



You Never Really Go Home: Returning from an International Service Trip

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I stared in awe. My senses went wild as I attempted to take in every sight, smell, and sound. The first thing I noticed was the stench: burning garbage. My eyes watered from the smell, but as they began to focus I started to process what I was seeing. The structures made of aluminum sheets and tarps were actually homes, and the large dirt path running straight through the cluster of homes was to be a highway. What looked like a construction site was actually a community that is home to hundreds of Nicaraguan refugees. My mind raced as Father Matteo led us through the Triangle of Solidarity, a “squatter” community made up of small “houses,” which were more like huts. The Triangle of Solidarity was a happy place, but it was also a broken one. I say broken, because a bulldozer had quite literally plowed through the middle of it, leaving hundreds of families without homes.

Seeing the destruction that the new road caused to this community was devastating. However, what is even more disturbing is that no one is aware that this is happening, which is sadly because no one wants to hear the hard truths. Unfortunately, when talking about service trips there is great disparity between what people expect and want to hear and what we want to say. When I returned home from Costa Rica, I would get the occasional question from a friend regarding my trip to Costa Rica, and each time I gave the same programmed response, “Costa Rica is absolutely stunning, I had an amazing trip, I definitely think I made a difference, they had so little but they were so happy and welcoming, and I would certainly go back again.” Each time I recited the expected speech, I felt my skin crawl and my blood boil. The fact is, Costa Rica is beautiful, breathtaking actually, but it was also ugly. While in Costa Rica I was able to meet amazing people and learn things that fundamentally changed how I view the world and the people who live in it, but I was also exposed to things that still keep me up at night.

Many of the families who once lived in the Triangle of Solidarity are now spread around the country of Costa Rica, many of them separated from one another. The families who remained in the Triangle often spent twelve hours a day without water, and sometimes it was multiple days before the water turned back on. These people had their lives turned upside down all so a highway could be built where their friends once lived, and there was nothing I could do about it. Returning from Costa Rica was infuriating; I found myself actually angry that people were just going about their normal daily lives while refugees in Costa Rica were going without water. Water is something taken for granted by many individuals, including myself. It is something that many people do not realize the importance of until it is gone. You don't think about how often you utilize or consume water until you are standing in the middle of a community that only has access to running water for a few hours a day.

A few days after I returned back to Albany as I was sitting in calculus class, my mind kept wandering back to Costa Rica. I always felt at home while at school, but after returning from this trip I found it difficult to feel comfortable anywhere. In a place where I had once felt engaged, excited, and secure, I felt cold, distant, and ungrounded. Everywhere I went I felt like I was looking at my life through someone else's eyes. As time went on, I began to feel hopeless, like there was nothing I would ever be able to do that would help to resolve the injustices in Costa Rica, let alone the rest of the world. I wanted to do something, but the task seemed so monumental that I didn't know where to start, so I began to go about my normal routine. I went to class, hung out with friends, and did homework like I normally would, but this time I felt like I was walking in someone else's shoes, like I was no longer the same person.

The experience of being in another country, living and serving with its people, and embracing its culture, is an experience that changes you. Stumbling over garbage and gagging on

the smell of the dump while walking through a Nicaraguan village in Costa Rica impacts you. These experiences change how you think, act, and perceive the world around you; quite like trauma. Sometimes when we take time to slow down and think about a given situation, it can be too painful to deal with or we may “not have the proper support and conditions to attend to it,” so we “deny, avoid, or circumvent” it (Pyles 2015, p. 18). This is why people often try to return to their “normal” lives rather than facing what they just experienced by continuing to think and talk about it. Just as after a traumatic incident, when you return from service abroad, you don’t return to the same home you once knew; everything you learned, saw, heard, and smelt stays with you.

Service and advocacy trips can be extremely impactful, but that is partly because they often bring up very sobering and upsetting information. Participants in these trips often learn things that will stick with them forever, so it is important that they find ways to process this information in a positive and constructive way. This shows the similarity between trauma and international experiences, especially service and advocacy trips. Both trauma and experiences abroad change the way in which you view the world and perceive different situations. This is why trauma research can be helpful when building a space in which students can reflect and plan for the future. Trauma researchers, as well as “researchers in several different fields have discovered that people who have experienced seriously adverse events frequently report that they were positively changed by the experience” (McMillen 1999, p. 455). However, it has also been found that these positive changes were reached through “the receipt of needed support” (McMillen 1999, p. 455). This suggests that similar types of spaces would be helpful in aiding students returning from service and advocacy in finding ways to process what they have learned and create action plans for the future.

