Availing

Spring 2005
Availing is an annual publication of students’ spiritual and religious reflections. It strives to create a public space for what we often hold inside-- vulnerabilities, convictions, and unlikely revelations. This year’s collection centers on the theme of pilgrimage and journey. The spiritual life is not one of comfort and ease, not one of perpetual confidence and understanding. Rather, as we walk with God we find ourselves on a strange and disruptive journey that leads us out of our complacency and into a place where God can speak to us. This journey requires faith; and this is what makes the path difficult—but glorious.

These pieces come from people’s time spent in India, Greece, France, and Scotland. There are also several reflections from students who participated in a trip to Nicaragua; an alumnus living in inner-city Oakland; as well as pilgrimages that take place in the most unassuming places. If there is one thing that these pieces have in common, it is this: that the journey is arduous, dusty, and often heartbreaking. We hope these words speak to you at this moment of your own journey.

Peace,

Laura Boston, Ariel Bugosh, and Laurie Hibbett

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Taylor Ansley

Journeys and Borders:
Breaking our Separation from God

“What do we leave behind when we cross a frontier? Each moment seems split in two: melancholy for what is left behind, and the excitement of entering a new land.” In this line from The Motorcycle Diaries, we encounter an idea that defines our notion of a journey: boundaries. I envisioned my journey to Nicaragua as a rupture of all of the comforts of my life that I have blindly accepted and encouraged, breaking through a frontier between my life as I live it and my life as it could be lived.

We tend to think of borders in the context of journeys. Traveling provokes the ready imagination, filling our heads with the pleasure of new ground beneath our feet and fresh skies above our heads. This was certainly true of my journey to Nicaragua, as the bright colors and stark contrasts of feelings, smells, and sights made my travel seem significant, real—and remote. Stepping off the plane in Nicaragua initiated a sickening self-congratulatory satisfaction—pride in my willingness to transcend borders and a sense that I had somehow accomplished something in my arrival. I see now that the frontiers I was so proud to cross were products of my own expectations of the trip: traveling, for me, meant a new perspective, learning, and escape. I wonder, though, whether the borders we see as we travel are present—in difficult and subtle ways—in our lives at home. As I ponder how my journey can impact the way I live my life, I return time and time again to the borders we create... borders within our
international separations, within our families and neighbors, and within ourselves.

How often, at home as in Nicaragua, do I allow my preconceptions, judgments, and fears of others to erect walls within which I feel safe, comfortable . . . and yet distant from the world. I think of the bristling apprehension I felt when approached by a street vendor on a sidewalk in Managua. There is a tempting urge to justify my anxiety as a product of borders—being in a new culture, an unfamiliar environment, and suffering the effects of a language barrier. How then am I to justify similar feelings of uneasiness on the streets of my hometown, when I pass a homeless man or walk through a poor neighborhood? We construct borders to avoid confronting our fears and in doing so we are enslaved by separation. If Nicaragua taught me anything it is that frontiers are easily constructed and just as easily maintained; we create the walls that contain us, and have no one to blame for our isolation but ourselves.

As I meditate on what it means to be a true member of the body of Christ, I believe the truest form of discipleship lies in eliminating the borders that hinder our capacity to love one another. Perhaps it is our duty as Christians and human beings to reject the barriers that inhibit our community; to pursue the idealism that fuels our souls but is so often absent from our actions.

Breaking free of borders requires not only having faith in God but having faith in people. Only when we can trust one another can we be one cohesive body of many distinct parts sharing the same ultimate goal: loving one another. Life without borders means seeing everyone who passes as a brother or sister.

I saw this in Nicaragua. I think of the families who, knowing nothing about our group of mysterious gringos from a place they had never seen, willingly opened up their houses to us. Trust involves a great deal of vulnerability, but these beautiful people were willing to be vulnerable, trusting that our motives were just and that God would protect them from harm. In this way, rejecting borders becomes rejecting separation from God. After all, we believe in a Lord who refused to allow separation to dictate His actions and insisted that trust conquers all division. In John 12, when Jesus says “Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light,” he affirms the notion that trust in Him will sustain us. Trusting others allows the distances—both physical and psychological—between God’s people to disappear, furthering His vision in one body of Christ. That’s a lesson that took a journey to learn.
August 15, 2004 Cinque Terre, Italy.

Why am I crying? I am hiking along Mediterranean landscape lit by the sun full in a cloudless sky. Not one hour ago I was swimming in a sea so blue that even my memory fails to do it justice. I’m healthy and free in one of the most beautiful places in the world…Why am I crying?

I am crying because moments ago I was led to sing “Amazing Grace,” a powerful song that pulled me out from the barriers I hide behind and into a vulnerable state. I’m tired.

I’m tired of turning my back on God, tired of my iniquity, tired of learning the same lesson over and over. My spiritual journey generally follows a rather predictable pattern of “ups” and “downs:” there are times when my spirit feels as light as a feather, when the presence of God is undeniable, when all my being is shouting with joy and praise, yet there are also times when my spirit is drenched in despair, when the presence of God is nowhere to be felt, when I feel depressed and alone. If this spiritual wave were to follow something along the lines of an EKG, then I experienced several sustained heart attacks while abroad, the normal rhythm or cycle speeding up to a rapid pace.

What is the lesson learned with each fluctuation? I am dependent. I am dependent on God. However, there is a part of me that desires independence, to do things on my own, perhaps fueling pride rather than humility. This independent side often leads me away from God. I’ve been blessed with enough life experience to know that when God is not in my life, things start to go downhill, and downhill I go until I find the courage to humbly turn around, finding myself in front of God, realizing that he has been there all along, awe-inspired by his faithfulness, emotionally broken in the presence of Grace.

