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Moisus from the Sierra

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Kellen Johansen

Quito, Ecuador

November 21, 2017

Moisus from the Sierra

I met Moisus during what for me was an aggravating struggle at 13,000 feet of elevation up the side of an extinct Ecuadorian volcano, and what for him was a walk back home from pre-school. A broken zipper on his backpack caused its back pocket to swing wide open behind him as he made his way up the slope. It looked to me like it must have been obnoxious, and my friend must have thought the same thing since when we finally caught up she offered to hook the broken bag to the back of her mountaineering pack. He seemed glad to get rid of it and happy enough to share his daily route to four exhausted gringos. For the next 40 minutes Moisus teamed up with my three friends and me on our way to the rim of the volcano, and during that time I pestered him with questions about the most important things in life, like whether or not he likes caramel candies (yes) and his favorite animal on his family's farm (the cow).

Though I, aside from candy and cows, also managed to learn a few deeper things about Moisus's life. He was four years old and lived with his parents and brother on the slopes of the extinct crater. He went to school at a small town at the base of the hill and walked up and down every day. When he wasn't walking or learning, he sometimes helped his brother and his parents run a small shop on the top of the trail by carrying food or vending to tourists. He was fairly quiet but became very concerned for our friend when we told him that he was sick from drinking bad water. In some ways, Moisus was a typical four-year-old, but in others he acted beyond his age.

Our talk changed my own perspective in several ways. The first was a shift in my perspective about what it meant to be isolated. Growing up in Alaska, I always resented what I thought was an unfair separation from the opportunities of the rest of the United States. I had dreams of playing college baseball, but the fact that my hometown was so far removed meant that I was at a disadvantage. It felt like a big deal at the time, but when compared to four-year-old Moïsus's hike up and down a volcano every day to school, suddenly my situation seemed less unfair. Another was the way I thought about work. When I was 14, I began working at a tour company. Compared to my peers, I began working fairly young, well before I graduated high school. But Moïsus was already helping his family run their store before he turned five. Suddenly my inconveniences seemed much more mundane.