A paper calls for structure, but this was an adventure.

Although my experience in Perú this summer was strung out through an
irrefutable, forward-whisking chronology, the memories do not follow the same
trajectory. Instead they pool in themes and winds, moons and mountain crests. The
passages presented here offer a quilted vision of modern and traditional healing, with
special attention to the threads that weave the pieces together.

La Selva – The Jungle

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 30, 2010
Bonito Tarapoto
Posted at 7:03 PM
Hello beautiful people I love!

Ana and I survived the slick sidewalks of grey Lima (aka got a great tour of the city with
our couchsurfing hosts) and are now sweating in Tarapoto, in the northern part of Peru.
Even though we've moved closer to the rainforest, the mosquitos aren't too bad. Although
I think I just got a bite on my throat. Damn it. Hopefully I won't collapse into Dengue
Fever.

Tarapoto is a really interesting city. Actually, it's hard for me to accept that it's a city
because it's so directly based on the building blocks of small Latin American towns like I
saw 5 years ago in Honduras, I keep assuming I'm out in el campo. I think the core
similarity is that the spaces here are less hermetically sealed and defined. People have
their homes that they keep free of animals and insects, but they aren't trying to be
sterilized capsules. It's hard to distinguish sometimes what's inside and what's outside,
you can peer through doorways and see trees, and the hallway to our room transitions
from the front door to the backyard seamlessly. Although it departs from the European
model, Tarapoto has the bustle of a city. There are tons of people here, in colorful squat
adobe buildings or flying by on motorcycles and in carts pulled by said motos. It creates a
fun pace on the streets, and I love seeing girls behind the handlebars.

For the two weeks that we're here in Tarapoto, we're boarding with a couple whose son is
away studying in Lima. Their names are Martín and Sylvia <3 and they are
incredibly sweet. We share meals with them and Sylvia's mother Lydia and it's wonderful
to chat with them over lentils, rice, and avocados. I feel strangely like I've gone home to
something. El español, the smells of laundry, the roosters... My time is running out at the
internet cafe, but I send love to all of you and will write more soon, especially about our
budding research on traditional medicine use here.
At the outset of our journey we were introduced to the use of traditional plants to heal spiritual or emotional issues. In the case of El Centro Takiwasi, the vine Ayahuasca is administered to patients who suffer from long-term drug addiction as a treatment: a way for the patient to discover another understanding of existence.

**This became a theme: spiritual medicine <---spiritual pain?**

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**Spiritual Healing**

“La persona que experimenta lo sagrado, amplía las perspectivas de su vida; ‘sabe’ que hay algo que está más allá de los problemas domésticos y el accionar diario; adquiere un punto de vista muy diferente, que le permite sobrellevar las frustraciones de la vida material y fijar sus metas en logros más elevados... Esto no quiere decir que se va a desvincular de su realidad, por el contrario, este cambio de perspectiva va a permitirle vivir plenamente cada momento real y encarnar lo divino en lo cotidiano.”

“The person who experiences the sacred, expands the perspectives of his life; he 'knows' that there is something beyond the domestic problems and daily actions; he acquires a very different point of view, that allows him to cope with the frustrations of material life and set his sights on higher achievements ... This does not mean he will disassociate from his reality, to the contrary, this change in perspective will allow him to fully live every real moment and embody the divine in daily life.”

Rosa Giove. *La Liana de los Muertos : The Vine of the Dead*

At El Centro Takiwasi, psychologists and shamans combine powers to help people heal.

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**THURSDAY, JULY 8, 2010**

**La Medicina Tradicional**

A bit on Amazonian healing (La Purga):

As Ana said,

“I can’t help thinking: If I swallow something that is poisonous to me, that my body doesn’t want, then I think my reaction would be to purge it out. **Still, I am trying to set my skepticism aside and be open-minded.**”

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1 THURSDAY, JULY 8, 2010
The foundation of health here seems to be the ability to clean out the body, and the majority of the plants pointed out to us on our wet 12-hour rainforest hike are good for La Purga, which empties the body through profuse vomiting. One of the more powerful plants, Ayahuasca, grows as a crazily twisted vine that winds around and around itself, squeezing into layered pretzels and gripping trees with long tendrils until it sucks them dry.

