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MARK WM. RADECKE

## SCAM-ing Service-Learning and Mission Trips: A Satirical Essay

The increase in service-learning courses and short-term mission trips offered by colleges and universities, religious communities, congregations, parachurch groups, and a host of independent organizations in recent years has been dramatic. Research by Janet Eyster and Dwight Giles (1999) has demonstrated both the pedagogical efficacy and the life-transforming potential of these experiences. As with any venture, however, such courses and trips can be done well or they can be done poorly. Stereotypes, for example, can be inadvertently reinforced. Ethnocentric assumptions can go unchallenged. Those who should benefit from service projects can be treated as objects of pity and targets of charity rather than fellow human beings who allow strangers to enter their communities, receive their hospitality, and share, for a brief while, the realities of their lives. One critic warns that the poorly executed short-term mission trip can become “a spiritualized vacation for spoiled, materialistic North Americans” (Whitner, 2003). When any or all of these things happen, students’ moral development is impeded, their spiritual development is hampered, and the transformations that teachers and leaders intend for their students can actually become deformations. Cognizant of these dangers, some thoughtful practitioners

have proposed codes of ethics for those who design and lead such experiences (Chapdelaine, Ruiz, Warchal & Wells, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to invite the reader to consider some of the best/promising (and worst) practices that can influence the quality of service-learning and short-term mission experiences and, in turn, the impact of those experiences on the lives and development of all participants—students as well as community partners with whom they serve. I am acutely aware, however, that—besides being soporific to some readers—a recitation of best and worst practices can sound like so much shrill harping, the pontifications of a self-appointed know-it-all. I have therefore chosen to couch the findings of my research in the form of a fictional narrative. This choice is not simply a matter of trying to be clever or polite; it draws on the observations of Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard regarding the value of indirect communication—a rhetorical device designed to deliver readers from their illusions and invite them to engage with deeper issues of the soul. (Kierkegaard, 1859). Such indirection is evident in, for example, the prophet Nathan’s charge against King David (2 Samuel 12) and Jesus’ use of parables, both of grace and of judgment. The take-away

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messages embedded in the narrative that follows suggest promising practices that readers might adapt and emulate, and worst practices they will do well to avoid.

### **Preface**

Those who design and lead service-learning courses and short-term missions at colleges, universities, and congregations often suspect that there must be another, more nefarious type of organization at work: one whose primary objective is to undermine their efforts, obstruct participants' learning, and sabotage their moral and spiritual development. The intercepted email correspondence below presumes and reifies the existence of just such an organization: "Spiritual Consultants and Mercenaries, Incorporated," doing business as SCAM, Inc.

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**FROM:** Dwayne Pipe, Ph.D., Asst. Professor – Thistlebottom University  
**TO:** Horatio Gumnut, President and CEO – SCAM, Inc.  
**SUBJECT:** Request for Proposal

Dear Mr. Gumnut:

I discovered your firm, Spiritual Consultants and Mercenaries, Inc., via a pop-under ad during an internet search, and write to inquire, in the strictest confidence, about retaining your services. Could you describe those services to me? Thank you.

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**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut  
**TO:** Dwayne Pipe  
**SUBJECT:** RE: Request for Proposal

Dear Dr. Pipe:

Thank you for your interest in SCAM, Inc. We are a centuries-old, multi-national organization serving as agents of Newton's Third Law of Motion: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." We represent the "equal and opposite" side of that formula, operating primarily in the spiritual, not the physical realm (although these two realms are often more closely related than many people suspect). For SCAM, Inc., causing nails to bend when being hammered, roasts to burn though being properly prepared, and tires to go flat is child's play. Our forte is reinforcing stereotypes, festering resentments,

obstructing insights, instilling notions, facilitating misunderstandings, and complicating love. We are not malevolent; think of us simply as the opposing team. How dull would it be to go to a sporting event where only one team took the field, and there was no defense to oppose the offense, no linebackers trying to sack the quarterback, no outfielder leaping to snag a ball headed for the fence, no guard to block the forward's jump shot? SCAM, Inc. keeps the game of life interesting by representing the "on the other hand, by the same token, notwithstanding" side of things.

