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Culturing Our Community: A Memoir of Life Experiences in Costa Rica

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Culturing Our Community:
A Memoir of Life Experiences in Costa Rica

Honors Senior Project

Jennifer Beckmeyer

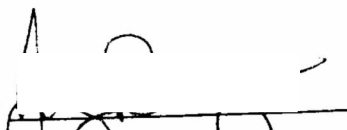

June 9, 2006

HONORS THESIS

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Date

The first thing I noticed when I arrived in Costa Rica were the smells. As I set foot into the moist tropical air, I was immediately overwhelmed with humidity, the aroma of unfamiliar plants, and excitement for this unknown world. Everywhere I went for the first several weeks, I was welcomed with new sensations of something different in the air. Even now, after seven months of being back in the United States, the images, smells, flavors, and people remain ingrained in my senses and are present in my daily interactions and decisions. Due to such strong sensory, as well as emotional, experiences, I feel blessed with a new awakening and awareness in life. This, in turn, has brought new complexities to my understanding of human interactions and furthered my capacities of facing adversity.

My own character in Costa Rica was also closely examined. The way I was perceived by people in a Latin American country brought me face to face with completely different identities than those I claim in the United States. I was seen as “la gringa,” “la macha,” the light-colored woman, and stood out more for my physical appearance, let alone my accent. However, those presumptions did not ostracize me from social groups or prevent me from exceeding expectations of what Costa Ricans thought a “normal” American was. Instead, I actively integrated myself into their daily life, participated in field work/trips, and grew to be a part of my host-family. By not letting my inhibitions get in the way I was welcomed and accepted by most everyone. With these new connections to the community, the reaches of my education in Costa Rica expanded beyond the classroom and into my own endeavors and adventures.

Culturally, these are just a few of the aspects that impacted how my perspectives evolved and I learned to integrate my own world views and values into a new culture.

Regardless of the challenges of adapting and having to confront opposing view points or opinions, my own self image remained quite positive, if not a little confused or overwhelmed at times. The fact that I could speak decent Spanish when I arrived enhanced my confidence level significantly. My Spanish skills also helped me face comments I encountered on the streets, such as the *piropos*, flirty calls typical in Latin American culture. Casual conversations I had with people around town often aided in breaking down some of the stereotypical images of people from the United States. By opening myself up to address these differences and by feeling increasingly more comfortable in new situations, my life inevitably began to change. I was so influenced and inspired by my surroundings, the good and the bad, and captivated with the more relaxed way of life that I truly left a different person.

As for my everyday life, like is tradition in most Latin American countries, I chose to focus a great deal on my family. I knew their concept of family connections was much more intimate than I was used to, but being able to experience and embrace it the way I did in Costa Rica took a deeper level of understanding. Before arriving in the country, the fact of living with a host family was definitely the biggest unknown I had about my trip. I figured that classes, the language, and customs I could get used to, but if I was placed with a family I did not, or could not, get along with for some reason, it would be disastrous. I did not have any idea what to look forward to, however. The only information I had about my family was their names, ages and occupations. The day I left I experienced quite a nerve-racking anticipation. It took the whole day of flying and two layovers for my nerves to settle a bit. However, once I got off the plane and was

welcomed by my mother, father, and host-sister for the first time, I knew this experience was going to take me far beyond any of the expectations or images I had dreamt of.

Right from the start I knew the Zamora Sanchez family was the best placement I could have been given. Right when they saw me, they swept me away, took my luggage, and lead me on an adventure around town before arriving back at the house. Their openness with me and each other enabled me to become more like a family member every day. For the first couple of days, questions flowed while language barriers were compromised as we grew more familiar with each other's customs and personalities. I loved that they wanted me to so openly share my perspectives and beliefs; and I always received good feedback or opinions from their side too. Living in that home for almost a year, being able to strengthen our trust, and feeling like I was cared about was an amazing part of my experience.