September 20, 2004 American Cathedral in Paris, France.

I am crying again. I’m crying because God has spoken directly to me through the voice of the associate pastor and the words of Thomas Merton; the following prayer fitted words to the state of my heart:

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going, I do not see the road ahead of me, I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.”

March 3, 2004 Taizé, France.

I’m watching the sunset on a clear evening, processing an insightful conversation that just ended with a brother here in the spiritual community. I was surprised to hear of the nature
of his first visit to Taizé more than twenty years ago: he stated that he did not learn anything new over the course of his weeklong stay; however, something he had known in his mind truly made sense to him there on a deeper level. I realize that this sense of profoundly understanding something previously known only on a superficial level describes my experience in this place.

I’ve heard an admonition from several sources over the past few years regarding spiritual emotion: a warning not to become addicted to the “highs,” seeking and praising a feeling rather than God. I’d known this for quite a while, yet it would be the words of the brother that would help me truly understand its meaning within the context of my life. I have an addiction. I’m addicted to the “ups” of the spiritual wave, seeking that feeling of closeness with God and thinking on some level that I am doing something wrong if I feel otherwise. It seems that I often catch a case of spiritual perfectionism, neglecting the knowledge that I am a “broken” creature. I am broken. The wave function of human nature is not a force to be reckoned with but rather something to be embraced. I feel that this wave reflects the beautiful nature of God’s mysterious design, a dialogue of dualisms and paradoxes which often sails high above our heads. I believe that one can find peace through this cycle by a simple, childlike act that recognizes dependence: Trust.

My commitment to trusting God is symbolized by a small necklace that hangs around my neck; it contains a small ceramic circle with the Chinese character for “trust” painted on its surface. I trust that God has always been by my side, that He is presently, and that He always will be, even when I do not feel His presence. I trust that, if I give Him my hand, God will guide me in what is true and right. I thank God for the unified dichotomy of independence and dependence which surpasses my understanding, for the beautiful sound of free will harmonizing with its surrender. I thank Him for Paul’s words: “I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:12-13). We are “jars of clay” possessing the light of Christ. My jar has many cracks, and I’ve been trying to seal them up for quite some time, yet is it not through such vulnerable cracks that the light of Christ shines ever more brightly?

“When we’ve been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
Than when we first begun.”
Strange Mix for a Lullaby

When I was nine years old, my family went to a month-long reading of The Ramayana. For ten hours a day, a swami told stories of Rama, his beloved Sita, the monkey god Hanuman, and the cruel Ravana.

The sermon was in Hindi, a language I barely understood. Sitting next to my parents in the auditorium, I would wait impatiently for the swami to pause long enough for my mom or dad to whisper a quick translation in my ear. For every five minutes of conversation, I would end up getting a twenty-second summary in English.

This had been my relationship with Hinduism for most of my life. Someone would whisper the meaning of my faith in my ear; others would decide what was important enough to tell me. No one has intentionally tried to shape my beliefs, but somewhere down the line, I became painfully aware that my knowledge of Hinduism was limited by where I was brought up and what language I spoke.

Youth of all religious traditions must feel this sense of distance, but like so many second-generation Hindus in America, I felt jaded. Nothing was more unsatisfying than memorizing dozens of Sanskrit prayers but never knowing what they meant. I used these language and cultural barriers as my excuse and became so caught up in my inability to know certain aspects of my faith that I missed out on a lot that I did understand.

Going to India last semester was, in many ways, a journey to renew my faith. With fifteen other Americans, I traveled the country, seeing a lot that shocked, confused and made me proud. The India I witnessed was just as foreign to me as it was to the others in my group. The languages – Tamil, Bengali, Kannada, Malayam, Hindi, Marathi – were unfamiliar and the extreme poverty put me miles outside my comfort zone. But somehow being immersed in this incomprehensible place called India made me grasp for what I could understand, rather than be bitter at what I didn’t.

The Hinduism I had known suddenly expanded to this boundless, timeless tradition I barely recognized. I witnessed hundreds of pilgrims performing rituals at sunrise and washing away their sins in the Ganges, which is said to flow from heaven to Earth through Lord Siva’s hair. The temples of Khajuraho taught me the Hindu concept of union between man and woman. It is through this powerful unity that the Divine is realized. Along the crowded streets of Calcutta, I watched preparations being made for Durga Puja, a festival honoring Goddess Durga’s annihilation of demons in protection of the Earth. I passed hundreds of makeshift altars from Kerala to Delhi in praise of countless village deities, all reflecting the diversity of worshippers and worshipped in the Hindu tradition. I found the scope of Hinduism breathtaking.

It was in Madurai, a holy city in south India, that I came to terms with my place in Hinduism.
I had been waiting for a hot and sticky hour in Sri Meenakshi Temple, named after a princess from Madurai who would become Lord Siva’s consort. After dinner the temple performs rituals and has a procession bringing Lord Siva to Sri Meenakshi’s temple so they can sleep together as husband and wife. One hundred and fifty Hindu men, women and children packed into the hall waiting for this daily ritual with joy and anticipation.

As usual, I had no idea what I was doing. Everyone seemed to knew where to wait (men on one side, women on the other) and what to sing (lullabies to put the God and Goddess to sleep). So I did what I had always done; I faked it. I put my hands together, prayed, and waited for what came next.

By the time the bronze statue of Lord Siva was brought into the chamber in a palanquin, the crowd had split, forming a path for him. The transformation from commotion to silence was remarkable. The crowd craned their necks, aching for a glimpse of the deity, as if God himself sat in the palanquin.

