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Chapter 4

Peru Story Book

By Caitlin Cipolla-McCulloch

Abstract: Embarking on a year outside one's own native culture challenges, stretches, and inspires. A year in Peru offered much to reflect on and share. This unique culture offers great diversity within its borders and in the midst of the variety of languages, dances, and foods is one of the '7 Wonders of the World'- Machu Picchu. In this spirit- the entry captures '7 Wonders of the World' and '7 Momentous Experiences' to honor a yearlong enculturation experience. In the end, it was a year marked by many transformative experiences.

As I pondered what to do after graduation; with a medical school acceptance in hand, a wise friend of mine directed to a path I would never have imagined. Bro. Tom Pieper invited me to email Bro. Felipe Melcher in Peru- to simply inquire about what he was doing. Bro. Felipe's response to me- was more than surprising, "I will be in Dayton in two weeks for a visit I make every three years, let us get together and talk". Four hours later, in what I would later learn was an interview, he offered me the opportunity to come to Peru; to move to a little mountain town called Otuzco in order to use both my biology and theology degrees to serve the mountain campesinos (farmers).

After I graduated from UD- I moved my life back into my mom's house- and packed what I needed for a year before setting off in June. I landed in Trujillo, with my luggage in hand, looking for a familiar face (familiar in the sense of the faces I had memorized from the Centro's blog). Thankfully I was greeted by our community director Jose Luis and Bro. Douglas Roper- a native of St Louis, who greeted me in English in the midst of a very unfamiliar place. We traveled to the Brother's community house for a day before traveling up the mountain to Otuzco.

When we arrived in Otuzco Bro. Douglas showed me to my simple brick room which I would use for the year. The view out the little window is breathtaking; a little windy road passes behind the house where campesinos pass daily with their donkeys heading out to the fields.

The first few days and weeks were difficult. I did not understand how to get around, feared getting lost without being able to find my way back home (and not really knowing enough vocabulary to get myself unlost), did not know how to cook here (the oven is in Celsius and you light the oven and stove with a match), did not know how to wash my clothes (by hand with collected rain water) and had a large hurdle of language learning to do in order to communicate. But after a couple months, the rhythm of life, the culture and language began to come.

For me this adventure was the accepting a calling. It was a moment for me to step outside my comfortable life and learn at my core who I deeply am. Responding to this calling has reminded me of life's urgency- challenging me to live each moment- conscious of the future but without a stressful preoccupation about it. It has challenged me to let music speak to my soul, even though the music is different for me and learning to dance has been a challenge. It has challenged me to take risks and make choices I never thought imaginable. I have had to answer to the aloneness of my own authority- being 'alone', 'on my own' in a new place and new culture; but have indeed found companions who have been present to accompany me at least for part of my journey as we walk in the same direction.

Experiences outside one's own culture really changes a person and so I would like to share both 7 Wonders of the World that were gained in my experience abroad as well as 7 Momentous Experiences. The experiences being listed in seven occurs because Machu Picchu is one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

7 Wonders of the World

Simplicity

In my time here in Peru I have learned about the grace of simplicity. Most of the people I work with live in very basic (sometimes 'substandard' houses) and work the land. Their homes, made of adobes, have very basic necessities: a few pans to cook in, beds, tools to work the land, and the objects necessary for the students to study. Some kids have a toy or two- the most prized of these being the soccer ball that they use to play 'futbol'. In their simplicity the campesinos live a good life. They are not often preoccupied with the latest telenovela (soap opera), don't worry about how they are dressed, and do one thing really well...live in the moment. The campesinos truly live in the moment- they welcome whatever grace or stranger who is present with open arms of hospitality- and stop their lives to attend the visitor. During almuerzo (lunch) the main meal of the day, the people linger at the table sharing life and stories, folks have some amazing stories- they may not have traveled the world- but they have definitely experienced life...it's joys, hardships, tribulations, graces and peace.

