

Like a child: Reflections on a mission trip

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

In January of this year I went to the Dominican Republic with Edge Outreach to install water purifiers. We were in the capital city of Santo Domingo. I was surprised to learn that the city does not provide clean water to its residents. Those who can afford it drink bottled water. Poor people drink the water from the tap and are frequently ill. No one knows how many children die in the poor neighborhoods from water-related illnesses.

The story of our trip can be told simply: we went to the Dominican Republic, and we built two water purification systems. We hope and believe they are continuing to produce clean water for the people who use them. That's one story.

What has happened to me since I came home is another story. I seem to have lost my appetite and along with that, a fair amount of weight. Like most Americans, I can always stand to lose a few pounds, so I'm not worried about the weight that I've lost. But the way it has happened is interesting to me. I'm not sure I understand it.

While we were in Santo Domingo, we lived at a house run by a Christian organization. We were brought there by bus at night. The bus made numerous turns on the one-hour journey from the airport. By the time we arrived I had no idea where we were. I could not speak Spanish, so I stood by silently while conversations took place. My meager possessions were in a suitcase and backpack. I had some money, but it had not been converted to the local currency, so it was useless. Someone gave us food, and I ate it because I was hungry. After that I was led to a bed in a room full of beds. It was dark, and others in the room were already asleep. Not wanting to wake anyone by unzipping my suitcase and rummaging through it in the dark, I climbed into bed in my clothing and went to sleep.

It was like becoming a child again. I had no idea where I was. Everything I needed was given to me by people who said things I couldn't understand.

I'm used to making a lot of small choices for myself throughout the day. If I get hungry, I can have a snack. If there is no snack food available, I can quickly drive to a convenience store and buy something. In my world, I've become accustomed to

deciding what to eat on the basis of what I feel like eating in that moment. A wide variety of food is available to me at all times. I eat when the impulse strikes me, and I eat what I want to eat.

In Santo Domingo, I had no car or money. There were no snacks and seemingly no way to obtain them. There were no options for me. We worked and got hungry. At mealtime we ate the food that was set before us. Sometimes it was delicious. Sometimes it wasn't as good. We ate it because we were hungry and there would be no more food until the next meal.

There was a rhythm to this way of living that seemed familiar to me. I later realized this was how I lived as a child. My parents were in complete control of the kids' lives, even the food that we ate. At dinner, my mother served us. Whatever was on the table was what we had that night. There might be snacks or treats, but those came on my parents' terms.

In Santo Domingo, I was a child again. When I was dropped off at the airport at the end of the trip, I realized I had forgotten my passport. I had no idea where I had been staying and didn't know the phone number there. I came very close to missing my flight and being stuck in the Dominican Republic. I simply wasn't ready to start being an adult again. I was surprised to find that I was expected to keep up with things like passports and phone numbers.

I left for Santo Domingo weighing about 189 pounds. I weighed 184 at the end of that week. About a week after I got home I realized that I hadn't been eating between meals. I made no conscious choice in this matter; I was out of the habit. I also found that I would finish about two-thirds of a normal portion of food and lose interest in it. Occasionally I would forget to eat lunch. Perhaps, subconsciously, I was expecting someone to bring me my food. My weight dropped to 180 pounds. And kept dropping. I became somewhat alarmed when my wife said I was looking a little gaunt. The scale said I weighed 174 pounds. I had lost 15 pounds in about six weeks. That seemed a bit fast to me, so I paid attention to my eating and gained four pounds back. I hover around 178 today.

My mind keeps returning to the people in Santo Domingo who cared for us. We went there to take care of them, but in truth they took care of us. I remember the women who prepared our food. We stood by the table shyly, looking at what we would be eating for that meal. I remember the man who drove our bus around the city while

we kept our faces pressed to the windows, watching a strange world go by. I remember being on the street and saying, "I'm thirsty." Our guide reached into his pocket, pulled out a few pesos, and pointed across the street to a small store. "Say 'Coca Cola Light,'" he said. I gleefully took the money and went across the street. It felt like a big step, going to the store by myself. I stood in line. A man who had been cooking eggs said, "*Qué?*" I said "Coca Cola Light" and handed him all the money in my hands. I had no idea how much change I would receive. He handed me an icy bottle and a handful of strange coins. I ran back across the street and gave our guide his change. "*Gracias,*" I said. He was a tall man and looked down at me. "*De nada.*"

One of the great, enduring mysteries of the Gospels is the command of Jesus that we become like children. He said, "Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

"And how shall we become like children?" we ask him, reminiscent of Nicodemus. "Can a grown person become a child again? Can I enter again into my mother's womb?"

I spent a week in the care of brothers and sisters in Christ in Santo Domingo. Yes, you can become a child again. But do not think it is something you will recover from quickly. When you become vulnerable and allow your life to rest in the hands of others, you live only in the present moment. Your eyes are open to the world around you. In that moment you begin to understand what it means to live in the kingdom of heaven.

And you may find, to your joy, that it is hard to find your way back home.