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I will readily admit that I failed to ease myself into the Peruvian culture prior to my departure. Whether it was preparing for the language (watched a couple of Almodóvar movies in Spanish, with English subtitles), researching the politics (talked to my Dad who listens to NPR radio), or learning the lay of the land (told my parents not to bother visiting, “Mom, there is nothing outside of Machu Picchu worth seeing”), I woefully underachieved. In a last ditch attempt to prepare for what awaited me on the other side, I entertained the idea of speaking to a young Peruvian waiting in the Atlanta gate, but my nerves kicked in and paralyzed me. And so I allowed myself to be thrown into the fire of Perú without having spoken to a Peruvian my entire life.

While most failures or instances of underachieving result in a personal detriment because of the necessary loss of something better, the “you’re-only-hurting-yourself” principle, my lack of preparation did not hurt in any way. It is the nature of complete cultural immersion that bailed me out of my early summer laziness. To manifest this in an image I present my first steps out of customs into Jorge Chavez International Airport, a scene that at the time queerly resembled a fire-pit: a forty by forty foot square of anxious, yelling Peruvians waiting for family, friends, guests, interns, the perimeter of this square five Peruvian’s deep at its narrowest and ten at its widest. The taxistas screamed out destinations in bursts of three, the tourist agencies handed out brochures by the handful, and anyone in charge of picking up a gringo waited anxiously for any white boy who possibly had the last name Smith or Johnson. So us newcomers circled the perimeter looking for the emblem of Coprodeli, a company we had never worked for, mounted on a poster held by three women we had never met. My unlearned and still extremely polite rejection tactics left me with countless cell-phone coupons, travel deals, and taxistas under the

impression they were taking me to Lima Centro. “No,” I thought, “I have not failed myself. There is no semi-immersion, and there is no preparation for immersion, hay que vivir la vida peruana.” And so began my summer-winter in Perú. The three women I eventually found holding the sign were Roxana, my work supervisor, Marlith, my comfort/safety supervisor, and Julia, one of the many abuelita’s who looked out for me and shared with me her rich history and knowledge of la patria and her own heritage.

Following our introductory weekend, a crash course on the greater Lima area, Roxana, Barbara, and I sat down with Robert and Carlos, professors of theatre, to plan our weekly schedule. As theatre interns we assisted Professor Robert in classes at three colegios in Callao (San Agustín de Hipona, San Vicente, and San Miguel) and Professor Carlos at San Francisco Solano, a colegio in Pachacutec. Each professor taught a weekly class in which we ran warm up activities, worked with students in the creation and dramatization of mini-plays, and offered feedback on performances of said mini-plays. The classes placed us all over Callao throughout the week (and on Mondays in Pachacutec) but each day we concluded at Hipona with rehearsal for la gran obra.

The central goal of the internship, the theatre classes as ancillary characters, was to prepare the play “Don Juan Tenorio” in nine weeks time, making us listos for the anniversary mass and celebration of Padre Miguel’s founding of Coprodeli on July 23<sup>rd</sup>. With a scheduled six rehearsals per week, Monday through Saturday, two to three hours, Barbara and I spent most of our time working with fifth and sixth graders (14-17 year olds) of San Agustín de Hipona.

Of course, in Perú, a schedule does not guarantee realization. Nine Mondays in Pachacutec became four due to holidays and transportation difficulties. Six rehearsals a week usually meant four to five. And two to three hour rehearsals often turned into chaos for an hour and half, yelling for half an hour, and half-baked rehearsal for an hour. For a gringo like my

father, this would be torture, but for a gringo like me, it was bliss. Every day was an adventure that demanded my evolution. The first two weeks I witnessed the unpredictability, instability, and inefficiency of a country lacking resources and responsible government. During this time Coprodeli employees guided me through the majority of every day, travelling with me to the sites, making sure food was provided, and ensuring there was no discomfort in the living situation that would affect my work. Coprodeli was so helpful and protective in those first two weeks, that due to no fault of theirs, but to my own restless and adventurous soul, I was eager for the settle-in period to be over and start exploring on my own.

