

ERES UN UNIVERSO DE UNIVERSOS

you are a universe of universes

Reconnecting with the human aspects of medicine through field experiences on La Isla de Ometepe

Nicaragua—la isla de Ometepe
Nicaragua—the island of Ometepe

el 16 de julio al 29 de julio, 2007
July 16—July 29, 2007

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“Ama tu ritmo . . .”

Ama tu ritmo y ritma tus acciones
bajo su ley, así como tus versos;
eres un universo de universos
y tu alma una fuente de canciones.

La celeste unidad que presupones
hará brotar en ti mundos diversos,
y al resonar tus números disperos
pitagoriza en tus constelaciones.

Escucha al retórica divina
del pájaro del aire y la nocturna
irradiación geométrica adivina;

mata la indiferencia taciturna
y engarza perla y perla cristalina
en donde la verdad vuelca su urna.

RUBEN DARIO

“Love Your Rhythm . . .”

Love your rhythm and rhythm your actions
in obedience to its law, and your poetry as well;
you are a universe of universes,
and your soul a fountain of song.

The celestial unity that you presuppose
will make varied worlds germinate within you,
and, as your scattered poems resound,
philosophize like Pythagoras among your constellations.

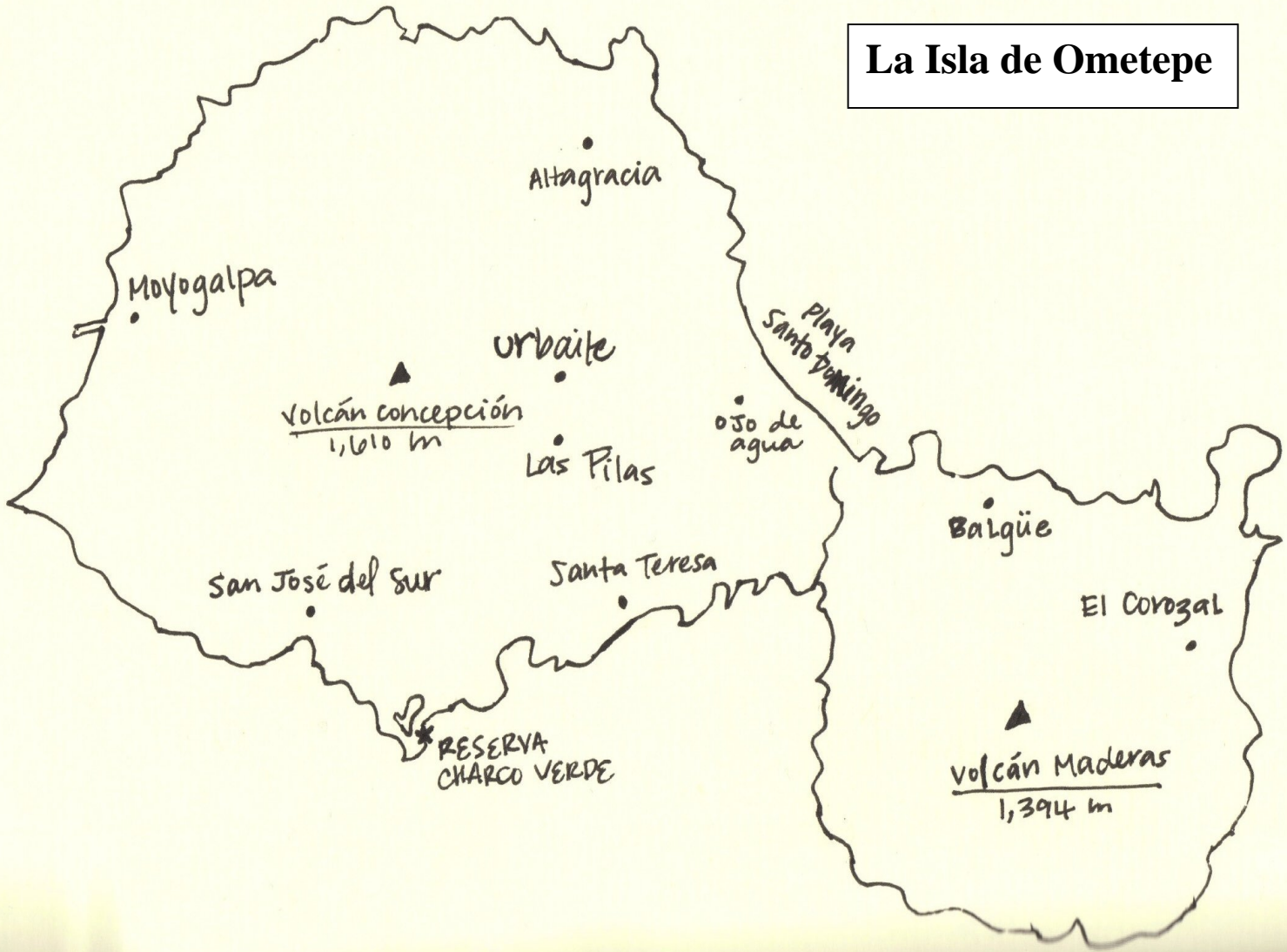
Listen to the divine rhetoric
of the bird in the air, and divine
the geometric radiation of the night;

