

The Discomforts of Displacement:  
Project Report for Winter-Term in Pisco, Peru  
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In North America, and in other wealthy countries, many of us have established elaborate comfort zones that are rarely violated or broken. Comfortable people can count on a roof to guard against bad weather. They can count on a bed to make sleep easy and pleasurable. They can count on clean water and on a regular influx of food into their systems. They can count on health care and medications, should something go wrong. Comfortable people have good hygiene and they like to minimize their interactions with their waste (sewage, trash, rotten foods, etc.) to a slim minimum.

Comfortable people do not like to see the waste that their lives create because waste is uncomfortable for our spoiled senses. Not only that, but generous exposure to self-produced waste makes many of us psychologically uncomfortable, since it is a guilt-inducing reminder that we are harming the environment and making the world uncomfortable for other people, contemporary and of the future.

In Peru, I felt rather uncomfortable. Physically, I was always dirty. Shoveling rubble left me covered from head to toe in a fine, but persistent, layer of grayish-yellow dust. For no apparent reason, my body seemed to have a particular predilection for Peruvian dust and by the end of the day, it was routinely decided by myself and by all who saw me that I was dirtier in appearance than all of the current 100 volunteers and than any of the volunteers that had been in Pisco in the past. While this was also a pride point for me, the dust quickly became invasive.

The weak, home-built showers (that I was still very grateful for!) didn't do the job. My fingernails were black and scratching my head led to a showering of dirt on my shoulders. The purpose of a shower grew more and more confusing to me since I knew that the next day I'd wake up again and within an hour be at least 50% as dirty as I was before the shower. Despite thick lathering of sun block, I still became very sunburnt. Blisters bubbled up on my back. My skin peeled off in long strips. My lower lip became severely sunburnt and inflated to the size of what felt like an inner tube tire. For this, I was sent to the Cuban doctors, who had set up medical tents in Pisco after the earthquake to offer free health care to those in dire need.

Persistently, I felt "tainted" from my hygienic practices in Pisco. There were two bathrooms at the Hands on Disaster Response headquarters that were shared with about 100 people, many of whom experienced frequent diarrhea and stomach sickness due to accidental tap water consumption. Toilet paper was thrown in the trash cans, and often overflowed onto the floor. On our work sites, there were rarely bathrooms, so the choice was between holes in the ground and holding it in. More often than not, soap was not available so I felt constantly germ-ridden.

While I've painted a somewhat unpleasant picture above, I did not intend to render the previous paragraph a forum for complaints. These issues of hygiene were minor inconveniences and I dealt with them with a good sense of humor. The point was to illustrate the reasons why I felt somewhat physically uncomfortable in Pisco -- a feeling that manifested itself as a tight knot that rested at the ceiling of my stomach, a sensation that often results from nervousness or anxiety. The point was to express the fact that the conditions above were the norm for 80% of the inhabitants

of Pisco who had lost their homes to the August earthquake. These 80%, if they hadn't the means to move away, lived in tents, in one-room modular homes, or in temporary structures, often consisting of some fabric draped over a handful of wood beams.

Pisco is located on the western coast of Peru, about four hours south of Lima. Pisco is a desert and the dust is inescapable. Casting my head down during walks in the market allowed the visual intake of hundreds of feet and ankles turned gray with dust, like thin socks of dirt. The dust will travel up your nose, releasing its grip on your nasal cavities only in the expulsion of snot. The dust will cling to your teeth, rendering them fuzzy. The 80%, living in temporary, open homes knew of this dust as well as they knew of the burning sun. The mini villages of refugee tents and modular homes were typically fenced in by piles of rubble and trash.

Pisco never had the reputation of being a clean, beautiful city, but the earthquake has rendered the streets dumpsters. They are lined with thick piles of rubble, dirt, rotten food, dead animals and trash, which passersby casually use as trash cans, tossing atop an unwanted wrapper or soda can. The streets smell like human waste and trash and I'm certain that the stink wafts through the open air into the tents that the 80% call home. For these people, the streets or piles of rubble in alleyways are often their best option for toilets and I bore witness to this on more than one occasion.

And so, while I was physically uncomfortable for a few days, I could console my filthy, germy self by the reminder that, for me, this state was temporary. After a couple of weeks, I would be back in my comfortable home in the United States. I would scratch my scalp and find no dirt. I would be clean and free of peeling skin or blisters. My nails would not be vessels for dust. I would throw my toilet paper in the toilet, flush it down to a mysterious water world below and wash my hands with anti-bacterial soap. But for people who have been displaced from their homes, for people who are living in poverty, this promise does not exist. They are uncomfortable - though perhaps only by our standards.

My psychological discomfort came from these intense confrontations with poverty and waste. Like most environment-conscious individuals, I try to minimize my use of paper towels and toilet paper. I recycle whenever I can and usually buy eco-friendly products. But in my tidy life, I put trash in a bag and put the bag in a can and put the can on the street and like magic, the trash disappears. Of course, I know all about its destiny. That trash is fated to join heaps of trash in landfills that stink and pollute and secrete and seep and may one day be sealed into our earth. In Pisco, seeing everyone's trash in piles on the street was frightening. Trash follows you around there, tapping you on the shoulder, red-faced and sad-eyed.