After Lord Siva passed, the devotees fell like dominoes to the ground, kneeling toward the chamber where Lord Siva was now sitting with his beloved. The prayers began with a raucous mix of bells, voices, and clapping – a strange mix for a lullaby, I thought.

The singing continued. I had no idea what was being sung or what it meant. Yet that all seemed so arbitrary. After years of complicating Hinduism, the worship service reflected something simple and beautiful. I found myself peering over others, yearning to see the Divine couple. I wanted to feel God’s presence in my life, and the only thing keeping me from it was myself, not my language or my culture.

The whispering of translations and memorization of prayers may not come to an end soon. But I know that for what’s most important, well, I can do that on my own.
Christie Kilby

**Breath, Threefold**

The evening's breath entwines my own with silver,
Yet silver unrefined, too raw for God,
Who seven times would purify
These words that still in dewy dampness wait.
What silver must embroider heaven's gate,
Like moonlight, weave the shining name of God!

Perhaps the ink was silvery that penned
The loss of Paradise, that wrote to God --
Perhaps that poet's eyes were slowly dimmed
By sweeping silver, holy veil of night.
Then even blindness might be treasured sight,
If blinding silver spelled the name of God.

My eyes are open: still I fail to find
The language pure enough to speak to God.
If prayer, like incense, drifts upon the wind
And reaches heaven's door with whispering,
Then maybe only breath is purity,
My purest prayer, to breathe the name of God.

_Cretan Morning Prayer_

Gentle Aegean sunlight lifts the mist from the still
Shadow-side of the hill: olive-lined, blessed
By fingertips that press and pluck, by toes
That memorize the rise and fall of the land.
Church bells peal, their voices catching up
The Dawn's rosy fingers in flashing bright embrace,
Holding them high as if to consecrate today's
Host before all up-turned eyes.

We look up, we listen, a young woman and I,
As she palms a plum in the stony street.
*She wears her prayers like garlands,*
*Like bells,* they sing.
The old man who sells the fruit comes to
Show me his tender sweet oranges,
In dark deep-lined hands,
Wearing his dignity like prayer,
Soft, exalting.

Beyond the strain one song remains, beyond
The fragility of people and their longings.
An olive tree bends, alone, glinting
Silver with waiting. *Do not ask*
*How much or how little you have left to give:*
*Even emptiness wears its own dignity.*
The hills roll on, touched
By our small lines and furrows.

There is a posture here that holds these things together:
The transcendent gaze, the oranges, bells, the olive tree.
A place that kneels can kiss its holy images,
Can even touch them to my lips and burn
Their subtle truth upon my mouth.
**Touching a Gilded God**

The pathway to holiness: circle, around the liturgy, between the singing and the song... God waits in a breath, like breath aware of breath, so naked, so holy. Breathe and see: how absence circles like a robe, a drawing darkness, incense listing with jingling sound to cradle our days, our praise, our memories.

Light glints off the gilded Christs, so still wrapped in silver, so silent -- light, gleaming from marble hand-rubbed with oil, light from oil lamps staining the air with their color. Light, the sun comes in circles through the stained glass, light within and without meeting, cold, alive.

I want to find this place of light and quiet, this opening as a blossom before a sun it has no eyes to comprehend, only hunger --

I want to find this God who moves in Light, consumes, illumines, dances -- come out from the walls, from the silver, the glass. Slide down my face, fill my eyes, teach me to taste you.

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**Ashley Brown**

**Generando Vida, Street Gang Community**

I don’t know why they call this place “New Generation.” There is nothing here but pin pricking painful stares of boys who I can’t understand. A community where every boy is part of one side or the other and I can feel the tension, but it is early in the day and subdued because of the light and the heat. The organization is led by two women, the first a bright skinned, blonde Jesuit volunteer, and a middle aged woman, Carmencita. She is the last original worker remaining after the rest left for better paying jobs. We sit in awkward shuffling silence and paint white crosses on a wet floor with three boys. I don’t know what to say to them, because I haven’t been there, and this truth reflects in my clean untouched eyes and their truth burns back, dark and raging. I wonder what the boys’ gentle daylight faces look like in the night, when they have get older and fight on these streets for acceptance or survival. We are inadequate for the job, us, the Jesuit volunteer, Carmencita, because we are women, and young, and know nothing of fighting for these things, not when it really matters. I think of strong men who could matter to these boys, I strain to find them. All the men who had hands of stone left last year to build better houses with better dreams in America where the pay is good.

Later we scatter white sticky painted crosses in the yard to dry in the sun. A little makeshift cemetery, paying tribute to the deaths and heroes of Nuevo Generando. These boys’ faces show something hard and true that I cannot find hope in. One stares at me, with his tattooed cheeks and, open
wounds with blood running through his eyes. Another boy with a clean pressed blue shirt uses bruised fists to cover his glue stained pockets. I am inadequate for this job and I know it.

