You might be forgiven, if you know Africa only through major television networks and the largest newspapers here, for assuming that the continent is a sink of poverty, disease, warfare and despair. Indeed, you will find problems aplenty in most places. But there is another, more powerful side to Africa, and we ought to ask ourselves and our captains of media why we don’t see more of it.

Did you know that Africa has so far given the world seven Nobel Peace Prize winners? The latest was 2005 recipient Mohamed El Baradei of Egypt. In 2004 it was Wangari Maathai of Kenya. Kofi Annan of Ghana won it in 2001.

The point is that one doesn’t win the Peace Prize for pessimism. Of all the prizes in the world, this is among the most hopeful. You don’t seek peace believing that the world is going to the dogs. Peace can be made today but it is for tomorrow, and its proponents do not exist in a vacuum. They may be exceptional, but they often carry the belief of their societies that the world can somehow be made a better place.

When was the last time you used your mobile phone to pay for something? If you are a savvy user in this country, you might check your bank balance with your phone or use it to pay for something with a debit card on the Internet. But what if your phone itself stored currency? It isn’t a far-fetched idea to the users of the one billion mobile phone lines in Africa.

Paying for goods and services by transferring plan minutes from one account to another is not only possible in places like Kenya and Ghana and Senegal and Botswana, it is popular. Where banks don’t reach or fear to tread, other business can thrive thanks to innovators at MTN, CelTel and others.

Whatever you think of art and artists, it is hard to argue with the notion that societies which produce a lot of art are dynamic. These are societies in which people are on the move, ones which cherish freedom of expression and which can barely contain the pressure to change.
Witness, then Nigeria. Its film industry, dubbed Nollywood produces more movies every year than our own Hollywood, and they are wildly popular in Nigeria itself and among Nigerians abroad. Or the vibrant music scenes in country after country, from Cape Jazz in South Africa to Bongo Flava, the Kiswahili hip-hop and rap music of Tanzania. There are fifty-three countries in Africa, and each one boasts authors, musicians and film-makers, sculptors and poets and painters.

Do you like chocolate? About eighty per cent of the cocoa that goes into chocolate that you eat comes from Ghana. How about diamonds? Most of the world’s gem-quality diamonds come from Sierra Leone and Congo and Botswana and South Africa. And not all of them star in blood-soaked films about organized crime and international economic exploitation.

Are you a lover of language? Africa is home to more than eleven hundred recognized ones, and there are more people in Africa who speak English than there are in the U.S. Every major religious tradition is represented in Africa, and we are supposed to believe that religious faith inspires us to make this world and the next one better.

If this is news to you, stop a moment and think. Africa is a big, diverse place. Three times the size of the U.S. The Sahara desert alone would cover the lower 48 states easily. Africa has fifty-three countries, seven major indigenous ethnic groups and tens of thousands of local ethnic identities. Almost one billion people speaking eleven hundred languages. A continent rich in every field of human endeavor. How did we come to see it as a home for innumerable poor, violent undifferentiated black people?

For this is precisely the image one gets from most public figures and institutions, even the well-meaning ones. Before the election of a half-Kenyan President of the United States, most of our school students could not locate Africa on a map unaided. Even after the election, possibly knowing where the continent or even Kenya is located, we persist in stereotyping it. Africa is not a place, it is many places. Why do we do this?

One reason we do it is plain, old-fashioned racism. World empires, of which the U.S. is only the latest, treated Africa as a battleground. First is was the struggle for supremacy in European politics and world trade between Britain and France. Then it was the Cold War between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. Now it is Us versus Them in the scramble for the remaining morsels of a world economy in which many people in Africa are exploited and deliberately impoverished by forces outside their control and sometimes by their own governments in order that we, here might enjoy a measure of prosperity.

Such an enterprise would be impossible to maintain unless They were somehow worth less or less deserving of prosperity than Us. If we refuse to look too closely, we don’t have to discern individual, national, ethnic or linguistic differences. We don’t have to get to know Them, and it becomes easier to get what we want by assuming that We are inherently better.

We in the U.S. also believe very strongly in our own exceptionalism. It is an article of faith here that we are best, or at least can be best with enough money, hard work, determination or luck. Such an attitude was critical to the rise of the U.S. as a world power and is fundamental to our
remaining there. It is one of the things which attracts immigrants from Africa and elsewhere: The American Dream.

But it also makes us as a society narrow-minded. What does this mean? My way or the highway. There are no points for second place. You are with us or against us. The rest of the world doesn’t exist except when we need something or when it occasionally arrives uninvited at our front door as a terrorist attack or a rebound from a world economic meltdown which began here.

The notions that the world is our oyster and that We are here to save Them, close off our minds from Africa. Thankfully the ignorance is not pervasive. There are informed, open-minded, caring people with interests in the people and societies there to be found all over the U.S., all over Chicago, and particularly in Rogers Park. Our neighborhood is home to one of the largest communities of immigrants from Africa in the nation. We should help those who need it understand and celebrate those people as we do ourselves.