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# The Intercultural Classroom: Reflections on the Development of a Psychologist

SHERRY WALLING

To be a clinical psychologist is to be a student of human life. How do we think? Why do we feel what we do? What do we long for? What hurts us? What heals us? In my work, I am invited into the sacred spaces of a person's inner world. I hear the real story, the secrets, the realities behind outer appearances. I hear the words that cannot be expressed in other places. It is privileged work that both entralls and terrifies.

I love being a clinician, but I must be honest about its difficulties. My job makes me confront existential possibilities I would rather deny, and grapple with questions that I cannot answer. My job is to be still, safe, and unafraid in the presence of pain. As a psychologist, I use the tools of science to help me learn and understand the world and the people that I work with; however, as a therapist the objectivity of science offers no protections. When it comes to the deeper, existential ability to be present in pain, the training only goes so far. My most important learning experiences have occurred outside the lines on my curriculum vitae: a twenty-hour bus ride through West Africa, learning to cook in San Salvador, a late night dinner with Chinese seminarians. Travel has been my best teacher in the endeavor to learn human lessons.

## Ana Maria

After my second year of graduate school, I spent a summer studying Spanish and backpacking through Central America. During my weeks in El Salvador, I found a transitional home in the guestroom of a woman named Ana Maria. Ana Maria ran an informal boarding house and a small *pupusaria* from her home located a few blocks from the University of San Salvador. She is a middle-aged, rotund woman who has become the surrogate mother of the neighborhood. She is generally soft-spoken but is not shy about scolding her regulars for running late to class. She advises boyfriends and girlfriends about their relationships and counsels young mothers on the care of their children while chopping cabbage and frying *pupusas*.

One morning she told me her story. During the civil war (1979–1992), her neighborhood was a hotbed of conflict. Student protesters clashed with government forces, informants monitored left-leaning faculty and other members of the neighborhood intelligentsia. On a Tuesday afternoon Ana Maria's sixteen-year-old son was taken while walking down the street in broad daylight. He came home for lunch, left to return to school and never came back. He *was disappeared*. (In Spanish it is literally "was disappeared." The passive grammar is worth preserving.) It is possible that he was killed right away. It is possible that he was forced to fight and killed later. It is unlikely, but possible, that he is alive somewhere. She does not know. She will likely never know. Two months after her son's disappearance, her husband died of a broken heart (a heart attack).

She told me that every time her door opens, she looks to see if it is her son returning. Every time, she feels a twinge of disappointment that it is not him.

After she lost her son and her husband, she spent two years closed away in her home. She prayed for death. One day a teenage boy knocked on her door and asked if she had extra food. Something clicked in her. She invited him in and cooked him a meal. She has been doing that for the past ten years. Her enclosed porch is filled with plastic tables and chairs. She begins cooking *pupusas* at 10 a.m. and cooks until midnight every day of the week. University students, professors, miscellaneous travelers and lost souls find a meal and a momentary home at Ana Maria's.

Her pain is close to the surface. She tells her story openly and tearfully. My tears join hers and we pass a tissue box back and forth. She continues to cry almost daily. She continues to grieve. She has not stopped longing for her son, but she has continued to live. Sometimes Ana Maria even seems downright joyful. Her life embodies the coexistence of pain alongside joy. This is an important lesson for a psychologist. In a pain-averse culture of helicopter parenting, over-medication, and addiction, we seem to operate under the assumption that pain will break us. We try to escape, numb, and intellectualize. The danger is that by cutting off this part of our lives, we restrict our capacity for the full range of experience. Without feeling pain, we shortchange healing, growth, joy, and courage. By not honestly confronting and acknowledging our pain, we limit our ability to live fully.

Over and over, travel has taught me that humans are stronger than we think. Pain hurts. It changes us. But, it usually does not break us. Pain is only a part of the human experience, not the whole. It may be the center of life for a season, but even hurt as deep as Ana Maria's succumbs to other feelings and other experiences. Because I have travelled, I believe deeply in the God-given capacity for healing, or at very least, in the universal inevitability of the passage of time. Most of the people and places that have shaped me exist in the constant shadow of war, death, poverty, and hunger. Yet in those places, be it El Salvador or Africa, people continue to make meals, make friends, experience joy, and move through life in spite of, in the midst of, the shadow of pain.

## **Nanjing**

I visited Nanjing, China, during a slushy, cold March. One of the most memorable experiences of my time in China was a visit to the Nanjing Massacre Memorial. It was well suited to the rain. The Japanese invaded China in 1931. Over 300,000 people were killed in Nanjing alone. The Nanjing memorial is built in and around a mass gravesite. The graves have been excavated but the remains have not been removed. The skeletons are encased in glass and visitors walk through an underground glass room, as if they were tunneling through the grave itself. The remains are preserved in the glass walls and people view them as they lay. The walls are piles of bones. There are several skeletons of small children. To say it is moving is an understatement.

China has one of the most complex cultures in the world. One Chinese person I met described it this way: "Long history makes me feel thicker, like I have a better or longer perspective than those with a shorter history." I could feel the depth of this history visiting the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, observing ancient rituals, and talking with Chinese friends about what it means to be Chinese. China has experienced an unbelievable amount of upheaval and tragedy in the past 100 years alone. Solidness and depth seem to come with being part of a culture that has survived for 3000 years. From empire to colonization to communist revolution to cultural revolution to cultural openness to international political and industrial powerhouse... A Chinese person does not proclaim cultural greatness but smiles demurely with a spark in the eyes to

reflect the strength and power of belonging to a culture that has survived every conceivable danger.