La Chureca, Managua City Dump

I see our sin, yours and mine, blown wide open, into the air, left to be inhaled by our skinny, clay bodies that dapple this landscape like petals, like snow, that never comes to this country. I see eyes full up to dark stained pupils with tears that will not come because they are too proud for things like crying in front a girl. The skyline burns black and smoke gray-blue. Bottles clink beneath bare feet and I wonder if there is any redemption beneath all of the dust and earth and people here. Edy has worked in the Dump for 5 years and his face is a mystery to me. He has wrinkles right up to his eyes, and I can tell he smiles a lot but I don’t know why. Not here. That doesn’t make sense. He says that things are complex and his work worn fingers, no longer fresh from early post college optimism tell me it’s true. Flor de piel he says, that means right there, the grit, the hurt, the reality of it all, staring me in the face, like a wall, like a child. A 13 year-old girl grabs my hand and presses it deep into her chest. She lines up her body to mine, and smiles a blackened relief of a smile. A smile so I will see we are not so different, her with eyes darkened by the sun or maybe what she has been. And I with pale white skin, that seems so out of place here where the air is tangible dirt grit gray. A smile so, perhaps, I will stay with her there in the trash where violating human hands bury the pieces of woman in her. I cannot stay and I know it. I run away to porcelain sinks and pressed sheets.

Ryan Ferrier ‘03

Oakland Journal  3/19/04

There is a freedom in poverty. Since poverty claims nothing as its own, it has nothing to lose. Poverty, then, is not as much to be avoided as it is to be embraced. I spend much of my time trying to acquire by my sufficiency what I have always had amidst my need: freedom. Thus, I am finding that freedom comes not in my striving but in my surrender.

Perhaps that is why I leapt at the offer to be chaplain of a local homeless shelter. The job pays nothing, the place smells a bit like a garbage dump, and the guests are not the type that you would meet at a dinner party. Still, arising amidst the poverty of the situation, I sensed freedom’s sweet aroma. The director of the shelter explained that the chapel services were already in such a shabby state that they could only improve. Translation: I had nothing to lose. Thus began my tenure as chaplain.

What has followed has been at once likely the most bizarre and refreshing fellowship I have yet to partake in. Some of the more zealous guests volunteer to lead the group in a worship song to begin the service. There are no song sheets, no overhead projector, and so the worship leader belts out the lyrics (often the wrong lyrics) and most of us sing along, off key and out of tune, but joyous nonetheless. I teach a short lesson, and the crowd’s countenance is varied to say the least. Some men are fiercely engaged hollering “Amen,” others nod out in their chairs looking half-comatose, and one man incessantly makes strange, fidgety hand motions as if he is communicating in a sort of extra-terrestrial sign language. It is
not uncommon for a guest to stop me in the middle of my sermonette to ask a question—some questions are more relevant to the lesson at hand than others. The whole affair is raggedy at best, but for me, the chaos has been therapeutic.

I suppose that I can embrace such a congregation because, in this instance, I myself am not much more than a beggar’s portion. There is no good reason for these homeless men to welcome me. Unlike the majority of the guests, I am white. I am a wee lad of just twenty-four, though I could pass for eighteen. My wiry frame and slight demeanor command little respect. And my hands, soft as a baby’s bottom, tell the tale of a young man more acquainted with the silver spoon than poverty. Furthermore, I have no official theological credentials to make up for my lack of street credentials.

So, practically speaking, what warrants this chaplainship? Nothing, really, except need. I believe the adage goes, “Beggars can’t be choosers.” Most shelters do not get to choose from an illustrious array of ideal chaplains, especially when the job is without pay. Instead, they are left to beg for someone whose greatest allure is nothing more than availability and willingness.

Ironically enough, that is what the homeless guests desire most: availability and willingness. And so, to my surprise, I have not just been welcomed; I have been celebrated. Before and after the service, guests approach me to talk—sometimes about scripture, but often just about life. These conversations engross me, for in them I am acutely aware that what the guests appreciate most about me is simply me. Surly I have not wooed them with a flawless program, and so I must conclude that that which they value most is not what I do but rather who I am.

For me, this context has been novel. I function in a holy calling as a “minister of the gospel”, and yet I have never been more at liberty to be myself, flaws and all. I have stumbled upon a truth that, though it easily eludes me, should be self-evident. It is not merely a possibility for holiness to meet with authenticity; it is a necessity. Holiness refuses to be found apart from authenticity.

Perhaps that is why Jesus, the Holy one of Israel, refused to distance himself from the poverty of this world. It is only right to celebrate Jesus’ self-sacrifice in extending freedom to the poor and the outcast. It may be equally true though, that since holiness cannot do without authenticity, Jesus was helplessly drawn to the “least of these” in pursuit of the very freedom that he offered. Notice, Jesus did not simply serve “the least of these;” he was “the least of these.” For he says, “What you have done to the least of these, you have done to me.” Could it be then, that Jesus identified so readily with “the least of these” because it was with them, in all their brokenness, that he was most free to be himself?

Maybe the holiest calling and the greatest grace is simply the ministry of being oneself.
**Christopher Pratt-Dannals**

*A Word About Hope*

Often our ability to hope depends on our perception. This statement may sound obvious—if we perceive things to be going well, we can have hope. If things are going badly, hope is more difficult. The problem with this view is that we assume our perception encompasses the whole of existence. We assume that we know the whole story. Our hope depends on our perception because we have forgotten that God is bigger than economics or politics, or corruption, or poverty. God is bigger than the suffering people of Nicaragua, and God is bigger than us. We must first recognize that our perception is but one tiny fraction of the Lord’s grand plan. We are ministers, not messiahs; workers, not master builders.

This recognition is not easy. It requires us to trust that the Lord is at work in this world, even in the darkest circumstances, when we have lost all hope ourselves. The worker must trust the Master Builder. The minister must trust the Messiah. When we can meet people living in the Managua city dump, or hold a mentally and physically handicapped twenty-year old in our arms like a child, or spend time with teenagers who sniff glue and fight in street gangs at night—when we can experience the intense brokenness of this world and still honestly say “I trust that God is at work”—that is Hope. That is the only hope that can pass the test of time and experience—hope that does not depend on our stubborn minds and weak hearts. That is the Hope of God.

