

TRAVEL: LESSONS LEARNED

BY GRACE PENNINGTON

As a child of parents that participate in a lot of international missions, you are naturally expected to be involved in missions too. I used to get annoyed by people always saying, “Are you going on this trip?” and when I said no, they would look concerned until I reminded them that I had to go to school. I was only in middle school.

Though I had to miss out on many international trips, I thought the idea of traveling was an ideal one. My family had taken a trip to Spain when I was nine, and I loved it. Even though it was a huge place for a kid with a lot of intimidating people that didn’t speak my language, it was a good first experience outside of the United States.

Before we went on the trip, my parents had a few special instructions for my two older sisters and me. In addition to informing me that I didn’t have room to pack all of my stuffed animals in my suitcase, they taught us one Spanish phrase. This phrase was the one thing that we had to remember that would supposedly save us from any situation. My parents explained that in Spanish the magic words were “*No hablo espanol*”. After I practiced repeating this phrase, I was ready-or at least I thought I was ready-to use it if I needed to.

Throughout our trip in Spain, we stayed with different missionary families that were friends of my parents. Some were funny and exciting, and others weren’t so much. I remember once falling asleep at the dinner table listening to the adults’ stories. It wasn’t just that the stories were boring, but that we didn’t start dinner until 9 p.m. and that can definitely throw off a 9-year old’s eating and sleeping schedule. One of the families that we stayed with had two rambunctious kids about 12 and 15. The older boy was always trying to show off and make us laugh, and the younger girl was amiable and not as extroverted. I have to say I liked her better, and the older boy probably intimidated me at that age.

One day, the brother and sister along with my sisters and I went to an amusement park accompanied by a babysitter, Lupita. I remember walking through the park’s great white gates thinking that it was the biggest and most exciting thing that I’d ever seen. I heard high-pitched screams all around as all sorts of colored rides flew through the air. As a girl that felt claustrophobic on elevators and refused to go on the tall water slides at summer camp, all of these whirring and twirling contraptions scared me. Even though Lupita and I weren’t best buds, considering I failed the ability to communicate with her, I stayed very close to her throughout the day.

The older kids decided to go on some rides together, so Lupita and I walked to the arcade. I decided to check out one of the games, and the next thing I knew, Lupita was nowhere in sight. My vision started to get hazy as panic took over.

My eyes wandered quickly over the premise a second time, hoping, praying that I wasn't alone. Oh great, now I'm lost in an amusement park in a different country, away from parents, and I'm going to get kidnapped and not even know what they're saying to me, I thought. As I freaked out and started to tear up, three or four Spanish boys about my age surrounded me and began to bombard me with questions. In that moment, I felt like I was utterly alone, I didn't belong in a foreign place, and I should probably learn Spanish before I came back here. The one thing that could help me, the Spanish magic words, had suddenly jumped out of the foreign language file in my brain. Fear took over my body for what felt like hours, but was not more than a minute.

After spending that frightful minute staring at the boys making confused motions to me, I saw Lupita out of the corner of my eye. Relieved that I wasn't going to be kidnapped, I returned to Lupita's side wanting to give her a huge hug, but not knowing if that was appropriate or translated right. I was ok, and I could breathe again. And of course, now the magic phrase popped back in my head.

It was funny how I concentrated so much on my problem and what I couldn't do that I missed Lupita, who was just outside the arcade. I think sometimes this applies to us as Christians. As we go through trials, fear and panic will master us if we don't stop to look at God's promises that are waiting for us. We are called to persevere through and conquer our trials to reach the next level in our lives. If I had only moved forward, instead of allowing fear and intimidation to paralyze me, I would have found peace and solved my problem as I discovered that Lupita was waiting for me.

When I was fourteen, I decided that I was ready to go on a mission trip to Mexico that my parents led with my church. I was nervous about the plane ride, the strange place and possibly strange food, but I felt that God was calling me to go. I made sure I knew a little more Spanish this time, too.

During the weeklong trip, I grew so much spiritually. I think this was because I was out of my comfort zone and vulnerable to God.

We had devotionals every morning and night, where we would have some worship, then one person would speak about what was on their heart.

In the guesthouse that we stayed in, there was a balcony on the top floor where we would sit in white plastic chairs in a circle. Although this balcony didn't seem to be anything special, it was a place where we were all open and ready for God's touch. We remained sensitive to God's voice as we sat in awe of His grace and beauty.

I will never forget the nights that I spent on that balcony, staring into the black sky. But here the darkness of the sky was overpowered by the twinkling of the city lights and palm trees dotting the city. In that place, the wonder of God's creation took over my whole being. I breathed deeper, my eyes widened and God's great majesty covered me like a cloud. Sometimes God has to get you out of your own day-to-day mundane atmosphere to remind you of his greatness. It is easy to get bogged down in the business of life when we are stuck concentrating on our problems and concerns. God only requires us to look beyond ourselves to experience His presence.

Even though I grew spiritually after learning from others' devotionals, and I came close to Him when we had worship, it was only when I was silent before God that I felt one with Him. When I just sat at His feet and let Him love me as a daughter, I really encountered God. As I silenced my mind, I allowed God to fill it with His promises and assurances.

