

Christ and Conflicts: An Engaging Bolivian Anecdote

by John Chamoun



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Every good story must endure conflict. Serving on the mission field is like a story that accentuates tribulations while promoting Christ's love to those in need. As missionaries, we should almost expect that our accomplishments and accolades likely will not come without the difficulties and failures that can accompany great successes. Michael Jordan once said, "I've failed over and over and over again in my life and that is why I succeeded."

Success, whether it is found on the mission field, or even in our monotonous daily routines, will hinge on our personal level of commitment and persistence. Sometimes we may become reluctant to accept these sacrifices, but Christ clearly calls us to do so. Philippians 2:17 tells us,

"Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all." Our mission team's story is one of sacrifice, but through our struggles we were able to implant Christ's compassion in the quintessence of a rural South American city.

Palm Beach Atlantic University, Lloyd L. Gregory School of Pharmacy (GSOP) conducts yearly mission trips to various countries during the early summer. Costa Rica, Honduras, Uganda, Bolivia, and Belle Glade, FL were on the selection list this year. Each trip consists of students and faculty who bring medication and willing, evangelistic hearts to impoverished people in need of physical and spiritual mending. Clinics are often established in areas that feel the sting of poverty the most. The exposition and setting of our particular story took place in the beautiful region of Cochabamba, Bolivia, where the mountains are copious and the locals are magnanimous. Cochabamba is often called "City of Eternal Springs" by the locals due to its year-round, spring-like temperature. Though it may

be abundant in beautiful scenery and kindhearted people, the threat of poor sanitation and health was well represented during our travels. Our clinics opened up a clear window that allowed us see the true realization of how blessed many of us are. In the United States, we often feel the need to conjure our own stresses because our lifestyle is such that prevents us from experiencing the true agony that many parts of the world deal with on a daily basis. For example, in Cochabamba clean water is considered to be "gold" due to the tight and costly regulations mandated by the Bolivian government. Many people end up drinking polluted water and contract parasites and other infections because they cannot afford proper drinkable water. In contrast, many Americans get upset about sometimes petty circumstances, such as becoming angered and frustrated when we cannot access the Internet for an entire day. Placing ourselves in the right perspective and mindset will allow us to shake the scales from our eyes that have blinded us toward excessive living. It will allow us to gain invaluable appreciation, allowing us to serve those less fortunate.

Much like a well-told story, character development in the mission field is crucial to the plot and ultimately the resolution of conflict. Though our school and its members disperse to different parts of the world, we make sure to

encourage and pray for one another during our mission; it's essentially a tightly knit family. Students will often tell you of the special bonds forged on these trips. Whether you knew everyone on the trip prior to departure or if you didn't know anyone at all, the end result will likely be that you experienced growth and maturation in your relationships. Even our treated patients were a testament to what Christian servant hood is about; loving others unconditionally. It might take us some time to come to grips with this realization. After all, we are sinful and broken beings at best. Do we really want to be rid of darkness? Our mistake in the garden has extensively twisted our world, and we find our environment aesthetically pleasing. We think ourselves better artists than God. I argue that we like it dark, or worse, gray. We'll entertain the notion of letting light in, but only in certain places. If we didn't, we would pray more. I don't think we're content with what we see every day; God blesses us with new breath and a roof over our heads each morning, but we moan and curse over spilled coffee or heavy traffic on the way to work. Why is it that we let the small things in life boggle our emotions the most? And I know we've got it in us to do something about it if we notice that something isn't right; there is so much more to this enriched life than being upset over simple stumbling blocks in our life's journey. This is the basis for why mission trips are typically undertaken. We see a problem that people do not know Christ and are suffering, and we attempt to amend our sinful mistake in the garden by accepting God's call to evangelism.

Perhaps the most interesting part of any story is the conflict. This is where we expect to see change or a movement to resolve a particular issue or hindrance. Our natural inclination is that for a story to be exciting and riveting there must be a source of conflict that will potentially be resolved. The Bolivian people know quite a bit about sacrifice and conflict themselves. Conflicts involving the Bolivian Workers' Central (COB) is common in Bolivia. The COB is the main workers' union in the country. They often lead strikes and roadblocks in protest against the government for increased benefits. In their most recent strike, the COB is fighting for increased pension even though the country's president said there is no more room for negotiation. The difference in opinions creates struggles that results in several strikes against this notion. Our mission team experienced these roadblocks and protests firsthand as we noticed trees uprooted and heaved into crossroads during ventures to and from our destinations. We often contemplated the idea of withholding some of our clinics due to the fear of impending protests around our area. However, the crisis in Bolivia was not the only source of conflict in our story; many team members became ill throughout the trip. Satan

was well at work in disrupting our spirited efforts. Not only were we being assaulted on the physical front, but our medication supply was also under duress. We seemed to rapidly run out of certain medications at times when overwhelming amounts of people in the clinics clearly were in need of them. As one can imagine, this scenario was untimely and frustrating for us. However, in the face of all this adversity, we took heart and persisted with our trip. There was no paradigm shift that would lodge us off our course.

The climax of a good story comes when the plot changes and conflict starts to be resolved. As our mission trip headed for the finale, the impact we had in Cochabamba became more and more evident. Despite all the literal and figurative obstacles and trials we had endured, our resolve had eventually blossomed into several patients receiving treatment. At the conclusion of our clinics, we had seen over 200 patients and provided fertility beads to the local gynecologist, who found this courtesy to be quite serendipitous as it would provide her future patients with much needed discernment. In addition, we were fortunate enough to visit a local boys' orphanage that not only allowed us to play with the children, but also gave us an opportunity to provide them with personal toys and medication. One boy had unfortunately broken his ankle prior to our arrival at the orphanage, so we arranged for him to be sent to Hospital of Hope with his medical expenses fully paid. Sometimes it is easy to forget about the struggles and conflicts that we endure in order to get to our happy ending. Once you are able to live a good story, you will get a taste for how life is meant to play out. It's meant to be filled with struggles that refine us into better characters. And once we are transformed by such events, our desire to return to our former selves who hold selfish ambitions will be forever altered.

It's also important to note that when some of us think of sharing Christ's love with people, our minds immediately go overseas. Your backyard is just as dense as that remote jungle. The crumbling architecture of people's hearts, not their cities, is what takes priority. Sometimes to broaden your horizons, you need to localize your range. As Christian pharmacists we should realize that when we are traversing through the land of conflict, God will give us the necessary stamina to endure hardships. Isaiah 41:10 (ESV) says, "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Whether it's dealing with a difficult patient here in the United States or traveling halfway around the world to share the story of Christ, our sacrifices will give us strength and stability in our Christian walk.