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Unfiltered Humanity: Reflections from Peru, July 12, 2000

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Before beginning medical school, I chose to explore parts of South America in the capacity of a servant to issues that moved my soul to action. Projects that commanded my pro-active stance were: environmental conservation, preservation of indigenous cultures, and healthcare in the developing world. I volunteered in conservation efforts in an inter-Andean forest in Ecuador, for an organization promoting protection of indigenous peoples of the Amazon, and at a children's rehabilitation clinic in Peru. After months of travel, I returned to my world of familiars deeply touched by these aspects of our global society and the magical people and landscapes impacted by their broad reach. I returned amazed at the diversity of our planet and empowered by the tenacity of human bonds. The humble words I share here came from a journal excerpt sent via electronic lines from Peru to my loved ones.

For the past couple of weeks I have been a volunteer at La Clinica San Juan de Dios in Cusco, a rehabilitation clinic for physically and mentally handicapped children. In the mornings, I work at the Special Education day school, then spend the afternoons feeding and spending time with the kids living at the clinic. (Many of the children are orphans and reside at the clinic on a permanent basis.) The work is physically and emotionally exhausting, but I am absolutely in love. If anyone has suggestions on how I can smuggle 50 little people onto an American Airlines flight, please do share!

They educate me each day on what it means to be truly human and free from imposing social boundaries. These beautiful beings lack the arbitrary filters that we as adults and even children brought up in our society acquire somewhere along the course of our development. Their emotions, thoughts, and actions flow completely unrestrained. This is simultaneously frustrating and heartwarming. Frustrating – after we have all been slapped for the 59th time in a day by the same child. Frustrating – when I watch their faces contort in pain while they cry and scream and I have no idea how to assuage the suffering because I can't understand their Spanish through their speech

impediments. Frustrating – even more so when NOBODY knows what saddens their souls.

But my heart's melting point is reached at least 30 times a day when my face and clothes are soaked from the best of all slobbery kisses and when even the slightest touch of my hand gives way to an ethereal laugh and smile that sends my heart in flight, landing directly into the palms of these precious angels (and believe me some know this all too well! No matter what, I will gladly remain a servant to their smiles and they may forever hold my heart in their hands.).

Last week we took all the children to the fair for the day. It was absolutely amazing to be among them. We didn't have enough wheelchairs, so many of the children were going to have to stay behind. Seeing this, the children with Down Syndrome volunteered to carry those who could not walk. Babies carrying babies. They soaked up the colorful fairground surroundings, walking like this all morning – small appendages clinging to each other, bodies inextricably linked in love – devoid of complaints of heat, thirst, hunger, or fatigue. This was perhaps the purest act of tenderness my eyes had ever witnessed. They draw blood one minute and then sacrifice their own comfort for each other the next.

These earth angels humble me so with their drive; after a day that is surely exhausting – filled with physical/speech therapy and school, they still beg us to walk, read, and dance with them at all hours! They are truly lit from within and the life they exude is contagious.

The staff here is also truly remarkable; they embody patience and warmth worthy of every saint's envy. It is so inspiring to know people who themselves are expanding houses of love, forever lacking a limiting ceiling.

Some days after work, I am just reduced to pure pain. The pain creeps from my limbs and coalesces with that which pierces my core when I think of the injustice of their conditions. But EVERYDAY, I am overwhelmed with gratitude that all my tiny heroes have welcomed clumsy, faulty, scatterbrained me to witness and live their special magic.

I am so very happy to be here. I will leave with the faces of each of my precious children permanently etched into every wall of my four chambered heart.

The energy of the positive and negative I absorbed from such experiences in South America permeate multiple facets of my life in medical school. Amidst the many hours of saturating my neurons with the basic sciences, I strive to keep my eyes, heart and mind open, so that I may learn from and freely share with all the beings who surround me: patients, peers, professors, loved ones, and strangers. Days when I feel alone, angry, or when cynicism fills rooms so completely that there seems to be no space for a hopeful heart, thoughts of the triumphant spirits of all those at the children's clinic uplift me. I reflect upon that special time volunteering among pure hearts and pristine green

surroundings. I contained within the borders of my skin such fullness from joy and amazement that some days I felt I might float off into the brilliant blue sky covering those wonderlands.

Now through my training, I revisit this feeling of completeness by reminiscing the simplicity of living that inspired it. That fullness helps me witness the miracles and potential for learning and kindness anticipating discovery within every life experience. It prevents me from reducing human beings to a single disease, condition, situation, or attribute and unconscious blindness to their wholeness. My experience instilled a greater gratitude for life and continues to illuminate in my perception the many gifts of being human.

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