January 25, 2008

Blog# 10
The United States of America, Re-mix

I woke with excitement to the bitter cold of Saint Louis for my first day of class of my last semester of college. I was excited for my classes and the new purpose I had found while studying abroad in El Salvador. I came back with a new sense of identity, a new sense of awareness and a new found love for community.

But, as I walked onto Saint Louis University’s campus, I was bombarded with images and people that I did not know. All the familiar buildings that I once knew well seemed foreign to me. I realized that I was just the same as anyone else on this campus, I was no longer the “tall gringo” and I no longer was the straight, white, suburban, Midwestern man. I walked on to Saint Louis University’s campus and I was gay. I had come out in El Salvador where I lived in a community that I felt safe and authentic love from twenty-four other United States’ students.

I think when I returned, I wanted to focus on all the injustices El Salvador experiences while in the shadow of the United States. I could write endlessly about the beautiful people I met and worked with or the complex culture that has been raided by government corruption. I could express my difficulty with learning a language and speak on the extreme poverty I witnessed. I think that is what we might want to hear from a study abroad student who has just returned from his or her “experience.” That is what we expect.

I know my fellow study abroad students have faced various amounts of “reverse culture shock.” I definitely felt the weight
of all things we call American; the abundance of wealth, the disparity between the rich and the poor, the staggering amounts of resources and even facing the clothes and shoes in my own closet. These things have all kept me fully aware of how privileged I am.

Nonetheless, I have not been able to fully embrace this transition. I am gay now. I think some people might be wondering what does this have to do with increasing awareness of a global world. It has everything to do with our awareness of our world. I studied with seventeen Salvadoran students that I could not tell them how I excited I was to finally be honest with myself. The cultural barrier was discouraging, but understandable. Salvadorans are extremely conservative when it comes to traditional values in the Catholic Church and I respected that, but do not agree with their approach. Yet, I have now returned to a culture where homosexuality is a “hot topic.” I want people to understand why I look at my campus and my community differently. I see poverty here, just as much as I have in Central America or Southern Africa. We are impoverished because we do not have love in the most authentic sense. I think regardless of my sexuality, I learned what it meant to be in community.

To be in community, is first to share your lives with each other. In my community, we shared our histories in an honest fashion. Second, we listened to each other. We listened with care for each other’s daily lives. Though we had similar schedules while studying abroad, we all came from different backgrounds and environments. We learned the difficult task of respecting people’s perspective. And third, there was patience. There was patience for each other’s issues, complaints, successes and failures. We had patience for one another.

I am the first to admit, I love to fill up my time with activities, class or entertainment. But, I think we should slow down and look at why we do certain things. Am I writing this article with another agenda in mind other than sharing my truth? I don’t think I am but, a reader might perceive it that way. We are only in control of our own truth and how much we share. We so often just are too lazy to ask the questions. And subsequently, we can never listen to any of the answers.

Re-entry into the United States is unique to everyone who
ceases the opportunity of traveling outside of our nation’s borders. Though it has been one of the most difficult experiences of my life, I have no choice but to embrace all of our glories and downfalls as an American citizen. I was lucky enough to gain a new sense of identity, a re-newed awareness and a new found love for our community, which I hope each person reading this can try their best to experience it in their own unique and personal way.

