

Hello, I'm Katy Axel for those who don't know me, I have been a member of Trinity since 2003 and I graduated from Davenport Central in 2016. I took a year off to travel and learn internationally, so I was asked to talk about my recent gap year. I was part of an organization called Thinking Beyond Borders and I travelled for 7 months with 13 other students and 3 program leaders. I travelled to 5 countries and lived and learned in local communities. We traveled to South Africa and studied Public health, India to learn about education and Ecuador to engage in sustainable agriculture practices. We also went to Cambodia and Peru for enrichment weeks.

Last year this time I was scared to be vulnerable. I hated asking for help, crying made me cringe and conflict was a waste of time. Today all of those things are still true for me, but through the experiences I had on my gap year I am learning to understand how necessary vulnerability is to fostering genuine human connection. And how vulnerability is the first step to breaking the societal and cultural and economic and geographic barriers shielding each of us from those who are different. I learned to be most vulnerable through the simple act of hospitality because I was fortunate to be able to stay with many different host families during my trip.

I will always have a deep love for all the people that guided me or fed me or taught me or pushed me through my year abroad. I learned the most from people's stories. But it was appreciative love, I'll remember you forever but I won't remember your name type of love. The families I lived with taught me about how to open up. They opened their beds and their tables and thankfully their toilets and showers to me, but they were opening up a very personal part of themselves. I saw the extent of their belongings and I learned about their jobs and I saw how they raised their kids. All things that we only like to show if they are shiny and well paying and behaved. They were real, they told me their true opinions about their countries and governments and were often times very critical. Overall it was the people that I met, no two similar to each other, that guided my experiences and cultivated my thinking around what it means to be human and how vulnerability can pull us all so much closer in order to move positively into the future.

So I'm going to give three examples of the hospitality I experienced on my gap year. The hospitality that sparked my acceptance of vulnerability. All three of these situations challenged me to question my own beliefs but ultimately strengthened the connections I had with the local people whom I was living and learning.

Our first stop on the trip was Plettenburg Bay, South Africa. It is on the very bottom tip of the African continent, nestled almost exactly on the border of the Eastern and Western Capes. I lived in Kwanokuthula Township, which is majority black, being different than colored and obviously different than white. The scars of apartheid are still shockingly present. While segregation is illegal on paper, the effects of many years of social and economic division have proven harder to reverse. While in SA, my group worked with a local Non-governmental organization called PlettAid, located in Kwanokuthula, which provides home palliative care to the surrounding township communities. I worked with a care giver, Clara and we visited many patients in their homes. For the next month I visited many people with Clara and I became increasingly comfortable in the homes and seeing people with such dire conditions. However what struck me was how consistently comfortable the people were every time I came into their homes. They all had serious conditions, often with visible signs and symptoms and they didn't have much more to

offer me than a chair, if that. But they were all willing to let me, a white, American girl they did not know, take their blood pressure and blood sugar, and they tried their best to include me in conversation and make me feel welcomed. I developed a mutual sense of connection with most patients. Despite the language barrier and the many physical, social, cultural and economic differences between us, kindness, empathy and understanding was exchanged. They all understood I was there to learn and I made it clear through my body language that I was engaged in both their personal self and the care they received. I had nothing to offer but my smile and my wide eyes and they often times had nothing to offer me but their arms and finger tips for observations but I learned so much about South Africa's public health care system through interaction with the people most affected. It strengthened my desire and passion to become a doctor in the future - but because of the openness and kindness of the people I met in South Africa, I now want to be a doctor in developing countries and help people who do not have adequate access to health care and resources.

So then went to India. We were first in Dharmasala, in northern India. There was this constant buzz of energy, even high up in the Himalayas, because there were so many people and so many noises and cows and dogs and trash everywhere, but it was colorful and it was beautiful. Everyone and everything was doing something, but no one was really interacting with each other. It was a very individualized society. In India I was exposed to four different religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Islam. Religion was one thing that, despite being extremely prevalent and very diverse between regions, did not seem to be a prominent source of conflict. I'm sure disputes occurred, but everyone we met was very open about their own religion in a manner that was never derogatory towards other religions. It was also the largest source of hospitality I received while in India. I lived with a Hindu family in Dharmasala and a Sikh family in Delhi, and both invited me to learn about their religion and wanted to learn about mine. I had more exposure to Sikhism than the other three religions, and went to a couple of Sikh services during my time in India. The main focus of Sikhism is service. We visited the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, which is the largest Sikh Temple. The temple serves food to 30,000 people a day, it is open 24 hours a day and all operations are completely run by volunteers. My group had an opportunity to volunteer at the temple. I spent an hour rolling out dough to make chapati, the traditional Indian bread. I couldn't communicate with anyone else volunteering at the station I was at, but they showed me the ropes with patience and kindness and a few giggles about how I couldn't roll the dough into a perfect circle as they could. It was refreshing to be immersed in a culture I was unfamiliar with, learning about a religion I had barely heard of before the trip and to be accepted, not questioned, not pressured, and not asked to convert. It was rewarding to pick up bits and pieces about many different religions. I believe it helped me to continue shaping my own beliefs about religion and faith and instilled a message that we can't and shouldn't strive to be one thing. Religion should be unifying not dividing. There is so much to learn from each other and all of our different beliefs and traditions and values, but there is even more to learn about our similarities and what we value as humans.