slay silent indifference
and slay pearl on crystalline pearl
there where truth pours out her urn.

RUBEN DARIO

translated by
STANLEY APPLEBAUM

La Isla de Ometepe



A THIRCE TOLD TAKE
CUENTOS Y POESÍAS
by Margery Wolf
by Rubén Darío

(edited + translated
by Stouffer
appetite)

NICARAGUA—la isla de Ometepe

el 16 de julio (lunes) a el 29 de julio (domingo)

lunes 16:	llegada a Managua
martes 17:	llegada a Ometepe
miércoles 18:	atender pacientes a la clínica de San José del Sur
jueves 19:	Feriado Nacional
viernes 20:	subir Volcán Maderas
sábado 21:	visitar Altagracia y el mirador
domingo 22:	misa, juego de béisbol, relajarse
lunes 23:	atender pacientes a la clínica de Las Pilas
martes 24:	salida a Corozal—atención de pacientes y de comedor infantil
miércoles 25:	atender pacientes a la clínica de San José del Sur
jueves 26:	atender pacientes a la clínica de Santa Teresa
viernes 27:	Playa Santo Domingo
sábado 28:	salida de Las Pilas a Managua por Moyogalpa
domingo 29:	salida de Managua a los Estados Unidos

AN OASIS OF PEACE

La doctora Sandra Villagra, a Nicaraguan clinical physician and dear friend of mine, sent me the previous schedule in the early days of July 2007. It served to roughly outline the two weeks I spent on *La Isla de Ometepe, Nicaragua* working with her to provide healthcare to four communities spanning the island. We visited the villages of *Las Pilas, Corozal, San José del Sur, and Santa Teresa*, each rich in hidden treasures and uniquely characterized by their charming inhabitants. The written schedule comprised our sole communication until I met *la doctora carismática* in person my second day on the island.

As a undergraduate student preparing for a career in global infectious diseases prevention and management, I set out to experience the *Ometepe* way of administering medical services to its 38,000 residents. Interested in public health and advocating for program implementation at the village level, I wanted to personally meet the impoverished, malnourished, and diseased and not only hear their stories, but live them. The humble people defining the island—working primarily in agriculture—are some of the poorest in

the world. According to 2004 World Bank classification, Nicaragua served as the only low-income country (income below \$765 per capita) in Central America. On my first adventure to the nation known as the ‘heart of America’, *la doctora* and her many friends welcomed me to the island insulated from the rest of the country by the waters of Lake Cocibolca.

The following compilation includes reflections and analyses written in the four months after my return from Nicaragua. I used my bilingual and visual journal to document smells, sights, feelings, sounds, and tastes that marked my experience on *La Isla de Ometepe*, but also to record questions I developed in the field, to compare and contrast my array of experiences, and to question prior assumptions. The subsequent passages represent developed ideas and specific awakenings that transpired from iteratively rereading and analyzing my journal and expanding on its resonating themes. Composing *Eres un Universo de Universos* allowed me to arrive at essences of the human experience lived by the people of *La Isla de Ometepe*, the haven referred to by singer-song-writer Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy as “an oasis of peace”.

A TWICE-TOLD TALE

In the summer of 2006 I traveled to Arusha, Tanzania and implemented a three-week service learning initiative orchestrated by the African Studies Institute at my university and the Training Center for Development Cooperation (TCDC) in Arusha. I wanted to record observations from my first trip abroad with rigor and thus produced an unpublished paper using heuristic, qualitative methodology. Viewing writing as a form of inquiry, I longed to again word the world utilizing an investigative perspective.

To bolster my increasing understanding of how to conduct humanitarian research and elucidate my findings via writing, I read A Thrice-Told Tale by Margery Wolf. As she challenges critics of traditional ethnography, I learned to continually confront my thinking and perspective for the duration of my stay in Nicaragua. Despite my initial self-consideration as an educated and brave American, my view drastically changed after a few days on *La Isla de Ometepe*.

