

The Gift of Language in a Foreign Land

By Bryan Bowes

Some years ago, traveling through South America, I learned the value of language. I had only been out of High School for a couple of years when I had the opportunity to travel to Brazil for 6 months with a friend and stay with some of his family. I had never left the US before and this would be my very first time going to a place that didn't speak English. I was very excited, but as I got off the plane and walked through the airport, I began to understand the term 'culture shock.' Everything was so different, and I felt every single bit the foreigner that I was. The smells were different, the food looked different, even the body language people used was unfamiliar, but most unsettling of all, I couldn't read any of the signs and I couldn't understand a word of the language spoken around me.

For the first few weeks I felt lost and very disconnected, but eventually we traveled to the town my friend was from and set up shop at his aunt, Edna, and uncle, Mario's home. That is where my experience began to change.

Edna and Mario were both intelligent, fun, and very warm, and at the end of most working days, Mario, who spoke no English, would invite me to the sunny back porch where we would "talk" for hours. We started out with the laughably small amount of Portuguese that I knew: "Hi", "Goodbye", "Thank you", but as time went on, I began to understand more of the words he used. I even ventured to use what I was learning to interact with people I met when out at the store, at a club, or just on the street. It was scary at first, but something beautiful happens when you try, and much of the fear and isolation I felt started to melt away. Brazilians were so happy to hear me speak their language and I was always greeted with a smile and encouragement. In time, and through talking with people in their own tongue, I found a deep appreciation for the things in their culture I did not understand at first.

I found that language was a tool, not just to see foreign places, and eat (often great) foreign foods, but it's the bridge that connects the thoughts and hearts of the people who use it. Language creates a foundation of understanding that helps people to move beyond conflict and fear and towards unity and joy in a way that nourishes the soul just as much as a country's native foods, but lasts far longer than the rice and beans on your plate, and that, to me, is a gift I will never forget.