More than a Rainforest

*What did you learn in Costa Rica? Respond to the article…*

“Austin to Houston, Houston to San Jose,” read my two tickets that I held tightly in my hands between the pages of my passport. It was finally January 17th and we were ready. We were ready to board that plane and travel over 2,000 miles to arrive in San Jose and experience something completely new. Traveling to Costa Rica, we were able to conquer fears and do things that one would never expect to do. Assumptions were smashed, expectations blown away, and lives changed as we were faced with the opportunity to travel as a political act.

Traveling as a political act is traveling with openness to both learning about the worldviews of others, as well as experiencing their unique cultures. Rick Steves’ perspective on travel, presented in his article “Travel as a Political Act”, includes allowing oneself to be fully immersed in the culture of the destination by being a “cultural lint brush—trying to pick up whatever cultural insights I can glean from every person I meet” (Steves 5-6). According to Steves, travel does not have to be just a vacation; it can be a “valuable learning experience” (Steves 20). Through travel, we can see the world in a different and awesome way that gives us a new appreciation for other cultures and people that we would not necessarily interact with in a day back at home (Steves 6). I agree with Rick Steves’ perspective of travel in that it can be a learning experience that opens our eyes to the world around us. Being a “cultural lint brush” presents an opportunity to gain a better appreciation and understanding for other cultures (Steves 5-6), which is important even if the traveler does not agree with everything that those people do or believe. As Steves said, getting out of our own country can give us the chance to look “back at America from a distant vantage point” (Steves 5). Seeing and hearing how other people view the world and the United States is important because it allows us to have a better understanding and respect of our place in the world, the connection that we have with people around the world, and the ideas and beliefs of others even as they may be different from our own. Traveling can not only be an opportunity to recognize that the world is large, but also that this large place is filled with a large community.

Before visiting the Bribri I constructed the image in my mind of people living in a very native and tribal way in the rainforest. That assumption was soon dashed as I saw the Bribri and how they actually lived. Their houses were just like something that would be seen in America: a rectangular prism house with a triangle-esque roof. Their clothing consisted of shorts, shirts, skirts, all articles that I would not consider “native”. This assumption, being very different from their actual way of living, could have contributed to my inability to completely grasp that this was a real Costa Rican indigenous people group and culture. The difficulty that I had in grasping the impact of what we were doing, who we were with, and where we were “[interfered] with [my] ability to fully engage with the culture on its own terms” (Steves 8). As I dramatized the experience in my head, there was some difficulty when it came to me accepting the reality of the way that some of the Bribri live. Also, the fact that we were even with the Bribri could have been so unreal that it was hard for me to grasp that we were actually having that experience. In contrast to our trip to Heifer International where we simulated living in different cultures, here we were experiencing one in real life. This is how they live. This is what they believe. In reflection, it is still difficult for me to fully grasp.

Any expectations that I had regarding this trip were exceeded. Everything was amazing. From when we first stepped into Austin Bergstrom to when we stepped out, I could not have asked for a better trip. I do not know all of the impacts that we had on the people that we met in Costa Rica. I do not even know all of the ways that they have impacted me. But I do know that how we impacted each other will stay in my heart for a long time to come. Thanks be to God that we had this opportunity to travel and experience the world in the way that we did. It would not be and is not possible without Him. Our trip to Costa Rica was unlike any that I have ever had and we are very blessed to have been able to go.