

Theme: Open the Eyes of my Heart

From January until the end of April, I spent an amazing semester living, serving, and studying in Guatemala and Colombia through EMU's cross cultural program. The first 2.5 months were spent living with host families and doing intensive Spanish study in Guatemala City, with occasional weekend and week-long trips discovering the vast beauties that Guatemala has to offer. Our last month was spent in Colombia, where we largely learned about the work of MCC and its partners, spent 10 days serving with an MCC partner, and spent Holy Week in Popayan, the "White City."

Having grown up in Guatemala as a child with parents who were mission workers, this semester was about discovering home for me. Going back to Guatemala was like returning to another home and another family. I was able to live another part of myself, a part that has not been able to flourish while I've lived my life in the US, with my American family and friends, and my American reality. Living and studying in Guatemala, walking the streets of the city every day, and living with a family that soon became just as much my family as my biological family, reminded me, once again, how complicated the concept of "home" is. And while I didn't have the same emotional attachment to Colombia as I did Guatemala, I left a small piece of my heart in Colombia also.

Both of these countries hold such beauty. If you're able to go to either country, I highly recommend it, because it will change your life. The people, the landscape, the diversity. But for all the overwhelming beauty, there is also much pain and violence. Guatemala's 30 year long civil war ended in 1996, but it is now plagued by gang violence, economic disparity, and such conditions that force families to be torn apart by migration and deportation. Colombia's long history of violence, between the FARC and the state, only recently came to an end in 2016, with

the process of disarmament of armed groups officially being completed in recent months.

Whether this peace process will actually remain peaceful and prevent further violence and solve past violence remains to be seen.

So how does all of this relate to refugees and the concept of “home”? Colombia is one of the countries with the highest rate of internally displaced persons worldwide. People who have been forced to leave their home and move to another part of the country due to the threat of violence and forced participation in the military or armed groups. Guatemala is part of the Northern Triangle, one of three countries in Central America that has extreme rates of violence and poverty that in turn influence migration trends towards the U.S. In both countries, there are people who are forced to leave what they know as home and in some cases, their family, in order to seek out a new “home,” one with more opportunity and increased life chances.

In Colombia, I served with the MCC partner Creciendo Juntos (Growing Together). It is a community center and after school program that serves people in the city of Soacha, a city made up almost entirely of displaced people. This city sprang up, almost overnight, as people fleeing the armed conflict needed a place to stay, and due to its relative closeness to Bogota, the capital city of Colombia, the city of Soacha soon became a hub for displaced persons. One young woman I got to know shared that she and her family had to flee their home because the armed groups gave her and her siblings the choice of joining the armed group or leaving their home and town entirely. They chose the latter. She now volunteers at this after school program, the same one she went through as a child after being forced out of their home. Another young man, only 16 years old, who probably knew more about US politics and climate change than I did, recently spent several weeks in the hospital after being assaulted by police officers, who saw his status as a young man and a resident of a troubled city as a threat. Both of these young people, as well as

millions of other Colombians, have been forced out of their homes. Thankfully for these 2 specific individuals, they are lucky enough to still have family.

In Guatemala, we had the opportunity to visit a safe house where recently deported immigrants can sleep and eat until they're able to find a job or get in touch with family or decide what they will do next. Most of the people who end up here have nothing except for the clothes on their back and no way to get in touch with old friends and family in Guatemala. We met one man who had been deported in the past 24 hours. This was his seventh time being deported, though he'd spent approximately 20 years in the U.S, making his life and a family there. He was in tears, angry that he had been torn away from his kids, torn away from his work, and what had become his home. "How could they take me away from my kids? How could they separate a family?" he kept asking. What an eye opening experience. Here was this man, a native Guatemalan, born and raised in Guatemala, yet coming "home" wasn't coming home anymore. His life and his home were in the US. It really makes us think about "home," doesn't it?

Another time we came in contact with a person deported just hours before he approached us in a restaurant. We were eating a traditional Guatemalan meal, enjoying the freedom and thrill of being college students in another country during our free travel week, when this man approached us, and in a timid voice, began telling us his story. It was hard to hear him over the loud tv playing the soccer game. He told us he had been deported and had arrived just a few hours ago. He had nothing with him, except for the clothes on his back, and he was asking us for money so he could eat. He planned to return to the US as soon as possible to get back to his family. As we gave him some money and blessed him on his journey and he turned to leave, I remember looking into his tired eyes and feeling completely and utterly helpless. Thinking back, I wonder, "Why didn't we invite him to eat with us? To hear his story? To show him we care?"

What could I have done to help him more?" There are still times I think back to this man and wonder where he is. Did he make it back to his kids? Is he ok?

Unfortunately many of these stories I've shared don't have a nice, closed ending. I don't know what happened or what will happen to these people I've met, or the millions others I haven't met. But one thing is for sure: all of us had our eyes opened to the sad realities around us. As Psalm 146: 8 says, "the Lord opens the eyes of the blind." All of us in our cross cultural group were blind to different things, no matter our knowledge and understanding of the world. Our eyes were opened to the experiences of others and how we contribute to the suffering of others. We all came away from our trip, filled and unsettled at the same time. What is privilege? What is justice? What is happiness? What is home?

Throughout our trip, in all of our encounters with people displaced or forced from their homes, separated from their families, suffering from violence and poverty, while still fully embodying the example of Christ as they suffered, we were reminded that, as the Scripture says,

⁷[The Lord] executes justice for the oppressed;
gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;
⁸ the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.

⁹ The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin."

Time and time again we were shown that God is a god of the oppressed. And as his followers, we are called to call out and stand up to oppression. And while I haven't had the experience of being a refugee or being physically forced from my home, I could somewhat understand the emotional strain that many of these people were going through. I too, felt like a nomad, without a home, or perhaps, too many homes to identify. And yes, that's a gross

understatement of the experience of being a refugee and a comparison that probably shouldn't even be made, but for me, my own experiences and questions about what home is for me, allowed me to more deeply understand the experiences of others, who are experiencing much more than I am. My eyes were opened. Those of us who have had exposure to the world and different cultures and histories are still blind to many things, no matter what level our knowledge or grasp on the happenings of the world. We all need to allow our eyes to be opened, to acknowledge suffering around the world and how we contribute to that, and how we, in our context, can fight that suffering and oppression, not as a White Savior, but as a fellow human being committed to standing up for all the other human beings on this planet.

And so, I think the main theme of our trip and the thought I want to leave you with is this: Risk love. Be contagious. And in the process, may the eyes of our hearts be opened.