

*Home is
where the Heart
wants to be*

Adopted Kids and their Struggles

*Robert Miller
Margaret Miller*

LN PRESS

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Dedicated to the boys of
The Home of Love & Hope and St.Mary's Technical Institute
Tegucigalpa, Honduras
Central America

Les aseguro que todo lo que hicieron por uno de
estos hermanos míos más humildes, por mí
mismo lo hicieron.

San Mateo 25:40

Forward

The task of completing an adoption in Latin America wears off a lot of jagged edges from adoptive parents. Parents who choose to adopt a child from Central or South America spend an average of 20 days in their child's country of birth. These averages are drawn from the gamut of short, 3-4 day in-and-out stays to veritable months spent in some countries.

When travelers spend time in a country for a chosen vacation or for study, with a tour group, or with friends within the country, they observe and compare and generally are very interested in what makes the country go round. Ordinarily, they do not feel threatened or obligated or anxious, and have only the usual worries that come in travel and finding one's way around the system.

When adoptive parents spend time in a foreign country three things are very very different:

1) besides travelling to a foreign country, they are approaching one of the biggest and most emotional moments of their lives, the placement of their child into their arms. As one parent put it, "it's almost like going to South America nine months pregnant, checking into a hospital where you have never met the obstetrician or nurses, never laid eyes on the hospital let alone the city, the country, or heard the language, or knew anything about the medical practices, and there, you choose to go into labor and have a baby. Yet this would not be a baby you had carried and communicated with for the nine months of pregnancy".

2) the child you bring back from that country is a native of that country. You do not just bring back souvenirs, you bring back a living being whose roots are somewhere else. The obligation to keep that child rooted in his native culture is yours. While you are there, you must sort out what it is you can possibly bring back with and for him. Recipes, cassette tapes and story books are only the surface. You are not quite sure what is beneath the surface or how you might get at it. This is a task you know you will never have enough time for, and besides, you want to JUST GO HOME. You might be feeling guilty to top it off.

3) you are a part of a legal process that you probably would not understand even if it were being done in your own county court house in your own English language and by your own personal lawyer. Helplessness and panic are the only two words that can describe what happens to you as they look over your paperwork or sit you down for a court investigation. You are almost certain that yours will be a story for TV.

Adopting is like nothing you have ever done before. This is certain, even if it is your second adoption. Can anything be done to help before? or after? or any time? That is what this book is about. It is NOT about how to do an adoption. It is about how to understand your child and the culture from which he came. It is about how to prepare to break out of your own cultural setting, the staid and solid and predictable USA from which you come. If, before you spend your time in Latin America, you can step out of your

North American shoes and walk around barefoot for just a bit, then you'll be tougher and readier for the new shoes during your adoption trip. Hopefully, you'll be able to stop looking down at your new shoes and wondering when your feet will hurt or why they hurt or when they will stop hurting.

As your child grows, and you and all of those who study genetics vs. environment sort out more and more of what comes with a child when he is adopted, you will also remember those shoes and what you saw and observed and ingested while you were in them.

This book is written through the eyes of two North American missionaries who stepped into the other culture and other world of Honduras for 10 years, opened a home for 100 abandoned boys, and received more than 50 volunteers and adoptive parents as visitors or workers during that time.

What they learned about abandoned or neglected kids in Honduras by living with them (and later adopting two of them), will give you a taste of the other side of the culture. If you read it before you travel, you will perhaps understand and see differently your time in your child's country of birth. If you read it later, as your Latin American child grows in your family, you will perhaps discover the treasure of being open to two cultures at once, enough to stand between them and be receptive and free.

1

Coming Home

or leaving home

Her shoulder sagged from the weight of the fifth piece of luggage she had managed to hand-carry from the plane. The three of them, Margi and our two newly-adopted sons, were traveling from Tegucigalpa, on the central plateau of Honduras, to Ames, a university town amid the corn fields of Iowa. Pushing from behind were eager Honduran shoppers on their way to the shopping malls of Houston, Texas, their arms empty at this point. Marty, Gilbert, and Margi were obviously out of place, transporting our few belongings from the Third World to the First World!

But who cared? Margi's preoccupation with luggage, customs, and the rush of travelers at a busy metropolitan airport was dimmed by the pleasant thoughts



Coming Home 1

of arriving to the open arms of friends and family and, at the same time, by the gnawing pain of what she had left behind. Distracted by a sudden flashback, she went over the comical departure scene again in her mind. "Sixty allotted pounds times three persons equals one hundred eighty pounds." The airline official had been courteous, but he had a sharp eye. Everything had to be weighed. They were slightly overweight. The agent wanted another \$50 out of our meager funds for only one piece of luggage. What Margi had learned in Central America during our stay there for nine years was, "Be creative, and you'll figure out a way to beat the system."

Right there on the airport floor she had removed the makeshift security tape, pulled out shoes, documents, and last minute gifts, and then bound it all back up and restuffed their hand luggage. The urge had come to toss a few things into the trash. "Throw going-away gifts given to us by boys from the orphanage?" she thought. "No way!" She chastised herself; she wasn't supposed to be angry or hurt or sad about leaving nine years of work with over a hundred boys behind and making a new choice to live a family life with only two!

Margi focussed back on the good feelings of the savings of the day. This slight embarrassment of spreading all their belongings before the public would save them \$50! Any rich traveler would simply have forked over the money and called it a day; any poor traveler would not have this many possessions. She was a missionary, shabby and deprived in some ways, rich in others. She had left the United States 10 years ago ordinary and sane. Now what had happened? Her mind quickly jumped to quietly curse her husband who had gone ahead a week earlier with the cat and just a minuscule share of the luggage. She was sure such humiliation hadn't fallen on him. For now, she relished

the comfort of collapsing in the airport's subway cars for the two-minute ride to the next terminal. She momentarily forgot about the two "new" sons with their strapped-on luggage trailing just behind.

A new beginning

=====

A Honduran and a Salvadoran boy, just adopted, and coming to live with us in the United States. It was their first plane ride, their first view of the great United States, the Houston airport. Would they understand the rose-colored carpeted floors in an air-conditioned tunnel protecting them from the 80-degree temperatures outside? "Would they be impressed?" she wondered.

=====

She was at the bottom of the escalator when she suddenly missed them and looked back. She laughed and smarted at the same time. There was Marty, five years old, teetering at the top, unable to balance because of two backpacks and looking down at her over the monstrous metal steps unfolding before him. He had never encountered an escalator before! Where did the steps come from? Afraid he might disappear with them at the bottom, Marty was daring himself to jump on, meanwhile holding up a line of two dozen businessmen and hurried passengers behind him. Some were already opting for the stairs.

A new mother, she had forgotten to look after her kids. Margi called up to the man next in line, "Sir, could you please lift that kid on." He looked at her in disbelief just as Marty realized it was now or never and sat down on the top

Coming Home 1

They took another escalator up to the departure level, and with no moments to spare found their flight destined to Corpus Christi. Our relatives would be spending over a month there while visiting family, and trying to adjust to our new environment. There would be some Spanish-speaking people in the area, and the climate of southern Texas would be similar to regions of Honduras. The boys would be updated on their childhood inoculations and tested for school grade placement.

Marty and Gilbert were leaping into a new world. Everything would be different. Few people would understand their Spanish, but everyone would understand their smiles. These were former street kids, and we knew they were capable of getting their basic needs met with their own finely-honed survival skills. But the expectations placed upon them in a new culture would be overwhelming.

No scripts for the future

We had seen it from the inside. We had seen what abandonment could do to children. We had witnessed what institutional living could do to children. The orphanage had given them the best of what it had—identity as members of a group, a kind of patriotism to *El Hogar*, a world within a world, a haven, a refuge. What would happen as our two boys came into a primary family unit with no positive models of what that meant, no image to hold up, no other kids to mirror them or to fight with, to find a place in line with, to hide behind, or to push aside? Was a place in a family a luxury, or was it something totally scary to them?

There was a poster on the wall of the bedroom the boys shared that first month. It read, “Bloom wherever you

are planted.” I think of it now, with its cartoon-like sketch of a flower and its roots wound up in the words. I explained the significance of the words to the boys, “Put down roots wherever you are, call it HOME for the moment, for that is all we have.” The words applied to the two of us, just as much as they applied to our two young emigrants.

Many missionaries and embassy staff members came and left during the years we spent in Honduras. Some of them were career diplomats; their lives were a succession of relatively short assignments of two to four years in various countries throughout the world. They said it sounded so adventuresome when they were young, but it became wrenching later on. Many of them kept a house someplace in the United States just to come back to for a month at a time. We wished we had that. Everybody needs some semblance of a permanent home. It is difficult to live the life of a nomad, a wanderer. I think now of the homeless families in our own community; every night is a mere sojourn. The memory of or longing for roots must burn in their very hearts! I sensed this longing in all of us, for Margi and me and for our newly-adopted sons.

2

Human Life

for sale

*I began
to
question
my
basic
belief
that life
should
be held
on to at
all costs.*



We've become so familiar with all that surrounds the birth of children that we are rarely aware of the deeper meaning of their arrival. A child is usually

conceived through the loving union of a man and woman. Some children are planned for, while others are not. But we assume that all children are welcome, and their arrival into this

Lawyers were eager to meet North Americans and Europeans, who could adopt these and other children. I remember Emiglio, an attorney of short stature, perhaps little more than five feet tall, with a pot belly. He reminded me of dramatic actor Edward G. Robinson, with a keen sense of humor. He always wore a white carnation in the lapel buttonhole of his dark, double-breasted suit. Emiglio spoke English quite well in a rough baritone voice, and he specialized in helping foreigners with the Honduran adoption process and with establishing legal residency required of foreign workers. He had performed this service for me and for Margi when we began the orphanage project for abandoned boys.

Emiglio's interest in adoptions, however, ran far deeper than writing legal documents and getting official signatures. One day I picked up the morning newspaper and discovered a photograph of Emiglio on the front page. He had been arrested by the police for operating a clinic in a north coast city where young women were impregnated, passed their pregnancy, and then made their children available for adoption. The mothers were given room and board, a monthly allowance, prenatal care by a visiting physician, and a final payment for legally relinquishing claim to their children—all of which was far less than the fee he collected. These young women, from the poorer regions surrounding the city, were vulnerable to his promises of becoming rich through the sale of their kids. The revelation of Emiglio's traffic in children proved to be a scandal that rocked the entire adoption program of that country, and there followed numerous stories in the newspapers about the possible marketing of children for profit. The Honduran government moved to shut down adoptions entirely for a time, following an investigation which revealed corruption throughout the system. The problem continues to emerge from time to time throughout Latin America and elsewhere.

While most lawyers working with adoption programs are reliable and reputable, there are some who take advantage of the strong desire of couples from abroad to adopt children. Adoption agencies commonly screen each lawyer to be certain that the fees being charged are reasonable for the services being performed and that the attorney will see the process to completion.

The experience of an adoptive couple with a lawyer has consequences long into the future. The attorney is a key player in setting the stage for positive feelings surrounding the entrance of a child into a family. If the experience is negative—if the adoptive parents conclude that they were charged exorbitant fees for the lawyer's services, for example—there can be residual unspoken resentment that emerges in the relationship with the child much later. If there's a good relationship with a lawyer who is genuinely concerned with the welfare of unwanted children, then the bonding of the new parents with their adopted child will be enhanced.

Another kind of letting go

Late one afternoon a man came to my door. It was the evening before Christmas, and we were expecting the arrival of Santa Claus and some Marines from the U.S. Embassy, who would distribute presents to the kids in the orphanage. The kids were eager to see the old man with the long, white beard. With so much excitement I was hardly eager to receive a different kind of visitor. His name was Ronaldo.

His manner was very somber, and he explained that a baby had died. "It is necessary," Ronaldo said, "to bury her at the city cemetery before nightfall, for it will be closed during the holiday weekend. Will you help us by

was the sense of loss? I interrupted her verbiage with the question, “What are your feelings about the death of your daughter?” She paused, looked directly at me, and answered, “Oh, it’s OK...I’ll just have another!” And continued on with her chatter, picking up her train of thought without any hesitation. Perhaps she and some neighboring women had done their sobbing and wailing when the baby died.



I thought about the difference between our cultures—her passive acceptance of death, and my Developed World value of saving every life at any cost. It was a problem for me rather than for her.



We arrived at the gate of the cemetery, collected the white cardboard coffin, the picks and shovels, and headed past the grave markers of those who have had money and influence in the past, and up the incline to the hill in back of the graveyard. Tegucigalpa was founded over four hundred years ago, and this property has served as the final resting place for countless generations of Hondurans. While a new cemetery at Suyapa to the east serves the contemporary deceased of the middle- and upper-classes, the poor continue to be buried in the paupers’ plots on the hillsides at the old graveyard. Once we found the designated sections for this month’s burials, Ronaldo passed around a small jar of Vicks. We were instructed to apply it to our noses, so that we would not smell the odor of the dead. I learned that the odor was thought of as a indication of the spirits of the dead were trying to enter into a person to capture his soul. And so the men began to dig through the clay and rocks common to the region. Once finished, they handed me the white box, which I carefully placed in the shallow grave.

While reading the Burial Office, I noticed that one of our group had taken a walk. He returned just as I said the Committal, his arms laden with bones from the remains that had surfaced or washed away in the torrential rains. He explained that they would serve well as fuel for his clay stove at home. The others reacted strongly, warning him against desecration and urging him to return the bones from where he’d found them. Anita wept silently as the cavity was filled with dirt. It was the only time I saw her reveal her sadness at her loss. We gathered up our tools and proceeded down the hillside to the surrounding wall.

I began to become concerned when I noticed that no one was around—no mourners, no gardeners, and no vendors of flowers. Arriving at the gate, we found we had been locked in! I’d had learned to always expect the unexpected in Latin America, but to be locked in the graveyard on Christmas Eve was stretching it! Anita had the presence of mind to search for help, while all of us men waited to be rescued. She returned a ten minutes later with an armed soldier, the large ring of keys in his hand, both laughing at our predicament.

It is true, I believe, that women are the strength of Latino society. Men put on a great show of *machismo*, but among the poor it is the mothers who take care of the children, do the laundry in the river, cook and clean house, and keep the family together.



Among the poor, the men come and go, but the mother continues to raise her children through thick and thin.



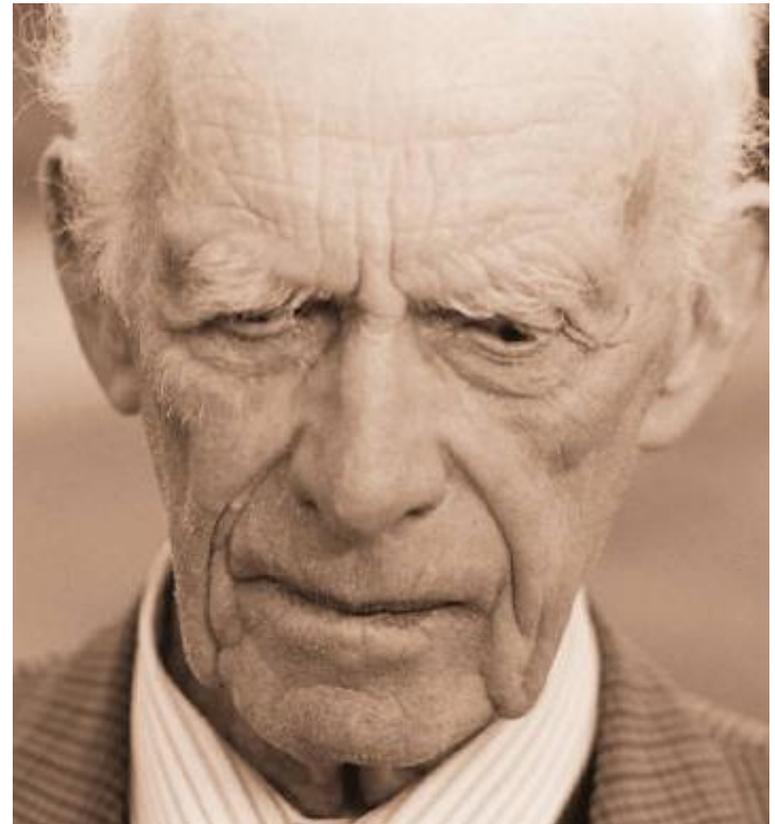
3 Past Lives

learning the stories

Children with painful memories of their past cope by having no recall of that past.

Each day on my way to the center of town in Tegucigalpa I would pass the federal prison, a massive facility extending several blocks along the river that winds through the city. By the appearance of the tall, green walls, I judged it to be terrible inside. But people told me it wasn't so, and that I was welcome any day to tour the inside and to buy the products of the prisoners' work. And so I did.

I found inside those walls a city within a city, a secure place for a lot of people who couldn't make it on the outside. Within the prison environment, a man could make a living; outside, he could not. Inside, he had opportunity to go to school and to learn a marketable trade; normally, formal vocational training was limited to youth enrolled in the two technical institutes in the city. In prison, a woman had privacy and a space of her own; homes outside usually amounted to little more than a room or two shared by an entire extended family of six to ten persons. The cells didn't look at all like I expected, at least compared to similar settings I've visited in



other Developing World countries. I would call them rooms rather than cells.

I entered the room of one inmate, a handsome man with a bushy mustache. He looked like any of the men who lived in my own neighborhood. He was not behind bars, but sitting at a table. He was selling hammocks, and I decided to buy one from him. I gave him the money, and learned in our conversation that it was his for keeps to buy more materials, food, or anything else the jail stores sold. His wife would come to visit him each Sunday, bringing him news of family and friends and encouraging him. The prison in Tegucigalpa is based upon an enlightened penal model that stresses education and rehabilitation. It was another challenge, among many, to my prejudices and expectations, the ones based on nothing more than movie fantasies and my assumptions that prisons were all alike.

Scattered throughout the city were smaller jails, usually housing 15-20 prisoners in a dormitory setting and staffed by security police. It was to these neighborhood centers that prisoners were first brought after arrest. Food was not provided, nor was medical care; each prisoner had to attend to his own needs through the kindness of friends and family. It was in these jails that I found young children, picked up by the police from the streets. Little effort was made by the authorities to find their parents, some kids having lost them months before due to abandonment or death. This is hard to imagine from the viewpoint of one living in the Developed World. These were truly lost children, ranging in ages from nine to twelve, whom nobody claimed. They were among the first brought in the police's jeeps to the *El Hogar*.

When we asked a child about what happened in the days, months and years before he came to us, we could get one of three responses: 1) a fabricated story, 2) a look of fear, and before we would know it the lad had run out of the room, or left the property or 3) the party line of kids from street backgrounds, "I don't have a mother or a father," which usually meant, "I don't want to remember my mother or my father."

%%%

Street boys generally know that "if I tell you I have no parents, I'll get sympathy and protection from you."

%%%

When the government's juvenile department social workers did an intake, they were required to do an assessment of the child's background. We followed this policy also with our own social worker. If some neighbor or relative or caring merchant brought the child in, there would be a fair amount of detail of dates and places and happenings, and perhaps some of it would be true and accurate. But if a child came in alone or was picked up and brought in, the story was written through the eyes of the child, and it was usually a whopper.

Abel and Pascual's mother, for instance, begged us to take her children, indicating they were ages seven and nine. Two years later she arrived with a birth certificate on Abel which she had obtained when she went back to the little town where he was born and where someone had registered his birth. Abel was 18, according to the document. We had suspected that he was a "bit older," but not quite that much. Abel's mom probably didn't intentionally mislead us.

have their “one time” also, and then I could find out where that was, the cast of characters, and something quite revealing about the boy.

Pedrito

There was one lad, however, for whom recall was never possible. Pedrito. His story is fascinating. Two public health nurses were walking one day at the edge of the jungle area where they served a remote outpost, when a strange noise and rustling caught their attention. They investigated, and they found a little boy, walking on all fours, naked, and making strange animal-like sounds. He was afraid of them and tried to escape, but they caught him. It was obvious to the nurses that this boy had never walked upright; his back and bones had already formed into an animal position. He obviously had no language, but appeared to be neither deaf nor dumb. He gathered in all information with his eyes and ears, but his eyes were sunken from always looking up and around from a crawling position.

When they inquired about him from other people in the area, no one had ever seen this boy. And so they brought him to the capital city, Tegucigalpa, and began to “domesticate” him. Pedrito arrived at *El Hogar* after having spent six months at a government reform school, where, as they concluded, he no longer needed to be now that he was standing upright and feeding himself and had learned to use the bathroom. Pedrito was judged to be about eight years old.

When Pedrito arrived at *El Hogar*, he was received with great understanding by all the boys. Even though he was already very tall in stature, his shoulders humped over, and he was not well coordinated. Pedrito often appeared

with very strange arrangements of clothing and shoes on the wrong feet. He sometimes snatched food, and he would often hang around me uttering the new sounds he was learning by repetition. He was unable to express any meaningful connection of syllables. He did not want physical contact, but he wanted some proximity. Strangely, Pedrito was fearful of animals--of our pet dog, the domestic animals, and especially of Cheeta, our pet spider monkey.

