

Foreign service: Looking outward

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

I have a recurring nightmare about the final exam on which my college graduation depends. Thinking I am prepared, I open a blue booklet only to discover that I am being tested in a language I do not know. I try to explain that there has been a terrible mistake, but the proctor is unforgiving. I am sent back to my chair to take a test that I have no hope of understanding, let alone passing. The number two pencil shakes limply in my sweaty hand.

Unfortunately when I wake up, instead of feeling relief, I recall real-life experiences that were all too much like my dreams.

After studying French for five years, I still opened the booklet for a college placement test and understood nothing. Forging ahead, telling myself this was merely a result of nerves, I did my very best and ended up placing into . . . first-year French. I'd like to pretend that it's just test-taking anxiety, but I have the same panic reaction when confronted with a menu.

My college had a fluency requirement, so I decided to try Spanish instead. For years I was invisible in the back "credit/no credit" row until, at the end of senior year, my teacher suddenly decided to call on me in class. "¿Cómo te llamas?" she asked, and for the first time my eyes made direct contact with hers. I had no idea what she was saying.

The two teens who live in my house today have no shortage of criticism for the world in general, but these days their most piercing sneers are reserved for lip-synchers, the starlets and rocker wannabees who perform by moving their lips while a canned sound system provides the music. Britney Spears and Ashlee Simpson are the lip-synchers of our day. In my younger years it was the famous male pop duo Milli Vanilli, who tearfully confessed that although they looked like models and had achieved pop chart success, they had never sung a note of their own music in public.

“¿Cómo te llamas, otra vez?” the Spanish teacher repeated. She was asking me what my name was. After all, given my total lack of class participation, how would she know? But I still had no idea what she was asking, only the cold dread of one about to be exposed.

“Lillian,” the person sitting next to me said to the teacher. “Se llama Lillian.”

“Gracias,” said the teacher, to the student who answered on my behalf. And that was it. My brief brush with conversational Spanish had ended, and I lived to see another credit. Barely. But the nightmares remain.

So it was with a sense of wonder that two decades later I found myself at our local community college sitting in a class titled “Introduction to Conversational Spanish.” You don’t end up middle-aged in a noncredit continuing ed course because you are a linguistic genius; everyone else in that class had a story like mine.

As we students introduced ourselves, we marveled that ten people who had never met before could all have the same recurring nightmare. But we shared another story—the story of the church.

Some people had been on mission trips and had returned with a desire to learn the language of the people they had visited. Another person’s church had started a Spanish language worship service, and she had wandered in. Others were hoping to go on a mission trip, and in that hope they were willing to try to learn a language once again. That was my story.

On Pentecost, the followers of Jesus suddenly understood one another’s languages. They spoke across the boundaries that had separated them with such power that people thought they were drunk. Today, some people live that out by speaking in tongues. Others sign up for Spanish class.

At the final class we listened to one another’s oral presentations. I learned about Sammy the black pug, about an Italian cousin who came to visit, and about a castle in Germany that is an exact replica of the one at Disneyland. I actually understood and followed a tale about bird watchers traveling to Ohio to see a Magnolia Warbler en route to Canada—a tale you would have lost me on had it been in English.

I also heard about AIDS orphans in Kenya, an Anglican church in Mexico, and house-building projects around the world. Almost everyone struggling to conjugate verbs

was there because of a church. In a world of lip-synching pop stars and glitzy productions, our little class seemed remarkable for its lack of finesse and for the fullness of its witness.

These days, the immigration issue is front-page news. Our nation's economy depends on the work of people whose languages are foreign but whose desire to sacrifice to provide for their families is familiar. Still, guest workers become invisible, even to those who benefit from their labor.

For those who read the Bible with an eye for the outsider, scripture is a long story of guest workers and immigrants whom God has chosen and blessed. The sanctuary movement, old and new, is an obvious prophetic response from the church. My little Spanish class was another. Out in the suburbs, in the classroom of a community college, amidst our stumbling oral presentations we had our own tongues of fire: quietly remarkable congregations that had called these people to look outward.

It could only be faith that led us back into the classroom that haunted our dreams, back to those grammar charts where we had all known defeat but now hoped for victory.

¿Cómo te llamas, otra vez? Me llamo Lillian.