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**Q&A WITH SIXTUS Z. ATABONG, PA-C:**

**AUTHOR OF *MY FATHER’S GIFT: HOW ONE MAN’S PURPOSE***

***BECAME A JOURNEY OF HOPE AND HEALING***

*“From Cameroon to Lubbock, Sixtus Atabong ‘dreamed no little dreams’ and made them come true through hard work and perseverance. Now, through his work as a Physician Assistant and as the founder of* [*Purpose Medical Mission*](https://purposemedicalmission.org/)*, Atabong is paying it forward in West Texas and across the world. What an amazing life.”*

**—Kent Hance**, former chancellor of the Texas Tech University System, former US representative for Texas’s 19th District

**Q: Your father sacrificed his life and most prized possession to get you an American Education. Through your struggles, you’ve found yourself and God’s purpose for your life. At what point did you discover your purpose? What do you say to people who are trying to find their purpose in life?**

**SIXTUS:** One of the most impactful lessons from my father is the realization that I am a gift from God to him, to my family, my friends and the world. The same applies to everyone we encounter. Secondly, he thought me that life’s challenges are meant to help us define ourselves.I don’t know about “finding my purpose”, but I strive on a daily basis through my actions to serve God. The most fulfilling experience in my life has been meeting the people in some of these remote villages that we serve. I see myself in them, and I hope that they see themselves in me. I pray that my story inspires them and their children to see that they, too, are created perfectly in God’s image for a purpose only they can accomplish.

I pray that they see that through obstacles in life, they can gather the knowledge to withstand the challenges of tomorrow and let Christ’s light and glory shine through their struggles and their sufferings. In the end, they, too, can make their own small contributions in their communities to leave their world a better place than they found it.

For anyone struggling to find their purpose in life, you must realize that we are each other’s *Passport to Purpose*. We can help one another search for our own “who, what, and why” (define ourselves), venture outside our comfort zones and own an identity. Most often, that identity is found through serving others. We don't know God's plans for us tomorrow. What we can control today is making ourselves physically and spiritually available to serve whenever needed.

**Q: As an immigrant, you are living the American Dream. What is this American Dream for which people are risking their lives and their families to come here? Is the American Dream the same for Americans as it is for immigrants?**

**SIXTUS:** In my opinion, there is no other country on this earth better than the United States for immigrants. It allows everyone, regardless of class or financial status, the opportunity to achieve their fullest

potential. While there are circumstances that can prevent individuals from attaining success, in relative terms, and from my personal experience, most immigrants in today’s America can be successful—as long as they put in the work it takes to achieve success.

*America is not a country for the weak or lazy*. If you are the get-rich-fast type, the system will chew you up and spit you right back out. It is not a perfect country, but it’s the one country that encourages its citizens to keep striving for greatness. When I ask immigrants what the American Dream means, most of them typically talk about owning a big house and driving that “dream” car. And if material possessions are a scorecard, then almost every immigrant I know has achieved some degree of success.

In America, you have to be smart and work hard to succeed. There are scammers, just like in Third World nations. But what the American Dream delivers that other countries don’t is ***FREEDOM***. It’s the reason most people migrate from other countries to the United States. Freedom of opportunity. Freedom to do the things that give value and bring joy to your life. The ability to take care of the things you can control, and let God take that over which you have no control. Simply put, as mentioned in our Declaration of Independence, the freedom to pursue your happiness. So, my definition of the American Dream is not the money, the big house, or the fancy car. I have achieved the American Dream by freeing myself and my family from the bondage of financial debt and an obsession for material possessions. I am free to use my resources in a manner that allows me to live an intentional life.

As immigrants, we all came to this country in search of freedom, prosperity and happiness. You have to ask yourself the tough question: “What controls our hearts? What causes us to be anxious? What is keeping us from acquiring peace of mind?” *The true American Dream is within reach if you allow the freedoms of this country to work for you*.

**Q: As an African in America, you obviously have a unique perspective. What is your take on the current ongoing racial divide in America? How can we address these problems? Do you believe that we can ever live in a country free of prejudice or racial discrimination?**

**SIXTUS:** The way I view race has been crucial in defining who I amtoday. I write to encourage, and hopefully to inspire, an honest conversation about this topic.

Most people, black or white, will eventually develop an opinion about race based on their experiences. I am an African who came to the United States by choice. My Black American counterparts were brought here against their will. What they know is that their ancestors didn’t freely come here like I did. On the other hand, my white American friends tell me that they feel they are being blamed for the sins of their ancestors. Though I have been a victim of racial prejudice, I don’t pretend to understand the atrocities that have taken place in the past in the name of racism, nor would I ever undermine the struggle for equality. Certainly, the result of that struggle is what has allowed me the freedom to speak today. The one thing I know is that everyone wants to move on and raise their children in a place that is peaceful, loving and free. However, we are being held back by our past and our unwillingness to have an honest and respectful conversation on how racism affects our society. We are held back by our preconceptions. Including me.

