\*\* My laptop battery might die in the middle of typing this, but I’ll see how far I can get! \*\*

Location: Simon Bolivar Airport, Santa Marta

Time: 10:40 am

Dear Diary,

I am feeling such a profound sense of hope for life and for the future.

I really want to try to take some time right now to write through some of my thoughts and experiences I’ve had - both in the last few days and over the last month or so.

First : yesterday.

I was sitting in el parque de los novios in Santa Marta, finishing eating a Mango, feeling a little bit over-full, and taking in the atmosphere of the calm Sunday afternoon. I saw some people roaming in the park trying to sell things. Initially, I wasn’t going to buy anything, but then I realized that they were selling water and I was pretty dehydrated.

So, when a man and his son approached me, I decided to buy a bottle of water from them. The man seemed incredibly appreciative. He asked me where I was from, I asked him where he was from - he said Venezuela.

When people have been telling me they are from Venezuela, I have been trying to ask them how things are back home, how long they have been here for, how they are doing, etc… because I figure it’s such a unique opportunity to learn about the shit that is happening there from an authentic primary source.

This man began to explain to me (in rapid Spanish so I really didn’t catch all of it) how awful everything is there. Children are dying. Businesses are shutting down. Everyone is trying to leave. It’s awful.

He told me his son and he have trouble making enough money to put food on their plates right now.

He began to cry. His son watched him cry. His 11 year old son.

He apologized for crying. I told him please don’t apologize, it was okay.

Suddenly, I felt a paradigm shift in my head. These people who were selling tintos, postres, water, and cigarettes in the street; these people who were ‘pestering’ me to buy things from them - I had so quickly judged them and assumed they were sleezy businessman trying to scam me. In reality… a LOT of them are from Venezuela. They are intelligent men and women. They have their own families. They are working all day and most of the night just to make enough scraps every day to hopefully put food on the table for their families and if they are lucky - for themselves.

I quickly gave the man the rest of the money I had in my backpack, which was next to nothing because I forgot my wallet at the hostel. I gave him 10 pesos (about $3 USD). He started to cry again. He told me that I was a sign of god to him. I started to cry. I told him I wasn’t God, I was just another human. I was just luckier than he was.

He told me that the money doesn’t matter to him, what matters and means so much to him and what is his sign from God is that I sat and listened to what he had to say, that I heard his story and took it all in with grace. He told me I gave him a new sense of hope, and that there are good people in this world.

Holding back tears at this point, I asked him if I could buy lunch for he and his son. He seemed shocked.

I took them to the closest burger joint, which I felt bad about choosing because it was pretty expensive for Colombia (like $7 USD for a burger and fries) but was really not a huge amount of money for me in any way… I just felt bad because I wish I had had that money in change so that I could have just given him more change, because I know he could have made better use of that. But, I only had my credit card to work with so I figured this place was one of few that would accept my card anyways.

I ordered him and his son 2 cheeseburgers and fries to go.

I gestured for them to come inside, it was now raining outside.

We sat at the table, waiting for the food to be made. I listened more to this man’s story. He told me about how he was a lighting engineering in school. His wife was an engineer as well. They made a good living in Venezuela. He had his own company that he started, he was wearing pants with his company’s logo on them. When I asked him about it, he started to tear up again.

Changing the subject, I asked him about his wife. I was pleasantly surprised that this man wasn’t making any attempt to hit on me, and seemed genuinely in love with his wife and family and had NO interest in me whatsoever. He told me he loves his wife so much. He lit up with happiness and love when he spoke about her. He told me the story of how they met each other. He told me about his 1 year old daughter, how difficult it is to feed her because she can’t have lactose. He told me she is so smart though. He loves his kids and his family so so much.

He started getting very excited and animated about life and hope and happiness and me helping him, he began to sing.

He sang a song all the way through, I actually understood a lot of the words in Spanish because he acted it out quite a bit. He was a BEAUTIFUL singer.

