

## Clean Home = Strong Community

May 28, 2014 By [Lizz \(Edit\)](#)

Benvenuti! Welcome!

I have to say that I did not think that my first blog post ever, especially in Italy, would be about clean floors, but it is. When I first arrived to L'Arca (L'Arche) one of the first things that I noticed about Cedro (the house we live in) was how clean the floors were. There are tile floors throughout the entire 3 story house which contains: two kitchens, two storage rooms, an elevator, two living and two dining rooms, 7 bathrooms, 8 bedrooms, and an art studio. I wondered how tile floors in a house of this size could be so clean. There did not appear to be a single speck of dirt.

Having lived in a house in Portland where the household duties were not always maintained equally I thought that I appreciated clean floors as much as a person could. I was wrong.

During a meeting, Lucca (the head of the volunteers) explained that the responsibilities of the household was equally shared among the residence so that everyone could feel pride in their home and their accomplishments. This means that everyone works to prepare the meals, distribute the meals, and clean up after the meals. The kitchen and dining room gets cleaned after every meal. The floors are swept and mopped after breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I thought this explained why the floors were so clean. I learned today that this is only the beginning. Everyday, Monday through Friday (lunedì – venerdì), you clean the house. Every room gets vacuumed or swept and then mopped. Every bed gets made. Every shower and toilet get cleaned. Let me remind you that this is a three story house with 7 bathrooms and 17 other rooms.

Today it was my job to vacuum, sweep, and mop. It took two and a half hours. (I also cleaned out 2 of 3 of the refrigerators). I will never complain about having to vacuum my house in Portland again, even with the two stair cases. (Well probably not EVER again but still...) Walking through the house after, I was exhausted but I felt proud. I felt proud that it was my hard work that had made those floors sparkle and knowing that we could all sit around the table tonight at dinner and also during the prayer and enjoy clean floors. It also helped that I viewed this as enough exercise to not feel bad that we never stop eating but that is a topic for later. Now it is snack time to hold us over while we prepare dinner. (I told you we never stop eating :-))

See! I told you the floors sparkle!



Ciao!

Lizz

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## **There is no use crying over spilled milk**

June 8, 2014 By [Lizz](#)

There is no use crying over spilled milk

This is a phrase I often heard growing up and I continue to hear from adults working with children. It is a phrase I have come to live by working as a nanny for small children and I continue to be reminded of here at L'Arche (although they don't use that phrase). I have worked as a nanny/regular babysitter since for the last 5 years. I have cleaned up all sorts of messes in those years I think I have seen most of it (I don't want to dare the universe by saying I have seen it all...). I have learned that if it cannot be washed, replaced, or lived without, you do not bring it into the house. I continue to be reminded of that lesson here.

The other night at the dinner table one of the core members threw what I would call a tantrum and what one of the other volunteers described as putting on a show. I am not sure what started it but I looked over just in time to see the core member scream "No!" pick up her water glass and throw it across the tile floor. It shattered instantly. And let me tell you she got some distance on that glass too! She was sitting at the head of the table and threw it towards to open door way. I was sitting on the other end of the table 4 seats away from her and I felt a piece of glass bounce off my leg (it did not cut me). Later while cleaning the kitchen I found glass in the kitchen and the hallway too. I have to say I was a little impressed at the distance she was able to get the broken pieces but I did not tell her this. Dinner for the rest of the table continued as nothing had happened while a volunteer and the core member worked to clean up the glass. This behavior would have shocked me had I not witnessed her do the same thing on my second night with a

glass and a plate. I later asked another volunteer why the core member does this but she did not know the reason this particular night because she normally does it when there are new people at the table as her way of “putting on a show.”

After the core member had cleaned up the broken glass she came into the kitchen to perform her nightly duty of cleaning the silverware and putting it in the dishwasher. She sits at a small table in the kitchen, where we place all the silverware in a bucket of warm soapy water, and washes the silverware before placing it in the dishwasher. When she was finished, as she was leaving the kitchen, another core member, another assistant, and I all noticed that the core member’s pants were wet as if she had wet her pants. We then noticed that the chair she had been sitting in was also wet and there was a puddle under the chair. Another volunteer took the core member upstairs to change while I cleaned up and disinfected the floor and brought the chair into the bathroom to be disinfected (there are now three chairs in this bathroom, all needing to be disinfected for the same reason).

No one was upset over the incidents of the night because there is nothing you can really do, it has already happened, and because accidents happen. They have happened before, and they will happen again. The clothes will be washed, the chair and the floor will be disinfected, and the glass will be replaced. Life will continue.