Poverty

Being poor is hard. The campesinos of Northern Peru- tirelessly work the fields which are situated on mountainsides- day in and day out at a wage of about 25 soles a day (if they are not working their own land) or they gather a harvest of vegetables to sell at very low prices. Their hands are large and tough burdened by the working of the land and the loads they carry. Radio is the only major communication tool- although most folks have an inexpensive cell phone as well- but the phone only works in some parts of the community. Showering happens normally with a bucket, but only a couple times a week (if that), electricity and running water (a spicket inside the house or just outside to cook with) are commodities, and latrines are present in most

areas- but not all forcing one to use 'el bano natural' sometimes. Poverty of this level means exposure to the elements- dressing for the weather, putting on tons of layers at night and sleeping under practical, heavy wool blankets. Fashion is not the object- although each region has their own type of dress and hat- but the clothes are meant to be functional not necessarily fashionable; although in some cases the clothing is just beautiful. But in the midst of these conditions- people are not sad; in fact they are joyful and normally quite content with their situation and many of them live to be over 100 years old because they do not experience the 'contamination' that city life brings.

Community

Though it has its unique cultural expressions, community speaks a universal language, and when you find community that is when you realize you are home. For me community has been found here all throughout the country of Peru. In the sierra I live in an intentional community- and when I visit the pueblos the families welcome me into their homes sharing community with me. When I visit other parts of Peru- the people who are there welcome me with open arms allowing me to share in their celebrations, patronal feasts, birthdays and holidays. The community here in Peru- has many more colors and festivities than my community in North America- but it shares the same root- care, compassion, love and an element of faith. It took me a while to really feel community but once I did I knew I was home.

Living in the Moment

The Peruvian people really understand how to live in the moment. They rejoice in every moment- dancing the night away often without thinking about the consequence of the next morning- and beautiful indeed are those nights. They value people more than the clock- and time is sort of fluid. You can enter into a deep conversation with a perfect stranger, who will take the time to be with you, without regard for the passing moments. There is such joy in each day and celebration because Peruvians live the days as if there is no tomorrow. It took a good deal of unlearning the planning habit- but at the end of an experience among the people of Peru I hope to take living in the moment home with me.

Humility

When you move to a new culture that speaks a new language you regress to the state of being a child again. You have to try your best to communicate and rely on everyone to help you do things. This regression leads to an incredible time of self-reflection and a growth in humility. Without humility and the ability to laugh at yourself- it is near impossible to live. Learning how to live again- requires this grace and the patience of others to help you on those difficult days.

Uncomfortable Vulnerability

When faced with the elements: extreme cold, no indoor plumbing, and fleas your body experiences a certain vulnerability. It is something which you don't think you can endure- but in the end you make it through. This same type of vulnerability is faced by those who invite you in. They may not experience the physical vulnerability to the elements that your unaccustomed body faces; however when a person invites you into their home to share with them something as intimate as the faith they are exposing themselves in a vulnerable way as well. When you are expressing vulnerability you can grow quickly in trust and what results are beautiful conversations and relationships.

The Sameness of Human Nature

No matter the country, stage in life, or economic status, human beings are all the same. All have intrinsic dignity and all just want to love and be loved. I learned about love and the differing manners in which it can be expressed in my time in Peru. The Peruvians do an excellent job of expressing love through gift giving, hospitality and quality time. The hospitality expressed by campesinos is hospitality that knows no limit. The people of the sierra offer all that they have for guests- sharing their best food (in great abundance), opening their homes, even offering their own beds as a place to rest.

Nature's Beauty

Peru is a diverse country- diverse in culture, language and beauty. Machu Picchu is one of Peru's riches and is one of the 7 Wonders of the World located in Cuzco, Peru. It is an incredible scene to behold, sacred ground, and is one of many beautiful landscapes found in Peru. The Peruvian sierra is incredible, with little (sometimes paved) roads that pass through the greening mountainsides. There are thousands of clear lakes throughout the sierra as well as glaciers topping the mountains of highest elevation. In the jungle there is an incredible diversity of animal and plant life. On the coast the ocean and beaches are full of people fishing using little boats made of reeds. Peru is a wonder of the world in its diverse landscapes.

