

2010

## Alyssa Cheadle

Sara Friedl-Putnam

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Friedl-Putnam, Sara (2010) "Alyssa Cheadle," *Intersections*: Vol. 2010: No. 31, Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2010/iss31/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Intersections* by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).



## Alyssa Cheadle

Some Luther students come to campus with a major in mind and never veer from that course. Others take much more of a smorgasbord approach, sampling classes in a variety of departments before eventually arriving at their major decision.

For Alyssa Cheadle ... the process boiled down to a moment that was nothing short of an epiphany.

Arriving on campus as a biology major, Cheadle abruptly switched gears her sophomore year after devouring the introduction to the textbook for the “Psychology of Health and Illness” course taught by psychology faculty member Loren Toussaint.

“I remember thinking, ‘This is awesome—health psychology is exactly what I want to do..., I had found this great thing, this avenue to studying the health of the whole person—everything from behavior to spirituality.’ ”

So energized was Cheadle that she called both parents that very night to tell them she had discovered what she wanted to study at Luther. It didn’t take her much longer to share the news with Toussaint. “We talked for an hour-and-a-half and realized our interests matched up.”

By the end of that meeting, Cheadle had signed on to conduct research with Toussaint on health psychology—specifically, “the relationships between health and dimensions of religiosity and spirituality, including forgiveness and empathy.”

Her work with Toussaint ultimately inspired Cheadle to declare an interdisciplinary major that combined the fields of psychology, biology, health, and religion. Their collaboration—which continued throughout her time at Luther—also yielded four paper presentations at conferences hosted by the APA Psychology of Research Division, three poster presentations at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Psychological Association, and a highly competitive Davis Projects for Peace grant that took Cheadle, Toussaint, and Anthony Sellu ’10 to Sierra Leone, Africa, in August 2007.

With \$10,000 in funding from the Davis program, the trio worked with Nancy Peddle of the LemonAid Fund and Fred Luskin of the Stanford Forgiveness Project to develop a forgiveness curriculum to introduce to war-affected students at the Dele Peddle Preparatory School in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Though they had to negotiate some unexpected obstacles—including an eruption of violence at the school that forced them to leave without their data—the project inspired some “powerful, stimulating, and often surprising” discussions about forgiveness and, more importantly, appears to have had a positive influence on the school’s students.

“It took a while for us to see it as a good experience because leaving early was extremely stressful,” she says. “But when we finally got our data, we saw that statistically we had made an impact—we saw an increase in their willingness to forgive and a decrease in anger and depression, among other measures of negative affect.”

Cheadle departed for Sierra Leone within weeks of wrapping up a summer research project at Oklahoma State University funded by the NSF-REU. She calls the project “a bit of a dud” in terms of results, but the experience was nonetheless key in her decision to put off graduate study in psychology. “The faculty at OSU stressed having a more specific area of research, and I realized that my research interests in psychology weren’t yet mature enough to apply to graduate school.” With encouragement from Loyal Rue, professor of religion and philosophy, Cheadle instead decided to apply to graduate school in theological studies, an area she longed to explore further. Rue also persuaded her to take a long, hard look at Harvard University when filling out her applications. “I didn’t think that I could get into Harvard, but he really pushed for that.” To no one’s surprise but perhaps her own, Cheadle was offered a full-tuition scholarship to attend the prestigious university, where she began a two-year master’s program in theological studies in September. Her long-term goal is to earn a doctorate in religion and psychology, though she has yet to decide which of the two disciplines to emphasize in her doctoral studies.

Whichever direction she heads, Cheadle seems destined to impress.

“No matter what set of superlatives I use to describe Alyssa, it won’t be sufficient,” says Toussaint. “She has the kind of personality, commitment, direction, stamina, and well-rounded social skills to be a charismatic scholar who is committed to improving the world and who will encourage and inspire others to do so as well.”

—original article by Sara Friedl-Putnam, published in the Fall 2008 issue of the Luther Alumni Magazine