November 25, 2007

BLOG# 9

The last month at my praxis site, San Andres Collegio, I have taught a summer school English class with my praxis partner, Lauren Trout (SLU student). The major issue children are facing here in their communities beyond the gangs or violence; is their own feeling of self-worth. Lauren and I felt it was important to try to use the class to help teach them not only English, but also their own value as people. It may seem like an unrealistic use of the class, but it has actually been a great experience. We have a “Palabra del Dia” (Word of the Day) that is related to their lives in a positive way. Some of the words we have chosen are peace, culture, friend, play or ocean. All of these topics relate to their lives through their family life, their personal life or their life as a citizen of El Salvador. We write the word of the day on the board and then ask them a question that relates to the word. The students, usually about 10 kids from the ages of 4 to 11, make their own vocabulary. We translate the words they come up with and then teach them pronunciation and how to use the word in a sentence. After we have chosen some vocabulary and practiced them, we then give them paper and crayons. We use about 30 minutes for their own creative juices to draw one of the words that they had thought up. It might seem like this is a simple activity, but for children who have grown up in a horrendous education system and do not really find too much support at home; creativity is about the last aspect of their lives that is fed. The first couple of classes, we struggled a lot with some students just copying each other and then ending up with all the same pictures and words. But, as Lauren and I have tried to teach, each of them have their own mind and their own things they love. So, about after a month of
teaching, most of the students have really caught on. We are getting beautiful pictures about their lives and what these children love. I never thought it could have gone so well. I am not sure how much English they are learning, but I feel like learning to use your own creativity is a much more powerful tool than English. But, it is has combined two great skills. Lauren and I only have 4 more classes and I am getting sad that I will have to leave them. Though, I do know they have made an imprint on my life and I hope we have helped them gain some confidence in their lives. I never thought helping kids learn about their creativity could be so rewarding. I don’t all of a sudden feel a calling to be a teacher, but I do feel a new sense of responsibility to children and knowing their own creative ability. Someone taught me long ago about my own creativity and I am so glad I was given the opportunity to give back in El Salvador.

November 19

BLOG# 8
A New Imagination

In my classes and through my experiences of El Salvador, I have gained a new imagination. This imagination previously was formed by my environment, society and education. All of our imaginations are formed from these aspects of our lives. We rarely try to engage in what our imaginations are, let alone try to change. I have tried to deconstruct what my imagination had been before and what it is now. Before I lived in El Salvador, most of my imagination had been formed from my family values and my education. It had definitely begun its shift with my trip to Malawi, but has now become an entirely new imagination. It is the imagination of the poor. I am not claiming to know what it feels like to be poor or to even be able to imagine what it means to suffer in that way. But, I do think that I have gained a perspective in which I approach situations with the poor in mind, be it in El Salvador or the poor of Washington, D.C. I no longer delineate from a developing nation to the United States. I believe we are all developing communities. We are developing people. There is an allusion that we have arrived somewhere or that some people have the answer and others do not. But, I believe that this is at the root of most of our social problems. My
imagination has shifted. We all are in control of how we approach certain situations as United States citizens. We have a greater power than most people believe and it is not just the power to vote in a Democratic society. No matter if you identify yourself as conservative, liberal, apathetic, Republican, Democrat or other, we all have similar needs as human beings. It is from our detachment from our basic needs as US citizens that we have been able to forget how fragile our lives are. The shift of my imagination has included questioning my actions and making sure every decision I make is a good decision. I hope that each person reading this can begin to think about their decisions with their own community in mind. It may seem simple, but it takes energy and I understand that. It has taken time and more energy than I know most people have to have my imagination shifted. But, I hope sharing some of these experiences can allow people to somewhat shift their imagination. In El Salvador, their imagination is of the Christian imagination. They are devout Christians that see themselves at the service of each other. No matter if we claim Christianity or not, being at the service of our fellow human beings should be an imagination we should try to engage in and see what happens. I think it would be a revolution. It could be a revolution of peace and not of the violence that I have seen in El Salvador’s history. There is something like 16 wars currently being waged on this planet, there is something fundamentally wrong with that figure. Why would we choose the action of violence over peace? We must try to see past our differences into a new imagination not just for Salvadorans, but also for the sake of ourselves.

November 12, 2007

BLOG #7

¡El lado Coca Cola de la vida!