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**Faris Al Mazrui**

*The Three Cousins and the Fire Inside*

In the Islamic culture I was rarely encouraged to think critically. As young Muslims we always got the impression that since the death of the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) everything, like interpretation of the Qur’an and Prophet’s hadiths, had been passed down to us unchanged. Unfortunately, that really was not the case. Civil wars took place between Muslims a few decades after the Prophet’s death. Many Muslims came up with nonexistent hadiths to support their views and opinions. I was never taught that Sahih al-Bukhari (a collection of hadiths put together by a very pious non-Arab Muslim centuries after the Prophet, which he traced back to the Prophet and believed were indeed true) contained only 5% of the hadiths that were out there. I was baffled when my father told me that al-Bukhari (may God rest his soul) believed that a very small percentage of the hadiths retold were true. That explains some of the hostility towards women that exists in Islamic culture. That explains why some Muslims believe all non-Muslims are doomed to hell. That explains Islamic extremism.

My eyes teared with sadness and my blood flowed with rage when I discovered this hidden truth; the truth that the

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1 Please note that I say Islamic culture and not religion because they are distinct.

2 A hadith is a saying that the Prophet peace be upon him has said in a particular situation, or a story about him.
innocence of Islam and its teachings have been masked by the
dogmatism and small-mindedness of a few people. The third-
world Muslim countries have failed to develop and the ignorant
extremists have consistently caused terror. Instead of studying
steps that will lead to the prosperity of millions, extremists
started with twisting the religion and politicizing it to their
cause. Of course this also happens in Christianity and Judaism;
only leading to separation, stereotyping and war.

There are as many wrong things about the Arabic culture as
there are in the Western culture. One must avoid flowing with
the wrong waves in one’s culture to see the big picture and the
truth for oneself. I never knew sex before marriage was
considered a sin in Christianity and Judaism. After seeing so
many Hollywood movies where sex is a normal thing between
unmarried couples I really thought that was ok in Christianity
and Judaism. Only after coming to the States for college did
my friends enlighten me. My heart was relieved when I learned
the three religions agreed there. That was the beginning of a
happy journey through which I discovered that the three major
religions of the world were more similar than different.

I look back with shame at my ignorance of other religions
growing up. Through a recent series of interfaith discussions
about the patriarch Abraham I learned more and more about the
similarities between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. With a
wonderful closing statement, Chaplain Rob Spach pointed out
how Abraham was the grandfather of Jews, Christians, and
Muslims. Light was shed in me; I saw something I have never
seen before. Jews, Christians and Muslims were cousins. I
could only imagine how different the world would be if people

of the three religions considered and treated each other as
cousins.
Year after year, students returning from Nicaragua report that their most powerful and moving experience occurred within the limits of the Managua city dump. This year was no exception. Nicaragua is plagued by an abundance of deeply rooted and complicated problems that manifest themselves in the suffering of the dump. The country is afflicted by a crumbling education system and a corrupt political structure. Seeing the physical expression of the country’s complex problems in the dehumanizing circumstances of the dump is a reality none of us will ever forget.

Amidst the mounds of smoldering trash, we witnessed over 1,200 people living and working in the dump, trying to eek out an existence. Unable to find jobs elsewhere, they scavenge daily for items to sell. 350 of them are children. Deeper into the heart of the dump, we discovered an entire community of shacks compiled of a patchwork of metal scraps. I was aghast at the sight of old Coca-Cola and Shell billboards in the midst of the metal collage. A piece of globalization had literally been built into their houses, and the corporations benefiting from the trade policies that allow for the exploitation of Nicaraguan workers were receiving free advertising space in the midst of this destitution.

We walked through the community, passing clusters of people staring back at us with—what was it—curiosity, bitterness, hatred? I stared at the ground, ashamed to meet those revealing eyes, concentrating instead on what I could distinguish amongst the smoky trash—pens, articles of clothing, broken mirrors, shoes, an empty perfume bottle. I tried to focus on each individual article because that I could comprehend. But pieced together to form the puzzle of the dump, the items run together to create a hazy muddle of gray and brown left to rot or burn as little children run around barefoot amidst shards of glass and metal, and that I could not comprehend. Though I could see the individuals who call this place “home” and could practically taste their hurt and despair hanging heavily in the hazy air, I could not understand. I was just a tourist passing through this place, while it was their existence.

But in spite of my inability to fully grasp the reality, I know that there was a definite purpose to our experience. A friend said to me upon my return, “I feel like I have a pretty good understanding of what goes on in the world. Do you think it’s really necessary to do something like this reverse mission trip?” Yes, I do. Only so much can be learned in a classroom and from the news. It takes experiences such as this one in Nicaragua in which you speak to the people directly involved, where you see how the “laws” of economics and the international policies of the IMF and World Bank affect individuals’ lives, where you witness the suffering and sorrow of a people with little reason for hope, where you become exposed to the many deeply rooted complexities of the problems and possible solutions, it’s only then that you can even begin to grasp what truly goes on in the world. The theories and facts do not suffice; experience—the act of “being” there in the midst of another’s reality—is essential.

I think this recognition of the need to “be” answers a question that many of us struggled with at the beginning of the
trip, “Why are we here? Why don’t we simply send the money each of us raised to Nicaragua?” I believe that we went to experience that reality, to have the theories and “facts” learned from textbooks and newspapers challenged and overturned in the face of harsh realities, and then to struggle with the void that their absence leaves behind. This journey to Nicaragua has led us to a more important question: “What can we do?”

