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It's been just over six weeks since I left the Dominican Republic, and some part of me is still figuring out which country I'm actually in. After spending the past two years in a hot, humid climate, it's more the physical change that I'm trying to process. To think that I was able to spend my daily life with some of the most passionate and joyful people I have ever met, in one of the most beautiful places I've ever lived, still astounds me and fills me with gratitude.



(Esperanza family.)

Thanksgiving has always been important in our family. As my cousin Andy commented about the nature of Thanksgiving having much less expectation than Christmas, "At Thanksgiving, you just show up, and it delivers."



(Virginia is not as warm as the DR.)

The last time I had sat at the family table was 2009, and I simply felt content to be there a week ago. To be around people that I loved, that loved me, and with whom I could share stories and crack jokes without having to fill in any back story or translate an unusual phrase was a blessing.

Maybe it's odd to say this, but to me the best part of thanksgiving is precisely when you've assembled the "perfect bite" on the fork, complete with turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, and gravy fighting gravity. You take ready aim and as you anticipate the cornucopia of flavors seconds from hitting a sea of taste buds, you see the rest of your family in various stages of meal-making, eagerly awaiting to dig in to their plated constructions, eyes fixed on

assembling their own perfect bite.

That memory is full and recent, and I can still taste it.

But just six weeks ago, I spent much of my life around people who didn't have enough to eat. I played with kids with bloated bellies from parasites, red hair from iron deficiency, and sores on their legs from bacteria that could be wiped away with medicine that costs a few bucks.

I don't bring this up to make you or me feel guilty. We are blessed to be where we are and live how we live, and I believe the right and mature response is seek to make more room at our tables. Poverty is still a crushing reality for millions of



(A daughter of an Esperanza client)

people in this world, and indeed, probably a few minutes from where we live. Unfortunately though, it can be an "out of sight, out of mind" kind of thing, where as soon as the image disappears, so does our preoccupation with doing something about it.

Since I've been back, I've been concerning myself with trying to keep warm and getting all my ducks in a row for my next stage of life which includes Central America for eight months, and hopefully graduate school. What's funny to me as I read these application essay questions about "a time in my life where I've been challenged" I'm a bit frustrated not over "what do I write about" but with "which story do I pick?"



(Children of Esperanza clients.)

Questions like these, give me cause to think about how my experience over the past two and a half years might help make me a better candidate for the application committee. And certainly, if I get an interview, which would take place in probably Nicaragua or nearby Costa Rica, that would probably help my odds. But now I ask myself, "Is this why I did it? Did I do this for my resume, for my grad school application, for a great 'life story.?"

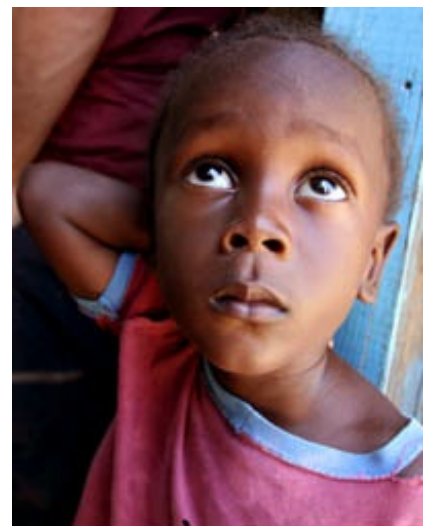
Many of the visitors to the Dominican Republic would comment on just how happy people were even though they were living in rudimentary or even ghetto-like areas. I would often hear the comment "They don't have much, but they're so happy!" Now, being back, it's even stranger to think about that

contrast of modern life with that of a developed nation. I suppose we could say, "They have so much, and they still aren't happy!" (Sounds weirder doesn't it?) I would suggest that even with our piles of things, and credit card debts to fund them, we have trouble seeing that "things" still don't make us content, like solid relationships with people we care about.

What I think we see behind the façade of material poverty are people who live more connected to each other. They have to. They have no choice. Poverty does not allow for separate bedrooms, individual computers, or text messaged reminders to sit down at the table. Consequently, relationships are stronger, people deal with conflict, because they have to, and something honest and pure begins to appear when people find a true source of happiness.

Joy.

It's such a small word. It can get lost behind the big words of materialism or self-actualization. It's so miniscule but if you've ever seen it, if you've ever felt it, if you've ever tasted it at Thanksgiving because you were just so happy to be home with the loving people who raised you to be the person you are today, you'll know that joy carries a tremendous significance that is worth giving up the pursuit of the things in the modern day race to the top.



(A daughter of a Haitian client.)

Even experiences or hobbies, accomplishments or current positions in an organization can fall into the category of "things." Where if we buy and show off what we've got, we'll be happier overall. I mean, look at my previous question about what being abroad could do for me professionally and what I really experienced over the past two years. It's like I can separate "career moves" into two categories. Ones that look good on a resume, and ones that make a life full of joy.

I look ahead to six weeks from now when I'll begin a new assignment. One that will bring great challenge, one that will test my strength and my commitment to what I believe. I think it would be stupid and even heretical to say that I'm



(Me with some Nicaraguan boys in Aug. 2010)

going to beef up my resume or grad school application in Nicaragua and Honduras to help [Edify](#) build up and empower small, affordable schools. Maybe it's fear of inadequacy that we try so hard to climb the corporate ladder, speed up just because everyone else is speeding, or see the huge advertisements to keep up with the Joneses that diverts us from a true destination as we travel. I've learned that sometimes the best destinations on the highway are pointed to not with the most audacious lettering but often by meager, modest signs.

Joy is something so tiny, so pure, so innocent that once it makes an appearance its little light becomes so overpowering it blinds out all the distractions. You've seen it before haven't you? In your kids, and in your spouse, in your family, in a job well-labored and well worth it, in a celebration of what is good and right, in a victory that comes after months or years of struggle and despair. I think when we see true joy we throw off all that slows us down.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV)"

To participate in God's work of restoration, partner with local leaders who share the same vision to help thousands of children receive a better education, carry out His will to draw the lost back home, so that more sons and daughters can sit at the feast with those that they love, I will then know of the future promise that made a King leave His throne.

That is the joy I want to taste and see.

I pray that you are able to see the things that distract you and steal your joy, and that the Lord would help throw off the things that hold you down.

Blessings to you and your family,
-Aaron

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