No Deep Thoughts

I have less than three weeks left in Honduras, and I'm struggling to gather my thoughts. There are a lot to gather. I've seen, heard, and learned so much over the last three months that I can hardly begin to make sense of it all. I want to write all the deep thoughts I have, but I'm not ready to put them into words.

I expected to come back from Honduras a changed person. I think I was hoping that the change would be obvious, dramatic, and exciting. I didn't expect to be the same person, weighed down by a few more thoughts, struggling with a few more convictions. Turns out, it's not that easy to change.

I can see the next few months play out like a movie. I come home passionate about helping the poor and marginalized who I've met, or outraged at the injustices I feel I understand. I come out too strong against certain things. I'm a little too ignorant. A little too self-righteous.

I can see over time, how the temptation of comfort will creep up. Eating sustainably is way too hard. Taking the bus is inconvenient. I would give, only I need this money for something else. And the memories fade a little. Passions are muted. Everything goes back to the way it was.

Dear Lord, let it not be so.

Here in Honduras, justice is right in my face. We spend hours every day learning about what it means to eat justly, to shop justly, to care for the environment and elect good leaders. We’re excited about it. We’re seeing things happen right in front of our eyes. It's real.

When I go back to Michigan, I'm going to have to look for it. I'm going to have to work to get to the same level of passion. I'm not going to have professors guiding my thought processes or friends studying the exact same things. It's going to be a different sort of real. Who I am isn't going to be handed to me: I'm going to have to decide.

Right now, I'm still in the middle of what's been the most interesting and intense four months of my life. But in three weeks, that will be over. If I'm realistic about it, I know that all I'm experiencing now isn't half as important as what I do with these experiences next month, next year, and for the rest of my life.

Studying abroad will change your life. But it's not a passive thing. You don't let Honduras happen to you, you jump in and engage the culture. You ask questions. You start to form those deep thoughts.

The thing about study abroad is that it ends. But the changes don't have to. What I want to start asking now is how to keep these things real. To transfer my Honduran real life to my Michigan one. How to remember the things that are important even in a complete change of scenery.

So I don't have any deep thoughts now. I think it's going to be a while before I can form experiences into opinions and opinions into a transformed life. It's not going to happen automatically. But I'm determined to make the effort.
Now What?

A week ago yesterday I was zipping up my suitcase. I was checking that all my papers were in the right places. I was trying to decide which of my mud-splattered, hole-riddled clothes I wanted to take home with me.

“Are you nervous?” my mamá asked me, seeing me pace our courtyard, trying to collect my thoughts.

“It’s a mix of thoughts,” I told her. Our pesky dog yipped around my ankles as I dragged my bags up the stairs for the last time. After so many months, there were people back home I couldn’t wait to see. But it felt strange to be leaving so much behind.

My little sister/niece ran out and hugged my knees. I dropped my bags and she pulled at my hand, dragging me into the living room for one last game together. She was too young to know this would be the last time.

“Lay on the floor!” she told me, characteristically bossy. I obeyed and we stared up at the ceiling, our hands folded beneath our heads.

“What are we looking at?” I whispered.

“The stars,” she whispered back solemnly, and pointed. “They’re beautiful. And that’s the moon.”

At the appointed time, all ten of us students trickled into the park dragging suitcases and families behind us. We had a school bus rented for the occasion, so mamás and cousins and siblings and friends could come with us.

I tried to be sentimental as we rolled out of our city for the last time, but it didn’t feel real. We’d left so many times in the four months for a day or a week that it was hard to believe this time we didn’t have a return ticket. But I blinked and tried to memorize every little detail.

The airport was an organized sort of chaos. Somehow we made it through all the lines and baggage-checking points and emerged to find our families waiting for us. In a crowded airport, we hugged and said our last goodbyes to these beautiful people who had cooked our meals, cleaned up after us, encouraged us, and looked out for us all semester.

I hate long goodbyes. I hate crying in public. I want a clean break, and that wasn’t happening. But we made our way through the glass doors eventually and onto the airplane and we stowed our bags and heard the warm Georgian voice of our flight attendant and it was really over.

Even though I had an aisle seat, I caught a glimpse of the country growing smaller as we took off into the sky. It was the end of a chapter.

I landed safely. Collected my bags. Distributed some much-deserved bear hugs. Saw friends. Laughed. Went home. Ate too much and did too little. I am eating too much and doing too little. The page has turned and the next chapter started, but this one doesn’t seem to have much of a plot.

A week away from goodbye, I’m struck dumb by the force of the question, “Now What?”
Four months doesn’t erase your memory. Dropping the toilet paper in the toilet felt weird maybe twice. Homemade food is nice. Carpet is okay. So maybe my mom laughs at me when I accidentally point with my lips and not my fingers; so maybe I’m surprised when I sneeze in a crowded store and don’t get a single “Salud” but things aren’t as weird as I thought they were going to be.

I prepared myself for reverse culture-shock. Instead, it’s almost a letdown how ready I am for extra clothes and applesauce and hot showers. I still fit in with my family and my friends. So what’s changed, then?

I have to remind myself of why I went abroad in the first place.

Was it to feel morally superior when I came back? Was it to impress people with all my cultural knowledge, or to be considered a more interesting person?

I hope, instead, it was to go humbly into someone else’s home and see what I could learn. To better understand, globally as well as locally, who my neighbor is and what responsibilities I have to her. And even if I feel like the same sister/daughter/friend who left, I know that I have learned a lot.

So now I just have to do something with it.

After four months of helplessness – of people feeding me and guiding me and translating for me; giving me deadlines and asking me questions – it’s up to me to keep on going. The things I’ve learned have to become to things I do, and that’s a tricky process.

Now what?

In some ways, my life isn’t as exciting anymore. There won’t be volcanoes or trips across borders in my near future. But in another way, my life is just getting exciting. Anyone can have an experience, but it all depends on what you do with it. Now my life, more than ever, is in my hands.

What I’m going to do with the things I learned will fill its own chapter. I’m not going to stop asking questions and exploring ideas. I have three more semesters of college, and who knows what comes next. So stay with me! The story (I hope) is just starting to get good.