Pedrito's progress in learning was slow; he progressed in half a year what a normal child learned in a single month. He grew quickly to understand directions, but not as quickly to speak. One of the volunteers decided to take on Pedrito's vocabulary as a special project, using Cheerios for rewards. While Pedrito learned lots of individual concrete words, three years later he was still not using any symbolic or conceptual words. His task performance was about the same. He could arrive in the kitchen daily, grab the potato peeler and work on and on. But when the pail was empty, he could not think sequentially of what to do next.

Pedrito's past was a mystery to us all. He had lived it alone and without a vocabulary. We concluded we'll never know of his earlier experiences in the jungle because he did not have the conceptual tools or words to describe it. Interestingly, he was also unable to draw pictures of these pre-verbal life experiences.

Covering painful past memories

Most boys did not share their past because there was so much pain and abuse and neglect that they had learned to cover over.

Sometime later in life the pain and abuse would surface. It would happen usually when the boys were in a situation of transition, such as completing the sixth grade and about to graduate, or in a situation of closeness, particularly when a house counselor would take extra time with them, or during a holiday or vacation time, when schedules would change and memories would come flooding in. If a child had been shamed earlier in life, he would do something to be ashamed of at these moments. If a child had been neglected earlier in life, he would begin to pull away and go it alone at a time when he most needed help. A child had been beaten earlier in life would become embroiled in fighting with his fists or with a knife. Those who had been sexually abused would find a younger boy to rape or act out sexually. If he had been hungry earlier, he would steal and store food or anything else he fancied.

It is said that children who have been neglected or rejected, who sit alone in pain, their cries as infants unattended for hours and hours, turn defiantly to the world and inwardly say, "I'll do this myself! I don't need nor can I count on anyone, ever again." These are the unbonded children who only con us into thinking we can be close to them. Reaching them through emotional warmth is very difficult.

Several times we witnessed adoptions of this kind take place in Honduras. Adoptive parents, usually the male in the family, would fall in love with a young boy and take him home to what was hoped would be a new life, only to experience the greatest of heartbreaks when the honeymoon was over and the boy began acting out his strong feelings of independence, rebellion, anger, and revenge on the bewildered and heartbroken adoptive parents.

At one point I became a staunch supporter of advising against taking these young boys out of Honduras and bringing them to the land of many spoils. I reasoned that they were functioning well within the structured system of the orphanage, which was akin to a Boy's Town. These kids found in *El Hogar* opportunities for education, structure, discipline, and a feeling of belonging. While the orphanage family was large and there was only surface bonding of brothers, it was significant. I argued that taking a boy into the very close intimacy of a family, where tears, joys, bedtime kisses, and perhaps close family contact for 5-6 hours a day would bring out the worst in a boy who needed to keep the world "at bay."

I also saw what happened when these same boys stayed in Honduras and found girls to marry. Bernardo committed suicide because of a relationship gone awry, Guillermo went from girl to girl as he tried to make the record of sexual prowess, while others tossed relationships away and broke girls' hearts. I realized then that the neglected past would surface anyway, just a little later.

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I remain to this day with my question. Is it better to give a child with an abusive past a second home where family intimacy and expectations of returned love will set off the fireworks, or to keep these children in group settings and stall off the fury for later?

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4

Miguelito

A case study of the insatiable needs in affection-starved street children.

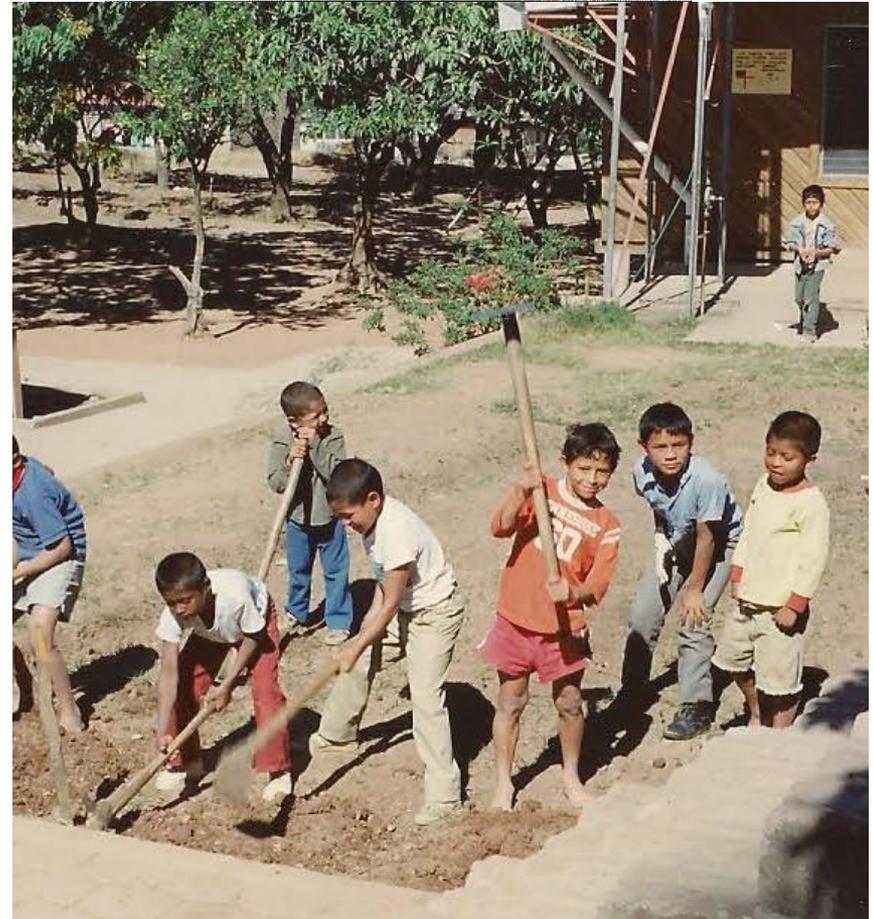
Open for business

February 28, 1979. We were open. We had done what we could to the old hacienda and its spacious two acres here at the edge of town. We had a name: *El Hogar de Amor y Esperanza*, The Home of Love and Hope.

Although the name seemed a bit cumbersome, it had been the committee's favorite choice. They had reasoned that when an abandoned child is shown love, he can regain some semblance of hope in the future. We agreed. We all also agreed that we would refer to the center simply as *El Hogar*.

We bought bunk beds, blankets, towels, glass dishes at the open-air central market. They would be replaced by Hong Kong plastic within a month. We went from market stall to stall asking ourselves what we really needed and what we did not—keeping in mind that we were about to form a family with kids who had virtually lived with no possessions other than a pair of pants and a t-shirt. Some lessons about this I would have to learn the hard way. When these kinds of kids have more than one set of clothes to keep track of, they appeared overwhelmed by the task. We would later find kids flushing their clothes down the toilet (each other's clothes, or even their own when they got dirty), selling them, tossing them onto the roof... It was truly amazing to us, so much so that we began to wonder if having fewer or no possessions was "better" than having them in abundance.

needing to be found again



Miguelito 4

The hacienda property included one large, slightly cracked adobe house of five large rooms, including three toilets, plus a gardener's two room adobe dwelling out back. The *casita* featured a toilet bowl that was NEW. Given my stateside background, I soon came to see the importance of a mere "toilet". I certainly would have accepted a latrine. Indeed, later counselors would beg to have latrines installed, especially for the new kids who often were terrified by the sound of a flushing toilet.

Determined to share our carefully prepared home with the MOST needy boys, I made nightly raids in the pre-dawn hours through the streets of the city. If a boy was asleep in a back alley or doorway, underneath a cardboard box, or under a parked car, it usually meant he had no better place to be. Lots more kids showed up in the street during the day, hand outstretched for loose change in the pockets of pedestrians passing by. Begging was commonplace for kids who saw no value in hanging around home where there would undoubtedly be little or no food and a lot of work to do. Home was often no more than a one-room, wooden shack with a door and perhaps a window, dirt floor and tin roof, and family chores could mean walking blocks to search for clean water and miles to find firewood scraps to cook with. The father has long been absent from the scene, and the mother is usually "out" doing laundry for hire in the river or selling something on the streets of the central market. Older children keep tentative watch over younger siblings.

On the streets

The streets were simply easier and generally more lucrative and inviting than home. The market and mall streets afforded color, movement, noise, crowds and

always the expectation that in the garbage or in the open stalls of the markets something good would show up. Then there was the challenge of stealing and not getting caught, of begging with a sad story and longing eyes and finding oneself with a 50-cent piece in one's hand to spend.

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They said the call of the street was like a fever from which there was no escape, beckoning its children to return.

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There was a school of the street. You learned how to beg, tell a very sad story, be cute. You learned some drug culture...not very advanced, not very smart, but it did the trick. It consisted of finding a plastic bag, begging 10 cents, and buying a dab of contact cement off a street-corner cobbler to put in your bag. The bag was stuffed beneath your shirt for easy access to the opening, and you would take sniffs every few minutes. Contact cement is strong, and the effects are immediate. You become insensitive to the cold or the heat, the hunger pangs in your stomach subside, loneliness is dispelled, and your head feels unaffected by the noise and confusion of a city street in daytime. Prolonged sniffing has a disastrous effect on your memory, and it literally fries your brain. There is no hope of total recovery.

Miguelito joins our family

Miguelito was one of these. I found him at about age five. He had probably spent a year on the streets, where he slept, ate, stole, sniffed glue and learned from the bigger boys. I discovered Miguelito one morning at about 3:00 a.m., sleeping at the side of an older man, a drunk, no relation to him. The two of them had chosen the same corner for the night,

Miguelito 4

was all too much for a boy whose dyslexia (almost universally a result of the glue sniffing) made these tasks more than twice as hard.

And so Miguelito took to running away, back, of course, to the streets. I would give him a few hours, enough to feel hungry and get dirty again, but hopefully not long enough to allow him to sell his shoes. Then I would go into the city's core to search for him, and usually find him sitting on the same street corner each time. We would chat for a bit, and then I would invite him once again to come and live with us. He would turn to me with a broad smile upon his lips, as I would take him up into my arms and bring him "home". Miguelito and I repeated these "rescues" nearly twenty times in the first two years. They became increasingly a source of laughter as they became familiar to us both. Miguelito needed to feel himself found, and he needed to replay that wonderful first scene of the first night when he came to us, was taken in and loved in a special way.

After the first year, however, these repeated rescues got increasingly difficult as I became weary of the same script and Miguelito played harder to get. And then one day Miguelito simply stopped. He no longer doubted his ability to trust that I would always be there for him, seeking him out when he felt pressured to escape from El Hogar. Many other boys repeated the same general scenario, hoping that someone cared enough would come after them. It was a common theme in many centers for abandoned children, and sadly, the plea was not always so well understood.

Graduation

The day Miguelito finally got his grade school diploma (taking eight years to complete six grades) should have been a raucous celebration. It was not. Miguelito was by this time living at our technical school and studying in the carpentry section trying to work during the day and complete his grade school at night. He simply came home one night with his diploma in hand, and without ceremony, put it in his box, and sighed a sigh of relief that the major fight was over. The results of glue sniffing had become obvious to him by now. When he was five, there had been no one to talk to him of the possibilities of life ahead. Now, eight years later, he knew that he would never go beyond 8th grade, yet he was lauded as one of the most concentrated and steady workers in the carpentry shop.

As he unceremoniously showed Margi his diploma, looking up for a glimmer of approval, she reached out to hug him, fully expecting him to pull away as he had many times. She remembered the years when he was failing subjects in a public school system that had little help or mercy for dyslexic children, and which based 80% of the year's grade on final exams. Miguelito told her once how he would begin to tremble as the teacher dictated the exam or wrote it on the board...tremble because he knew he could not write or read it fast enough to keep up. They shared the memory together of one year when he had simply frozen in his seat, and the teacher had to send him home even before the exams began. School was often a source of terror to him.

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I told him the day before I left Honduras that one of the greatest privileges of my life was to be able to walk through the carpentry shop now and witness his steady hand at a saw or lathe and give thanks for his determination. He smiled a now almost manly smile and told me that he never thought he was going to make it.

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Miguelito was never placed for adoption, but there are scores of Miguelitos just like him who have been adopted by caring and loving families. These children often replay their need to be found in different ways. When they run away or distance themselves, it is often interpreted as a rejection of the love and warmth the adoptive parents seek to offer the child. However, flight—running away from home—is a natural response by boys and girls who come from the deprivation of the developing world.

Daily life in the Third World is often lived outside of houses and on the streets. Houses are places where families store their few belongings and sleep at night; the street and *pulperia* (corner store) are the natural gathering-places for kids and adults alike during the daylight hours. Houses also serve as lock-up places for unattended children. Parents do not think it unusual to leave infants and toddlers locked inside a house alone during the day as they go off to sell, to market, or to wash clothes at the river. Like kids anywhere, they will raid any available food and naturally explore their enclosed environment. But among the poor, there are few or no belongings or supplies to explore. Adoptive parents can expect that a house in this country that includes so many things will be a source of fascination and discovery, perhaps to the point of overload.

The fear of abandonment may be the first of life's hard lessons among children in the Developing World. Unfortunately, the feeling of abandonment is often learned by children in the developing world at an early age.

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The first experience of being left alone may occur before the child is able to speak, and it will remain hidden and unarticulated in the subconscious of that girl or boy.

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Love must be tried and proven for these children, over and over again until the fear vanishes. This deep need for reassurance can be trying on the adoptive relationship and the patience of the adoptive parents. Most children will resolve the issue like Miguelito, while a few will not. It is important for the new parents to realize that the pattern reflects an early experience in the child's life and is not a sign of personal rejection of their love and care.

5

Stealing Children

from the streets

Law and Order sometimes get in the way of serving the needs of kids

Lazaro had been living with us from the very beginning of the program. He was my link to the reality of Honduras. I could be sure, absolutely so, to trust him, and it was always that way. It was never any other way. A lad twenty years my junior, I looked upon him as my Honduran model and mentor. I looked to him for guidance in my own cultural acclimatizing. Many attitudes and ways of doing things that I had taken for granted during my lifetime were different in the developing world. No longer was there a so-called “right” way.

I was learning fast as a U.S. missionary that I could not simply transport what I called my “moral expectations” to Honduras. People did not place the same values on things, and therefore they did not make the same moral choices. Lazaro had grown up



Stealing Children 5

as an orphan with a British missionary, and he already was aware of the cultural differences and what I was in for. He knew, for example, that I would be very adverse to lying and stealing, that wasting things, politely covering over things, or that doing things slowly but surely would not be thought of as virtues on my part. He also knew his own people, and he was able to stand somewhere between both cultures, bridging my passage.

Julio and Cesar

One day, just a short time after we had picked up and accepted two of the worst looking and acting urchins I had ever quite experienced, I came in the gate home from the market. Lazaro was there to meet me. He had been in charge of our small community of twelve boys. Though he was nineteen, he was mature; having passed through an orphanage himself, he knew all the tricks.

Whatever they had done must have been a trick he hadn't known, because I saw the distressed look on his face as he greeted me. I had suspected it was something these two newest brothers, Julio and Cesar, had done, for they truly were something. I had taken them to the market the day before to outfit them with new shoes along with four other new boys. As we were ready to get back into the car, Julio swept out two pairs of socks from beneath his t-shirt and proclaimed: "Now, I have something to wear with my new shoes!"...unpaid for, of course! I found sandwiches under their pillows and the belongings of other kids hidden away among their clothes. There were reports of them terrorizing the youngest and producing a can of glue for sniffing for after-dinner entertainment. "Now what?" I said, hoping to relieve Lazaro's anxiety. But it was he who was about to give ME the attack.

An order to appear in court

He began slowly, "It is just a matter of protocol, I'm sure...but you have received a subpoena to appear in juvenile court for stealing children from the street." I panicked. He could see it by my wild eyes, and he tried to calm me down by saying it would be easy to talk my way out. Small chance, I thought. I didn't know any Honduran law, nor any legal Spanish. How would I even talk to them? How would I defend myself? We had a permit from the security police to be taking children from the street. Well, we sort of had official permission. I remembered now that the chief of police had said we didn't need anything in writing. And who knows if the local police station has any clout with the Juvenile Court? Who knows if one branch of the government connects with another? And a lawyer? Lazaro added, as if to be comforting, "It's only the mother of the two latest trouble makers. We can just turn the kids back over and everyone will be better off." The kids, of course, had told us that they had no mother or father, and that they were long ago dumped on the street and had been living there with nothing to eat, begging for their food, clothing, and other necessities. Now a mother shows up claiming that we have stolen her children!

I went in to the little room we called an office to muster my forces. I wanted to call Connie, my supporter and confidant in these daily crises, and to get us a lawyer. But of course we had no phone. I was on my own! I left again for town and miraculously found a working phone.

Two hours later we were waiting outside the judge's office, the two of us and a lawyer who assured us that we had nothing to worry about in view of our "promised" police order. Lawyers were like that; they dealt more in assuring their clients than with law, for there were always convenient

exceptions to laws. Connie was more alarmed than I was. She had lived in Tegucigalpa for ten years, and she knew what this might turn into--the downfall of all her hard work and the end of a dream of giving all those street children a decent life. "And this is the same judge who had the gall to say to the media there were NO NEEDY CHILDREN ON THE STREETS! Why, there are thousands of them," she said, as if trying to convince herself. She continued, "That lady was just threatened because somebody was finally going to do something decent for kids."

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It was a cultural bias, and one of the many we learned to understand working in someone else's country and doing a job they thought they should be doing, handling, conquering. The fact is, this is a global village we inhabit. The more than 1000 wandering street kids was as much our problem as hers.

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All of the talk about previous dealings with this particular judge made me even more nervous, until I saw the mother of the boys walk in. She was so recognizable, so much like her two "gangster" kids, I almost laughed. She did not think to announce her arrival, and sat down on the bench across from us. We looked at each other, but didn't speak.

After what seemed an eternity, the social worker came out into the hall and showed us into the judge's chambers. The judge greeted us. She seemed to know the case, the mother, and us. She began: "This lady is claiming that you have her children and will not give them up." I began to explain the circumstances of finding the boys on

the street. Connie commented about our official permissions from the police, and the lawyer added his own attempt at clarifying the situation. When the judge had listened patiently to our five minutes of staccato-like attempts to explain, she cut in. I had done a really poor job of explaining my case, and I felt the end very near.

I strained to understand her as she began authoritatively, "The point is clear. We have an irresponsible mother whose children now might be cared for in a good institution, but who does not want anything good for them." I was sure I had misunderstood. This judge was for us! She turned to the lady and asked her to state her case. The answer came in an unconnected sort of way. "I need my children at home. They are mine. But they just won't obey and do what I tell them." There followed a barrage of words from the judge against irresponsible motherhood that I barely understood but which gave me a new sense of relief. Actually, I had wanted to be rid of these two boys. I wanted the mother to have them. I wanted all of this to be over. This mother was a BIG problem, and that problem would not end here in the judge's office. She was being told off, put down, and I would get the brunt of it. I said as clearly as I could to the mother, "Come with me right now; the boys are yours, take them. When and if you really need to put them in a home, then come. We exist for boys who have no mothers to care for them." She turned away, angered by the court's decision. We departed, and the two boys remained at *El Hogar*. I never knew if there were winners or losers.

Grandmothers, aunts, wayward fathers, mothers of every kind would occasionally show up at our door after we had taken their boys from the streets. Some came out of embarrassment for having let their children stray. Some came just to see. Some came out of anger. Some expected us to solve their own personal problems. Lots came in tears.

Stealing Children 5

I often relived that same feeling of that day in court. Through the years I was to deal with delinquent parents, too. How could I ever have thought that problem children could have non-problem parents?

Generally, I found many of those in authority to be embarrassed that someone would come from outside Honduras to care for what appeared to be unwanted and lost children. Many confided that they believed this was a problem of that society, just as the kids and the homeless who wander the streets of New York or Los Angeles, for example, are signs of our inability to care adequately for our own people. It was important, therefore, that workers from abroad assist the Hondurans in our program in a subordinant role. Each center came to be directed by a national, and as the program developed, Margi and I increasingly took background roles.

More encounters with the legal community

Several other homes for abandoned children opened during our first ten years of operation, and some were closed down for “dealing in adoptions” and various other reasons, most of which I considered as “misfortunes” with the law or consequences of a vengeful people using the law to their advantage. Law in the U.S. seems comparatively absolute and at times a hard, immovable wall of bureaucracy; it was different in Honduras. There, bureaucracy was a game of wits, a challenge intermixed with favoritism and open bribes. The legal establishment invited one to jump in, just to see how long it took to conquer the forces.

U.S. parents, when dealing with lawyers and adoption laws in Latin America, tend to ride a roller coaster of sorts for this very reason. They usually consider their lawyer a

friend and advocate for them. After all, they are PAYING him. But the lawyer is a player in a game, a very involved game in which he deals with favors, outwitting the system, trying to slide into or under home base. To make matters worse, there are the *gringos* breathing down his/her back wondering if she/he will get things done in a “timely fashion.”

Which line?

