

When Things Fall Apart in Guatemala: Contemplative Service Advising

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Abstract: Service learning in a developing country can be a transformative experience, especially when we engage in contemplative practices such as journaling. This is a reflection on the application of Buddhist concepts while serving as an advisor on a service learning trip to Guatemala. The writer explores mindfulness, acceptance, and compassion while journaling on the trip. Insight is provided regarding how to deepen the connection of the advisor's and the students' experiences.

Keywords: service learning; contemplative practices, journaling.

Three Buddhist teachings draw me most personally to contemplative practices: mindfulness, acceptance, and compassion. As a social worker, researcher, and faculty member, I have explored these concepts and their connections, researching how to develop these qualities in myself, my students, and my clients. While serving as an advisor on a service trip, I applied these teachings, keeping a journal of my experiences. After rereading my journal from this two week long trip to Guatemala, I am able to connect what I learned about both myself and the role of service learning advisor.

Guatemala Service-Trip 2012

At the start of my fourth year as a full-time faculty member in a Bachelor of Social Work Program at a small Catholic University, I applied for and accepted the position of advisor for a 12-day service trip to Guatemala. I had just completed my three-year review document and was really interested in getting out of the classroom/office and back into the "field." The previous three years had been challenging for me, requiring me to balance the teaching, service, and research requirements of a tenure-track position with my roles of mother, wife, and daughter. That time had been particularly difficult since my mother died from malignant brain cancer a month before the sign-up for the trip. Along with my husband and two teenaged children, we had provided my mother with in-home care. Prior to her illness, my mother had retired to Mexico and had a strong interest in serving indigenous people. I committed to be a service trip advisor, in part, to honor my mother. The other part of my decision to go on the trip was my desire to reconnect to myself and to my contemplative practice.

During the 9 months leading up to the trip to Guatemala, the other trip advisor, Sister Donna, attempted to prepare me and the 10 students in our monthly meetings. None of the students were in my

Social Work Program. Most of the students displayed a strong connection between their Catholic religion and their commitment to serving others. Our trip would include service at two sites, a Catholic mission in San Lucas Toliman and a Catholic school in Chichicastenango. The preparations for our trip included the standard directives for immunizations and packing. In our monthly pre-trip meetings, we worked on team building and fund raising, while also engaging in prayer and reflection. Having been raised Catholic, I blended in, familiar with the prayers. My own spiritual path has led me to identify more as a Buddhist, something that I did not share in the pre-trip meetings. Sister Donna gave us all blank journals which she had brought back from Guatemala for us to use during the trip. We began to learn about the beauty and the tragedy of Guatemala. We read and watched films about "La Violencia", the civil war from 1960-1996 which resulted in the death of in excess of 200,000, mostly Mayan, people. We also began to hear about the resilience, generosity, and beauty of the Guatemalan country and people.

One of the conversations that came up several times in our preparations for the trip was the impact that technology has on the service trip experience. Sister Donna spoke of cell phones as a distraction from the experience of being with the people we were serving. She said that there would be limited wifi in our sites in Guatemala, establishing the expectation that we would be somewhat "unplugged" from our usual technology.

Since I teach undergraduates, I am very familiar with the reluctance that 19-year-olds have about turning off their devices. I contemplated researching the felt experiences of students on unplugging from technology. Due to timing and lack of IRB approval, I left for the trip feeling frustrated that I was not going to be able to study the experiences of the students on the trip.

Regardless, I decided to unplug myself for the 2- week

trip, focusing on being as present as possible for the experience of Guatemala, rather than escaping into the usual distractions of contemporary society. Instead of bringing novels to read during free time, as I normally would do on a vacation, I brought only my journal, yoga mat, and a book on Buddhist teachings by Pema Chödrön. I received *When Things Fall Apart* (Chödrön, 2005) as a gift from a friend several years earlier. I have always wanted to know how to keep things from falling apart, and my first reading of the book had been superficial with a good degree of skepticism. I remembered that the book was about accepting life as it is, with all of its pain and messiness. I chose to bring this book because I wanted to use my free time in Guatemala to think more deeply about Buddhist teachings, developing my own, often neglected, contemplative practice.