For example, my host mom's two favorite things are books and plants. She loved sharing her knowledge and passion for both items with me, especially the world of Latin American literature. The amount of books she has, and knows by heart, is astounding. She is a remarkable Nicaraguan woman with a university education, something very rare for her generation. Now retired from teaching, she loves sharing her love for life with her granddaughter, Shirley. My host father is a private accountant and one of the most hard working yet tender hearted men I met in Costa Rica. Most important is the love shared in that house, which was shared unconditionally with me and also brought me to a greater level of understanding not only of the family dynamics, but of the culture and values of their countries. Any question, doubt, concern, or insecurity I had was immediately addressed in the most caring manner, and I was as much a priority for them as their own

children. Being in an environment of love and trust is healthy for any family life. Yet when it comes from people who months ago were mere strangers whose language and country I did not know well, it made me feel like I instantly belonged and could accomplish anything with their support.

Along with my wonderful family, I also realized quickly how fortunate I was to be studying and realizing part of my undergraduate education in a Spanish speaking country. Spending time working on classes and being with professors and classmates made up a good portion of my time while studying in Costa Rica. It also provided me with a great opportunity to familiarize myself with the social norms of the country. The courses that included field trips were by far more conducive to making friends and getting to know what the educational expectations are in this Central American country, from interactions between professors and students, to accepted behavior while on trips. More than anything, I felt my language skills were challenged every day as I grew more and more accustomed to teacher's voices and lecture styles. I eventually reached the point to where I could understand just about every side comment made by the students, which was a great personal achievement in my mind. Language was one of the most challenging hurdles of fitting in with my peers and catching on to their jokes and innuendoes that may not even exist in English. The second semester resulted much easier as far as comprehension goes, and I ended the school year with quite a few good friends, both students and faculty members, as well as a much better grasp on the idiosyncrasies of Costa Rican Spanish in the university setting.

Traveling, of course, was another form of exposure to the language and the native people. It served as a perfect supplement to classes and I was fortunate to take advantage

of the low bus fares and extensive destinations of the national transportation companies. Most of my exploration of the country was either done alone or with Costa Ricans, therefore providing me with even more opportunities to get to know the “real” countryside and not just the tourist-friendly towns other students were drawn to. I spent a good portion of my time traveling with a Costa Rican friend whose parents live in the country, about five hours in bus from the capital. Spending a week at their house was something I will never forget; I found the purest example of simple living I have come across, and had a joyous time experiencing it.

While in Las Flores de Bijagua de Upala, I picked cucumbers, beans, guavas, and mamones (a tropical fruit) from the neighbors farm with doña Clara, her two daughter-in-laws, their children, her own two daughters, and three of her sons. All of the food prepared at the house, for that many people, was hand picked and prepped. We took the bean pods and separated out the dark purple beans to cook them to eat with breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the next several days. Clara made the tortillas, the milk came from the cow down the road, and the majority of their other basic needs come from within a five mile radius. Mulling sugar cane was another chore we did at the neighbor’s house, which is quite a workout for at least four people. The fresh juice is like candy, an elixir heated, chilled, boiled, or resolidified to serve mainly as a drink or use as a sweetener. When guests come and they can afford to buy chicken, all they have to do is go up the hill, bring down a couple of live birds, hang them on the tree out back to cut their necks, and they are ready to boil, pluck, gut, cut, and fry for dinner. I find living so close to the Earth to be a very enriching life. Yet it is very difficult to survive economically without the proper education or work-skills training, which are the main barriers for the people

that live out in the country. That trip afforded me the privilege of getting to know how different it is to live in the country as compared to a city in Costa Rica. This distinction is assumed by their popular culture, but is one that surprisingly few Costa Ricans have seen firsthand, and not many of my fellow exchange students were exposed to it either.

Another one of my most memorable and unique experiences was a trip I took my first month in the country to the Bribri Indigenous Reserve in Talamanca, in the southeast corner of Costa Rica. The people had just suffered from immense floods, so a friend of mine, who was then the president of the Student Association of Rural Education, organized a group of students from various Education programs to bring much needed school and farming supplies to the region. He invited me along because he thought it was something I would enjoy. I still do not know what made him sense that, but I accepted with much excitement and anticipation for what was ahead of me, though needless to say I was rather unprepared.

