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Alvin Wang

University of Central Florida, Alvin.Wang@ucf.edu

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Dreaming About the Transformative Power of International Service-Learning

By Alvin Wang
UCF Forum columnist
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The day was spent participating in an international service-learning program with Tzotzil children. Our location was a small village outside of San Cristobal de las Casas in the southernmost Mexican state of Chiapas. This was the third year our team of UCF students would teach basic English phrases to Tzotzil children.

The Tzotzil are an indigenous Maya community who have fiercely maintained their cultural traditions dating back over 1,000 years. Their ancestors built the great city states of Palenque and Toniná during the rise of the classic period in Maya history. For many who speak Tzotzil, Spanish is their second language and for most, crushing poverty is their only existence.

Later that afternoon our group of students visited the home of 8-year old Israel. Three years earlier, Israel was diagnosed with a brain tumor that explained his lethargy and inability to keep food down. He also lost feeling in his left arm and leg. After several tests it was determined that brain surgery was required. The result of this surgery was a long white scar on the right side of his head and the loss of vision in his left eye.

In all other respects, Israel was a normal child who wanted to do kid things. But due to Tzotzil superstitions, he and his mother were ostracized from their family and community. As a result he couldn't attend school or playgroups. Israel didn't have any friends so he played by himself.

Israel lived with his mother in a rough-hewn wooden shack with an uneven dirt floor that looked no different than the ground surrounding their home. No other homes were visible from their remote location in a forest. There was no furniture. Only two makeshift beds, a shelf, and a square fire pit. The clothes that were stacked on the beds also served as their blankets. They didn't have running water and lacked a toilet or outhouse. There were no toys. When we visited, the fire pit smoldered a small fire as gray smoke leaked through the walls of their house.

The plan was for our service-learning team to work with Tzotzil children like Israel for two weeks.

As I walked through the house I had a growing sense of disquiet—a feeling of disconnection. It was my home and yet it wasn't.

Yet I found myself back home one week early. My initial reaction to returning home was a sense of peace and comfort. It always feels good coming home after a long trip. But as I walked through the house I had a growing sense of disquiet—a feeling of disconnection. It was my home and yet it wasn't.

I first noticed that a home improvement project that I hadn't completed before leaving was now finished. I peered around the corner of the living room and saw furniture that I had never seen before. Household objects were in places where they shouldn't be. And there was that large square hole in the back of the fireplace that didn't make any sense.

When I questioned my wife about these strange occurrences she stared at me with a puzzled expression. "You seem different" she remarked. "Somehow you seem out of place."

It was then that I started to question my existence in these surroundings. I wandered through the house. Was this really my home? Was I standing in my living room or was I dreaming?

My teenage daughter was watching me quietly from the doorway. I approached her and asked her to stand in front of me. She looked puzzled and gently asked “What for? Dad, is something wrong?”

“I need you to stand in front of me. So I can look into your eyes”

“Why?”

I took a deep breath. “Because if I look into your eyes I can tell if this is a dream or not. I need grounding and you can help me. There are things I don’t understand. I need to know that this place is real and not a dream—that I am real and standing before you.”

We stood face to face and gazed at each other. A warmth came over me.

I was not dreaming. I was at home with my daughter and wife. So this isn’t a dream. I started to relax. Maybe things will be all right. Until...

I woke...in San Cristobal de las Casas.

It took a few moments for me to adjust to the new reality. I was lying in a hotel bed. The blankets were pushed aside onto the floor. My home was a thousand miles away. I was still in Mexico. Israel was real. We had visited his home the day before. I saw the scar on the side of his head. The plight of the Tzotzil and oppressed peoples continues to be a historic struggle for indigenous rights and identity. My new reality slowly came into focus.

Working on service-learning projects with marginalized peoples like the Tzotzil can be transformative. It not only informs you about their proud heritage, but also their perseverance when confronting centuries of social, economic and political oppression.

And if you’re lucky you may also learn something about yourself and how the experience changes you.

I know this because I had a dream in San Cristobal de las Casas.

Alvin Wang resumed his role as a professor in the University of Central Florida’s Department of Psychology this year after serving 11 years as dean of the Burnett Honors College. He can be reached at Alvin.Wang@ucf.edu.