



A spectacular view of Fianarantsoa.

FIHAVANANA

Living,
Loving,
and Learning
in Madagascar

March 2018

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! (Yes, I know it's March.)

My host community wasn't kidding when they said Christmas continues well into February. One month ago, SALT held their annual Christmas celebration. And just last week I attended a New Year's event sponsored by the students from the southern synods! At first, I was confused about why Christmas and New Year's last so long here. Back in the U.S., we can hardly get through one holiday before things are already in full swing for the next one. Part of the reason Christmas in Madagascar stretches on until, well, practically Easter is that there is no Lent. The Malagasy Lutheran Church doesn't celebrate Ash Wednesday, so Lent sort of falls off the table along with it. And with no season in-between Christmas/Epiphany and Easter, the celebrations just continue.

I'm not convinced that the lack of Lent is the reason for the extended holiday season. I'm still not really sure *why* Christmas lasts so long—but I'm definitely a fan. Christmas is all about rejoicing. About spreading love and cheer. About believing in miracles. Why shouldn't we celebrate that on more than one day per year?

The most beautiful thing about the extended holiday season here is the intentionality. People set aside time for family, friends, and fellowship. People take time out of their busy lives to get together with loved ones, to cook and eat together, and to worship together. People make time to greet the new year, to praise God and to thank Him for life, for faith, for happiness, and for love. In short, they intentionally include time in their lives for the things that really matter.

I think we could all use a little more Malagasy Christmas in our lives.



Performing "The First Noel" with the SALT staff.



Dancing with an English class.



The Betsioky Synod after cooking and picnicking together.

Putting it in Perspective

Six months. It sounds like a long time. It's half a year. The length of two full seasons. Longer than a college semester. Definitely the longest time I've ever been out of the United States. Sometimes it feels like it's been longer. Most times I can't believe my YAGM year is flying by so fast.

Because six months sounds like such a long time to me, I expected that, by this point, my life in Fianarantsoa would be pretty settled. I figured that living somewhere for six months would mean that I would have developed many deep relationships, would be well beyond teaching greetings and introductions, and would speak Malagasy passably well.

Expectations aside, it's time for a reality check:

I know a lot of people in my community. I'm friends with the majority of them. I talk to most of them every day. Yet, many of my relationships still feel superficial. What am I doing wrong?

I teach at three different places every week. My students are eager, dedicated, and bright. I plan my lessons diligently and fill class with activities from start to finish every time we meet. Yet, we just finished learning how to say "my name is" and "How are you?" at Amboaloboka. We're still working on nouns and the basic present tense at SALT. We just wrapped up question words at FaFaFi, a unit I started way back in December. What am I doing wrong??

I live in a country where Malagasy is the most common first language. Every single day I talk to people who don't speak English or French. I have conversations with people I meet on the street. I've started meeting with a tutor every week. Yet, I can do little more than say my name and ask how much something costs. I usually don't know what people are talking about or how to respond on the rare occasions when I do understand. What am I doing wrong?!

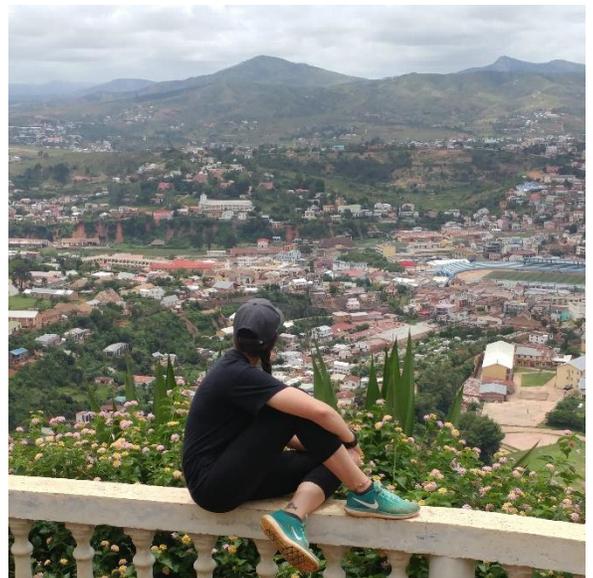
The answer? I'm not doing anything wrong. Except looking at my year from an incomplete perspective.