First of all, to even get to the villages, we drove five-and-a-half hours to Talamanca on a bus to meet with several indigenous women who prepared us culturally and mentally for our trips the next day. We broke into three groups that night and divided the supplies we had brought accordingly. Books, notebooks, pencils, crayons, school uniforms, shoes, machetes, shovels, and seeds were divided as equally as possible between the three destined schools. In the morning, our groups set off in different directions, one heading straight up the mountain, and two crossing another main river together before diverging on separate paths that lead deeper into the mountain to get to the small villages, or *aldeas*, of Soki and Katsi. Lucky for us, my group was the one that

forded the most rivers overall, including one that ran up to our chests, with garbage bags and boxes full of the gifts to be delivered.

After two hours of a fairly steep hiking and river wading, our group of seven arrived at a grassy clearing with a small, green, concrete building on one side and a traditional palm leaf hut on the other. It was the school of Katsi. There was one classroom of children present, and they were very shy towards the unknown visitors. They were studying Spanish when we arrived, a sign of how remote and isolated many of these children's families are that many of them do not even speak Spanish, the national language. The teacher, director, and cook of the school all introduced us to the students, who welcomed us with a song in their native language. We, in turn, performed a caterpillar song and danced around the room, which nonetheless made the children laugh and feel more comfortable. Then it came time to present the gifts.

Everyone went outside, the students lined up, and those of us from the university began to empty out the bulging black bags. Timid, curious glimpses whispered with excitement and awe of all of the treasures we revealed. All of the new things, especially the shoes and coloring items, grabbed the immediate attention of the students. Many of the children walk barefoot to school; the farthest student from the school walked two hours each way every day. Living conditions are so dependent on the rainfall, harvest schedule, and family needs that making it to class often is not a priority, let alone having the supplies to study or do school work at home. I do not know how they do it, but even some of the teachers have to cross the big river, making it difficult to maintain a regular school schedule. Getting beyond the sixth grade in that community is often not a reality. Having a school uniform or a new book or pencils, therefore, was much more of a

blessing than I realized. Naturally, then, the teachers and students were ecstatic to receive such thoughtful gifts. Afterwards, we were able to talk to the students, most of them from age six to twelve, about their daily activities and favorite things. Yet we could not spend much time because we had to get back before dark. We took a group picture, said our goodbyes, and headed back down the trail to cross the rivers to home. The trip back was much less burdensome without all of the gear, and we even got to swim in the big river. When we reunited with the rest of the group at the end of the day, it seemed like it had been a week since we had seen each other. We all had worked hard that day, and all came back with a new respect for the ways of the indigenous people. However, that was only a glimpse of the kind of life those almost forgotten people so far up in the mountain lead.

One thing I learned after the trip was the lack of dedication in those remote areas on the government's part, including in education, economic development, and political participation. Not many people pay attention to the fact that these people exist, and there is relatively little help offered. There are several books that have been written on this issue, like "Mamita Yunai" by Carlos Luis Fallas, and many stories that I have heard about life deep in the mountains. One story is about a very isolated tribe that lives a three or four day's hike away from the closest town. Supposedly people there are in a pact with Colombian drug lords. Because of their great isolation, any outside needs the people have are hard to come by. So, the Colombians provide amenities like clothes and food to the tribe in return for cash crops, marijuana. The men of the tribes are given guns and told to shoot anyone that wanders into their fields, which are used to grow marijuana among other things. While there is a great deal of drug-related activity in that area, I am not one to say that such relations rule the area. I can say, however, that being so close to that

reality made me realize the complexity of the hardships that these people face. There is not even room for comparison with my own existence, other than reaffirming my belief that the whole of my being is dedicated to endorsing justice and humbly reaching out to those in greater need as to prevent communities from being forgotten or ignored.

