

Things I Miss

(or Need to Remember to Appreciate More When I Get Home) – Nov. 5, 2005

It's been a couple weeks since I was able to write for this site. That's because there were students to prepare for their panel discussions/presentations; two more groups of orphans to play with at the UMCOR farms; a Halloween party to help organize at the University; UMCOR success stories to write for the U.S. Embassy; a newsletter to get done for the U.S. Grains Council in Washington, D.C.; and my roommate Marcia Evans to send off to the Republic of Georgia where she'll serve at a youth house until December 24 when she meets her husband in London for a week together in Wales.

On any given day back in Wisconsin, this would have all occurred within a week. Here, however, everything occurs at a different pace. In thinking about these activities, I've come to the conclusion that the reason is I can't do everything myself. Rather than being the 46-year-old, independent American woman that I strive to be any other time, I'm dependent. And, the frustration I feel from that adds to the length of time it sometimes takes to get things done.

On the other hand, it's also just how things are here. Let me explain today, for example.

UMCOR Regional Finance Director Michael Halbert, American-Canadian, invited me to go on some errands with him. We visited two large shopping areas. Not like a superstore. Rather, there were lots of shops in one area. Or, in one case, it was a huge former arena-like space in which there were hundreds of vendors behind tables and in booths selling their wares – everything from spices and fresh fruits and vegetables to chandeliers and bassinets. It was a marvelous experience because, if you walked around long enough, you might actually find everything you wanted. OK, maybe not *everything* you wanted, but certainly just about everything you needed. All in one place!

Women shop every few days despite the fact they have refrigerators. You would do that much shopping, too, if you had to haul everything home in a bag and climb three floors or more to get it in the house. So you buy a bit at a time and, since there's ample supplies of fresh food everywhere in Yerevan, shopping several times a week is routine.

So, what are some things I miss? Or, put another way, what are things that I maybe don't appreciate as much as I should when I'm home? Here's a list. Please do NOT send these things to me. That is not the point. Nor should my Armenian friends be offended that I list them. These are meant merely as observations of myself and information for friends at home.

- Knowing where the store is that has what you're looking for. Or, knowing which store has what before you walk a few blocks to it to try to figure out if it has what you want. Or, when you walk in the store, knowing what you want will be there. Just about every American store seems to have just about the same stuff as the next store. That's not the case here.
- Knowing how to read the labels on some of the products. For example, the little man in the spice booth knew some of the words in English and also allowed me to take a pinch of the spices to try to figure out if it was what I was looking for. Nutmeg and cinnamon sticks for the apple cider I made for the University party were easy. Everything else has been a challenge. English labels on products are great. Pictures are the next best thing. I think I should look at a career move—to become a consultant to food processors so they can get their labels correct in the growing global market we all talk about.
- A washer and dryer. Washing in the bathtub is OK. Hanging the clothes on the line off the balcony is dangerous. Marcia lost a sock. Friday night I lost two pillow cases, though they were a good excuse to meet one of the two neighbors below me. I have to rescue the other pillow case

another day because the first rescue included two tasty cakes, several fruits I've never eaten before in my life, a cup of coffee, a glass of Coke and a shot of vodka. Always a shot of vodka (or cognac), especially when the house is filled with relatives who are still mourning the passing away of an elderly relative who lived in the apartment.

- Hot running water. For most of Marcia's nine weeks here, the shower head kept falling off the hose. It first started falling off last year after my mother arrived for a visit. When a suitcase arrived here via Texas A&M and the Republic of Georgia last week, there was also duck tape in it. As a treat, I taped up the shower head for Marcia's last week in Armenia. Many people here chuckle because Americans like to use two hands when we shower, whereas they are used to holding the shower head in one hand and washing with the other hand. So, we don't even get one shower in when the hot-water heater box on the wall in the tub goes ka-plooey. It's been a week of boiling water on the stove, hauling it to the tub and adding cold water. That's just for doing the wash! Getting in a good bath becomes a strategic exercise because you have to figure out how to wash and rinse your hair while not wasting any of the boiled hot water down the drain. Oh, for a faucet with hot running water!
- Just hanging out with friends. Stopping by unannounced and just sitting. Or, having a beer, whether the friends are women or men. No fuss. No bother. No cultural inappropriateness. No one running to the bakery for tasty treats, hauling out a bowl of fruit and pouring assorted drinks. I always feel like I'm imposing. Armenian friends think nothing of it. So I guess I actually need to loosen up on this one.
- Knowing more Armenian so I can talk to people about more things, their thoughts and ideas, their weekends and their families, their futures and why it's so important for them to learn more English and feel comfortable speaking it. Several wonderful friends and even a few students interpret for me, but sometimes you just want to have a quiet, personal conversation between yourself and the person to whom you're talking.
- A car. Walking has been great exercise. My clothes are getting a little baggy. But I'd like to hop in the car and go out into the rural areas to just watch life. Or, to watch the sun rise or set. Just the freedom, the independence, a car gives you, as an American. I hate white Nivas and I hate sitting in the backseat of them and I hate bumpy roads because then the country doesn't have coffee shops that sell it by the Styrofoam cup-full and I hate not being able to drive and I hate not being able to jump in and run back home if I forget something. But I wouldn't trade the experience of bouncing around in the back of a white Niva surrounded by crazy Armenian drivers for anything else in the world right now.
- TV that features more English-speaking channels than just CNN. Something in the order of Law & Order, Law & Order: SVU, Law & Order: Criminal Intent or CSI. Public TV and all its mysteries. A&E and its mini-series. However, I did watch Bambi in Russian Saturday morning. I knew the story, so I could follow the plot. It made me think of Gary since I turned to it right at the part where Thumper and Bambi go out onto the ice. Gary always gets a kick out of that part.

That's it for now. The things I think I miss the most. Otherwise, everything is going great. Check back with me in a few weeks, though. Since Marcia left Friday morning I can see where there will be a hole in my life here. Things will pop up to fill it, I'm sure. But it won't be the same. It will just be different, like our lives are at any given moment in time.

Peace!
Pam