

Dispatches from the Cono Sur: Río de la Plata

Young Adults in Global Mission Newsletter Vol. 01, No. 01

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Greetings from Montevideo!

By plane, by ferry, by car, by titillating taxi rides, by sore feet, by overcrowded buses, by the grace of those who have received us, I have arrived safely to the Methodist Church's International Volunteer House in the neighborhood of Buceo, Montevideo, Uruguay, where I will be staying throughout the next year.

On August 16th, I joined alongside our 84 other companions serving the ELCA's YAGM program this year to begin a week-long orientation in Chicago. We shared our stories, our fears, our expectations, and our for the upcoming year. We engaged deeply in thought and conversation about the theology of accompaniment, hearing from past alumni of the program and leaders within the ELCA how to authentically walk beside the communities inviting us this year.

Along with the seven other YAGM volunteers serving in Argentina and Uruguay, our group arrived in Buenos Aires on August 25th, for yet more time to reflect on the work of Christ in the world, the church, and the meaning of our service.

We also participated in language support classes, and along with our country coordinators Krystle and Ignacio, tried our hand at navigating public transportation, buying and ordering food in castellano (Spanish), and learned about the social and political forces that have shaped the communities we have been invited to. By the end of this 10-day period, we even caught a chance to relax, which was celebrated with an Argentinian-style asado hosted by our very own country coordinators.

At last, by the beginning of September, and by ferry the three of us serving in Uruguay arrived in Montevideo. Already, it has been a profound privilege to go on this journey. I thank you greatly for your prayers and support, which have sustained me thus far.

Above: Playa Buceo. This overlook is about 4 blocks from our house; to the right is a historic lighthouse. Like many Montevideo-ans who have the ability and resources to live near or access the beach, on warm days people enjoy spending the afternoon near the beach, walking, playing soccer, swimming, or drinking maté, a warm herbal beverage.

Left: Buceo public cemetery. "Lo mismo que las aguas vuelven a la mar, lo que nace de la tierra vuelve a su seno." (Just as the waters return to the sea, what springs from the earth returns to its womb)

Along with the common embrace of our sending and inviting communities around the United States, the world, the ELCA at large, and the whole of Christ's body: Thank you again for your continued support. The intention of this newsletter is to inform and to create dialogue, and you may feel free to email me anytime at jperkins16@gmail.com

“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.”
(John 21, 24-25 NIV)

“The Library is limitless and periodic. If an eternal voyager were to traverse it in any direction, they would find... the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder—which, repeated, would constitute an order: Order itself. My solitude rejoices in this elegant hope.”
(“The Library of Babel,” *Ficciones*, Jorge Luis Borges)

Each month, this column will feature reflections, either brief or long, in word or in photographs

Recipe of the Month:

Pan de Trenza Dulce



(Every Thursday at the youth center where I work—El Centro Juvenil Flor de Maroñas—hosts a cooking class, ‘taller de cocina.’ Here is the Trenza Dulce they made.)

1. INGREDIENTS:

20g dry, active yeast or instant leavening substitute

A little over 3 oz. (100cc) cold milk

4 tbsp. of sugar

About ½ cup (100g) flour

--In a stainless steel bowl, dissolve yeast in milk. Add sugar and mix well. Add flour. Mix until fully incorporated. Cover and let rest for 45min.-1hr.

2. INGREDIENTS (pre-heat oven to 350°F

About 2 cups flour (500g)

2 tbsp. sugar

2 eggs

3 oz. (80g) melted butter

Vanilla extract/ flavor or other coloring powder

--In a separate container/on a clean surface, mix flour and sugar. Form a divet in the mound of flour and add the eggs, butter, and flavor/coloring substance desired. Mix well. Knead and add flour as needed until you have a dough smooth and slightly firm. Let rest for 5-10 min. (grab a cup of coffee, take a quick walk). (Cont.)→

Montevideo— Spring here seems to have crept up on us silently. Just the way the heavy, humid air does this far south, at least for one first greeting the Río de Plata.

End of September. Winter with its last cold and windy grip, trailing languid clouds above our eyes like the time of early morning light before you wake, thoughts as heavy and pliant as damp clothes lines, hearts pacing on cold tile floors, our conscious selves, as if holding in and running out to tumble in the constant churn of sea and sediment, out in an exhale to the ocean among the car exhaust, the chatter of birds and wood in stoves, the sense of new air turning, new beginnings, new language, new beings...

Since arriving in Montevideo, the three of our YAGM group have seemingly been rocked through waves of greetings and silence. The countless ‘besos’ (‘kisses,’ or common greeting among persons by touching cheeks), the silence felt by having finally reached a destination; arrival to a new home and place to leave the things. And so it happened that on our first Sunday we took much needed rest and received a great welcome from the Iglesia Cristiana Evangélica Espronceda, where many of the congregation’s members are staff or volunteers with Juventud Para Cristo.