\*This also reminded me about the advantage of tile / wooden floors – they are MUCH EASIER to clean than carpet!

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## **Traditional American Meal.... (no hamburgers and nothing fried please)**

June 14, 2014 By [Lizz](#)

I have to say that before I came here I had heard a lot about what to expect from Italian and Italy in general and it was all wrong. For example everyone does not speak English. I did not expect this to be the case but I found out very quickly that this is also not true. It may be more accurate in heavy tourist cities but Bologna is not one of those cities, and L'Arche is definitely not a place where there are a lot of English speaking tourists. However I have noticed that many of the people here do use a lot of hand gestures when speaking, and if a silence lasts more than 30 seconds someone will comment on it. This may not be true in the rest of the city, but at L'Arche there is almost always someone talking.

I have also learned that the people here also have their stereotypes about Americans. While drinking coffee after lunch one day one of the assistants asked if I liked coffee in Italy (where we only drink espresso shots, or shots of café di orzo) or the coffee in America better (s during which she motioned a very large cup. She was surprised when I said that the coffee I drink in America is not that different than the coffee we drink here because when home I drink a short

dry cappuccino (an espresso shot with foam). The other day I was also asked if I would make a LIGHT traditional American meal. She specifically asked that it not be hamburgers or anything fried. As someone that doesn't eat a lot of meat and ate my first hamburger in the last 9 years this past year, hamburgers and fried food are not a traditional meal for me, my family, or most of my friends. It was difficult to explain that what we eat here is not that different from what I eat at home (pasta, salad, sautéed vegetables) except there is a lot more meat. However I have also learned that these stereotypes come from some place. Most of what the world sees of American culture comes in the form of MTV for entertainment, McDonalds and Burger King for food, and Starbucks for coffee. When people talk to me about Starbucks, McDonalds, or Teen Mom (from MTV, which I had no idea aired in other countries) I honestly get embarrassed. I do not eat at these restaurants and I do not like Starbucks (however I do still go because it is convenient and is a good bathroom stop on a long drive) and I do not watch Teen Mom but at the same time I cannot say that these stereotypes are completely wrong and that is what is hard. I know 3 people that were teen moms out of wedlock (well technically one was 20 but the father was 18). I am the only one of my close friends from high school that is currently enrolled in a 4 year university. I have friends that eat fast food way too much and others that love Starbucks. It embarrasses me that I know where so many of these stereotypes come from and that I can't say that they are completely inaccurate but I do like to show that although they may apply to many people, these stereotypes are not accurate for the entire population as a whole.

I am also sure that I am not the only one who feels this way. This past week we had two guests here from a L'Arche community in Kenya. At lunch last weekend one of the core members asked one of the people from Kenya if the children in Kenya were sick. I immediately thought of the TV ads in the US talking about the starving children in Africa and quickly realized she was referring to something similar. J (the man from Kenya) looked a little confused at first and then realized what she was asking. He explained that there are sick children in Kenya just as there are sick children in Italy. Some children get sick just as in any other country and they get better just the same. She then asked if the children were skinny and J responded in the same manner saying that just like all countries everybody comes in a different size; some people are skinny while others are much bigger. Her final question was "Are the children hungry?" You could see a glimpse of sadness cross J's face, almost like he had answered this question before and was embarrassed that this was the stereotype of the children in his country. The same sadness that I feel when people from other countries talk to me about Teen Mom. He explained that the government works hard to make sure that the children and people of Kenya are not hungry and that they have enough food to eat. But he also explained that during war it is hard because the country has to support the people fighting which often means that there is less for the people who are hungry so more people are hungry. I thought that this was a wonderful answer because it addressed what she had asked while informing her where this stereotype came from but that it also didn't apply to all the children and people of Kenya but that it did sometimes apply to some of the people.

I thought that this conversation was also what Luca (volunteer coordinator) had asked us (me and Sara) to look for. Luca in our weekly meeting last week had explained to us that many people view the people with mental disabilities as a waste of life and space because they are not real people who can have a meaningful life. (I have to say that I already knew this to be true but it was definitely painful to hear said.) He said that L'Arche was founded to oppose this belief and

to create a community where people with disabilities and people without can share a life together all as productive members of society. He asked that we look at the core members and look at the ways that they are adults without their disabilities so we can see more than just their disabilities which is all that some can see. I thought this conversation between this core member and I was the perfect example of this. (I should also mention that this is the same core member I talked about in my previous post who was throwing dishes and wet her pants at the dinner table.) This core member was genuinely concerned about the health of the children in Kenya and was wondering if this stereotype she had was accurate. That is something that a lot of people without disabilities don't even do. She asked. She asked if this stereotype of children in Kenya was accurate before assuming it was and applying this assumption to an entire population.

