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I spent two months in San Isidro de Heredia, Costa Rica. I took two classes, lived with a host family and explored some of the country in my free time. I continue to realize new experiences and opportunities that have come from this trip even now back in the United States. Through the immersion in a contrasting culture, I was able to learn about the diversity of practices and cultures and the global relationships of power and how decisions of one country can impact another. There were some experiences that made me question my own ways of thinking. This was crucial in opening my mind to the cultural differences and their implications. As I have readjusted to life in the United States, I have try to find a balance between the two cultures. I also find myself educating others on cultural awareness and diversity as a result of my time abroad.

Every culture and group of people are unique. Consequently their behaviors and values also vary. Over the course of the eight weeks we were there my friends and I each got sick at some point. I found it very interesting to compare the reactions to health issues from Costa Rica and the United States. They rubbed the feet, put lotion on them and then wrapped them in a warm cloth to help the body naturally heal itself. This is because they believe that sickness can enter through your feet. As a result, when I got sick, I was strongly discouraged from walking around barefoot the house, which I am accustomed to doing. I was also given nightly of bamboo tea to help with a cold. I found it curious that I was told not to drink anything cold after this tea. They said that it was bad for my throat to be exposed to cold liquids after warm ones.

These health practices were quite different than those I had experienced and it took some time for me to accept them. After some time I realized that my family knew their environment and resources better than I could and I should listen to them. Additionally, just because their approaches were unlike than those in the United States didn't necessarily make them wrong. Although medicine is a science, it is approached uniquely by the many different

cultures around the world, Costa Rica being just one example.

Another cultural difference that I found was their treatment of animals. There were constantly dogs roaming the streets. We were told not to touch or feed them because they dogs would follow you all the way home. Some animals were kept as pets; my family in Costa Rica had three dogs and a cat. However, the interactions were different, indifference and neglect are more common in Costa Rica while they are often thought of as a member of the family in the United States. My family was particularly unique with their care for and lovingness towards their animals. My cat was allowed in the house during the day but the dogs all lived in a large kennel outside. As an animal lover it was difficult for me to cope with this cultural difference. It took a great deal of reflection before I realized that the excess of resources that we have in the United States has given us the privilege to put more time and money into our animals. Culture can also be influenced by international powers.

While in Costa Rica I gained a better understanding of power relationships and global influences. When I went into San Jose, the capital, I became immediately aware of the United States influence on the consumer. Numerous fast food chains could be found which was not as surprising for me. However, in the markets and with street vendors, both colones, the Costa Rican currency, and the U.S. dollar were accepted. Additionally, some advertisements were in English and vendors would call out to people in English. I did not understand why a Spanish-speaking, Latin American country would have such a strong influence of the United States and English.

Over time, I was able to learn about the historical influence of the United States in several Latin American countries, Costa Rica included. The United States has played a large role over the years economically in Costa Rica through agricultural exports. Currently, tourism is a large part of the economy. This is an example of the power relationship because the Costa Rican economy can then find itself dependent on that of the United States. One of my Costa

Rican friends said that many marketers will try to mimic the United States. I felt that this influence diminished the Costa Rican culture. However it is a normal part of Costa Rican lives now because of the tradition of this foreign power. Individual and group decisions can be impacted by these international forces.

My time in Costa Rica taught me about the United Fruit Company (UFC) which gave me a new perspective on the global influence decisions can have. I had previously heard things about the UFC in classes in the United States but taught with a different bias. The UCF was implemented by the United States into many Latin American countries, including Costa Rica. The U.S. was able to produce significantly more produce for less cost through this company. However, the repercussions for the Latinos was not fully considered. There have been long-term economic and environmental impacts for numerous Latin American countries.

It is rare to think of the profound impact that one person or company can have on another country. The effects of the United Fruit Company are the responsibility of not only the business itself and the governments who agreed upon the arrangement but also the people who purchase products from the UFC and continue to support that industry. This is difficult because almost everyone becomes responsible for the damage being done to the environment and people in these Latin American countries. Ideally rather than guilt, this awareness creates a desire to be conscientious of the decisions made individually and collectively.

In Costa Rica I was also shown the global impact of individuals' decisions through my family's actions. Despite environmental laws, the streets of Costa Rica were littered with waste as is often the case in developing countries. Nonetheless, I was perplexed to find that my family was particularly conscious of their environmental impacts. While I was pleased that my family cared so much, it also made me challenge my own decisions. My family had much greater immediate concerns than the health of our planet. They used more expensive but safer household products. We also had a compost site in our yard which was used for all

of our food scraps. I was inspired by the efforts of my family especially considering it seemed so few people around them cared the same way.

On the other hand, in the United States we are flooded with the resources and knowledge to take care of the planet and rarely do so. I often find people would rather throw things away than walk to a recycling bin. My family made me reconsider my own priorities and those of other people in the United States. My Costa Rican family was making personal choices that had large scale impacts. They encouraged me to do the same. Although the experience was initially baffling, I am grateful for the lesson that it taught me. I learned a great deal during my time in Costa Rica and know that I will take the experiences with me and continue to grow from them.

The expression “pura vida” or pure life is the motto of Costa Rica. I did not understand why they were so proud of their country and content with life when they had fewer opportunities and lived in much more challenging conditions. It was a humbling and beautiful moment when I realized that happiness is possible no matter what the conditions. I also came to understand that pride in a country is for the people and culture more than the opportunities that are provided. These insights helped me to reevaluate my own views on life.

The simplicity of material goods is a change that I would like to make for myself and my family for the future. In Costa Rica, the people were much more focused on each other than money or objects. This is a difficult mentality and lifestyle to achieve while surrounded by the materialism of the United States but I believe it is an important goal for me to strive for. Costa Rica taught me that being happy with the people and things that I have is a unique and powerful way to live my life. I know that there are many small physical changes that I would like to make to my life as a result of my time abroad but I think that the changes in my perspectives will be more significant long term.