For example, if a woman sees a homeless man on the street, is moved by his plight, and thinks to help him, we stimulate her xenophobia while reminding her of her other obligations, the danger of fostering dependence, and the possibility that the man could use her well-intended gift to feed an addiction. If a man feels drawn to the faith and practices of a religious group, we arrange for him to come across film footage of the Bakker and Swaggart scandals of the 1980s, histories of the Crusades and the Inquisition, and news reports regarding religiously-motivated acts of terrorism in an effort to curb his appetite to embrace any faith.

As our firm's name suggests, we provide two types of services: consulting and mercenary. Those who avail themselves of the latter have an assortment of highly trained and experienced gremlins, hobgoblins, gnomes, pixies, imps, faeries, and bugbears at their disposal to do their bidding. Those whose budgets are modest can learn the basic principles and practices themselves through our online tutorial course, upon the completion of which we continue to provide advice and consultation. Part-time intervention by one or more of our spiritual mercenaries is also available on a fee-for-service basis.

Perhaps if you could describe your need, we can discuss a suitable arrangement. I look forward to hearing from you.

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**FROM:** Dwayne Pipe  
**TO:** Horatio Gumnut  
**SUBJECT:** My Situation

Thank you for your prompt and informative response.

Here's my situation. My colleague here at Thistlebottom University, Assistant Professor of Religion Dr. Charity Apoyo, is planning a service-learning mission trip to Nicaragua. She has invited me to come along as a chaperone. This is an opportunity I am eager to accept, though not for the do-gooder reasons that motivate many who undertake such excursions. Let me explain.

Dr. Apoyo and I are both assistant professors with comparable credentials, and we are in direct competition for a very

limited number of tenured positions. If this venture succeeds, she will have a considerable leg up on me come tenure and promotion time. It is imperative, therefore, that this new project of hers crash and burn (not literally, of course; I will also be in the airplane). No one should be physically harmed or injured; I simply want to provide some push-back to assure that the venture produces inglorious results.

I have a month's worth of wages at my disposal. What will that buy?

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**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut  
**TO:** Dwayne Pipe  
**SUBJECT:** RE: My Situation

Your need is perfectly in line with SCAM's services. I believe we can work together on this matter. Despite the current global economic recession—or perhaps precisely because of it—demand for our spiritual mercenaries is high, with costs naturally driven by laws of supply and demand. May I suggest, therefore, our online course?

Confounding the sort of undertaking you describe is a professional hobby of mine: I have become something of an authority on “disservice-learning,” and I will therefore be pleased to act as your personal consultant in this matter.

You may register and pay for the course through our secure website. I will know when you have completed it and will contact you shortly thereafter. Thank you for doing business with SCAM, Inc.

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**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut  
**TO:** Dwayne Pipe  
**SUBJECT:** Course Completion

Congratulations on the successful completion of SCAM's online tutorial. You clearly have an aptitude for metaphysical manipulation, a capacity that will serve you well as we collaborate.

You say that Dr. Apoyo is planning a service-learning mission trip through your university, and to Nicaragua, of all places. Accompanying her and her students will afford you abundant opportunities to employ both your natural talent and your newly acquired skills. By nipping certain things in the bud and nurturing others, you can assure that the tree of her noble good intentions will bear rotten and stunted fruit—the very sort we at SCAM, Inc. find so tasty and delectable.

Permit me, therefore, to advise you with regard to the myriad ways in which this new undertaking of hers can be undermined. The first and primary principle you need to bear in mind is this: Do not seek to defeat her efforts overtly, but rather to manipulate them. Remember the ditty you learned in the tutorial:

*Use the energy she expends  
To achieve the opposite of what she intends!*

I am sure I do not need to remind you of the material with which the road to Hell is paved. Dr. Apoyo intends that this experience will *help* Nicaraguans living in poverty. Make it so she and her students *commodify* “the poor,” using them as mere means to her charitable ends. She intends that the experience will *transform* the minds and souls of her students. Apply your skills to assure that it will *deform* those minds and souls. These things you will do by applying the same principle used in certain martial arts. Use the opponent's force against her instead of directly opposing it. A twist here, a turn there, and Dr. Apoyo's enterprise will bend in your direction.