I challenge you to go to a place that you've never been to, read a book of the Bible that you never have, watch your favorite movie and find God in it.

I've learned that God can be found in everything, sometimes we just have to change our mind about things to see that. When we change within ourselves or see life in a different way, we can easily recognize the Holy Spirit around us.

Church in Mexico opened my eyes. It showed that circumstances, music, and buildings have absolutely nothing to do with worship. Even though these are the main things that I usually base my intensity of worship on, they don't matter.

I once heard someone who spoke on worship. He said that whether you like the worship leader or hate the style of music or have a hectic day ahead of you, "Worship your face off."

That's exactly what the Mexicans did. During worship time, they jumped around, raised their hands, and actually acted like they were celebrating something they believed. Sometimes when I leave churches in America, I feel like God isn't even exciting. Like He's not even worth our whole attention in worship. I wish I were more adamant about really focusing when I worship God.

At the church services in Mexico, the people would use their whole bodies to worship God; this includes hands, feet, and soul. Their joy of the Lord was transmitted through their exuberant attitudes. As I enjoyed watching their involvement in worship, I was assured that God had really changed their lives. They acted as if it was their last time to worship God, and they gave great thanks as they exalted His name.

My dad traveled to Rwanda a few years ago and was impacted by the people's passionate and lively style of worship. The people in the church that he visited danced and yelled and waved their hands toward God during

their praise and worship time. In the middle of the service, someone told my dad that every person in the church had lost someone in the country's genocide. Each person had lost a father, son, daughter, husband, brother, etc. But my dad said you never would have known that they had lost anything by their worship. Even in the broken state of their country and lives, God was real to them, and He deserved praise. After dealing with so much death, the people decided to rely on God for true joy.

When you travel to other parts of the world, your view of the world changes. For me, my view of Christianity changed too. I saw my struggles as petty and my dedication to God as seriously lacking. God seemed to become more real to me, as I did things that were out of my comfort zone that pushed me to grow.

One day in Mexico, we traveled to a remote village called Sutchitlan where we attended their church service that night. When we got there, we were welcomed by cheery and hospitable people that lived on dirt floors and didn't have running toilets. One thing is for sure, I appreciated running toilets after that day. After we ate the dinner that the people had prepared for us, we sat around and played with the kids there. We brought bubbles to blow with them, and then some members of our team played guitars and sang until it was time for church.

The village's church service started off with vibrant worship which we called "Ranchero Praise" for its distinctly Latin, syncopated feel. The music sort of reminded me of the stuff they play in Mexican restaurants. Regardless of what it sounded like, the people rejoiced with such vitality. I was only concerned with the fact that they lived on dirt floors and didn't have a running toilet. That was one of the many moments in the trip when I felt like a whiny, spoiled American who would complain about something as silly as their McDonald's french fries not being hot enough.

After worship, our interpreter, who was the pastor of another church, spoke to the people. Seeing as it was in Spanish, none of us had a clue what he was saying. This could call for problems, since he was the king of practical jokes.

He told us that it was time for testimonies and asked for volunteers. After we all just stared at him for a few seconds, he decided to volunteer me. I did have a little testimony to give, but the thought of talking in front of people made me really nervous. Add a foreign language into the mix, and you have a lethal combination. So, I timidly walked to the microphone and shared the short testimony that was on my heart and walked back to my seat, thanking God that I had lived through the experience.

When I returned to my seat, the interpreter talked for a few minutes. The people started to laugh and some of them looked at me funny. What the heck was going on? What was he saying to them? I could feel my face

heating up and turning red, and I half-smiled because I didn't know what else to do. The speaker moved on and welcomed the preacher to the stage, while leaving me confused and embarrassed.

Later, my oldest sister, who is fluent in Spanish, told me that the interpreter told all of the people that I had been a hardcore drug addict. He told them that God had brought me out of a lot, and it was a big deal for me to talk to them. Although he was a big practical joker, he wasn't completely insensitive, so I think he told them he was joking at the end. Well, I think, but to this day I don't really know that for a fact.

I laughed off that embarrassing moment, but it really helped me get over my fear of speaking in front of people and sharing about God's work in my life. I figured, if I could make it through people thinking I was a former drug addict, I could do anything. God made me realize that He would give me the power to share about Him, even if I felt like I couldn't. It was in those times that I had to rely on God for confidence, that He strengthened my heart. I began to truly trust that God was in control of everything, and I didn't need to freak out about anything. Whenever I started to worry about things or got nervous, I would recite this verse to myself. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, let your needs be made known to God. And the peace that passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6).

Travel is a great way for God to get us away from focusing on ourselves and our small worlds. When you are in an unfamiliar environment, God will throw challenges at you and when you conquer them, you will find yourself stronger and humbled. Even if this growth requires going through some embarrassing or scary circumstances, the lesson you learn will be worth the uncomfortable moments. For me, experiencing life outside of the U.S. confronted me with God's great power and love. My heart was changed and I believe yours could be, too.