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Gerry Boyle
Colby College
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By Gerry Boyle ’78

Jeronimo Maradiaga ’09 knows it’s coming. On the street in New York, on Facebook, the question is inevitable: “How was your Watson?”

“People often expect me to be like, ‘It was the most beautiful, wonderful year of my life,’” Maradiaga said of the one-year, $28,000 fellowship for international study that he won. “Yes, I got to travel. It sounds great and I’m not saying it’s not. But I was dealing with very difficult things, seeing very ugly things. The ugly side of life. So in a lot of ways I’m privileged to have experienced that in the way that I did. But it was also not easy.”

So his reply? “It was fantastic, but not for the reasons you may think.”

Maradiaga grew up in New York’s South Bronx and succeeded academically at Colby despite personal obstacles, including homelessness and poverty. A biology and East Asian studies major, he was awarded the prestigious Thomas J. Watson Fellowship—one of 40 granted nationally—to study the dreams of some of the world’s most disadvantaged young people.

He met them in the poorest slum in Mumbai, India. In a crowded township in Cape Town, South Africa. And, in perhaps the most unlikely stop in his travels, a remote indigenous settlement in Ecuador’s rainforest.

Along the way, Maradiaga was attacked by rabid dogs in Dharavi, the impoverished community known in the West as the location of the movie Slumdog Millionaire. He narrowly escaped with his life from an attempted robbery in Khayelitsha, in Cape Town. He stayed with the reputedly fearsome Waorani people in Ecuador, who tolerated his ineptitude at hunting with a spear and fishing for piranha.

In Mumbai he saw young girls kept as sex slaves in padlocked cages. In Dharavi he knew boys who scavenged used hypodermic needles from a dump, selling them back to the hospital. In Khayelitsha he lived with a 17-year-old who was a robber. When Maradiaga advised him about the importance of education for his future, the boy confided that he was born HIV positive and had neither the time nor the inclination to go to school. During the three months Maradiaga worked with young people in the township, four of them died.

Asked to describe their notion of a successful life, Khayelitsha teens said, “To grow old.”

Maradiaga told his story over dinner at an Ethiopian restaurant close by the Columbia University campus in upper Manhattan. He spoke haltingly, the streaming narrative interrupted by long pauses as he searched for the right word or phrase, tried to explain what has happened to him, how he has changed, how hard it is to relate to the world back home.

“The way I speak, the way I think, the way I interact with others has radically changed,” he said. “I would say for the better, even though it was very difficult. I’ve lost some really close friends, former Colby students, people I loved.

“No one had this experience with me. Very few people know where I’m coming from.”
The journey began in June 2009. Maradiaga had sold or given away all of his belongings, packing everything remaining into a single bag, his first purchase with his Watson stipend. After a tearful goodbye with family, he boarded the Staten Island ferry and was off to the airport. First stop Mumbai, where he stayed briefly with an Indian Colby friend before making his way to Dharavi.

“When I got to a place, I would ask people where not to go,” Maradiaga said. “And I would go there. That was the principle of my project. … I wanted to humanize that experience.”

In Dharavi that meant living with a family that included a grandmother who made earthen pots. Her grandson, Maradiaga’s “host brother,” was Maradiaga’s age and worked in a metal factory. A younger brother scavenged needles from the dump. The family was Dalit, the caste known to the West as untouchables. And what did they make of his arrival? “They were just like, ‘Why are you here with us? Who are we to warrant your attention?’”

They were questions with no easy answers. Maradiaga knew the family wouldn’t understand the concept of the Watson fellowship, the idea that he had been given a fortune to travel the world, that he had set out to live with them, some of the poorest people in one of the world’s poorest nations.

The project was changing quickly. Maradiaga had planned to write a blog but decided it would be exploitive to display his hosts to the world. He wrote a journal but kept it to himself (and he still hasn’t reread all of it). When he tried to pursue his thesis, exploring notions of success, even that seemed insufficient. As a Hindu, the older brother said he felt it was his lot in this life to suffer. If he suffered enough, in his next life he might come back as a white, rich man, he said. “You’re just like, ‘Oh, my god,’” Maradiaga said.

“I was really for so many reasons sad and dejected by the interviews and what I saw in India,” he said. “It was poverty on a level I had never seen in my life. When I went to China and I went to Taiwan and I went to Honduras, I saw pretty extreme levels of poverty. It wasn’t like I was sheltered. Here it was on a whole other level. Something I couldn’t conceptualize.”

And then there were the mishaps. Maradiaga bit into a stone in a plate of food and cracked a tooth, only to have it extracted with little anesthesia. A piece of rusted metal embedded in his cornea and he went to the hospital again.

