

Hello Everyone!

Belated Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! I hope all of you were able to enjoy the holidays with loved ones and got a good break from work.

So much has happened since I've last wrote. I hope I'm able to encompass everything in a matter of one letter because I'm too impatient to learn how to use a video editing software. Warning: This is a long one, sorry! I have so much to share!

First and foremost, one of the biggest cultural differences here in Manila is the sense of community that's so deeply ingrained into the culture. The mindset of almost every Filipino I've met is how they can help their community rather than how can I make life better for myself. I've had the privilege to see my family for 2 weeks in celebration of Christmas. My Christmas break started with a "community" feeding with my aunt. We made small lunchbox meals of pork barbecue sticks, lumpia, rice, crackers, and juice. We went to Christmas Eve Mass and drove all around Metro Manila to hand them out to security guards and gas station employees. My family made it a point to specifically give these Noche Buena (midnight of Christmas Day) meals to these unsung heroes of Christmas Eve who fuel our cars on our way to our relatives' homes or those who guard the office buildings that contain presumably confidential material late at night with no one to keep them company. Most Noche Buena meals are distributed to the poor, who have no homes or other means of providing a warm meal for their families. Those who have to work on Christmas Eve to provide the financial needs for their families are often forgotten and sacrifice spending a special time of year to work instead of be with families. With my TERRIBLE Tagalog (which you can view with caution attached), we were able to pull an Ellen DeGeneres style gift giving and it was so awesome to see how joyful they became. Maybe they were already in a good mood because they just witnessed an American totally botch Tagalog when it was much easier to speak English. OH WELL, dinner and a show. After this experience, I deeply reflected on the blessings spread across my family. Had I been in my original assignment in Antique, Philippines, I'm not sure if I'd be granted the same opportunity to witness all of this within my own family.

If I'm being honest here, I really thought my family was extremely privileged and maybe perhaps ignorant of the real problems that exist here in the Philippines. I thought many of them were unaware of what the daily life of the poor looks like but I realize this was more of a reflection of my own pride showing itself because I was having a difficult time adjusting. It was a time I felt particularly isolated - a privileged American who has the means to travel to the Philippines on her own volition and funds, choosing to live among the poor with other women who are also poor. I didn't know anyone who could relate to privilege guilt yet wanting to humble their life to do service, and I felt shameful in even feeling this way. It felt wrong to live as I normally would because my normal is a privileged life compared to my colleagues who come from provinces and a much more simple lifestyle compared to mine. For example:

- access to healthy food
- air conditioning
- technology - my own laptop, kindle, camera, etc.
- interest and means to participate in R&R opportunities
- international experience (educational and recreational)

Living in New York where "privilege", "guilt" and any other social justice issue you can think of is put on the forefront of many conversations has led me to feel a bit conflicted on where I can stand without shame or fear. Maybe this is true for several other parts of the US. In an effort to fully immerse myself in this experience and adapt to the lifestyle of my environment, I've been trying to adjust my life to meet their normal. This entails spending significantly less money, engaging in more conversation rather than activities, and eating the same food during meals since it's family style. Our meals were mostly comprised of canned meat, cheap cuts from the butcher, fried fish (with lots of bones), eggs and rice. To paint a picture, most veggies and fruits are 1/2 the price or more in comparison to the cost in the US, but still considered expensive locally. Immediately before leaving for the Philippines, I was diagnosed with pre-diabetes and I'm not allowed to eat carbs or sugar...I was so angry with my doctor for dealing such bad news and he knew it hahahaha. WHO TELLS SOMEONE THEY CAN'T EAT RICE RIGHT BEFORE THEY LEAVE FOR A COUNTRY WHERE THEY EAT RICE WITH EVERY MEAL?! So as part of my experience, I offer this as a sacrifice. It's been painful but doable. It didn't take long for my colleagues/co-teachers/friends to realize that my plate looked quite empty since there was no rice. They've been so supportive in my challenges to avoid sugary drinks and carbs which are literally in every food corner in the Philippines. They've accompanied me in my walking adventures to stay active, they've cooked family meals with more meat and veggies, and seemingly eat more rice than usual to satisfy their hunger so I can eat the other food that's on the table. I've cheated every now and then because it was so hot and was scared I'd faint otherwise... I'm human not God, don't judge me lol.

