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November has been a full month of new experiences amidst depending my relationship with the people in my praxis site as well as the students in Casa Bayanihan. All of batch 8 recently went to a silent retreat outside of the metropolis of Manila in Tagaytay situated within a convent overlooking the Taal volcano. The beautiful scenery and gardens with private nooks provided a comfortable space to reflect alone in silence.

At first it was weird to walk the halls or sit near my fellow batchmates and not be able to speak with them but this awkwardness soon abated when we first came together at night for a group silent reflection. It was therapeutic to end each night together, in silence, because I could not only use the time to reflect internally but appreciate the presence of my batchmates as well. I began to appreciate my surroundings--the environment and the people in a way I had not before.

The following days went by surprisingly quickly once I let myself be liberated from the fact that I felt as if I was not being productive. I appreciated the space to reflect on my own life that I would not otherwise have had never come to the Philippines through the Casa Bayanihan program. The experience was unforgettable and taught me the importance of self-care in learning to appreciate myself and others especially in regards to service and working in communities.

With the silent retreat and praxis weekend, November was a month of firsts and lasts. My three praxis partners and I each spent the weekend with different families than we had during our first praxis weekend. It was great to spend time with another family on the weekend as during praxis weekdays we do not always get to spend time with the people who work or study outside of the house. Saturday we spent the day helping with the distribution of Toms shoes with Children's International where our praxis site coordinator spends the majority of his time volunteering.

It was great to discover that the Toms stands by their mission and assist the tireless Children's International workers with the high demand of the distribution. While I know our help needed, it felt sort of empty as we were in a neighborhood of the city where we did not know any of the families. For the first few weeks of Casa I wanted something tangible to do in praxis like the Toms distribution, but I found that at this point I wanted to go back to the house and spend time with my ate and her children.

In any setting, meaningful relationships make an experience, but especially in service and accompaniment. As an ACE, I knew the value of relationships in regards to sustained and consistent service learning. But I thought I would come every week, get the "job" done, whatever it was, and the relationships would presumably follow. Being in praxis has allowed me let go of the need to live a life of checklists and focus on the people around me instead. This perception will follow my growth as an ACE as I enter communities fully present to the experience and people without expectations for myself but an openness instead.