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### To Teach, or Not to Teach: That is the Question

The question that continually stumps me is, “What do you want to do with your life?” With this question, I become silent as I sit there and think for a short period of time, all the while knowing that I will not have an answer. I have had ample time to sort through this question in my time here in Mexico. Although I don’t have a definite answer, I have been greatly impacted by various speakers, trips, and personal experiences here in Mexico that have helped narrow my answer to this question.

Being a mathematics and statistics major, my career options were somewhat limited. My options seemed to branch in two directions—business or teaching. Ever since I babysat a child who had Attention Deficit Disorder for five years straight, I swore to myself that I would never be a teacher. Therefore, my only option was to sell my soul to a major corporation and slave behind a desk for the rest of my working career. The pay would be more than sufficient and the job would be steady, no doubt. However, spending time here in Mexico has greatly changed my view of major corporations and the desire I have to make a difference in the lives of people instead of in the already full pockets of businesses. Sarah Anderson and John Cavanagh, the authors of the book, *Field Guide to the Global Economy*, said “the rich are getting richer while the poor are becoming more desperate and numerous” (Anderson, 2005, viii). If I choose to work for some major corporation, my efforts go directly to the advancement of the company. I want no part of that, whatsoever. So, even though I already scratched teaching off my list of things to do in my life, I revert back to my option of teaching.

First off, I am not going to confess that I want to teach for the rest of my life. That is a major step to take, and I am not secure enough in my abilities to declare this direction in my life. However, I am confident that I want to use my knowledge and abilities to help others who don’t have the same opportunities that I have. The more I am here, the more I realize my own ambitions and just how selfish they are. Who am I to use my talents and educational knowledge to only further my own life? I have many rights, and one of them is the ability to share what God has given me with others who are less fortunate. In the years to come, when people hear my name, what will they picture me doing? Will I be a

soccer mom, living in the suburbs and rushing kids to practice? Or will they not be able to picture me, because I will be living in a foreign country, teaching?

Some people are content with their lives what they have made for themselves. The problem in my life arises when I get too comfortable with my life. After hearing first-hand accounts of various hardships, I feel like I don't have the right to sit in a cozy comfortable house, perfectly content with my life. The more I am here, the more I realize the privilege of being an American. Even though there are many negative effects of privilege, I want to use my American privilege—education, language, money, supportive family, and many other things to help others in either Mexico or in another Latin American country.

One amazing woman who inspired my thinking was Susan Smith, the founder of a non-profit organization called Caminamos Juntos. She told us students, “To whom much has been given, much is expected” (Susan Smith 1/29/08). After a presentation about Caminamos Juntos, we went in a small group on February 16, 2008 to Tlamacazapa, Guerrero to see for ourselves the positive and negative effects of this organization. The positive aspects of this organization far outweighed the negative aspects. Dr. Smith didn't initially come into Tlapacazapa with a long list of things to do for the townspeople. Instead, she humbly entered the town, made friendships, and then developed programs to directly apply to their lives. The compassion and dedication that Dr. Smith has for this community, is an inspiration to us all. Even though she was completely content in her homeland, Canada, she used her medical knowledge, scientific knowledge, and other talents to improve the lives of hundreds of people. Her form of self-sacrifice is a model for others, including myself, to learn from and maybe even follow someday.

Another trip that had a strong impact on my decision to consider the idea of teaching was a week-long home stay in the town of Amatlán. Here, I got a first-hand account of the educational status of many rural communities in Mexico. I was shocked as we toured Telesecundaria Quetzalcoatl, a middle school that uses educational television programs to educate the 28 students in attendance. One of the three teachers, Lic Carlos Ramon Rigueroa Carbajal, serves as both the 9<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and principal of the school. Along with being both the secretary and the principal of the school, he frequently attends

meetings for the school, so often to that, “For the six months I’ve been here, it feels like I’ve only been here a month” (Carlos Figueroa 2/26/08). With only two other teachers to help him manage the school, he said he feels like he’s “been dropped here with no help” (Carlos Figueroa 2/26/08). He even told us that he plans on leaving very shortly in search of a private school. According to his lecture, children perform better at private schools and have a better chance of continuing school and attending college. At these small, public telesecundaria schools that spread across the Mexican countryside, many students graduate without being able to read well and no desire to further their education. The chance that these students and others have of graduating from these telesecundaria schools and attending college are slim to none. Carlos Figueroa, himself, attended one of these schools when he was younger. Out of the ten people in his graduating class, he was the only one to pursue a college degree.

