

“Communicating Across Cultures: How A Conversation in Another Culture Changed My
Life”

A Monster is Slain

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Here lies the distilled essence of loneliness-the fear that one will never be able to find the word for what one desires to say. The word forms only in the darkest pools of ones being. The barest outline offers itself from the shadows. A monster is slain.

-Lewis Carroll¹

Life changing is serious business. Generally left to God, forces of nature, or life's defining moments, a birth or a death, it isn't something we often credit to mere conversation. Mere conversation doesn't seem powerful enough. Unless of course you consider that every life change is in fact a change in perspective. If we understand this, it is certainly acceptable that a few words, thoughts, or ideas exchanged can alter one's perspective, and in turn, one's life.

I had one such conversation after my arrival in Costa Rica just a few short months ago. It's no stretch to say that I struggled initially. Having never left the United States I had no idea what to expect. That, of course didn't keep my imagination from filling in a few details for me. I expected excitement, I expected fun, I expected to learn, and somehow, inexplicably, I expected a native speaker's proficiency in Spanish to come pouring forth ever so naturally from my "determinada y fina boca" (that's "resolute and delicate mouth," to quote Neruda²). My arrival was grounding. After a day for travel, filled with confusion and airplane induced claustrophobia, I realized I was quite clumsy with the language.

As soon as the plane touched down, we students were promptly escorted *a la Universidad de Costa Rica* to meet our prospective families and immediately, my

¹Roiphe, Katie. *Still She Haunts Me*. ©2001, The Dial Press Random House, Inc. NY, NY, p. 72.

²Neruda, Pablo. "Madrigal Written in Winter." *Residence on Earth (Residencia en la Tierra)*, trans. Donald D. Walsh. ©1973, New Directions Publishing Corporation, NY, NY, p.21.

fatigued mind struggled to process what was being spoken. I was pleased with my *familia* but there was so much I wished to respond to; kind questions I wanted to answer and hospitality I was eager to show my gratitude for. Unfortunately, I could only squeak out a *muchas gracias* with a smile. It was a strange dilemma. I think we've all experienced a shortage of words or not knowing what to say in a situation, but this was different. I had the words. I knew exactly what to say to these kind strangers, I just didn't have the translation! I struggled awhile with polite conversation over some very questionable looking cake, and then decided it best to get some sleep.

The next week proceeded similarly. I learned to listen more than I spoke, because speaking just left me tongue tied and frustrated. I was consistently fascinated by all that I saw, I knew that I was learning a great deal, and I was really enjoying myself. But I feared my host family thought me shy or withdrawn. I feared seeming stupid or inarticulate. The confidence was simply not there. Everything and everyone in Costa Rica seemed so beautiful and untouchable to me. It was just out of my reach and I longed to feel a part of it. *"If only," I thought, "If only I could find the perfect words, just transparent enough to reveal the self that lay dormant under a million hollow sounds."*

And so my big opportunity came one evening. It was during the second week. The rain was exceptionally heavy that day and it kept me hibernating in my bedroom enjoying a little *siesta*. Sleep was a precious commodity with daily classes, tours, and only a month to explore San Jose. Around dinnertime I was stirred out of my sleep. Someone was speaking very loudly in the kitchen. I could tell it wasn't a member of my host family because although it was Spanish, it didn't sound pretty. Nope, this was definitely an American. I tried in vain to go back to sleep and after lying awake for awhile my

curiosity got the better of me. I decided to find out who it was.

Her name was Jane, a fellow student at the University and an invited guest for dinner. She must have been about my mother's age, warm and endearing, I instantly liked her. She began to tell us why she decided to make the trip to Costa Rica. Fluent in French and English, she set out to master Spanish. She was still a beginner, like me, but she had no reservations about speaking. She talked and she talked as we moved to the dining room to enjoy dinner. She told stories enthusiastically, though slowly. Her pronunciation was terrible, her vocabulary limited, but I so admired her. She was fearless. She spoke of her home, her interests, and her family. Before long, I found myself joining in, inspired by her lack of self-consciousness. It must have seemed a little strange, two Americans speaking to each other in stilted Spanish, but I was genuinely enjoying myself. The words came freely when I stopped worrying about perfection. My host family seemed pleased at how suddenly animated I'd become. If the words were insufficient, I could speak with my tones, my expressions, even laughter, "letting the meaning shine through them in bright pieces, like light through a tree."(1) I paused a moment to reflect on that scene. Six people ranging in age from nineteen to ninety, some family, some strangers, and two straining at times to communicate in a language they barely grasped. I watched in amazement at the ease of it all, how natural it seemed for me to be eating this homemade pizza prepared by my *tica mami* with *mi hermano* to my left and other family surrounding, with the rain's thunderous applause punctuating every word. It was comforting and warm. Like good food; delicious. I was happy.

That night I decided that words alone aren't the only means of expression and I could, despite my shortcomings, satisfy my drive to be understood. It was truly a

breakthrough for me. All a once I'd gained confidence in conversation and the relief of effective self expression. Most importantly, I began to feel connected to the culture that surrounded me. It changed the way I communicated for the rest of the trip. I lost my inferiority complex and enjoyed myself much more. I, the terminally self-defeating perfectionist, had discovered that, "It matters not what you say-it is the effort, the animating force behind it that signifies-the desire to speak is still there-and that portion of the puzzle will create some modicum of sense."(1)