Some dealings with Honduran bureaucracies were downright comical. A friend once waited in a line for forty-five minutes with his young and inexperienced Honduran secretary as translator, hoping to be able to pay his municipal taxes. Finally, arriving at the window, the clerk asked his name, date of birth, and birthplace, and the name and birthdate of his fiancée. They found they were in the line for obtaining a marriage license!

Waiting and waiting

There were always long lines for government and banking services. Getting a phone, a water meter, or paying an electric bill, obtaining a telephone directory or a driver's license, signing up for garbage collection, or paying my taxes would require queuing up as early as 7:30 am, when the lines would involve only 20-to-30 people. One would expect to do the first step in the process and then be sent away with a form to fill out, stamps or seals to buy, copies to make, and then return to the line, arriving at the window about the time they closed for lunch. As I watched the faces of the people who waited with me after traveling miles and miles on busses from the countryside be told to “come back in the morning,” my own anger would dissipate. I live only a 45-minute bus ride from this office. It took fourteen visits

for the phone permit and three visits for the phone book. How could I utter a complaint?

When, at the end of our stay in Honduras, I personally did the giant portions of the adoption work myself, I realized why lawyers took so long on adoptions. The offices I had to queue up for numbered twenty-one:

- Juvenile Protection - 3,
- Forensic MD - 1,
- Juvenile Court - 2,
- Birth Registry - 2,
- Adoption Registry - 1,
- Newspaper bans - 3,
- Local Police - 2,
- Family Court - 2,
- Notary Public - 2,
- Passport - 1,
- Medical Certificate - 1,
- Exit Visa - 1,
- and finally the US Consulate.

Each section usually required more than one visit, sometimes weeks apart. Once I thought, along with several other people, that I was saving big time by going right outside the door and buying the government stamps required after the first signature. There were two ladies selling them at only slightly inflated prices. We all got back in line to hand in our documents. We were all told, one by one, that we had just purchased counterfeit stamps...

The paper push

I always brought along a good novel to read while in line. But as I moved closer to the clerk, I would stop reading and try to analyze the situation to see if I could find a shortcut. Usually only the directors of the various branches

of the government would have signatory authority, and these individuals, often feeling their importance, would spend only a few hours in the office per day. The documents to be signed would accumulate in large piles on the desk. Offices were invariably overcrowded, with people working in stuffy cubicles with antiquated typewriters or perhaps a non-functioning computer stuck in the corner and thousands of interruptions that make for impossible concentration and a high level of mistakes and the misplacing of documents.

I once missed getting a signature on a very important document I had been waiting for. The official walked out past the pregnant secretary who was on her way to find him with the paper in hand, but had stopped to let a co-worker feel the baby move and exchange a piece of information about the latest style in baby clothes. I was frozen to the spot. I wanted to yell out "My paper, my paper." Instead, under my breath I blamed fate.

Getting lost

Offices are constantly being moved or undergoing reconstruction. The paper sign on the door that is supposed to inform you of the new location has usually fallen down by the time you get there, and even if you were able to find and read it, you would have to be a ten-year resident of the city to understand the new address, often stated in vague terms like, "Four blocks down from the Suarez mom and pop store in the area where the old Post Office used to be." No house numbers or street names would be given. "Down from" and "up from" are supposedly understood but have little relation to typography or the compass directions I am used to being given.

Stealing Children 5

Once you are a resident of a country like Honduras, you must request permission to leave. There are four steps to getting out, each of which may be done at four different sites within an hour's walk or a 20-minute bus ride. I often found that some of the offices had been moved several times during our nine years in Honduras. Each time I discovered they had moved by going to the wrong location. The most painful times were those when I needed to leave quickly to go home to a funeral or dying parent.

Privileges for the affluent

I saw the reverse of the coin, too. I went to the U.S. Consulate to do some paperwork, and outside the entrance I saw two long lines of people extending up the street. These were Hondurans waiting to apply for visa applications for entering the United States. They began lining up at 5:00 am, hoping to get in before the noon deadline. While inside, I listened to the questions posed the applicants by the interviewing officers. "How much money do you have in the bank?...Where is your statement?" "What kind of job do you have here?...Show me the affidavit." "Who will you be visiting?...Show me the formal invitation" The questions were intended to assure that people would not join the ranks of undocumented foreigners in the U.S. or slip in under the quota, but they sounded so much like granting privileges to the rich. On the more than fifteen times I travelled back to Honduras by airplane, I was surrounded by shoppers, most of whom had simply gone to Miami for the weekend and bought everything money could buy. But one time the last third of the plane was occupied by people who had been gathered up in Miami and deported back to Honduras for illegal entry. They were given no food, and they were so intimidated by the experience that they spoke not a word during the three-hour trip.

Conflict begins

In March of 1988, the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa was bombed, ostensibly to demonstrate defiance against the U.S. by drug kings fighting their way up the ladder in the internal Honduran power struggle. Despite a security system of security cameras, two identification checks, three sets of barred doors, two gun detection checks, and a host of Honduran military and Marine guards, key individuals were paid off to abandon their posts and the damage was done, mostly in the area where visas were approved. The conflict was an angry outcry of frustration by the Honduran people. Three months later, Hondurans trying unsuccessfully to obtain visas for legitimate reasons (for study, work-shops, and medical problems, for example), concluded, "The *gringos* are still mad at us and won't give out any visas."

Changing of the guard

Payoffs in Honduras come in the forms of favors and jobs. I concluded that every time a new political party comes into power, there is such a clean sweep of workers that even the janitors are replaced by members of the new party. Your hope of finding a document that was filed under the former system is slim. Efforts are made to "milk" the system for bribes and payoffs during the four years a particular party is in office, because its members will soon be facing the next four or eight years of unemployment while the other party takes its turn.

Most paperwork is done first in longhand and then passed to a secretary who types it on official legal paper. (Legal paper is a piece of paper with official seals that is purchased from the government and submitted for them to do their work on!) Always, when you present a request (even importing the family cat) you must "respectfully direct

yourself” on this official paper to the Minister of the department, in much detail and very formal language, often with the signatures of witnesses and notary publics. You may be asked to purchase an additional blank page for the Minister to approve or deny your request. The procedure usually takes about eight days to complete.

Delegating the tasks to “Gofers”

These time-consuming transactions have given rise to the large and lucrative profession called “*gofers*” or transaction expeditors. Almost everyone of importance has his personal paper pusher, just as he would have his maid, cook, gardener, or chauffeur. Of all of these, the *gofer* is the most valuable and highly paid. He must have a high level of education, social skills, and finesse, for he must know how to find the right people and make the right friends in all the offices, read the paperwork, remember messages, and run back and forth to get signatures or make appointments. The *gofer* insures that his employer will not have to wait in the long lines.

The paper pusher also has to know when and how to bribe. I went with Lazaro through the seven steps to obtain our vehicle license renewed for a year, and we were advised to “pay a little extra” to the right person at the right time to get the mechanical inspection seal. We chose to ignore this counsel, and when I brought our vehicle back in for the fourth time (the inspector thought the light that illuminated the license plate was too far recessed into the bumper), I knew we would have to do major bodywork to enable that vehicle to pass the inspection. Meanwhile, another paper pusher was buying an inspection seal for a car he had at home and may not even have had a light!

Checkers

Another profession to which bureaucracy gives rise is the “*checker*.” *Checkers* are people who are hired to review how you have filled out your forms and how government workers complete the other portion of the application. They are known and identified by their big red pencils, and they perform their tasks by checking with a mighty “X.” I often stood before them and watched them mark my forms. Any pause in their work might suggest another day or week of my time. Something found to be incorrect or mistyped could send me back to the beginning of the process. In essence, the system presumes you have lied unless you are proven accurate.

Once, Margi needed to submit to the government a copy of her birth certificate from her home town in Minnesota. She made an international long-distance call to the County Clerk’s office in Wadena, Minnesota and arranged to have them drop it off at her mom’s house on the way home from work. Contrast that process to obtaining birth certificates for our adopted Honduran sons in the very city in which we lived, Tegucigalpa. We began in May, finished in February of the following year, and calculated more than a hundred actual hours spent sitting in offices, even with “incentives” of bottles of rum or doughnuts. Of the 150 boys we harbored at *El Hogar* and later at the Institute, over half of them had no documentation. We began the slow process with birth certificates and progressed all the way up to national identification cards, medical cards, and finally draft cards. At the Institute, we offered the boys a course in paper pushing. They stood in the lines as a part of the course!

Stealing Children 5

I sometimes spent my time in lines conversing with other exasperated Hondurans. We complained of the paper-pushers in front of us, because they sometimes processed documents for a dozen people at once and would surely take more time. I would begin to tell exaggerated stories of efficiency in the U.S.; I would share tales of being able to mail in checks to pay parking violation fines or that speeding tickets were mailed to you as your photo was taken passing a radar point and matched up with your license plate. I even told someone about the clothing-optional sit-in on a university-owned beach in California in 1977, where nude participants were photographed from off-shore boats, the pictures computer-matched with drivers' license identification records in Sacramento, and the fines sent in the mail. Hondurans would drop their jaws upon hearing these stories, and I would recognize that we were simply at the other end of the spectrum.

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***Waiting for (on) each other is what the powers that
be do to us and what we do back to someone else.***

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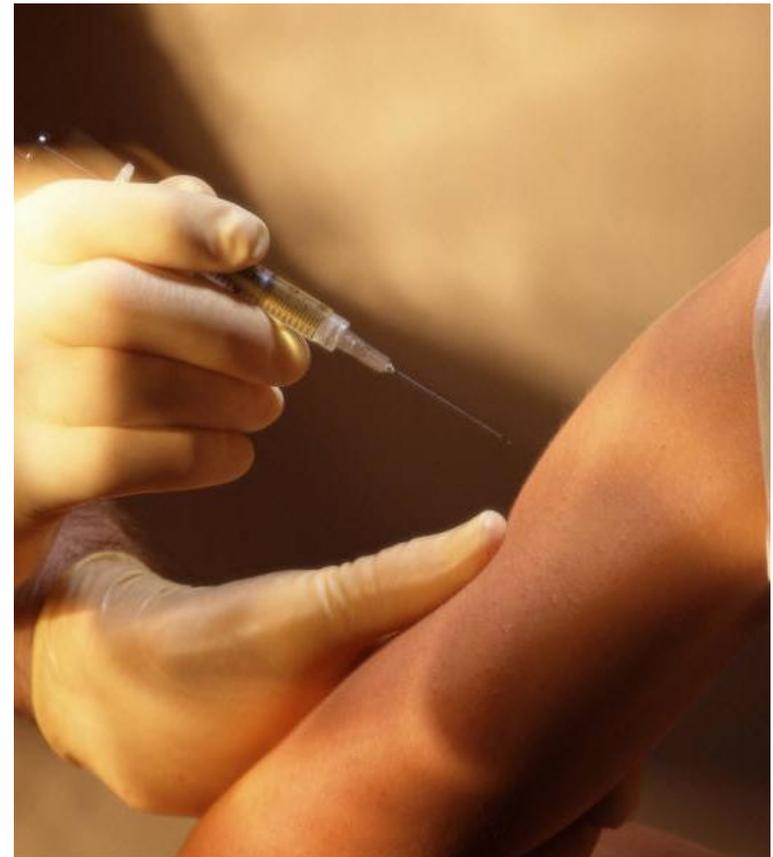
6

Being Sick

and coping

Many children did not know the difference between feeling sick and feeling sad.

It was close to 8:00 am. We had all been standing for two hours on cement-tiled floors, shifting from one leg to another, swatting flies, and waiting in line at the public health clinic to hand in fecal specimens. I was there with the latest tapeworm victim of *El Hogar*. Most of us had jars (Gerber's baby food jars were usually sold in the open market for that very purpose, even though the used lids were not very reliable). The most discrete had their jars inside a paper bag. The lines were VERY long and the feeling of frustration prevailed. Why not simply to leave your "stuff" on the counter and get on with the day? But no, you had to wait in line to show that you had paid your money at the other office first, and let the lady take down the details and spell your name correctly while she pecked out the letters with one finger on a twenty-years old Royal typewriter. A middle-aged, already toothless, and barefoot lady in line had not been informed of step one. She looked a bit disheveled anyway; her hair was matted, and her mannerisms reminded me of the women about whom they always said, "*Nervios...nervios*," meaning anything could happen as a result of being emotionally high strung. When she finally arrived at the front of the line and was told she had to start all over because she didn't have her



receipt for the \$1.00 payment, she looked down and then away, took the baggie with her specimen in it from her pocket and in one swift swoop flung it at the wall. The fecal material separated from the bag, and all the onlookers secretly delighted in this “concrete” outlet of her feelings.

While in Honduras, we knew that if we got really sick, we could “go home.” That said it all. To me, sickness had, for a long time, moved me to aggressively charge towards the cure, the medicine, the “up and at it as soon as possible” attitude. But at the end of those years, having watched from afar both my mom and Margi’s mother and father let cancer take their lives, and having lived in a land where illness and infirmity seem not to make a difference in the meaning of life, something in me has changed.

Javier and the Dengue

One day Javier asked to go to bed between classes, saying he didn’t feel well. I felt his head and thought he must have a temperature. I sent him off with some Tylenol and went into my next class. The class was learning the difference between the Fahrenheit and Centigrade scales that day, and so I decided the perfect example was to show them how necessary it was to use both kinds of thermometers (as both are used in Honduras). I would use Javier as a case in point. I went into the infirmary for the two thermometers, stuck the first one in his mouth and waited. My plan was to do the same with the second one and then bring them back to class for the students to analyze and calculate the differences. Javier seemed half asleep, but also shivering a bit. I pulled out the thermometer; it read 105 degrees. I never made it back to class. A question or two to this very sick kid and we knew he had a case of Dengue fever.

We did not often see either Malaria or Dengue in Tegucigalpa, located high in the central plains, but Javier had just returned from the coast, and yes, there were others there with Dengue. It is said that many, many people live on and on with untreated, recurring Malaria or with walking Dengue. Several children would tell me later as they got older that they knew the time of day by the time they broke out with chills and fever—for it happened with regularity every twenty-four hours for months and perhaps years. Most of the kids who lived with us were physically healthy. They were the survivors of their generation. Only three of five children born in Honduras during the 1980’s were expected to live past age five. The average lifetime expectancy was 59 years.

Roger’s stomach aches

Roger’s friends came to report that he was on his bed, writhing in pain. I went to his bedside. He complained of a terrible stomach ache. I asked the usual questions that might point to an inflamed appendix and felt his abdomen, then asked what he ate, and finally if he had been having worms in his stool. The last question got the positive answer. Kids at El Hogar had plenty of clean food to eat. It was when they went out for periodic visits to relatives that they returned with every infection and parasite possible. Roger had been living a long time with cramps, diarrhea, and intestinal pain and hadn’t bothered to mention his discomfort, probably because he was used to it from long before. This time he was really hurting. He went into the bathroom and threw up a stomach full of long, white worms. They had backed up from his intestines.

Severe pain was no stranger to this lad. He had one good leg and one prosthetic leg. As a seven year old, he was playing on the railroad tracks and caught his foot. The train

came upon him, severing his leg before it could stop. He was rushed unconscious to an infirmary, where the wound was cleaned. It wasn't for several hours later that he was transported to a hospital for the emergency surgery. This lad indeed knew pain.

Gabriel's open skull

Gabriel was another who had known pain. He came to us from the children's hospital, abandoned of sorts. His father had brought him to the city from the a remote rural area, taken him to the hospital with a swollen head, and abandoned Gabriel when he heard the diagnosis. Gabriel had a significant brain tumor.

Physicians at the hospital immediately operated, removed the tumor, and inserted a metal plate over the exposed area of his brain. There followed weeks of radiation therapy. After three months in the hospital without a visitor and unclaimed, Gabriel was brought to us. Before much time passed, the plate in Gabriel's head seemed to be springing up, and his scar opening. It became infected, and twice daily I would clean the discharge from the wound. Eventually, it was decided to again operate, this time to remove the protective plate. The lad came back to us with the doctor's admonition, "If a ball hits this child on the head, he could die. There is now no protection for the brain." It was our constant fear that some boy would toss a rock or a ball in his direction. We tried to protect Gabriel, at that time only seven years old, from any possible such accident. He constantly wore a baseball cap which hid the large cavity on one side of his head where the hair had not grown back. But Gabriel soon became isolated by the other boys, sullen and sad, and we knew this was not going to work.

Some doctors from Florida happened to visit while on a medical mission to the south of Honduras. One of them took an interest in this lonely child with bright eyes and winning smile. The physician offered to take him to Florida, where a surgeon would insert a new silicon plate, and bring him back with a new lease on life. Two months later, Gabriel returned to us, delighted with his experience in the United States and very glad to be well.

Renieri and the Shriners

Renieri David had polio when he was younger, leaving one leg weaker and shorter than the other by at least an inch. While unable to run and jump with the other kids, he had a positive attitude and limitless patience with his handicap. We outfitted him with special shoes, built up to accommodate the missing growth in his leg, but he continued to walk with a considerable limp, one foot pointing outward to the side. As he developed, it was obvious that his handicap would preclude his being employed at a job where physical activity was involved.

I contacted the Shriners' Hospital in Florida, forwarding them Renieri's x-rays and photographs, and they agreed to operate. The Shriners who sponsor the orthopedic hospitals are true saints of this world, providing miracles that normally would be beyond the hope of many, especially those in the Developing World. Renieri returned to Honduras after two months, delighted with his experience of being spoiled in the United States, and now able to run and play much like the other boys.

No complaining

It always amazed me how little sympathy or care kids required when they were sick. The boys would often confuse being sick with feeling sad. A lad off in a corner, sitting alone, would typically answer when asked, "I just feel sad." It wasn't depression he was feeling. I would place my hand on his forehead to check for a fever. Another boy with a systemic infection.

Most children never thought that bed might feel good when they felt sick. Perhaps there were no memories of a comfortable bed. Most boys came from homes where three or four children shared a single mattress, or where there was only a straw mat to lay out on the dirt floor at night. Even though at El Hogar each boy had his own bunk and mattress, blankets, sheets, and pillow, and a bit of privacy with his lock box at his head, we seldom had nappers or kids who wanted to stay in bed in the morning. Sleep seemed to be just a function of life, not anything special to be enjoyed. The Honduran was to be up and out, no matter if you were sick or tired. However, the sun in Central America, all year round, rises just before 6:00 and sets just after 6:00 in the evening. Most villages have no electricity, or at best only a diesel generator, and so the hour to turn in comes early. The kids of El Hogar normally went to bed at 8:00, with lights out at 8:30. I never had to worry about the kids getting enough sleep.

I've watched, however, with some puzzlement, our younger adopted son turn into a night owl, with circles surrounding his wide, brown eyes. He's lucky if he gets seven hours of rest on any given night; I hear him moving around in his room hours after I've gone to bed. During the long months of winter, he seems to have one cold or ear-

ache after another. He loves to sleep late into the morning hours on weekends, and his favorite game is to see how late he can possibly remain in bed on weekdays before rushing off to meet the waiting school bus. What brought about the transition in lifestyle from his earlier socialization? Where did he get the message that it is "cool" for a kid to stay up late?

In general, people in the Developing World do not pamper each other. Life is hard, and everyone does what is expected. These days when my work takes me into hospital rooms, and I commonly observe demanding patients. Whenever I brought a child to the hospital in Honduras, I was reminded of this great difference. For example, I often visited the maternity ward, where the labor room consisted of a public hallway where mothers-to-be would simply lie on the floor and groan. Many of them never made it to the delivery room, especially if there were too many ahead of them.

Hospital triage

In the emergency waiting room, the severe cases were mixed with the colicky child whose mom did not know what this was all about. There seemed to be no triage. Everyone simply knew that the benches would be lined with the coughing, the bleeding, and the feverish. We had an agreement that we could get special treatment because we had so many kids waiting back at home. It felt awful. Once, during a fifteen-minute wait, I saw a child die in his mother's arms in the long lineup of benched patients.

Almost everyone understood that if you went to a general hospital, you needed to have someone come with you. There was no system of getting blood work to the lab

or patients to x-ray or drugs back to the patient. That was all done by the partner who had brought you in. For the most part, so was bathing, dressing, feeding and comforting a patient. Your companion was your attendant and nurse. The practice certainly minimized costs.

I observed that most people appeared not to fight illness but to accept it. Being ill was thought of as a normal part of living, another of life's happenings. I wasn't forced to listen to endless conversations about aches and pains and cures as is sometimes the case in the Developed World. The standards and willingness to tolerate physical discomfort are different. Folks simply spent a lot of quiet time together. I noticed this on buses, in hospitals, and in homes. They were just there, together—present to each other when it counted. What more can we ask of our friends and family?

Typhoid Alicia

I visited a clinic in the mountains in central Guatemala, near Lake Atitlan. I saw there nearly a dozen infants and very young children being cared for, brought in from the small mountainside farms by their parents because the kids were sickly. And small wonder—the people of that region live off the land on a minimal diet. They are poor *campesino* farmers. The care was good under dedicated volunteers and staff, and many children consequently improved in health and returned to their families. But I also knew some kids would return a few weeks later, again sickly, dehydrated, and weak.

