

Icy Showers

A reflection on my time in Lima, Perú

The faucet handle creaked as I pulled the rusted lever around, and slowly a trickle of cloudy brown spurting into an unsteady shower of clear, cold water. I let my hand play through the stream and goose bumps rose on my arms. *Gosh, it's freezing.* I looked down at my bare legs crusted with dust from the street. I squeezed my eyes shut, took a deep breath, and stepped in.

What brought me to that icy shower in a tiny cement stall in Perú, over six thousand kilometers from home, is a story I am still coming to understand, but one for which I am immensely grateful. It began after being forced to leave distance running, unable to extract my sport from the ongoing cycles of disordered eating it incited. After reaching my lowest point and walking away, I finally paused to reflect for the first time in years and thought critically about my values and purpose. I considered seriously my weaknesses, and in learning to acknowledge them rather than fighting to hide them, I gained a tool to connect with those around me who struggled in similar ways. My own recovery is not a story of overcoming my setbacks and failures so much as a realization that those lows allow me to empathize with the suffering of others and to fight with conviction for the right of all human beings to health, both physical and mental.

I came to understand my own experience with mental health better as I began studying the anthropology of global health and illness. I realized that in the same way my eating disorder had prevented my own self-reflection, mental illness acts as a barrier to pursuing meaningful questions for people around the world. Regardless of culture, social structure, status, or physiology, mental illness impairs people's ability to live fully. I recognized the advantages I was privileged with in my own recovery — having a vocabulary, even, to describe the psychology behind my behavior — and I wanted to pay those forward. This led me to a defining period of my college career; in the winter of my junior year, I traveled to Lima, Perú and volunteered for ten weeks with *Socios en Salud* on their mental health team. My time there refined my vision of a future in healthcare, intensifying my emerging hope for a career path in global mental health.

I was involved in all components of the mental health team's activities, and I learned constantly through the exposure to mental health care and inner workings of an international charity. Slowly, a vision for my future emerged as the two intellectual halves of myself wrestled with one another. The drugs we were delivering would not have been available without modern biomedicine, but the scientist-researcher within me inwardly groaned as I calculated the resources and manpower necessary for every patient. Simultaneously, the anthropologist in me recognized the community never would have trusted or accepted treatment from *Socios en Salud* without the cultural understanding and rapport that had been established over time. As I advocated for homeless shelters to accept those with mental illness, however, I fumed at the laid-back pace of work, characteristic of the culture, preventing progress. Each intellectual and experiential stage of my life facilitated necessary understanding and allowed me to continuously grow.

Each day began with an icy shower — not just a discomfort but also a metaphor for the way Peru taught me to live. Warm showers are comfortable and easy; for many of us, they are part of a routine we take for granted. Examining the world around me through the lens of anthropology, I began to see how, as a society, we are so easily lulled into complacency, allowing ourselves to be pacified into remaining safely in the careers, goals, and relationships

that have become routine. We forget to expose ourselves to the world's injustices or our intellectual superiors, instead allowing our consciences and egos to remain appeased. We forget to question why because it all feels safe...familiar. In a culture orbiting around achievement, the possibility of failure paralyzes us. We become risk-averse and would not dream of giving up what we have established, worked hard for even, to take a chance on ourselves. In my case, running trapped me with its promises of success, holding me back from ever searching myself for what I truly cared about.

But oh, the beauty of cold showers — of fingers of ice tracing down my shoulder blades and ripping me out of my comfort zone — of being thrown into a situation and forced to react, learn, stretch, grow — of pushing to the edge of breaking, collapsing into bed at night and awakening to find that the edge has moved even further. And eventually, the discomfort becomes normalized, even revered. Each day I feel myself growing stronger than the last, and I relish that feeling. Like an athlete in training, I learn to embrace the discomfort as I see how the sport shapes my body and competitive mind; I know that the soreness in my muscles means a self that is better prepared to face tomorrow, whatever it might bring. It is in these experiences that our souls are refined. Everyday, global mental health in Perú was a literal and metaphorical cold shower.

Yes, days still came when I longed for the warm water of routine: days when the exhaustion made the failures and frustrations feel overwhelming, when I felt so fed up with shivering that I would have rather kept the dirt on my feet. But I would grit my teeth and do it anyway. And eventually, I came to see how it changed me: how it strengthened my resolve, ignited my conscious, and brought everything into razor sharp focus. I now search for opportunities to challenge myself each day — forcing myself to break out of a routine of comfort or complacency — and find myself more acutely alive than ever before.