In my last couple of weeks here in El Salvador, I have been trying to find a thread that ties this culture to others, including the United States. In the last 11 months, I have traveled to six different countries: England, South Africa, Malawi, El Salvador, Guatemala and Belize. All of this travel has been due in part to generous support of my family and others. I never thought I would have traveled this much in 2007. I feel with this travel and the experiences in those countries I have
been granted a responsibility. It is a responsibility to the poorest of the poor in those countries, as well as the United States. I have thought about all of my travels and there are certain similarities that come to my mind about language, music or food but there is a stark image that keeps coming up through my analysis. It is an image that was created in the United States and now is the most recognized symbol of the world. It is the Coca-Cola sign. The sign that is red and white and “refreshing.” It may seem unusual that I have chosen the Coca-Cola sign as the subject of an entire blog and most likely the subject of continuous study, but I just want people to stop and think for a moment about Coca-Cola. First, it is a refreshing carbonated beverage that is in fact the number one carbonated drink in the world. The drink and their advertising are seen in the poorest communities of the world. It is everywhere. Second, the company has been linked to countless human rights violations and is destroying water sources in hundreds of communities. Out of the six countries I have traveled, the red and white sign is the only global product that I have seen time and time again. It makes me wonder what our global community is coming to when we have allowed the poorest of the poor the opportunity to drink a sugar-carbonated drink when they do not even have access to clean water, let alone a toothbrush and toothpaste. To produce Coca-Cola, they use more water than it is in the actual drink, as well as, polluting the water, which returns to some communities’ only source of “clean” water. I am not writing this to convince people of not drinking Coke because I am as guilty of anyone for supporting this company. I am writing this because we need to question, not only what we buy, but what we are looking at: the images that are part of our lives. I think it is pretty ridiculous that the symbol that connects these developing countries is a company that is stealing their fresh water right from under them and then re-selling their water as a sugary drink. It may seem simple but the majority of this world does not have the “best clean water in the US” as St. Louis can claim. We must start questioning our water use, our purchases, and the responsibility we have to our communities.

November 12, 2007

Blog #6
What does solidarity mean to me?

"It is an eternal truth in the political as well as the mystical body, that "where one member suffers, all the members suffer with it." Proverb

This question has multiple answers that are all difficult to pin-point. It almost seems nearly impossible to give some sort of coherent answer, but I will try my best to dive into the mystery of solidarity. Throughout my life, the meaning of the word and concept has changed many times. I think my first understanding of solidarity started with food, clothes and other expenditures in my little college lifestyle. I would get my kicks by giving up certain foods or wearing certain clothing because I would be saying "no" to the companies that are oppressing so many people and cultures. I used to think that is what solidarity meant; it meant fighting against "the man" with my power as a consumer.

But, now solidarity has changed. It has been a process and will continue to be a process of evolution. Solidarity is walking a line, a line that is unbelievably hard to walk. We all inevitably fall off. Yet, it will not prevent me from trying my hardest to accompany the homeless of Washington, D.C, the malnourished children of Malawi or the war-torn people of El Salvador. This line includes entering into different people's pain and suffering. It means entering into their lives and their history. This solidarity does not include the need to save the world. Nor does it include how much I spend on a pair of jeans. It is much more than that and it is a lot more dangerous. I say dangerous because when you engage in other people's lives, especially those of a different context than of your own, you set yourself up for heartbreak. This heartbreak represents the brokenness of the world. I cannot say that this heartbreak is worth it. I really cannot honestly say if humans are capable of handling this solidarity. The heartbreak seems to be too much for human beings. I don't want to be pessimistic, but it seems inevitable.

This inevitability spawns from many different experiences in my life that have shaped who I am as a person, my beliefs and my values. Each experience of extreme poverty, extreme suffering or my own life events has formed my idea of solidarity. The only thing that I can say for certain (and certainty scares me quite a bit) is that solidarity is not easy.
Whatever anyone's definition of solidarity may be, it is not easy. To accompany and to walk this line is the hardest choice one has to make when considering doing justice and loving others. Through my life experiences and travels, this choice is undeniable. We can avoid following the truth but it will always gnaw at us. I thought I could run away from this idea of solidarity, but it has turned into my life. It became part of my identity. It became so much more than where I bought my food or how much I used my car to save gasoline. I still believe those are all part of the line of solidarity, but when it comes to the human spirit and the construction of our imaginations, these are so much more important.