For example, you could use her passion for this new venture to short-circuit her rationality and make her think that more than a modicum of planning and preparation would demonstrate a lack of trust in the God to whom she prays. She and her students should just plan to show up and do good. Oh, how much havoc SCAM, Inc. was able to wreak in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita! Our mercenaries successfully instilled the notion that people should just go at once and help those unfortunate flood victims. And so scores of Americans, their common sense clouded by compassion, tossed reason to the wind, loaded up U-Hauls with boxes of tattered tee-shirts and bags of pulverized potato chips and headed for the Mississippi Delta, giving nary a thought to where they as visitors might lodge in an area where thousands of permanent residents were already homeless, making no provisions to remove their own human waste from a city whose sewer and septic systems were already overwhelmed, and taking nothing to drink to a place where potable water was as scarce as lips on a chicken. Oh, what glee! Turning potential blessing into pure burden was so easy it was almost unfair, which, of course, suited our team just fine.

You see, Professor Pipe, this is how you will achieve your goals: less by means of direct opposition and more through subtle subversion. So set your mind to that task, and keep her mind from it.

Keep me posted on new developments. I promise to respond promptly.

**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut  
**TO:** Dwayne Pipe  
**SUBJECT:** Trip Preparations

Given your descriptions of Dr. Apoyo's rather deliberate nature, I am not surprised that your efforts to derail her preparations have met with limited success. As those pesky messengers of her God are so fond of saying, "Fear not!" We have many other arrows in our quiver, and some are sure to strike their mark.

So she is of the pensive, thoughtful sort. Then let us use that! Plague her mind with thoughts about the plethora of things that can go wrong on a trip such as the one she is planning. Preoccupy her with thoughts of lost baggage, cancelled flights, uncooperative weather, surly guides, whining and drunken students, leaky boats and rickety buses, language barriers and the like. Then remind her of her vulnerable status as an untenured professor. A few hours on the website of the Centers for Disease Control and the State Department's International Travel Warnings web page may persuade her that she is about to walk her students into a valley of pestilence and hostility where dengue fever and dysentery join gang violence and political instability as constant threats to students' safety and well-being. The more you are able to focus her attention on matters such as these, the less time and energy she will have to think about those things that could truly make the experience transformative in the way she intends. Do you perceive the pattern here, good doctor? First, try to get her to pay insufficient attention to practical matters; and if that doesn't work, then make her obsess over those matters. Either way, our team wins.

Oh—and don't forget the value of a well-placed nightmare!

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**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut  
**TO:** Dwayne Pipe  
**SUBJECT:** Orientation Sessions

So Dr. Apoyo's preparations continue apace, and she is gathering her students for orientation sessions. Your objective, therefore, now shifts. You are to divert their thoughts from topics of civic, political, moral, theological, and spiritual substance and keep them focused on such mundane matters as passports, packing, and prophylactic vaccinations. If they must do pre-trip reading and discussing, make sure it is about such things as folkloric dances, *quinceñera* celebrations, and other quaint traditions. At all costs, keep them from considering, for example, the history of American military involvement in Nicaragua, the social and political manipulations of the United Fruit Company and the

US support of the Somoza regime. If the students reflect on such matters as these, they may begin to detect a pattern of systemic oppression and injustice instead of merely focusing, as we want them to do, on the pitiable conditions of discrete individuals. That would be a grave error for our team.