Our last stop was Ecuador. We spent a few days in Quito, the capital, to recover from jet lag and then we went to Riobamba, which is just north of Quito, in the Andes mountains. We spent two weeks there and I lived with a family that reminded me a lot of my own. I spent the last month in Ecuador in a very small village called El Cabuyal, located in the Western coastal region. This was the poorest place I lived during the whole gap year and the people here could be considered

to be living in extreme poverty to some standards. The people were also Afro-Ecuadorian so they were all black descendants of the Spaniard's slaves. However during this time, my whole group agreed that we experienced the strongest sense of community. There were many kids running around and we were always included to engage in their activities, like soccer and boxing and swimming in the river, and try their foods like Cacao fruit and plantains. My group brought in money and the families had an incentive to house us, but it was still a challenge to put food on the table and to give up their beds for us to sleep in, when they would often not have enough to eat themselves and 6 or 7 people would then have to sleep in one bed. El Cabuyal is located about 15 minutes by bus from a larger town called Puerto Quito. The river running through El Cabuyal used to divide the houses in the village from the school and from easily getting to Puerto Quito. This is not an easy river to cross, you will float significantly downstream if you try to walk or swim. However, a small footbridge bridge was built 10 years ago and then the big paved road and bridge across the river was built only about 3 years ago. This is a perfect example of the challenges of development we discussed all through the program. At first thought, of course a paved street and bridge for cars and trucks to pass over the water is great development, but because of that road and bridge, Cabuyal has become just another pass through town on the bus route. No one stops there anymore because there is no reason to. Before the bridge people used to come to Cabuyal to stay and to interact with the community. So because of the effects of the bridge, the people in the village were genuinely interested in us and wanted to make us feel welcomed and comfortable because we were probably the largest, whitest and longest staying group in the village for a while. I learned so much about the people there and evidently the effects of living in poverty. My host family had very few possessions, but my host mother opened her home to anyone and often times was hosting a friend for the night because they didn't have anywhere else to go. Even though she had so little, she gave her time and her compassion to everyone who needed it. There was mindset shift, I started to learn to adopt, away from material and things and towards community and interaction and trust. Ultimately I saw that development, foreign aid, whatever you wish to call it must be focused on people. Pushing infrastructure and resources into small towns will not solve the problems. Cultivating connections between people with different ideas and promoting cooperation and compromise will be more beneficial for eradicating problems in the long run.

During the trip, in all of the moments where I could look up and all around me at a completely different and unfamiliar environment, I felt comfortable and I was never scared. I bungee jumped off a very tall bridge, basically ran off of it for that matter, I brushed off palm sized spiders crawling under the mosquito net in my bed, I thought of being sick as a chance for me to get to experience different countries health care systems, I struggled my way through speaking only Spanish and I was a minority in most communities I lived in. However, all of the people I met were supportive and engaged along the way. I was welcomed, I was hugged, I was given gifts and kisses and too much food and treated as royalty to each person's cultural standard. I'm not saying, as Americans, we wouldn't offer that kind of hospitality to our guests, but the important question is who are our guests? Who are we inviting into our homes and into our communities? Are we playing our part in fostering cultural exchange, to promote cultural understanding - a crucial first step in changing the way with think about other's identities. So what was scary was coming home. Coming home to my privileged life in my homogenous society where it is honestly hard to muster up the courage to talk to someone different. I struggled with the ideas of societal norms. I had gained weight, but I felt that I had to lose it because society has trained my

brain to think idealistic beauty is skinny. I broke up with my boyfriend, not because I didn't like him as a person but because I didn't need to force a relationship where we were going in different directions. I felt like the same person, but I had very different ideas and messages about myself and the world I wanted to announce. And it was scary to return to a town which was the exact same, as when I had left.

So I'll leave you with this quote I recently heard: Ambition is tempered with presence. I've been doing yoga to compensate for the lack of soccer and dance that usually engrosses my life during these spring months, but an instructor said that at the end of one class. Ambition is tempered with presence. I think about it often. If I had not taken a gap year, I would not have been present in many situations that have impacted me. I would not have trekked in the Himalayas, or swam in the Indian Ocean or learned to use a machete or met people exposed to dire and seemingly unchangeable situations and I surely would not have had the challenging and meaningful interactions that sparked lasting connection and mutual understanding with so many different people. My developing ideas about my place in this world and how I can be the best agent of change are shaped by my gap year, by being in unfamiliar environments and interacting with people I did not know who were different than me. I found my truest ambitions in far away countries doing things I would not normally do. I was lucky to be able to travel abroad, but the important part is to do something you would not normally do. That can happen in your backyard or at church or at the grocery store. It sounds very cliché, but I guarantee you it pays to step out of your comfort zone. I learned how to be vulnerable and goofy and unapologetically me because I was surrounded by amazing people with amazing insights and stories. And now I am learning how to share my knowledge and my stories to inspire people I know well. I'm breaking the societal norms so deeply instilled into my mind and I'm actively engaging in furthering my education about the world and its people and their systems. I'm still making connections, usually about things I learned abroad, but I'm applying them to my daily life. But most importantly I'm learning how to ask questions and ask for help because that is still difficult for me, but scaredy cats don't change the world. Have faith in your ability to take risks and be vulnerable; break down the barriers we put on ourselves and realize we are all scared of something, we are all human! Embrace all the nuances of yourself and your identities and it will be much easier to understand and relate to people who may appear very different than you. Open your hearts and your minds to those around you, but consciously place yourself in places where everyone around you is not like you. Fostering hospitality for others different than you is an achievable goal we all can aim to become better at - and a crucial first step towards a world of peace and unity.