This inner conflict I have about privilege and how starkly blessed I feel in comparison to the people I work with is deeply embedded in how I live my life here. It felt like I was living a secret life and therefore hid a part of who I was and was ashamed of it. It turns out that they also like getting massages, are willing to chip in for more veggies and fruits, and most of all are so understanding that I was having a hard time fitting in. The longer I stayed, the more I realized that maybe my idea of a blessing is just different. Having material things are certainly useful today that help us focus on the real tasks that are needed, but the real blessings go deeper than this as most of you already know. I suppose it's different to experience it than read about it. Before she died, my grandmother always said to serve the poor. I think this manifested in our family in different ways. My immediate family is living this mission through Mustard Seed Communities, the community feeding with my aunt, the ongoing ministries of another aunt and her family in igniting the faith of others, social enterprise founded by cousin that sells handmade jewelry and bags made by nanays, and the overwhelming sense of welcome into all of their homes. My first day of school in Manila opened with a prayer recited by the students that my grandmother used to always pray to me before I went to bed. My first Sunday mass was at a church full of gold and yellow flowers, my grandmother's favorite. As someone who has witnessed poverty with her own eyes, I can now see what my grandmother means. It seems that God is showing Himself through our missions in serving the poor. Privilege doesn't matter, we're still able to connect with others regardless of our background.

Speaking from my own personal experience, Mustard Seed Communities in Jamaica was the first reality check in my spiritual journey. My faith was tested and I was challenged to leave my burdens on the altar instead of harboring onto them and the pain they came with. I had never planned to go to Jamaica nor did I want to. My mom said to just pray about it and see if there's a sign that points me to a certain direction. Maybe it was really my grandmother speaking, reminding me to stop being picky about my service and just go as God

originally called me to do. It's not really my plan anyway. To provide context, the residents of Mustard Seed Communities don't really have a traditional home. They've been shunned by society because their burdens and crosses manifest themselves physically through conditions like cerebral palsy, downs syndrome, schizophrenia, autism, and much more. Regardless of their condition, they always run to the bus the moment we arrive to greet us with smiles and big hugs. They didn't even know who I was yet they were so happy to know that someone will be there to love them for who they really are, not the person people see on the outside. They say that we'll often find the same kind of burden within ourselves, except that we carry those in our hearts which can at times be more painful. I've found my experience here in the Philippines to have such a significant parallel. **The simpler the life, the happier you can be.** This is not to say that those who have more are unhappy, but having lesser things has allowed me to connect with the students and the nanays on a much different level, not to mention that this has also allowed my Tagalog to improve significantly. My first experience of happiness was mentioned in my previous email through the residents of Tondo, who smiled at me when I walked on their turf, and when the children run into the school to hug and greet me good morning. I think they like me because I make fun of them all day and watch them play catch with a roll of tape. In my most recent experience, all the students were instructed to go to 20 people to say "Thank you, I love you, and bless you" with the sign of the cross on the forehead as an activity during our Christmas parties in Tondo and Makati. I didn't understand my boss when he said this in Tagalog and was shocked to find a swarm of children run straight for me. That was scary lol. I was particularly touched when one of our students gave me a long tight hug because she had recently gotten into a fight with another student who called her fat. My colleagues asked if I could deal with it and I thought it was because i was the biggest teacher and the rest of them were barely 5 ft and 100 lbs. SURE, I will ignore that they just implied I'm "big enough" and will try to talk to her. They later explained that it was because I've been able to help manage stressful conversations with them so maybe I could calm her down too. (oh. okay.) I'm not sure if what I said to the student helped. Maybe she felt touched by the 30 minutes of linebacker practice we had and was only hugging me because she finally met her match (LOL), or maybe she just needed to be hugged and hear that she was beautiful no matter what. In Tondo, I found all the parents in tears when they were sharing their appreciation for each other and the staff. All of them were in each others embrace for the entire activity and I later learned that it was because a barrier was finally broken down. Because they're from the poorest community in Manila, no one wants to touch them and history has shown that they've been abandoned by everyone else in Manila. It reminded me of my experience in Jamaica, where residents are ridiculed for their circumstance and shunned from society because they seem different. I'm certainly guilty of the initial hesitation of hugging someone who lives among trash, may have lice, and doesn't shower but my self-check is reminding myself that Jesus didn't hesitate to touch the lepers so if he can do it, so can I hahahaha. What an example to live by, but hey gotta do what keeps me humble right?