Despite our inability to ever understand fully the immense complexities of the suffering and poverty we witnessed in Nicaragua, I believe that it’s our obligation to try. Walking through the dump and seeing the dehumanizing conditions, the weariness in the adults’ long faces, and the innocence of the young children, I think we caught a pebble in Nicaragua’s mountain of truth. Talking to Edy, a man who has worked every day for the past ten years to change the reality of the dump, I think we picked up another. And listening to Father Cardenal, a Jesuit priest who has spent his entire life working amongst the poor, we obtained yet another. But complete comprehension can’t be accomplished in a fifteen minute tour, or in a ten day trip, or even in a lifetime. It’s a continual process that each of us must engage in throughout our lives. And with that growing sense of understanding, each of us can focus on a piece of the problem where our personal and communal strengths are needed. Then regardless of whether we are in Nicaragua, Nashville, or Davidson, we will be working alongside each other to alleviate the suffering of God’s people.

Laura Beach
Viajes

Antes
A pilgrimage to encounter the body of Christ
In a land not too distant,
Yet worlds away.
I don’t know what to expect…

Durante
The heat, the brilliance of life,
The colors that explode all around me
Signify that I have journeyed far from home.
But there’s something else, too—the people
Are different here.
It’s not just their dark, beautiful faces or their melodious words.
These people have known unfathomable tribulations and also pure, simple joy.
They have stories to tell and are not afraid to share them.
They understand that lessons from their journeys can help me on mine.
And I come to see that though we may be different elements of the body,
We have a common core.

Después.
I now have a new lens,
Altering forever my perception.
Those moments are present
In every moment now.
Particia Massey

Maybe So

Brows wet with sweat and bodies infected with trash;
Where is the Body of Christ?

Dusty roads and mandarins freshly plucked from the tree;
Where is the Body of Christ?

Women cooking, cleaning, caring for children,
And never dreaming of anything different;
Where is the Body of Christ?

Broken hearts and wounded souls,
Where is the Body of Christ?

Those who have suffered the injustice of the church,
Where is the Body of Christ?

Students whose skin is the color of milk,
Visiting brothers and sisters whose tone is that of coffee with cream;
Is this the Body of Christ?

Maybe so…

Yet more than simply this, the Body of Christ is
Brows wet with sweat and bodies infected with trash,
Dusty roads and mandarins freshly plucked from the tree,
Women cooking, cleaning, caring for children,

And never dreaming of anything different,
Broken hearts and wounded souls,
Those who have suffered the injustice of the church.

The city dump, the poor family, the souls crying out for comfort,
My own inadequacies highlighted by the overwhelming strength of others.
These are the places in which we are called to be the Body of Christ.

And,

To search for the Body of Christ.

“When, however, God is with the poor and marginal, then I have to dare to go there, and find him there. I now realize that I can be with people without having to make them think my thoughts and say my words. I can be free to listen and slowly discern where God shows his merciful face to me.”

(Nouwen, Henri. Gracias: A Latin American Journal.)
Lauren Stutts

Yellow Brick Road

[This piece of writing is a compilation of my thoughts from different papers and journals spliced together into hopefully something cohesive and meaningful. It’s very personal and just downright sappy at times, but there it is. Throughout the piece, I inserted snippets from *The Wizard of Oz* because I love analogies and because it reminds me of a happy childhood memory. My favorite costume of all time on Halloween was Dorothy. I had the bright red lipstick, braided hair, blue-and-white checkered dress, a picket basket as my candy-holder, and, the best part, the ruby slippers. My dog even looked like Toto. It reminds me of the innocence of childhood and how we should always remember that on our journey.]

*Follow the Yellow Brick Road? Follow the Yellow Brick...?*

- Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*

We are all on this twisty, bumpy, Dr. Seuss-crazy kind of path. We may think our life is going on one trajectory, and then we get thrown into an unexpected one. Well, that happened to me when I was 15. I just wasn’t growing. Therefore, I prayed what some call a “brokenness/transformation” prayer. Basically, I just asked God to do something in my life to make me an effective person and to let me bring His light to others. I wasn’t specific, however. A couple weeks later I found out I had a benign tumor near my spinal cord. *It’s a twister! It’s a twister!* Then I was unexpectedly paralyzed from the surgery to remove the tumor. Hmmm…. traveling on the path of life in a wheelchair was not on my itinerary. *Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.*

When something like that happens, the classic question is “Why?” How you answer that question will determine the entire course of how you respond to it. Some strangers have said I was paralyzed as a punishment for my sins. *I'll get you, my pretty, and your little dog, too!* But no. It wasn’t a punishment. You can’t view it that way or you will never get past it. Other people don’t want to think about why; they just ask for a rock, crawl under it, and do some inventive head-thunking. That doesn’t work out too well either. The answer to this looming question is actually quite simple according to the Bible: *Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character; and character, hope* (Romans 5:3-4). God was with me throughout my whole illness experience and I knew everything would be okay. *Someday I'll wish upon a star and wake up where the clouds are far behind me. Where troubles melt like lemon drops, Away above the chimney tops. That's where you'll find me.*

One reason I know God had me go through this experience is so I would be better able to help people with chronic illnesses and disabilities. *The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God* (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). I’ve
always loved hospitals. Before I was paralyzed, I volunteered as a candy striper on a pediatric ward. I absolutely loved it because hospitals are the center of human experience, from life to death, and where people experience a range of emotions from pain to joy to fear to hope. As a volunteer, you have the privilege of just being there for people as they go through the entire spectrum of emotions. When I found out I had a tumor, I ended up as a patient on the very ward where I was a candy striper. I knew the whole hospital setup and all the nurses and everything. It was very strange to go from being the one outside the hospital room, helping, to being a patient inside of it, receiving the help. No matter how much time you spend in a hospital, you have no idea what it is like to be a patient until you have been one, especially when you have been one for 42 days straight. After recovery, when I rolled back to volunteering in a wheelchair, I connected substantially more with the patients because of my personal experience. The difference in my perspective was staggering, and I would never have had the ability to connect with patients and their families had I not gone through that.

