

Discovering Human Closeness: Outside the U.S. (Part I)

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Thanks to a Bolivian merchant's error of inserting an extra digit in a bank card charge, delaying my departure back to the Northern Hemisphere, my history was changed. In the three extra days in the country, where I needed to rest up after an altitude related illness, I reached a surprising level of involvement in the community where I happen to have gotten stuck. This was my journal entry:

The word "culture" does not suffice when experiencing the eye-opening revelations of days lived amongst aware people. I am fortunate to be doing this now in Bolivia. The differences between modern and traditional peoples are far deeper than facile analysis or sociological comparisons. To understand fully is to feel and live the alternative, the "real reality."

After one month in this richly endowed, mostly indigenous country, I feel fortunate to reach quantum leaps of insight after a requisite time for initiation and becoming familiar. What a difference a few more days makes.

Having sailed to dozens of countries as a boy, I have always known that my own peculiarly insular and often arrogant country, the U.S., lacks the range of social intricacy and cohesion of places that are more community based and closer to nature.

Perhaps, as author Chellis Glendinning observes, U.S.ians are a sick people, increasingly unhealthy for reasons of toxicity, radiation, and fast paced modern living. This trend helps explain the high incidence of stress and social posing that seems to dominate in the U.S.

For example, a "bruja" or sorceress in Bolivia, in her supportive circle, is able to be totally down to Earth, kind, and passionate. Loved, not seen as really different. In the U.S. one who gravitates toward similar interests is separated by choice from the mainstream and can appear as a nut case (deservedly or not). Our Bolivian bruja has practical wisdom, such as her observation that "in the North life is about work, work, work and the South it's fiesta, fiesta, fiesta." This is probably in her book, *Yo, Bruja*.

How well is one able to enjoy the amount of friendship, family ties, work, money, art, recreation, etc. that is available? Sustainability and absence of militarism count too. The U.S. citizen, particularly one who is able to pay his or her bills, has much pride on all these counts, regardless of objective reality. This is partly because of lack of knowledge about the rest of the world (usually depicted as more dangerous and deprived). Overwork and poor health in the U.S. have been on the rise for decades, coinciding with top-dog overcompensation and greed. Meanwhile, what the U.S. public is told about poverty neglects to include the likelihood that being poorer materially may be connected to having more social intimacy and time for family -- generally, outside the U.S.

Bolivia is the poorest nation in South America, but the country is enviable in many ways. The people strike me as just as dignified and proud as any people I have seen in other parts of the world. Could it be in part due to that no Walmarts or McDonalds are in Bolivia, resulting in a crucial advantage over, say, the more economically devastated, less educated, strife-torn Mexico (the land of my birth)?

Granted, Bolivia is not one, big egalitarian love-in. Indeed, the legacy of colonialism and hierarchy from the European (partial) conquest for half a millennium endures, although President Evo Morales (an Aymara) represents a departure as he provides inspiration for 100% native pride.

A visitor here can develop a sense of being more alive when the structures of the far more materialist and imperialist culture of the U.S. are far away. For many back in my home country, the trade-offs are not worth it: contracting an intestinal infection (de rigueur) or risking a deadly Amazonian fever becomes the be-all, end-all of comparative existence. If we add the northerner's cherished greater order to traffic, better sidewalks, predictable bathroom plumbing, and more, the list starts to go on forever.

But here the fresher, local food, the greater informality of movement and scheduling, more expression of physical affection, constant safety for a woman or child walking alone on a road at night -- these are readily apparent in any country that does not, like the U.S., have such rigid control between people and within the individual. How can these values be readily perceived?

In general, says the bruja, who is originally from Spain, only a tiny segment of the population of the world thinks much. Instead, they accept the story told to them by society, the government, and surrounding fellow citizens. So that, when people of greater awareness can meet and get together in mutual support, a dividing line is clear between the two segments of people. Yet, she is not able to speak as a U.S. citizen might, with the usual pressures and challenges of our less happy society. The Bolivian functions and feels to be more a part of a community, which colors such a person's perspective.

In my present location, this small, intentional community/eco hotel/publishing house of aware people, surrounded by the outside world of destructive forces such as commercialization, capitalist exploitation and unhealthy influences, more love and teaching are shared constantly. Within such communities the personal transformation is undertaken without waiting for social change or a general awakening. Bonds -- both between individuals and for the group -- are created, proliferated and strengthened. Such realities of lifestyle and perception are more powerful for the spirit of unity and personal growth than any changes in political developments or cultural adjustments (e.g., more internet, a Black man in the White House, etc.).

How could I be so lucky to fall into such a scene as this, what with the blinders I had on to a greater extent than I had realized? My discovery started with a sense in March that I should go to Bolivia to attend the World Peoples Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in April. Staying beyond its conclusion was crucial, if only to not waste a major jet trip. Perhaps a twist of the Fates then made all the difference.

I fell ill with one week and a half left to my stay in South America. I had already decided to refrain from maximum travel (e.g., to explore Peru and the whole west coast to investigate Sail Transport Network potential). It made more sense to enjoy a restful stay in the beautiful Bolivian countryside in order to work on my manuscripts, giving my body a break from the rigors of an active, not very tranquil routine.

