



STEADFAST FREEDOM YOGA

September 4, 2004, 26 Years Old – One Year in Peace Corps: La Grama, Peru

It just occurred to me recently that most of my friends have so little teeth I can count them on one hand. Their glowing smiles radiate joy and I quickly forget that our cultures are worlds apart. For example, barely anyone I know here has a bathroom, sink, or shower. Every time I go to any sort of meal with the villagers, people are elbow deep in fried Guinea Pig. When I shake hands with my friends, I don't even notice anymore the various animal feces incrusting on their hands and arms after returning from working with their animals.

My neighbors are four dirty sheep, two loud but friendly donkeys, wild chickens, an oversized black mother pig with seven babies, a malnourished horse, and a large number of goats, all of whom I enjoy chatting with in the late afternoons. In a recent conversation with the governor of my town concerning the fact that we have running water only one hour daily about six days a week, he asked me what I studied in university. I explained my degree is in Computer Information Systems and with that response his face lit up with a grin as he inquired if I could design a system to make it rain more in La Grama. The question seemed quite normal to me as each and every day I am asked preposterous questions. At times, I feel so disconnected from North American life, and in fact, I am.

The main form of communication to the outside world here in La Grama is the one radio station and two television stations, both of which have information only pertaining to the surrounding areas here in Peru. It is hard to believe over a year of intentional living here in La Grama Peru has passed so rapidly, pleasantly, and peacefully and all of the above examples constitute what is defined as my life in La Grama Peru, a small Andean community located along the banks of the Rio Cajamarquino nestled in the gorgeous, wide Condebabma Valley.

Often people ask me why I am having the most incredible wonderfully blissful experience living here in Peru. The answer is not simple to express, but I will make an attempt to explain.

First of all, speaking Spanish is fun. I am finally able to communicate and articulate in this splendid language. Second of all, my richest and most fulfilling experiences lie in relationships. When people have time, and believe me here the people have all the time

in the universe, there is intentional conversations, the fruit of which is developed in intercultural relationships.

My mind is constantly active and creative here. I intuitively sense the immensity and underlying oneness of all life because I am connected and grounded through my bare feet and open heart to the raw earth. I flourish in serene surroundings and periods of quiet and solitude are vital for my emotional balance and well being. I recognize that feelings, intuition, and my heart are the best tools to guide me to inner peace, and a typical logical approach towards life seems irrational to me. This heart based thinking does not change the fact that my sun is in Gemini and my moon is in Virgo, laying the foundation for me to think and reason with both my heart and cranium.

Here in La Grama, I spend everyday outside suffused wholly in nature leading my mind to feel bright, attentive, playful, curious, and flexible. My curiosity regarding the deeper joys of life is inexhaustible. Self-sustaining agriculture allows me to cultivate food energy or Prana that fills my body with the breath of the earth. My experience here is teaching me patience, including how to be a gentler human being and less of a perfectionist with others and myself. Two essential ingredients that formulate this magical journey are the immense personal and professional growth that takes place when one is removed from his comfort zone. Daily I try to confront obstacles stoically. I am community spirited and my life here is based around relating and communicating as a local villager both effectively and harmoniously. My appreciation for the rich Peruvian culture and other cultures around the world will unquestionably lead me on a path to preserve and support the cultural heritage of all ethnic groups, and this international immersion is certainly a great stepping stone. I am growing in a way that is productive and proactive. **My daily Anusara yoga and meditation practice keeps me grounded and challenges me to constantly increase my inner and outer strength. The bottom line is I LOVE LIFE!**

Over a year ago, when I arrived in Peru, I was informed that my primary project would be in partnership with the non-profit organization CARE, working on sustainable food security networks to reduce the rate of chronic malnutrition in children, increase the income, monetary and non-monetary, of families, and reduce the prevalence of diarrhea. My small component in this endeavor was to support farmers in their process to facilitate the access of their products to the market by strengthening of organizations and associations. Peace Corps wanted me to conduct training sessions for farmers in organizational development, marketing, feasibility studies, business planning, communication, and quality control as well as assist farmers and small business in income and financial management. My job description went even as far as to say that I will conduct business-consulting activities such as developing business plans, creating marketing strategies and developing management skills. HAH! What a joke.