(Side note: they keep playing the same song OVER AND OVER in this internet cafe!!!AAHHHHHH!!!!!) 

Ayahuasca treatment purges both corporally and spiritually. Mixed with another plant called Chacuruna, it brings on intense visualizations and the natives here report seeing twisting serpents (not a surprise after seeing the vine), visualizing past traumatic events they had blocked out, and connecting with their ancestors. The treatment is a way of cleaning out one's fears, facing what is buried inside in order to learn from it and move on. In an informal conference at El Centro, held in French (my understanding was guesswork--although Manus' French lessons helped out, I leaned on Ana's translation skills), the curandero of El Centro talked about the importance of healing oneself, and espoused the belief that if someone cannot do the healing necessary within herself, then all the doctors in the world could not save her [This is not to say Jacque Mombi doesn’t believe in the importance of medicine—but he sees its limits in the face of someone’s spiritual struggle]. Jacque raised a lot of questions within me about what illness means and the connection between emotional/spiritual struggles with physical health. It's not a stretch for me to see that they're related--for one, I feel like I inherited my dad's aching right knee after his death--but I'm not sure it works in a clear-cut cause and effect relationship. Most likely these factors go back and forth... I'm conscious of an ache in my knee and miss my father, I think of my father and tense my knee... I am far from coming to a conclusion about the nature of illness and its relationship to the rest of human experience; this is in fact the beginning of "la investigación" that Ana and I have

**Lions, Witches, and...**
embarked on. It's an exciting prospect to come to a better understanding of what is inside oneself and how that can accumulate and take effect. To imagine spiritual inheritance stretching back through the generations adds a depth that would be difficult to address in a regular check-up in the Dr.'s office, but I think that there's some truth in the passage of unspoken history on to each new life.

Time seemed especially tangible as Ana and I stood in a small clearing in the Amazon last week at Winston's curandero retreat near Llucanayacu. The stars here are not the ones I've known my whole life. This side of the equator receives the light of a different set of stars, and these stars have been sending their energy here for millions of years, looking over the rainforest and watching it grow. And, as we all learn in school, the light that was reaching us that night has traveled so far that the stars we saw might not actually be there any more, might have extinguished billions of years ago. We rely on an idea of a fixed reality to go about our lives, but as Frederique, our new French anthropologist friend points out, reality is fixed within the context of its time and place. In one reality Ana and I stood beneath ancient stars while giant fireflies flitted their momentary lights. In another, stars are born and die, black holes tug on the fabric of spacetime, and a man meets his ancestor face to face. It is important to maintain a grasp on one's current reality, but not to hold on to it so tightly as to forget the variety. We're trying to keep this in mind as we learn what the people we meet see as true and real.

Much love to all of you!

Posted at 10:19 AM

“All medicine is poison. What separates medicine from poison is dosage.” Dr. Jacque Mombí prescribes a three-day purge from the daily treatment of fried foods and fermented drink, adds a taste of the vine which squeezes itself into knotted braids as it grows. The bitter twists down the patient’s throat and the patched baskets of her daily knowledge come unfurled. She had known a craving for something to fill her, the plant offers to empty her and show her a new shape fueled by eons of ancestors growing before her and the constant offerings of fresh air for her sacred breath.
Guided through the rainforest by José, a consultant for El Centro Takiwasi:
José led us through the section of the Amazon he watches over, clearing brush occasionally and getting to know the different plants and their medicinal uses: Chiric Sanango: planta maestra (teaching plant (hallucinogenic)); Sangre de grado: for healing wounds...

When he stays in the jungle, José lives in a sophisticated treehouse that he built himself, using pivot points on the giant beams to pull them to the 2nd floor by himself. Screened windows; he gazes out and leans on the sill. He speaks of using iguana fat for severe scar healing—a girl burned on the face... go hunt an iguana in the rain forest to help her heal smoothly. One large iguana hangs out by a little drainage pond near Jose’s house. Jose knows about three names for each plant, and many of their uses. He writes papers for schools to make some money and laments that so few people learn about plants from seeing them in the forest and instead have only book knowledge, which can be wrong or ineffective when it comes to actually identifying the plants in the wild. He insists that the best thing to do is to go out into the forest. We completely agree. We hope he would not be disappointed in us for not learning all the names, we picked up a differently-shaped set of knowledge from that drippy afternoon, about the variety of life and the interesting way Jose lives his. Met another jungleman coming back down the path toward town. He did not speak as much, but he accompanied us and smiled and kept his machete ar from our kneecaps. Not many of them, these forest keepers.

