

The Maine Trust Project

“We need people in our lives with whom we can be as open as possible. To have real conversations with people may seem like such a simple, obvious suggestion, but it involves courage and risk,” wrote 18th-century Irish poet, singer and songwriter Thomas Moore.

In this mistrust-filled world full of political contention and both fake and devastating news, mustering such courage is challenging. Finding common ground and engaging in civil conversations about important issues facing our communities, our state, our country and our world can seem elusive, if not sadly impossible.

This concerning state of affairs prompted Pine Tree Watch to examine the concept of trust. And thus, we’re launching a new series called “The Maine Trust Project.” Each month, we’ll sit down with a Maine resident to discuss this precious commodity. We’ll see which people and institutions Mainers trust and how the concept of trust drives their thought processes and actions.

<https://pinetreewatch.org/the-maine-trust-project-jane-ogembo/>

From Kenya to rural Maine, Jane Ogembo has used trust to navigate the world

By Stephanie Bouchard | July 25, 2019

Get to know Jane Ogembo

Age: 55

Hometown: Baring Plantation

Religious affiliation: Seventh-day Adventist

Political affiliation: On paper, I am a Democrat, but I like to hear both sides to see who is saying what rather than just what the party is standing for.

How she describes herself: It is important to me to make a difference, whether it is small or fundamental in the lives of people, especially those who are in need. I am evolving. I strive to be someone who is empathetic, who wants to understand people and the particular situation they are in. I aspire to be a better person who is not affected by petty things and who takes time to digest an issue to understand it or understand where someone is coming from. I want to listen more and say less.

How she defines trust: Trust is the belief in a reliability or truth in someone or something without proof. I trust in God. Have I seen God? No, but I believe he’s there. That gives me confidence and assurance. It removes doubt.

CALAIS – When Jane Ogembo was about 20 years old and living in her native country of Kenya, most of her friends were getting married. But not Jane. She had her heart set on a

different path: college in the United States. “I was adventurous,” she said. “I wanted to see the world.”

She worked as a secretary to save money. An uncle who had spent some time in the U.S. helped her to get accepted at a two-year college in Georgia. When she landed in the U.S. in 1984, she arrived alone. She had no relatives here but stayed temporarily with a family who had ties to her village.

She dived into school and got a part-time job at a bank. She had an interest in biology but wasn't sure what to do with it – until a trip to the dentist changed her life.

Growing up in a small village in rural western Kenya, Jane had never gone to a dentist. Dentists were in the cities and dentistry was considered a luxury. “Rural folk don't think about dentistry,” Jane said.

Through her part-time job she had dental insurance, so, at the age of 20, she found herself for the first time in her life in a dentist's chair in Georgia. Sitting in that chair, she discovered her dentist was just as fascinated by her as she was of him. This young African woman had come a long way by herself to a new country where she was on her own.

And he was amazed that she'd never seen a dentist before.

He talked to her about what she wanted to do with her college degree and suggested that with her interest in biology, she should consider becoming a dentist. She could return home to provide needed dentistry services to her community.

His suggestion struck a chord with Jane, so the young woman who had never seen a dentist before arriving in the U.S. set out to become one.

Having to pay back student loans and residency requirements for the receipt of educational grants has kept her in the U.S. However, while she is not serving rural communities in Kenya, she has dedicated her career to those in need in this country, working in inner cities and rural communities across the U.S.

Today, she is the only dentist at St. Croix Regional Family Health Center in Princeton, a rural community at the U.S. border with Canada in northeastern Maine.

Trust, she said, is key to becoming part of a community where she looks and sounds quite different from other residents.

“I trust greatly the goodness of people in the areas where I go,” she said. “I've never been really afraid of people who look different from me. That's why I can come here. I have a certain level of trust that a human being is not going to harm me . . . no matter how different they look from me.”

That willingness to trust in the basic goodness of people allows community members to feel at ease with her and begin to trust her. As they begin to learn about each other, they find out that while they may look different from each other, they're not so different. Building trust is a two-way street, she said.

“In the process of interaction, you learn who I am. I learn who you are,” she said. “It’s a wonderful learning curve.”

Q&A:

Pine Tree Watch: Who meets your definition of trust?

Jane: It’s a very difficult thing for me to say. To be perfectly honest, probably just God is the only one who meets my definition of trust. I think human beings are so fallible. You can trust them sometimes. You can trust your mother sometimes. She has good intentions, but she’s human. You can trust your siblings sometimes, but they’re human. So I can tell you that, really, only God meets that total definition, but for human beings, I lower my expectations.

PTW: Who doesn’t meet your definition of trust?

Jane: People who abuse children. People who fail their children. People who mistreat or take advantage of others. People who stratify society or who create castes in society.

PTW: What breaks trust for you?

Jane: I think there are universal things that break trust. Cheating in a marriage. Or when someone does something that is unacceptable – like abusing a child.

Trust is very hard to establish yet really easy to break. It’s tricky because often you don’t discuss with others what the expectations are. Mostly trust is an unspoken pact. You don’t have the benefit of discussing what would break trust. If I did not give you the benefit of knowing what would break my expectations of you, then when you do something that breaks trust, I feel betrayed even though you didn’t know what would cause me to feel betrayed.

