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THE RAT BENEATH THE BED

When he takes students to the missions, he always remembers his own early experience, when a tiny creature taught him to keep things in perspective.

BY JOHN J. McLAUGHLIN

“Why should we travel far away to do service when there’s so much need right here at home?”

I’ve heard this question every year for nearly two decades, from parents and pastors concerned about sending their student volunteers with me to the Dominican Republic for a faith-based immersion experience. I’ve heard it from students, too, as they try to talk themselves into (or out of) this challenge.

Many times I’ll respond reasonably, with some to-the-point statements about global solidarity and long-term personal growth. I’ll ask them to consider that, because an international experience can invite a

volunteer far beyond her or his comfort zone through a different language, climate, diet, and culture, it can plant the seeds of deeper transformation. And I’ll note that, really, the question poses a false choice: Why not do both, since in God’s eyes home is everywhere? Jesus and Paul, for example, sometimes ministered in places that necessitated days of travel by foot, animal, or boat. In fact, when asked directly, “Who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:29), Jesus taught the parable of the good Samaritan, illustrating that foreigners are as capable of giving God’s love—and receiving it—as locals are.

If my questioner is still unconvinced, I’ll ask if I can tell a story.

Gnawing in the Night

Nearly 20 years ago, during my first night in a rural community in the Dominican Republic, I was awakened by a gnawing, sawing sound somewhere in the room where I slept.

I switched on my flashlight. I was the guest of a very humble coffee-farming family in Cacique—a community without electricity, plumbing, or English. Since at that time I knew little Spanish, the flashlight represented my only adequate preparation. I swept its beam around the room, and the sound stopped; I switched it off, and it began again. This time, I understood what was making the sound, now coming from beneath my bed.

Let’s just say this was not a pleasant, or even a neutral, realization. If you are one of those people who likes rats, or can even tolerate the thought of them, well, congratulations. I despise them.

Naively, I believed it was trying to chew through the mattress, rather than merely sharpening its teeth on the foot of the bed, as it was actually doing. So I prepared for battle.

My best weapons were my boots, but they were in the opposite corner of the room, and I was too fainthearted to get them. My sandals, on the floor within reach, presented the next best option. I slowly extended my hand from beneath the mosquito net, then jerked one up like pulling a trout from a stream, before the rat—foul creature—could attack.

The rat, unaware that I was now armed, continued its gnawing. I slapped the mattress with the sandal, and it scurried off, only to return minutes later. I switched on the flashlight again, but this time the rat just kept gnawing, perhaps grateful now for the illumination.

This went on for an hour or so—slap, scurry, return—until I admitted defeat. I put away the flashlight and tried praying, breathing, whatever might calm me. Eventually, the rat moved on. But I kept my sandal close, just in case.

Language and Laughter

I found myself in that room because, frankly, some plans had fallen through. I had just finished graduate school in creative writing, and my dreams of immediately landing a book contract or a college teaching job had proven unrealistic. Feeling unmoored, I took a job with a Jesuit university’s semester

abroad program in the Dominican Republic, ostensibly for noble purposes—service! justice! solidarity!—but also to distance myself from my failures. As an introvert who’d never been to Latin America or studied Spanish, I found the country’s noise and chaos overwhelming, and I spent the first few weeks largely frustrated and humiliated, bumbling my way through conversations, sometimes even faking comprehension—“Oh, *¡sí, sí!*”—simply because I was tired of asking people to repeat themselves. I felt like a little boy, learning to talk all over again.

I’d had a great plan for this weekend: I would stay with a gregarious Dominican family, accompanied by my bilingual mentor, who could translate when I needed help. But I was asked to stay with a very shy family, alone. When I arrived at their tiny clapboard home, it was past dark. The two youngest daughters, 7 and 9 years old, simply stared. The mother, María, tried to engage me, but I couldn’t understand her, and her repetitions got faster and louder until she dismissed me with a disappointed wave, returning to her plantains boiling over the fire. I might have put on a good face, but in the weak glow of that family’s oil lamp, I was far outside my comfort zone. I went to sleep regretting I’d come to this house, even to this country. The rat beneath the bed seemed yet further confirmation I didn’t belong.

In the morning, the family’s father, Edilio, greeted me with great concern. “*Juan, ¿qué pasó anoche?*” What happened last night?

I’d hoped that the family had slept through the slap-scurry racket. But, given their home’s eighth-inch-plywood interior walls, I should have known I wouldn’t escape a reckoning.

“*Una rata,*” I began, reaching for the pocket dictionary that was not in my pocket. But I’d already looked fruitlessly for *gnaw*, *chew*, and *chomp*. *Eat* was as close as I could get.

I told Edilio, in Spanish, “Last night . . . I hear rat . . . eat . . . close . . . my bed.” By this point his four children, amused by my Spanish, had gathered around to listen. Swallowing my pride, I said that I’d been afraid. Then I paused, intending to say that the rat kept gnawing away no matter what I did.