Story on the way up: Él árbol brujo The Witch Tree
Plants can do amazing things, Jose tells us at the beginning of our hike. He explains that one tree, if you cut a hole in it and place the underwear of your enemy inside and then close it back up, will squeeze the life out of a person. As it regrows, it tightens on the garment and the owner swells with water very painfully until they eventually burst and die. This was told amidst completely credible fact tidbits about other native plants and José said he wouldn’t have believed it if he hadn’t seen it happen in his community as he was growing up. Not sure if I can believe it, but there is so much about the world which I do not understand...

Another example of the unlikely overlap of traditional and modern: José leads us to the top of a hill overlooking the valley and city below, then pauses to show us pictures on his digital camera of plants, monkeys, his family, and the same view on a clearer day when you can see even beyond the city, to far-off mountains.

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And then there is hybridization, the perpetual mixture of things.
They say in forensic science, “Everything leaves a trace.” A fiber transferred between clothing, an eyelash at the scene of a crime, a smile evoked by a gift, an idea at the end of a conversation, a traditional practice from a borrowed religion...

Ripples spreading outwards,
mixing
outwardly-emanating concentric circles

The true “contemporary” is far from a pure model of modernity. Instead we find a patchwork of old habits, beliefs, practices, reticent artifacts that made it through the evolutionary tunnels of cultural practice. Evolution acts on culture as decisively and haphazardly as on the progression of a species, with gradual ebbs in resources and the iterations of stubborn patterns. Habits accumulate and become as integral to the culture as camouflaging feather patterns, but the system is always susceptible to a mutation in the genes—an invasive species violently co-opts the design, a shock and a change to the old way but nevertheless incorporated into the way of things much in the way a tree will envelope a nail stuck into it. It takes it gradually into its flesh because life can adapt and incorporate more readily than going on being two and separate. The modus operandi is mixture, not quarantine. And so Mother Mary finds her place at the head of the ayahuasca ceremony, a figure of adoration even though she comes from a cultural tradition that choked and attempted to bulldoze the natives who originally cultivated the spiritual and medicinal practice.

Today is a vibrant echoing reflection of all time past; ours to inherit and reshape with our flesh and pulsing ideas. We ride the waves of ripples started long ago and use the reeds at hand to stay afloat, reaching out to old ways for help constructing our boats. “Ayudame, plantita” “Help me, little plant,” asks a groundskeeper at El Centro Takiwasi before turning to a vine his people have kept and used for millennia to foster cosmic knowledge of themselves, seeking to understand their existence in a greater context than the time and place of their context.

... And so Mother Mary finds her place at the head of the Ayahuasca ceremony...

*Please note, this entry may have been written in a moment of some disillusionment and shows some disappointment and angst because the Search for Authenticity can wear heavily on one’s hopes and idealisms. It is, in the end, a search for the truth, but we so often want the truth to come dressed up in the way we expected it. Some of this frustration comes out in this entry, but I do not claim to have ground to stand on for judging modern curanderos—their spirituality and practices are real and are not answerable to my romanticization of what “traditional” means. I also believe there is a population of curanderos who we did not have access to, which may have retained more of the traditional knowledge and assimilated less to Incan, Spanish, or North American
influence. Necessarily, they would have to be very isolated in order to keep their culture in tact throughout each reckless conquest.

3 julio 2010:

Y ahora, al lado de la quebrada en que bañamos con arañas aquáticas más grandes que nuestras caras, escribo para pasar el tiempo—allí está, Winston se ha llegado. Checkers. Viajeros en busca de la ayahuasca. Nosotras buscamos las tradiciones, encontramos un retreat, un spa de purges y dietas. Pensábamos que podríamos comparar la medicina tradicional con la occidental, pero todavía no hemos encontrado la sabiduría nativa de la naturaleza. Parece que está o perdida o escondida. Vemos información limitada de los usos de unas plantitas específicas mezclado con la superstición inconvencible y palida. Sí, creo en los poderes de las plantas para curar, para mostrar, pero no para quitar la mala suerte con un baño fragrante. Pero sí respeto el trabajo del curandero.