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**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut  
**TO:** Dwayne Pipe  
**SUBJECT:** Reflection

Dr. Apoyo is proving to be wiler than most who design and lead ventures of this variety. You report that she is requiring her students to commence their journaling several weeks before the actual trip begins. This is not good news. This sort of "preflection" (Eylar, 2002, pp. 517-534) may cultivate in her students the habit of actually observing and taking note of things, especially things about themselves! Even worse, preflection may lead her students to a dawning awareness of religious and cultural stereotypes and their own ethnocentric assumptions (Keene & Colligan, 2004)—intellectually and spiritually powerful dynamics about which we would prefer they remain blissfully and malignantly ignorant.

No, my dear doctor. Keep their journaling light and breezy—replete with the eager anticipation of palm trees, cerulean skies, and tropical fruits. Quietly and without drawing undue attention to the fact that you are doing so, reinforce the belief that students' accustomed ways of thinking and acting and being form the gold standard against which all other ways of thinking and acting and being are to be measured. If this proves impossible, then take the opposite tack: instill a false sense of multiculturalism which suggests that it is inappropriate for them to form any moral judgment about another culture, its practices and mores. Ironically, Professor Pipe, both ethnocentrism and moral relativism achieve the same end: they preclude taking another culture seriously; the former by discounting it and the latter by a well-disguised disinclination to do the work required actually to know the culture well enough to engage it critically (Midgley, 2004). Each is, therefore, a form of moral and intellectual sloth.

As they anticipate their service-learning adventure, make the members of her class feel heroic, self-giving, sacrificial, and yet still humble. Make them especially aware of their humility—and proud of it. After all, they are giving their time and energy (and not a little hard-earned cash) to improve the lives of poor, benighted people they've never met and are unlikely ever to see again—people, not coincidentally, whom many of them would

cross the street to avoid were they to see them on the sidewalks of their neighborhoods after dark.

Thus you may begin to generate a mindset most useful to your purpose: the objectification and commodification of those the students ostensibly go to serve (Harkavy, 2006, pp. 5-37). It is of the utmost importance that they perceive the *campesinos* they will encounter as fitting objects of their mercy, appropriate targets for their works of charity, but in no way people with whom they might form genuine and mutual relationships. The urban and rural poor of Central America are to be seen as part of the exotic tropical landscape, not unlike the lakes and volcanoes that dot the Nicaraguan countryside. These people play a twin role in the students' disservice-learning experience: first, they constitute an essential component of service-based tourism and "mission-vacations" (Illich, 1968), and second, they are means to the heightened self-esteem, admiration, and good feelings about themselves many students seek when they sign on for such a do-good venture in the first place. In both cases, "the poor" are anonymous objects to Dr. Apoyo and her students. Commodities. Means to their self-serving ends, and never ends in and of themselves.

Unlike their awareness of their virtuousness, however, all of *this* must fly beneath their intellectual and spiritual radar. Were Dr. Apoyo and her students to recognize that they are, in fact, using the very people they intend to help, they might be tempted to engage in that most regrettable and reprehensible spiritual practice: repentance.

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**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut  
**TO:** Dwayne Pipe  
**SUBJECT:** Customs and Immigration

Thank you for your text message from the airport. So your group is on its way to Nicaragua. Let the games begin!

I have prevailed upon Bruja Duende, our mercenary in Managua, to instigate a domestic dispute between the customs official at the airport and her husband on the morning of your group's arrival. The quarrel, of course, will be about money—or more precisely, the unfortunate family's insufficiency thereof. The official should be in a most querulous and truculent mood when your group drags its duffel bags full of donated supplies through her station. This will present Dr. Apoyo with a nice little moral conundrum right off the bat, and in front of her students, no less. The official will claim that the group is bringing commercial goods into the country and must pay a duty. Dr. Apoyo will object, ever so politely, that the items are gifts and

will not be sold. The official will stall. The students will become restive. The professor will perspire. Eventually it will occur to her to offer, in her very best Spanish, *algunos regalitos para su familia*, a few little gifts for your family. Some cash while the customs official's supervisor is not looking, a few plush animals and pairs of shoes for her children, and poof—the problem evaporates like a snowflake in the place to which good intentions lead. Within moments of her arrival, therefore, Dr. Apoyo will have become complicit in the corruption that SCAM, Inc. has managed to breed in Nicaragua from the highest to the lowest levels of government and business (Seligson, 1997). She will understand and explain it to her students as "the way things are done here"—a little fee for the expeditious handling of a minor customs quibble. When in Rome, do as the Romans do, and all that. No matter; as you learned in the tutorial: start with small moral compromises. Snip a stitch here, open a tear there, and soon the moral fabric is certain to unravel.

