

The Relativity of Optimism

A memoir by Jillian Gold, MS3, University of Rochester School of Medicine

May, 2017

Her long, dirty fingernails...we found them at the end of a rocky trail along the trash-covered mountain. We found her covered in dirt, and breadcrumbs. With sores on her back, in the shape of hammock strings. It took her mom several minutes to bring her outside and show her to us. We assume she was naked before, but she was presented to us in a pretty dress. Ripped in many places, yet a stunning turquoise, with white lace; brightness shined through the stains.

Professor Roni had left his class with an activity to do and guided us to her home. "What a nice surprise," he said to us when we appeared outside his classroom, dripping in sweat from our long hike from San Jose centro to Portillon. "This is very important," he stated with a kind yet solemn tone. "I'm very glad you came to do this."

On the way to her home, Roni asked us to please stop on the side of a ridge. We had been engaged in our conversation about Alex's plans to move to the US and did not notice our surroundings: mountain ranges and the San Juan River in clear view to our left. "Delicias is over that mountain - down, then up, then down, then up again. You can see the new road over there."

"Ah! You can now drive to Delicias!" Alex exclaimed with a smirk on his face. There had been many comments amongst the brigade about this ominous place called Delicias, over all the mountains, but still technically within our work area. Mention had been made about the adventuresome residents who made the trek there in years past. There was always an implied dare: *who's going to do it this time?* But Doug said we did not need to go that far to find more people who could benefit from our programs.

"No, not yet," Roni said. "Not yet." He let out a sigh. "On the other side of the river is the department of Lempira," he pointed. "You can see where Indian Lempira died fighting for Honduran independence from Spain." I savored these moments, when Hondurans paused to teach me something about their culture or history -- like on the first night when I went dancing with Catherine, Melissa, and Alex. Alex began his two-week endeavor of teaching me Honduran slang -- and I have hung onto those special words that exist only in Honduran Spanish. That night I learned *rijioso*, an adjective that describes being so excited to do something that somebody will have to drag you away if they ever want to move on. Like when I'm climbing a mountain, or when my mom is rearranging her gardens on a spring day. That night, Alex and Catherine were *rijiosos* for dancing. I could have watched them for hours, but every time I stood still Melissa grabbed me and taught me the basics of whatever dance was playing -- salsa, bachata, merengue. When the typical Honduran music came on, I stopped in my tracks. The beat was so fast I could barely tap it out with my fingers. I gaped at the three of them in awe; they saw me and laughed, without missing a beat of their dance. "Just move your hips! You can do it!"

Catherine said with a smile out to her ears. The beautiful thing was there was no judgment; just a warm, friendly welcoming into their country and an invitation to new friendships.

We trekked to Portillon for the home visit on a hot, clear day, the first in two weeks without afternoon rain. "These paths used to smell like human feces," Alex told me, "before Doug started pushing for the latrine projects 10 years ago." I was thankful we did not have to walk through that smell in the heat; the occasional animal excrement was enough, and I did not need anything extra to make my stomach churn. Alex and I had spent the walk distracting each other from the inevitable feeling of hopelessness associated with investigating a case of reported child abuse in a country with extremely limited resources to help. We talked about food for the entire hike: Italian food, Ethiopian food, Indian food, how Hondurans learn to cook Italian food, the most recent recipes we had each come up with in our own kitchens, what Alex's wife Becca likes to cook, what our moms grow in their gardens. I was relieved we found a light-hearted topic that we could both discuss with such enthusiasm.

The night before, the conversations were not light-hearted. Alex painted me a gloomy picture of the Honduran systems around investigating child abuse. There is no mechanism like CPS, and nobody is mandated to report. The police will pick up a case if they wish, but even then, there would unlikely be a place to take a child with epilepsy and paraplegia. Further, the Honduran police have no protections for witnesses. Earlier this year there was a group of a hundred or so citizens in the capital who bore witness to serious crimes and their names were given away, leaving them in danger. This explained why the man who came to the clinic asking for our help was not interested in reporting the case himself.

All 14 members of our group labored over the question: *to what degree, if any, should we get involved in this case?* During our time in Honduras we had analyzed our role as public-health-minded medical practitioners in light of our own country's history in Honduran politics. We had learned about the US banana companies placing Honduran figureheads into power to steal land from the subsistence farmers and bolster their profits. We had traced out the events around the coup of 2009, which exiled President Manuel Zelaya, a liberal president who cared for the poor, and replaced him with a conservative president who supports US corporate interests; a president who went so far as to outlaw peaceful political rallies and change the constitution to allow multiple-term re-elections. We had pondered the murders of brave indigenous leaders, such as Berta Caceres, who fought against foreign corporations to protect their country's natural resources. Berta was assassinated in March of 2016, her killing linked to US-trained special forces in the Honduran military. We were acutely aware that people who look and talk like us have done many things to harm the people of this land. Over the past several decades our organization had established a thoughtful and mutually respectful presence in the community; we agreed we had better not do anything to compromise their trust.

The beauty about being a physician is that no matter the

history of a place, the severity of the public health needs, or the ethical muddiness of community development work as a foreigner, there is always one thing that is crystal clear: it is my job to do my best for an individual that has come to me seeking help. Here in rural Honduras, despite the oppressive history of US influence, despite the lack of infrastructure for normal clinic visits, despite the absence of basic rights for children with developmental delay, I had an obvious role to play. I would visit my patient in her home, offer a consult, and give my best medical advice within the (limited) resources at my disposal. I would share a detailed report with my colleagues and arrange follow-up visits. I would consult with the community leaders and have their instant respect due to the history of my organization's work here. I would advocate for this girl, because she is now my patient, and I am now her health care provider.

There is no amount of politics or poverty that can get in the way of my human-to-human empathy and decision to do whatever is in my power to help her. And for that, I am glad to be a (soon-to-be) physician.