And now, beside the stream where we bathed with water spiders bigger than our faces, I write to pass the time—there he is, Winston has arrived. Checkers. Travelers in search of ayahuasca. We seek traditions, we find a retreat, a spa of purges and diets. We thought we could compare traditional and Western medicine, but have not yet found the native natural wisdom. It seems that it is either lost or hidden. We see limited information about the uses of specific plants mixed with unconvincing, pallid superstition. Yes, I believe in the powers of plants to heal, to teach, but not to remove bad luck with a fragrant bath. But I do respect the work of the healer.

4 julio 2010:

I respect the knowledge of plants and their uses, and I respect the mixture of medicine and spirituality in this type of healing. I am confused and frustrated by the invocation of Catholicism in a tradition that is thousands of years older and which nearly ded out because of the Spaniards violent introduction on their religion. Inside, the curandero Winston who we visit at El Centro Situlli stews a conflict so thick and bubbly one hardly has the heart to point out the boiling mess to him. He resents Spaniards to the point that he’ll charge them extra when they come to him (otherwise he is very fair, he assures us) and yet he integrates the worship of Jesus and Mary into his ayahuasca practice, insisting that Catholicism was part of his culture before the Spanish.

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The Coast... curses and plantitas

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 4, 2010
Hueca, Huaca, Huaraz

so i’ve realized that my natural inclination is not toward blogging, but my mama has
objected to my hiatus, so here's what i've got for now:

we've been traveling at a really quick pace since we left quito, staying 2 nights or less in each place. it's been chaotic but really fun. now we're in huaraz (mountain city), and we'll be between huaraz and chavin (small town 2 hours from huaraz where we'll meet up with Stanford professor/archeologist John Rick) for the next... month maybe. this place feels good, very good vibes. clean air, people selling fruit and veggies on the street, and CRAZY tall hats with wide rims and colorful patterned shawls. I'm going to take a million pictures--luckily i found some cheap film in Trujillo, which is a cool but strangely cursed town.... we were only there for one day but we had quite an adventure. first we met this strange girl who seemed really really out of it and was supposedly going to help us find a restaurant but ended up just taking us around the same blocks over and over, and when we were talking to her about the ruins Huaca de la Luna and Huaca del Sol, I accidentally said Hueca and she stopped and said, "hueca? are you talking about me because i can't find a place to eat?" and explained that hueca meant someone who has a hole in their head and so their thoughts just escape right out. after she said that, ana and i could not stop thinking of her that way. there was something very odd about her, an emptiness to her gaze. after ana and i got back from the huaca de la luna (ruins of the ceremonial place of the moche civilization where they used to perform human sacrifices--we think this might have something to do with the curse) we started feeling like we couldn't get a hold of our thoughts and that we were turning into huecas. luckily we chugged some water and snapped out of it in time to plunge into the marketplace. we bought some latin american poetry, tools to work with metal wire for our new artisan careers... doesn't really matter what we bought, it was just really exciting to be in the midst of so many people. it felt like we had broken through the tourist bubble. anyway, another night bus later and we've arrived in Huaraz and i'll leave it at that for now because we're going to go enjoy our new city :)

Much love, and i'll try to write more.

Posted by Justine Massey at 7:50 AM
There was a boy on the beach in Mâncora who asked if I wanted to go for a walk. He said his father was an ayahuasquero and he’d grown up on the stuff, freed at a very early age. He began telling of the jungle and the ancestors, snakes and insights. He felt he had found a way to the purity of life and was put-off by my camera catching sunset rays. No, no, you don’t need that crap, that technology. You have to be free, natural.

Yes, I said, but this feels natural to me. I think Pablo wanted me to thrown my equipment to the sea. He would have rejoiced at such a demonstration of anarchic agency and he would have seen in me a saved soul, reaching back to roots of raw simplicity.