Attached is the invoice for services rendered by Doña Duende. You may pay her directly, and remit my commission via the website.

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**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut  
**TO:** Dwayne Pipe  
**SUBJECT:** Service Projects

As regards the matter of service projects, let us get two things straight: first, Dr. Apoyo must be encouraged to believe that she is, by virtue of her superior education and white, middle-class American upbringing, uniquely qualified to diagnose a problem and commence a project to fix it. Engineers come by this trait naturally, but with hard work, it can be encouraged even in those who teach in the humanities. Second, she and her pupils are to throw themselves into that project with absolute abandon. They are—physically, spiritually, and intellectually—to exhaust themselves in hard manual labor.

Let us consider these items in reverse order. Regarding the latter topic, this is simply a matter of misdirection. The beauty of the service project she has devised and to which her students will devote themselves is that it involves literally tons of concrete and shovels and buckets and unfamiliar tools. It requires heavy lifting and hours of physical exertion—far more than they are accustomed to, and under a sun far more fierce than most *norteros* can handle. They will, therefore, be too exhausted at the end of the day for such reflection activities as journaling, discussion, and prayer. The easiest temptation you will ever dangle in front of anyone will be the temptation to forego reflection after a long

and difficult day's work. Even when they cease their service mid-afternoon and have lectures or presentations thereafter, their ability to entertain and accommodate new ideas will be seriously compromised. Dr. Apoyo has designed this as a *service-learning* experience. The group's ant-like industriousness with regard to the service, however, can effectively diminish the members' capacity to attend to the learning. It can also sap the intellectual energy required for them to engage in those reflective practices that form the "hyphen in service-learning." Your task, therefore, is to upset the balance, tilting it toward the service project and away from reflection and learning. For our team, this is simply a matter of damage control. The amount of human suffering mitigated by the service project will be minimal, and the volunteers will be kept from considering the social, political, economic, moral, and spiritual conditions that keep the beneficiaries trapped in poverty.

With regard to the former matter, I recall a great success our firm had in Belize just a few years back. A team of American volunteers showed up in a little Mayan village, looked around, saw that the village lacked adequate sanitary facilities, and commenced a project to dig and install ventilated pit latrines. What they failed to take into account was the fact that the village elders had been negotiating with the Belizean authorities to provide water and sewer service to the community. When those authorities came to make a site visit, they saw that the village had ventilated pit latrines and said, "You have ventilated pit latrines. There are other communities in greater need than yours. We'll run water and sewer to those communities first; yours will have to wait." Another "good intentions brick" fashioned, fired, and fitted in that infamous road! The women of the village are still walking more than a mile each way to fetch water for their families, and two and a half miles each way to the river to do their laundry. A simple conversation with the elders would have revealed other and more pressing needs in that village, but our mercenaries persuaded the Americans that they knew best, and with that battle won, victory was assured. You have done well by impeding Dr. Apoyo's attempts at negotiation and collaboration with the Nicaraguans regarding the identification of a suitable service project for her group. She has therefore imagined a need and designed a project to meet it. With any luck, it will be another Belizean boondoggle.

I am also reminded of a pastor in Mexico who has visiting teams of volunteers work on something he calls "the Wall." He would like for the volunteers to spend time playing with and reading to the children living at the orphanage his church operates, but the volunteers insist on building something. So he puts them to work on the Wall. He has no idea what the Wall will

ever be used for. He just says it makes the volunteers happy and keeps them out of everyone's hair (Becchetti, 1997). Those are the mindset and outcome we're after!