“*La rata . . .*,” I trailed off, and in frustration simply bared my teeth and chomped rapidly several



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The author (back left) stands with his *papá dominicano* and the Rodriguez family in Cacique, Dominican Republic.

INSET PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHN J. MCLAUGHLIN



Laughter trumped the language barrier between the author and siblings Estefani and Mariela.



María and Edilio flank daughters Marilyn and Mariela at their home in September 1997.

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times. The children cracked up, and Edilio covered his laugh.

I hadn't meant to be funny, just accurate, but now a new door had opened.

"¡Otra vez, Juan, otra vez!" The kids told me to do it again, then called their mother to come and watch.

María's face soured as she approached, as if at some insipid food. She stood next to Edilio, crossed her arms, and said in Spanish, "Let's see."

I paused, wondering: *Is this what I'm here for? Is this how I'm going to serve the poor?* When I'd worked with the homeless in the United States, I'd brought some relevant professional skills to the task. But now, what—I'll play the clown?

Against my better judgment, I chomped away, with even more vigor, then made claws with my hands and play-swiped at María. She started, then chortled, and Edilio and the kids cracked up again.

The boy, Esteban, looked at me excitedly. "Juan, what other animals do you know? How about a rooster?" he asked in Spanish.

I did the rooster, adding a strut and some chest thumps. I became a cow, then a sheep, then a wolf that ate them both. Esteban got the fever, and did an excellent dogfight bit, and the girls chimed in with meows and a donkey's bray. Edilio and María wouldn't take turns, but they couldn't stop laughing, either.

Connecting through Vulnerability

I usually pause the story there. As you can see, I wasn't doing anything useful or productive; I wasn't making a difference in this family's life as much as burdening them (and maybe providing someone to laugh at)—criticisms that are often leveled, fairly, at some international service experiences for US youths and adults. I've leveled them myself over the years, having witnessed this too many times: well-meaning groups arriving with inadequate preparation, jumping into make-work projects that put *their* experience at the center and leave the supposed beneficiaries in a subservient position, even on the sidelines.

At the same time, we must be careful not to make productivity our primary goal. Yes, projects must be useful, but an essential element of that utility resides in the degree to which they emerge from, and are done collaboratively with, the beneficiaries, rather than imposed or done for them. Relationship—a genuine, human encounter with a person, not an issue or a statistic—must be the heart and foundation of faith-based service if it hopes to be truly transformational.

And we must build this foundation carefully, by creating a context of mutual vulnerability, an experience of childlike dependency and openness for everyone involved, not only the poor. Otherwise, we have only the powerful serving the weak. That has

value—we *do* need to feed the hungry—but in the long term, nothing will change. With mutual vulnerability, we upend traditional notions of server and served: everyone who embraces his or her vulnerability, in whatever form, offers another person a chance to be generous. And that can change everything.

In a service setting, vulnerability is not the same as danger, nor does danger equate to lack of comfort. Physical risks must be minimized to maximize spiritual risks. But safe discomforts—rickety buses, cold showers, the occasional spider or rodent—are welcome (in theory, at least) to increase vulnerability. In fact, the more, the better. That's the chief advantage most international service experiences possess.

Lessons Learned

To my surprise, that afternoon the children invited me to play with them again, and at the end of the weekend the family invited me to return. I did, often, riding up in a bus or motorcycle taxi from the city of Santiago, where I lived. For a while, as I struggled to become more fluent, to avoid getting cheated by the moto-taxi drivers, and to recover from the various illnesses I contracted, the family took care of me, as if I were another son. It was clear that all I could offer was my presence, so I let go of the hope of being of service, of possessing some power to help. Two years later I'd built enough trust to invite the first US service group to visit, and

for the past 18 years others have followed, to stay in the homes of Dominican families and collaborate on projects that community leaders have identified, designed, and blessed. To serve and be served; to change and be changed.

Service values relationship over results. It asks us to surrender, to give up control, and to act not upon favorable odds, but upon our convictions—even against great odds—while leaving room for God to make a way out of no way.

Jesus taught that children are first in the kingdom. Letting go of the need to be a savvy, in-control adult allowed me to become more open, dependent, and childlike—more (not less) of my true self. The Dominican family's obvious vulnerabilities—living in poverty, at the mercies of nature and the coffee market—forced me to accept my own; and our mutual vulnerability began to bind us as friends, even family. I still refer to Edilio as *mi papá dominicano* (my Dominican dad).

Vulnerability offers the opportunity to be broken and healed by love, a love that binds us to God and others. We don't know what kind of men the good Samaritan and the robbers' victim were before they encountered each other in their mutual poverty: the one a despised foreigner, the other a naked wretch beaten nearly to death. Perhaps they harbored deep prejudices about the others in their respective lives. But vulnerability created the opportunity for compassion, which transformed them both. The grain of wheat, to produce fruit, must be broken open.

Though I didn't know it at the time, the rat's gnawing had been my wake-up call, my breaking open: an invitation to surrender control, humble myself like a child, and be open to relationship. That's the invitation to all called to service—to hear, in that midnight gnawing, sawing sound beneath the bed, the still, small voice of God. A

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