The animalistic utopia Pablo propones is not new to me. There was a time, fresh at college, when all human innovation seemed strange and cataclysmic to me—a giant off-balance Rube-Goldberg machine of awkward gears grinding and screeching as the junk pile expanded, growing in size but inherently empty, continuously toppling and restacking. I saw the Frankenstein of civilization as an aberration in nature’s firm but serene laws, where beasts may fall, but only to the ground to re-grow. I was convinced that a hunter-gatherer society was the only way for humans to live harmoniously, and searched for the original departure point when man became dis-integrated from his surroundings. Was it fire? farming? language? medicine? In general, man seems set apart by his propensity to manipulate his environment to suit his needs, taking power into his own nimble hands to affect change. But here is the conundrum: if it is man’s nature to invent and adapt and fabricate and organize, synthesize, create and destroy, it is because his environment made it possible. His mutation was successful. His “unnaturalness” arose from nature’s trial and error strategy for shaping life. To reject man in favor of nature is to reject nature. I didn’t get into all of this with Pablo on our 10 minute walk (hunter-gatherer is quite a mouthful in Spanish) but I held firm on my place in modernity and kept my camera well above the waves. Pablo, with his swim shorts and dainty gold tooth, is as much a product of the times as I am. As strange as it is, Ayahuasca and iPods are contemporaries. Each individual is a mix of ancient biology and instantaneous responses, each culture a collaboration between tradition and continual experimentation. Pablo and I seek authenticity in different ways—Pablo rides a bus to leave the jungle and visit the sea but doesn’t want his picture taken with my little machine. I flew to Peru to learn what my computer screen couldn’t tell me, and lugged 90 rolls of film on my back (1/5th the size and weight of my sole backpack) because I’m dedicated to a traditional technology.

In our research, we quickly found ourselves changing our rhetoric from “modern versus traditional” to traditional versus occidental medicine since “modern” seemed to imply that the traditional practices were relegated to the past when we were looking for the modern-day expression of these practices. The contrast, compromise, and collaboration of traditional knowledge and modern practices: ayahuasca in coca-cola bottles, Mary at the helm of the curandero’s ceremonial space, the bottling and advertising of traditional plants like uña de gato, the reliance of many curanderos’ practices on the influx of foreign tourists looking to experiment with ancient knowledge for a day or two, the
motorcycles purring at the edge of the rainforest, the climbers on the faces of rocks which sheltered ancestors and continues to hold their mysteries and cave paintings...
This is where we found authenticity, in the dynamic hodgepodge of old and new which are forever informing one another. The new springs from the old, and the only old we know is that which is accessible through the lens of today.

ALTITUDE
The thin, fresh air of the mountains

TUESDAY, JULY 20, 2010
15,370 feet

Hola from Quito, Ecuador!

The city of Quito sits at about the altitude of the highest Sierra Nevada Mountains. And it is cradled by mountains that go about 5,000 feet higher. Ana and I climbed (walked, strolled) up Pichincha yesterday, to reach a height of 15,370 feet. The peak was within sight, and would have been an easy climb for Ana if we weren't high on altitude. We were lucid enough to know our limits, and settled on a nice scramble up to a ledge, and then a cloud swallowed us—we've got pictures of us flanked in white to prove it. The hike was absolutely beautiful. We agreed that the rational parts of us don't really understand why it's so great to hike up a big mound of dirt and rock and grasses, but luckily we aren't overly rational people. As we walked, those square little thoughts that cycle round and round dissipated into the clear, light air. We were pretty sure we could feel that the atmosphere was weighing on us less. Enormous clouds rolled overhead and filled the valley down below, glowing with light. Weird vegetation reflected the challenges of mountain life, and every once in a while black and white marbled birds would cut past us with a chirp. The icing of the view was Quito glistening like a jeweled blanket laid down in the creases between mountains. As much as I love cities, I love them even more seen in the context of the landscape that nourishes them.

We descended with the sun, getting back to the teleférico (snowless-ski-lift) as the last light drained from the sky. A taxi ride and dinner out with friends reintegrated us into the city, and now I'm writing from the comfort of our host Galito's home whose family has been wonderful to us and even has a little pug dog whose snorts are surprisingly adorable. All in all, feeling good--both adventurous and comfortable at the same time.

Much love to all of you at home!