I brought my phone on the trip, intending to use any technology mindfully. I was the first participant to arrive for the airplane shuttle, and I noticed my conditioned reflex to look at something, anything, on my phone. I resisted and picked up my journal, “A minute after he (my husband) is gone and my first instinct is to pull out my phone, check Facebook, e-mail but I don’t.” In social work, I often assign journals to explore feelings about field experiences and classroom material. Journal writing has been identified as a “special form of reflection through which new meaning can be created, new understandings of problems can be circumscribed and new ways of organizing experiences can be developed” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999, p. 113). It had been about 10 years since I regularly wrote in a journal, and that first entry was spent on noticing my anxiety about the trip, the work that would pile up while I was away, and the sadness of leaving my family. So off we went on the airplane to Guatemala City. I had my last calls and texts and watched a film on the flight. By the time the movie ended, I started to wonder if I should buy a book at the connecting airport in Georgia. This commitment of mine to refrain from “distraction” was going to be harder than I expected.

Our University runs a trip to Guatemala at least once per year and has developed relationships with two venues for volunteering. For the first week of the trip, we built beautiful clay ovens in the small homes of local families through the Mission at San Lucas Toliman. These ovens enable the women to vent the smoke from their cooking fires through their roofs. Health-related illnesses associated with having an open fire pit inside a small windowless building are significantly reduced by installing these ovens. The

second week, we were at the Centro Educativo Anunciata, a parish school in Chichicastenango (Chichi) where we taught English. We stayed at a small hotel in San Lucas Toliman, the typical arrangement made by the mission for their volunteers. In Chichi, we stayed at the “Internado”, a residence run by the Dominican Sisters for poor, indigenous girls from the rural Guatemala highlands.

So I went to Guatemala, without my usual distractions and obligations. I carefully read the Chödrön book and wrote in my journal a few times per day. The journal and reading naturally connected, revealing three main themes: mindfulness, acceptance, and compassion, connecting the Buddhist writing of Chödrön to my experiences on the trip.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness, the central principle of Buddhist meditation, has been described by Kabat-Zinn as “...paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally” (1994, p.4). Intention, attention, and attitude are identified as three building blocks of mindfulness (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). Mindfulness is described as being purposefully focused and accepting of present moment internal and external experiences. Mindfulness can be practiced in a variety of forms. These practices include, but are not limited to, formal meditation, such as sitting meditation. In my time in Guatemala, I was intending to practice mindfulness throughout the day, noticing when my mind wandered to the past or to the future and then to gently return to my present moment internal and external experiences. Writing in my journal enabled me to be even more conscious of my thoughts and feelings.

“We become so accustomed to speeding ahead, we rob ourselves of joy” (Chödrön, 2005, p. 36). My mind is the classic “monkey mind” described in Buddhist writings, always making lists, thinking about the future or ruminating on the past. When I first started doing yoga 25 years ago, that is literally what I did during the meditation time. I would make lists of what I needed to do/get after the yoga class. In Guatemala, there is so much going on in the present moment, so much to attend to. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013), who is credited for popularizing mindfulness, writes about cultivating wisdom and equanimity in the face of life’s “full catastrophe.” This phrase “full catastrophe” came to my mind as I intentionally embraced the present moment in Guatemala; there is so much beauty and so much pain apparent at all times there. For example, in one moment, I noticed the puff of the active volcano

over the beautiful but contaminated Lake Atitlan; I heard the sounds--a symphony of birds, roosters, dog fights, firecrackers, and marimba music; I smelled smoke billowing out from under the tin roof of a small adobe house, the tamales from the street vendor, and the scent of an explosion of flowering bushes; and I saw the cobblestone street with shoeless children and starving dogs.

Despite my decision to allow this trip to bring me closer to the "present moment," I often felt an intense desire to escape. Chödrön (2005) writes, "There are so many ways that have been dreamt up to entertain us away from the moment...so we don't have to feel the full impact of the pain that arises..."(p. 15). I experienced that pain and desire to escape as a native Kakchiquel Mayan woman from San Lucas Tolimán told our group of her experiences in the civil war. Tears rolled down her weathered face as she looked through me, telling of the 1981 capture and "disappearance" of her own husband. She told of cleaning the bloody floor after the assassination of Father Stan Rother in nearby Santiago de Atitlan. She told of risking her life as she smuggled a truckload of 12 orphans through a military checkpoint, keeping the children, whom she claimed to be her own, from crying by giving them candy. The description of these nightmares on a rainy afternoon had a dreamlike quality. I looked around at our students who were trying to remain alert but were nodding off, as the pain provided no escape. Despite my own sleepiness, I willed myself to be "present," maintaining eye contact as she took us through those traumatic years. I chose to remain mindful of my own thoughts, refraining from the urge to get away from the fear and pain. Chödrön suggests, "Basically, the instruction is not to try to solve the problem but instead to use it as a question about how to let this very situation wake us up further rather than lull us into ignorance" (2005, p. 178).