God has also shown me that I need to break down negative stereotypes about people with disabilities. For example, one of the stereotypes that I very much dislike is that people often feel sorry for you if you are physically disabled. No. No. No. I am deliriously happy most of the time, so it really hurts my feelings when people think my life must be horrible. Walking is highly overrated. In fact, I’ll have you know there are plenty advantages of rolling around in a wheelchair. Soaring downhill is a total blast. I actually also really like pushing myself uphill, too, because it not only pumps you up and wakes you up for class, but it also gives you some mad upper-arm strength (although my brother still beats me at arm-wrestling). You never have to worry about finding a seat. When you are feeling restless, you can just do a bunch of consecutive 360s. You don’t have to worry so much about parking. You have really soft feet. You are easy to find in a crowd. You can pop wheelies if you’ve got the skills (I don’t, but I’m working on it). If someone is mean to you, then you can just run over their toes. Everything about being in a wheelchair isn’t bluebirds and lemonade; however, I tend to (or try to) be a Pollyanna-half-cup-full-Little-Engine-That-Could kind of girl and not dwell on the negative aspects because hey, it’s just easier. The only real problem is when someone else makes your disability a problem, and even then, that says a lot more about them than it does about you (so I run over their toes, figuratively, of course).

It really was a blessing, and I would not change what happened to me. The tornadoes of life can end up taking you to a place like Munchkinland. There will always be flying monkeys, of course, and your occasional wicked witch; however, difficult experiences allow you to see the world in different colors, to meet new people, and learn about life.

"Sometimes a wound is the place where we encounter life for the first time, where we come to know its power and its ways. Wounded, we may find a wisdom that will enable us to live better than any knowledge and glimpse a view of ourselves and of life that is both true and unexpected" (Rachel Remen, *My Grandfather’s Blessings*). Suffering brings us closer to God because it makes us realize how much we need Him. I could not have gotten through that time without God; my faith was solidified because of it. Familiar song lyrics come to mind: “Now I see / That I’m more complete / Everyday that I
can’t live without you.” In my case, a difficult part was learning to see my body in a new way. The unsettling fact about my body is that the neurosurgeons removed some of my ribs from my back to make sure they extracted all the cancerous cells. Not only that but I was also left with a red diagonal scar across my back. When you are 15 and everyone around you is still pretty intact, it is very difficult not to dislike the fact that you have these physical differences. Plus, society tells us to hide our scars. For example, remember *The Lion King*? The evil lion was named "Scar." Shame on you, Disney. In a recent magazine, I also saw an advertisement for silicone scar sheets, which you are supposed to use to cover your scars. What?! Why must we perfect everything? When Jesus was resurrected, his wounds were still present. Why can’t we just follow his example and stop covering everything up just to conform to idealistic societal standards of physical perfection? I have learned to like scars because they signify experience, strength, and mystery. Brokenness is inherent in our lives but we are still here, living: *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body* (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

In addition to those overt physical differences, I had to deal with the fact that I was paralyzed. How could I view my paralysis in similar positive terms? First, I’ll describe it. Paralysis honestly feels like my legs are asleep, except it’s a somewhat Rip-van-Winkle-like sleep. There is this tingling aura on the surface of my skin but deep down in my bones and in my blood, I can sense the presence of my legs. When I touch my paralyzed skin, it does not feel like it is my own skin, but then again, it does not feel like anyone else’s skin either. The paralysis begins at my toes and travels up my legs to just beneath my chest. The edge of my paralysis on the right side is higher than on the left. It’s not a clear cut edge, but the paralysis blurs with the alive skin, and sometimes it is hard to tell where the paralysis ends and the feeling begins. It is like someone painted the lower part of my body with blue watercolor, the top part of my body in red watercolor, and let the two mix into a hazy purple in the middle of my body. It’s very strange at first. You have to learn balance, and you have to use and strengthen the muscles you do have. It’s amazing what all you can still do if you have the use of your arms. I take care of all my daily needs. I drive with hand controls. I get my own groceries. I’m often even stubbornly-independent. Try putting a fitted sheet on your bed while sitting on it and using just your arms. It took 15 minutes, but by golly, I got it on there. I feel so blessed because I still have my heart, spirit, and mind. Only physical abilities were taken away from me. The mental abilities I’ve acquired because of that loss, though, has far made up for those losses. The “losses” aren’t really even losses in the grand scheme of things anyway. So what if I can’t feel the sand between my toes? So what if I can’t swing dance? When you think about all the problems you could have, those things become inconsequential.

So that was the biggest transforming event in my journey thus far. However, I am continually confronted with new challenges. One of the hardest parts of the journey is living in the journey—in the moment. Some of us live in the past. On the other hand, most of us at Davidson (ahem) have the problem of living in the future. We should learn to take
opportunities as they come. Therefore, if someone invites you to coffee at 4:00, and your schedule says you are supposed to study from 4:06 – 6:34 in order to make an A on your next test, otherwise you will fail the class, you won’t get into graduate school, the earth will shatter, and ALL WILL BE LOST, then just stop, breathe, and go get some mocha with your friend because you will probably remember that encounter more than you will about your relationship with your books. In fact, some of my most amazing conversations and experiences have been those that occurred spontaneously. For example, if I had decided not to go when one of my friends asked me to visit her church, then I would be a completely different person now because that church lead to a cascade of other wonderful events that changed my life in remarkable ways.

