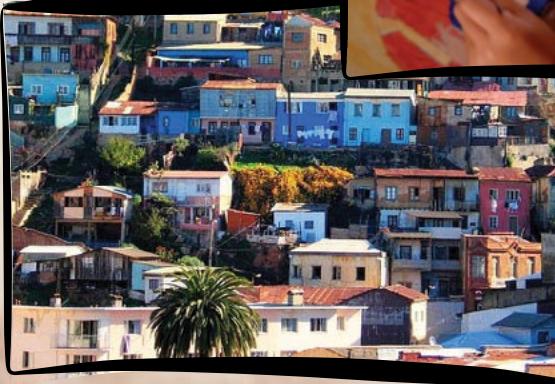


21. CHILE VALPARAÍSO



In 2006, I spent the winter in Chile, in the coastal city of Valparaíso, where during the months of December and January is a wonderful summer! I was there on a study-abroad program with a group of American students from Furman University (South Carolina, USA), where at that time I was completing my bachelor's degree, and in Valparaíso I was a teaching assistant for a course on community wellbeing. Beside the academic work, I was curious to explore different community development projects and get involved to help.

Valparaíso is a unique, truly gorgeous city spread across a few steep hills, called *cerro*, which dive into the ocean and each has its own cable car taking people up and down the hill. The hills are carved by steep, narrow, cobble-stoned streets and brightly colored houses of all sizes and mixed architectural styles, which European migrants coming to Valparaíso brought over the centuries – Spanish, German, Italian.

As I was roaming the enchanting nooks and crannies of Valparaíso, I reached the low-income neighborhood of Cerro Cordillera. And there I stumbled across an amazing place that seemed like coming out of a fairy tale, as if I were Alice in Wonderland! At the end of a row of poor, shabby houses, in front of me loomed a gorgeous amphitheater, with steps painted in all the colors of the rainbow, and decorated all around with mosaics and murals amidst lush orchards with ripe-fruit trees!

After the first minutes of mouth-opened amazement, I started asking around how that place had gotten to be here. And my amazement grew even more when I learned that previously this whole area was... a garbage dump!!! Trash by trash, as the people from the area – due to lack of education and poverty - kept throwing their trash into an open area in-between the houses, the ravine became so filled that the only thing that could remind people of its previous state was the rooftop of an abandoned house, which seemed to be floating atop the huge piles of rubbish!

One day, however, the change for this forgotten place was catalyzed by social worker Patricia Castillo, who inspired the community to transform their hillside and their social reality by creating a place of beauty and arts – a haven for the local children and all generations. She created the local organization Taller de Acción Comunitaria (TAC), the Community Action Workshop, which is still an exemplary case of an organization completely staffed by volunteers, who contribute their own talents and resources or raise funds for workshops in visual and performance arts, ecology, and local history.

A few blocks away from TAC's amphitheater on Cerro Cordillera, I discovered a Catholic shelter for girls, who had been abandoned or escaped from their families because of physical abuse. I wanted to be able to spend more time with the girls, and I offered to volunteer to teach them my favorite hobby: icon-painting (Christian images of Christ, the Mother of God, and other saints). While painting together, we talked about the

meaning of life, about their hopes for the future and the tragedy from their past, and all of us felt transformed after each time we shared paints, desks, and dreams together! Upon leaving Valparaíso, with a few other students and professors from Furman University, we established the organization “Hills of Hope” to continue helping the girls at the shelter and to create other exchanges with students from the USA.

The third extraordinary place I discovered while roaming the streets of Valparaíso was a huge former prison, which was now turned into a vibrant cultural center, the Parque Cultural de Valparaíso! I could hardly believe my eyes, watching children play music, jump, and even fly up high during circus arts workshops in the open area surrounded by former prisoners' cells! The prison's amazing transformation witnessed to Chile's recent transformation from its tragic history: for two decades, between 1970 and 1990, the military regime of dictator Pinochet persecuted and locked and tortured in prisons

many innocent people who opposed the regime's repressions. The only ones who dared challenge the regime in public places were performance artists, who managed to activate opposition through graffiti, posters, clowning, and satirical performances – the same way now, after the fall of the regime, the artists had taken over the old prison!

And this is my hope for Chile and the world: that there will be fewer garbage dumps and prisons, and in their places - amphitheatres and cultural centers! They can inspire us, young and old, to (as said a sign written on two broken TV sets): “Turn off the TV and live your life”!



Problem(s) faced: totalitarian regime and repression, imprisonment of innocent people; lacking environmental conscience and education, due to poverty and exclusion; socio-economic inequalities; child abuse at home.