The staff, particularly the cook, gave the kids lots of attention. Food was in abundance, as was good care. There was laughter, hugging, holding, and toys for the young

patients. What a contrast this must have been for many of the kids, who came from humble dwellings. I recall meeting Jose, a bright boy of about ten years of age, who would come by to visit with me each afternoon. On his back he carried Alicia, his younger sister. Alicia always seemed to have a runny nose and coughing. It was Jose's duty to care for her while his mother and father and older siblings worked the coffee plantation up the mountain. Jose, Alicia, and I would play ball and talk and sing. One day I heard that Alicia was in the clinic; she was diagnosed as sick with typhoid. I found Jose sitting outside my door that afternoon. He said he felt ashamed and worried because she was sick; it was his responsibility to care for her, he explained. He had done his best, but he was no match for the virus. And neither was I, as it turned out. In a few weeks I was ill with the same infection; Alicia was a carrier.

Bathing was a daily ritual at the clinic, and infections and parasites were given immediate attention. Some of the babies had diarrhea, and I noticed that the Guatemalan nurse in charge of them would change their diapers herself. I spent a morning helping her, and what I saw pained me, for their tender bottoms were red with blisters and sores. She explained that the skin tissue was so fragile, and any carelessness by untrained caregivers could damage it. She made no attempt to wipe a child clean, nor did she powder him dry. The danger of infection was too great, she said. A clean diaper quickly replaced the soiled one, and the child was placed in the arms of a waiting volunteer and returned to the crib. With a few weeks of care, the soreness would heal and the children returned to their anxious mothers. I wondered how long it would be before these same infants returned to the clinic with the same problem. And so the cycle went for many of these children, in and out and in again through the revolving door of the clinic.

These kids were fortunate to have a clinic such as this; there are countless others who receive only the care of their mothers and older sisters. And what of the sickly children who ride the backs of brothers like Jose? Not all survive; the mortality rate among these children is greatest during the first five years of life. Some of them will be fortunate to be adopted by American families, their early precarious situations unknown.

Culture clashes on the care and discipline of problem children.

your way



The mornings were always sunny and bright. The roaring diesel buses that passed on the road were full of people on their way to their jobs at 6 am. I was among them now,

because we had moved five miles from the *El Hogar* property to live and begin work at the technical school. I spent mornings at *El Hogar* and afternoons at the Institute. I loved the morning bus

ride, even though it meant three transfers and a jockey for space to put my body. I loved the time to talk to myself amid the masses of perfumed and sweaty bodies pressed side by side like sardines.

Pushed to the limit

One morning, as I walked up the dusty rutted hill towards *El Hogar*, I could see someone pacing back and forth inside the fence. I tensed. I was approaching something difficult and different. He awaited the moment I swung open the rusty and hesitant gate of the property of *El Hogar*. The Honduran counselor was without his usual smile and warm greeting. The counselors were normally busy at that time of day with getting the kids up, dressed, and fed. Some child had caused a major problem and taken off through the gate, I thought. He began, "You are going to hear some things about us today. It's because the *gringo* volunteers don't really understand the Honduran way."

"What happened?" I asked, fearing the worst. My mind ran through a catalog of events that might be devastating, such as the death of a child or the burning of one of the dorms. The counselor seemed not to want to answer, and my anxiety was already so high that I was having trouble remaining focused. I kept walking with him, instinctively trying to get closer to the source of my anxiety. A boy came up to ask the counselor something, and then all communication seemed lost between us. By the time the counselor was free again, one of the *gringo* volunteers was following me asking to talk. The Honduran counselor darted glances from the side. Now I was in between the two of them, and it felt dreadful. I still didn't

know what was wrong, but I felt the tension between the two.

My loyalties between being a director and supporter to the Honduran staff and a model missionary to the U.S. students who came to give of their time and talents were often pulled apart. I had always felt uneasy about having young college volunteers or volunteers of any age. It was so hard to mix the two sets of people. The Honduran counselors were mostly young, paid a fair wage, but struggling, and usually in the middle of their education. The *gringo* volunteers were unpaid volunteers, meaning they many times worked just a few hours a day, took off for long trips here and there, and usually did not speak or understand Spanish well. However, they could do all kinds of other things the Hondurans couldn't, such as drive cars, fix tape recorders, and use sewing machines. Volunteers came with cameras and gadgets, and they represented a lot of education and money. In short, we were mixing apples and pears. Sometimes I hoped that I could integrate the two groups. With some volunteers the integrating came easily. But when relationships didn't mesh, I didn't handle it very successfully. I had a strange feeling I was about to hear the results of some poor public relations.

According to the *gringo* story, one of the more troubled boys had been beaten the night before because he had tried to run away. I knew that boys tried to run often, very often. In fact, when anything went wrong the flight syndrome set in. It was the only way boys with no particular bonds of affection for parents knew to react to bothersome situations. They had lived on the streets, had been chased from begging at restaurants or stores and then from back alleys and even from abandoned cars. While we tried hard to create an environment which would motivate the boys to stay with us, it was an incredible sorrow, hardship, and slap-in-the-face for any counselor (Honduran or *gringo*) to have worked so long with a boy only to have him defy us and run away,

usually with several other invited boys and goods to sell on the street. Many times the counselors' personal possessions, if they were anywhere within reach, went with the runaways.

The story began to unravel more. Last night the counselors had decided to make an example of one boy's behavior in order to discourage fleeing culprits once and for all. They stood the offender up in public in front of the assembled group of kids and began to tell him that he was a bad example to all. The boy balked, talked back, spat in the face of the counselor, and ran for the gate. The counselors dared the rest of the boys to go after him. The boys responded *en mass* like a mob and charged out the entrance. They caught the runaway, dragged him back in through the gate, and deposited him at the feet of the counselors, who proceeded to strip and whip the lad to make the point even stronger before the entire group of boys. At this point two *gringo* volunteers stood up to express their protest against the events of the evening and to side with the runaway.

Protecting the kids

I listened, shaken by the two tragedies, a beaten boy and beaten egos. I was trying to identify with the two sides, but I felt repulsed by both. I considered the Honduran counselors as my sons and companions. We had made *El Hogar* home for eighty boys, eighty renewed lives. We had gone through hard times together. We had a policy, agreed upon by all, that severe forms of punishment were never to be used. We also all knew that the kids tested us to our limits. And so I tried to see the *gringo* side. I, too, was scandalized to see injustice done and wanted to take the unpopular stand against it. I wondered where the kids stood in the middle of all of this. I did what I considered

the best I could in the situation: I listened. I talked to individuals, letting them air their feelings, realizing it was hurting them more than me. At the next counselors' meeting, I reiterated the policy statement, that children were not to be publicly humiliated and beaten. I reminded both *gringo* and Honduran faculties that we had an especially hard job of working together in the midst of especially difficult kids.

There began a long term uneasiness between the North American volunteers and our Honduran counselors that never ever quite subsided. We spent long hours in sessions talking, agreeing in principle, hoping that talking it out might lead us to resolve our different opinions on discipline.

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What we as gringos believed had validity in some cases, and badly needed change in other cases.

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There were times I saw Honduran counselors in total awe as they watched the merit/reward system actually WORK. There were times I saw *gringo* counselors decide to give Honduran counselors still another chance.

I discovered a great variety of disciplines commonly used with children in Honduras, ranging from withholding dinner to corporal punishment. I set up some sessions with the children and asked them to indicate by a show of hands how many had been punished by being hung upside down, naked, by their heels, and beaten on the buttocks with a belt or rope. Forty percent of the boys in that room had suffered

this. Those who had been tied naked to a stake or doorpost were sixty percent.

The image of the experience of shame and humiliation of a child who is stripped naked and held in bondage bothered me for some weeks afterwards. And then I found out just how relative all that was. We had had a barrage of bad words, lies, insults from one of the children. I was getting very angry at those who would not clean up their act. I remembered how my mother used to wash our mouths out with soap for the "infractions of the mouth" and I tried it out on a Honduran child. Within the same week I slapped a child on the mouth for a blatant and defiant lie. In both cases I got a reaction I will never forget. The child was totally stunned. I could just as well have taken a North American child, denuded him, tied him up outside in public and belted him. I had committed the worst of all child punishments in the Honduran book--I had touched a child's face, head, and mouth. Why that act was so significant I never really knew. I kept trying to analyze it all. How could a quick slap of the hand across the cheek possibly equal the premeditated cruelty of pulling down a kids pants AND underwear, finding a rope to tie him, and a belt to whip him? I started to think that our *gringo* ways of punishment are typically quick and efficient. After a few such incidents, I was cured from any kind of corporal punishment forever.

I wanted, more than anything, a system of rewards and privileges, an honor system. I wanted to be able to explain to the boys the rational consequences of their actions. Bad words hurt, so a boy needs to apologize or spend time in silence. Stealing is a violation, so he has to return the article and more. Taking care of clothes and toys means he has the privilege of having more. Using time and money wisely means he gets more of it; wasting it means he get less. Every counselor that worked for me told me that the system was doomed to failure. In the first place, logic was

not a part of the upbringing of children who live from hand to mouth. Consequences such as going without money, treats, clothing, fun, or toys were never associated with their actions. Having nothing was characteristic of their poverty, a fact of life that no one ever expected to change. Hard work rarely brings money or privileges. All of these values belonged to the upper class, period. These boys lived not on the level of earning or learning, but on the level of pure survival.

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Survival meant the use of instinct, highly developed in the personalities of these lads. The most basic reaction of a street boy is to GRAB and to HOARD. And that instinct stays deeply ingrained in even the most reformed of the kids.

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I was not to be so easily discouraged, and so, we implemented a merit system. We tried it every year over and over, changing the specifics. The first year we used stars on a chart; a star was given for doing well. Then some boys figured out how to steal the pens and draw their own stars on the chart. So...we splurged and bought stick-on stars (imported from the U.S.)...until the boys learned how to peel them off from someone else's name, go outside to the pine trees, get resin, and re-glue them next to their own name! Next, the chart was moved up higher on the wall, out of reach of most--until the kids learned how to smuggle in cinder blocks, climb up, clean up, and clear out without a trace. I then built a glass encasement for the charts (very expensive, considering the number of times we had to replace the glass). Next there was the almighty computer that did printouts DAILY and paid credits at our "company

store” for the purchase of extra clothes, toys, and treats. That system seemed to work until we realized that the items were being sold at school or on the street by boys who would rather have the money for ice cream!

Spare the rod and spoil the children

There were criticisms from Hondurans: “This is the first place I’ve ever seen that gives you money for studying or going to class. You’re ruining the kids!” They were probably right, and watching kids in the very process of being spoiled has been one of my most painful experiences, although most visiting *gringos* said we were very frugal and strict, with firm and uncompromising limits. Our youngest adopted son, after a few years living in our family, sometimes exhibits a kind of selfishness that pains my conscience--wanting everything from his family and friends, and giving very little of himself in return.

Time to throw in the towel

I knew, however, that the limits had to have exceptions in many cases. Young Julio, for example, was a boy who had mounted up more than 1000 demerits within the system (thirty was enough to ground you for a weekend’s fun activities). I noticed him absent from Saturday lunch, just after the Saturday “privileges store” had been opened for shopping. I went to look for him. No one missed meals! I found him under his bed.

Julio had lost or sold all his clothes except a pair of shorts; he had no bed clothes remaining, nor school books. Julio had crawled under the bare bed into a corner of the dorm, refusing to come out even to eat. His friends had abandoned him, refusing to lend him anything else. I pulled

him out, took him in the car over to the technical institute, where he was showered with Irish Spring soap, fed, and outfitted with new clothes and books...and I struck his debt from the computer. Julio’s self-esteem raised 1000 points that day. I loved it, he loved it.

We both knew it was a magic cure for a day and that it would not last. Julio had come from a situation so dysfunctional that the only attention he ever got was when he was being beaten. He had learned the art of “bugging” everyone to get center stage, and he tried his best to raise enough chaos so that perhaps we would call in his mother (from whom he had been removed for neglect and abuse) and get from her the attention he had never received. The hold of negative attention that had been practiced for eight years began to show signs of release only after Julio was with us for more than five years.

Get it while you have the chance

When children of the Developing World live with unrelenting hunger and without any possessions, as do the “street kids”, and also wander among store and restaurant customers and watch the rich buy whatever they want, they never quite get over it. One Thanksgiving, the *El Hogar* band and dance troupe were invited to the U.S./Honduran military base at Palmerola to perform, share a meal, and make some friends. Nearly thirty boys went--boys who had been with us for three or more years at least, who had performed often in public, and who knew what good manners were. We could count on them to be fairly civilized in almost any condition.

The room set aside for their concert was prepared with tables filled with a magnificent buffet of food, enough

to satisfy the hunger of all the guests and our military hosts afterwards. The counselors, knowing that the boys were already accustomed to long waits and good manners, felt at ease with the situation. The band members performed their eight band numbers and their five folk dances like master performers. The counselors looked on and took a few pictures of the boys and of the great cornucopia spread of the table, commenting themselves about what a feast this was to be!

The concert over, the boys made their bows and then began to line up by the table, eager to begin work on the food before them. One of them stepped over to Beatriz, the *El Hogar* director in charge and asked, "May we pass through the food line now?" She looked around but could not find anyone in charge, and so motioned yes. The line began to move in very orderly and quiet fashion, while the commander in charge walked in, greeted Beatriz and began talking with her. Exactly four minutes later, as they finished their conversation, they looked over to the table to see it completely white, barren except for the EMPTY cornucopia basket and the empty serving plates. There was not a crumb left on a table set for a hundred. The Commander was politely amused, but Beatriz was embarrassed, for she could see the food not just on their plates but bulging from their pockets! All had been done in order, silently, and with a kind of finesse that only comes from a highly developed and well practiced instinct of foraging.

Respecting the rights of a child

As we developed our system of rewards and privileges we had to take into account the survival instincts learned on the streets. We learned that denying a boy a mid-

day snack of a banana is a worse punishment than two hours assigned to scrubbing a floor.

Last week I was having trouble getting Marty to sleep at night, so I prohibited him from stashing his toys underneath the bed to play with in the dark. I walked in to check, caught him with a little L'Eggs stocking container in his hands one hour after he should have been asleep, silently removed it from his hands, and tossed it in the waste basket. What ensued, copious tears and screams, made me think I had burned his every possession. He could have taken a spanking, calisthenics, standing in the corner, or added chores (these would all be looked on as positive challenges), but he could not bear to have a possession taken away against his will.

I thought a lot about this and other such incidents of taking away something a child feels is his by right. Third World children seldom can hold on to something concrete and material for keeps. There is no privacy, no space, no place to safely store anything. Everything in their world gets stolen. For orphanage kids the scene is basically the same. There may be many toys and material goods, but almost nothing is really "mine." Adoptive parents often notice in the orphanages they visit that everything is "put away" or that the items they donated are not being put to use. The painful "other side of the story" is that what is not put away until supervised play time is literally destroyed, stolen or completely consumed. Products of too little personal space, too few opportunities to care for personal items, orphanage kids have no chance to learn "what is mine and what is yours". Most of our kids tended not to take care of things; still, almost everything my adopted children receive is either destroyed or disappears before the week is out. Yet the fleeting sense of possession is very symbolic and important.

Quantum leap

It was several months before our things caught up with us when we moved to Honduras in 1979. We'd traveled with a pickup filled with nothing more than a radio, our clothes, a mattress, and a few necessary possessions. Since the cottage where we were to live was barren of furnishings, and we purchased a simply-constructed table and two chairs of pine boxwood from the outdoor central market--the kind of furniture found in the most humble of homes around us. We slept on the floor, and we used a single hotplate to prepare our meals. Our lifestyle reflected that of the poor among whom we lived.

One morning a message came that was to bring about a change we'd not anticipated: our things had arrived at the moving company, were being inspected by the *Aduana*, and would be delivered that afternoon. The shipping case included things for the orphanage, but also a color television, tools, table and chairs, beds, stove, refrigerator, bicycles, and even an organ for the church--all things we had been advised by the bishop as necessary to make our stay in Honduras comfortable.

Margi and I suddenly realized that having more possessions than most families in our neighborhood would suddenly catapult us into being thought of as wealthy *gringos*, called *los ricos* by the Hondurans. We had successfully resisted the subtle pressure from a few ex-patriots to live among the affluent North Americans with spacious homes in the hills that are just south of the business core of the city. Some of these people concluded that Margi and I had crossed an invisible social boundary which was unforgivable; we had betrayed what they regarded as "proper" social protocol. So there was some cost to us,

socially, to live in *Barrio San Jose de la Vega*. And now, the arrival of our possessions would escalate us in the eyes of the Hondurans to the status of *los patrones*, no longer welcomed because we sought to help with the abandoned children but now primarily because we had money and influence, and the authority that comes with them. We also realized that we'd have to give greater energies to protecting our things from theft, eventually hiring a night watchman and arming him with a pistol.

Margi experienced one of her most profound bouts of culture shock at this point. Our "goods" from home reminded her of home AND presented her with the thought of losing the personal closeness with our neighbors and co-workers we'd known those few months. Our possessions would clearly become obstacles to our chosen lifestyle. The solution we came to was simple but difficult at the same time--we would give away or sell whatever we found inappropriate. The television, stereo, and camera were gone within a week's time, and the refrigerator and several other items were placed in the orphanage building for community use.

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As I reflect back on that time in our lives, the question remains as to whether it is ever possible to maintain a simple lifestyle.

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There was a change in how we were perceived by our neighbors, and word quickly got around that the orphanage could be a source for donations of food, clothing, and money. Actually, our resources were spread rather thinly among the kids in our care. Were the shipment to arrive

today, this afternoon, my decision would be to instruct the moving company to dispose of it all and to leave us in peace. Margi and I learned in Honduras that possessions can, and often do, take control over our lives and sometimes propel us in directions we would not otherwise freely choose. Our things can become extensions of ourselves, acquiring our identities--revealed in the words, "That's mine, not yours!" I've noticed that when something of mine is stolen, the experience feels like an invasion and attack upon my person. I lose the item, and I also feel the sense of loss within. Curious.

We confronted the same kind of issue when we returned to the United States with our adopted sons. Nearly everything we'd accumulated over the years in Honduras was left behind, given to the orphanage staff and to the program. We were free to choose whatever lifestyle and socio-economic level we wanted, and yet all of us were quickly influenced by the mass of advertising on television and in the thick Sunday newspapers. There were expectations of lifestyle implied in our professions. It seemed appropriate for a college language instructor and the local parish priest to purchase a spacious home in a modern tract that surrounded a secluded public park. Both Margi and I were aware of our needs for space, so long denied by the crowded conditions of the Developing World, and our sons aware that they had entered a Disney-like world where, as Jiminy Cricket long ago said, all your dreams come true. I doubt the kids could have distinguished between reality and the American fantasy in their first year here.

Security through possessions

One of our first Sundays back in the United States we went to a flea market. I gave Marty a dollar and told him he

could buy anything he wanted. He came back with a Snoopy dog, the saddest, dirtiest, and shaggiest thing I had ever seen (even at a flea market). He had bought it for 15 cents; the remainder would be used for something to fill his tummy. He still has that dog on his bed, along with some better looking specimens. Gilbert has a worse-looking Teddy Bear, but one he had actually salvaged from Honduras and managed to keep and to hold during the long flight to this country. These are no longer fleeting things. They will remain on their beds as long as they instinctively need their ties with the past.

Yet I am reminded of whole communities that live with no personal possessions, especially in Africa, and many places in Latin America. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan missionary, tells the story of such a village clan where he was working in Central America. He recounts the prayer of one of the men of the group: "Dear Lord, lead us not into the temptation of houses with doors." Later he asked what this might mean. He was told that the villagers had observed another nearby group who had "come into the money". The began to buy things for themselves, and then they had to protect those things. They built cinder block homes to replace their grass and bamboo open huts. They put on doors with locks. For them, it was the beginning of the end of their community.

8

Sponsors and Donors

and care packages

The exchange of gifts and souvenirs from country to country goes much deeper than pocketbooks.

“Javier, your sponsors are coming to visit. Let’s talk.”

That was the opening line for telling a boy at *El Hogar* how to act in front of visiting *gringos*. What we really wanted them to do was not to beg, not to be greedy, and not to laugh at their attempts to speak Spanish. For the most part, our children were angelic in front of visitors, and immediately won their hearts. They would embrace them with sincerity, take their hands to lead them around the property, make true friends even when not a word was understood between parties, they would openly show their need for affection and attention in a way that was inoffensive and heart rending. Visitors would often end their one-hour stay in tears of emotion.

Many times sponsors came to Honduras. I was always amazed at how widely traveled people were. I sometimes wondered why we didn’t ask for more than \$50 a month to support each child when I knew that



boy who could easily retaliate by denting a fender or door or break into the vehicle to empty it of anything left inside.

Javier's sponsors, whom I'd never met, were on their way to visit him. I took the opportunity to remind the boy to be well groomed, have his bed and things in order, and to be grateful for whatever they might bring him. A father with a son about Javier's age arrived, and they began an exchange with a bit of Spanish they had learned. "How are you?"..."How old are you?"..."How is school?" After the first few questions, both sides usually faltered in conversation, and out would come presents to fill the uncomfortable void. I interceded to add more to the verbal exchange. I wanted Javier to show his new friends something about the life he lived. We would start with where he slept.