I've traveled around -- to Europe, Israel, and Costa Rica -- but I've never been to such a poor country before this January. As the second poorest country in South America after Bolivia, the standards of living in Peru are not very high. Of course, visiting a city that had recently been ravaged by an earthquake further decreased the standards of living. It was tragic to see so many people displaced indefinitely, with nowhere to go and no feasible way to improve their situations.

Hands on Disaster Response is an organization founded by David Campbell after the Thailand Tsunami. Their first large-scale project was in Biloxi, Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. The organization aims to respond quickly and efficiently to natural

disaster-stricken regions for a short period of time (about three months). They do not establish themselves permanently in any one region, but attempt to speedily restore order to the chaotic states that ensue from disasters. Currently, they are launching a project in Bangladesh.

HODR arrived in Pisco, Peru in early September and set up their headquarters in a former restaurant near the Pisco Playa, the beach. A number of excellent projects were carried out in the months they spent in Pisco. Among them were the construction of irrigation canals for farmers, laying a cement floor for a new cathedral, daycare in the Ludotecas (safe spaces for children), and home construction.

For my first two days in Pisco, I worked on the San Andres School, a private school established and run by a cheerful man named Alberto, who lacked the funds to rebuild. After the earthquake, a huge amount of children simply stopped going to school since the buildings no longer existed. HODR began rebuilding from scratch, erecting brick walls and concrete columns to lay the foundations for a sustainable structure. I assisted with concrete mixing and column construction.

I spent the rest of my time in Pisco working on the Centro Rubble team, a large group that chose various locations around downtown Pisco (residential and public) to free of rubble. Though this was grueling work, it was extremely essential and rewarding. Many of the residents lacked the tools, time or proper physical state to remove rubble themselves and if rubble littered the former foundations of their homes, it was impossible to rebuild.

The gratitude they felt toward the Rubble team was very palpable as they watched us work or helped with a wheelbarrow now and then. Often times, they would bring us bread or soda during breaks. Clearing rubble was also essential in restoring order to Pisco aesthetically. Living in a dirty city is discouraging to displacees, diminishing their hope for a happy future.

As we shoveled rubble into wheelbarrows on one site, a "gang" of neighborhood children observed us from beneath the shadow of trees. On my break, I gave one of the girls a popsicle. The ice was broken and from that point on they treated us as their older siblings, climbing atop our backs, tackling us, and asking for rides in the wheelbarrows. We also formed relationships with many of the stray animals that roamed the streets of Pisco. They followed us to and from work, barking at people they perceived as aggressors toward us, and we fed them rice and beans.

It was wonderful to be able to form relationships with the men and women of Peru, who were so grateful for our help, with their children, who were in need of activity, and with the animals as well, who were also left high and dry by the earthquake. I was fascinated by the positive attitude of so many of these people, despite their predicaments.

Considering the positive nature of so many of the volunteers' relationships with the local population, it was shocking when President Campbell announced that the project would be shut down three weeks early. A number of "incidents" had occurred, involving armed robbery, assaults on the beach and pick-pocketing at the market - too many incidents for the project to safely continue.

I decided to remain until the end of the project (for temporary volunteers - the long-termers were permitted to stay for five extra days). On my last night in Pisco,

the HODR volunteers were invited for mass at the makeshift church in the Plaza de Armas, the main square of the city. Mass was right after we finished work, so we arrived (embarrassingly) in our work clothes, covered in dust. I spoke little Spanish, so most of the ceremony was a mystery to me. The church was outdoors, blocked off from the outside by tarp. At the end of Mass, we got up to leave, but were confronted with open arms everywhere we looked. The people of Pisco hugged us with tears in their eyes, thanking us for our help and calling us angeles.

The next day, I went to Chincha on my way back to Lima. An hour north of Pisco, Chincha was equally hard-hit by the earthquake. UNICEF had recently donated money to be used to rebuild schools in Chincha and a number of HODR volunteers had relocated, staying in a former Christian rehab center for drug addicts. A couple of friends and I spent a day clearing rubble from the site in exchange for allowing volunteers to bunk there.

Steering my wheelbarrow filled with bits of plaster out to the trash pile on the street, I felt nostalgic already for Pisco and Centro rubble. It was the type of job that broke your back, leaving you sore in muscles you didn't even know you had (finger muscles!). It was hard on the knees. It coaxed sweat out of every pore, sweat which streamed down your forehead into your eyes, which would burn as a result. It took the wind out of you.

There was something so incredible about devoting all of your corporal capabilities to helping other people. In a sense, their calamities cannot be felt by reading about them, donating money, or doing light construction. The physicality of this work clarified just how much there was to be done and the amount I personally had accomplished in a week or a day or an hour was tangible and real. The pain of the work illuminated for me the pain that these people were going through. The discomfort of living in a city that had been devastated by causes beyond human was initially unbearable.

Over the days I spent in Pisco, however, this discomfort became bearable and second nature. Though I knew that my time there was only temporary, there were lucid moments where I felt that the discomfort had become a part of me and where I sensed that it could become intertwined with my existence indefinitely. It was in this way that I began to understand (and still cannot fully) what it meant to be pushed from your home, what it meant to be forced to change your way of life, and what it meant to look forward and be uncertain about what is there.