My physical appearance and lack in fluidity of Spanish conversation inexorably yielded the foreigner stamp. Moreover, the verity of traveling alone at age nineteen to a faraway island illuminated the power differential. I perceived myself as an alien desiring to mesh in a distant culture I knew only through photographs and literature detailing Nicaraguan history, politics, and economics. On the contrary, the *Ometepe* natives enjoyed the comfort of family and friends and possessed boundless knowledge of the language and the land.

Addressing my dual responsibility to accurately depict my ‘subjects’ while conveying my findings to an audience, I asked: how do I harvest information from and develop relationships with locals in an appropriate manner? I recognized my limitations as an undergraduate student with little funding and the time constraint of two weeks. Coupling the necessity to have confidence in my observations, analyses, and writings as a heuristic researcher, I strived to obtain minimal disruption in the daily lives of the islanders.

TU RITMO

Nicaraguan poet and essayist Rubén Darío serves as one of the most significant Latin American writers of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Often referred to as the high priest of *modernismo*, I read an anthology of his stories and poems to expand my cultural knowledge of the people and country of Nicaragua. The underlying theme in “*Ama tu ritmo . . .*” (“Love Your Rhythm . . .”), of rhythm and harmony as keys to the universe, helped shape my medical, heuristic, and humanitarian perspectives as I immersed myself in the *Ometepe* human experience.

Darío uses rhythm in poetry as a means of delving deeper into the ambiguities of life and the enigma of men. Stressing the idea of personal exploration, he communicates the rhythmic control derived from connecting first with ourselves internally before entering the world of universal harmony. I venture to interpret his hunger for human beings to

expose their intimate individual power not only to facilitate contact with celestial Gods, but with other human beings as well.

Prior to my departure for Nicaragua I spent hours meditating and praying to spiritually prepare for each of the days composing my two-week trip. I searched profoundly in my heart and soul to acquire the strength to endure such a journey in full capacity, the patience and candidness to understand cultural differences, and the courage to openly speak the language, to develop lasting relationships with the villagers of *La Isla de Ometepe*, and to strengthen my mind of continual questioning.

Through uniting with myself internally, I explored the infinite possibilities I am or rather, the universe of universes. I externalized the courage and aspiration to genuinely live the Nicaraguan life and I embodied the principle, “the more discoveries you make, the more questions you raise”.

NO MAN'S AN ISLAND

We are connected. Despite our communal existence as children of God, as humans we are rooted deep within one another. A global network of intricate connections, we reach from impoverished villages to the very core of world power and wealth and back again.

For the sake of humanity and well-being of others, I feel a moral responsibility to empower marginalized populations residing in my own country and to reach out to underprivileged individuals across borders. With no intention of self-glorification, I acknowledge some do not have the innate drive to conquer the myriad inequalities marking the human experience.

The desire (or lack thereof) to care for other human beings—different than our neighbors and loved ones—should not be equated to a simple dichotomy of good and evil. We must not rid such a yearning of its essence and deeper roots. In

order to ensure the continuation of the human race, we must feel compelled as individuals and act cooperatively to rescue communities experiencing tragedies worldwide.

When Hurricane Felix hammered Nicaragua in September, the news story resonated with me more soundly than the cyclone striking Bangladesh in November. While truthful, I recognize fault in such a claim. We are connected. Travelers, students, and missionaries from the United States venture to Bangladesh, the American Red Cross resides in Dhaka, and numerous corporations outsource garment assembly, creating Bangladeshi industry and providing jobs for their penniless youth.

I want to no longer make the excuse that the catastrophes are too great, too frequent, and too deep... while they may not be etched in my soul today, they will be tomorrow. As human beings we are connected and must remember: no man's an island.

SCIENCE: A BORDER DEVIANT

Fortunately, the principles of human physiology remain constant from the village of *Las Pilas (La Isla de Ometepe*, Nicaragua) to Tengeru (Arusha, Tanzania) to Athens, Georgia. Several mechanisms exist—including ionic diffusion by concentration gradients, selective permeability of ions and thus specific ion channels, and the activity of electrogenic pumps—to maintain a resting neural membrane potential of approximately -70 millivolts. No matter where one lives in the world, the resting membrane potential of his or her cells prevents the body from experiencing electrical shock.

Geographical borders often determine politics, wealth, social systems, and disease; however, I deem science fascinating because it defies such parameters. Intriguingly, the interaction of *Sandinistas* strictly ruling the nation, extreme poverty sinking deep into plentiful land, and malaria transmission on the rise, complicates the principles of human

physiology. As a scientist, I value the need to first learn the mechanical, physical, and biochemical functions of humans in a state of good health. Though as an aspiring epidemiologist, studying pathology (at the cellular level transpiring to the disruption of organ and system functions) thrills me.

