

2 [COURAGE]

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College Degree Program: Aerospace Engineering

Study Abroad Program: Puebla, Mexico



**“COURAGE IS ALMOST A
CONTRADICTION IN TERMS. IT MEANS
A STRONG DESIRE TO LIVE TAKING THE
FORM OF A READINESS TO DIE.”
- G. K. CHESTERTON**

I will not pretend to know anything about that life-threatening courage which Chesterton describes. No, my courage is much more of the ordinary sort. I am not a soldier. I am not a warrior. And I am not an explorer. I am, however, someone who will occasionally build up enough of that same courageous essence to do what is often referred to as “stupid shit” by my friends. It is a similar contradiction — within the setting of a university — that begins this story.

First-semester freshmen are expected to be filled with excitement, delighted by our studies and loving all things college. Now in reality, I have no idea why first-semester freshmen are portrayed this way, because it seemed to me that everyone

I met was dealing with more complex feelings. Were we filled with excitement? Yes, but it was a painful excitement — one that makes you a bit nauseous and longing for something more familiar. Were we delighted by our studies? Yes, but few students I met (myself included) were sure of our degree choices, and we struggled with the pressure of deciding our futures on the spot. Were we in love with college? Yes, but not all things college (having to clean a shared bathroom comes to mind). I was stuck in a rut. I dutifully attended my classes but felt as if I did not enjoy my time. It was as though my classes and my degree were getting me somewhere, just not somewhere that I wanted to be. I felt like I was dying from this first semester of freshman year.

One day I was talking to one of my longtime friends over the phone, and she mentioned a yearlong program (at another university) where she could study Spanish in Argentina and be fully immersed in the culture, learning a language and having the opportunity of a lifetime. I was immediately intrigued. Of course,

The Cross at Our Lady of Remedies, Cholula.



as a mathematics major at the time, no such opportunities made sense with my curriculum, as it would be difficult (if not impossible) to find the right upper division math classes at foreign universities. And while I had been forced into taking two years of Spanish in high school, my knowledge of foreign language was laughable at best. I knew that as a freshman, I would need a special petition to study abroad, and that anyway, I should stay in Norman to make friends and solidify those early stages of relationships. But I was enamored with the idea, even if it was unrealistic and unachievable. And so, on October 29th, I bought a plane ticket to Puebla, Mexico, departing just a little more than two months in the future. I had signed up for a program that seemed like academic and social suicide. I wanted to live.

Although it was cold in my home city of Tulsa, I arrived in Puebla that January to be greeted with perfect weather, blue skies and the constant busyness that life in a city of more than a million brings. As I moved from street to street, another world unfolded. Broken concrete walls surrounded the chaotic streets, all filled with unfamiliar cars and strange faces. Everything threateningly greeted me everywhere I dared to glance. The man selling food on the corner out of a brightly painted bicycle-like cart yelled at me; a large truck, like a strange ice cream man, blasted an incessant megaphone advertisement seeking out dilapidated items to repair and sell for a profit. I did not understand it all, but I did not need to yet. It was just the first day. In the face of such a strange new world that threatened to overwhelm, I took it all in anyway. I wanted to live.

At the beginning of my semester in Puebla, I was presented with the opportunity to student teach parts of a math class at a local high school. But once again, I was somewhat disappointed in myself because I had no experience teaching and knew very little Spanish. And while I do have two younger siblings, classroom management was something I had a limited (that is to say zero) knowledge of. And yet, I found myself standing in front of a classroom full of Mexican high school students about two weeks later. They were calling me “professor.” I wanted to live.



The Angel of Independence, Mexico City.

Within our first week of living in Puebla, my roommate and I decided that at some point in the semester, we had to climb one of the three mountains that surround the city. Popocatepetl, Iztaccíhuatl and La Malinche loom over Puebla in nearly opposite directions and entice travelers like myself to a spirit of adventure. While they seem close, they are actually a lengthy drive away, and peaking at around 14,500 ft. elevation, they are more than 13,000 ft. higher than any point in our previous home of Norman, Oklahoma. My roommate and I needed time to get acclimated to the already high altitude of Puebla, learn a bit more Spanish and get a feel for how safe travel to the area would be before attempting this journey. And yet, five days after landing in Puebla, I found myself hiking up the side of La Malinche. I wanted to live.

Courage. “[A] strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die” (Chesterton 94). When I was in Mexico, just taking the first step in the morning outside of a safe, familiar space meant having courage. No, I did not need a readiness to die in a literal sense (Puebla is arguably the safest state in all of Mexico, even safer than many US cities). Instead, what I needed was a willingness to have all of my comfort, safety, confidence, familiarity, strength, etc. put directly in front of the firing squad, knowing that it just may be shot to pieces.

For what purpose? To live.

My Spanish would never improve if I was afraid, every time I spoke, that I would mess up. Courage.

My knowledge of the city would never become deeper if I stayed in my comfortable apartment. Courage.

My teaching would stagnate if I was worried about misspeaking or looking foolish in front of my students. Courage.

My appreciation of the culture would remain surface level if I was timid about what the locals may think of me. Courage.

My love and understanding of Mexican cuisine may have never existed had I worried I may not like it. Courage.

Each of these problems — and the solution of courage — was one I experienced during my study in Mexico. It was the constant dance I had to perform throughout the semester. Every move, graceful or otherwise, demanded a move in response. Each time, courage offered the next step, while that next step seldom looked the same as the last. It took the form of a spin, a twist or a kick, always masking itself as something new and exciting, enticing and begging me to live. The dance continues, and study abroad taught me the steps and the rhythm to which it beats: “If you want to live, be ready to die.” Courage.

Metropolitan Cathedral of The Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven, Mexico City.

