

“The Mountain of Our Dreams: A Learning Experience”

Keynote Address to the Globe Med National Student Conference

April 2, 2004, Chicago, Illinois

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One of the targets for most people nowadays is to learn. To learn as much as we can. As fast as we can. To learn useful information, interesting pieces of knowledge which might someday lead us to human glory... or just to learn things nobody knows as of yet.

But most of the people also are not looking back to the tradition inherited from the Roman and the Greek, in which learning should always be in the field of the personal human quality and parts of ordinary life. Nothing more ordinary in our lives than being with ourselves and coexisting with others, I think. We have to do it every day, most of the time and yet we are missing some important pieces of knowledge in this field. Sensibility, compassion, service, compromise, leadership, friendship, tolerance and respect, generosity, solidarity and patriotism are only few of the many involved. Such values can only be learned ‘in the field’, in day-to-day ordinary life, and sometimes in unexpected ways.

From my very personal experience, I have had the privilege and the pleasure to work with indigenous communities. Since I started Medical School at *Universidad Panamericana* in Mexico City, some teachers encouraged us to volunteer on summer breaks for medical assistance programs for indigenous people in poor municipalities of the state of Guerrero, in a region called “La Montaña”. And so we did.

The contrast between the region of “La Montaña” and the rest of the country is remarkable. For most of us who were born and have lived our whole lives in Mexico, this reality should not be surprisnig, but it still is.

I suppose more than one of you have heard about Acapulco or Taxco... Both beautiful tourist destinations are in the state of Guerrero, the same state in which “La Montaña” is. And how many of you have heard about “La Montaña”? I had never heard about the place either until I started going as a volunteer. Ten years ago, a group of young university students went to Tlapa with some Mexican and foreign doctors who were told about the general needs of the region and decided to help. They didn’t have their own facilities, so they asked for a temporary permission to work in the old building of the Red Cross, which was abandoned at that time. Patients from small indigenous populations started coming, and doctors and volunteers stayed for about a month. The next year it was almost the same, but the number of patients had increased. So year after year they came back and more people knew about the doctors. A couple of local doctors and a dentist joined the team and worked throughout the year until the next summer...

That is how MAS was born. *Medicina y Asistencia Social* (www.mas.org.mx) is a NGO which works developing programs in several indigenous regions of the country, mostly in the state of Guerrero. Ever since then, specific programs have been running with amazing success in the small communities surrounding Tlapa. MAS efforts are oriented to promote a better quality of life and better health and nutritional conditions, within poor indigenous and poor inhabitants of suburban areas. The goal is to enhance solidarity, create consciousness in the society regarding the suffering of the poor, and most important of all **promoting the values of volunteering.**

One of the things we consider more important is to make sure that the help we are intending to provide will last as much as possible. This is only viable if people take active part in their own changing process. In other words, it's not only about giving material things; not only about teaching them new things... it is about a fair cultural exchange with them. In every exchange, both parts give something and they both receive something in return. As Professor Michael Pakaluk of Clark University wrote in one of his essays on the website of the North American Educational Initiatives Foundation (www.naeif.org), "We all know that one-sided charity is typically obnoxious and destructive". For the values MAS promotes, we encourage people to help the projects in some way. Some of them bring material things and others donate part of their time helping with specific tasks.

In these essays about friendship and solidarity written by Professor Pakaluk, which I

strongly recommend to you, he provides a complete analysis of the background of friendship is done in a very fine way. He points out that Aristotle explained the differences in degree of friendship, in which the third one in a sense encompasses, and surpasses while encompassing, the other kinds of friendship. It is a deeper relationship rather than remaining one that is centered solely on relaxation and amusements.

Why am I referring to this? Because in many ways the work we do with indigenous people is a real friendship relationship. I quote Professor Pakaluk again: “Such relationships place greater demands on what we give. To contribute help or money to a friend (...), is to give him something of one’s own, but not so far to give him yourself”. Not only have they received material benefits. Not only have we provided the service and the goods either. We try to be conscious of their needs but at the same time of what can make them grow as individuals and as communities. “The task of growing in perfect friendship, then, requires good judgment, to recognize when such a relationship is required or even possible; generosity; detachment from self; and, fundamentally, the ability to perceive and to take delight in, someone’s goodness, just for its own sake”.

So much can be learned from this people if we see them as our ‘other selves’. That is what solidarity is about. To put ourselves in their place and act in concordance to the needs we see, because this people are not different from us as human beings. We have all the same dignity, because we have all the same nature. The only difference is that some of us are meant to help in a way others are meant to receive it.

We all know that for many years indigenous peoples have been excluded. Excluded because they don't speak the national language and they have traditions and beliefs that explain the different way in which they work and live. These big differences should not divide, but unite the efforts to work for that people.

It is a great opportunity to learn things that we cannot learn in classrooms or reading a book. We cannot even learn that from others' experiences. It is a personal learning experience that not only lasts for the time you spend there. New shades of meaning will come across our minds every time we remember those moments. Satisfaction will come not for what we have given, but for what our friends have received. The difference is very subtle, but necessary, because only satisfaction for what friends have received, not for what we gave, will provide true happiness to our lives.

“This is the end of human life, and a necessary feature of human happiness. It is therefore the proper goal to which assistance and giving should be directed”.