Through these and many other magical experiences around Costa Rica and other parts of Central America, I was taught many lessons, like what I value in life. For me, the most important things that have stayed with me are not only the pictures and memories of the places and people, but the daily interactions, creating habits and new routines, and being accepted more not just as a foreigner, but because of who I was and what I contributed to the community. I volunteered in an elementary school, took class fieldtrips to National Parks, decided to pursue the prospects of continuing my education at my host university, and, most importantly, I truly connected with many of the people around me. Neighbors, store owners, and bus drivers make up the array of people I became acquainted with on a more personal basis. It is something that I know not everyone in my position has the capability to do, but I am very thankful that I opened myself up and did not let our different cultures prevent that. Those relationships definitely made my eleven month stay more enjoyable, to say the least.

Another thing I was told to look out for, this time referring to returning back to the U.S., was reverse culture-shock. Fortunately for me, the transition between cultures did not signify a drastic change in lifestyle, other than a more enhanced sensitivity to everyday things like my own actions. Not only did I come back to the U.S. with a small accent, but the way I looked at my own world and the culture and society I grew up in changed. I suppose that is a common story as far as study abroad experiences go; coming

back a “changed person” with “new perspectives” is fairly typical when traveling to other countries, especially for an extended period of time. However, the heart of the experiences, the stories and memories, are too often undisclosed, not shared, and fade away before they can be passed on and remembered. The internal changes I experienced were one of the more important elements of living in a different culture that I wanted to share with people in the United States upon returning.

In returning back to Bellingham, I found myself in the dilemma stated above. If my goal had been to share my newly acquired knowledge and perspectives through all of my experiences, I would not be able to focus on finishing my degree. It is an unfortunate truth that I reckoned with upon returning from such a life altering experience. Not to mention the fact that I was reentering school mid-way through the year with so much to share yet so many other demands of time. If going abroad is meeting new people, falling in love with the way of life, the food, or the host family, then coming home is trying desperately to retain those feelings and places and people for as long as possible. This, by nature, is quite a hard task especially when other responsibilities such as school and work begin to take precedence. Soon enough, the fresh sensation of being immersed in another culture drains to barely a drop of the memories that used to feel like an overflowing glass of inspiration. Is it worth fighting to maintain that tingling of change and bright-eyed awareness that felt so right after being in another country? Or is the fading recollection just another step in the process, the coming down after a great high, a time to get back to the routine of normal, every day life. That is where the difference sets in between those who really embrace and are changed by their experiences in other countries, and those

who appreciate the time spent, but really have more critical things on their plate than reminiscing about a far off land they may never see again.

In my community, Bellingham, Washington and Western Washington University, there is a plethora of college students and other locals who have experienced both the advantages and disadvantages to coming home after a study abroad experience or another similar trip. My desire was to bring together some of those people, gather around a good meal from all parts of the globe, and exchange times we all have been through and remember, but have not had the chance to sit down and share with others. For my senior project, I coordinated just that sort of activity: a night of "Culturing Our Community" through food, stories, photographs, and people. I planned the date and time, sent out invitations, prepared an appetizer and a drink along with what I would share of out of my experience, and hoped people would come. Thankfully, there was a group of twelve of us that evening, which allowed for ample personal sharing and open conversations.

At the start of the night, we gathered around the projector to view a collection of my photos and I shared some of my experiences in Costa Rica as they came up on the screen. The discussion then evolved into questions and comments about my trip, and people shared similar or connected memories and adventures they have had around the world. As the sharing grew, the food grew colder, so we took a trip to the kitchen to eat traditional dishes from Australia, France, Central America, India, and the Middle East. Food is so essential to experiencing a culture that I wanted to be sure to include it as an important element of the night. Each person gave a brief description of their dish before we served the food, and we all tried something new for our palate that night. As we ate, we talked more about personal reactions to being in a different country, living with

families, or speaking (or trying to speak) other languages. With so many different destinations, Spain, Australia, Southeast Asia, Mexico, Central America, Cameroon, France, Belgium, and several other European countries, there were many learning experiences connected to each place visited. It was interesting to see how one person's memory reminded someone else of a similar situation, which fed into another experience, and in this way personal accounts continued to flow from to the next. From spending time with Buddhist monks, to coming face-to-face with honest perceptions of body image, to saving a friend from a spider-ridden cabin all night, our small group we had accomplished some incredible feats.