Dr. Apoyo is too sophisticated to subscribe such currently-discredited ideas as the "White Man's Burden," so popular when Rudyard Kipling wrote his infamous and much misunderstood poem (Kipling, 1899). She may, however, still be susceptible to notions of *noblesse oblige*. Her Christian faith, after all, teaches her that "from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required" (Luke 12: 48b). She *has* been given much in the way of education and social status. Her race and national origin bestow on her unearned power and privilege. Let an awareness of those facts engender in her a sense of moral responsibility to those she goes to serve—but make it a responsibility to make them more like her. They should enjoy some of the comforts she enjoys: the sweet, narcotic fruits of consumerism and materialism. In this way, she and her students will become not *compañeros* of the poor, nor sisters and brothers in a family of faith, nor even responsible global citizens, but rather merchants of a middle-class American Way of Life. And let them never for a moment question whether that way of life is alive enough to warrant being shared (Illich, 1968).

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**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut

**TO:** Dwayne Pipe

**SUBJECT:** Service Projects—addendum

I want to add a *post scriptum* to my last missive concerning the topic of learning—or more precisely, teaching. By whatever means are at your disposal, prevent Dr. Apoyo and her students from seeing the poor inhabitants of the communities they visit as people who have anything to teach them beyond, perhaps, masonry techniques and how to cook *gallo pinto*. Reinforce the notion that only those with appropriate academic credentials and professional pedigrees are properly positioned to instruct, inform, and educate them: professors, pastors, business leaders, experts, and other acknowledged "authorities." Those loud-mouthed liberation theologians in Latin America blabbed a secret SCAM, Inc. had kept hidden for ages when they started talking about the "epistemological advantage of the poor" (Dorr, 1992, p.108). We have always known that people living in poverty have fewer buffers and barriers between them and the gospel. They hear the message Christian people call "good news" with immediacy unavailable to the blissfully distracted and materially preoccupied non-poor. The poor, you see, are uniquely well positioned to usher the non-poor into a reality that is more real than

the one to which the non-poor are accustomed. A priest working in El Salvador let that cat out of the bag when he wrote,

If we allow [the poor] to share their suffering with us, they communicate some of their hope to us as well. The smile that seems to have no foundation in the facts is not phony; the spirit of fiesta is not an escape but a recognition that something else is going on in the world besides injustice and destruction. The poor smile because they suspect that this something is more powerful than the injustice. When they insist on sharing their tortilla with a visiting gringo, we recognize there is something going on in the world that is more wonderful than we dared to imagine. (Brackley, 2000)

You must therefore keep Dr. Apoyo and her students from more than superficial conversations with the poor, and most definitely never about the role of faith in the peasants' lives. Fortunately for you, many of her group are Lutherans, and would therefore sooner stick a hot poker in their eye than talk about their faith.

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**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut

**TO:** Dwayne Pipe

**SUBJECT:** Disorienting Dilemmas

You are quite correct to be concerned that Dr. Apoyo is exposing her students to a variety of churches and religious practices, images, and art. This is dangerous and uncomfortable territory for us. But, as with so many other things, there is a way for us to use even this. The dynamic we want to create is one that learning theorist Jack Mezirow (1995, pp. 39-70) has termed a disorienting dilemma: a situation in which a new experience does not conform to or confirm one's existing meaning schemes and structures. Those experiencing the disorienting dilemma struggle to solve a problem, but their usual ways of doing or seeing do not work, and they are called to question the validity of what they think they know or to examine critically the very premises of their perception of the problem. (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 134). This is where we can sneak in and sow weeds among the wheat!