Fortunately, when I was hit by the combination of high altitude, a month of sometimes questionable fried foods, rough car & bus rides amidst traffic with uncontrolled exhaust systems, combined with a unique climate, I had landed in a favorable location for support. Fasting, organic food and massage are normal in this compound. With artistic gardens and natural-building structures, the price per night of seven dollars U.S. was quite the incentive to stay. The season is not a busy one, allowing my hostel-dorm option to be enjoyed with no other guests. Nevertheless, becoming violently ill with unfamiliar symptoms in unfamiliar surroundings, among people I didn't really know, caused unlimited stress while I wondered where all my strength had gone. How could I manage to leave or travel?

I would have been gone today (May 16th) if not for the merchant error with my card. Both the U.S. and Bolivian banks involved were supposedly unable to reverse immediately the obvious mistake. But after my revelations today, it turns out to be most fortunate that my failed attempts to make bureaucracy work in my favor meant that I had to remain where I was. I was too ill to stand in lines and catch planes, but I needed to descend thousands of feet if only to escape the sleep apnea from the "mal de altitud."

Stuck I was, feeling like the character in "Hotel California" (big in Bolivia today): "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave." Then I met the bruja Inka Lecumberri and her fellow shaman Luis Espinoza Chamalu, founder of the community. She was available for a healing session, so I grasped at the opportunity for possible relief and salvation. Using for divination an egg dropped into a glass of water to observe the tendrils of egg white representing my issues and problems, and laying her hands upon me, she delivered wise analysis and advice. To unblock my pathways she used knuckles on areas such as my sternum and legs that had me howling, screaming and laughing. The entire grounds and adjacent village heard it, but it was nothing new. I was soon spending a long time by myself on the same spot, lying on the ground, hands on Mother Earth, meditating in such a way to welcome other voices that Inka said I needed to allow into my life more frequently.

By then I realized I had to simply accept my longer stay, grateful for a bit more time to gird myself for three airplane rides including the 6 ½ hour flight to Miami. I was not instantly cured from my session with Inka, as I have seen happen in my own prior cases in Nepal and Mexico with traditional, unfathomable healers. But Inka made me realize that I had somehow blocked my awareness that I am in a personal transformation. Getting closer to the energy of Mother Earth (Pachamama) was a major part of Inka's message to me, and I immediately knew that this is worth remembering more than my usual daily fixation on trying to be a more effective, successful activist and writer.

It was the next day -- today -- that I again perchance was exposed and immersed into the community which I had just begun to be part of. I had gotten to know most of the staff and volunteers, young people from around South America who were attracted to the open, radical philosophy of the founder of this 20-year community.

Human relations that I have been witnessing here are devoid, apparently, of the game-playing jockeying for quick gratification that I have observed even among the best grassroots activists in the U.S. that I have known for decades. I include Earth First!ers, who in their semi-tribal non-organization have effectively saved ancient trees and made successful calls for protection of mountains threatened by coal mining, for example. When surrounded by "Babylon" (modern culture and society) it is impossible to be as one would like to be in harmony with others and with the land, no matter what the well intended aspirations of a fine individual may be.

Here the lack of both hierarchy and self-motivated behavior, as well as the slower paced acceptance of daily life and of the entire world, is obvious -- although it is only the natural way of living that is being pursued. It is seemingly without ego or private gain. Rather it is the group and the land that come first, with an easy grace for one's usual responsibilities and interactions.

It must not be the first time that a guest becomes welcome to join this partially self-sufficient community. It touches my heart. I would be by far the oldest person here, an unproven worker, and my Spanish leaves a lot to be desired. My being too weak to play my songs for them on my guitar may have helped, or maybe the songs would have made me even more desirable. I don't seem able to exhaust my new friends' goodwill, as I ask for help walking the paths or for another cup of lemon tea.

This feels better than scoring a pile of great DVDs or going on a glorious hike back in Oregon. Do my new friends have a real idea of how different I am, with my more intense upbringing geared toward accomplishment, goals, and ego? I feel that they sense I am more than a fellow traveler who claims to work for Mother Earth.

The patience and helpfulness in all ways that I am receiving is refreshing and relaxing. This experience carries more weight than being able to set down sooner on U.S. soil and being able to shop at Whole Foods or an organic food co-op. For now I've traded that and the U.S. soundtrack of street noise, sirens and televisions in for my current exotic sound-background of Bolivian music, choruses of feral dogs, and unfamiliar bird and frog sounds. Pigs being slaughtered nearby sound like children screaming, disturbing this vegetarian community. In the U.S. one might never hear such a

thing because factory farms are away from villages and towns.

Changing my flight ticket again today meant being on the atrocious roads and viewing the apparent chaos of street vending and zero discernible traffic discipline. But it was definitely worth it because of my company: my new friends. Still, since my health collapsed I have longed to see my old friends and family back in the U.S. But it is with expanding perspective that I have to wonder where I ought to want to live.

To come: Part Two on this series on culture and being closer to people.

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See April's reports on the Climate/Mother Earth conference on this website.