Posted by Justine Massey at 10:41 AM

Sept. 1 2010
Hatun Machay
Rock forest 4,200 meters high
Here’s to experimenting, here’s to graceful connection. Quiet calm confianza. An outlook from a Pride-Rock: All of this is yours and you belong to this—land, earth more fantastic than the moon, earthling Justine can’t possibly narrate...

feathers where we nested
I follow these birds,
I trust them
in their light flight
and song

Delicate rock carved by water, whittled by wind. Play the delicate tips of these boulders like a colossal instrument worth touching lightly, gorgeous for another 1000 years. And the sheep Aaaaa and Aymara half sheep half unicorn dogfriend soft white fur cotton-matted dreads—guardian playmate, sister in another species. Momentum of wind and sun and rock and field—mountain.

SAN PEDRO

I awake in the refuge at 3 in the morning, put on all my warmest wool, and step out into the night with Andres and Ana. Andrés is the caretaker of Hatun Machay, managing the interests of his rock-climbing clients with those of the ancestors and the current Quechua-speaking natives who live in rock houses and care for their sheep on the sides of the hills cradling the rock forest. Hatun Machay is the most beautiful place I have ever been. At an altitude of 4,200 meters, I couldn’t stay the first time I saw it because I was still recovering from a voracious bout of altitude sickness and had to return to lower ground. When I was finally able to stay for a week, it was a time of healing in many senses. My digestive system was kicking back into gear after having shut down from lack of oxygen (at least that is my explanation for how the altitude affected me). My right cheek was recovering from a sun&snow&wind burn which bubbled the very top layer of skin—Vallunaraju, the mountain Ana and I climbed with ice axes and cramp-ons left a lick on my face from its intensity (I didn’t mind too much, the moonset/sunrise over the peaks of La Cordillera Blanca was well worth the wear-and-tear). I also, if you don’t mind me sharing, was a veritable fountain of snot and spent a good part of my days clearing my airways. Toilet paper rolls have never been so precious to me. Hatun Machay was the ultimate site for recovery. San Pedro took this healing to another level.

Healing Old Wounds

There is something inherently violating about an injury. An invasion of your peace, a disruption to your wholeness. And there’s no reversal, nor simple 1-step process to healing. It is not like putting dirty dishes in the dishwasher. It is closer to re-sewing a torn pair of pants, though the needle and thread are not so easily defined nor tucked so neatly in the kit. Our healing powers are braided into our genes—the blood knows how to clot, the bones tend to mend, and they say Time heals all pain. So healing can be a
waiting game—the boy summons patience while his cast itches and the young woman swims to stay strong until she can run again. What of those injuries that persist, either festering or dormant but aching? What of the scar that burns bright six years later? What of the joint that never regained strength? The cough that cannot be cleared? The addiction that cannot be cured? These dilemma beg for active treatments in the pursuit of health. We begin to look into the wounds, search for the roots of the problem. Sometimes they seem to take hold deep within us, beyond the discomfort of the body, drawing from emotional/psychological/spiritual [what is this, how do we call it?] pain.

I believe this to be the case with the chronic ache in my right foot and knee.

I have incredibly sensitive feet. They are unbearably ticklish, they hurt from the cold, and a gentle foot massage is a guaranteed way to win me over. When the doctor taps on the soles of my feet looking for reflex, my feet bounce twice, feeling the rebound of his knocks. I’m very demanding of my feet, seeing as there are so many interesting places to go and people to meet (plus I love dancing). When I was playing tennis in high school, my feet, especially the right one, became incredibly uncomfortable within my shoes and even the pressure of the sheet against my foot at night registered as pain. I spoke to my parents, both in the medical profession—my father was a psychiatrist and my mother a nurse—and we concluded that I had inherited my father’s bunion (a gradual displacement of a bone in the foot which can cause great discomfort) and, based on his experience, it would only get worse with time. We scheduled a surgery. When I was sixteen, I relinquished consciousness while Dr. Hook (seriously, Dr. Hook) and his medical team wheeled me to the surgery room. The Beatles were playing, as per the operating procedure Dr. Hook had described to me in consultation. In order to keep my bones from sliding to a more extreme angle and to relieve pressure on my nerves, Dr. Hook sliced open my right foot, bolted my bones together, shaved bone, and and even broke the tip of my big tow to straiten it, securing it with a small metal loop. I awoke to a freshly engineered foot wrapped thoughtfully in protective bandages. I accepted the crutches with relative grace and began counting down to my next tennis match. But my young spry body did not heal as anticipated. At the check-up, the bones did not show sings of knitting, and in my impatience to walk again I rebroke the tip of my toe—today it does not lie down all the way. After months of waiting and a Jr. Prom spent in “The Boot” as my date affectionately called it, I began a treatment of some sort of electrical pulses... basically, I would stick my foot in a kind of plastic box for a few minutes while the little clock counted down. I couldn’t tell that anything was happening, but either the magical invisible waves helped stimulate my bone growth, or it provided a very effective placebo effect because I did eventually heal to the point where Dr. Hook stopped scheduling follow-ups. And then it was up to me to get accustomed to using my foot again normally. I practiced walking, I took it easy yet tried not to favor it, and I avoided shoes that rubbed my scar too hard (except for those little pointy blue ones, they were too cool to shelve).