I loved having the children show off their dormitories. They did not sleep in long bare rooms with clanging metal beds and steel lockers. Rather, they slept in buildings that looked like California beach houses made of warm Honduran pine with built-in bunk beds. There were five or six kids to a room, and each room had a closet section for shoes, clothing, balls, and skateboards. They were open to the inspecting eye of the counselors and for all to see. Clean and folded clothes were rewarded. Each building had a game chest with checker boards or games painted on the lid. There were mirrors, murals, and homemade drawback curtains.

As visitors would comment about the informal environment of the dorms, I would always add that our building costs were only \$15 per square foot. The older boys and I had constructed the buildings ourselves, with the help of volunteers. The front cement steps showed the handprints of the makers—tiny hands who hauled boards and blocks, big hands that lifted beams and mixed concrete.

What I always tried to hide from the visitors were the bottoms of the curtains that kids had used to polish their shoes, the junk they had stored under their mattresses, the smell of toilets when the water was off, or the nicks on the clothes storage chests where boys had broken in to steal. While I was proud of our boys, at the same time I found them difficult.

We always hoped that our boys would know and contrast the warmth of our buildings with the one-room houses many of their relatives lived in—dried mud floors, cinder-block walls, and cement fibre ceilings. One naked light bulb substituted for window light and torn plastic tablecloths for wall hangings, and clothes were piled on the floor along with dishes, oil stoves and sacks of beans and rice. Walls were papered with old calendar pin-ups. Plastic flowers sometimes graced the dining table. There was stench from the one toilet and wash tub. I prayed our boys would either have the money to choose a place of beauty, or could make one for themselves in the country.

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I somehow believed that if a child grew up in a surrounding of order, beauty, cleanliness and domestic peace for just a few years, he would choose that for his own family forever.

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I was sure Javier would be one of these, for he truly was a boy who loved nice things. He took his sponsors to his bunk and pointed out how smoothly his bed was made, running his hand across the spread. Javier was a bed wetter, and he would continue to be so until age fourteen. In those days we had the children with such problems all in the same

building with plastic pads. Hector and Javier were the only two boys allowed to move to the dorms that housed the older boys. They were too old to remain with the younger kids. We had consulted with doctors and tried everything, including medications and alarm clocks. No solution worked. But Hector and Javier handled the situation very well, arising early to wash their bedsheets on their own so as not to incur the ridicule and disdain of their roommates. Javier would decline offers to go camping overnight with the Scouting program because he knew he would be embarrassed. Hector wasn't going to let anything interfere with having fun. The band was invited to perform in another town, and the boys, including Hector, slept with the firemen. His companions later confided to me that he had tied a pop bottle to his penis before falling asleep! Javier, also in the band, slept with a host family and simply stayed awake all night. He was our star drummer, and I feared he wouldn't be alert the next day. When the hour came when he was to appear, we could not locate him—he missed his appearance totally. We eventually found him curled up asleep inside the big bass drum case.

The tour over, I left Javier with more time alone with his sponsors, for I always thought gift giving time was a private thing. Returning half an hour later, I found Javier dressed in a L.L.Bean down jacket and finishing off five pounds of a Whitman's Chocolate Sampler with his buddies. Six boys had just eaten five pounds of chocolate. It was 75 degrees outside, and he was toasting inside a down jacket with a sort of glazed look on his face. The sponsors had witnessed it all, bewildered. Javier knew it was time to say goodbye, and spontaneously went over to embrace them. He saw the tears in their eyes and held on to them in an extended hug. They left. No one who witnessed such events ever forgot their impact.

Sponsors were assigned to the kids at random, with little effort at matching them. Kind folks answered our mail pleas or decided on sponsorship after I had visited their parishes or clubs and talked about our project. It was like a turkey shoot, but with interesting coincidences. A dentist was assigned a boy with an artificial leg. I later learned that the man's own father had lost his leg in the war. We once matched a polio child to a lady who wrote asking to sponsor a child. In our description we did not remember to mention that Renieri was crippled. One day she came to visit the boy, and I learned her own son had been a victim of polio. "When I saw him from afar," she told me, "it was like watching my own child approach me again."

The boys wrote two or three times a year to their sponsors. We translated their messages as best we could into English. It was a wonderful job for volunteers to stretch their Spanish into the grammar and spelling of grade-school boys and to figure out what they might be intending to communicate.

We labored our best to get the boys to say something significant in their letters. We would give directions such as, "Say something interesting about your country and what you do...something they wouldn't know and would like to know about you." Then we would laugh at ourselves. How were boys in Honduras supposed to know what *gringos* in the U.S. wouldn't know about them? We resorted to sentence starters like, "Here in Honduras at Christmas time we eat..." We hoped for elaborations on their favorite holiday food, *nacatamales*. The boys had something more brief in mind, "Here during the holidays we eat FOOD." Yet, the letter writing events were important, we knew, even if only for the drawings the boys included with them.

8 Sponsors and Donors

To this day, some of the sponsors of the *El Hogar* children are our best friends. They reached out not only to the boys, but also to us. They would come to visit, bringing with them gifts for the boys along with corn chips and M&M's for us and any volunteers on hand. I remember a friend who had sent us a package in the mail consisting of jello, candies, and soap. We never answered, and she never inquired why; the truth was, we never received the package. Finally, one day we received a letter from her with an explanation. She wrote, "Last September I sent you a care package. Today it came back via return mail. It had been opened, and in place of the food and goodies was an old Spanish textbook!" No doubt someone in the postoffice took advantage of temptations impossible to pass up! Yet people continued to care for us and figured out how to do it in ingenious ways.

The exchange of gifts and souvenirs from country to country is something that goes much deeper than the pocketbook. Countless visitors to Latin America, as to all other places of tourism or vacation spots, seem to need to bring a piece of it back with them. Likewise, when they go to visit a specific family or individual in a country, it is always such a decision about what to bring for a gift. We try to bring what represents us and our country and what our hosts will both want, need, and keep to remind them of us and our country. We try to buy from that country what is unique about it, what will do more than just clutter our homes, and usually what will endure.

For adoptive parents, the levels of emotion and complication are even greater. Some of them will meet the birth parent(s) of the child they are to adopt. Or they will meet the foster parents who have cared for their child, or the agency personnel who have made this adoption possible. They may be granted a few precious moments of visit with

those who received and counselled the birth parents of their child.

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When they anguish over the decision of what to bring as a gift, the message is a deeper one: what can I leave with them that represents me and my gratitude for the gift of the lifetime of a child to be mine?

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9

Volunteers

Lorrie, Wilbur and the box kite

Volunteers make some big changes... in themselves.

Some of the most influential people on the face of the earth walked through the doors of the Home of Love and Hope. They would come to visit the center, touring the buildings and meeting the kids. Influential, perhaps not in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of the boys who lived there. The boys idolized visitors, especially those coming from other countries. A boy would look up at each of them with a kind of awe, "Who is this, and will he possibly single me out of this crowd for something?"

The key words were "single me out", and the boys each tried to invent ways to make that happen, for a day with a volunteer or a visitor was worth a thousand among the crowd. One day I saw Henri at the barbed wire gouging out a bloody scratch in his hand so he could get Laura to focus on only him. She had brought Superman bandaids for the kids, and he was aiming for her time, attention, and a bandaid all at once!

Why volunteers ever chose to seek us out in Honduras is just as much a mystery as why the boys came to us. Being a volunteer usually means scraping up the money for the plane ticket, giving up some wage earning time, learning



Volunteers 9

to speak and function in Spanish (and street Spanish at that, so they never quite feel they are going to go home a polished language major). It means living in one room, a room often invaded by kids, eating Honduran institutional food that must make college dorm cafeterias look great, and living without the support of familiar family and friends. But still they came, laughed and wept and worked with us, and went away never forgetting the faces and souls of at least a few of the boys of *El Hogar*.

Competing for more than toys

Often local volunteer groups of women would arrive with some used toys to share. It was always an administrative nightmare because we wanted the donors to see the joy in the eyes of those who would be the proud owners, but WHO among 80 would get them? The kids almost instinctively learned not to mob visitors, preferring to stand at what they thought a safe distance, just a few feet, and let their upturned faces and longing eyes do the rest. Invariably we could sense the discomfort of the donors as they wondered how so little could stretch so far, and they would begin to apologize for not bringing more (and probably swear never to do this again). And so I would begin my spiel about how everything was always welcome, and that children here earned the donated toys by their improved behavior.

I would talk on and on about how generous our supporters were and how much we appreciated their efforts and about how important toys were for children who had never had them before, but still I could always imagine that inner dialogue of the donor: “and what happens to the little boy who doesn’t behave and therefore doesn’t get my toy?” It felt cruel, of course. My ultimate

embarrassment came the day one of the boys behind me, eyes intent on the bags being carried in from the car, boldly addressed me within the woman’s earshot: “How much will that truck cost me?” He was referring to our honor system and the money the boys earned by their chores, punctuality, and behavior and then used at the company store to buy toys. The lady looked at him strangely and said: “I have not come to SELL toys. These are gifts!”

Attention getting

While I constantly dealt with the “who is worthy?” question, the boys dealt with other things, like how to take revenge on volunteers and visitors who DIDN’T pay them the attention they wanted or give them something. Invariably volunteers who stayed with us for any length of time would be attracted to some boys more than to others. And, no matter how much we tried to lead them to the bashful and withdrawn children, the “attractive” personalities would win out, for they had learned how to get attention and could not do without it. When they knew a certain honeymoon was coming to an end, that is, a few days before a volunteer was to leave, they would begin punishing the young individual (most severe in the cases of 18-to-24 year-old female volunteers), usually by refusing to talk to her and many times, unfortunately, stealing from her. When I reminded volunteers of the dynamics of love affairs and the subtleties of jealousy, youthful romantic crushes, break-ups, looking for a rebound, and departures, I would see relief in their eyes, and I sensed that they had learned something very valuable about life from the desperate attempt of a small Honduran child to get and to enjoy all the love he could. I would then go to the boy in question and tell him how sad or how happy he could really make his beloved volunteer in the last few days—the choice was his. They would usually end the relationship in peace.

Testing how much you care

The most complicated love/revenge story I witnessed, however, was that of Rony and a volunteer. Rony was a seven-year old boy brought to us by an elderly lady who said he had been rescued from the Salvadoran soldiers. They had reportedly shot and killed his father. Later, Rony was required to identify his dad from a group of bodies in a ditch. The boy also had witnessed his mother being violated by the soldiers and carried away. Somehow he was snatched away from the scene and brought to the elderly lady in Tegucigalpa by a friend of his grandmother to “forget it all”. Rony had become uncontrollable under her guidance, and so she brought him to us. We witnessed Rony act out the trauma by playing incessant war games, and later by playing sex games with the rest of the kids. I wondered, what other reality for solving conflicts did Rony and the other boys know? Their country had been in a state of armed conflict with El Salvador and Nicaragua for years.

Susan, a graduate psychology student, arrived at the orphanage for a six-week stay to do some verbal testing of the kids and to help us set up some ways to measure the progress of problem children. Her work identified Rony and another boy (who had, strangely enough, just FAILED second grade in the local school for the second time) as having the two highest scores on the Peabody Vocabulary Test. During her stay at *El Hogar* over the following month, Susan became emotionally close to Rony, so much so that she seriously considered adopting him. In the eyes of the other boys, Rony had “won” Susan single-handedly, and this made him something very special in the community of children as well as to himself. He thought of her as his, and his alone.

It was time for her to go, and Susan returned to the United States. Our staff marveled at his apparently easy adjustment to her departure. Rony learned to write to her and accepted her affection by letter and the gifts she sent during the following weeks. All went well until Lorrie, the next volunteer, appeared on the scene. Unlike Susan, Lorrie chose not to relate to Rony as much, but spread her attention among other boys. Rony inwardly felt crushed and unable to express his deep sadness. And then one day, quite unexpectedly, he was gone.

“He left last night” was all the other kids in his room would say. They weren’t covering for him. They really didn’t know why. No one ever did.



Children ran away for reasons we could almost never understand or explain. To them, running was "doing something about it", it was problem solving, it was comforting, comfortable, it was a way of life.



And so the staff and I began several rounds of looking for Rony out on the streets, finding him, bringing him home, only to have him run away again before he could even talk about it or give us a clue to the real problem. Apparently he never ran away TO anyone or anything, and he never visited his grandmother. Rony didn’t seem to be escaping FROM any identifiable problem at *El Hogar*. He just ran away!

For some of the boys who had come to us from having lived on the streets, staying at *El Hogar* and settling down was difficult. I always made it a point to find out

where a lad normally had been sleeping on the streets and meet some of the adult friends and storekeepers around the area.. I could usually count on these people to help us in the task of relocating the runaway boys. Almost always a runaway would be found in his old hideout during the first few times he left *El Hogar*. Logic would have told the lad that he should find a better place to hide out, but then being found was subconsciously what was wanted, and so the security of an old hiding spot usually won out. Most boys WANTED to be rescued again, needed to have us come to them and say they were okay.

And how many times was enough? With Rony it was going on five. Many times that was the cut-off point for our staff, but the boy was only seven years old. The counselors went the rounds in discussing runaway boys. They still do. They asked how many times they have to be forgiving parents to prodigal sons. They wanted to follow their personal instincts of punishing boys for running away, but their logic said that punishment might cause a boy to run away again and never come back. I wondered which ones were out there getting hardened by street life or were in danger, and how long we should allow them to “suffer” before reclaiming them. The most difficult of situations also arose when a leader type runs away, convincing a gullible little companion or group to run with him. Rony had tried all of these, and he was playing harder and harder to get—so much so that most of the counselors wanted to stop looking for him.

Lorrie finds herself in jail

Then one day Lorrie was passing the Central Park on the city bus. She saw Rony with a street gang out of the corner of her eye. She jumped off the bus, more by instinct

than anything else, and ran for him. She came up behind him and put her arms around him. One hour later Lorrie was in jail. Six hours later she was released and arrived home to tell us about her adventure. Rony had struggled loose and began to run. Lorrie dropped everything and began to chase him...through the marketplace, darting in and out of the vegetable stands, breathless. The event drew a crowd. Then, the climax. Rony ran up to a police officer and excitedly told him an American woman was trying to kidnap him.

It was a sudden and opportune challenge for a 19-year old low-paid and bored policeman spending his days conducting traffic from the corner of a busy street! What ensued was nothing that could have resembled a defense of Rony, but a game to be played between a lucky Honduran policeman and a 20 year old *gringa*. Rony had won sweet revenge against the “new volunteer” who did not treat him as well as Susan had! His only disappointment was that he was neither taken back to *El Hogar* nor asked to come to the police station, but was left there in the streets.

Lorrie recovered from her ordeal, but Rony, four years later, was still playing the same games, manipulating the people he set up as “soldiers”: volunteers and counselors of various institutions he’s in and out of, in the vague hope of bringing back his dead mother and father from the grave.

An unforgettable, loving man

Just as there are boys I will always remember, the faces and life experiences of some of those valiant volunteers have also made them my lifetime friends. Wilbur is one such influence in my life. The Peace Corps had assigned

him to a small village, where he served until he had a heart attack. When they wanted to send him back to the United States, Wilbur argued his case to be allowed to continue his term in Honduras, accepting the compromise that he work in the capital city where medical care was readily available. He was assigned to work with the kids at *El Hogar*.

Wilbur had been a salesman by profession and a carpenter by hobby, and he felt he could influence some boys to care about the precious wood in Honduras and make useful things from it. Today, many of our first graduate carpenters say that Wilbur was responsible for making them who they are. As I look back at my snapshots I can see why. There is Wilbur with his arms around boy after boy as he guides the saw in their hands, the first caring male many of them ever experienced!

He brought the kind of dignity and self esteem that only comes when we can all admit and laugh at our mistakes. Beginning at age 79 to learn Spanish did not have the greatest results for Wilbur, and so he had to stick to the essentials of how to ask directions, find the bathroom and pick out food. That vocabulary obviously did not include understanding the intricate problems of boys tattling on each other or vying for attention, yet Wilbur would have an open ear for hundreds of tales from the boys who worked in his shop. Intuitively, the boys knew he somehow understood them. He never stopped to ask them to clarify, tell the real truth, or defend themselves. He was just there, and they loved him.

Each morning, noon and evening Wilbur would sit at the head of the dining room table and listen to more chatter. They loved him so much they would compete to see who would take his plate and wash it for him. "*Llevo su plato,*

Don Wilbur?" was their term of endearment, one of the only things they could do to repay this giving man.

They learned with Wilbur's guidance to make everything from scrap lumber—small chairs and tables, and toy trucks and cars. They loved what they made. They began to sell their products. Wilbur's patience with them was endless. From him they learned the beauty of the time-consuming process of sanding and polishing; their products were indeed beautiful.

Wilbur and the box kite

One story about Wilbur embodies for me what it means to adapt to culture in a foreign country. About November the winds begin to pick up in the mountain areas of Honduras, and there is no rain until May. And so everyone makes the best of living in a blowing dust bowl, and especially the children during what they call the "kite season." There is a certain palm frond which has an almost weightless spine, and it is used by the boys for the mast pole of their kites. They gather resin from the pine trees for their glue, and use large leaves or pieces of plastic bag for the body, with a length of string for the tail. *Voila!*—with almost no expense, they have a magnificent homemade kite, properly balanced by the secrets only they know.

Well, Wilbur took one look at the sad little pieces of "garbage" flying in the skies over *El Hogar* and made a decision that he would offer carpentry lessons on something "real" in the world of the kids: a box kite. He singled out a group of young "experts" and invited them to watch him make a bigger and better kite out of pieces of pine, remembering his own childhood successes. Wilbur forgot to take into account, however, that Honduran pine is much denser

10

Cleanliness

water and sanitation become priorities

While our image of a country in the Developing World may conjure up dust and dirt and poor sanitation, actually cleanliness and neatness are sources of great personal pride.

I have a vague memory of my mother complaining about my messy room. I also know that school custodians and cleaning service employees lament the lack of respect for cleanliness in public buildings and especially in bathrooms where careless and vengeful people vent their inhibitions. I know that most states have a \$500 fine for tossing litter out of car windows, but I never quite knew what it was like to spearhead a campaign to clean up the environment until I came upon the eighty boys of *El Hogar* living on two acres of property in the midst of one of the poorest barrios of town.

Garbage was everywhere. There was, I discovered, a designated city dump. But it was never open to the public because too many people who had used it were found taking away things rather than dumping them and they would end up sick. It was guarded by armed watchmen. This, coupled with poor garbage pick-up service even in the wealthy areas, enticed people to simply dump things on the sides of the roads, down ravines, literally anyplace where a house guard might not be present and threaten to shoot you. It left good pickings for the roaming pigs...and children, in gullies and washes, blown by



bag here and a bag there in the rich people's garbage cans and tried not to get caught by a guard with a gun!

We carried on this Sunday morning ritual for about 6 months, and then one Monday morning, delivered RIGHT TO OUR OWN DOOR, was a citation and a fine of \$50.00 for dumping our garbage in the city's Dempsey dumpster. I was surprised that someone had had the savvy to trace our license plate (in a country where not even mail can be delivered because many streets have no names and many houses have no numbers). I gained a level of respect for the workings of the city government, and decided I would challenge their garbage department and try for service in our area (and even, perhaps, get the fine waived). I did, and I thought we had a victory. Garbage service to our door was promised. Seven years later and five formal requests later, we STILL DID NOT HAVE GARBAGE PICK-UP. What we DID have, however, was a mounting bi-monthly bill for this non-existent garbage pickup, which a friend of a friend in Congress is still sorting out for us. (Ironically, the very day in 1987 that our garbage plea was to come before the Council at City Hall, there was an attempted assassination, and all minor business was suspended.)

Clean clothes

A huge flaw in the garbage system of *El Hogar* resulted in the trashing and burning of clothes. Donations of clothing were always in good supply; it was much more difficult to obtain donations for food or for the utilities. I found this all so hard to believe, that kids who had never had more than one set of clothes in their lives would sweep up someone else's dropped sweater or underpants from the floor and trash it. I knew that part of it was our fault for holding the kids responsible for too many things. Each kid had five sets of clothes which he had to turn in and claim

from the wash. He had to fold, store and keep track of them. Was that too much to ask of a 8 year old, a 10 year old, a 14-year old? We had programmed times to do it all. Many were like young Jose had been before he came, spending time beside his mother while she washed clothes in the river for hire, helping her to pound the jeans and shirts with stones and to scrub the clothing clean with *Doña Blanca* soap. Jose knew what wringing and putting them out to dry in the hot sun meant. He also knew that if his mother lost any piece of clothing washed for another family it would COST her money. Perhaps these kids couldn't quite believe these five sets of clothes were theirs. When I would share my woes with parents from the States, most would say: "It's just kids!"