I wrote about the difficulty staying with the present moment in my journal, "12 days seems like a long (too long) time. What was I thinking? I feel a bit of panic now and then and I remind myself that I am only in the present moment--be here now." The simple act of writing those words, acknowledging the panic that I was experiencing in a nonjudgmental way, loosened the grip of my distress. I was relaxing with whatever was arising, developing gentleness and curiosity towards my own thoughts. I still wanted to call my husband, to find out how each detail of our family life was doing without me. Chödrön encourages readers to notice this urge to do

something, anything, to escape from the moment, felt as fear or edginess. "Through refraining, we see that there's something between the arising of the craving--or the aggression or the loneliness or whatever it might be--and whatever action we take as a result"(2005, p.40).

Acceptance

Part of what I had to let go of in Guatemala was my usual roles. I was there as an advisor, having agreed, according to my contract, to be a "mature influence, add educational value to the trip, be a role model, and build a relationship with students in a nontraditional setting." I was not the teacher and was not in my other major roles as mother and wife. I wrote in my journal, "I am really enjoying Sister Donna (other advisor) and the students. I am working to be authentic with them on a personal level rather than "professor." One of the students introduced me as 'amiga' today."

My University, the two Missions, and most of the trip participants were Catholic, unlike me. I had a book of Buddhist teachings and a yoga mat with me. I struggled with how to maintain my authenticity and fit in during the trip. In Chichí, while our students stayed in the girls' dorm, Sister Donna and I had rooms in the convent upstairs. The idea of staying in a convent was unsettling for me at first, but I quickly adapted to the comfortable, quiet place. I wrote, "I am negotiating the religion issue. We do a lot of praying at meals, and as we gather in the evening. I have not led a prayer but have discussed that I am not Catholic with Donna and one of the students."

In my journal, I reflected on the role confusion that I experienced and my difficulty letting go of my habitual desire to control things. When the students were planning their lessons for the schoolchildren, I was aware that I did not want to take over, giving too much direction to the students. I also had materials and ideas to share, but I struggled with being an advisor/participant. One of my most joyful times in Guatemala was when I took a risk, sharing openly with the students. I asked if I could teach the group a song as our prayer for the night. The students were enthusiastic, singing, line by line after me, a song written by Kenneth Guilmartin to commemorate the tragedy of 9/11, "May all children everywhere live in peace, sweet peace." For the rest of the trip, the song became a touchstone for our group, shared with the girls at the Internado. In post-trip evaluations, our students identified the song as a highlight of the contemplative practices for our trip.

Throughout the journal, I wrote about my difficulty with letting go of control, evidently one of my core issues. "I just realized that we have 9 more days. Each moment here is precious...I hope that they (my family) are doing OK, getting along, helping one another...I am thinking about the events coming up... I am reading about letting go of my habitual tendencies, realizing that the world can continue to spin on its axis without me."

There is so much to want to fix in Guatemala. Children walk shoeless through streets littered with dog feces. Busses spew out toxic black smoke. Each market has a number of limbless or blind beggars sitting on the street curb. Chödrön explains that the moment when we reach our limit and want to avoid suffering is a moment of great potential for the development of compassion. We can "let the energy of that emotion... pierce us to the heart" (2005, p.18). In my journal I wrote about this suffering, "Shopping in the villages is overwhelming and sad to me. So many beautiful things and the people are so desperate to sell to me; yet it makes me not want to buy any of it. I admire their work and yet I would rather give them the money since in relation to them, I do not need anything." Also in my journal, I wrote, "We had a very hot sunny day. Second day with no rain. I cannot imagine how hot it would be in one of the tin houses, cooking tortillas three times a day over an open fire like the local women do. They have so little here." And I worry in my journal for the people that we meet, "Sister Josephina, the head of the school, spoke to us about the history including having to leave Chichi for months when the religious were being killed during the war. Both this and the last mission seem so fragile, not sure if there will continue to be money to keep going for another 50 years."

The morale of the service trip group was impacted by the suffering that we witnessed. We were wanting to help with so many needs, "We had a great meeting to end our night. The students planned for tomorrow's classes and then we all checked in. There was some good sharing about the difficulties of privilege, of wanting to DO more for the people, and of the love, sharing, and fun with the kids." By the end of the trip, we all started to feel the powerlessness of really helping in Guatemala. We all had things, shoes, clothes, or money that we wanted to give. We realized that none of it could be enough to fill the need. I wrote, "Last night in our reflection time we talked about service. Some expected to help more. We talked about service being more of an accompanying than an act of I do

this for you. This connects with what I am reading about egolessness...It is hard coming from our culture to think more communally and to accept that we cannot fix things."