I asked him for more. He sang me two more songs. Serenating me in the beauty and authenticity of his voice. The last song, I felt tears coming up in my eyes again. He was singing:

Para Donde Iré - which stands for : where will I go?

The deepness and emotions of the song were felt through his emotional vebrado, and he made continuous, deep eye contact with me throughout the entire song. I was so moved.

I don’t think I will ever forget that song.

I asked him what the song was, he said I could record him if I wanted a memory of it, I did.

We went outside to avoid the crowd that just entered the restaurant, and I recorded a video of him serenading me to that song, his beautiful voice. As his child ate the burger and fries ravenously at the table next to me.

After some more talk about life, I decided to give him and his son some space to eat together and enjoy the moment. I gave them both hugs and told them thank you so much for having hope. I told him he is an incredible father and is instilling so much hope and happiness in his son. I told him to have hope and faith for the future, and that I had confidence in him.

He told me that I was a sign of god, that he had faith, that he had no words for what I had done for him.

I wished them good luck, and left.

Then I walked to the beach - and cried.

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May 28, 2019

Location : my room in the top floor of the school in Bógota

Time : about 8 am

I didn’t end up having enough time / mental energy to finish the journal entry yesterday so here we are finishing it today!

Okay, so basically:

That experience with the man and his son from Venezuela was so moving for me. I felt a lot of different emotions, but I think one of the biggest that I felt was this:

**HOPE.**

If someone who has lost literally *everything*, their business, their home, their normal life, their money, their safety and security, easy access to food and necessities for living, and all of the above for their family - and is STILL able to have a smile on their face, laugh telling stories about how they met their loving wife, and sing loudly and ecstatically to a stranger to show their appreciation in public - then *hope* above all else, persists.

Seeing someone in such a dire situation feeling so optimistic and appreciative for such small things puts my life into such a bigger perspective.

I too, can find optimism and courage and hope and faith in my life in the places that I need it.

I’m making sure to try my best to not diminish anything that I am struggling with in my own life. I can’t control that I was born into a luckier situation, so in order to try to be mindful about this fact, I am attempting to practice radical acceptance towards it. It isn’t fair to myself to think that my own struggles with my eating disorder, self-hate, depression, or anxiety are any less valid than someone else who is going through something clearly much harder and more devastating.

If anything, seeing that man so accepting of his own situation has made me feel so much more accepting and optimistic of my own struggles in my life.

Side note - I can’t imagine how the man who created “Humans of New York” must feel! Constantly interviewing and getting to know people with insane and difficult-to-take-in stories for years… I have so much empathy towards him. That job is *not* easy.

Honestly, ever since leaving the reserve, I have felt pretty on top of the world in comparison to when I was there.

I’m realizing more and more each day how the circumstances there were the opposite of good for my body and my mind. My skin was clearly FREAKING out over the bugs and the ecosystem around me. I found a new rash / weird scab on my butt last night that I didn’t even know had been there! I finally woke up with less bug bites than the night before instead of more! Even in Santa Marta with the mosquitos I was really struggling to be okay with them and sleep at night knowing they were nibbling all over my body.

I was eating all of my meals alone after Betti left, which in itself wasn’t bad - but because I was in such distress and out of my comfort zone, I was seeking comfort in food. I wasn’t treating my body well with overfilling it. I was feeling pretty consistently outed by the women who worked on the reserve. I could never tell if they were talking about me (they probably weren’t), but because I couldn’t speak spanish well enough, I felt like I wasn’t able to get close to any of them, which made me feel like I wasn’t really accepted by them. That is hard for me to live in an environment where I don’t necessarily feel like I belong or have friends.

Already here at the school I feel like the warm eyes and genuine smiles I’ve been receiving from the women here are more nurturing than any connections I felt on the reserve.

I hope this doesn’t come across as any slander towards the reserve or the women and men there. I don’t blame them **at all**. It’s hard having new people consistently come in and out of your life, I couldn’t really communicate at all with them even if they had tried to make an attempt to chat and get to know me better, and to be honest - their lives are *hard*.