When we established *El Hogar*, we had so little water that we made daily trips to the river to wash clothes and dishes. Soon we were cautioned by the health department that the river was too polluted to stand in and put our hands in, and that only ladies accustomed to it could take it. I was reminded of the women in Mexico who labor long hours in the sun to pick hot chile peppers; their unique skin chemistry enables only women to do this work, so the men told me! So, I paid a lady to wash clothes. Who was I to question the wisdom of tradition?

One week I noticed a body rash on my thighs. It itched and burned as I sweated. I learned it was caused by fungus from the river in my freshly-washed jeans. About the same time, we were able to pipe water to the orphanage property. Thus, we ended that laundry ritual with a sigh of relief and went back to washing on the property in a big old cast iron bathtub. The younger kids loved it, for they could splash in the water and throw soap bubbles at each other. But the older ones crowded out the little ones, and so the little ones would go off and toss or hide their clothes some-

Ingenuity in dress abounded as boys would substitute for things they had lost or torn. Dried vines or twine often served for belts for borrowed pants that were too large, pieces of curtains and sheets appeared for shirts, handkerchiefs, and headbands, for example. Every time I saw a toy truck being pulled by a series of shoe strings, I knew the next day a whole set of boys would be off to school with tears in their eyes for having lost their shoe laces and using grass ones to replace them.

It was quite common while walking the unpaved streets of our barrio to see young children naked. The climate was warm, and clothes were very expensive for most people. Recently I passed through the hallway of the school of one of our adopted sons, and I saw three tables heaped with lost-and-found mittens, jackets, shirts, shoes, etc.—all unclaimed. I had no words to describe my feelings, and I've never asked our son if he noticed.

I tried to explain it all to people who would donate clothes to the boys. Imagine a Buster Brown outfit purchased by his sponsors for a boy at the orphanage for his birthday, and two weeks later it is displayed as a muddy item for lost-and-found time! I would have to say to myself, little boys who have had the custom of begging for clothes, then wearing them until they rotted, will not be very amenable to keeping their clothes clean. Kids who have never worn shoes or socks in their lives have hardly acquired the habit of keeping track of them. Boys who have always slept on the ground or on cardboard, and who never wore diapers or underpants until they were “naturally” trained are not going to have any idea of keeping bed clothes clean or reporting when they have wet the bed.

When our count reached seventy kids at *El Hogar*, someone calculated that there were 420 socks to keep track

of! This explained why over half of the kids wore socks without mates. Amazingly, I learned that there is not even a word in Spanish for “Lost-and-Found”; the concept does not exist in that language. We simply labeled our boxes “LOST THINGS.”

The lost lambs

Another masterplan was the SHEPHERD/SHEEP program. We picked out the twenty youngest or newest or least organized of the boys and called them the “sheep”, and then asked another twenty older and more responsible boys to be “shepherds”, giving them extra merit points for looking after their sheep. Every night before bed the shepherds had to take count of the sheeps’ clothing and help them find what was missing. If there was a bed wetter, the shepherd had to be on hand every morning to help the sheep wash his sheet. There were a few flaws in the system, but it generally worked. There were exceptions. I remember one day Manuel, a shepherd, was in school, and his sheep, Julio, had to have his good clothes to go to town. Alas, they were locked up tight in the shepherd’s lock box! There were



Every child had an older "shepherd" to help him with school work and chores. Most importantly, these older boys served as big brother role models to the younger lads.



reluctant shepherds, and there were sheep no one wanted—but for the most part we saw improvement and kept on with the program. Of course, we wanted “mothers, fathers, counselors,” someone to care for each and every child’s

Cleanliness 10

hygiene and bedtime rituals. But each counselor had twenty boys. The Shepherds established bonds with these “little guys” that substituted as best we knew how.

Doña Blanca

Personally, I grew to appreciate how clean people kept themselves amidst tremendous odds. Sundays and the Sunday clothes ritual would impress me to no end as I saw immaculately dressed people walking the dusty roads on their way to church services. I was also overwhelmed to see school after school require white uniforms. White shirts, white skirts, white pants in a dust bowl! That meant washing every night. Margi and I respected the Honduran laundry system. We admired those women who found their community along shores of the river. Margi and I joined the ranks of the rows of ladies along the apartment sinks who washed clothes for an hour each morning. Scrubbing together felt like a real art, akin to kneading bread... The cylindrical soap bars (called, LADY WHITE, *Doña Blanca*) are better than any I ever remember from my childhood when we used washboards to get out spots. The sound of swishing water, the movement of scrubbing clothes, and all of us kneading and squeezing our clothes in silent communion was truly a homemaker’s meditation. We thought of women in Developed Countries standing before mirrors in stretch exercise classes with weights in their hands doing the same things with their arms as we were doing, and we wondered if they felt the same sense of fulfillment...

A network television crew's search for a human-interest story becomes the children's key to the power of music.

I had merged myself with the throngs of people watching the Independence Day (September 15th) parade in Tegucigalpa. I was bursting with a pride alternated between tears and applause. Our thirty grade school boys were marching down the main streets of this capital city, competing with twenty-five high school bands. It was a hot 85 degrees. The band boys had been up since 4:00 am, practicing, dressing, and grooming themselves. They had been waiting in lines since 5:00 am. It was now six hours later, and they still had about five miles to go, lugging the big drums and flags and glockenspeils up and down the hills, tripping on the uneven pavement stones. It would be a difficult five miles of puckering tired lip muscles into trombones and trumpets and of trying to hear the directions whistled forth by Luis and the head standard bearers who were trying not to bump into the chaos ahead.

These were our kids, kids from the streets playing The Marine's Hymn as if they had grown up with it! They had five other marches too, ones Margi remembered well enough from her high school band to teach and that showed up with half-way decent arrangements in the learners' books. As I listened to the others, I realized we had music no other band had, and that we actually sounded better with our thirty youths than the other bands stuffed with eighty out-of-step high schoolers. Someone near me in the crowd spoke to her companion, "Look at those tiny little kids. How darling! How well they play. Who are they?" I chimed in, "They're mine, our boys from the orphanage."

exposure widens horizons



“An orphanage?” the lady looked interested. I nodded and then choked into a great flood of tears, “They are the boys who used to panhandle these streets and live in the back alleys. Now look at them march down the middle of the same streets.” I’m sure the ladies never quite understood me or why there were tears running down my cheeks. It happened and would happen to me every time I heard them play.

From the beginning it was a fairy tale kind of story. ABC News was in town in 1981. All the major networks had set up offices in the hotels and kept reporters and camera persons nearby for possible stories on escaped Nicaraguan *Somosistas* and a few bombings and discoveries of caches of terrorist arms in Tegucigalpa. Indeed, there were some former hostages and a few bombed sites to film, but the life of a reporter in Tegucigalpa was, for the most part, boring. And so this ABC reporting team took the initiative to do some human interest stories, and asked to come out and meet us and film us.

Their visit was in itself a great event for *El Hogar*, for never had our boys seen anything but home video equipment until then. The great joke was that the day before the big filming, a vacation day from school, we had had a great jogging tournament. We had gone out early with the truck and left off the 10-year old kids at one place, the 12-year olds farther away, and so on, and told them we would see them all at home for the prizes. They ran so hard that the next morning they all felt stiff. And once one boy started, the idea spread like a plague. They were all walking around like little old men with aching bones, hardly able to climb steps without moaning. In the midst of this ABC was filming and wondering!

The 6:00 news

Out of two hours of filming our orphanage, however, they did get some good footage, and we were on the nightly news in the United States for three minutes. We did not see the actual telecast, but we knew something had happened when we received a phone call from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Not only had people seen us, but Holy Spirit Parish had contacted the Office of Overseas Missions in New York to find out all about us. They were eager to contribute generously to a worthy cause. The voice on the phone excitedly reported that they had decided to fly down a group to pay us a visit and spend \$3000 on us for whatever we might want. Margi had answered the phone, and so she made one of those spontaneous decisions that change lives, one we would never regret. “I think I would like musical instruments to start a small band,” she answered. Father Barge answered excitedly, “You will never believe this, but the owners of the largest local music store are parishioners and friends!” When Margi shared with me the exciting news, I looked at her incredulously. We both could play the guitar and a bit of piano, she might remember how to play the trumpet, and I had a beginning knowledge of the clarinet. But to teach all the instruments found in a band stretched my imagination!

In a few short weeks, a team consisting of a bishop, pastor, and parishioner arrived at the Tegucigalpa International Airport, laden with trombones, trumpets, drums, bells, and beginners’ sheet music. We called ABC again, and the camera crew was on hand to film the great arrival.

Even now I am amused by the old video tapes of Margi leading those kids around like a pied piper on that day, encouraging them to toot and tap and try to keep step, as she kept saying “Left, Right, Left, Right” in English because “*Derecho, Izquierdo*” had too many syllables in Spanish!

Nobody knew how to blow a decent sounding note, but that didn't matter; we heard music in our imaginations!

Learning to play

Teaching music to Honduran children put Margi immediately in touch with her own history and the age-old controversy, will we teach the kids to play by ear or shall we have them learn to read music? Her father had played piano and violin by ear, as was the tradition in my family. Now we were to teach another generation of children. She decided to teach as she had been taught, by reading notes. The response was interesting. Some boys read. Most of them pretended to look at the notes and simply memorized the music, playing by ear. By the end of five years with them, the musicians had memorized 25 songs in their respective parts, and all the director would have to do is call out a number and they would start. The difficulty came whenever we tried to make any changes in notes or arrangements. The most embarrassing example was the Star Spangled Banner which, because of Margi's absence from the learning scene, somehow got learned in 3/4 time and sounded like a ballroom waltz!

Margi had to learn to play every instrument, and play each new melody over and over for a boy until he could "pick it up". That was fine for the first five songs, but she had developed no lip for a trumpet, and her time and patience were waning. Trombone was a disaster. After Margi had the first five trumpeters trained, she decided it was time to learn trombone so she could teach it. We were off on a two-week vacation, and we took a trombone with us to learn. She had no instruction book, and no way to get one. Confidently, she reminded herself that she had sat for four years in front of the trombones in the Wadena High School band, and that she could surely pick out a scale. Every day

she practiced, while I went on frequent walks, praising her progress when I returned. We went back to Honduras, and she taught the first three boys. But their parts didn't sound right with what the trumpeters were playing. For a while we reasoned that there was a special system of positions unique to Central America. She found a former trombonist to ask what was wrong—lo and behold, she had learned the entire set of trombone positions one note off! Ingrained in her memory, Margi could NOT make the change to the correct positions. We turned to the local music school, found a student teacher to carry on, and so the band enlarged and grew to greatness.

Uniforms came next

We made our first uniforms for the boys from red and blue cotton fabric, following a picture from the McCall's pattern book. We made top hats stuffed with foam rubber and visors from sections of bleach bottles. Gold buttons abounded in Honduras as well as braid and tassels imported from China. When funding became available, we located used uniforms from a high school band at Asheville, North Carolina. Two volunteers spent an entire summer cutting them down to fit the smaller Honduran stature. Even today when Margi stops at garage sales, she seeks out pairs of white gloves to send to Honduras, for they are the order of the day in the big parades.

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The band offered the boys the chance of a lifetime to march proudly down the very city streets where they once begged for food and clothing.

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ABC News 11

Soon every counselor, volunteer and friend of *El Hogar* had a part in preparing the BIG BAND. U.S. volunteers in the program were appreciated all the more if they had played an instrument in high school, for they became our teachers. Flags and marching routines were added.

That little band has played on U.S. Naval ships anchored off the Honduras coastline and for the first Lady of the Land, has greeted distinguished visitors at the international airport, and, as Margi and I left the country, was negotiating to do Thanksgiving Day entertainment for the U.S. troops in Honduras for maneuvers with the Honduran forces.

Boys won scholarships to the national music school. Some have made music a profession. Young Denis, a promising trumpeter, withdrew after a few years at the music school. While completion of the training would have assured him of a lifetime job in the national band, Denis chose instead to play with a small dance band. He had known too many unfulfilled dreams and broken promises. He could not believe that his entire future could so easily fall into place. And so he withdrew.

Music continues to heal the souls of many children at *El Hogar*. The sense of accomplishment, the feeling of restored dignity, the pride of becoming part of a disciplined and very visible group, and the cleansing of the heart by melodic tunes has brought many children through rough times. No other single activity at *El Hogar* has given the boys more of a sense of community than their band.

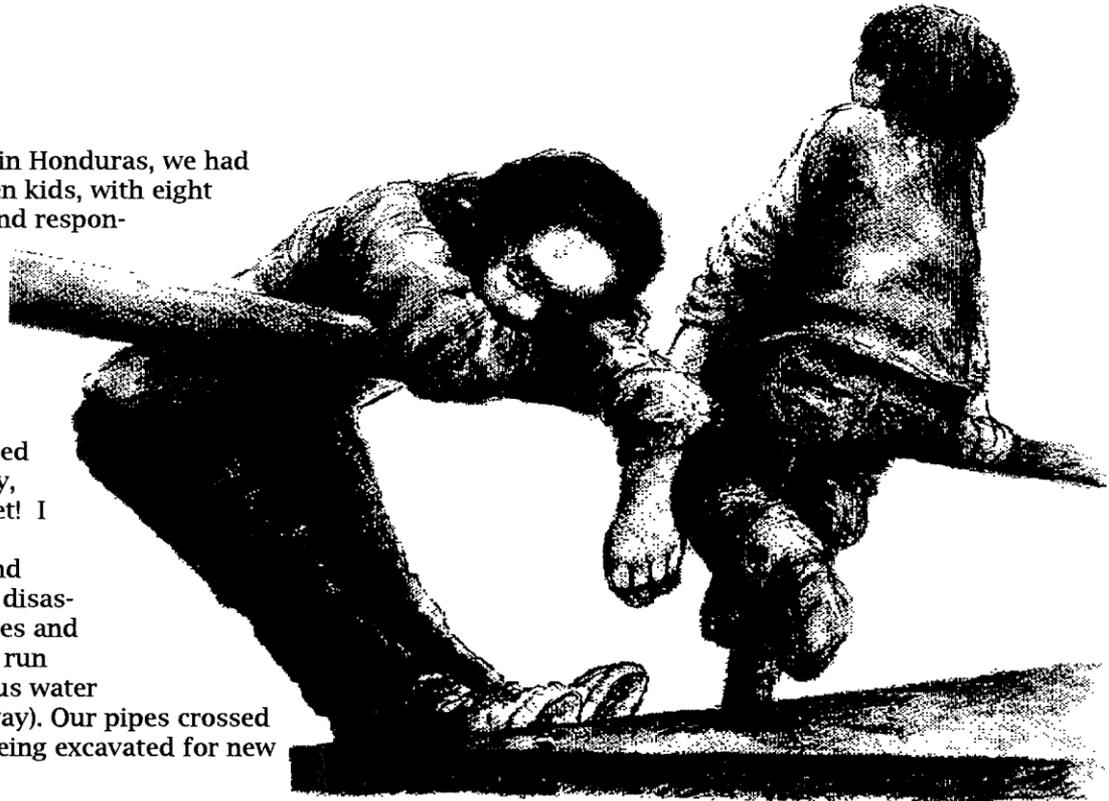
Last week I watched thirty young adopted teens from Colombia, now children of various adoptive parents in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, perform their Colombian dances in costume. They have formed a traveling dance troop, and

they are in high demand for performances because they share a cultural experience rarely available here. These kids were great, wonderful! Each time I see them they have polished their routines and improved their explanations. I thought of ABC News, wanting them to do another story on pride and cultural heritage, and on the important part adoption plays in making the world truly inter-national.

just watch me

Different cultures have different ways of getting what they want.

After just three short weeks in Honduras, we had furnished a Home for fifteen kids, with eight spaces filled with excited and responsive boys. We had hit the peak of our Honduran “honeymoon”. That morning we woke up to gurgling, dry plumbing. There was no water for our laundry, for bathing, for cooking or dishes, or, worst of all, none for the toilets. Margi was half in and half out of bed with her first bad case of dysentery, and she wanted water for that toilet! I washed my hands and face in the precious bottled drinking water, and woke the boys up to announce the disaster. I ventured out to trace the pipes and found that a bulldozer nearby had run over the water pipes that brought us water from a river (terribly unclean anyway). Our pipes crossed a rocky hillside in the process of being excavated for new housing.



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I approached the developer and tried my first Spanish conversation with a very limited plumbing vocabulary. I later realized that names for tools vary from country to country in Latin America. I came away guessing that the man was taking no responsibility whatever for the accident, that he would continue to bulldoze deeper and deeper, and that was that! The only thing to do was to buy more pipe and re-route the line around the area. That seemed simple enough. I thought of all the nice things. It wouldn't cost a whole lot. Our pickup could haul the pipe, we even had the proper wrenches with us, etc., etc. I am essentially a problem solver, and thinking up ways to get things done can easily override the more basic questions like, "Did I come to Honduras to be a plumber?" The developer had suggested that it was simply a matter of getting a "ditch digger", and they were a dime a dozen in Honduras. I asked him for a reference, and very soon a man showed up at our door.

Later on that week I would say to myself, "Is there not a Biblical injunction against hiring a worker who has alcohol on his breath before 9:00 am?" But we did. First, he needed five lempiras (\$2.50) to sharpen his pick to get started. That seemed reasonable, and we gave them to him. He came back four hours later to report that the pick sharpener was not working that day. (Did I note that he was even less lucid at that point?) By our next check-up, twelve hours later, our newly purchased pipe had disappeared along with the worker, never again to be found!

I remember those first feelings, and now compare them to the myriad of other "dupings" and robberies in our years there. It was a case of what I came to call "Just watch me steal!" Why anyone would do that, my moralistic upbringing would not let me fathom. In time, I began to sort out the incidents and change my mind. When

thieves arose from the lot of truly poor people, I would almost silently congratulate them for their enterprising endeavors. When stealing came from one of our own boys it depended upon how close I was to the boy...some could really betray me and make it hurt. The boys had a word they used frequently, "*aprovechar*"—to take advantage of. Just as in English, the word has a positive and a negative connotation, but in Honduras I often felt the two meanings were one. It was almost natural for the boys we dealt with to steal and run, befriend and betray, to cut off their noses to spite their faces. It would almost always make me sad.

Arturo tests us

My first hard case was Arturo, whom I found on one of our shopping days in the market. Tegucigalpa, at that time, had only one large, open-air market filled each morning with women in search of grains and vegetables (mixed in with underwear and shoes, nail polish, and brooms). Here you could buy without paying the 30-50% extra to have goods delivered to outlying supermarkets or the indoor stores by middlemen or "coyotes", so called because these suppliers charged an hefty extra percentage for transportation. Supermarkets were frequented by the rich who needed passable roads and parking lots.

Arturo, along with hundreds of other street kids, had found himself a job in the market carrying shopping bags around while customers filled them. An important part of the job was to "pave the way" for the customer, for there was almost no walking room among the crowded vendors, most of whom squatted on the side of the dirt road and displayed their wares on newspapers and old gunny sacks.

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books, pencils, and so forth. But once a boy had stolen, he had to get off our property to sell. That involved getting back to town and to the market which meant “running away”, staying out several nights until he was found again, and then the cycle would start all over. I hoped we could fix that by giving them other ways of gaining self importance.

Sometimes boys stole without a show. They needed to fill some “hole” in their psyches, and goods seemed to do it. Being a bully, being a clown, being smart-alecky, or disrespecting authority were the traits of a few, but only a very few boys. Street dwellers never had anyone pay attention to them in the first place, and so they did not need to be clowns or bullies or show-offs competing for attention. They simply had big holes of nothingness to fill. Well, our Home would fill those gaping wounds of loneliness in some other way—I knew we could. We did not need another jail, and that was that!

My thoughts re-centered: “Would Arturo steal?” When we got out of the market area, I invited him into the cab with me. On the four-mile ride home I found out from a few of his mutterings that he had been alone for as long as he could remember. That probably meant he had a long history of “making do” by stealing food and clothes. Now that he was getting bigger it would be harder to steal food, for the police were more on the lookout for the adolescent types.

We arrived at *El Hogar*, and Arturo began at that moment what probably drew me most to him. I asked him to unload the truck and to help the cook in the kitchen to stack the food we had bought. An hour later he came to find me and to report that he was done. He was not only done unloading, he had cleaned, stacked and reorganized

the entire pantry! The cook was still standing in awe, and so was I.

In the ensuing days I tried to engage Arturo in conversation about his past. Nothing. But this was normal for boys who were either trying to forget their past or who feared we would find out too much and send them elsewhere or force them back to an abusive parent. When Arturo talked, he limited himself to conversations about how we needed to clean this, organize that, and get garden and animal projects underway! He was generally silent and he seemed happy, but obviously a loner.

Reality hits hard

My first fallout with him came after several trips back to the market to do the weekly shopping. By now we had three regular *El Hogar* boys that would go with me, each trained to go out into the various sections of the market with money in hand and buy what we needed. I prided myself on figuring this system out, especially because it meant I could stay back at the truck and simply organize while the boys did the leg work and felt important on their mission. No longer just helpers, they were buyers. Arturo was doing his job well, as usual. He made three trips out to buy bananas, pineapples, and yucca. On the fourth trip he never came back, and after searching two hours for him, we gave up and went home. He had \$10 in his pocket for the purchases, and that was enough for him to live on for a week. I felt like crying. For him and for me. I took it all personally.