Life returned to normal—my foot was not perfect, but it seemed perpetually on the mend, with strength and balance just around the corner. And then, a year and a half of healing gone by, my father died suddenly of a heart attack two weeks before my high school
graduation. Shatter. Bodies, lives, families were revealed for their fragility. I ached deeper than I thought my soul to go. And no one could prescribe a relief for the sickness of loss. Friends held my hands, brought me candy, let me talk or not, drink or not, laugh or not, cry or not. Time passed and I left my broken family to go to school where my father spent his undergraduate years. I looked for him everywhere yet tried to make it my own. I ground my teeth, believed in love, became a vegetarian, my bones still ached.
The strangest thing about deep, lasting pain is that it hides not out of maliciousness but out of necessity. From the moment of injury—the phone call, the siren lights in the front yard—the psyche begins to bury. It’s too much, it’s catastrophic, world crushing... it can exist as a concept outside of one’s reality, or in the abyss of acknowledged but unintelligible facts stowed within. When held in between, in that thin plane of consciousness, it strains against the protective structures which allow us to commit ourselves utterly to Life knowing the response in the call-and-answer is Death.

So when faced with the wounds of humanity, we bury. But wanting to heal, we dig. And sometimes the hurt translates itself into physical pain so it can be understood at least briefly, fragmentarily. I miss my father, my foot hurts. My foot hurts, I miss my father.

San Pedro: Andres says, “We don’t die, we change form.” I look around at the crevassed faces of those who came before and anchored their spirits in the rocks. I envision the special things about my father and see them so present in the world he brought me into. His blue eyes are the sky. His salt, the ocean. His questions, my questions. I miss having him all together, but it is so wonderful to find he is not gone.

Leaves drop to the ground, and the tree does not dwell on its loss because new ones grow each Spring.

Whether I am the tree,
or another leaf on the branch,
I have this life to grow
and thrill with colors.

This is mine to live,
not to hold on to death
like a phantom limb.

Recognition of this does not
complete my healing,

but it gives me energy for each successive step.
Shake it out

Poem mixed with dance, performed at the open-mic in Cuzco:

¡AL ATAQUE!

Arriba, arriba con los pájaros
que te guían
plumas por todos lados
y caras en las piedras
-ya, estamos bien,-
dicen los ancestros
desde el pasado petrificado
-cuida a los lugares sagrados,
y váyate a la playa.
Bañate, disfrutale.

lleve esa carne
y muévete como prefieras.

To the ATTACK!

Up, up with the birds
that guide you
feathers everywhere
and faces in the rocks
-Enough, we're fine, -
the ancestors say
from the petrified past
-Care for the sacred sites
and get yourself to the beach.
Bathe yourself, enjoy yourself.

Take that meat
and move yourself as you please.

THANK YOU. Thank you to the Stanford Anthropology Department's Beagle II Award, both for the money and for the confidence in us and in our project. There is so much to
be learned when one is living the experiment; thank you for enabling this voyage of exploration. I am only just beginning to crack open the rolls of film I brought back from Perú, and I am thrilled to continue learning from the diverse images of how people live, work, and heal in their environments.

Hasta pronto...