7 Momentous Experiences

The Walk from Trujillo to Otuzco

Each year in December thousands of pilgrims make between a 35 and 65 kilometer walk from Shiran or Trujillo to Otuzco to the Virgen de la Puerta (Our Lady of the Door). They walk to show their devotion to the Mother of God- often asking for her intercession. While I did not complete this pilgrimage in December, in May I walked with 18 campesinos from Trujillo to

Otuzco. The first few hours of the walk were ok because my feet and legs did not really hurt- but after 6 hours of walking I was pretty spent. We all stopped for dinner around 9:30 pm before continuing on the journey. What followed dinner for me was the most difficult. The leg of the journey between Shiran and Samne was the only unpaved part of the journey. It was on the 'carretera vieja' (old road) which is dust and rocks. My unfortunate timing after dinner meant that my group (with whom I walked the first 6 hours, at my pace) had already left and I was now to accompany the slower group. (I have nothing against the slower walkers, it is just very difficult to walk at a pace that is not your own, you get tired a lot faster) So I headed out at my pace which meant I was a bit ahead of the big group. I used the first hour of more or less solitude- to give thanks for the graces in life. My friends, family (near and far) and the opportunities God has given me. It was a wonderful hour of reflection with God- in the darkness of the night. But after the hour- a strange thing happened- all of a sudden I wanted to cry. No- I wasn't sad- just exhausted- and while I tried to listen for God's voice- I was just overwhelmed and started to choke back tears. So I shouted back to Eloy and Leoncio- telling them that I needed some company and thankfully Leoncio obliged. I needed the community on this journey- it was impossible to complete the walk on my own. I tried to make conversation with Leoncio- but he was not a big talker- he just walked peacefully even offering to carry my backpack (cross) for part of the journey. We journeyed a number of hours farther and arrived in Casmiche at around 3 am. We saw that the velorio for Faustino's father was still going on and so we arrived to support and be present with him. The majority of the group entered into Faustino's house and blessed his Father's body with Holy Water, then sat and prayed with him. The only people present at this time were Faustino and his brother and the arrival of 20 people was such a surprise for him. We had the guitar with us in the camioneta- so Jose and I sang some songs- meanwhile

all the campesinos who were seated- took a little nap. We sang until about 4 am- at which point Faustino thanked us with teary eyes and told us to continue on. This experience with Faustino strengthened me for the journey. Four hours later we arrived in Otuzco, blistered, exhausted, but pleased. Without the community- this journey of faith would not have been possible.

Hitchhiking in Trucks throughout the Sierra

Most Peruvians do not own cars because they are very expensive, which makes public transportation a highly developed art. There are comvis that pass from community to community and buses that even run between major cities. There is also the custom of just stopping cars to find out where they are traveling to and paying them a little to help cover the cost of gas. My greatest hitchhiking adventure was a trip to a local pueblo called Mache. I made it down to the split where the buses pass which is only a few kilometers from Otuzco only to learn that the bus for Mache had already passed. I was planning on going back to Otuzco- but wanted to double check with the police officer to see if the bus had passed. He said- Yes- but proceeded to stop the next truck for a routine traffic check and told me to climb up. He told the driver that I was a missionary and to take me as far as he could on his route. We traveled together for 13 kilometers but then his route and mine diverged, so I climbed down. While trying to devise a plan to arrive at Mache which was still about an hour's ride from where I was, a police truck was passing. I ran up to the truck and asked them where they were headed. They mentioned a pueblo in my direction and so I asked them if I could ride with them. They happily obliged and there I was, seated in the back of a police truck as my personal escort. They asked me exactly where I was going and decided that they would take me all the way there. The ride was long- but I finally arrived in front of the house that I was visiting in Mache. They dropped me off right in front of the house. It was a hitchhiking success.