After the dog attack, he suffered a severe reaction to the combination of rabies shots and antimalarial drugs. His host brother visited him in the hospital and told about his little sister. She had been bitten by rabid dogs, too. The family had never heard of rabies and tied her to her bed. And she just dies,” Maradiaga said.

He asked himself, “Do I really want to leave? What am I really doing on my Watson year? Is it just so I can have anecdotes, pat myself on the back? I lived with the poor folk around the world … .”

And even if they had known of a remedy, the family made about $100 a year, he said. The six rabies shots were $3 apiece, a fortune. The little girl probably would have died anyway.

“There was an intense amount of guilt. The entire time. What am I really doing here? They’re not gaining anything from me. I’m gaining everything. Is it right? Is it justifiable by any stretch of the imagination?”

He felt guilty that he wasn’t doing anything to address the larger, underlying problems of poverty. When he did anything to help the family, their overwhelming gratitude made him feel even worse, he said. And while he was able to extract himself from Dharavi, they still are there. “It’s like I felt so bad—but then I went on to my next country. Then I felt so bad again—but I went on to my next country.”

The first next country was South Africa, where Maradiaga connected with an NGO operating in Khayelitsha, a black township plagued by poverty, crime, and HIV. The NGO placed Maradiaga with a family, and while he lived with them he did research and taught for the NGO. Rejecting warnings, Maradiaga took the local minibuses to work and walked the township’s narrow lanes. “If I want people to open up to me, if I want to learn things from them, I need to be there,” he said. “I can’t go in and ask questions. I need to learn with them and live with them.”

That commitment nearly cost Maradiaga his life. He was walking to the bus stop when three young men began following him. He walked faster and they started jogging. When they passed him and continued down the road, Maradiaga scolded...
himself. “I was like, oh, I’m a racist. … It’s so American of me to assume and stereotype.”

Around the next bend they were waiting.

“One of them stops right in front of me, reaches into his shirt, and pulls out this long knife,” Maradiaga said. “He didn’t say anything. And he goes to stab me.”

Maybe it was New York street smarts, but Maradiaga didn’t back away. Instead he rushed at the assailant, knocking him back, and then ran, the three robbers in pursuit, bystanders shouting, “Run, umlungu [white man], run!” A passing taxi driver saw what was happening and stopped, throwing the passenger door open. Maradiaga dove in and the driver sped away, taking him, still shaking, to the NGO office. “They kept saying, ‘Thank god you’re alive.’” They said, ‘You don’t understand, Jeronimo. They don’t mug people here. They kill you. You’re white. They hate you.’”

For days afterward, Maradiaga was distrustful, jumpy. He stayed in the house. When he ventured out, one of the first stories he heard was from a coworker at the NGO, a vibrant 21-year-old woman. She was telling how she came be HIV positive, that she was gang raped when she was 14.

“Are you a hunter? Fish? Fruit?” said. “He didn’t say anything. And what I’m capable of.”

And then, once again, it was time to move on. Maradiaga flew to Quito, Ecuador, just after Christmas. He traveled in the region, lived with indigenous people north of the city. He then met an American photographer/ethnologist who had spent time with the Waorani, an isolated tribe deep in the rainforest. The photographer, interested in Maradiaga’s project, offered to give him an entrée. “I was like, ‘Yes. That’s what I want to do.’”

A 10-hour bus ride, two-hour drive, and four-hour boat trip later, Maradiaga arrived at the village, on the banks of the Amazon. The Waorani are hunter-gatherers who have lived in the same way for thousands of years. They threw a welcome party for their visitor, digesting yucca plant, and giving Maradiaga a favorite place on Earth.” The courage of the people, their hopes in the face of overwhelming obstacles. “I’m really glad I stayed,” Maradiaga said. “South Africa taught me who I am and what I’m capable of.”

“Whoa. Good riddance. What was wrong with him?”

The next morning Maradiaga, still feeling the effects of the chi-cha, was awakened before dawn to join a hunting expedition, the barefoot hunters armed with spears and blowguns. Maradiaga learned the origin of the word tenderfoot.

“They start trotting into the woods. I’m like, ‘Oh, ow, ooh, ouch.’ I’m all the way in the back. I’m like, ‘Excuse me! Excuse me!’”

Hunting was followed by fishing for piranha in the river, using line made from plant fiber. Maradiaga was outfished by a young girl, and he ended up falling off the riverbank. “I’m struggling to get out and they just erupt in laughter,” he said.

A bust as a hunter and fisherman, Maradiaga struggled as members of the tribe tried to teach him to climb trees. “They were really patient with me,” he said. “They were nice. I was just a joke. I went from being a success, from being on top of my game, to being an absolute zero.