As proposed by the economist Jeffrey Sachs, I support the notion of a differential diagnosis when attacking public health crises. With knowledge of the multitude of mechanisms creating and maintaining cellular membrane potentials, we must explore how these biochemical phenomena are disrupted. Do the residents of *La Isla de Ometepe* ingest sufficient electrolytes and minerals? Are essential nutrients available in their food sources? Does their dwindling economy allow for the growth and distribution of necessary crops?

Exploring inconsistencies across borders enables us to make revolutionary scientific discoveries and thus contribute to a discipline I define by its harmonizing unity.

LAS PILAS

I find it of utmost importance to develop the perspective of what constitutes a ‘problem’. *La doctora* arrived four hours late today to the clinic after attending to a five year old girl whose lungs collapsed in Managua. The extensive line of patients waited unwearyingly. I heard not one complaint for they knew Monday defined the one day per week on which they had the ‘privilege’ of seeking medical attention. Remaining calm extrinsically, I frantically paced back and forth in my mind anxiously (and selfishly) wanting *la doctora* to enter the room so that I could embark on my clinical experience.

When she finally rushed through the door—glowing and out of breath—the crowd cheered and many women embraced her, graciously thanking her for coming. For a moment my mind flashed to the waiting room in a general practitioner’s office in a high-society Atlanta suburb;

conservatively speaking, the patients did not react in similar fashion. I then realized the significance of establishing a point of comparison.

At home in the states my daily struggles consist of contemplating the value of sleep, a flat bike tire, ongoing family strife, dashed hopes for an experiment, or whether to attend the “God, Darwin, & Design” lecture or study for a Spanish linguistics exam tomorrow. What about my Nicaraguan counterpart? Who is she and what are her struggles? *María*, a neighbor of *Herbierto Aguirre* (the father from my home stay), is twenty years old, HIV positive, and mother to her four year old son, *Juan*, who is infected with malaria. She struggles daily to provide food for him because she labors in a nearby field and the rest of her family escaped to Costa Rica seeking economic prosperity.

If I feel as if my world is crumbling, I simply envision *María* and do not ask for a lighter load, but a stronger back.

COROZAL

The residents of *La Palma*, a community in *Corozal*, do not ingest adequate amounts of protein on a daily basis. The majority of families work in agriculture—specifically coffee, corn, and rice—and few own animals to serve as vehicles of transportation to and from the fields; others trek tens of kilometers by foot (and most individuals brave the terrain without shoes). A high priced commodity, families cannot afford meat and additionally, venturing to the vendors in town compromises a day in the field harvesting their crops. In severe cases of protein deficiencies, white blood cell numbers decline thus reducing the body's ability to fight disease.

I learned the unfortunate situation confronting the people of *La Palma* from the fervent voices of the individuals struggling weekly to survive. When *la doctora* and I traveled to their community, a representative from every family eagerly awaited our arrival, panting in the unbearable heat. After *la*

doctora announced the implementation of the American-funded nutrition program, the community members unexpectedly controlled the remainder of the meeting. In addition to expressing their deepest gratitude for our visit, they addressed root causes associated with the decreasing life expectancy rate stalking their community.

Speaking with dignity, eloquence and clarity about their dilemmas, the residents stated their need for anti-malarial bed nets, non-nitrogen fertilizers, and water points. In all honesty, their layered knowledge of resource gaps, and proposed solutions to better their health and productivity, astonished me. In the same breath the individuals of *La Palma* inspired me and birthed my advocacy for ending healthcare disparities by starting with the people experiencing the tragedies. They have a realistic idea about their conditions and how to improve them and already know the strength needed to combat disease and hunger. They are individually and collectively ready to act.

SAN JOSE DEL SUR

Señora Magdalena Gonzalez arrived as the first of 36 patients to *la clínica de San José del Sur* at six o'clock in the morning. Ironically, she insisted on having the last consult with *la doctora*, not meeting with us until eight o'clock that evening. After shambling into the room at a steady pace, she immediately unveiled the opportunistic infection enveloping her foot by peeling away the tethered cloth bathed in blood and pus. Without further ado *la doctora* plugged her nose to hinder the horrific stench from stinging her nasal cavity. She then politely asked me to retrieve the camera and document the distinct wound.

The exemplary tale portrays the community's dire need for health education as a tool of preventive medicine.

Magdalena admitted not bathing for more than two weeks and to compensate for relentless malnutrition she reverted to cooking with cow dung. Understanding the importance of

maintaining good hygiene could have saved her from weeks of physical pain and mental exhaustion. She attempted to cure a simple bacterial infection by saturating the lesion with tree leaves from her backyard.

