

La Paz Bolivia, Summer 2008

My first day in Bolivia could have been a day in Bulgaria, or Paris France; it was country I didn't know and a language I couldn't speak. Our flight from Miami left with 4th of July fireworks beneath us and sleepless anticipation; in Spanish and English everyone felt excited to visit family, come home, or be somewhere totally different for three months. From the airport in El Alto, where I discovered my bags were lost (prompting frenzied mental scheduling of how to get the most mileage from my extra pair of socks and underwear), a small fleet of taxis holding American students flew down the highway thousands of feet into the bowl that is La Paz, sun touched at 6 am, alien, and thrilling.

Our host-mother, who was usually never awake at 6, met my roommate and me and together we sat at the kitchen table for an hour and grappled with sleep deprivation and shockingly poor Spanish skills. After it became plain that we had run out of information to communicate with each other (the number of siblings we had, their names and professions, and our school classes figuring prominently), we did for the first time what I would continue to do for three months, which was take our leave by nodding and smiling violently while giving thanks and backing away to our rooms, where I slept heavily and dreamless.

Around the 8th week of my 10-week stay in La Paz, my Bolivian family would tell me that my Spanish had improved a lot. Childlike, I had begun to smile at the appropriate moments in conversation, and at meal times could usually answer

questions when prompted. Sometimes we spoke at length about politics, mugs of tea steaming in our faces, we played with the floating coca leaves and I tried to think of more complex adjectives than “very bad/good” or “terrible.” When Obama was elected a week ago, I recalled vividly these sessions spent in the only warm room of the apartment, the silence of people staring into their tea, the shut up animal of my desire to express my excitement about the Democratic Candidate, and my inability to do so. My Bolivian family spoke no English, and for the first two months I was like a pet excitedly wagging its tail at the sound of its name, or “dinner.”

What really contributed to learning Spanish was the fact that by the end of my time in Bolivia every English speaking person I had met had left for home, and my only friend was a German student I had met while working at Hospital del Nino, Anna, who spoke both English and Spanish but preferred the latter. If I was truly lost she could speak in English, but except for on the phone we used Spanish, and in the course of a couple weeks my Spanish grew by leaps and bounds. Once I took Anna home to meet my host family and have lunch with everyone. They were so pleased to have a student that they could talk to easily, and I was pleased to be able to eat in silence without the hunted feeling of being called on to decipher something and reply.

After visiting the different hospitals for the first month of my stay, I spent four weeks at Hospital del Nino, where Anna had come to work for three months. Hospital del Nino had an infections disease ward with patients who stayed for a month, a week, or less than a day, with or without parents, their diseases disfiguring or unnoticeable. Other clinic settings EI3 students worked at focused a lot on

primary care, well baby check ups, and- for me- the chaos of attempting to understand what's happening in two other languages, Spanish and medicine, not to mention culture. Women with babies wrapped in 20 or 30 pink blankets resting on their knees, nodded dutifully to every word the Doctora said, and when they left the physician would turn to the interns and explain that it wasn't likely that the women would follow doctor's orders, they would follow their husband's orders first, and the husband didn't often come in with his child. Besides learning the basics of performing well baby exams and the ailments particular to that region, I learned that I did not want to be a primary care physician.

Hospital del Nino also conducted well baby exams, but what all of us students there found truly thrilling were the cases of infectious disease that changed daily and taught us not only about what they were and how they were treated, but the lives that people lived all over Bolivia. Because of a national infatuation with sugar (shared by the US as well) a lot of children came in simply because of poor dental hygiene, which turned to a bacterial infection, and spread, swelling, into their jaws and cheeks, causing the three to six year olds sitting on the iron beds in the sunny ward to cry at the slightest touch to their red, chipmunk-like faces. This was a problem that could have been avoided by tooth brushing, but would now result in the removal of part or all of a patient's jawbone. National health coverage, SUMI, provided coverage for pregnant women and children up to 5 years of age. It did not cover esthetic procedures, so a six year old who had part of her jaw bone removed to clear up a wildly out of control bacterial infection would be doubly out of luck as far as receiving government help for her health care.

We observed many problems due to out of control staph infections, as well as TB. Once there was a little boy who had a disease from the jungle I was never able to make out. Because I had little experience in medicine, and needed to concentrate hard just to understand the Spanish spoken about each patient, I felt relatively ineffective in the hospital setting. Our job as interns was primarily to watch and learn, but 10 weeks is a long time to stand around. We were usually given the opportunity to perform perfunctory exams on babies and the doctor would then check after us. I attempted to supplement hospital experience with a notebook that I wrote down words I didn't understand or different cases that came in which I would then Google later that day to learn more about. Sometimes the initial Spanish I'd written was so inaccurate I wouldn't even know what I was looking for in the first place, as simple as it may be. This was the case with the little boy and his "jungle disease," which I couldn't find anything about. He had had horrible swelling on his neck and behind his ear, but left the hospital looking much better.

In Bolivia there are an unimaginable number of places to go and things to do. My attempts to experience as much as I could in the 10-week stay I had in this new country were at times exhausting, but I feel grateful I had the chance to do so. I saw the jungle, the salt flats, and the vacation town of Croico and also Lake Titicaca, went on two climbing trips as well as day trips around La Paz, and at the end of my stay, I traveled to Machu Pichu in Peru. My favorite thing to do in my free time was to walk around La Paz and explore the neighborhoods there. One of the days that stands out the most in my mind was the day of the referendum, when all traffic and work was suspended so that every Bolivian citizen could vote- which they were legally

obligated to do- on whether or not Evo Morales should remain president. After walking to the voting station with my host family, I wandered up the streets that wound higher and higher up the steep sides of La Paz and watched a different soccer game on every block, interrupted by kids sitting on skateboards and riding out the impossibly steep inclines. In the courtyard of the fire station all the fire fighters were playing soccer passionately, people were out with their dogs and their babies and their old people. In the absence of traffic and work, everyone was just doing what people everywhere will do with space and time to do it- play- and even as a total stranger, it made me feel at home.