The thing is, my YAGM journey might have started six months ago—but my adventure in Fianar did not. Subtracting time spent at orientation, in South Africa, and on a New Year's trip with my fellow Madagascals, I've only been living in Fianar for a little less than four months. I've been teaching for less than three. And suddenly it all makes sense. Four months is plenty of time to make friends. But with language barriers, cultural differences, and busy schedules, creating deep bonds takes longer. Besides, it's not like there's a timeline for making friends; it varies from person to person. Three months of teaching classes that only meet once a week comes out to twelve total class periods, tops. Twelve days is a respectable length of time to spend on the basics. Twelve days is a decent-length unit. Four months of full immersion would be sufficient to get a good grasp of a new language—but my language experience is far from a full immersion. I do hear Malagasy every day, and I speak a little almost every day. But many people at SALT speak English and even more want to learn and to practice. So, I speak English. It's no wonder I haven't progressed very far with my Malagasy. And overall, I *am* feeling very settled in Fianar. I feel like I'm a part of my community, and I love life here, which doesn't surprise me at all. In general, I adapt relatively easily and quickly to new places, and that's been true about living in Madagascar. And I think that, because I adjust so quickly, I often forget that not everything else (like building relationships and learning languages) happens as fast.

I've learned a lot during these four short months in Fianar. I've learned a lot about Madagascar, about Malagasy culture, about Fianar, and about SALT, but I've also learned a lot about myself. And one of my biggest realizations? I really struggle with being patient with myself.

I'm a patient teacher. I understand that learning is a process that is different for every student, so I give them time: time to try, time to mess up, time to try again, and time to grow. I don't get stressed when my students don't master concepts rapidly. I don't get frustrated when we have to repeat topics. I don't question their intelligence or their abilities or their personalities when progress isn't instantly visible.

But, for whatever reason, it's difficult for me to be as gracious with myself. Building relationships and learning languages take *time*. I have to remember that it's okay to go slow. I'm not necessarily doing anything wrong simply because I can't see the results right now. I need to remind myself to look at the bigger picture—and that the best things are always worth waiting for.



Looking out over Fianarantsoa at Point de Vue, which is French for "point of view" or, fittingly, "perspective."

Meet my Host Family

An introduction to these wonderful people is long past overdue! We might not live in the same house, but this family has definitely become my home away from home.

My host dad, Barson, is a professor at SALT. He completed his Master's and Doctorate at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. My host mom, Germaine, works with the women at SALT. The two of us are only 10 years apart in age, so she has become a combination of my mom, my sister, and my friend. My host siblings Aina (14), Sonia (11), and Clara (9) are all fluent in Malagasy, English, and French! Aina's a big basketball fan, Sonia loves to read and write, and Clara is a social butterfly and always full of stories to tell. The five of them lived in Minneapolis for four years (Barson for seven), so it's always fun talking and reminiscing about Minnesota. Barson even lived in my hometown for a few months!

Victoire is Germaine's youngest sister. She's studying computer science in



From left to right: Victoire, Larissa, Sonia, Aina, Clara, me, Barson, and Germaine.

Fianar and sings in a choir at another church. Larissa lives and works with the family as a "helper" (a very common job throughout Madagascar), which means she is in charge of the cooking, cleaning, laundry, and walking the kids to school. She feels just like a member of the family and usually translates the Sunday morning sermon for me—into French!

Every Sunday, we share a big family lunch at their house, which is across the SALT campus from

mine. Our time together is always full of conversation and lots and lots of laughter. After lunch (and on other occasions during the week) my host siblings and I often play cards together. Some weekends, everyone comes over to my house, where we make pizza together and transform my living room into a movie theater.

I am so incredibly thankful every day for my Malagasy family!

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Donate:

I am still working towards my fundraising goal of \$5,000. For more information or to make a contribution, visit my personal fundraising page at support.elca.org/goto/RachelMann.

Pray:

Please consider keeping me and the 85 other YAGMs in your prayers this year. Thank you for your love and support!

MALAGASY WORDS OF THE MONTH

MAMY (mommy):
Sweet

MASIRA (maw-sear-uh):
Salty

MATSATSO (maw-sought-soo):
Not sweet, not salty, but in-between and still flavorful (My host mom and I have been trying to think of the English equivalent and can't figure it out! Does this word even exist in English?)

MOFO GASY, RAMANONAKA, GREFY:
Three types of delicious rice-flour bread sold on the streets. "Mofo gasy" is *mamy*, "ramanonaka" is *masira*, and "grefy" is *matsatso*.