PTW: Can broken trust be healed and, if so, what has to happen for healing to take place?

Jane: It depends on the issue. I don’t think it is easy to heal broken trust. Trivial things, I think can be healed if you make amends. But fundamental things, once you break trust, I think it’s gone. Take a marriage, for example, and a partner transgresses and goes out with someone else. I don’t see how you can build that trust again. I think you can tolerate. But I don’t think that you can build trust.

And I think as you go forward, when trust has been broken, it’s not just with that person. You become very skeptical of other people as well. It carries over. Again, take a marriage where a partner has gone astray. The betrayed partner often does not trust easily and new relationships are difficult. You lower your expectations of others. Lowering the expectation ruins things because this second person is not having the benefit of starting afresh. You’re going there with baggage.

PTW: Has your definition of trust changed over the years, and if so, how?

Jane: It has definitely with the benefit of experience. When I was a child, for example, I had all the belief and the trust that my mother would take care of everything. If she said she was

bringing me candy, that candy would be there. But the more I've grown up, I've lowered my expectations. Human beings are fallible. I'd like to trust them. I put a pinch of salt that maybe the things that I expect are not going to be met in the way that I want them to be met. I can trust you to do something. You might make an effort to do it. But are you doing it in the way I thought it would be done? Maybe not. So I trust, but I lower my expectations so that I'm not disappointed.

PTW: Do you think the cultural definition of trust has changed, and if so, how?

Jane: In the United States, not much, but in Kenya, absolutely. We got independence in the '60s, just around the time I was born. Around that time most people were in the rural villages. Most families worked on their farms. You had to be on your best behavior because there was nowhere to hide. Everybody knows you. There wasn't that much wealth in the country. Most people had basic homes. Really basic. Thatched roofs. Mud huts. And we trusted each other. Families were not afraid that a neighbor might burn them in their thatched house.

But as we have progressed and become more Western by the day, we now have strong concrete homes with iron roofs. And you should see the doors. Reinforced with steel grills. Why? Because in the thatched-roof homes there was no TV. There were no cell phones. Whatever was in my house were the same basic things as the neighbors' houses. There was nothing to come and steal other than cows and goats. But now if someone has gone to school and has a good job, they are likely to have a TV or household things that might be attractive to a thief. Now, there's something to protect. So, as we have developed, that trust that we once had when we were living very simple lives, it's not there anymore. Now you must fortify your home because someone might want to get in and get whatever they think they don't have. And people can commit crimes and run away and hide in the cities. I think the change is tremendous.

PTW: What worries you?

Jane: A lot of things worry me. The drug use. In the rural communities, we see a lot of that. Not just here; in Kenya, too. Children who cannot achieve their potential because of poverty. People dying from preventable diseases. In the Third World, you have a lot of that. Hunger. People, even in this day and age, still cannot afford food or can't get access to food. Climate change. Most of Africa has always seen excellent weather. We only had a rainy season and a dry season. Now we are having hurricanes. Just recently, 1,000 people were killed in Mozambique. Those are things that we never used to have. Whether it's climate change or cyclical weather changes that go for a long time, like 2,000 or 3,000 years, it doesn't matter; the effect is the same. We're seeing things that we never saw.

PTW: What inspires you?

Jane: People who help the disadvantaged achieve life-changing progress. People like Bill Gates, who is helping with vaccines, agricultural improvements and education. Oprah, who has built a school in South Africa to educate young girls. People who work at federally qualified health centers like the one I work in, and those who fund them. They bring basic medical and oral health services to people who need it most. And there are many people who are doing important things to help others everywhere.

PTW: What issues do you think are important today?

Jane: Many, many, many issues. Inequality. The disparity between those who have a lot of wealth and those who don't. Abuse of power. Injustice. The misappropriation of resources by people in power in developing countries.

Religious conflicts. You saw what happened in Sri Lanka (on Easter) and at the synagogue in San Diego.

Cross-cultural divisions in the U.S. The U.S. was a beacon of hope. As I was growing up in Kenya, it was this country that we looked up to. We saw how the schools were sponsored. The health was there. Things were working. If there was conflict, the U.S. stepped in and made things right. It's different now. Now we see and hear things that are of great concern. The beacon is now kind of fractured. That's said in the most humble way. Not to criticize.

Immigration of poor people from South America. Do you let all people in? Would Kenya let all people in? Canada? You can't just say, 'Yes, let them all in.' Do we stop them? What is the answer? Those are complex, complex questions.

PTW: Please share a memorable trust moment.

Jane: There are many, many trust moments. Everywhere I've worked, I've been welcome. I've been welcome. I've been welcome. I get eggs! I get deer and moose meat from my patients! It builds trust across cultures. All the things people say about how people behave when they're grouped together and afraid of the other group – you can just dismiss that idea because it is not true. It is never true! It is not true! There are individuals over there that might have views. And there are individuals over here who have other views. But we are all the same. You know what? When you're different and you're in a new community, they make an extra effort – they make an extra effort – to put you at ease. Yes. They say, 'You are welcome here.' That is my experience.