On the second Sunday, we committed ourselves to worship at the Lutheran Church in Montevideo, Nuestro Salvador (‘Our Savior’). Though a small congregation of about 35 members, the church has a fundamentally strong diaconal presence in the community, as do many of the churches within the Iglesia Evangelica Luterana Unida. Two of Nuestro Salvador’s main programs include a community space for youth called El Sembrador (The ‘Sower’), along with a support and prevention program for people with HIV/AIDS.

The Sunday we visited Nuestro Salvador marked the beginning of spring vacations for schools and for many people in the community. It was a beautiful morning, with service (“celebración”) planned for 10:30. We arrived early, before any other members had come. The pastor of Nuestro Salvador, Octavio Burgoa, welcomed the three of us and kindly gave us coffee and bilingual bibles for the service. We began introducing ourselves, and spoke, haphazardly, in Spanish for some time. Meanwhile, he began to stand expectantly at the entrance to the church facing the street with the door open. Minutes passed and no one else had arrived. He then went into the church office. Soon he emerged wearing his vestments, and again opened the door and looked out into the street. Minutes passed and no one else arrived. He then turned and spoke to us in English, “Well, since we are here, and it is time, let us go and worship.”

In many ways, our visit was incongruous. The next week, regular life of the church ensued, with almost the whole congregation in attendance for a celebration for El Sembrador. Yet it was a service equally beautiful and fragmented; similar to the adjustment one feels when living in a new culture, immersed in new forms of communication, establishing new relationships. On this particular Sunday, the “being,” or periodic and regular gathering of the church had disappeared. With pastor Octavio presiding in a combination of English and Spanish—speaking in Spanish for communion, and the more traditional and spiritual parts of the congregation’s liturgy, then in English for the reading of the texts and sermon—it had become a church of “non-being,” a church non-material, a church in distortion. While the three of us were of the “church” in the larger sense of the “catholic Church” and Christ’s body—having been sent and invited by the ELCA and IELU—we were yet strangers of its local being within the community, identity in language, and location within the political and social realm, and we had likewise estranged pastor Octavio from this. It was at once slightly awkward. But in the same moments, this fumbling and renegotiation of language—of context, ideas, and behaviors through the word of God—helped to elicit a new kind of awareness, away from normality.

I would like to extend sincere thanks for your support and accompaniment thus far. Here are a few ways you can continue to do so:

1. **Pray:** for the receiving communities here, for YAGM volunteers across the globe, as I will continue to pray for you
2. **Witness:** My hope is that through this experience, you might likewise understand God's presence in new ways wherever you might be

In the English language, the past is most often constructed through four basic tenses: the Simple, Continuous, Perfect, and Perfect Continuous pasts. Respectively, these are demonstrated as: "I ate pizza," "I was eating pizza," "I had eaten pizza," "I had been eating pizza (every day)." The equivalent tenses to these in Spanish are: pretérito, imperfecto de indicativo, pluscuamperfecto de indicativo, pretérito de anterior. For me, words mean a great deal in the way that we think about things, either consciously or unconsciously. So the idea of a past 'imperfecto' (or 'imperfect')—a past altering the "perfect," faulty, our words constructing meaning in the present, with some credence to experience—is fascinating, especially when combined with the ways we construct our beliefs. The use of the 'imperfecto' states that, for an indefinite or incalculable period of time in the past, a certain action or state of being has taken place, right up until that past tense is broken by a sudden or distinct action, which then renders a new existence within past/present reality.

Anthony Kerrigan, who has translated works by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges to English, says in an introduction to *Ficciones* that for readers who search for exegesis, much of Borges' would bring the revelation that "all our knowledge has led us... just where we started, endless ages ago." In Borges' "The Library of Babel," (Borges also happened to be director of the National Library of Argentina from 1955-1973), the narrator describes his understanding of divine presence as a kind of truth that emerges solely within the infinite permutation and cacophony of words in the library, where the collective of every book represents "all verbal structures, all the variations allowed... but it does not permit of one absolute absurdity." Arguably, it's by the incompetence of each book—its form of disarray—and its intrinsic inability to encapsulate "Truth," that ultimately this "one absolute absurdity" is avoided. It's what keeps the eternal voyager alert and alive in the faith of motion and variation itself. In fact, Perfection—whether an object or being that is fully-formed, precisely composed—would be this absurdity.