It is within our environments that we shape our gender, our culture, our values, ultimately our identity. It this identity that we latch onto and refuse to let go, yet truly at the core of it all, is our humanness. Our humanness is the meaning of solidarity for me. Solidarity is the search for our humanness in each other. It is truly the most difficult process one can go through in their life, the search to be truly human and truly awakened. This process is difficult because of the raw experiences that are involved in purging the masks and other false ideas we have had about our communities, world and most of all, ourselves. Solidarity is much bigger than most people think; they want to isolate solidarity to a feeling or emotion. But, it is a lifestyle, a way of approaching situations. If I am in solidarity, I am working each day to gain more knowledge about my fellow members of the human family. I am trying to engage in different cultures, different values and allow those things to shape my mind and heart. It is in this openness that true human freedom lies. Solidarity is not just a philosophical idea or something that "God desires," it is an action. It is an action of love and purpose.

I continue to find purpose in walking the line of solidarity. I would not have it any other way. For me, there is no choice, but to walk in solidarity. I feel as if I have chosen and been forced into solidarity because of my sexual orientation. By coming out as a gay male, I am faced with a hyper-awareness of the world in which live. But, I know that I had desired that awareness long before I came out nor do I feel you have to be oppressed systematically to gain this awareness. Solidarity is living with intention in every action we make. It pervades every aspect of our lives; our friendships, our relationships,
our families, our education, or our jobs. It is everywhere. Solidarity is not isolated but a revolution. In the words of Shane Claibourne, it is a revolution of ordinary people in ordinary communities. But, this revolution is not of angry protesters, but one of peaceful radicals yearning for change. These people yearn for everyone to recognize the solidarity that goes beyond doing justice in the products you buy but, in how you love each other. I have chosen to walk this line, but I know I do not walk alone. Millions of people choose to walk this line and millions of others are forced onto it by war, hunger, AIDS, racial discrimination, sexual orientation, gender, age, or countless of other ways people have found to oppress other humans. This is a revolution, a revolution of the oppressed everywhere and I know I am not alone.

October 23, 2007

Blog #5

According to a Salvadoran being 45 mintues to 2 hours late is being “on time.” Though I have struggled with this concept of time I have had to look a little bit closer to understand the situation. It is difficult for me to accept this part of their culture because it is so drastically different from the United States’ understanding of “time is money.” When you look closer at this culture, it becomes clear why they might be running late. In the Salvadoran culture, being on time is really not a value for them. It is not a value because they put more value on the present moment or situation that could arise than that of being “on time.” I have struggled with this concept because I feel like it is disrespectful to the other person. It just seems like courtesy is important. I am not here to say one culture is better than the other. But, I am trying to decipher values, gender roles and differences within each culture. I think the concept of time is a large part of any culture. I have talked to Salvadorans and US citizens alike about the value behind both understanding on time. On the Salvadoran side, the concept of time is realitive to the person´s life and what is happening currently in their lives. At first, I was kind of taken back by the complete willingness of each Salvadoran to be paitient enough with their friends, families, or co-workers. I think there is value in trying to place yourself in the other person´s place. I think to often, US citizens are just so
impatient with “wasting time” as I think some people might label tardiness. I think it is rude and inconsiderate for someone not to call or reschedule if they are going to be late, but then again this is my own construction of timliness. I think there is value in both but it has definitely made me question how self-driven the environment I have grown up within. This “untimliness” has definitely shattered my own construction. I think that is what El Salvador continues to do; shatter my previous presumptions about other cultures, even my own culture. Culture is such a diverse term which one has to take into account such things as being “on time.” I know some may think that does not have much to do with how a culture drives a society, but it is a bigger role than one may think. Think of the chance occurrences that might happen if someone is 15 or 30 minutes late to a meeting. There is more time to think, to question. The lateness creates space for individuals to actually be alone. I might say it is even connected to United States individualism, but we don’t even really know how to be by ourselves. We are constantly seeking more things to fill up our schedules, to feed our overconfidence and to be “successful.” Though I am in a developing country with an unstable economy, it makes me wonder, are they happier? Do they have more hope for the world? Possibly. I continue to experience that hope more and more. Slowing down or paying attention to the details of our lives can really shatter presumptions we have about others and even ourselves. Time is not money. I am going to continue to try not to be late to meetings and important events in my life, but I don’t think I will worry as much about being late. I think Salvadorans are in no rush to please others by there timliness [or lack of], they care more about conversation and connection. Becuase really when it comes down to it, conversation and community is really all they have left. Beyond the corrupted government, gang raids, and lack of resources; there are only humans left. We cover all our humanness up with materials, systems, events, parties, and organizations that we leave no time for eachother. We are starving for human connection. You may think I am pushing it too far or making presumptions, I might be, but next time you are late to a meeting and you don’t call, see if they are still there waiting for you with a smile on their face to greet you. I doubt that response will occur but I hope you can prove me wrong.
“How is one to live a moral and compassionate existence when one is fully aware of the blood, the horror inherent in life, when one finds darkness not only in one’s culture but within oneself? If there is a stage at which an individual becomes truly adult, it must be when one grasps the irony in its unfolding and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the middle of contradiction, because if all contradiction were eliminated at once life would collapse. There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light.” Barry Lopez, Artic Dreams