In addition to the travel anecdotes are the diverse ways in which people have molded their experiences to form new perspectives of everyday life. What I hoped to highlight from the evening was that these moments of stepping into unknown territories leave lasting impressions on our lives and contribute to who we are as a human being. I wanted to know if anyone had specifically been changed due to their experience as I have been, or if they had found out something different in returning home. One woman shared about her personal struggle with body image, and the great challenge and later relief she found in the women of Cameroon. Life there is lived very exposed, with all different shapes and sizes of people. They are not those who walk around with a tape measurer and judging eyes, but find the simplest ways to enjoy life and live happily. We also received wonderful advice from veteran travelers: to take children abroad with you and allow them to receive a part of their education in another country. I had not really thought about that before, but the middle school years are a perfect time for new life experiences and a change of atmosphere. The couple that shared this advice thought it to be very beneficial

in the development in their own children, and something I would like to take to heart someday. For me personally, Costa Rica has become my second country and the time I spent there will always be a part of who I am. It is a new community I would never have had if I did not speak Spanish. I realize now how fortunate I am to be bilingual and be able to travel to enhance that skill, which includes putting my Spanish to work by helping the Hispanic community in the United States.

Another relation I found between leaving and returning back home to new behaviors and life-style changes are the connections to the goals of environmental education. People who travel and actually bring back something they have learned ideally will apply that knowledge to their own community. However, it is often difficult to do the opposite, to travel to a strange community, in another country or not, and try to implement new ideas and practices. This concept reinforces the fact that one must be familiar with his or her own environment and the community's issues before bringing innovative ideas to someone else's. For every person that is able to experience life in another country, I hope that the concerns at home will become even more important after they see some of the different environmental values and hazards around the globe. Then, initiatives that focus on local change will have a wider scope in the big picture and will be more prone to understand the significance that a banana plantation in the tropics has on their own life and choices. This is when a person or larger entity is truly able to value the uniqueness found in other spots around the globe, and can bring home values that help create a more positive impact on both the environment and the people.

The formation of an international community is one of the most obvious benefits of world travel these days. A higher level of awareness and commitment for the common

good is necessary to keep one single community functioning and working together, but this also has benefits on a larger scale if these communities, states, or countries are willing and able to compromise and work towards a common goal. Action, whether it is on a large or small scale, must be taken with careful forethought and consideration of who is going to be effected, before it is implemented. In this sense, the future ambassadors of this world are people like the travelers who shared at my house in April. Such individuals with passion for other cultures and an innate understanding of not only our differences but also our similarities and connections with those around the globe, should be working for the betterment of established social, ethical, and environmental norms whether it is locally or internationally. Therefore, in order to not lose our connection with various experiences and fond memories that serve as our inspiration, we must share, pass on, write down, and remember how our life stories and world views have been impacted by experiencing life in another country.

Senior Project Presentation
April 28, 2006

“Culturing Our Community”

Outline

7pm- People begin arriving with dishes/pictures.

Load pics onto computer (put in same slideshow?) and

Food goes into kitchen

*have drinks and appetizers (tamarind, refried beans with tortilla chips)

7:30- Welcome, explanation of the purpose of the evening, thank you for being here, etc.

*have pictures set up and going, to observe throughout the night

Share part of my experience, inspiration for the night

Ask people to go around the room, share where we have traveled to, one thing you would like to give and one thing you would like to receive from the night.

(what dish you brought?)

Get plates of food, have a seat in the living room to eat and share.

8:15pm- Be ready to share! Eating, watching photos, get things started.

Have questions ready to pose- anyone can jump in and answer, share perspectives, react to questions.

Flexible until about 9:00pm, then get more food, more thoughts processing, culminating activity.....wrapping things up with overall views on experiences, integration into own life views or actions, etc.

9:30-10pm- Say goodnight, thanks for coming, end product TBA (diary / write-up / digestion)