Staring Out of Windows: A Theological Reflection

Staring aimlessly out the airplane window, I knew only one thing for certain about my reentry into the United States after three weeks in the barrios of Lima, Peru. I wasn’t going to preach about the experience the following Sunday. It was too soon. I need time to digest this cultural implosion (which, I would later discover is impossible, physically or emotionally). The water is not the only thing that upsets your system.

I was landing in Boston on late Friday afternoon and I wanted to look at the readings for Sunday. Fumbling through my carry-on, I discovered that I had packed my Scriptures in the suitcase. Oh, well. Later.

Resting my head back on the seat, I slowly drifted back to the hot, desert sand hills of the barrios; the one where I stayed had only about 100,000 people – the next hill over had 400,000. And the next one, who knows? The lack of running water, electricity, or, in some cases, roofs, made these hills even hotter. My temple wrinkles with these discomforting thoughts as I, and my plane, tear through the curtain that separates one world from another.

I once heard Joan Chittister, OSB quote an old rabbinic saying: “Always pray in a room with windows.” Many of us live, never mind pray, in a room that has no windows. Or we pull them down like the shades on the airplane. We never make the trip out of our own little room, little hospital, little prison, little parish, little rehab. We diminish and become little in mind and spirit.

Part of our reason for this feature edition, Windows Onto the World: Spiritual Care International, is to break down our walls and see outside to spiritual care in the lives of those who share this planet in God’s creation with us as sisters and brothers. It may be a limited view, but hopefully it can lift up our eyes out of our sometimes insular world of humanity and of God. One is only found where the other dwells. So if you and I have a small view of the global neighborhood, we likewise have a small view of God. Like Zacchaeus, we’d better climb up and get a better view of what’s going by.

My two trips to Peru were life changing for me. My first occasion was at the invitation of a congregation of religious to be the facilitator
for a week-long meeting for retreat and planning with 30 priests. My second trip, indirectly emergent from the first, was to set up a relationship between the parish I served in Boston and the parish of a classmate in Las Delicias, the 100,000 person hill in Lima.

I learned.

I learned what it is was like to land at an airport where I was greeted by submachine guns pointed at me by what looked like children.

I learned what it was like to be jogging down a city street and to accidentally startle a military man who pulled back his weapon and clicked with a readiness to shoot amidst our pleas of innocence.

I learned what it was like to hurry home at 11:30 in the evening from the plaza in Lima as we saw the military tanks roll out onto the streets with the clear instruction to shoot anyone on sight who was not authorized to be out after midnight during this time of curfew.

I learned to value water - by the drop.

While I stayed at a city rectory for a few days, the water pressure ran down and we could not shower (which was a luxury anyway). My friend Jim came in and said, “Quick, there’s a little stream of water out of the shower. You go ahead.” I stripped and stood under a freezing cold, one-hole faucet drip. I lathered in 30 seconds, rinsed in another 30, and yelled for my classmate for his turn. Heaven after three days.

I learned what it was like to be sitting in a house in the valley and hear explosions in the distance, watch lights flicker, then find myself in total darkness. The Sendero Luminoso (“shining path” revolutionaries) had bombed a power station again.

I learned what it looked like to stand in a line of hundreds of people with bucket/pail/bottle in hand waiting for the distribution of badly needed milk.

I learned that the missionary priests were the ones who for the most part stayed with the poor. And were thus suspect by the increasingly paranoid and conservative local Church leaders.

I listened.

I listened to a priest unsuccessfully fight back his tears as he told of a little girl who was run over by a truck (that didn’t stop) while walking in her First Communion dress to this special day in her and her family’s life.
I listened to a group of priests rage and smolder with the injustices of a government, a Church, an international monetary system, a world. Rage with anger, then smolder with depression and helplessness.

I listened incredulously to a priest calmly tell a story of bribery and bureaucracy as he was randomly stopped and his documents were found to be out of order because the birth day was on the line of the birth month and vice versa.

I listened to a group of priests spend an entire day answering one personal question in group without which no other pastoral plan or strategy can go forward. The question: “What do you need to say to this group to be free?” I have never led nor witnessed a more courageous, honest and liberated group process in my 20-plus years.

I listened to a priest tell his story of being thrown out of Chile in the middle of the night by – guess who? – General Pinochet’s government. I heard how security forces broke down his doors and with police dogs’ teeth curled around his throat tried to make him confess to crimes he never committed.

I listened to a group of older priests (25 to 30 years in mission) dare to dream that a future justice could still be just over the horizon of a people walking in faith.

I listened to a priest cry out his depression and feelings of inadequacy as he sought some refuge from the horrors of this land that had black-clouded his own interior space.

I laughed.

I laughed as one priest, yelling down to us from his third-story window in the retreat house, as he sat unable to leave the toilet while swigging huge amounts of Kaopectate. (That was the day that I decided that missionaries don’t necessarily give up their lives for the gospel, but more often than not, give up their health for the gospel – in very tangible ways).

I laughed as we sat at table and the missionaries would tell wonderful stories of faith, fun and adventure from their work.

I laughed the day a quiet Australian missionary (once a diocesan priest) told me how he would go on Fridays to his communion calls – OK, I did that – oh, but he flew his plane from call to call in the Australian outback.

I laughed (and cried) as 30 men spoke a truth to one another in a day
of profound vulnerability.

I laughed heartily with Gustavo Gutierrez when two of us went to his apartment in the Rimac section of Peru, where this international “father of liberation theology” lives as a parish pastor among his people. We rode the public bus to get there (that was an unrepeatable experience) and we waited in a long line for bread to share with our coffee following the Sunday Eucharist with him and his people.

I laughed when something like 25 barefoot, little girls came running up to my classmate – big, blond, bearded Jim – screaming “Padre Jaime, Padre Jaime,” and he bent way over and they kissed him like little bees. And then one brave little one looked over at the other “gringo” and slowly walked toward me, and as I bent down the swarm of them circled me. I was so stunned, so overjoyed, so close to tears. Jim, breaking the moment of intense feeling (after a pause), said as we were walking away, “You’d better wash your face, you don’t know what you may get.”

I laughed in the evening when the intensity of the day meetings ended and we gathered as brothers around table with a beer in hand.

I learned, I listened, and I laughed. I went to give, and true to the reality of “reverse mission,” I was the one that was transformed.

Descending over Boston, the snow-covered landscape starkly reminded me that I crossed into a very different room in this world. I returned to my rectory and what I remember most was the evergreen trees all around the property. Beautiful. Heavily laden with freshly fallen snow.

Staring aimlessly out this window, I finally left the outer landscape for a few minutes. Yes, the hornsly for Sunday. I searched out the Scriptures and the reading cycle.

First Reading. Isaiah the prophet, speaking that night to me at that desk in that part of the earth, “Those who have walked in darkness, have seen a great light.” I remember putting the book down and staring back out the window.

Two thoughts immediately became conscious. First, I have just come from a people who definitely walk in darkness. I don’t know about the light, right yet, but I know that first verse in the wrinkling of my forehead. Those who have walked in darkness, a good headline for this trip. Desert, literally and symbolically, depression, physically and emotionally.
The second thought: I have no option about preaching. The Word this weekend echoes loudly throughout God’s earthly home – from the back corridors of Lima to the front rooms of Boston.

And I did preach. And I had to stop because I felt a wall of water come up between those two places within me. But after a pause, the Word continued on.

That is what happens when you and I live and pray in a room with windows.