



THE LLILAS 2008 GRADUATION ADDRESS

by SANDRA BOTERO



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GOOD AFTERNOON. Buenas tardes. Thank you all for being here. Muchas gracias por estar aquí.

Here's a story. In August 2006, when I flew in to the United States from Colombia, where I originally come from, the U.S. immigrations officer at the airport asked me the following question:

Why would a person FROM Latin America come to the United States to study Latin America?

He said this with a sigh, perplexed; this wasn't an officer trying to figure out whether I would be attempting to switch my visa status anytime soon. He was Latin American himself, and he seemed somewhat annoyed and sad at the thought of my leaving the region to study it. To him, this was somehow backwards. He was not alone in this feeling. I had heard that question before, and I would hear it again in the coming months. In Bogotá, before my trip, some people expressed similar concerns. They sighed, frustrated: Why do you have to go away to study your own country? According to the extremists, I was on my way to being brainwashed; others were concerned that I would lose touch with reality. Why leave? And to the U.S., of all places? When I get the question here, people are sometimes surprised, for similar reasons, or else they are trying to gauge two things: (1) whether I am after the American dream and an American husband—which I'm not or (2) if this is just a coverup for some shady cocaine-related operation—not the case either. (I am dead serious; I have actually been asked the last question.)

I don't want to exaggerate. I was mostly surrounded by people who thought my going

away was a great idea, and I have been received here by people who also agree—or who simply think it's a good thing to have a Colombian in the room who can dance salsa. But I have to say that the question keeps coming back, from strangers and friends alike. I keep asking it myself. I thought I would try to answer that question this afternoon.

The way I see it, there are two dimensions to that answer. On a personal level, I went away for the sake of just going away. These two years have been quite an experience; I have taught people how to dance and have seen my pupils surpass me in skill and certainly in enthusiasm. As a "cultural exchange thing" I have tried to figure out football (unsuccessfully); I have also cried on the phone out of sheer desperation and fury at my poor listening comprehension of the English language. The story might be familiar to you: how living in another country can change you. Completely.

On another level, which is no less personal, the answer I can give you has caught me completely by surprise. I suspect what I am about to say may seem obvious to a lot of people, especially to my comparative politics professors; all I know is it has changed me profoundly. My sense is that the people from Latin America who come to the U.S. to study Latin America are given an amazing gift: it's called *perspective*. Looking at my country from this particular vantage point has challenged every assumption I had about its history, its conflict, its politics, its culture; it has also completely transformed the questions I now carry in my head. I still find what happens in my country incredibly interesting, but for reasons I didn't even know. Colombia doesn't seem so unique

anymore, so utterly important: in that sense, I have lost my innocence. I understand it a little bit better, and when I watch the news, that actually makes it worse. (I should probably say I am interested in politics so, yes, I do lose sleep over these issues.) More important perhaps, being here has forced me and encouraged me to really look at Latin America as a whole, and to try and understand how other people see us. It is as if I stepped outside the eye of the storm, and suddenly BAM!—the continent in all its size and complexity was before me. Every day I study Latin America here, I walk down paths I am familiar with, because I grew up with them. But my familiarity is no longer the catchall answer. I get to make new questions of my old questions every day. I have to.

I have been struggling with this speech for a couple of days now. At some ungodly hour last night, I was offered all sorts of advice, two pieces of which I found especially useful. A friend said, be funny. It's easy for him, he's a natural. So for laughs, I suggest you look for the Chilean guy hovering around the beautiful pregnant Chilean lady; he will crack you up. Another wise Brazilian friend said: keep it simple. Simplicity and clarity come more easily to me in Spanish, so I will end this the only way I possibly can: en español. Ha sido un placer compartir los últimos dos años con ustedes, de verdad que si. Les deseo la mejor de las suertes. Buen viento y buena mar. Muchas gracias.

Sandra Botero graduated with an M.A. in Latin American Studies in spring 2008 and is starting her Ph.D. in government at the University of Texas this fall. ✨