We learned in my evolutionary psychology the necessity for assumptions but at the same time we also need to be careful of them. I am a single person. I am a citizen of the United States of America. However I am not the entire population of the USA. I can only tell you what I know to be true from my experiences but that does not apply to the USA as a whole. I will tell you that what I call a traditional meal in my family is not that different from what we are eating here but I can also tell you that my traditional family meal is different than my neighbors. We are different people with different histories. This is why I have no idea what I am going to make as my "Traditional American meal" since I don't want to be making an Italian meal (which is typically the style of food I eat) as my traditional meal of the US for Italians in Italy. \*Any suggestions for what to make would be gladly accepted\*

Lizz

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## **We didn't get lost!**

June 23, 2014 By [Lizz](#)

Today was a great day. Sara and I decided to go into downtown Bologna and just get lost. Not literally lost... but we just wanted to get out and explore without a real plan in mind. This was only the second time we had ever been into downtown Bologna and this was the first time that we were alone. When we went two weeks ago on our day off, one of our German friends, who is also a volunteer here came with us. I am happy to say that during this day we did not get lost! Even though we walked around some new areas, we were able to get back to the community without calling anyone for help! We were very proud of our selves and kept giving each other high fives throughout the day with all that we accomplished! We had a great time! The first stop we made once we got off the bus was at this gelateria that we had seen the first time we walked around and had heard a rumor that this place might have Harry Potter themed gelato... so of course we had to stop. Sadly, this was not the gelateria that had Harry Potter gelato, however, it had the BEST gelato I have ever had! I am not sure what the first flavor was but the second flavor was blueberry they were amazing!! I wish I had a picture to show you, but I ate it before I had the chance. The gelato place is located next to the Two Towers of Bologna which are a set of medieval towers, one of which is slanted and the other one you can climb. So, having nothing

else to do we decided to climb it. At the time we did not know how tall it was or how many stairs there were. (For the record it is 498 stairs. And we climbed it to the top and back.)

So we started climbing. It was an old wooden stair case that was very narrow. About every 6 flight of stairs there was a little landing that you could stop and take a breather at, which was very necessary. It was hot and humid in the tower. By the time we got to the top we were sweaty and gross, and so was everyone else who was at the top. It was beautiful though. The tower is one of the tallest buildings around so you have a beautiful view over the city. I think my favorite part about the climb though was that most of the people at the top spoke English. It was so nice to be surrounded by people and actually be able to understand everything they were saying. (There were some people speaking Italian and some Portuguese (we think) but most of it was English.) We made friends with a couple when Sara offered to take their picture. Jess and Scott are from Queens and are on their honeymoon. Jess had study abroad in Bologna for a year and never got a chance to climb the tower because it is apparently bad luck to climb it before you graduate.... Oops! Any way while we were introducing ourselves another couple walked by and casually introduced themselves in a joking manner and said that they were from London. We had a lot of fun talking to Jess and Scott and Jess told us that the Piazza is a great place to listen to concerts although they can be very ... “unusual” music choices (Jess’s words).

This week has been challenging for me with the Italian language so it was really nice to be in a place where I could understand most of the conversations around me. I don’t know what happened this week but I struggled a lot more this week to understand Italian than I had the previous week. I think part of it is that the people are starting to speak to me faster and with more complex words than they had been because I was understanding more (or maybe they think I should be understanding more by now). I also think this week I have been pretty tired and my brain has struggled with translating. It is difficult when all of a sudden you are in a place without the ability to speak the language. Simple things like asking someone to pass the water or “condiments” (oil and vinegar) at the table are now much more difficult because you don’t know how and everyone is talking, so it is hard to find a pause in the conversation so you can ask. (For the record I do now know how but in the beginning it was very difficult) It also doesn’t help that I spend most of my free time and while I am cleaning trying to learn Italian through websites and courses. I learned this week that sometimes when you are really struggling with something, it is best to take a break. On this tower surrounded by conversations I could understand with people I didn’t know (aka someone other than Sara) looking over a beautiful city was the best break I could have asked for. While there are a few other people here that speak English (really only 4 that speak well enough for a conversation and 2 of them are out of town this week), they are not fluent so you still have to talk slower than normal and stop to explain some words. I also realized though, that I could understand some of the Italian conversations around me. I understood fully when I lady asked if I knew who the sunglasses that were left on a bench belonged to, and when the lady at the gelato placed spoke to me in Italian, and when the fruit vendor that we bought avocado and a mango from spoke to us. I was really proud of this. When we got back I also understood all of what Monica (one of the assistants) said to us when she say we bought avocado. (She was telling us how she loves avocado and how she normally has it in a salad or with fish.) However there were still some moments where I had no idea what someone was saying (like the man who asked us a question on the bus). But I was still proud of all I was able to understand.

