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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 than 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. A few years ago 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 that "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 just 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 into 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, orange reddish 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 to make more room at our tables. Poverty is still a crushing reality for millions of people



(A daughter of an Esperanza client.)

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 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.?"

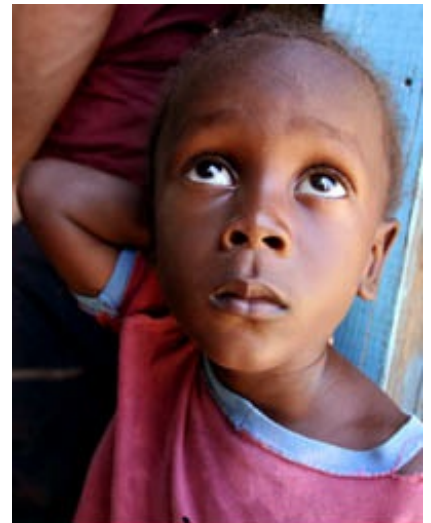
Many of the visitors to the Dominican Republic would comment on just how happy people were even though they were living in rudimentary or even ghetto-like areas. I would often hear the comment "They don't have much, but they're so happy!" Now, being back, it's even stranger to think about that

contrast in respect to our modern day life with that of a developed nation. I suppose we could say, "We have so much, and we 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 emerges 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 exactly what it is. Joy carries a tremendous significance that is worth giving up the pursuit of 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.

I look ahead to six weeks from now when I'll begin a new assignment. One that will bring great challenge, and one that will test my strength and my commitment to what I believe. I think it would be silly to say that I'm going to beef up my resume or grad school application in Nicaragua and





(Me with some Nicaraguan boys in Aug. 2010)

Honduras to help [Edify](#) build up and empower small, affordable schools. Truly doing something good in life is worth more than a few lines on a piece of paper.

Maybe it's a fear of inadequacy that makes us tirelessly climb the corporate ladder, speed up just because everyone else is speeding, or fixate on the 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 can destroy what once were monstrous 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)"

I want to continue God's work with our local brothers and sisters in Nicaragua and Honduras to help children receive a better education, helping to make a place at His Thanksgiving table for everyone.

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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