

Ballet of a Good City Sidewalk: Sensenti

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The following requires a slight stretch of the imagination since it takes place in what most Americans probably would not consider a city: there are no sidewalks here and the roads remain unpaved. Regardless, Hondurans consider Sensenti a city because it is the geographic and political center of the county. Located at the foot of a mountain and at the intersection of three main roads leading to the rest of the region, Sensenti has a population of close to 1,000. This rural farming community was my home for almost 3 years when I served as a U.S. Peace Corps Volunteer.

It's 6:30 AM and I can hear the bus coming. Don Findo wakes Sensenti every morning (except Sunday) with the horn of the old school bus. By the time this bus makes its way to my house, it is almost full with students going to high school in the neighboring municipality and workers and shoppers heading to Santa Rosa, the bus's ultimate destination. Over time I am deaf to the horn and do not hear it at all.

It's the sound of gravel, sand, and cement being mixed by my neighbor across the street and the dance music he likes to listen to while making concrete blocks that wakes me. Other mornings, it is the sound of him actually making the blocks – that pounding sound I never can get used to.

I open the back door to let natural light fill my kitchen, and I see the high school from my back porch. The students congregate outside the gate – there's a pair working on their homework, a group of girls flirting with a group of boys, and a few playing soccer. I finish washing a few items of clothes and sweep the floor, and then I make my way out the door.

Now it's the children going to school, and I walk with them part of the way. No parent accompanies them; even the kids who live furthest from the school walk unaccompanied. "Apúrense!" a mother yells, shuffling her children out the door. Hurry up!, she yells it as if she is telling all the kids within earshot that they are going to be late. Almost every child greets me, "Buenas días, Kimi!" We chitchat about what they are learning in school and whether or not they did their homework. After 4 blocks of this, I turn the corner while the children continue towards school.

On this other road, it is the women who greet me. They don't know my name, and I don't know theirs: we are public acquaintances. They are on their way to the house I just passed that has an electric mill to grind corn they will use to make the day's tortillas. Through the fenced yards, I can see and hear other women washing clothes. I pass one of the many general goods stores. The bread man makes his delivery at one store as another vendor drives past me towards his next destination. He drives in the middle of the road to avoid potholes and people.

One of the most unusual days on this street occurred when a handful of men did not go to their fields one morning. Instead, they filled their wheelbarrows with sand, shovels in hand, to fix the potholes on this dirt road. One of the women's groups organized this event and helped with the labor. The mayor said they did not have the money to fix the roads so the women decided to fix them themselves. They stopped each car, truck, delivery vehicle, and bus that passed and asked for contributions to cover the costs of the repair. It took them two days to repair the roads. By the second day, vehicles avoided the unofficial toll and took a side road to their destination.

On a typical day, I pass through this area to get to my destination on the edge of Sensenti and sit on a rock to wait for a ride up the mountain. The old lady whose house I wait in front of comes out, pats my arm heartily as she does every time, and asks me where I'm going. It's the same answer every time, "Voy para Cones otra vez, abuelita." I'm going up to Cones, grandmother. I can never remember her name so I just call her grandmother. She's one of those "eyes on the street" and tells me if I miss my ride or if it's safe to catch a ride with the next truck that passes by. We are no longer public acquaintances after sharing this morning ritual a few times a week. When I first arrived here, a complete stranger

from a faraway and mystical land, no one talked to me. My awkward Spanish greetings were answered with blank stares or strange looks. It took multiple cups of coffee in people's homes for me not to be a stranger anymore. Abuelita and I talk about the bad conditions of the roads during the rainy season, the price of eggs, and if I miss my family back in the United States. Eventually a pick-up truck heads our way, and she tells me it's ok to get a ride with them.

When I return in the afternoon, I follow the same sequence from the morning except it's in reverse. I hop out of the bed of a pick-up truck and abuelita greets me again. She tells one of her grandchildren to bring me a cup of coffee as I briefly tell her about my day and she tells me about hers. While on my way home this afternoon, the milk truck makes its rounds as does the Pepsi-Cola delivery. At the same intersection where I left the children this morning, I rejoin them in the afternoon on their way home. "Qué aprendieron en escuela hoy?" I ask them. They tell me what they learned in school. The bus from this morning usually comes back from Santa Rosa at this time. Again Don Findo's hand is on the horn, but this time it's to announce their arrival. There are no designated stops in the afternoons. He simply stops where people live.

I get to my house, and usually one of the kids opens the gate for me with anticipation to be invited in. "Fijese que," I tell them, "estuve en Cones todo el día. Quizzás otro día." Not today, I've had a long day. Maybe tomorrow. Shortly thereafter, a stream of different deliveries fills the streets. Mothers who made bread, cheese, or butter earlier in the day send their kids out to sell them in the afternoon. Similarly, men return from the fields early and sell their extra vegetables the same way. Unlike the earlier vendors, this batch of vendors fills my street with a daily, yet unpredictable mix of seasonal fruits and vegetables.

Inevitably kids play an impromptu game of soccer on a side street in the evenings, while the young men play in the stadium and the young women use the other field next to the cemetery. Even on the basketball court, a group plays soccer. I've never seen anyone play basketball there. All of the men are home from the fields by now and they gather in front of a store to grab a cigarette and watch the occasional car, mini-bus, or truck go by.

I go to the store two doors down from my house to buy eggs for dinner. My neighbor, the shopkeeper, tells me that they ran out of eggs earlier in the day. "Ya no tenemos huevos – lo viene mañana si Dios quiere." We ran out of eggs earlier today. The truck with eggs will come tomorrow, if God wills it. She tells me to try across the street at her brother, the barber's. I go there and I ask for eggs. He puts down his scissors, goes to the back of his house, and returns with a few eggs for me. I tell him that I'll pay him once I get money from the bank later this week in Santa Rosa. I leave the shop, and I know what the two men are going to talk about now. "Quién es ella?" Who is she? He asks the other man when he thinks I can't hear him. I, the stranger who's lived in Sensenti for quite some time now, am still talked about as if I just arrived the other day. Whereas the other stranger, who has had his hair trimmed here once a month since he was a teenager, talks as if he knows all the neighbors by now.

By nightfall the streets are dark, and my neighbors close the doors and windows to their homes and shops. Cars and trucks pass and an occasional horse gallops by too. Later, one hears the voices of men walking home from the billiards hall, or a group of women giggling as they walk home from a church meeting.



Fixing the Road. Photo: Kimiko Doherty