

...Although there were things going on around us that were normal to the people in Cuba and caught us Americans completely off-guard, (using horses and oxen as main sources of transportation, along with hitch-hiking, and drinking water out of a big bucket of collected rain water) I was more surprised about the intense presence of God in all of these people's lives that I met over the nine days. For example, within the first two hours of arriving at Camp Canaan, I met a girl named Arlen. She spoke as much English as I did Spanish, (which is "un poquito") so most of our conversations were very basic and used a plethora of hand signals. Some even included pathetic attempts at sign language! Arlen had a friend named Amanda that spoke much more English than Arlen did, so she acted as our translator. Arlen and I were talking about our favorite music, books, and what we like to do in our free time. Then she continued to say that she was sixteen years old. I told her that I turned sixteen a couple months ago as well. Arlen said she had a very nice birthday, but her all-time favorite was her thirteenth. I asked her why her thirteenth was her favorite, and her eyes immediately lit up just at the thought of it. Arlen pointed to herself and dragged her arms out and then back into her body, showing that she had gotten something, and then said in English "A can Coca Cola." I thought she was going to continue and explain what her party was like, and what food there was, but that's all she said. "A can Coca Cola" left her beaming for minutes. I quickly realized that the can of coke was the one and only present she had gotten. I didn't want Arlen to see that I was completely taken aback by her answer, so I said "Wow! Muy Bien! Delicioso!" After my reaction, Arlen said in Spanglish, "My life es perfecto." I was speechless. How could someone who got one can of coca cola for her thirteenth birthday say that her life is perfect? This simple, ten minute conversation about Arlen's birthday changed my perspective on the vast amount of tangible things that we all think are necessities. Arlen showed me that when you wake up with God as the focus of your life instead of tangible things that provide about eight seconds of a carbonated aftertaste, your life can be as close to perfect as possible. When we can be free of what the World defines as perfect and simply dwell in God's love and his plans for us, that is when our life is truly perfect.

Arlen was just one of the 980 children at Camp Canaan. What were the odds that she would approach me and tell me a story like this? God only knows. Throughout the remainder of the week, whenever we sat down at a lunch or dinner table and there was a bottle of "Tukola" (Cuban Coca-Cola) my mind flew straight to Arlen. In fact, when we walked out of the air-conditioned Miami airport and were reminded of what real roads look like again, the first car that caught my eye was an eighteen-wheel Coca Cola tractor trailer.

I came home from Cuba with myriads and myriads of more stories and experiences that I would be ecstatic to tell you about at anytime, anywhere. There was no tangible "thing" that I took back from Cuba to the United States, but the one memory I will always have is Arlen and her "can Coca Cola."

Melissa Moulton