Compassion

Gyalwa Karmapa according to Chödrön (2005, p. 107) said, "You take it all in. You let the pain of the world touch your heart and you turn it into compassion." I wrote of one experience that our group had with compassion, "Last full day in Guatemala, Donna introduced us to Maria (alias). She was seeking help from the Internado since she had just been caught trying to enter the U.S. illegally. Wanting to join her boyfriend in New Jersey, she had borrowed \$3000 to pay the "coyotes" to bring her to the United States. She was arrested in Texas where she had to give up all of her possessions, even the blouse under her sweater. She was flown back to Guatemala City and came to Chichi by bus. Maria was welcomed by the Sisters. She had dinner and a bed for the night and left the next day to return to her home with clothes and toiletries donated by our students. She will most likely try to get to New Jersey again." Chödrön teaches the practice of tonglen, "Whenever we encounter suffering of any form, the tonglen instruction is to breathe it in with the wish that everyone could be free of pain" (2005, p. 109). We were able to breathe in Maria's suffering, developing compassion for her and for all of the Central Americans who have attempted to make a better life for themselves in the United States.

At the very end of our trip I had the opportunity to put together all of the teachings, developing "maitri", the Sanskrit word for loving-kindness or unconditional friendliness, with myself. After our 3-hour van ride from Chichi to Guatemala City, we arrived at the airport for the trip home. Donna and I got everyone through check-in and security, relaxing in the belief that we were "home free." About 30 minutes into our breakfast, I was suddenly violently ill. I spent the next two hours in and out of the bathroom with what can only be described as a movie-quality case of food poisoning. As our departure time ticked closer, I became aware of my anxiety that I would not be able to make the flight. I felt humiliated as a bathroom in a developing country was closed down due to my illness. The more anxious and embarrassed I felt, the sicker I became. Then it occurred to me, I became mindful, that I could accept this situation just as it is. I did not have to like the fact that I might not be able to get onto the plane, but I could accept it. Once I accepted my situation, I was able to have compassion for myself, even starting to see the humor in my

dilemma. My mind even grasped how lucky I was that this was happening at the airport rather than on the plane or in one of the worksites with more primitive plumbing. “The instruction is to relate compassionately with where we find ourselves and begin to see our predicament as workable” (Chödrön, 2005, p. 174). Telling myself to accept the situation as it is, my stomach started to settle. With the help of some medicine, I was eventually able to board the plane. My instinct would typically be to let no one know what happened in that airport. Thus, even writing about this embarrassing incident is a powerful step in gentle friendliness with myself.

Conclusions

“The world is always displaying itself, always waving and winking, but we are so self-involved that we miss it” (Chödrön, 2005, p. 159). A ten year old girl called to me, “Professora! Come quick, a hummingbird, it’s hurt.” On seeing the beautiful, fragile being, I was awed. It was barely breathing, eyes drooping, seeming to be nearing death. What could I do? I wondered. A dozen Guatemalan girls and U.S. college students huddled around the bird, anxiously debating how to help. Remembering that hummingbirds need a lot of energy, I asked one of the girls to get a bowl of sugar water. I gently took the bird to a patio away from the throng of girls and the hungry cat. Without much hope, I placed the bird’s bill into the sweet water. It dipped its tongue in the water, swallowing tiny sips, becoming more alert. I held the hummingbird out in my open palm, letting go and flap, flap, it buzzed away. My experience with the hummingbird symbolizes many of the aspects of my experiences on the service trip to Guatemala. Both required my heightened awareness of myself and my surroundings, my acceptance of both beauty and pain, and my ability to let go.

Contemplative practices are a natural fit with service learning experiences. Usually the students who volunteer for service learning are altruistic students with some spiritual or religious practice. Our students were very comfortable with journals and prayer. Many of them were also able to share freely

their reflections with the group. Like me, the students were struggling with the “full catastrophe” of Guatemala. I believe that our students would have been open if I had shared some of Chödrön’s teachings with them. I wish that I had spoken with the students about my attempts at mindfulness, acceptance, and compassion throughout our shared experiences.

One of the many things that I learned from advising in Guatemala is that I can risk sharing my authentic self with students as I did when we shared the song. When I advise on trips in the future, I will apply the “maitri” that I am developing for myself, taking the risk to incorporate more of myself and my contemplative practices in each phase of the service trip. I will share my intention to refrain from my usual distractions from the present moment, encouraging students to do the same in order to “let the energy of that emotion... pierce us to the heart” (Chödrön, 2005, p.18).

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