I think this sense of history helps with Nanjing. The weight of history, the depth of the human story grounds us in our pain. Telling stories and memorializing experiences contributes to identity and a sense of time and place. The horror of the massacre is woven into the larger narrative of history. It is undeniably and painfully significant, but it is layered on either side of the timeline with more stories, more history. The sense that this too shall pass seems etched in the Chinese psyche. Dynasties rise and fall, yet life continues.

This idea pervades everything I do as a psychologist. I believe that pain is not permanent but I know that it is ever present. Just as China continues as a nation despite massacre, revolution, and upheaval, so can people cultivate a depth of identity and history that is able to withstand tremendous pain. The retelling of our pain allows us to remember and memory is very important. Few things are more human than our capacity to remember. We need memory to tell us who we are, but we need a history fluid enough to prevent us from being defined solely by our most painful events. We need to remember, but not become stuck. China is an amazing embodiment of a psychological oxymoron: dynamic permanence. It demonstrates that ability to assimilate new experience into a history that is solid enough to remain relatively unmoved by a new experience.

### **Little girl**

One of the most amazing moments of my life occurred in the back of a truck. I was spending the summer in Ghana, West Africa. One day a week, I hitched a ride from Accra to the Buduburam refugee camp in the back of a truck owned by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). One day we had an extra errand to run; we picked up a nine-year-old girl from an orphanage. She was not an orphan, but had been living in the orphan house for almost six months. The little girl was the survivor of a brutal assault by several men that occurred at night in the camp. She was seriously injured and hospitalized for several months. After she was released from the hospital, she was too weak to make the hour-long trip between the camp and the medical center. The orphanage is near the hospital so arrangements were made for her to live there

while she received medical care. She had been separated from her mother for almost six months and our errand was to take her home.

While some of the group managed the paperwork, she wanted to change her dress so she would look nice for her reunion with her mother. She changed it twice and then settled on a floral print with ruffles. It was a bit too big and made her look even smaller and younger than nine.

The plan was to meet her mom at a gas station outside the camp. Without phones, we could not call to confirm that her mother would meet us. A message had been sent to her mother through another camp resident. The communication was word of mouth and felt very convoluted to my Western sensibility. Everyone in the truck was nervous that her mom would not be there. Her face was pancaked against the window. She held an abandoned snack in her hand. Watching her anticipation, knowing of her suffering, none of us could bear for her to feel any more disappointment. Pulling into the crowded gas station was one of the tensest moments of my life. No one breathed. My heart raced. I sat on the edge of my seat frantically scouring the faces in the crowd looking for a woman I had no idea how to recognize.

Thankfully, her mom was there. I exhaled and melted into my seat. The little girl let out a squeal and before the truck could stop, she scrambled out and was enfolded in her mother's arms. They twirled together, bodies intertwined, and sobbed.

I was humbled to bear witness to this moment. It is rare that the deepest longings of two people are given physical expression in a public space. I am moved even now as I attempt to write about it. The tension of searching and the relief of finding returns to my body as I remember the moments.

I don't know what happened next. My moment in her life passed. I got back in the truck and went into the camp to do my work. I hope it was a redemptive moment, one that marks a shift from surviving a horror to healing and new life. I hope.

One of the most palpable aspects of my memory of that day was the degree to which the entire community in the truck was emotionally invested in the little girl's story. There was tangible tension as we searched for her mother. There

was collective relief when the girl was returned to her mother's arms. For one hour my life was completely absorbed in hers.

And maybe this is the most human part of my travel lessons. People care. People are universally human. We are hurt by the same losses and we delight in the same reunions.

My psychology colleagues may wonder if Ana Maria is depressed or if the Liberian girl needs trauma-focused psychotherapy. We may question whether the memorial in Nanjing will cause vicarious traumatization in visitors. If I were reading these stories, I would ask those questions too. The difference is that I lived these moments; they are not academic exercises. I saw and felt the way that grief and joy coexisted in Ana Maria. I observed the strength of historical identity in the many Chinese people I met. I felt the way every person in the truck became completely engulfed in the little girl's journey. I experienced the presence of life in these stories of death and loss.

The gift of travel is that it gets us out of our heads, out of our patterns, and lets us be in the world in a new way. It makes us pay attention and notice who is around us. My travel has helped me develop great confidence in the human capacity to come back to life after pain. These are embodied lessons that I could not have learn through text or lecture. They are lessons I carry with me into the classroom and the therapy room every day.

Travel also gave me a framework for my own pain. My tiredness faded when I watched a woman carry a baby on her back and a basketful of rocks on her head. My hunger eased when I saw the distended bellies of true hunger. My shower became valuable when I watched a tired worker splash his face with water from a river inhabited by livestock and floating trash. Travel breeds compassion, It breeds tolerance. It has helped me contextualize my life within the larger human story.

One of my favorite pieces of writing is in a book by Kent Nerburn called *Letters to my Son*. He writes a chapter on travel and describes it like this:

This is the magic of travel. You leave your home secure in your own knowledge and identity. But as you travel, the world in all its richness intervenes. You meet people you could not invent; you see scenes you

could not imagine. Your own world, which was so large as to consume your whole life, becomes smaller and smaller until it is only one tiny dot in time and space. You return a different person...

Because I have traveled, I can see other universes in the eyes of strangers. Because I have traveled, I know what parts of me I cannot deny and what parts of me are simply choices that I make. I know the blessings of my own table and the warmth of my own bed. I know how much life is pure chance and how great a gift I have been given simply to be who I am.

And because I have traveled I believe in life in the midst of pain. I believe in the importance of telling stories, especially painful stories. I believe in the value of caring for another person, of really desiring their well being, even if it only lasts a moment. Travelling taught me how to be a psychologist.