

Blue Clay People
by William Powers

“Blue Clay People” is about the author’s, William Powers, experiences in Liberia working as director of projects for the Catholic Relief Services stationed there. He goes to Liberia with his own preconceived ideas on how he will help improve the situation in the developing country. His motto when he first arrived was to “reduce poverty while conserving the rainforest.” He learns that the situation is much more complicated than he had thought and that he needs to let go of his preconceived ideas. He eventually learns to adapt to the many trials he has to face.

He starts off very positive and full of hope. The first culture shock he encounters is realizing just how bad it is in Liberia, on the drive to capital, Monrovia, there is a hill of trash that is simply called *the mountain* that they have to drive over just to reach where he will be living. Powers is shocked that where he’ll be living looked more like a plantation estate than what he had thought he’d be living in such as a small home sleeping on the ground. He even finds out that the previous director used servants to do most of the work around the home. He is also surprised by his encounters with many of the locals asking for free handouts in a variety of different ways. One common phrase is to ask for money is “My weekend is on you?” Powers is very much against just giving out money as he views that this creates dependencies in the Liberians.

Powers learns how much politics and foreign trade have shaped and influenced the daily lives of the people. Liberia was found as a place where freed slaves were sent after slavery in America was abolished, the thought was that they would be happier there. With the Oriental Timber Company cutting down trees, farmers practicing slash and burn techniques for growing crops, discovering corruption within his own organization, the rebel politics, and sickness he starts to become disheartened and questions if he can really do anything to make a difference. Even one of his mentors begins to doubt his own abilities. His trip back home did little to alleviate his feelings as he learns that people the United States just aren’t concerned with what’s going on in Liberia and continues to buy products that help fund the corruption, including his own fiancée.

It takes nearly two years before he starts to see his efforts pay off with a farmer in area that he frequents to make sure his new efforts were working. He is pleased to see that the people are starting to learn how to farm in a sustainable manner. Though eventually he chooses to leave Liberia due to the increasing unrest and war and moved on to help with efforts in South America.

The term Blue Clay People was from a story Powers’ driver in Liberia told him about how God created people from blue clay and sneezed pepper on them causing the

people of the world to war with each other and be hateful. The book reflects on this theme time after time. Powers makes a clear point that our efforts in helping other countries are not straightforward and there is a lot that needs to be considered when trying aid them. Though at times it may seemed pointless to Powers he managed to continue on and was able to help even if it wasn't in the way he thought.