One of the best parts of the journey is that it is never-ending. It is hard because sometimes parts of the journey end. It brings me great sadness to realize that I will be leaving so many amazing people at Davidson. However, I like to think that God brings people into our lives for a time to shape us along the journey. Sometimes they are meant to only be in our lives temporarily and then we let them go because they are meant to shape other people’s lives just as we are meant to meet new people who will change us and whom we will change. To get back to our Wizard of Oz analogy, on the Yellow-brick-road of life, we meet wonderful people like the Scarecrow (without a brain), the Tin Man (without a heart), and the Lion (without courage) — all broken people who accompany us along the path. At the end, even though we may have to leave them, they are still a part of us. What’s also really cool is that the wizard, metaphorical of God, gives us knowledge (a brain), a new heart, and courage.

I’ve given up trying to figure out what the journey will look like ahead. I’ve given up the desire for a white-picket-fence-kind-of-life. I mean, that’s just dangerous; you could poke an eye out. You just have to be like the Coyote. You get smashed like a pancake but you still pop back up in 3D form and go chasing after the Road Runner again. Only God knows what trajectory you will be on next. It may be scary but you are not alone for God is with you every step of the way.

Somewhere, over the rainbow, skies are blue. And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.
Elizabeth Campbell

Northern Lights in St. Andrews, Scotland

“Do not we feel the voice of our own loneliness before the low roar of the sea?” -- Theodore Holmes

I have, or at least I did many times, particularly beside the North Sea, all at sun-up or just about that time, when water meets footstepped-grains of sand, and it is so dark you cannot tell where water, sky, or land begins.

And thus in disorientation, we stumble on: We receive home.

Then Genesis comes to mind. We think: God came here just for this:

To breathe within the pools of our lives, To make a carnival of our colorlessness, To gather together the disparate elements, To let the gray, cobalt, and mahogany swim— dance—

via eden-Revelation.

I watch the slow moving waves of black: They hypnotize me.

And I think of that layman back home saying: “Bread of Life. Cup of Salvation.”

Then God exhales It is good and decides to make light.

And stretched out on this bit of beach, I feel like some spiritual-pilgrim, enamored by a beyond timelessly keener than my own perception.

And so here I only walk in slow steps, and I wait. I observe the richness of each spectacle.

Green starlight drifts from the sky, with slow, spontaneous, and soft settledness,

Then everything falls together, Falls without violence into the undivided blue of sky and sea.

Perhaps this is what it means to love.
Julie Goff

Morning by Morning (letter from Peru)

Dearest of brothers and sisters,

A week ago, it seems I left you at a place of my own personal helplessness, hopelessness and sadness for the Peruvian people. Entrenched poverty, compounded by a corrupt government and inadequate sustainable development to pull a population out of its circumstances, is a heavy thing. I truly struggled with how my God was too the God of this land, a God who loved these people as much as He loves you and me as we lead such comfortable lives.

My mistake, it now seems, is that I am far too dependent on my own strength and my own vision. I can certainly not save the Sacred Valley in six weeks. I can barely offer small improvements to a local NGO--I am powerless. But the last few days have been a kick in the pants. I think our Father wants us to enjoy Him and His creation, even when we are overwhelmed by the work that needs to be done. He wants to show us more of Himself, not more of what we can do for Him. Why do I say this, you ask?

On Monday, I traveled out to a local village on my own to do interviews (my partner was sick). After walking deep into this farming community, I sat down by a stream to rest and pray. With my head down and eyes closed, I hear from behind me a concerned ‘Senorita, estas solita?’ It was a very small Quechuan woman (who probably came up to my rib cage), carrying a large load on her back who insisted on walking me to the bus stop a good 20 minutes away. As we walked, she reached into the depths of her britches, pulled out two granadillas; we shared fruit and conversation about her life and mine. She stopped every few minutes to adjust her sack and complain about the intense pain in her legs. Her Spanish was about as good as mine, and she suggested several times that I learn the beautiful language of Quechua. I told her I would love too, once I master Spanish of course.

Today, we visited the home of a local beekeeper; he answered the door wearing a hat with a RED Rural logo on it and as we talked, he repeatedly expressed his gratefulness for the loans he has received (they helped his business profit while his wife was in the hospital last year and he struggled to pay the bills). After our interview, he took us back into his honey-making kitchen and gave us each a jar of delicious Peruvian honey--a token of his gratitude, even though we had nothing to do with the success of his loans.

And yesterday (Peru’s Independence Day) was the icing on the cake for God’s continued joy in showing me more of Himself. Chris, Petey (another Christian girl studying in Peru) and I had the day off and so ventured up a nearby mountain for the good part of the day. Several minutes after arriving at the top, four Peruvian children that live on the mountain quietly climbed the boulder overlooking the Sacred Valley where we had sat down to have lunch. We small talked with the kids and breathed in the silence of 12,000ft. Later, we translated the story of Jesus healing a blind man (John 9), sang and prayed with them--it was far beyond refreshing for my weary soul.
So yes, I have surely been encouraged in the past few days. God has provided opportunity after opportunity for me to see His goodness through His people and His creation. Thank you for your prayers and encouragement.

And my adventure is surely not over yet--stayed tuned!!

In His Grip,
Julie

The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. –Isaiah 50:4