know that the answer can be found in one, not-so-simple word: ethnocentrism. My textbook, "Society in Focus," defines ethnocentrism as "the tendency to evaluate the customs of other groups according to one's own cultural standards," which basically means thinking other cultures are inferior, strange or even bad in comparison to your own.

The sad part is, the various customs and habits that make each of us American (and

even the term "American" is ethnocentric) are so embedded into daily life that they have become social norms. In fact, we hardly even notice them. Yet, when we see the Mangbetu people in Africa practicing head elongation we call it abnormal, even when here we are in America cutting women open and inserting plastic into their bodies. Plastic surgery is simply another norm of our culture and we take it as completely acceptable, no questions asked.

But the greatest tragedy, I think, is that our ethnocentrism has blinded us so completely that we hardly ever even think about Africa. That's why all the events of the past few weeks have stood out so much in my mind: I've never thought about Africa so much. It is just as Joaquin Phoenix's character in "Hotel Rwanda," Jack Darglish, says: we are content to see the atrocities of Africa unfold on TV, say "how terrible" and turn back to eating our dinners.

I think part of the problem lies in the fact that we see Africa as so greatly removed from our own lives. Because the customs and peoples of the various countries are so different from our own, we feel disconnected and unable to understand; and who wants to dwell upon that which they don't understand?

The answer to why we have ignored Africa for so long is more complex than I am able to fathom, but what I am certain of is that this is

a problem. Hello people! There is an entire continent of this world that we are almost completely ignoring. Through increasingly ethnocentric eyes we see a continent, yes, an entire continent, that is just too far away and too different to be helped. I think it's safe to say that we are all horrified by the AIDS epidemic and the severe shortage of drinkable water and the lack of proper schools, but what are we actually doing about it?

Really, we just don't care, and if we care, we simply don't care enough.

But when I review my mental log of all the "African" things that I have encountered over the past month, I am most struck by the Elon 101 class that raised money for iAbolish. They didn't raise much money, but they were at least doing something. All the talk in the world isn't going to change how we view and treat Africa. In fact, I could write this column six times over and still, no one would do a thing.

I won't end with typically cheesy lines like "Find your own way to make a difference, you can do it!" but I will say to you, why not be more like our beloved Elon and choose to be BIG on Africa. Now wouldn't that make a nice T-shirt?

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A look at 'Family Guy' and a free will

Jeremy White
Columnist

I was thinking the other day about what so many people love, accept and take advantage of everyday, free will. The dictionary describes free will as the ability or discretion to choose. Or the second definition: the power of making free choices that are unconstrained by external circumstances or by an agency such as fate or divine will. The inevitable question therefore becomes, to choose what? And what are external circumstances that are fate and divine will?

Well to answer the first question, some would say that it is the ability to choose what you do in your everyday life. Who we interact with, what we say, where we go, whether we choose to do laundry on a weekly basis or

not. But wait, what is this 'unconstrained by external circumstances' business? Does that have to do with your ability to choose? It would seem that by the definition, 'external circumstances' constitutes fate and divine will. Follow me if you will.

If I have gotten up at about 7 a.m. and I am a second year college student who is trying to make it in the world, is my free will really my free will for the entire day? Allow me to explain myself further. I'm up, I'm eating breakfast, why? Because I'm hungry, because if I don't I will die eventually, but if there were a way to never eat again, would I take it? If I would, is me eating actually an action of my own free will or the set up that was designated by my body whether by evolution (as some believe) or intelligent design

(as others would believe)? As I go on about my day, I go to class and sit in the same spot for an hour and some odd minutes. Do I do this because I like sitting and listening to someone else talk for that long? Does it entertain me? During the class period I feel a rumbling in my stomach and realize that my body is telling me to go to the bathroom. If we are in the middle of a deep discussion that is appealing, my free will tells me I want to wait and not go to the bathroom, but my body is directing me (divine will?) to go. So in essence, I decide to go. Was that because of free will or because it's just the way things are?

I could go on for hours with scenarios such as this, the point is, how much of our daily lives is actually free will? While thinking about this inevitably I thought of something crazy that is

the closest thing to free will as I have ever seen. "Family Guy." That's right, "Family Guy." "Family Guy" is probably the most random show I have ever watched or set eyes on in my entire life. The fact is, there is no reasoning for a lot of the things that happen on that show. Meg gets hit in the face by Stewie who gets laughed at by a father who is taking a pee right in the middle of the floor for no apparent reason. This, ladies and gentleman, is what I see as the closest thing to free will in our world today. This is not to say we don't make our own decisions, but a lot of our decisions are made due to our circumstances and our needs rather than outright randomness. Think about it ...

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