Three days later he appeared back at *El Hogar* among the crowd of boys. He would not tell me what had

happened. I did not demand an explanation. We both worked silently at re-creating the bond.

Margi had him sweep and mop our two room quarters every evening. One of *El Hogar's* distinctive traits was that the boys did all the cleaning, food preparation, laundry, dishes, gardening, and sewing jobs. All the boys, down to the five-year olds, had their responsibilities, and they knew that if they did not complete them, there would be hungry mouths and people waiting. So, while Margi and I were out on the property supervising chores, Arturo would be alone in our little house. We had nothing of great value, only the money used for the weekly market trips in a locked closet. Then I started noticing that money was missing from the well secured safe box. \$10, \$20... Perhaps we were making errors in our counting. I refused to believe that a boy who at age 13 could not even read numbers past ten or the words of a first grade primer would have the ability to find the hidden key and work the two combination locks upon which we based our sense of security.

Finally, it dawned on me that Arturo may be responsible for the missing funds. But Margi wasn't to be so easily convinced. Worried and confused by my suggestion that she was letting Arturo "get by with it", Margi devised a plan to see if it were possibly true. She hid Lazaro, our shortest counselor, in the closet, and then she announced to Arturo that we were going in to town, as we many times did, and asked the boy to lock up when he was finished with his chores.

When we returned, Lazaro brought us the sad news that he had witnessed Arturo stealing from us. We took the boy to the police station to make a scene for everyone's sake. That, of course, was not the answer nor the end. Arturo returned. And so we began again. And after a week, he again stole.

The void that Arturo had within him was never filled. We had tried filling it with love and special care. Arturo tried filling it with his compulsion to steal, and later with more drugs. He left many times, and the pauses in between became so long his returns were almost hopeless. Each time he would be in worse shape.

I lost track of him. Perhaps one day he hit bottom and remembered that somewhere along the way someone did nurture him, for a while. Perhaps he hit bottom and did not make it. His case was not unique. He and other boys like him made a profound impression on me. "The poor you will have always with you."

Honesty at the feed store

About a year after I thought I was making inroads for honesty, I hit upon an obvious answer to why my battle was so difficult. In our yellow truck with six boys to help, I was making the rounds to buy the things we needed. We stopped to buy feed for our new goat and chicken projects. The boys came into the feed store with me. They helped, we left, and as we were entering the gate at home they asked permission to go to the little neighborhood store. After we had unloaded the feed, I gave them permission. Ten minutes later, I saw them over by the edge of the property with a whole loaf of bread and several other indistinguishable items. I walked towards them and realized they were having a first class feast. I asked them where they got all the money to buy the party supplies. The kids were usually given a 50-cent allowance that usually only lasted a day, and this scene was taking place three days later. They answered that they had found ten lempiras (\$5.00) on the floor of the feed store. I looked at them dubiously, but had to believe them, and then began my lecture about reporting found

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items to the store owner. As I “preached,” I got more intrigued with the situation. This could be one of those rare educational moments, I thought. I asked them how much they had left, and decided that we could make a lesson out of the remaining Lps.5.00 and go back to the store. Unquestioningly, they jumped back into the car for this new venture of returning the money. We practiced what they were to say to the store keeper on the way. They seemed not at all afraid or embarrassed by what they had to do, and, of course, having full tummies helped.

We arrived at the feed store. I set the stage, and then Cesar began his little speech. At the end, the store owner, an obvious upper middle-class type, looked at me with a kind of disgust in his face, and then addressed the kids, “Boys, if I had found ten lempiras on the floor, I certainly would pocket it, too!” He returned his gaze to my face, then walked away, leaving the kids holding the five lempiras!

I continue to this day to grapple with those issues of stealing, swindling, and taking advantage of someone. There are times when I wonder if the counter-cultural system I taught left the kids too vulnerable to others.

One day, just before we were to leave the country, I found an atypical Honduran university student. We were selling off our furniture and sundries, and he came to look at our fifteen-years old Sony stereo which we had hoped to sell for \$150. We had talked by phone several times, and he was already a bit disappointed that it was only AM-FM and record player with no cassette tape deck. In Honduras the bottom price for records is \$15, but cassettes are freely copied and sold by street vendors for \$4.00. Henry arrived, and I expected him to reject the idea of the purchase or to bargain me down to about half the price. I had told him over the phone that probably any tape recorder could be

connected to the amplifier and used. Just a few minutes before he came I tried hooking one up, but could not get enough drive to amount to anything, and so I scrapped my plan of suggesting that idea. I realized a few minutes after his arrival that Henry had no stereo savvy. He was more worried about how to make a record drop from the spindle than about how many decibels he could create or the size of the amplifier and speakers. He labored and labored reading over the labels in English, asking me several times for information and directions and translations. After an hour of deliberating, he was ready and decided to go for it. I awaited the bargaining price, already determined that I would not accept a big cut. He started. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll buy it for \$147.50 because I need the \$2.50 for a cab home!” Since that day, I’ve wondered how he ever made it in the Developing World; his attitude was not typical.

Supporting adoptive parents

Adoptive parents often seek each other out both in country and back home to share their stories of woe. Sometimes they feed on each others’ misfortunes so much that there results a kind of one-upmanship, usually covering some guilty feelings, or they end up jealous, bickering, and later wonder how they could have possibly acted that way.

Having two adopted boys in our family, I often wonder what goes on in their heads when they confront values that differ from the ones they were exposed to as young children in Honduras. Which are the compelling values to be followed, and which are secondary? As we gain experience of a being a family together, there are situations from time to time that reveal the simple truth that they have not really integrated the morality Margi and I have tried to

model for them. Both boys seem to have a different attitude towards authority than the two of us were raised with. It's more than moving into adolescence for the boys, a challenge in itself. Basic concepts such as the meaning and value of truth and the respect for the property of others differ from culture to culture in this world. In my naivete, I had thought they were the same!

I also wonder how much nine years in Honduras has affected me and my original German programming. My mind became so attuned to keeping one step ahead of eighty boys who might be sneaking something out of the orphanage or involved in some intrigue, that I realize I no longer take things at face value. And could I easily do the same thing myself, abandoning my "breeding," as my mom used to call it? For example (and this is a true story), a supposedly uneducated kid of thirteen was able to sneak into a volunteer's locked room, find her travelers' checks, remember to pick up her ID card, make it to the bank, cash the travelers' checks (ones the volunteer had found almost impossible to cash without a month-long waiting period) and make off with \$200. When we later caught the check-cashing culprit, we learned that his success was attributed to inviting the bank teller to accept part of the proceeds from the checks! Does our honesty prevent us from thinking of such simple answers? Couldn't I, much more aware and wiser as an adult, with a college education, take advantage of the system to a far more significant level? What is there, besides the small voice of my conscience, that prevents me from abandoning my own standards of behavior? What kind of ethno-centricism is operating within my subconscious that assumes the standards of my own society are superior? For the Honduran kids, their values are survival tools, enabling them to obtain food, clothing, housing, and recognition.

I watched the same kind of "duping" come from businessmen, lawyers, and almost every profession. I linked it to things I saw and remembered in the United States like mailorder fraud, advertising to convince people they need something to be truly happy, or con jobs on senior citizens that separated them from their life savings. Perhaps the difference is that in the U.S. the system seems more intent on catching the scoundrels. Perhaps. I know an old native American woman who buys too many lottery tickets each week from her modest food allowance, hoping for a remote chance at the good life before she dies. What does this say to my kids?

In Honduras most dishonesty went unchecked and there was a proliferation of dupings. It seemed for a while that the more aid from foreign countries poured into the Third World, the more ways would be found to dishonestly grab it. Could that also mean the harder I worked and asked for donations, the more opportunities I would produce for dishonest action among our boys?



Would raising their expectations in life motivate them to steal in order to have it?



I've also thought a lot about being "taken" because of prejudice and resentment against me. I was in a country as a foreigner. I was perhaps respected, but certainly not honored. How could they NOT hate me beneath it all for the money and control I represented? I would simply have to be the recipient of a lot of cons and dupings, and learn from the experiences something of the evil of my society. I read a lot of Liberation Theology. I listened to Archbishop Oscar

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Romero's recorded talks after he was assassinated in El Salvador in 1980. I learned from Romero that the greatest violation possible to the poor is that the only way left for them to survive is to cheat and steal. Their sins are pardonable. To me, it means that when those who HAVE food to eat and clothes to wear do dishonest things, their sins weigh doubly upon their shoulders.

Re-evaluating our own visions

I envision the American Dream as my parents and society taught it to me, and now I can see how it influences people into buying, acting in a certain way, believing certain things, holding certain values. During a money-raising trip in the United States, I noted how every kitchen now needed an extra water tap of boiling water for making instant tea and coffee. In Honduras I watched women walk from the rivers along dirt paths and up hills with five gallon buckets of contaminated water on their heads. If they wanted to keep their children from having amoebic dysentery, they would have to use up precious firewood to boil that water. I would say to myself, "No one has convinced them they can't do without luxuries, yet."

People and articles have told us that recounting such scandalous stories is a form of venting culture shock. They say North Americans who gather in social settings within a foreign country spend a lot of time making national jokes and telling scandalous stories in order to offset their own pain. I haven't got it all sorted out yet. I know only that in the long run it was good for me to have dealt with being taken and being cheated. It happened many times. It happens to me now at home, but in a softer way. It is a part of living in a world of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. I only hope that I can become more aware

and open to the people I make poorer by what I buy and eat and do.

13

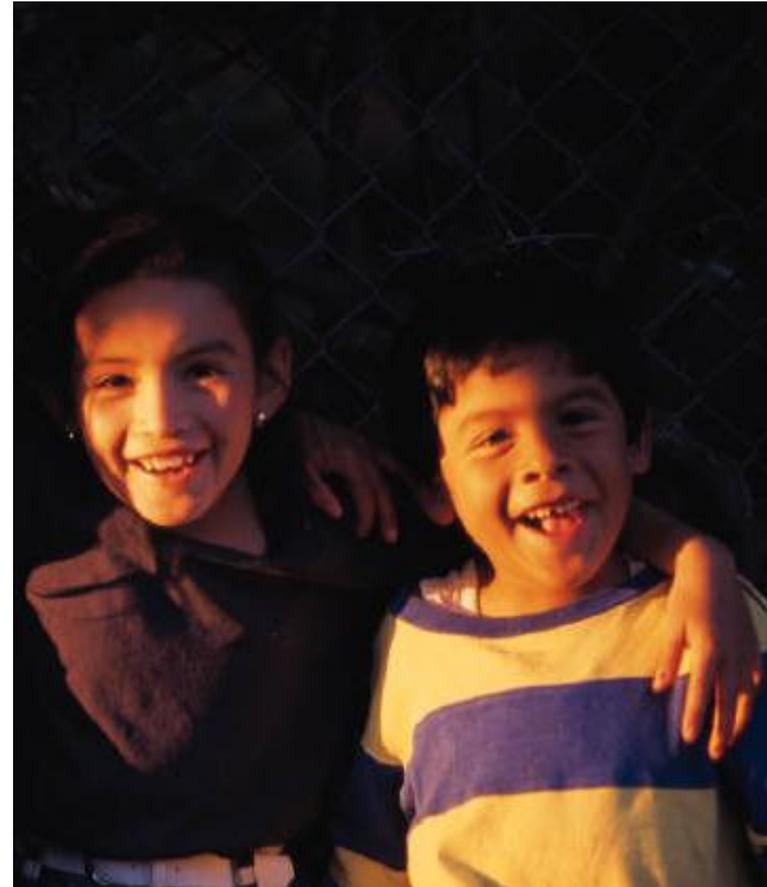
Foreigners

the protected ones

We didn't know which felt worse, feeling helpless (sometimes) or being treated as the helpless ones.

There sat Marty in the midst of his grubby little street gang of former friends. But he, unlike they, had a bottle of pop in his hand, sat on a chair, and didn't quite know what to do. They simply stared at him.

It was a few days before we were to leave the country, and I had brought my newly adopted son back to visit the lady who had "bought" him, and who, according to the neighbors that reported her, had used and abused him. I had been told by the judge and social worker that this lady was crazy. I wasn't sure that I had arranged this trip for Marty or for myself. Did he really want to see her again or did I need to see the environment from which he had come to the orphanage. As we approached the house, walking through what seemed like an unfriendly neighborhood of all sorts of visible squabbles and angry voices, I almost changed my mind. I also was totally dubious that Marty knew where he was. But out of one of the clumps of gathered humanity a small boy yelled to our "Martin" in recognition, and Marty hesitantly acknowledged it.



I remember this now in the United States whenever we have foreign students to dinner. Foreign visitors need a lot of extra care. I had received it, and I try to offer it to others. When U.S. visitors would get off the plane in Tegucigalpa, I would be reminded of the immense effort it took an outsider to hail a taxi, make change, make themselves understood, find potable water, know what might harm them, and find what might pleasantly surprise them.

Perhaps this need for protection and extra care is what makes foreign exchange students and their host families form lasting friendships. The traveler must become vulnerable to survive; the family feels their worth when they must respond and protect. This is also what makes traveling adoptive parents vulnerable and receptive to any extra warmth and care from the locals or from other adoptive parents staying at the same hotel or hostel.

People from the U.S. tend to have a broad and not-so-deep basis for friendships. They will often go out to supper or to events with other families, sometimes share home meals or vacations or child care, but they do not enter into the “inner circle” of lending money, sharing cars or houses, or very personal problems.

During the emotion of the adoptive process in international situations, this cultural barrier is often crossed and parents share (with the locals and with other parents) everything from the “state” of their intestines to their personal belongings. When they return to the United States, old behaviors of “distancing” usually return after a while for parents. This may not be so for the international friend whose expectations are culturally different.

There were wealthy people who lived out in the Honduran countryside, but just a few, for most who had

money needed to be near enough to cities to spend it. Since the early days, most hacienda owners had turned into absentee landlords and lived “in town.” Teachers had to be SENT by the Ministry of Education to remote rural areas for their first two years of internship, for none would volunteer. Even doctors usually refused to go. At one time the statistics reported several hundred part-time doctors in the cities who refused employment in the “sticks.” Life in the *campo* meant living without discotheques, movie theaters, fancy restaurants, indoor toilets, and sometimes electricity.

Margi and I loved our time in the country, as any North American who had “endured” city life too long might have. Yet, we were never there on our own, and we were always treated as if we were visiting V.I.P.s. The closest I ever came to experiencing the hardships of rural life were what I call the “Three Water Incidents”.

Searching a site for the farm

The first incident occurred during an exploratory trip in search of suitable land for our proposed agricultural school. The team included our experts in agriculture and applied appropriate technology, Connie, Val, and Ross, and the two of us. We all had been invited to see some land that would be a perfect investment for our grants of \$30,000 designated for the purchase of land for an agricultural school. We had heard there were some 300 hectares of fertile soil in the area, located on a plateau with a river flowing along one side edge. The property had only one slight flaw—there was no road to it, and the man who had been farming it usually came and went by plane. I was immediately suspicious that he had been growing marijuana, for I had seen such an operation years before, complete with a airplane landing strip.

We approached the plateau in a Land Rover jeep to meet our prospective seller. It was a journey that I shall never forget. We drove over tree stumps, into gullies and ditches, crossed a shallow marsh, and literally leapt in our seats, the top of my head often crashing against the roof of the Land Rover. Finally, we arrived at our destination to find an aging, lovable and slightly confused man. He took us on a very short walk to point out the features of his property. I was hoping for a more exciting excursion, like the one we had experienced two weeks before. That trip had involved riding bareback on some very broadbacked mules to check out every nook and cranny of the property.



Afterwards, I realized most Hondurans thought that only poor campesinos rode mules, and that North Americans needed, and perhaps deserved because of our relative affluence, the comfort of traveling in cars and trucks and jeeps.



Again, there was the urge to protect us from the difficult lifestyle of the poor.

The owner was intent on being sure we understood the advantages and disadvantages of the property, and we appreciated his honesty. One of the problems was the infestation of fire-ants in the area. I had never thought of ants as being a farm hazard, but I certainly could believe that hand harvesting would be difficult under such circumstances. As the others in the party talked on about the river, irrigation, and the quality of the soil, I was more inclined to worry about the road situation, for building a road of over

eight miles on land that someone else owned would require some convincing.

As they talked and I looked out over the muddy territory we had just crossed, I noticed menacing clouds in the distance. I was about to remark that perhaps we should be on our way when the host proclaimed that we were invited to join him for dinner. It was then 2:00. The noon meal, dinner for the *campesinos*, would soon be underway. I heard the children running after the chickens. Chicken? I remembered seeing some aging hens outside the house, and I figured any one of them would need a good two hours of tenderizing boiling before we could eat it. I felt awkwardly afraid, and tried to interest others in our English-speaking group in my desire to get out before the rains came. Val, too, was genuinely worried, which made matters worse for me, because I knew he had battled mud in the *campo* before. We waited, and the talk went on. As the clouds came closer, I could not even smell the chicken cooking. Finally, at 4:30 we sat down to eat. The host was worried too—so concerned that he had hurried the cooking process. We could barely chew the chicken in the stew.

We said our hasty goodbyes and jumped into the Land Rover as the rains began in earnest. It poured. The road became nothing more than a muddy wash of wet clay. There were several times when we got out and ran behind while pushing the jeep, as Val, its driver, battled losing traction. As I think back, I wonder why we rushed. Lots of times people simply returned late from a day in the country. We had been shown some fine hospitality. Certainly we could have slept in this man's tile-floored house on his animal furs with plenty of gunny sacks to cover us. There were chickens, many more, and eggs, and lots and lots of corn and beans. We were, and always would be, the honored

guests who never quite understood that we should at least try the local cuisine of our hosts.

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I sensed one of the major differences between the cultures of the Developed and Developing World. I am used to a society where everything is ordered and predictable. I would never think of being late for dinner, and try never to make someone wait for an appointment.

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We usually think something is wrong with a person who is chronically late—"unreliable," "lazy," or "inconsiderate" are some of the labels we attach to such persons.

Sometimes I feel enslaved to the watch on my wrist, and I welcome the opportunity on a retreat or on vacation to take it off and to just let time pass. That's perceived as a kind of luxury to most of us. However, in the Developing World, the unpredictable happens as a matter of course. Tasks are rarely completed on time, a entire morning spent at the market will leave some items on the shopping list, and each day seems to present the unexpected. What counts is people getting together, whenever that may be. And when that happens, it is celebrated with joy and delight. Native Americans of the Great Plains and southwest have much the same kind of ethos going for them in the pow-wow, which gathers friends far and wide to a common place to celebrate the tribe, a kind of extended family. Being a day late isn't important; you are important!

The event of the family gathering is celebrated by young and old alike, and there are stories to be shared and activities to interest everyone. I try to remember this when

one of my adopted sons is late for supper or loses track of time while playing with his friends. I wonder why we always have to say to others, "Do you have a minute?"

Please excuse the hot water

My second "water story" took place in the drought-ridden section of the country on a medical caravan with a group of nurses. We had worked all day in the heat and drought with scabies and lice-ridden children, applying Lindane while they screamed. The kids had no way of understanding that later the itching and stinging would be rewarded by lice-free bodies. I knew we would all return to the city after our two days in the *campo* with lice in our hair and creatures on our bodies. It was inevitable, but it was curable. I looked forward to a wonderful warm shower beneath my Electro-Duche. I loved this great Italian device. It was an electric shower head in which water was heated as it passed over a hot coil. It required no hot water tank, a great savings at 20 cents a kilowatt hour. To be perfectly honest, all I got was luke-warm water and a lot of fear whenever I looked up to see the electric wires hanging above me in the shower stall. But they were better than cold water.

We expected to have very little water up here in the mountains, and our hearts went out to families who could not bathe their children for lack of water during the nine months of dry and blowing dust which constituted one of the only two seasons in that part of the country. We were about to end our day and be escorted to the family who would host us for the evening. It was getting cold, and I was very tired, hoping only for my plate of rice and beans and a place to lay my head. Instead, the lady of the house announced that we would be able to bathe, for she had a reservoir of water and a hose into their back garden. "Wait

just a bit”, she said. “Right now the water is hot because the sun has been on the hose all afternoon. I’ll run it a bit so you all can have cool water to bathe with.” I almost leapt on the woman as she turned to the faucet to let the water “run”.

I’ve discovered that my adopted latino sons both prefer cold showers. Gilberto says, “A cold shower makes the blood run faster, and you, too!” We’ve never talked about it, and I’d presumed that a hot shower would prove to be as much a luxury to them as it is to me. Another example of the differences in our cultures and customs!

