Living without guard rails

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When I was a senior in college two of my girlfriends and I took a drive away car from Illinois to Encino California. We were three Midwestern girls who couldn't wait to see the Rocky Mountains. We used that as touchstone to keep us focused on where we were going and what we wanted to do....when we get to the Rockies we will stay in a nice hotel; when we get to the Rockies we will begin to feel like we are in another world, no longer flat; when we get to the Rockies....

And we got to the Rockies and in a split second we were shocked into a state of panic by the enormity and ruggedness of the mountains. None of us had ever driven in real mountains; in fact one friend had gotten her driver’s license the day before we left. We climbed that first mountain and our shock and panic increased when we realized that there were no guard rails along the sides of the windy two lane mountain roads. I guess until that moment we never imagined that there could be life without guardrails.

I was so blessed to have the opportunity to be in Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina during the fall semester of 2005. I prepared myself in multiple ways for this adventure. I read every report that was sent to me, participated in every briefing both in the US and when I arrived in Sarajevo, talked with the Bosnian and Bosnian American students I knew. I even did my own electronic research. I remember listening with rapt attention at the US Embassy safety briefing covering information on land mines, carjacking, household break-ins, car accidents, personal attacks, undue interest in US activities, emergency illnesses, and routine pick pocketing or purse snatchings. And then after being there for almost a month I realized that the Embassy missed the boat on the safety presentation.

While land mines were and continue to be a threat and I always followed their When Walking Make It Concrete or a Guide mantra, they clearly needed to do something that reminded us sheltered “we are not responsible for our own safety” Americans that we were now living a life without guardrails. I do not mean to belittle the safety orientation, as I knew it was important and something to pay attention to, but for me there were many more real hazards to cause concern.
The hazards that surrounded me had little to do with the kind of accident or incident that can be blamed on some deliberate attempt to do harm or take something from me. The hazards were the kinds of things that local Bosnians saw around them and took in stride everyday and the kind of things that we normally didn't see in the US.

For example:

- The best roasted chicken in Sarajevo, and near my house so I could take advantage of it, had 3 spits with 10 chickens on each, rotating over a bed of glowing smoking coals. This rotisserie was in the front porch of the house within arm’s reach as you walked into the little house to purchase your chicken. There was no screen let alone guard rail. At first I thought I had come in the wrong way and might be reprimanded for this safety violation. But no, once I did my sign language request one chicken to take home, the young woman just walked over and opened a big metal pot and wrapped up one delicious chicken, in my mind walking perilously close to the hot coals. I paid and the transaction was over with neither of us any worse for wear.

- My walk to work was another reminder that with the ever changing daily hazards around you, walking required constant vigilance. I walked a route to the university in the morning and on the way home in the middle of the sidewalk where in the morning was nothing there was now a hole 4 feet deep and 10 feet square with pipes opened and dripping and broken concrete all around it. There was no designated sidewalk and no heads up sort of notice to cross the street and the only thing between me and the gaping hole was a plastic strip sort of flapping around parts of the hole. Yet the old men and women, some using canes and some needing canes and not using them, walked easily like dancers or tight rope walkers around the hole paying it very little attention.

- The street crews in Sarajevo worked with jack hammers and picks and shovels with no protective eye or ear gear. One man actually jumped in with the pick as the other was still jack hammering away, shaking any chance of procreation right out of his system. And while all this was going on they stopped periodically, moving all the equipment a foot or two away from their work space and the rails embedded in the street, for the tram that went by every 10-12 minutes. With the tram came all the people entering and exiting, those people now crossing the street, often in the same space that they had just been hammering and picking, myself included. And there was also the never changing
regardless of continent, rambunctious school children breaking free from the confines of the classroom adding to the circus like atmosphere of the pause in work. I crossed the street in complete wonder that no one seemed to be concerned and no one came close to a real danger, except maybe me from gaping at the whole thing.

- In addition to these large scale safety hazards there were the numerous holes or gaps in the street that could be one foot square with nothing over them or nothing marking them. There were manhole covers with those covers off their holes, resting nearby only slightly touching their charge. There were traffic lights that had openings in their poles with their electronic guts hanging out, rain or shine. There was constant construction on sidewalks, with workers and pedestrians sharing the same thoroughfare each moving slightly for the other as necessary. While there was a large very fashionable young and middle aged population here, there are also many older people who appear shaky on foot and who besides carrying bundles are engaged in conversations that require their hands. And yet no one seemed to mind or even notice the steps necessary for moving safely forward.

Speaking of steps, the stairs to most places, particularly exterior steps were not the same height or depth. I don't mean that the steps from one place are not the same height or grade as another. I mean that in the climb to my front door, a climb of about 12 steps, there were about 4 different heights, ranging from about 3 inches to 14 inches. It was difficult to climb without seriously thinking about what I was doing or I ended up stumbling. Somehow my brain had great difficulty moving from one stretch to another in the same flight. It was something that I had to constantly be on guard for and this was much more likely to cause me physical damage than land mines or a carjacking.

And after my trip to Lukamir, the village that time forgot and the highest point in the country, I realized that on some level this is a country of dare devils, regardless of age. Their idea of a hike and mine were decidedly different. Walking along a mountain path on the rim of the valley 800 meters below, at an elevation of about 1500 meters, meaning that most of the time I was in a cloud, fording streams that bubble to waterfalls that cascade the 800 meters down to a lovely lake, required energy and courage that was beyond gentle and most of the time beyond a Midwestern resident like myself!
While I was struck by the hazards of getting from one place to another in the routine of my day, I was also struck by something else. When the cement is poured to cover the now connected pipes, again there was nothing marking off this blank slate, and no one wrote in it, walked in it, or left any impression at all. The neighborhood continued to move around it until it was dry and useable. While the mountain hiking didn't have a guard rail it did have guard, Mustafa our guide. And in those spots where the hike required almost more courage than I had, he walked with me and at points held my hand as we jumped from one spot to another.

Bosnia is a country that has lived through a war and each day is a celebration of life, and a celebration of courage and energy that has sustained them to this point. When they needed a guard rail or two the world abandoned them and so they had to figure out how to work without a net until eventually some of the world took notice and helped. They don't need guard rails since they have each other.

My experience as a Fulbright Teaching Scholar in Bosnia was very exciting. I was there for the celebration of the 10 year anniversary of the signing of the Dayton Peace Accord. And while there continues to be much work that needs to be done, even today, it was an exciting time to bear witness to the resiliency of people. There was much for me to learn while I was there, about the people and of course about myself.