We are disconnected from this “contradiction.” We are disconnected from the earth. We are disconnected from our food. I have just returned from six days in the campo about twenty minutes from the border of Honduras. I was with one other Casa student and a family of eight in the middle of the mountains in a valley by a river. It was beautiful scenery but I could not let the beauty blind the reality of the situation of these people. It is not that these people are starving as I experienced in Malawi. It is a different type of poverty, very similar to rural poverty in the United States. But, amid the “simplicity” of my United States lens, I saw so much more. They were farmers. They had land and ate everything they grew. I spent a week depending on the land. The United States culture is one of the very few in this world that has been able to become disconnected from the land we live on. It may be sad that I had to leave the country to see how disconnected from the earth I have been my entire life, but it is an important realization that I have to confront. In the United States, I just go to the grocery store or go out to eat and never think twice about who grew the chicken, who killed the chicken, or the method in which the chicken was killed? It may seem disgusting to most people who might read this, but how many of us have killed a chicken for our own lunch or dinner. How many of us caught the fish in the river then had to eat everything, including the head? In the campo, they don’t waste any part of their food or any part of the land they use. It
reminds me of the Native American lifestyle in the Americas before the white man destroyed their land. We often don’t teach what our leaders did to those people. But, there are so many lessons we could and still can learn from these cultures. I was in awe of how they used the land and the benefits they received. They respected the land because they depended on the land for their life source. Little do United States citizens realize that we are dependent on this earth that we are rapidly destroying? I was faced with this stark contrast of culture. I still am not sure what to do with it, how do I get more connected with the land in the United States? What are alternatives? This was at the root of my campo experience, dependence on the land.

The branches of my experience were facing the realization that this culture is far from perfect, just as United States culture is far from perfect. I had many experiences of machismo (male dominance). My friends who are women were constantly whistled, catcalled and threatened. This is part of their culture. I know there are inappropriate men in the United States, but this seems much more prevalent and accepted. It is something the Casa program has struggled with for years regarding safety and mental health of the women. There is so much oppression towards women and homosexuality that these people are in the forefront of what seems a winless battle. It seems as if El Salvador wants the materialism of the United States, but they have not caught onto the equal rights bandwagon. Nor do I think the United States is perfect in these areas as well. But, women and homosexuals are silent here. They are more silent than they are in the United States. Most women could not comprehend being seeing as equal to men. It is a difficult situation to face everyday with my female friends as well as people who are homosexual in the program. Outside of the city, these people are forgotten about and just swept under the doormat. It is unimaginable for women or homosexuals to be open in the campo. Equal rights are not something that is even a concept in this culture.

The land and equal rights for people are two stark realities that I found in my week experience in rural El Salvador. It is something that needs to start to be talked about and continued to be important topics in the United States. Their lives here are not that far away from our lives in the United States, it is
just a different way of achieving survival. We have farmers, scientists, environmentalists, women, homosexuals and oppression in our own country. With a country that is trying to model so much of what we do, I think we should probably start to move on trying to reconnect with our land and continue to believe in equality. Even if there are not “answers to some of the great pressing questions,” we must continue to search for multiple loving solutions to them.