Today was a great day. And that avocado I mentioned earlier was a wonderful addition to our dinner. Sara and I had been talking about how we really missed avocado and almond butter from the start of this trip so to finally have some avocado was amazing.

Lizz



Only about 1/3 of the stairs.



Looking through a little hole in the wall on the way up the stairs.





Bologna!



Sara, Jess, and Scott



Bologna!

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## **My last week...**

July 1, 2014 By [Lizz](#)

I wanted to start off by thanking everyone who has read this blog and helped make this journey possible and so enjoyable. This is probably my last blog post since we leave in a week and will be leaving L'Arche on Thursday for a few days of Formation. This experience has been beyond anything I could have imagined. This trip was so short and I am sad that it is coming to an end. I am hoping that I will be able to return and stay for a longer period of time either next summer or after graduation. I also hope that by then I will also be able to speak Italian.

For this last blog post I wanted to share some of the things that I have learned along the way.



1. In order to fully experience life in a L'Arche community it is necessary to be able to speak the language. Sara and I were able to get by not speaking very much Italian with the help of some of the assistants and other volunteers who spoke English but it was harder to connect with the core members and other assistants who do not speak English.
2. There are still ways to connect and build relationships with people when you speak different languages. It is significantly harder but still possible to build relationships with people through actions. So much of our connections were built by contributing to the community and being present and vulnerable and aware of their vulnerabilities.
  1. Sara and I spent every morning 6 days a week cleaning. At first I did not enjoy it and wondered how we were supposed to be connecting with the members of the community when we spent the mornings alone in the house cleaning. After the first week I realized the importance of cleaning the house (especially bathrooms) every day. I realized how important it was to all members of the community and how much everyone appreciated it. Luca explained that while there are still some people that come in about once a month and are paid to clean the houses, they are not as appreciated by the community because they are only here because they are paid to. However the volunteers that come in and help with whatever needs to be done are appreciated. The members of the community realize that all the volunteers are here during their free time because they want to be here, be a part of the community, and help the community. Cleaning the house is one of the most important and most appreciated jobs in the community.
  2. The best way to be vulnerable around people is to eat with them. Around the table you have to constantly ask for things to be passed especially when there are usually 8-12 people at a meal. One person takes the plates and serves food to everyone at the table and the dinner is served in courses. This usually means that dinner and lunch last at least an hour to an hour and a half. Around the table things get spilled, some core members need help cutting their food and eating, other people have dietary restrictions, and there is always the possibility of accidentally taking someone else's napkin and or cutlery. This is where the vulnerability comes in around the table and also what helps to make the community feel like one giant family.
  3. There is always a reason to celebrate! And what better way to celebrate than food! We must have had at least one party a week. We celebrated the quarter moon, birthdays, national holidays... you name it chances are we celebrated it. Individual birthdays are a big deal! Whenever there was a birthday in one of the houses they would be celebrated at breakfast, lunch, dinner, and usually there was a party for everyone during the day. This insured that everyone in the community got to celebrate the special day. With the number of people living and working in the community it felt like it was someone's birthday every week. On top of that at the end of the month there is a giant party for everyone who had a birthday during the month and everyone in the greater community (friends and family) are invited. We celebrated new volunteers, and volunteers and assistants moving on to other jobs. This was a nice way to show that it is important to always slow down, come together, and celebrate the little and not so little things. Food is also a great way to do this! I have never seen so much delicious food! Cakes, ice cream, pasta, pizza, and crescentina! (Crescentina is the most delicious fried dough which you can eat

plain, with meat, and or cheese! It is absolutely amazing and way better than any pasta or pizza)

4. Ball pits are an amazing place to watch movies once you finally pick a movie. After weeks of wanting to play in the ball pit in one of the laboratories we finally did it. This ball pit is large enough to fit three adults comfortably but that is about it. It is incredibly comfortable and a very nice place to relax.
5. Finally of all the places and countries I have been to, there are so many more that I have never seen, and others that I have never even heard of. Meeting people who come here because they want to visit this L'Arche, have friends who they are visiting here, or even just need a place to sleep tonight has made me so excited to travel more and see as much of the world as I can.

I am sad that I will be leaving here in a few days but I have learned so much and made some great friends. I hope that someday soon I will be able to return to L'Arche Bologna and stay for a longer period. Until then...

Arrivederci

~Lizz

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