As I reflect on the tour, the effectiveness of these schools seems rather discouraging. The teachers aren’t equipped to teach and the kids aren’t learning. The grim reality of these educational schools has motivated me to reconsider my “no teaching” policy. I want these children to have the same opportunities that I had in the United States. Having gone to a very loosely disciplined school, these children don’t have strong work ethics or desire to learn. I want to challenge them to absorb as much knowledge as possible and apply this knowledge in their lives.

The sad reality is that many children must drop out of school to work and help support their family. While in Amatlán, I had a conversation with my host mother, Maura Guerrero Robles about her schooling. With regret in her eyes, she replied, “I never finished grade school. I had to stop going because I had to help my family” (Maura Guerrero 2/26/08). Unfortunately, Señora Guerrero’s case is not uncommon in Mexico. With the older generation, it is rare to find a person who made it to high school. I think we need to attach value to education and teach children just how vital their education is to their lives.

Every day I’m here, another idea pops into my head of something I want to do both now and in the future—I want to teach math concepts to high school kids, I want to give English as a Second Language classes, I want to work at an orphanage and give children the love and support they are missing

in their lives, I want to teach a class about the similarities and differences of Protestantism and Catholicism...and the list continues. Although, I have to be careful in the way I approach and fulfill these dreams. I do realize that there are people who are against “foreigners” coming into their country to help. Ivan Illich wrote an article titled *To Hell with Good Intentions*. In his article, he states “Today, the existence of organizations like yours (volunteer organizations) is offensive to Mexico...You will not help anybody by your good intentions...” (Illich, 1990, 314). In addition, he adds “There is no way for you to really meet with the underprivileged, since there is no common ground whatsoever for you to meet on” (Illich, 1990, 318). After I read his article, I was outraged at his blunt remarks and his strong opinion against foreign help that somehow represented all oppressed people of the world. Even though some underprivileged people of the world would be hesitant to accept foreign help at first, I think most of them would be grateful for those who give up time and money to help them with their situation. Hopefully, they would recognize that organizations, such as Caminamos Juntos, are doing more good for a community than bad. I keep thinking of what would have happened if Susan Smith read this article before coming to Mexico and decided to stay in Canada. Hundreds of people would be sick with lead poisoning, and many would be dead. I think it’s important for a foreign volunteer group to be sensitive to the country they are entering, like Dr. Smith did with Caminamos Juntos. Dr. Smith told us that it took her years of women’s groups to establish trust in the community of Tlamacazapa. It’s important to come in with an open agenda, flexible to the needs and wants of the people.

With almost 100 million people living in Mexico, about 48 million people live in poverty. Even though I’m a math major, it doesn’t take rocket science to realize that 48 million people is nearly half the population of Mexico. With lack of money, comes lack of resources and opportunities. If I follow this reasoning, that means that almost half of the population of Mexico lacks basic resources and is denied certain opportunities. Living in the United States, I’ve been blessed with the privilege to engage in any opportunity that has come my way. I believe my life would be in vain if I didn’t share my talents, skills, and knowledge with those who were denied these same opportunities. In my time here, I have found that one of the ways I can share my knowledge is in the form of teaching. I don’t know how to teach, or what

to teach, but I'm going to keep sifting through my experiences here in Mexico to find out what exactly God wants me to do with my life. Referring back to the infamous question, "What do you want to do with your life," I still don't think I have an answer. I don't know if I will ever have an answer. My life is like the second hand of a clock—continually moving and changing every second of my life. My time here in Mexico has opened the door to opportunities that have radically changed my life. Mexico has put my life into perspective and challenged me to make a difference in the world.

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