“I was like, I can write. I can read. That means nothing. Climb a tree to get some fruit? Nope. Hunt? Nope. Fish? Nope. That’s what success was. Everyone contributed in the most substantive ways.”

He stayed for three weeks, engaging in conversations (their common language was Spanish; only one member of the tribe knew a few words) that left his hosts befuddled. He tried to explain paper money, how it’s used to buy food, to buy a house, to buy land. “They said, ‘Why don’t you just hunt for your food? Build your own house? Go where there isn’t a house and build it there?’ They’re asking these fundamental root questions I could not answer.”
For the Waorani, anyone who contributed to the collective was respected. “Afterwards I read Marx,” Maradiaga said. “I’m not a communist by any means, but I’m definitely critical of capitalism.”

He said he gave away the items in his backpack when he left, but concluded that he had nothing of value to offer the Waorani, either in goods or services. “The best thing I could offer them was for me to leave,” he said, chuckling. “It’s like, ‘Whoa. Good riddance. What was wrong with him?’”

Maradiaga visited other, more modernized indigenous communities in the region, but it was the Waorani who made the deepest impression. “It was amazing. It was the most radical thing I could have done,” he said.

And then Maradiaga came home. Fresh from his experience of being “plopped into a place,” he was plopped back into another—language school for Chinese at Middlebury College. And, rather than being relieved to be back in the America, he was angry, confused.

In some ways, he still is.

Back in New York City, everything he saw was part of the cause of a global problem. Those who had not had the same experience couldn’t understand why he was so troubled, why he found it hard to take part in their conversations. One night he was with friends, guys who had gone to a strip club. “I exploded,” Maradiaga said. “And then I had to explain the experiences I had in India. And that’s happened a lot.”

His friends responded that they weren’t “trying to save the world twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.”

Maradiaga says he knows that. But he can’t help comparing the modest dreams of his host family in Dharavi with those of his educated, Western peers. A prestigious job. A house. A nice car. The right jeans. “Honestly,” Maradiaga said, “sometimes I feel very disgusted.”

Later he would write on Facebook, “I just don’t think this country is for me anymore. In this way my watson was both a curse and a blessing.”

That post would elicit a response from Jennifer Ludovici, assistant director of the Watson Fellowship. “We just tonight finalized the 2011 class, and I’m feeling very thankful for the blessing of you Watsons in our world. If it was easy it wouldn’t be transformative. And part of the reason we believe in it with all our heart is that Watsons put out way more good than they get. I understand where you are, but I believe in where you will go. Great change does not come without frustration.”

For Maradiaga part of the frustration is that he feels he has changed but his life in New York has not. “I don’t know how to make my actions catch up with how [the Watson year] changed me, ideologically and so many other ways.”

He is living in Queens with his brother and sister-in-law and two other roommates. He has become a vegetarian, so as not to consume more of the world’s resources than necessary. He has maintained his practice of not owning more than can fit into the single bag. In his room there are books and a bed. “I have one pair of jeans. I have a few shirts. I have a few more shirts for work,” he said.

Maradiaga recently landed a job as an investigator for Bronx Defenders, a nonprofit that offers free legal assistance to people in the Bronx. He interviews witnesses, plaintiffs in criminal cases. And, as he rides the subways, he still wonders how he can sustain the memories of the people he met in his travels. “Educate myself about their existence,” he said. “Speak about it as much as we can. Sometimes it means bringing up issues when it’s not comfortable to. I’m like, ‘Just do it, Jeronimo. That’s the way you can honor them.’”

That and eventually returning to places like Dharavi and Khayelitsha.

Before he left on his Watson year, Maradiaga, who completed undergraduate premed work at Colby and elsewhere, planned to become a graduate medical student. An emergency room physician. That plan remains.

“I want to do poverty medicine,” he said, in the restaurant full of New York diners. “I want to continue my Watson. I want to work in slums. I don’t think this world is for me. I don’t aspire to wealth as we understand it. I’ve seen such drastic contrasts. People living without what we define as wealth. And they’re living fine. I can be poor for the rest of my life. I never aspired for a mansion or whatever, but now even less so.

“I’ll get my medical degree. I’ll get whatever degree and I have faith and confidence, delusions, whatever, that things will work themselves out in a way that I know I’m going to be—”

He paused to consider.

“Happy,” Maradiaga said. “Successful.”

Maradiaga, center left, atop Cape Town’s Table Mountain with teenagers from Khayelitsha, a nearby township. The young people had never been to the famous landmark, a favorite with tourists.