Our notions of travel often require the crossing of thresholds: our willingness to plunge into interstitial space, the crisscrossing of portals, histories, all mediated by our earthly bodies. I happened to stumble upon the last verse of the Gospel of John on a ferry ride from Buenos Aires to Montevideo. It surprised me that I had never read the passage before; that we have, through means of omission, in a way censored this strange ending. What was striking, of course, was the absence of Christ's ascension. The event's omission, to me, seemed analogous to the absence of a kind of future "tense." Instead of directing the reader to an abstract spiritual realm (by the threshold from which Christ's body incarnate leaves our world), we are provided with an incomplete, almost hushed ending. The writer even inserts their self with a sudden protagonization. Before us, the narrator materializes in the first-person, thus demanding attention to the personal and limited frame by which the Gospels are told. To me, this ending seemed to acknowledge deliberately our haphazard constructions of the past, our forever imperfect forms of communication among human beings to witness and describe the actions of God through Christ. It provides a diametrical ending to a book that began with the divine hope of God and Christ incarnate in the "Word," and leaves the reader to wonder about the persistence of the Word after Christ. Yet, just before this ending, there is one last scene between Jesus and Peter concerning an unnamed disciple. Amidst some abstract debate about this disciples' mortality and existence, it is said that the disciple is one whose action ultimately testifies to the "word," has wrote it down, and "his testimony is true" (John 21:24). Perhaps too, this is the very word which gives the story action in the future tense, one elusive of definite meaning, hinging on the faith and fallibility of account, given action through "testament," renewed by witness.

If, then, we are to speak of God's presence in our world, of God's actions speaking defiance in the margins of our communities, illuminating our horizons,

Next, divide the dough into 6 even parts. Roll each ball of dough into a long rope-like shape, but not too thin. Braid three rope doughs together, as desired, and place on an oiled sheet. Finally, brush the dough with any remaining melted butter and sprinkle with sugar and bake for about 30-35min., until flaky.

Poem of the Month:

Complot

todos escribimos sobre lo mismo
con punta de birome
sobre la ceremonia de los naufragos
alguien dispone abiertamente de verbos
como yo espero de las imágenes

tal vez le pidan que confiese
sus relaciones imprecisas con las frases
y lo condenarán por transportar palabras
que comparte con otros complotados

lo nuestro sigue siendo el ojo
puesto a curiosear
tratando de no quedar al descubierto

--Roberto Bianchi
[Poeta y narrador Uruguayo]
Esa lengua tuya

Complot ('Plot')

We all write the same
with the point of a pen
about the ceremony of the forgotten
anyone openly disposed to verbs
just as I hope to images

They may ask you to confess
your imprecise relations with these phrases
and may condemn you for delivering words
shared by other plotters

Ours is to continue being the watch
positioned towards curiosity
trying not to be discovered

--Roberto Bianchi
[Uruguayan poet and writer]
Esa lengua tuya
trans. by Justin Perkins

breaking into the darkness, the mystery of our broken selves: how do we speak of God's presence when our liminal understandings break? Those moments when we are arrested suddenly awake: whether in the moments when our identities and beliefs conflict (as people or the Church), or even overturn, by the touch of new life, by its absolute absence in death. The distance, the noise, the silence. In a way, our encounter at Nuestro Salvador felt like its own kind of repentance. It was a rupture from what we knew before, which through dis-orientation made us yearn for a new way of seeing. Indeed, by the gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ, God abides in the midst of our absurdity, meaninglessness, and death. And indeed, God is

working within the unarticulated human depths, directly within the disarray of our own mangled mess of identity and coexistence. It persists by breaking through—the action of God in *Kairos* rupturing human chronology, a re-orientation in the search of God's presence, God's touch. A strange gift it fell to let the mystery of a person, surround and overwhelm us, to let new relations wear us down in frustration; new customs inundate us with confusion, new beliefs strike us to silence. Yet knowing all the while the strength of God will continue to make us walk and see differently; allow us to inhabit boldly the distortions we occupy, at last in modes where we too may protagonize our future and undo those things we have known as truth before.



Buenos Aires. The seven YAGM volunteers in Argentina and Uruguay, plus an ELCA Horizon intern who is doing her year of vicar-ship in Grand Bourg, Argentina. Top, from left to right: Emily Richardson, Luke Swanson, Justin Perkins. Bottom, from left to right: Micaela Laurence, Hilda Santiago, Katie Friedman, Malyn Kuntz, Nicolette "Nic" Faison (Horizon Intern). (Photo credit: Krystle Moraska)



"Adaso" is the term used by Argentinians and Uruguayans to represent a large, traditional communal celebration of cooking delicious meats over an open-coal fire. We have been graciously welcomed by the Iglesia Espronceda, who hosted this celebration at the end of one of their annual retreats in September. (Photo credit: Michael Borges)



Through this newsletter, by witness and testimony, I ask that you would likewise consider this an exercise in accompanying our neighbors around the globe.

If you would like to send mail, here's the address:

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