



Editor's Notes

THE BUS TO COPAN

My wife and I spent the Christmas Holidays in Honduras, visiting my daughter who is serving a two-year stint in the Peace Corps. I always cherish international travel opportunities because I am so fascinated by the distinctive features of the local culture. This in turn stimulates me to reflect upon and better understand my own culture, and sometimes even myself. This trip was extra special because I was able to see first hand that my daughter has become nearly fluent in Spanish, has formed many friendships, and has already contributed much to her local community. But that aspect of the trip is more appropriate for my family letter.

Visiting the Mayan Ruins at Copan was one of the highlights of our trip. These ruins are widely considered the most archeologically important remains of the Mayan Empire. They are remarkably well preserved, with generous public access to the grounds, the structures, and even the internal tunnels. Set in a lush and tranquil forest along the Copan River with clear views of surrounding mountains, the site is both inspiring and relaxing. But that aspect of the trip is also more appropriate for another forum.

The bus ride to Copan is the focus of this column. The trip of 100 or so miles took 7 hours. Our trip started at the end of a ticket line that snaked through the bus terminal and down the street. The next line wound through the parking lot and connected to whatever bus happened to be leaving. There were far more people than bus seats and getting on the buses was first come, first served. People were remarkably courteous; I saw only one person trying to cut in line and no one fussing about having to wait. Once we reached a point in our line of close proximity to an opening bus door, all chaos broke loose. At least 100 people, including infants and frail elderly dashed for the bus door, attempting to cram themselves through a 24-inch opening. Everyone was smashed; no one was hurt or angry. The driver closed the door when the seats and aisle were packed. Twenty minutes into the ride, the bus pulled to the side of the road to drop off a few riders. The driver could not get the bus moving again; so we poured out of the bus onto the roadside. Everyone waited patiently. Kids did not fuss or try to run into the street. No one complained. An hour later the bus engine roared, the crowd cheered, and we climbed back onto the bus for a ride to the original bus station and to the end of the still long line to repeat the waiting and boarding process on a new bus. Three buses later, we finally made it to Copan. I stood half the time and sat half the time. At no point did I not have someone smashed against me. At no point did I hear anyone complain, and every few minutes I saw a kindness extended, be it a young person offering a seat to an elderly rider, someone offering to

hold a package, or someone sliding over to fit a third person onto a seat built for two. I learned that "peekaboo" is indeed an internationally effective method to entertain babies up to age 3, and that distorting one's face can keep 3-6 year olds howling for 45 minutes even when they are crammed 4 or 5 to a seat. Five hours into the trip, I was really enjoying myself and marveling at the accepting nature of the Honduran people. I reflected on what is health and what is quality of life.

The Honduran people have so many challenges. Compared to the 10 top nations in the world, their per capita Gross Domestic Product is less than one tenth of the average of those nations, their infant mortality is eight times higher, their life expectancy is 10 years shorter, and 28% of the population is unemployed. Broken families are very common. Drug smugglers are so ruthless and prevalent that travel between cities at night is often fatal and rarely attempted. Nevertheless, with the exception of the large capital city, food is prevalent, kids can play safely and happily in the streets, and most people are kind to strangers.

How do they do it? They focus on the moment and on what they can control. They focus on relationships. They are not caught up with trying to juggle a zillion different projects or amass great wealth. They are patient. Sounds a lot like the advice we give to people to manage stress.

I thought about the definition of optimal health I have espoused in these pages for several decades: a balance of physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health. Pretty good model ... one that I need to better integrate into my own life. I thought about what I could and would do to improve my own approach to life and how I treat other people, even in stressful situations. Just as I decided I could actually be very comfortable crammed into a bus that took all day to go 100 miles, a well-dressed middle-aged man slipped into the aisle next to my seat, rested his significant potbelly on my shoulder, pressed his groin against my back and started verbally harassing the pretty, teenage girls standing in the aisle in front of me.

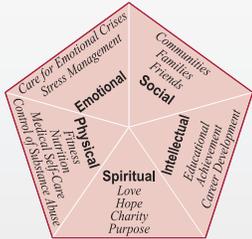
OK, so my fantasy of a perfect social environment in Honduras was shattered and part of my new found patience lasted only a few hours. Change is difficult and new habits take months or years to take hold and need to be adapted to different circumstances. Nevertheless, my interest and commitment to reflecting on what is health, what is quality of life, and what I can do to improve balance in my own life was reinvigorated by this trip and will continue.

Michael O'Donnell

Michael P. O'Donnell, PhD, MBA, MPH

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(O'Donnell, *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 1989, 3(3):5.)

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