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A Street Without a Name: The Essentials of Communication

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Griffin Messer

Griffin is an International Studies from Springfield, Ohio. The son of an English major mother and International Studies father, he believes he has found the ideal combination of his parents’ degrees with his father’s major and investment in the Spanish language with a Spanish minor, and his mother’s enjoyment of writing with a Creative Writing minor. Griffin is passionate about people, infatuated with music, and is secretly a hopeless romantic (he asks that you keep that detail to yourself). He is pursuing a career in international affairs and hopes to become a diplomat.

A Street Without a Name:
The Essentials of Communication

I sit in a house without a number, on a street without a name. The rocking chair, beneath me, creaks softly, and the birds chirp just within earshot. The heat is blistering and seems only to grow more and more intense as the seconds tick by. The fan runs in a corner, but merely serves to push the hot, thick air around the room and make us even more uncomfortable. I can feel the sweat hold my shirt to my body, and I can smell the faint stench of the body odor of an entire town. The bulbs are off. Our light comes from the day outside.

I sit with two men. One man, Kaleb, I’ve known for only a handful of days; the other, Andres, is a man I’ve only just met. We sit in rocking chairs, in a small house with few rooms. We sit in a neighborhood of thousands of homes much like this one. We sit in
near one hundred degree heat. We sit in Chinandega, Nicaragua. One man speaks one language. The other speaks another. And, to my dismay, I am left to try to mediate between the two.

Kaleb is an Ohio boy. Kaleb, as usual, finds himself in jeans, even in this heat, partially because of his own poor planning, partially because he hates the sight of himself wearing shorts. He sits in a rocking chair against the wall directly across from mine, seeking the psychological shelter made in the shadow of the open door. Kaleb speaks English. Prior to our visiting, he knew one word of Spanish: leche.

Andres is our Nicaraguan host. He leads YoungLife, or rather VidaJoven, here in Chinandega. He is also wearing jeans, but he is considerably more used to the heat here. He sits perpendicular to Kaleb and me, capitalizing on the slight breeze provided by the open door. Andres lives here, in this three-room house without fully completed walls, without a number, on a street without a name. Andres speaks Spanish, although he can understand considerably more English than Kaleb can Spanish. Prior to our visit he knew a few words of English, one of them: milk.

Remaining, there is me. I wear athletic shorts that do little to help the heat. I am here to experience life in this country before I continue my journey to La Finca YoungLife camp in the north of the country where I will help and serve the organization that I love so much. My rocking chair faces the door, and I struggle against the excess of light emitted through it. I speak English, but I have something else that helps me much less than I ever hoped it would.
I have three years of high school Spanish classes under my belt, and therefore, I am the translator.

So here I sit, the translator of two men who otherwise could not communicate with any semblance of efficiency. We have hours to kill, and plenty to learn about each other, so we begin.

“Ask him how old he is.”
“Uhh.. Cuantos años tienes?”
“Veinte.”
“Twenty.”

Our conversations start slow. The simplest of questions paired with the simplest of answers still tests my Spanish abilities to the furthest reaches of my skills, but the undeniable tension seems to lessen as we press on in our conversations. The rocking chairs creak quietly, the heat chokes, and we continue to talk.

“Oh, oh, ask him how long he’s been a part of YoungLife.”
“Umm… Cuanto tiempo.. Uh.. hiciste VidaJoven?”
“Ahh.. tres años. Mas o menos.”
“He said he’s been doing it for about three years now.”
“Oh yes! I thought I heard him say something about three.”
“There’s another word,” we say, as we’ve counted the words Kaleb has learned in this conversation alone. He is currently at seven, with more hopefully to come. He is learning quickly, but only the words that seem exceptionally interesting to him-- the words that sound cool.

We continue on like this. Kaleb asks a question in English; I ask Andres the same question in Spanish in my terribly fragmented language with my extremely limited vocabulary. Andres answers in Spanish, and I do my absolute best to interpret any answer for
Kaleb in English. Kaleb learns another word. The results are choppy, and the process is quite inefficient, but it is working. The rocking chairs creak, the Chinandegan heat presses on, and the talking becomes easier.

All of this back and forth brings to my mind a rather simple question -- a simple question with a potentially very complicated answer. My question is as follows: what is truly necessary to get a point across? What are the true essentials of communication? I believe that answer to be entirely dependent on the situation. Sometimes, it is only necessary to give a subject paired with a nice bit of predicate and potentially a direct object and the point is communicated and the job done. Other times, an author must write outrageously long theses with countless, excessively long words that about half of the audience will have to look up in order to understand the point fully. Other times it may only require a point, or a nod, or a wink, or a collection of largely uninterpretable utterances that seem like they cannot possibly be a form of language. A specific example comes to my mind, and that example is named Dominick, which takes me to a different time and place.

I sit in the cafeteria of my high school. The room is utterly chaotic, and it’s often hard to hear the people sitting at the same table as me. Out of the commotion, though, comes a voice I’ve learned to pick out of any crowd. It is unique, and it finds itself very near to my heart. That voice belongs to Dominick, my brother and the person I love more than any other on our planet. It is unlike any other because Dom is unlike any other. Dom has CP, or Cerebral Palsy.
“Bubba, bubba-” which is his way of saying Griffin- “foobau ho toigh?”

“Is football home tonight?” I ask, to make sure I translated correctly.

“Yah.”

“Yeah. We’re home, bud.”

“Ohkay, ankks bubba.”

Dom has a moderate to severe speech disability and has worked his entire life to learn how best to communicate in manners that the common person may be able to understand. Only after years of experience with the boy have I, along with the rest of my family, learned to understand him on a very regular basis. In any other circumstance he is left to struggle through communicating using this muddy and edited version of English -- a version in which nearly no words sound as they would if they were said by any typical English speaker, paired with copious hand motions and facial expressions. Dom has taught me, likely more than anything else, what is really needed to communicate.

He still teaches me more every day. He makes me appreciate my ability to speak and write in such a way that it can be easily understood by the masses. He makes me question what I truly need to say. What words are truly necessary? What is most efficient? Must I include a subject and a complete predicate and a direct object? Or will a nod do the trick? Should I bother repeating myself about rocking chairs and high Nicaraguan heats? Or is it excessive detail? Should houses have numbers? Must streets really have names?