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**September 17, 2007**

**Blog #3**

**Amatepec**

While lying in bed in the urban neighborhood of Amatepec of San Salvador, I heard roosters crowing and dogs fighting on the streets. Those are not noises I am usually used to in St. Louis, Missouri even in the middle of the city. I stayed with a family at my praxis site on the weekend of September 21. This experience was supposed to help me engage in my community more while spending time getting to know the community members. It was definitely a full weekend. My praxis partner and I arrived in the community while a downpour was occurring. I had two dinners because I started at my partner’s home stay and then went to my house. Salvadorans are really hospitable and always want to feed guests. And it is pretty difficult to say no. It is usually pupusas (cheese and frijoles stuffed in a corn tortilla). My family was the house of the school secretary, Helen. She had two boys, Daniel (10) and Keka (12). Her husband and her older brother, Neto, lived with them as well. Neto is a 26 - year old mentally challenged Salvadoran. This was definitely an interesting dynamic to see in the family and community. Neto can understand what you say, but cannot respond. The husband treated him more like a maid than a human being, which was really hard for me to comprehend. But, what medical aid is available? Also, I am sure their house would be better than any mental health facility in San Salvador. He again reminded me that everyone is beautiful in their own unique way.

Living in an urban setting was really interesting. All the houses are concrete squares that are mostly two bedrooms, two other rooms with a kitchen and a small family room.
There is the pila (sink, where you wash your clothes) and a bathroom. Everything is concrete and most families have a few photographs or other collectibles that line the walls. The collectibles are usually of Whinnie the Pooh or Tweety bird, which I find amusing yet very sad. They find these simple items so dear to their families. While I was there, my privilege was continually thrown in my face. I asked the husband and wife about where they would travel if they could and they said Honduras, which is four hours away. They are so limited in choice. Choice is really what freedom means the more and more I think of what I have in the United States. Not everyone in the United States has choice either. I realize these similarities and have started to engage in those questions.

On Saturday, I was woken by the sounds of people and roosters at 4am. Again, an experience I had yet to have in my life. It is amazing the crossover of urban and rural cultures that I have seen. Most people in Amatepec are refugees from the civil war so they left their original homes in the campo (rural area) and came to the southeastern part of the city. They became squatters (non-owners) in these concrete homes and tried to make their living. All they had ever-known was farming so there are many people still trying to hold onto their past lives. I really cannot fathom what it would mean just to leave your home and leave all that you have known and go to a completely different environment. I think this switch has definitely traumatized the older generation because they have had to live two lives.

I was able to go and see the area where most people who fled from in the war. I was in the back of the pickup for about two and half hours going southeast to a small campo town, San Juan Lettres. This was the area where they all lived and were forced to move because of the death squads of the Salvadoran military and after one of the largest massacres of the war. We had traveled to the Alta Lempa area (the Lempa river is one of the largest rivers in El Salvador and I was on the upper (alta) side of the river) for the dedication of a small clinic paid for by the Episcopal Church. The dedication of this small, modest concrete clinic was quite a celebration. Salvadorans definitely love to celebrate their small and large victories. I call the building of the clinic a victory because they have never had a place for doctors or nurses to visit and have a space for those who are sick. It was by no means a
hospital but it was a space. That is what they were celebrating, a new space for the community. This culture is resilient in so many ways. I was really glad to be a part of the dedication as they thanked my partner and I three times during the dedication for just being there. I think I started to learn what it meant to accompany people through their struggles. There is a quote by an aboriginal woman who said, “If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But, if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” I am just starting to grasp this concept. The impact of the United States is seen everywhere in this country. We have so much influence. I have a responsibility to be an advocate for a better image of the United States as well as be a supporter of this country because of our influence.

The rest of the weekend included a lot of church at San Andres Episcopal. We had a vigil, more of a revival, on Saturday night from 7-12am. It was quite an experience. It was my first revival and it was all in Spanish. This small community is really a place that is seeking change and strength from each other. On Sunday morning, we had mass with the same people as the night before. But, there was one moment during the Episcopal mass that encompassed my entire weekend in Amatepec. As someone who was raised Roman Catholic, having a woman priest is definitely something different. Yet, when Rev. Amy said the words of institution during the Eucharist, I would have to say it was one of the most beautiful things I have ever have experienced. As the United States is labeled a Protestant country and El Salvador is predominantly Catholic, this dichotomy really hit hard. It was even more beautiful because Rev. Amy is eight months pregnant. By here commemorating a death of a well-known religious figure and her representing birth was a beautiful sign of new life. It was new life for this country after a 15-year Civil War, new life after gangs raiding their community, new life because there is hope in this place.