In visiting certain places of worship, the students will see images of the man Jesus of Nazareth when our team thought we had him sacked, tackled behind the line of spiritual scrimmage: on the cross and in the tomb. These images will depict him as dolorous and defeated, gory, bloody, beaten, dying, dead, and lying in the tomb. This will perplex and offend especially those

Protestants from iconoclastic traditions, and it will disorient those whose faith centers on a sweet and gentle Jesus. At the same time, they will be exposed to a non-white Jesus and his non-white Mother: the Virgin of Guadalupe, La Negrita, the Black Christ of Esquipulas, and a host of primitivistic paintings showing a dark and swarthy Jesus. This will confound those whose dominant image is Warner Sallman's blonde and somewhat effeminate Head of Christ. Yet again, they will sing the hymns and songs of the liberationists, who describe Jesus as *el Dios de los pobres*, "the God of the poor" (Mejía Godoy, 1975), who may be seen sweating as he works, wearing leather gloves and overalls as he checks under the hood of a car, selling chiclets and lottery tickets in the street. Finally, in the evangelical churches they will sing repetitive praise choruses along with European and North American hymns in translation: *Cual grande es El* ("How Great Thou Art") and *Gran tu fidelidad* ("Great is Thy Faithfulness"). The theological heads of these young women and men will be spinning so fast they'll have a bout of Christological vertigo, and it will suit your needs perfectly when they don't know which way is up and which is down!

This journal entry, penned by a young volunteer on another Nicaraguan team just a few years ago, shows how seeing so many divergent images of Jesus can lead to a disorienting dilemma. Here's what she wrote, word for word:

There are a whole lot of misguided people in the world who have their Jesus all wrong. Then I realize that odds are I am one of the mass misguided. So since I am in no position to correct other people's misconceptions, I am ethically right back to where I started, except that I now have to live with the probability of being wrong.

Your Jesus being the custom creation of yourself or someone you know is one of those nagging little facts that I think I have always known, but just never really thought about. When you are very little you are hand fed the Jesus, and brand of religion that is espoused by your family and community, the one that has been passed down through the generations and as the naïve, sheltered creature that most children are, is easily swallowed without question, and digested as the obvious truth. Assuming that as you age you get past this very basic peanut butter and jelly phase in life and acquire a more urbane palette, you will probably notice in your sampling of the lives of others that their Jesus isn't the same as your Jesus, assuming they have a taste for Jesus and don't enjoy a religious diet based on some other figurehead. Anyway, food references aside, I find the whole thing very troubling.



That's how we use disorienting dilemmas, Dr. Pipe. This young journal writer could be so close to breaking through to a new and deeper understanding of Jesus as *salvador mundi*, the Savior of the world, whom every culture imagines as one of them. But instead, complexity breeds perplexity, which devolves into a kind of "you have your Jesus and I have mine, and can't we all just get along" mentality. And, of course, as the history of Christianity abundantly demonstrates, getting along is the one thing they can't do.

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**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut

**TO:** Dwayne Pipe

**SUBJECT:** Troubling Developments

Oh, dear. Oh, my. Oh, fiddlesticks! You report that the students have begun to form friendships with the Nicaraguans! More than this, they perceive a certain mutuality in those relationships—the recognition that each party is receiving as well as giving. Dr. Apoyo and her students are engaged in service not merely for, but with and alongside the Nicaraguans. The Nicaraguans are extending hospitality, gladly welcoming American strangers into their homes, hearts, and churches as their sacred writings instruct them to do (Genesis 18, Matthew 25; Hebrews 13:2). And both sides are enjoying this reprehensible state of affairs! This, Professor Pipe, is a situation in which the objectives of your colleague and those of SCAM, Inc. are diametrically opposed. The Greek word her Bible uses for hospitality is *philoxenos*—literally love of the stranger. One of our most potent weapons is *xenophobia*—fear of the stranger. She and her students seem to have vanquished this fear. Those who have become friends are no longer strangers, and people do not fear those who have become their friends! As their scriptures teach them, "There is no fear in love" (1 John 4:18).

This development is highly problematic. Here is what you must do to minimize the damage. You must now accentuate the "otherness" of the *campesinos*. The students may be permitted to exoticize them, romanticize them, lionize them, turn them into pets, and admire their primitive and uncluttered way of life. But do not let these budding friendships take deep root, blossom, or flourish. Let there be no talk of "accompaniment." Keep the interactions superficial. Americans are famous for forming infatuations that are intense, immediate, and ephemeral. Make sure these new relationships are as fleeting as summer love. After all, if the students can't send text messages

to their host families once they've returned to campus; if they can't Facebook their new Nicaraguan friends or IM them, then these relationships should fade along with their suntans.