I spent the following two weeks seeking independent solutions to any unexpected changes in my day-to-day routine that normally would have been patched up by Marlith, Robert, or Roxana. In this period I adopted the term “fluidity” for what others would more curtly name (as I did earlier) “the plaguing inefficiency and lack of punctuality in the third world,” which although is in the West, is far from Westernized. And I came to love this fluidity, for although the Peruvian concept of time led to many “wasted” hours in which rehearsals were delayed or simply paused, it was in these spare moments of “nothing” when the students and I could learn about each other’s lives, in which I had some of the richest conversations of the whole two months. In these two weeks I had to adapt my demands of efficiency and relationship with time. Mind you, I have never been called efficient minded or punctual by anyone, that alone speaks volumes about the cultural difference. I changed my concept of achievement and growth as only seen through progress over time for a looser definition of what makes time “well-spent.” While these “lost” hours added up to a whole lot of procrastination and a whole lot of cramming in the final weeks, I would never have traded them for rehearsal time nor do I think any power in the world could have succeeded in such a task.

After these first four weeks of learning, filtering, and adapting, I felt like I had gotten the hang of many things. A four day weekend (very common in Perú) allowed me to take a beautiful trip to the mountains, and upon my return I had the sensation of living in Callao as opposed to visiting. As far as a routine can be established in Perú, I had one, and with this growth came everything good I could have ever asked for out of the internship. I was no longer the American volunteer in the schools; I was José, Josecito, gringuito, amigo. Work became more natural and instinctive and because of my comfort level with the students I was able to demand more out of them, and they too demanded more out of me. Although this increased comfort led to more distracting conversations, shared lessons on colloquialisms of the English and Spanish languages, and World Cup taunting, I am certain it made the experience richer for the students, professors, and myself.

Naturally, as any job should be, work was challenging. The play was compulsory and for some of the students, being on stage was the last place they wanted to be. Because we were dealing with fourteen to seventeen year olds who had never had a teacher put the fear of god into them (professor-student relationships in Perú are much less founded on unconditional respect), there was truly no way to demand the memorization of lines or the dramatization of the play in rehearsals, “practice, we talkin’ bout’ practice?!” Every ultimatum or scare tactic that had been used on me in my suburban, middle-upper class public high school, would not work on these students. Their resistance was the cause of much stress for Professor Robert, Barbara, and myself, but it also allowed for such a feeling of accomplishment following the play’s completion. In the marathon rehearsals preceding the production I could feel finally the cohesion of the group; it was no longer a compulsory play, it was a piece of art put on to show the appreciation of a whole city for the organization of Coprodeli.

“Don Juan Tenorio” was performed in the Municipal Theatre of Callao, one of the region’s most-respected venues, eight hundred seats in all, and the students did not seem out of place on a stage that has held some of Peru’s most famed productions. The play was a success among the families, my fellow volunteers, and most importantly among the staff of Coprodeli, to whom it was a show of appreciation. Since my internship’s purpose and this play were one in the same I can certainly say that my stay was successful for myself and for the organization. However, I cannot reduce the success and mutual benefit of my experience to the play alone. I am extremely proud of the performance, but I am most proud of having known and affected the students who put it on and the people for whom it was intended. Had the play been an absolute failure, I would still consider the experience a success solely for the relationships I built with those I worked for and with and for the profound connection I now feel with Coprodeli, Callao, and Perú.

Coprodeli is a truly amazing organization whose projects continue to grow into new fields and new areas of Perú. It is a staple to the community of Callao and it could not have given me a better two months. Marlith, who embodies all that Coprodeli stands for, left me with this quote in an email after my return to the states, it summarizes in full my feelings about, well, everything: “verás que la vida es linda para vivirla, pero es más hermosa cuando vas ayudando a otros cada día.” *You will see that life is beautiful to live, but it is more beautiful when you lead it helping others every day.*