Similar to trauma, experiences abroad should be debriefed and reflected upon in order to bring about positive changes. I think that if students had a platform to work through the experiences they had while abroad, they may be able to work towards enacting change upon arrival home. Unfortunately, many institutions do not provide a space in which students can reflect and generate ideas after returning from a service or advocacy trip abroad. The lack of action-planning and post-trip reflection after returning from Costa Rica brought to my attention the need for this type of space in higher-education institutions. My experiences have shown me that there is a need for post-trip reflections and debriefing exercises in order to increase the ability for short-term international service trips to enact sustainable change. We need a space to be together, to reflect, and to plan; a space in which we can mentally return to Costa Rica and create a blueprint for the future; something that keeps us attached; attached to ourselves, our experiences in Costa Rica, and the present.

Debriefing and making sense of past experiences can help students to form creative ideas and can also prevent students from simply slipping back into their normal routine and unintentionally letting the thoughts and plans for action become memories. Healing justice, a practice that “proposes we bring our nonjudgmental awareness to what is asking for our kind attention right here and now,” is one method for dealing with trauma, especially for those who are healers themselves, and not necessarily the ones who faced the trauma directly (Pyles 2015, p. 18). This is an appropriate framework to use when crafting a safe space for people coming back from service abroad because as volunteers, we did not directly face the hardships of the people in Costa Rica, but instead observed them and worked through ways to relieve them.

When organizing international service trips, the organizers always plan pre-departure activities that will prepare students for what will occur on the trip, but nobody prepares you for

coming home. Nobody prepares you for feeling like a stranger in your own home. Trips leaders have even admitted that they “have little insight into the longer-term impact of international study tour on students,” which shows the need for post-trip reflections (Hall et al. 2016, p. 43). Like trauma, travel experiences can encourage purposeful changes in one’s life structure and views of others and the world, but in order for this to happen, people need to enter the right spaces when they return from abroad. The methods used to help victims cope with trauma show that positive changes can occur as a result of crisis, and therefore could be used to help create the spaces needed to keep the story of “us” intact after an international service trip (McMillen 1999, p. 458).

Having reflections and group gatherings after returning from Costa Rica would have helped my team and I to develop new ideas regarding how we could take action after our trip came to an end. This type of post-trip reflection would not only have given us the chance to create action plans, but it would also give us the opportunity to hold one another accountable. It would have given us the chance to more thoroughly work through what we had experienced and find positive ways to take action. We could have found local organizations to connect with or come up with innovative ways to aid those who we met with and learned from in Costa Rica. Unfortunately this didn’t happen for us, but that does not mean it can’t happen in the future.

The first step in creating this space is to build the foundations. Trauma research, such as healing justice can be part of that foundation. Another part could be pulled from existing travel models, such as the Jafari model, which is a tourism model that explores the “potentially transformative impact of the return from non-ordinary back to ordinary daily life” (Hall et al. 2016, p. 34). This model has six components, but there are two that would be appropriate for building this safe space, and they are called repatriation and incorporation. Repatriation

recognizes that “while the former self is being revived, it will not be exactly the same,” and incorporation involves weaving elements of the experience into everyday life (Hall et al., 2016, p. 42-43). The Jafari model highlights the importance of “a post-travel review or debrief in which students and staff reconnect” in order to “solicit feedback, conduct presentations and draw linkages between theory and the study tour activities” (Hall et al., 2016, p. 43). International service trips are similar to tourist trips because of their length, but they also have elements of trauma mixed in, which is why the combination of these two models would help to build the foundations of these post-trip spaces.

The next step is to bring the students into a space that has been created using the ideas laid out above. Using repartition, incorporation, and healing justice, leaders can create a space for the students who participated in the trip to meet and have conversations with one another upon arrival home. The key here is to utilize the ideals of each of these frameworks to approach these conversations. Healing justice assures that people will be heard without judgment and with the intention of focusing on what can be done right now. Repartition highlights students’ need to be given the “opportunity to examine and articulate the ways in which they have been affected in both formal and informal” settings (Hall et al., 2016, p. 42). By talking through and reflecting upon experiences, students can find ways to uncover the hope in hopeless situations. By continuing the conversation upon arrival home, students can find ways to use past experiences to change both their lives and the lives of others for the better.

The final step is to find ways to help students connect their experiences serving aboard with another part of their lives. Helping students to find meaning behind their experiences can help them to better process what they have seen. This is where incorporation comes in. The incorporation component insures that elements of the experience are built into students’ “normal

lives.” In our case, this could include taking a class that focuses on Costa Rica or refugees in some way. It could also include changing our career paths, but it could also be something less drastic such as simply incorporating a cultural component learned in Costa Rica into our daily routine. The key here is making a space that allows students to grow and have the realizations that allow them to use what they have learned and seen in a constructive way going forward.

The type of spaces I am looking to create are difficult to build, and will require creativity and careful planning to be strong and sustainable. Trip leaders will need to put as much thought into post-trip sessions as they do into planning the activities that will take place during the duration of the trip. Healing justice and the Jafari model are two models that can be used to build the foundations of these spaces. These are the materials needed to build the post-trip spaces in which students can reflect and grow, so now we just need to pick up our tools and get to work.

References

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