The last of their worries is to make a temporary volunteer feel at home on the reserve. Most of the women on the reserve are single mothers. Most of them have to worry every day about making sure they do their job well enough to be able to put food on the plate for their children the next day, week, or month. They don’t have any option to look for new work, because they can’t afford to go a day without working. They probably feel very stuck in a circumstance that they don’t see any way out of. And here I am, just volunteering my time, traveling for a long time, teaching yoga, not doing manual labor, and worrying about bugs.

To them, I can see why they didn’t make an effort to get close with me.

Again, I’m not diminishing my own struggles on the reserve, I am just placing myself into the perspective of someone else.

It’s interesting. That man from venezuela, and another boy (Jesus) who I met on the beach in Santa Marta who sold me the beautiful soul-hand bracelet that I now wear seemed to have quite a bit more hope than the women in the reserve.

Maybe it’s because it has only been a few weeks of hardship and displacement for them? Or probably more than that honestly, maybe a few years. While these women on the reserve have probably had a decade or decades of hardship… that’s all they know.

I’m feeling very optimistic, good in my body and good in my head today so that’s probably why I’m able to rationalize a lot of these thoughts in an accepting way.

In reality, while I was on the reserve and in Santa Marta (and I’m sure more in the future) - I REALLY struggled with these experiences and thoughts.

I was feeling **so** entitled even to have the option to leave the reserve when I was going through my struggles. I felt like everything that I was having a hard time with was so invalidated against the poverty that I saw around me.

Seeing the kids at the school made me so sad sometimes. I recognized that so many of them were receiving barely any education and that because of that fact, they may never leave the mountain. They might end up living the exact same lives that their mothers and families lived before them. For some people, maybe they prefer it that way. But to not have the option for anything more in life is what really nagged at me.

The girl who is seven years old who just started school this year because Kath threatened to call the police and take the mother’s children away if she didn’t allow her daughter to attend school really stuck with me.

This mother had 6 children (or was it 5?) and couldn’t even afford milk for her baby. Her baby was in the hospital because it wasn’t doing well! Her seven year old was in charge of all of the children and the baby while she would try to make money for the family… selling avocados.

This little girl had to grow up so quickly, and she had no option otherwise.

These are the sobering realities of life in the Sierra Nevadas.

It made me question so much how I might be able to help, what the best way to help was, if I was doing enough, if I should be leaving, if giving money was the best option, if donating to foundations was the best option, or if I was even the right person to be able to help.

I felt *so* entitled for even thinking these things. What gives me the right to feel struggle about hearing someone’s hardships? What gave me the right to have my hardships be one degree removed from the actual pain and suffering?

Today in my daily meditation, Tamira spoke about accepting everything that we are not in control of in order to practice mindfulness. I really liked this, and I think it’s been helping me keep a perspective about my own entitlement. I can not control the circumstances I was born into, so I shouldn’t shame myself about them. What I can control is how I utilize this privalege, and I plan to do that.

Hell, I’m only 22. I still have a *long* way to go in order to figure out how to try to make a positive impact for others.

What I have been seeing here in Colombia is probably < 0.0001% of the poverty that exists in the world and is not even remotely as harsh as other people’s conditions. There are so many more people’s lives for me to experience, so much more empathy to build (for others and for myself), and so much more research to be done on creating wide impacts for those who need it.

Now that I have easy access to my computer and consistent wifi again, I have a feeling I’ll be writing a bit more about this. I think it’s important to work through these thoughts and to allow my brain to make some sense out of what I’ve been seeing in the world. It’s important to document shifts in my paradigms and perspectives.

For now, I have quite a bit of catching up to do in my other projects so I will leave this entry at the above.

Today I am feeling so much love and gratitude for my ability to travel, for my circumstances that I was born into, for my hope and optimism in my own life, and for everything that is coming ahead.

More soon,

Jess

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