I can't even believe that when I arrived in La Grama I thought any of that western minded gibberish would be slightly possible to achieve in a remote third world country village where the people don't have a clue as to the definition of any of the above mentioned words. My first month I was a bit discouraged and asked myself, "What can I,

a gringo from New York, possibly have to offer anyone here?” The obvious answer was an interchange of cultures and ideas, but this work was not enough to satisfy me. The location of my village is a blessing because we live in an Andean mountain valley microclimate where the temperature is 85 degrees and sunny all year round. I decided to try to think like a rural Peruvian farmer and I came up with the idea of community Biointensive Organic Vegetable gardens. With community gardens, I would be achieving part of my Peace Corps job description of reducing the rate of chronic malnutrition in children, along with fulfilling a practical need that the community had for learning to eat healthy food and experimenting with innovative ways to grow life.

A year has passed and I am now fully integrated into my community. My garden projects are a smashing success, and in my personal garden this year I have planted and harvested a ton of organic goodies including:

Herbs: Basil, Rosemary, Oregano, Dill, Lemongrass, Chamomile, Peppermint, Spearmint, Sage, Thai and Peruvian Basil.

Flowers: 12 foot tall sunflowers, Wildflowers, Meadow Grass, Loofah Sponges, Celosias, Chrysanthemums, African Marigolds, Nigellas, Morning Glories, and Zinnias.

Veggies: Purple Mountain Spinach, Beets, Mesclun Spicy Salad Mix, three types of Broccoli, Green Spinach, Red Orange Yellow and Green Sweet Peppers, Italian Pink Bi Color Eggplant, Japanese Pickling Eggplant, Pumpkins, Zucchini, Soy Beans, Cucumbers, Carrots of all shapes and sizes, Radishes, and six varieties of Tomatoes.

Fruits: Bananas, Papayas, Mangos, Avocados, Oranges, Limes, Sour sop, Passion fruit, Guava, Sugar Cane, and four types of other tropical fruits I could not even begin to spell.

This year I have also had the opportunity to do some traveling within this astounding vast country. I have explored many different parts of Peru including:

Cajamarca, famous as the site where Pizarro captured and imprisoned the Inca Atahualpa, also the wildest place to celebrate Carnaval in Peru.

Trujillo, a costal town where Marinera dancers and nice beaches make a cool vacation spot

Cusco, the famous Inca capital

Machu Picchu, the breathtaking Lost City of the Incas

Arequipa, a gorgeous city framed by smothering volcanoes

Lima, the capital city where I can buy stuff and even eat Indian food

Pisco, part of Peru’s desert coast where there are boats to explore islands laden with wildlife

Ica, an oasis city is famous for its wines and surrounding sand dunes

Nazca, where the famous huge mysterious ancient drawings on the desert floor depict animals and geometric shapes that can only be seen from the air

Chincha, the home of Afro Peruvian music and people!

Cordillera Blanca, mountains galore with over 50 snowcapped peaks rising to 5700m.

Next destination: The Amazon Jungle!

The highlight of this year in Peru was the three weeks my mom visited from New York. Traveling with her was an absolute pleasure as she fully opened up to the new and often times crazy experience of life in Peru. Her visit to my remote village was amazing as the

people embraced her with unconditional love and kindness. They treated her as a queen, which included having her march with the Peruvian flag during a parade, after which she sat up on stage with the Mayor, Governor, and other esteemed officials. She had a glowing smile every moment of each day and our time together will be a memory that I will hold forever dear in my heart. All of my family is entirely supportive of my journey here and they give me unconditional love always, allowing me to blossom and radiate this love to others.

I give thanks for Life!
I give thanks for the people of the world!
I give thanks for the miracle of Love!
Cherishing the tranquility of each day
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OM Peace Peace Peace