September 2007

Blog #2

It is now going on a month being in El Salvador. I have traveled to Santa Ana, which is the third largest city in the
country. The Casa program also traveled to Cosa del Sol, a small beach town on the coast of the Pacific Ocean. Both of these trips have constantly reminded me of the privilege that each student has in this program, including myself. It was about $30 to travel two hours away to the city for a weekend. The bus ride was $.95 both ways and it was $6.00 for a night in a decent hotel. Our most expensive meal was a wanna-be US restaurant that we sat down by accident. It was a bit of culture shock. One of the becarias (scholarship student from El Salvador) said that it was her dream to go to Santa Ana. She might have had the $.95 to travel but she obviously could not afford to do anything once she got there because she has never had the leisure to spend $30 on travel. It makes me think about how I choose to spend my money and what does it mean to live in solidarity. Solidarity is a thin line to walk. These choices become increasingly harder to make while I am living in an impoverished country. I know reading a simple blog will never do these people justice but I do hope that one might think about how much money we spend in a day. And it is not just the money we spend but thinking about the people that are impacted by our country. The amount of money that I have spent on phone cards alone has been over $40 which would send three children here to high school for a month. This is not 1-800- Save a Child, this is the reality I am living in the neighborhoods I visit and the people I am getting to know. They are becoming a part of my life.

El Salvador is probably the most infiltrated by United States culture because of the dependency this country has on the United States economy. Each day there are thousands of dollars being sent back from the US immigrants to their families still El Salvador. I had an experience with this money transfer. Many times we hear statistics and never are impacted by the actual statistic. I was sitting at lunch with a family from the Anglican Church I am working with and while we were eating, the husband was opening the mail. I glanced over and saw a return address from E.E. U. U. (the United States). Inside the envelope was a check from his nephew in Chicago. There it was. I saw it with my own eyes while sitting in this simple, concrete house in the middle of an urban neighborhood in San Salvador. I saw the money. This is the source of hope for these people, money from their families in the United States. I just think about the situation of immigration in the United States right now and it is such a
heated issue. I never truly felt connected to that issue until now.

I think this past month has just been a constant thought process. I think I was aware of a lot of injustices in this world but now my awareness is not a choice but a daily reality. I can’t really imagine what it would feel like to be a youth in El Salvador growing up with white, United States actors showing you what beautiful meant or what it meant to be a man. We as a United States rarely stop to think about how these images are affecting ourselves let alone stop to think about what these images might be doing in developing nations.

At my praxis site, I will be teaching a human rights class to youth focusing on their self-worth. Our advisor at our praxis site said that most of these kids don’t believe they are worth anything because they face continual abuse from not only their parents, but also their society in general. I cannot imagine growing up in a family where I was told that I was just a waste of space. It is hard to comprehend the internal issues these children face. There are so many social problems here, as well as in the United States; it is overwhelming to think of all of them. But, I have chosen not to let the over abundance of issues stop me from thinking or questioning, which I think so often happens when faced with poverty, homelessness, abuse, etc. We start with each person in our family and work out from there. We try to seek justice in our own communities.

Regarding community living, I am struggling at times to find space of my own as well as integrate the becarios into our community life. Speaking Spanish has been a difficult task and I sometimes have been too shy to try, but I am improving. There are some issues that I see with this program that I am trying to reconcile and move on from. The Salvadorans and Casa students have created somewhat of divide. It is a difficult task to try to converge two completely different cultures. There is a lot of apprehension, as well as judgment that occurs. I am not sure how to go about mending any of this apprehension except trying to speak their language and continue to be open to new experiences. It is past the immersion feeling; I am starting to feel a part of this community but still very much an outsider looking in.
“It belongs to the very substance of non-violence never to destroy or damage another person’s feel of self-worth, even an opponent’s. We all need, constantly, an advance of trust and affirmation.” – Bernard Haring