The lack of ample educational opportunities throughout the island leads to maternal anemia in pregnant women and many children succumbing to parasitic infections, pneumonia, and infectious diarrhea. Resource shortages, unaffordable diagnostic equipment, and scarcity of trained health professionals culminate in the practicality of focusing on prevention, not treatment. Supplementing the medical perspective, I propose villagewide classes once a month for adults teaching hygiene, computer literacy, malaria control, HIV/AIDS prevention, mobile phone use, and other technical skills. Additionally, providing meals for all children in primary school could improve their nutritional state, quality of education, and attendance at school.

SANTA TERESA

The last day spent working with *la doctora* seemed to illuminate my purpose for traveling to the island. For the duration of my time on *La Isla de Ometepe*—while always feeling secure and happy—I questioned the value of the clinical experience, the allocation of my time between serving the community and enjoying the company of *mi familia*, and my decision to completely immerse myself in the culture to the extent of illness. I wondered why I marveled at *Charco Verde* and *Ojo de Agua*, hallmarks of the island's natural beauty, with Marta and Michael instead of visiting a clinic to engage in the growing sphere of learning.

I reminisced when planning the trip my persistence to work with a Nicaraguan doctor dominated all other variables; I wanted to experience ritualistic health care and not a rarity. I now know why—my experience defined Nicaraguan life and in essence, that is exactly what I was seeking. The inhabitants of

La Isla de Ometepe do not know the hustle and bustle characterizing my home country. Thus, they take the time to marvel at their wondrous surroundings: the fire and molten of the island's shifting skin embodied by *Volcán Concepción* and *Volcán Maderas*, the peaceful calming and vastness surfaced by Lake Colcibolca, and the greenery blanketing the land of 38,000 humble yet charismatic individuals.

Retrospectively, the unfamiliarity and excitement of my stay on the island blinded me while there, however, deep processing, review, and analysis allowed me to recognize and appreciate its inexhaustible value. It furthered my understanding of qualitative inquiry and strengthened my mind of continual questioning. From exploring my body, heart, mind, and soul, I connected with the people of *La Isla de Ometepe*. As human beings we are collectively woven throughout the world but as individuals we are each a universe of universes, *un universo de universos*.

Originalmente cuando tuve la idea de viajar a Nicaragua, no estaba segura de la derivación de mi deseo. Me dije que necesité cavar profundo y encontrar mi motivo para dar valor verdadero al viaje. Aparte de disfrutar el paisaje vibrante culturalmente, usar el idioma español diario, aprender de la declamación de asistencia médica en un país en desarrollo, y explorar la vida nicaragüense, en mi corazón sabía que quería más. Después de pensar mucho, me di cuenta de la meta del viaje, mi razón.

Yo quería sumergirme completamente en la experiencia humana de La Isla de Ometepe: el idioma, la comida, el campo, la música, la cultura, la familia y la tierra, en todos aspectos de al vida nicaragüense. Decidí que mi viaje a la isla sería una prueba personal. Sinceramente si quiera pasar años de mi vida en el extranjero, específicamente en los países luchadores, necesité ponerme a la prueba. Por lo tanto, puse todo mi confianza en Dios y con valentía extrema y el deseo desafiarme y aprender el mundo, dispuse vivir la vida real. Y honestamente viví la vida real nicaragüense y amé cada momento.

Escribí este pasaje dos semanas después de volver del viaje en la última página de mi álbum de fotos de Nicaragua. Fue escrito primero en español y entonces interpretado.

Originally when I had the idea of traveling to Nicaragua, I was unsure of the derivation of my desire. I told myself I needed to dig deep and unearth my motive in order to give true meaning and worth to the trip. Aside from enjoying the culturally vibrant landscape, using the Spanish language daily, experiencing the delivery of healthcare in a developing country, and exploring the Nicaraguan life, I knew in my heart I longed for more. And after much thought, I realized the purpose of my trip, my mission.

I wanted to completely immerse myself in the human experience of *La Isla de Ometepe*: language, food, countryside, music, culture, family, land, all aspects of Nicaraguan life. I decided that my trip to the island would be a personal trial. If I sincerely aspire to spend years of my life working abroad—specifically in developing countries—I needed to put myself to the test. Therefore, I put all of my trust in God and with extreme bravery, and the desire to challenge myself and to learn the world, I set out to live the real life. And indeed, I lived the real Nicaraguan life and loved every moment.

I wrote this passage two weeks after returning from the trip on the last page of my album of photos from Nicaragua. It was written first in Spanish and then interpreted.