Through the years, I have truly been blessed with friends from all races. I now understand that part of this is because of my preconception—or lack of it—about race, and the other part is my basic belief about the need for us to get rid of our prejudices and respect each other as created in God’s image.

Nelson Mandela once said, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of their skin or his background or religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than the opposite.”

Before we can do this, we must accept the truth about racism in America, listen and understand how it affects a society, and open our hearts to reconciliation.

So, how do we start this dialogue? First, we have to accept the facts and realities of race discrimination in America:

1. Slavery and slave trading did exist where people were considered less than human and sold to the highest bidder.
2. If someone is discriminated against solely because of the color of his or her skin, they feel angry and usually don’t forget this event.
3. When anyone is accused of being racist towards another race and that wasn’t their intention, they feel angry and usually don’t forget.
4. Most people who are discriminated against or accused of racism usually develop protective psychological barriers against the other race, especially if the accused is innocent.

Once we all agree on these facts, we have to figure out how to reconcile. We must be open to listening to others about how racial acts threaten the dignity of other human beings. Then, we have to understand that everyone deserves the basic right to fulfill his or her best potential. Finally, we must be willing to forgive each other.

**Q: In your book, *My Father’s Gift*, you talk about corruption in developing countries. What do you believe is the root of this problem? How is corruption affecting development in these countries? Why should Americans care, and how can the problem be solved?**

**SIXTUS:** The most dreadful thing that one human being can to do to another is to take away their hope, or intentionally prevent them from attaining their full potential. This happens every

day around the world, especially in Africa, where the only way to maintain power and control of the people or the country’s resources is to deprive the people of their God-given rights

to control their own destiny.

These governments and leaders pretend to care for the citizens and then control every aspect of their lives. I have had the privilege of visiting Cameroon at least once a year for the past ten years as we continue to provide health services to some of their most impoverished communities. I always look forward to going there, but year after year I see the physical and moral infrastructure of the country collapsing. In fact, it appears to be moving backwards. There is widespread corruption that has metastasized into every aspect of the people’s lives. *What I have observed is quite honestly a complete disappointment*.

It stems from the highest levels of government where corrupt officials use public funds to enrich themselves and their friends at the expense of the civilians. It’s a place where retired workers give up hope after bribing at different levels to collect their hard-earned pensions; a place where senior government officials fly to foreign countries to seek medical care while most of the population doesn’t even have care for their most basic health needs. Some civilians feel that they have to bribe healthcare professionals just to see a medical provider. There is complete lack of respect for free speech or human rights. The root cause of these problems is greed, power, and the absence of any moral conscience by these perpetrators.

Like I mentioned before, people migrate to the United States in search of hope and freedom from developing countries like Cameroon as they run away from tyranny and despair. I recently visited South Korea and Vietnam. Two countries that just some decades ago recording huge loss of their citizens to the United States. Today, their economies are much improved and their future is hopeful. Not only have their emigration slowed down significantly, they actually have Americans of South Korean and Vietnamese ancestry going back to invest in their countries. They give some credit to Americans for helping them build a stable democracy and an atmosphere that encourages economic progress. During this trip, I was also fortunate to visit the Korean Demilitarized zone (DMZ). While there, I read the speech that was delivered by George W. Bush at the opening of the Dorasan railroad station, the last station in South Korea that led to North Korea. In it he said: "When nations embrace freedom, they find economic and social progress…When nations treat men and women with dignity, they find true greatness."

The first step to solving these problems is to start holding these corrupt governments responsible for fleecing their country’s resources. I am still hopeful that there will be a change of hearts on a larger scale, and that our children can one day visit and maybe live in a free and fair Cameroon where hard work and honesty will be respected, and people will have a government that truly cares for the well-being of its citizens.

There is evil everywhere we go, especially when the devil promises us material possessions, but we are called to always speak the truth and help transform evil into goodness. We must take a stand against the evil of corruption, embezzlement and lies. In a place where paranoia by the government and distrust by the people clash every day, there is a risk that people’s rights will be violated. I still think that if everyone would just stop condoning these habits, there is a chance we might turn the tide. I pray that the government can find a way of creating a society where the truth is allowed to be heard.

**Q: What is Purposeful charity? What makes you qualified to talk or make recommendations on how charity should be done?**

**SIXTUS:** Any act that is intended to help another person is always good. Because I am someone who has been on the receiving end of charity, and now find myself on the giving end,

I consider this my attempt to influence how collectively we can use charity to foster human dignity.