As for Dr. Apoyo, Americans have a peculiar penchant for variety. Exploit this. Cause her to instantiate the notion that her students will benefit most from a four-year cycle of service-learning adventures: Nicaragua this year, Bosnia next year, Tanzania the year after that, and the Philippines in year four. A different country on a different continent every year! Most humans cannot sustain relationships marked by a four year hiatus. She will have to start all over with each new trip. Nevertheless, these are chilling developments. We must step up our efforts.

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**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut

**TO:** Dwayne Pipe

**SUBJECT:** More Bad News

The news you share continues to be troubling, Dr. Pipe. Our goal all along has been to keep this a discrete, isolated event in the lives of Dr. Apoyo and her students, a little disservice-learning bubble, something they will look back on with nostalgia, like a trip to Disney World, and like that trip, something with no bearing on the rest of their lives. We needed to keep their focus on the particular individuals they were helping, perhaps on their community, but no more than that. Micro, good professor, but never macro. Never, ever should we have permitted them to step back and entertain the larger and more systemic questions: What keeps a nation trapped in poverty? What structural forces are at work here? How has religion been used to oppress and control? What has their county been doing here in their name and with their tax dollars? What is their moral duty as Christians and responsible citizens? Moving from a perspective that is individual to one that is systemic is difficult for most adults. Yet we have allowed some of these adolescents to do it! Think of the thousands who pound nails for Habitat for Humanity in America and never stop to ask why, in such a wealthy nation, a decent home cannot be afforded by a family of working poor. That's how SCAM, Inc. usually works. Yet these are the very sorts of questions Dr. Apoyo's students are pondering and discussing. Clearly, we have lost control of this game.

**FROM:** Horatio Gumnut

**TO:** Dwayne Pipe

**SUBJECT:** Endgame

It is the bottom of the ninth, professor. Our team trails badly, our bullpen is empty, and the fat lady is getting ready to sing. Let us recap the game:

- Dr. Apoyo and her students began reflective practices before they ever left home.
- They formed substantial and reciprocal relationships with the locals.
- Dr. Apoyo is now committed to serving as a continuing representative of that relationship between Thistlebottom U. and that village.
- Her team experienced themselves as receivers of hospitality and not merely givers of charity.
- They learned things from uncredentialed peasants.
- Their world-view and spiritual horizons were expanded.
- They heard the gospel through the ears of the poor and glimpsed the reign of God through the eyes of the poor.
- They drew back the veil of ignorance and began to see structural and systemic evil at work.
- They experienced themselves as citizens of a global world and began to consider the notion that with such knowledge come both discomfort and responsibility.
- Some of them have decided to form an advocacy team upon their return to campus to engage larger questions and encourage contact with political leaders.
- They learned that they can make a difference in the world.

This journal entry from one of the students, a sophomore of tender years, is for us the play that ends the game:

I felt like I was seeing the world through new eyes and in a way I was, but how could any one of my friends or family possibly understand that a change like that was possible within a short span of two weeks? I'd seen real poverty for the first time in my life, I'd learned about Christology and liberation theology, realized the political power of U.S. from outside of the country, and even my ideas of God/

Jesus had changed! My role in this world as a Christian had changed in that I felt I'd been exposed to something that now demanded greater responsibility. When your eyes are opened to something like that you cannot simply choose to forget . . . not that I'd ever, ever want to.

I deeply regret the inability of our firm to help you achieve your goals, Professor Pipe. It is clear that Dr. Apoyo and her students did not get SCAM'ed as we had hoped and planned. Some years, even the Yankees don't make it to the playoffs.

If I can be of any assistance as you update your *curriculum vitae* and seek a new position, please feel free to call upon me.

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