To add onto another lesson on privilege I've learned here, I think it's also important to note that privilege in the Philippines carries a different connotation because the controversies that are involved are also somewhat different. There's no argument over race or even money despite that being the common denominator in almost every privilege disparity across the world. It seems that majority of the debates that occur here are revolved around basic human rights within a community rather than individual rights which I think is more prevalent in the States. When I was teaching a values formation course to the high school students, we talked about common issues that they witness within their communities. I was very surprised to hear them talk

about **family planning, overpopulation, and water shortages/limited resources**. It was then I realized that the students and the teacher have now switched places. These are issues they face every day - education is already significantly different when comparing public and private school education, so providing comprehensive sex education to the general population will take even longer. With sex education lacking, unexpected pregnancies were increasing and ultimately leaving a shortage in all the resources available per capita. I was astounded by how much these high school students knew as it relates to their community. It was clear these young adults had the knowledge and the desire to make an impact but were restricted by one critical component of Filipino culture: Never disrespect elders. They shared that it's very hard to make changes in their homes and community because adults usually see younger people as less knowledgeable and when challenged, it insinuates that the child is disrespecting the parent by implying they lack the knowledge to know any better. I can certainly relate to this aspect of Filipino culture as it was demanded in my home that we always respect everyone who is older than us, but I've never felt silenced in my opinions. Sure, I've gotten been misguided along the way, but open conversation around the dinner table has allowed my family and I to challenge and empathize with each other that I think many people seem to notice within our family. It was a humbling experience because I was now hearing stories of others who are fighting for their right to live as they fear they will be killed while in the States it seems we're fighting for a right to be accepted. This is a dangerous path to follow because the Philippines and the United States are not one in the same and have completely different cultures, so it's only natural that our issues will carry different levels of controversy and entitlements. As someone who is continuously trying to navigate her place and constantly analyzing everything, I've concluded that corruption is everywhere but manifests differently soliciting a different kind of response from the community. When the legal system fails its people, Filipinos seem to be less angry and are just desperate to make the best out of what they have while Americans seem to demand the legal system be fixed. How do you know when enough is enough or when to be happy with what you have left?

I recently watched the Two Popes on Netflix which highlighted the political and religious warfare that happened in Argentina in the 70s-80s. One scene struck me as the camera panned over a wall that clearly separated the poor from the rich. As I reflect on my experience in the Philippines and comparing it to current events in the States, it feels like the wall is certainly a problem but not the physical kind. The walls we build within ourselves distorts our perception of living among the poor, the differently-abled, and others of a different upbringing. As someone who is admittedly privileged, I have found so much more enrichment in speaking with people who have experienced communal adversity, in this case the poor. Our conversations has allowed us to develop loving friendships and empathy for each other. The people here in the Philippines witness poverty together as there is no wall to separate between social class. There still seems to be a degree of separation but the community mentality has allowed people to come together in a way that many Americans seem to struggle with. The daily struggles impact everyone and not just one sector of society which I believe contributes to the community mentality I mentioned before. Of course there's the legality side of it all, but I found it to be particularly profound in this case.

It's so funny how my grandmother continues to guide our lives long after her passing, as she's "**planted the seed**" in many of us that's now blossoming into something more beautiful. Maybe this is the light that everyone refers to whenever they speak of my family. Thanks, Lola :) With her being my muse in my experience, I've grown a deep appreciation for the many blessings afforded to me and my family, but an even

deeper appreciation for her as she was the OG missionary and inspired this whole thing. Because of her example, I feel my relationships with the nanays and the students growing each day and feel less homesick because of it. The hardest bout of homesickness came after I was rushed to the hospital from getting into a motorcycle accident. In the ambulance I felt the same pressure in my chest that I get during healing masses, and my legs felt like they were floating. Maybe I was high from all the adrenaline...or maybe it was something else. Mentally revisiting the impact of getting hit and the semi loss of consciousness and ability to speak really left me in an emotional roller coaster. It became more apparent that I really could have died, not from the initial hit but from oncoming traffic as the story has leaked to what seems like the entirety of Manila and they shared their feedback. Cheating death once forced me to grapple with the idea that I could have never seen my family and loved ones again which was particularly hard. God still blessed me to have other family nearby to care for me, and a new family from school who rushed to the hospital to be by my side and packed me an overnight bag despite only knowing each other for 3 weeks. Whatever the reason is, I'm still here and I'm supposed to be here. I had trouble understanding others whenever they said there was "this light" about me that's heaven sent. I don't really know why I'm here. My assignment changed several times and I never had a specific reason for doing something like this. It was just a call. During adoration, God answered my prayers as the mural above read, *"Those who follow Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life"* and I broke into tears. Completely surrendering my life to God has been scary but it's brought so much peace and joy to my life when I needed it most. Regardless of your relationship with God or your spirituality, my one hope for all of you is that you're able to see that life was never meant to be walked alone. While I still don't know the exact reason I'm here, it seems like I'm going in the right direction as all the signs have clearly pointed to it...except pedestrian crossings.