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Climate Policy and Adaptation

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Is Knowing Understanding?

The honking from the traffic was relentless. My eyes were closed in half sleep, but I knew that people were blasting horns in vain. We weren't moving. The humidity of the AC in the car splashed my face, as if recycling the hot air from outside. I heard a tapping on my window, which woke me. A boy was marketing home made items, the same ones that the other boys in front of him and behind him were selling. It took me a moment to realize that I was not on some street in Barranquilla. No. I was on my way to a train taking me to New Delhi.

And so it went. Throughout my stay in India, I had constant reminders of the society into which I was born. Colombia, also a developing nation, had the same viewable stratifications. People sought shelter on sidewalks, people lived in houses where their beds were constantly made, people pleaded for food, people threw away the remainder of their dinners, people sold inexpensive amenities on the streets, people bought inexpensive services for their homes. If you subtract the density of the population and the obvious cultural differences, the equation that comprises one country looks like a reflection of the other.

As I walked around certain areas in India, where people sat awaiting money or food, I would give the water bottle I had to the person that was most accessible. This act of so-called benevolence I picked up in Colombia, where I was taught to seldom give money to

those who begged. Instead, give them food or water. In India, I continued this thought process, but was consistently overwhelmed by the amount of need. On countless occasions, I would reprimand myself thinking, *who am I to decide who needs the most water? Who am I to pity a group of people whose shoes (or lack thereof) I've never walked in?* This perpetual agony had a diagnosis, of which I tried to stray from... "The White Man/Woman's Burden."

To me, this quality is where I'm the one feeling hopeless about the viciousness of poverty or cultural oppression, when people are physically looking up; this is the quality where I have the proclivities of giving immediate help without understanding the socioeconomic setting; this quality I adopted in the States. I recall a time when I went to Colombia, I picked up my plate to take to the kitchen, and my aunt stopped me saying, "Don't worry, they are glad to be of service." My initial thought was that I did not like people encroaching on my independence. My second thought pondered on what she had said. The inflection of her voice made it sound as though, she was certain that people earning 150 USD a month were "glad to be of service." *How did she know? How could she know?* I thought. And that's when I realized that the social stratification was so engrained in our society that I could never truly know if they were "glad to be of service." The confusion left me with one elucidation: empathy can be reached through careful observation and questioning of a predicament, not an assumption of a predicament. Empathy can be reached when you know how something feels. Not an easy feat, but one worth working towards.

From time to time, I felt the same way when I was in India. I felt that it was unfair for me to criticize situations I did not understand. This sentiment of sympathy that I acquired is comparable to the way many look at Muslim women, who are probably beaming with cultural pride under a burka. Or the way a Westerner might criticize a stringent Chinese family, who glows with ecstasy as their child masters a skill. Or the way people pity others who tangibly have nothing, but emotionally have everything.

Throughout the entirety of my trip I constantly questioned whether I had the right to subjectively discuss inequality. Am I going to change the world by simply thinking to myself that others are at a constant disadvantage? No. But I can make an incremental difference by vocalizing the fact that empathy is the true key to dismembering these “inequalities” we so condemn. I am by no means saying that the world does not deliver cruelties and privileges to those underserved. But, if we start to think of these differences as beautiful factions that help humans learn from one another, these stratifications can be partially dissolved. As I write, I recognize that I might have oversimplified the way I feel about socioeconomic inequities and magnanimity. I know that a solution to the plague of poverty is more than emotional understanding. However, I believe that as I continue meeting people from all social backgrounds, I must personally take the time to sit there and entertain a dialogue before I censure or claim to know.