Riding a Motor Boat down a River in the Jungle in the Night during a Rainstorm

When I arrived in Madre de Dios, a region of Southern Peru, it was raining, but that would not hinder the journey to the middle of the rainforest lodge. After sloshing along muddy roads in a bus, we arrived at where we would board a little motor boat just as night was falling. Upon boarding the boat with about 10 other people we departed for what would be a boat ride of more than one hour. The driver seemed rather confident but the passengers were a little skeptical. After passing through some rough portions of the river- with everyone in the boat looking for debris we finally arrived at the lodge. Upon making landfall we learned that the driver had never driven the boat with passengers in the rain nor had he ever driven the boat at night. Traveling success.

Climbing a 20 story lookout tower in the middle of the rainforest

When in the rainforest, what better way to obtain a view than to climb a 20 story watch tower? From there you are in the canopy and have a view of the distant rivers and the macaw migration patterns. This point of view is distinct, a new way of appreciating life. It is a risk to be up that high, but a valuable risk which allows you to be exposed to a different beauty. You have an up close view of birds sitting in a tree, and the expansive colors present in the leaves and flowers in this zone. You can touch the clouds as they pass and feel the strong breeze moving the tree tops. It is like being immersed in a new culture- because the way of life at that elevation is so different- and because of that there is grace in realizing the beauty and intricacy that makes up a complex habitat.

Buying raw fish in the market- you choose the fish, I clean it, do you want the heads?

Buying food from a fresh market has its distinctive advantages, but definitely takes a little getting used to. When you first enter the scene of a fresh market- the first thing that calls your attention is the smell. Even though the food is fresh, dead animals still have a distinctive scent, add that to the liquid that runs through the grates on the floor and you have quite an experience. Buying the meat is one thing, but I believe buying fresh fish is a different experience. The fresh fish arrives in buckets, and sometimes is still moving when you get there. You select which fish you would like to consume from the woman who sells the fish, she then sharpens her knife and goes to work. She first scales the fish, then slices it up into little pieces for you. You are free to decide whether you would like the fish heads or whether you would like her to keep them- she will charge you for their weight anyway- so you may as well take them. When you bring them home to prepare- make sure to give them a good rinse- because she cleaned them for you with the same hands she used to give you change.

Processing behind an image of Jesus every night of Holy Week

Faith is culture throughout much of Latin America and Peru is no exception. The celebration of Holy Week is a special occasion in Peru, there is Mass every evening leading up to Easter Sunday and a procession throughout the streets each night. In Otuzco the tradition is to process with a different image of Christ each night. Each procession passes along the streets of Otuzco, with incense, candles and a band. Some of the images move, such as the 'Christ of the 7 Falls', the image falls into in pillow each time being received by a small child with dramatic

music. The people perfume the image and throw flowers as an act of devotion. The experience of faith as a part of culture is indeed profound.

Hiking up and down mountains with the supplies for the mission

A backpack with supplies for a pueblo visit does not truly weigh that much; unless you are climbing a mountain with them. On some of the visits to the pueblos we walk. Sometimes you are at a high elevation and you walk to a pueblo at a lower elevation- but sometimes the most direct path- is over a mountain. On one occasion I rose around 5:30 in the morning to set out walking before the sun. Walking in the early morning is wonderful because the air is cool and you get to watch the sun rise over the mountains enlivening the dull greys and browns with a splash of golden yellow before they brighten to green. The hike is fun, for a while, but after a couple hours especially when the path is not very clear, the hike becomes less fun. Sometimes the hike leads you up by a cemetery, sometimes down near a river, sometimes alongside animals and sometimes along a dusty road in solitude. The way of arriving, on foot is an excellent form of transportation because it reminds you of simplicity and also allows ample time to transition from one place to the next. It gives you time to think, to reflect and to just be silent. Although sometimes it is difficult, the hike and full experience of the mission is always graced.

This time outside of my own country has been a time of immense growth. I have shared life with simple people, grown in humility, captured incredible landscapes and learned to be myself in another culture. I have had adventures that I will be sharing for a lifetime. The experience was irreplaceable and graced. I have a long road ahead to unpack and uncover all that I have learned- but I look forward to that opportunity because it means I am going forward.

The next chapter will also be filled with adventures, perhaps of a different kind, but will be shaped by my year's experiences.