So, what is charity? Many people will tell you that charity is voluntarily helping someone with nothing in return. I beg to differ. Let’s be honest; we get something in return. Sometimes we get more than we give. When you offer to help someone, the fulfillment you get from doing the act can’t be measured. There is no way to put a value to it. And the more you give of yourself, the more fulfilled you are. No one knows how long that fulfillment lasts. But what if you were to give something that truly keeps on giving? What if you gave something that continues to give long after you are gone, something that doesn’t stop in your absence and wait for your next visit? This is what I call purposeful charity. It’s giving with purpose to help you and others get to a destination. To help you find your own way of giving.

I found my way of giving through the people and organization that helped me along the way. This is what [Purpose Medical Mission](https://purposemedicalmission.org/) is all about. When we travel to some of the most remote places on earth, I am reminded of what that means to us and the people we are trying to help. We are perfect strangers driven by faith to perfect the body of Christ by helping one another. The people we are helping have no way of repaying us. However, when we sit with them, pray with them, eat with them, laugh with them, the message they take back to their villages is of perfect strangers who loved them so much that they would leave their families, risking their lives to care for them. When we work alongside them to build their own clinics and teach them how to care for each other, we are telling them that we expect them to care for themselves.

The message I always leave behind is that if the volunteers I bring with me can care for them without knowing them, then God is asking them to care for each other. *Show love for each other*. This form of charity is most beneficial when dealing with the health or education of a group or community, the two aspects of life that I feel that every living person on earth deserves to have access to.

Remember, don’t see the people as victims, see them as partners. We need them as much as they need us. This partnership begins from day one, when we ask them how we can help.

**Q: How has the close relationship with your father influenced the way you raise your children? How is parenting different in the U.S from your upbringing in Cameroon?**

**SIXTUS:** Yes, I enjoyed a very special relationship with my father. Growing up, none of us children had any doubt how much our parents loved and cared about us, especially after a spanking. Our relationship was great because that was a father-son relationship at its best in that part of the world. It was never a friendship. The father talks, the child listens. My father was a tough guy to please, and because of that we worked extremely hard to impress him.

Now, I have come full circle. My wife and I are raising two beautiful boys in a society that couldn’t be more different from where we were both born. However, we will face similar fears and challenges as we try to balance discipline and building a solid relationship for them. Contrary to my dad, I strive to build a friendly relationship with my boys to enable them to have an open communication with me. In a society where they will be faced with many options as they get older, I want to make sure that they feel confident in my ability to protect them, care for them, and provide for them just like I felt with my father. I can’t help, however, asking myself what my dad would say if he saw my kids wasting food, wanting something different than what is presented to them on the dinner table, or watching me negotiate and compromise with them. That was never the case with my father’s family.

It’s a different way of parenting, but in the end, like my parents, I believe that we are their initial window to the world. I must give them the tools to not only succeed in life but to find their God-given purpose on this earth, and to seize every opportunity to help others find theirs.

My children will never endure the hardship my father went through, nor will they experience the financial hardships I endured. But they won’t take life for granted, either. For now, they have me to lean on for support, but there will come a time when these lessons will be all they have to sustain them. I will have to teach them to preserve their personal dignity and protect their basic right to freedom that this great country has afforded us.

[**SIXTUS Z. ATABONG, PA-C**](http://www.sixtusatabong.com/)**, President and Founder of Purpose Medical Mission (PMM), is a neurosurgery Physician Assistant. PMM is a nonprofit organization focusing on developing sustainable healthcare infrastructure and services in developing countries. It has helped build clinics and hospitals in Cameroon, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Nicaragua, and Guatemala.**

**Atabong has received numerous prestigious awards for his leadership and humanitarian work, including the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center Hall of Fame Award and the American Red Cross Humanitarian of Year Award. In 2013, he was awarded the PA Service to the Underserved Award by the American Academy of Physician Assistants.**

**Atabong obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in Clinical Laboratory Sciences and a Master of Science in Physician Assistant Studies. He uses his life experiences and voice to motivate individuals on attaining their God-given purpose. He speaks on issues such as, living a purposeful life, realizing your American dream, financial independence, and racial relations.**

**Atabong’s goals in life have been achieved through faith and self-determination. He enjoys traveling the world with his family and learning about different cultures. He lives in Lubbock, Texas, with his wife, Kyu Mee, and their two sons.**

**For more information, visit www.sixtusatabong.com, and connect with Atabong on** [**Twitter**](https://twitter.com/SixtusZAtabong)**,** [**LinkedIn**](https://www.linkedin.com/in/sixtus-z-atabong-pa-c-8273a2161/)**, and** [**Facebook**](https://www.facebook.com/sixtus.atabong)**.**

***My Father’s Gift* will be available through** [**Amazon**](https://www.amazon.com/My-Fathers-Gift-Purpose-Journey/dp/1633936759) starting August 24, 2018.

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