

From Guatemala to Ireland: Lessons from a Young Soul's Journey

His small warm hands and rosy cheeks, his helpless cries for his mother who could not tend to him, his round eyes wandering in fear, his soul in discomfort.

That is how I found little Luis Fernando tucked away in a blue crate behind his mother's tiny makeshift toy shop, one of many in the little market. We had stopped in a small town en route from Guatemala City to Huehuetenango, the province in which we were to set up our medical camp.

I ran to this little boy, and without much concern about his mother, I picked him up in my arms, warmed by his touch and softened to the core by his innocence. In my attempts to please him, reeking from the exploits of the western world, I pulled a Cliff Bar from my purse as I did not have any candy with me. His face brightened, and he immediately stopped crying. I gave his mother some leftover money I had and spent as much time as I could with little Luis in my arms, taking as many pictures as I could with him to capture these beautiful moments, stilling time in a tireless and hopeless age.

I did not realize this until hindsight allowed me to analyze every part of my journey in this enchanted land, but Luis had become my hope for the rest of the overwhelming week we had in Huehuetenango, my warmth in the cold nights atop the mountains, my strength at the end of ceaseless days of seeing the sick, the diseased, the hopeless, the helpless, the powerless.

After a week of helping treat over two thousand patients, from newborns to the aged, from those who walked endless miles to reach us, those who waited days at the gate of the military camp, to those whose hearts were heavy with blood and with rage and with happiness and with sorrow and most abundantly those whose hearts reeked with hope, we returned to Guatemala City. On our way back, we stopped in the town we visited at the beginning of our trip, and there again, I was treated with warmth from my angel on earth, Luis Fernando.

It was in this moment, coming full circle, I realized that there is a world out there full of innocents like Luis. There is a world raging with poverty, a world without end to injustice, a world which harbors malice, yet somehow this world contains happiness. Somehow, children like Luis find a way to smile; in the sheer adversity which defines the lives of the poverty-stricken, they find ultimate hope, they find true happiness, they find the core of life and of death.

Guatemala was a call to arms, a prelude to One Young World. A few months later, in October of 2014, I represented the US and Texas Tech University in a summit which brings together the world's young leaders, from over 180 countries. OYW puts us all under one roof and provides a platform for young leaders to discuss the world's most pressing issues, in the hope that resources from the developed world can be used to help those in need in other parts of the world. The summit in 2014 was held in Dublin, Ireland.

A land filled with deep mystery and with unfathomable beauty, I could not have found myself in a more fitting geography than Ireland's to discuss the world's issues with those affected firsthand. Over a thousand young leaders, also known as ambassadors, attended the summit, representing over 180 countries. Never before would I have felt the power of the world and its youth pressing upon every quantum of my soul, urging me to solidify my mission of devoting a life to helping those who have been ripped apart by injustice and those whose nations'; threatening beauty becomes their source of weakness.

OYW was that magical place where world leaders like Mr. Mohammad Yunus, Mr. Kofi Annan, former Irish President Mary Robinson, Richard Branson, presidents of various Latin American nations and other notable dignitaries, taught us the terrifying reality of our times. They enlightened us with the knowledge that their generation has "messed up" and that we have not been "good stewards of our planet" and that if there's any hope, it lies with the passions of young leaders across the globe that we inhabit together.

It would be mathematically impossible to calculate the upper limit, if it exists, of the impact of OYW and the connections that were made between young leaders from the poorest countries and those from economic superpowers since the inception of the summit six years ago. My own personal connections led me to pursue constructive dialogues with and aid the efforts of my OYW ambassador friends in Kashmir, Kurdistan, Guatemala, Peru, Liberia, Kenya, South Africa, Ireland, England, Australia, Colombia, Qatar, Bangladesh, Nepal, North Korea, Thailand, India, and Pakistan, just to name a few countries.

I have talked about the world, its unjust contents, its hopeful people, but I must tell you the state of affairs of my own heart. I have given my heart away to those whose stories haunt me every day, those who are afraid to see the dew of the morrow, the sunshine of the day, the twilight of the evening, and the depth of the stars at night. They're afraid because they are running away from rape, violence, bitter cold, burning heat, from disease, the excesses of industrialization, from their own island nations because the effects of climate change have destroyed their homes, from their children because they cannot feed them, from their psyche because it harbors terrorism, from their governmental leaders who have caged them and, from the shadows because that is the only world they know.

Let me know tell you that though adversity is in every quantum of their blood, they are happy. They are hopeful. They have elders and they have high spirits, a few treasures the West lacks. I encourage western youth to relieve themselves of the sheltered milieu that clothes them and to venture beyond their nation's soul to see the world. I promise you, when you see this brave new world, your eyes will tell your heart's soul that this earth and this universe are filled with mystery, with terror and injustice, but it is not without happiness and not without hope.