It has been two weeks since I entered the country of El Salvador, Central America. These past fourteen days have radically changed my perspective on the United States as well as my global perspective. While entering immigration, there was a certain tension that arose as the immigration officer asked me my purpose for visiting the country. We had a short conversation and he questioned my purpose. I later found out, El Salvador is very reluctant to allow North Americans into their country due to the overabundance of NGOs (Non-governmental organizations/ non-for-profits). It was an interesting experience to say the least. This was the beginning of a whirlwind orientation into my program, Santa Clara University’s Casa de la Solidaridad (House of Solidarity). There are three houses, which are comprised of twenty-four students from all over the country (mostly Jesuit universities). My house is Casa Silvia where I live with seven women from the United States and two Salvadoran scholarship students, Ernest and Enfrain. The different aspects of the program strive to be in solidarity with the poor. There are simple ways we all can try to be in solidarity with the poor of the world. The houses are simple, we do not have hot water and we wash all of our clothes by hand. These simple reminders everyday are beneficial in so many ways. I actually appreciate the simplicity more than I ever thought I would. We really have no idea how many things act as debris in our lives.

We quickly overcame the awkwardness and have since formed an incredible community of support, love and trust. In El Salvador, they would say that we have formed “confianza” with each other. This is a term used often in the cities and campo (rural areas of El Salvador) when creating friendships. Though I have had difficulty adjusting to the language, I have learned there is much more outside of the classroom than I could have imagined. For example, “pena” is a term used
quite frequently. Pena is used to describe embarrassment, pain or one’s struggle in life. These small differences in Spanish have started to show me the complexity of the Salvadoran culture. I once was told that El Salvador lacked culture. I have a hard time believing that statement after these past few days (though I have not traveled to other CA countries). The orientation has included a tour of nine “praxis” sites as well as other historic sites such as the place where the six Jesuits and their two housekeepers were murdered, the site where the four North American women were raped and murdered, as well as the church were Monsgr. Oscar Romero was assassinated.

The nine “sites” are the communities in which my community members will participate in an internship two days a week. The communities are quite diverse and each represent the many different challenges for this developing country; some are in the campo working with ESL (English as a second language classes), others are in urban areas working on recording the stories of Civil War survivors. Due to the war, natural disasters and lack of planning, many communities lack electricity and clean water. My site is Amatepec at an Anglican Episcopal Church. I have only gone to the site once but I worked with the school. I was thrown into a first grade classroom to teach English. First of all, my Spanish is definitely not where it should be to be teaching first graders. And the second observation I made was that I have never known the complications of the English language. I also noticed their English book had the United States flag plastered over the cover.

The United States presence is overcrowding their streets, their homes and their families. The statistic that is thrown around is that 700 Salvadorans are fleeing the country everyday for the US. I have just begun to see the ramifications of this migration. Migration is just one of the many issues that I have seen first hand. To obtain a visa form the US, a Salvadoran must wait in line for an average of five hours, then once they get inside the Embassy, they have 2 minutes to plead their case in English for $110 each time. I met one student who had their papers to study in the United States and he had to go back three times. He had to request more money from the school he was studying at because he did not have the money to keep pleading his case.
Probably the starkest issues are from the effects of the Salvadoran Civil War. We have heard from first hand accounts of rape, murder and death squads that took over this country for more than a decade. The war is a complex story in which I will not go into too much detail here because of my lack of experience so far. Yet, as a program we watched the documentary “Enemies of War,” which personified the injustice of the war. And shared the influence of the United States involvement (which included 600 billion dollars to the Salvadoran government). The Civil war had two basic sides, the government versus the rural citizens. I am simplifying this incredibly but I am just trying to show that the United States supported one side and was directly responsible for providing weapons, planes and other military aid. The United States government’s excuse was wrapped up in the fear of communism taking a foothold in Central America. I am not here to use this blog as an American bashing tool but I am here to share the truth with others. “La Realidad” is another a term used often. It is the search for the reality for Salvadorans. There were government cover-ups of thousands of deaths and injustices throughout this small country. I will continue to search out the truth through my classes and my praxis site experience. I look forward to digging deeper into the American influence here as well as the fight to hold onto their beautiful culture.