St. Anthony’s pilgrimage

Finally, to the third story. Up in the highest hill country I once drove our two-ton diesel truck filled with medical volunteers and supplies to a small, remote village. Ours was the only vehicle there besides the visiting Pepsi truck which came every two weeks. Other trucks would enter during the resin-harvesting months, and that was all the road serviced. Because it had deep ruts and was rocky, with occasional wash-outs, we were badly shaken when we arrived. In fact, we did not QUITE arrive, for 1000 feet before the little village church, the truck simply stopped. I got out to inspect and found that the oil filter had jarred loose and fallen off half a mile behind us. We had no filter, but could have reclaimed and cleaned the one that fell. However, we also had no oil. None was to be found in the village. I gave thanks for the small miracle that we were within walking distance of our destination and the work to be done.

I also had three days to do something about the problem, for I was in charge of transportation and not the

entire clinic undertaking. The answer, clearly, was to go down on horseback some 15 miles to the main road, hitch a ride into town, 25 more miles away, and simply buy a new filter and oil. I had remembered this little village from a year before when there was no negotiable road at all. We had come up on horseback the back way. I had been so very embarrassed, because we were given sorry-looking mules to ride, while alongside us WALKED the Hondurans. (I almost never knew in Honduras what was a horse and what was a donkey or mule, for they were all called “*bestias*” and had been cross-bred to appear indistinguishable.) At one place we had had to cross a swiftly flowing river. The Hondurans crossed it holding arms up while we did it on muleback. I specifically remembered my mule, because as my legs and seat of my pants were getting wet, I felt his legs give out and the current took us. I had in my arms, of all things, a big plaster statue of St. Anthony which we were about to give to the mission church at the top of the mountain, a church about to be consecrated as “St. Anthony’s.” As the horse and I were swept downstream, I held tighter to St. Anthony and hoped he could be a pinch hitter for St. Christopher! The mule did indeed recover his footing, we crossed, and I swallowed my fears and stifled my giggles until later when I could share them with alone with the other *gringos*. I wasn’t about to let the Hondurans see my true colors!

Later, I was about to go down the same mountain, and I wondered if I would be given the same mule. *Campesinos* usually have one mule per two families, and when visitors come, they pool all the beasts in caravan. I thought of the inconvenience I would cause the mule owner, who really needed to have his teeth attended to by the dentist rather than accompany me back. As I didn’t need the owner of the mule to walk beside me, I begged to go down alone. After much consternation among our protec-

tive hosts, I was granted permission to go alone. I never quite knew, but I think I got the very same mule.

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Three hours alone on a trail in the mountains of Honduras was for me the purest bliss I had ever experienced. Would there ever be three hours of travel in my life when I would not run into another human being or when I could feel so close to nature?

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Margi and I had tried consciously to do develop our sensitivity to nature in the Sierra Nevadas in Northern California. Ecstasy always seemed elusive; we seldom achieved it. Now, the mule, my silent and close buddy by this time, arrived at the river. We walked through the now shallow waters. He stopped to drink. I remembered our time before of struggle against the waters. I remembered all the times the people of Honduras had protected and cared for us.

14

Food

for today and yesterday

*In the lives of growing children,
food becomes a symbol of power,
whether it be refusing or hoarding.*

El Hogar serves three substantial meals a day—always on time, always predictable, always nourishing, thanks to a very dedicated and caring cook, Tona. She begins her day at 5:00 a.m. and relies on about six shifts of helping hands—the small hands of children only six, seven, and eight years old—to peel, chop, and wash. She works in a central kitchen and prepares everything in giant size pots, so big that the kids who stir the soup have to stand on chairs and peer down in. These same pint-size kids wash the pots afterwards and are responsible for the last crumb on the floor.

At meal times each house sends its representatives to the kitchen to transport their share of the food in smaller pots to their dining area. Those table setters are to distribute the food EQUALLY onto the twenty plates of those who will eat in the dining room. They must do this while every one else stays out. Even with these fairly strict rules, food disappears, is sold, or given as bribes. God help the boy who for some reason does not make it to the dining room in time to eat with the rest! Food, in the eyes of a child who has experienced



hunger as a normal fact of life, takes on a value higher than money, higher than anything. Meat is served four or five times a week. The size of the piece one receives from the table setter is of huge import. It indicates your position in the hierarchy of the house. During the meal, there is almost total silence, not by rule, but by custom. Boys are communing with this sacred thing called food.

From scratch

Food is purchased in bulk: grains and vegetables and meat...all the elements we would label as “from scratch.” On weekends the cook has time off and an assigned sixth-grader RUNS the kitchen, preparing a breakfast of oatmeal, a lunch of homemade vegetable soup and a supper featuring hoagies with 80 home-baked buns. Taking turns for this weekend task at *El Hogar* is good preparation for graduation to the Institute. There the boys take month-long turns in the kitchen cooking all three meals for 50 students. That means seven days a week, three meals a day, making a menu, meeting a budget, taking inventory of the supplies, and listening to the complaints of their peers—strenuous, but worth it. We sometimes joked that our boys would make great fathers of families, but only with fifty children to feed!

I marveled at their acceptance of the task and at their abilities to learn quickly. At the church we now attend there is a “handbook” on how to do a Sunday morning coffee hour. It includes everything possible, from where to plug in the coffee pot to where to buy good cookies in a pinch! I wonder how the boys of *El Hogar* would take to a set of written instructions. It never would have worked. The more things I wrote down, the more insecure they felt. Almost all of the boys were learners who absorbed information by observation. They had

incredible memories for detail if the directions given were concrete. Ask any boy today, and he will proudly recite the instructions for the morning cereal:

- red arrow straight left on the stove knob
- water in the big (50 gallon) pot to the black mark
- upon boiling, 17 bags of oatmeal in the pot
- 2 coffee cans full of powdered milk
- 2 coffee cans full of sugar
- stir a lot
- serve.

As easy as that! How different this is from the experience of many kids in the United States, who work with textbook-explicit instructions, step by step. And sure enough, he will come to his parent and proclaim he doesn't understand.

There is an underlying pathos to the ritual of food preparation at *El Hogar*, the technical institute, and the farm. It is the never forgotten fear that perhaps there will be no next meal. How could a child entering *El Hogar*, who has spent the major portion of his life desperate for the next meal ever believe that it will now always be there? He usually cannot believe it, and we see the consequences of this skepticism.

There is, for example, no such thing as left-overs in our kitchens. I planned our kitchen with a walk-in refrigerator room. But I never installed it; we barely needed refrigerator space. The only thing the cold room holds is uncooked meat, eggs, and cabbage and tomatoes. There is among the boys a tremendous hassle over hoarded food, the hiding of food under pillows, gulping down the meal at a rate too fast for anyone's health, followed by the mad dash to the serving platters to line up for more.

Sometimes the chicken and pig feed that we store in the animal shed gets consumed for in-between-meal snacks. A large donation of dried soups was once stored too close to a

window in the storeroom, and by “hook” and “crook” it got consumed before it got to the kitchen, 200 packs of it! Lectures and rules never seemed to help. I remember Antonio, a child who was emotionally starved. He would connive to stay awake long hours till the counselors are in bed, sneak out to the gardens and pick cucumbers, go back to bed, and then consume his stolen treasure with a sense of momentary bliss. It was not a matter of having an empty stomach, but of having experienced unrelenting hunger.

One day Hector was found with a cracked raw egg on a plate in his bed. The chicken coop area was close to his dorm, and he would perform some of his daily chores there. When I asked him about it, he announced innocently that the chicken had come in from the pen outside and had simply “laid” the egg right there on the plate. I wondered with Hector what happened to the shell!

300 tortillas a day

On another day I sent Omar into the food pantry to sweep and mop. He emerged ten minutes later with a big sugar ring around his mouth. When I mentioned it to him, he proclaimed that while mopping the floor he had tripped and had fallen face first into the sugar bin!

Working in the kitchen, then, is a highly desirable job, with little tidbits here and there to consume. Best of all is the tortilla job, pressing 300 tortillas from a ball of raw corn dough and cooking them on an outdoor clay stove. At the Institute it is even better, for there is little supervision over the pair of boys on duty. They are told to plan menus, get the food out on time, meet the cleanliness standards each night at check out time—more than enough to keep them busy. The keys to the kitchen are theirs for the month.

However, the record body weight gain for one of them was 20 pounds in 30 days!

Essentially, Honduran food is easy to prepare, but it takes time. Tortillas, from the stage of unwashed, unshelled field corn, take about four hours per family per day of almost constant labor. It begins with finding or buying and carrying water, washing the dried corn and soaking it in lime, looking for and chopping firewood, rinsing the lime out, cooking the corn, taking it to the mill to grind, kneading and forming it into small balls of dough, patting it out into tortillas, and cooking them. Tortillas must be made fresh daily because they sour without preservatives and dry out too quickly to keep them for the next day.

The hard, brown beans that make up the “rice and beans” staple of the Honduran diet take about two hours of cooking time. That, in my estimation, takes a lot of firewood, which is one of the reasons the hillsides are denuded and the city’s parks are fenced and locked. But corn and beans are dried foods; they can be harvested once a year and kept safely in the corner of the house until needed. If corn is kept on the cob to dry, it is quite resistant to spoilage, and many a house has one wall lined with stacked corn cobs. One bag of corn and one bag of beans must be kept for seed for planting in May of the next year. If the family eats too much or has too little and finds there is nothing left for the months of March and April, the temptation to dig into the seed bag for food to eat is overwhelming. When agricultural aid programs hand out “seed” corn and beans to families, they sprinkle them with a harmless powder and tell the people it is poisonous insecticide so they will be preserved for planting.

This menu of rice, beans, corn tortillas with coffee, occasional milk, cheese, meat and fruit is the year round

diet of the *campesino*, especially in the arid, southern half of the country. Those living in the northern coastal areas near the Caribbean enjoy tropical fruits. The higher plateaus can afford vegetables: potatoes, yucca, cabbage, tomatoes, chayote, etc. We lived in the central plateau area. Yet the capital city certainly had its poor and undernourished. Statistics indicate that half of the city's population were unemployed or under-employed. The downtown market places and restaurant areas always had plenty of food for sale, and restaurant owners or market vendors would often give away leftovers when they close at night. For those who could buy anything they wanted, there was almost anything...from imported Campbell's Soup at \$3.00 a can to papaya the size of footballs for \$1.50 a piece.

Living daily in the midst of those who had food and those who experienced unfulfilled hunger kept pulling at me. I would go to town and see children with bloated stomachs, beggars, mothers with babes in arms. Always you would see them on the street, eating with one hand and begging food with the other. I observed Hondurans generally to always be generous to these people. One man told me, "I would be in that very place, with my hand reaching out for help, if it were not for God's grace. Life is so uncertain. We could change places at any time." His sincere sense of duty to his brother touched me deeply, and I've never forgotten his words. Many others spoke in similar terms, as they reached into their pockets to share.

What a contrast I saw in my own viewpoint and the presuppositions I held. I came from one of the richest and most developed countries in the world, where poverty was not a matter of God's grace but commonly thought of as due to a lack of character or motivation. Some would just be "down on their luck," as we say. But in the Developing World the property lines between the rich and the poor are

very thin, and the two groups touch each others lives daily. Just down the street from our technical institute in Tegucigalpa was a mansion built in imitation of Tara, the great house in Gone With the Wind, and next door to it I noticed a shack. Food crosses the fence that separates the two, making a bridge of caring. I would learn later that there are Fourth and Fifth Worlds progressively more impoverished and powerless in degree than the Third World. We need to build more such bridges, with wider lanes.

I saw the poorest of people daily consuming what we in the United States think of as "junk food." Candy and chips and ice cream were sold all over; every corner had a food stand, and sometimes six or seven of them lined up next to each other. One stand would sell bananas and oranges for five or ten cents. Next to them would be the junk food for three times the price, which even the beggars, when they got enough money, would prefer.

Feeding the hungry

I regularly brought the Institute boys to work at the General Hospital ward for severely malnourished children. There they fed children between the ages of one and five, still unable to stand up or walk, totally lethargic. These children desperately needed to have someone hold the spoon for them, to be held and touched enough to maybe sense that someone cared for them, or else they would not eat. For some it was a chore to chew and swallow. They would either just lie limp, or meal time would take them a couple of hours. Years before, I recall visiting an orphanage in Tijuana, where some of the children had become totally psychologically closed in upon themselves because they hadn't experienced enough human touch.

Antonio's hunger

There was one house that will forever remain in my memory. Inside were three children—Antonio, a chubby boy about eight years old, and his two younger sisters, Eva and Maria. The girls were obviously undernourished, weak and almost skin and bones, emaciated from lack of food. Each morning their mother would set aside some tortillas and beans for them to eat, and then lock her kids in the house where they would remain safe until she returned at sunset. These kids in time became the concern of neighbors, and they asked me to find out what was wrong.

One afternoon I went to the door and knocked. A small voice answered, and I explained that I lived down the road. The latch was unbolted, and the door opened. It was Antonio. Inside I could hear Eva and Maria crying. Antonio motioned for me to come inside and to take a look at Eva. She was sick with fever and very weak. The place smelled of urine, and flies were everywhere. I looked for some food, but there was nothing. I learned that Antonio would rush to the food as soon as the door was locked behind his mother early in the morning, and he would quickly devour the allotment for the three of them. Only a pitcher of water remained in the room. He was scared, and Maria sensed that.

What choices did this mother have? They were safe, and they were sheltered from the daily downpours of rain and the hot sun. She was trying desperately to provide for them on a daily basis, but it wasn't enough. Eva and Maria were showing early signs of deprivation. Such is the plight of a single-parent family in the developing world. Eva would probably not survive.

I went to a small store down the street, a *pulperia*. To provide these children with milk would only complicate things. Their capacity to metabolize dairy products with the required enzymes had long ago been exhausted. Milk would only make them sick and give them diarrhea. It would have to be tortillas, the bread of the poor, and some jam as a source of sugar. I returned to the shack with the food. This time, Antonio would not let me inside, but begged for the food in my hands. I resolved to return that evening, when the mother would have returned. Quite possibly she would be open to allowing Antonio to live at *El Hogar*, and the girls could be placed in a center run by some nuns. This incident left a seed of humility deep within me, from which grew a sense of respect and honor of mothers for the struggle they, as single-parents, endure in providing for their children. These were the times when I regretted that we hadn't opened a facility for girls; our focus was on the boys. The children would at most be a short bus ride from their home and well-cared for; and she could visit them on weekends. Many boys came to *El Hogar* in this manner. I always found mothers eager to provide an opportunity for their young children, even if that meant dividing the family.

Struggling with an image of Honduras

I made a video tape of Fanny, age five, who looked like a shriveled up little old lady in the body the size of a two-year old. She could only roll her head toward me and moan. I still have that tape. I brought it back with me because a doctor at the hospital was so worried that it would fall into the hands of the Nicaraguans who would then show it on TV in an effort to embarrass Hondurans as being worse off than their country; it was a period of extreme political pressure, and U.S. foreign policy against the revolutionary government in Nicaragua found many expres-

sions, positive and negative. The government generally discouraged foreigners from taking photographs of the effects of poverty, which ultimately served to reinforce stereotypes of the developing world. The government wanted only the strengths and the development of their country to be displayed. Sometimes I, too, wondered why visitors wanted to capture scenes of poverty on film. I could not blame them. I had a different use for the tape in mind than for or against Nicaragua.

One day some volunteers and I went out into the market place with a video camera to look for all kinds of hunger and food scenes to accompany the story of Fanny. We shed tears as we recorded on tape what we saw for a fund-raising documentary. There were scenes of people down by the river picking through meat bones the butchers had sent to be tossed away; kids were finding food in piles along the road near the marketplace and stuffing more than their mouths could hold; other scenes showed bloated bellies, matted hair, sad and energyless faces, and on the audio track there were hunger cries of very small children.

In the package with the video tapes we put recipes for Honduran rice and beans and tortillas and sent them out to various churches suggesting they invite groups into their homes to watch the video, eat a simple meal together, and donate the leftover money. There was little response. No wonder! Giving up food is not popular, and trying to imagine hunger problems in Third World countries is an impossible task. It is difficult even for me to empathize with the hungry having lived right next to them. No amount of fasting can bring to my experience the desperation of daily hunger.

Bon appetit

An American official in Honduras once told me a story about himself that illustrates the difference in viewpoint between the two worlds in which we live. "I was to take one of my customary field trips into the country where we had agricultural improvement projects. The rest of my Honduran counterpart companions never took food along. They counted on always being able to find some family to sell them a meal of beans, tortillas and something to drink. Not me. I was never quite sure. I always brought along canned food, just in case."

"On this particular day we had just finished eating a lunch of beans, eggs, tortillas and rice. I should have been full. But there was my canned pudding in my pack. Just thinking about something sweet made it impossible to resist. I went around by the rear fender of the jeep, sat down on the bumper, opened my pudding, and began to eat. Just then a boy of about 12 came around to look. He did not beg. He just looked at me and said the equivalent of 'bon appetit,' then walked away a distance and looked back. He was going to watch and see what I might do with the can. The can would be a treasure to him for in the country such containers are hard to come by. The word for 'bon appetit' rang in my ears. Here was a kid who most likely only ate twice a day and sometimes perhaps only once. I put the pudding down, half eaten, and I walked away without looking back."

Recently, I participated in a 10 km. walk for hunger. There were about 200 of us. Half-way through the walk, as we passed green lawns before ranch and split level houses, I stopped talking to my companion. I was crying. In my mind I remembered walking past dirt caked huts where kids with

bloated bellies sat propped up in doorways sucking on sticks and sugar cane. At this moment I was in the company of teenagers anxious to get the walking over, but in my mind I was being tugged on by beggar hands in the city streets of Tegucigalpa, anxious for the food the donation of a passer-by might give them. It was their only way to get a bite of food to eat and then lie down in the back alley, exhausted and trying to fall asleep without hurting more.

Most adoptive parents have seen the scenes and ponder them. If their children come from orphanages, they also see the results. The kids gulp down their food as fast as they can at first, and later begin to enjoy a very long stay at the table. Their behavior includes hoarding food, hiding it, and having little or no logic about foods. Always, these children will notice that someone else got the larger piece. Later there may be a turnaround of 180 degrees; when angered or feeling ashamed, they may refuse to eat for long periods of time.

The obsession with food is worldwide and crosses all socio-economic lines. We are preoccupied with concerns of how much, how tasty, how expensive, how easy to prepare, how fat-free, how satisfying. Food is symbolic of so many things—power-plays between parent and child, status, respect and care of the earth and the body. Reflecting on the significance of food and living in a country where it is so scarce gave me more than the usual to ponder.

As a society, we North Americans like to feel that we are a chosen people, with a doctrine of manifest destiny to teach the world to grow enough food, feed its hungry and set the standards for care of the environment. But there are other views. For example, in the countries of the Third World it is the custom to slash and burn the fields. From North American eyes, this devastates the land, kills valuable

organisms in the soil, and prevents natural composting. All kinds of North American advisory groups have tried repeatedly to discourage this practice. However, the local wisdom is radically different. Burning is a way of controlling a prolific insect population, which if left to multiply, quickly will devour an entire field of potatoes or corn.

We need to listen to the peoples of the Developing World, and to appreciate the knowledge and experience that they have to contribute to our global community. As adoptive parents, we often prepare foods from our child's native country. We can go beyond this, too. We can help our children to appreciate and to be proud of the wisdom and ways of their native cultures in the cultivation and care of the land and its produce.

15

Disneyland

"Practice hard enough, and you'll make it to your dreams."

trumpeters



The comment was Fredys.' "There must not be any birds in the United States. We've been flying for hours now in this plane, and I haven't seen a one!" Denis wanted to know, "Which seats do the airmail letters use?" Apparently, he thought that letters that came to Honduras by air occupied seats on the plane. And Jose Angel returned from the rest room, telling the others excitedly, "The water in the toilet is blue just like the sky!" He was convinced that water turns blue once it is airborne. Kids make sense of the world in terms they can understand from their own experiences. Adult explanations are usually interesting as theories, but experience counts!

A while later, the stewardess passed. "Is everything all right, boys?" she asked as she looked smilingly at Denis. "Coca-cola, thank you," he replied in English, for he understood not a word of what she said, but had learned that when the stewardess speaks, it usually means to you tell her what you want. The motto of the boys had become, "When, in doubt, say Coca Cola!"

Margi was on her way to Anaheim, California with four *El Hogar* boys, fulfilling one of her wildest dreams and obviously theirs. It was the year of a General Convention of the Episcopal Church, and it was customary to have a booth in the display hall to raise



again. They would bring the boys presents. As the days passed, the collection baskets filled. Every half hour our musicians would play a couple of quartets or rounds. They had the twenty-five tunes memorized to perfection and their trumpets were sounding more brilliant and more in tune each day. Margi was elated. Never had she seen the results of preparation with rewards work so well. Each boy had given his explanation more than five hundred times before he left the convention, and that meant we had reached 2,000 people with 1,500 packs of coffee and brochures.

To keep the boys enthused, she declared the goals for the day. After each boy had talked with fifty delegates, there would be a break for a special lunch and roaming around the hall on their own. They worked even harder, loved it even more, and became popular throughout the convention. They returned from each exploration with stickers and buttons and free popcorn.

One day the people from the popcorn booth came over to see our booth. They were surprised there were only four boys; they had kept track only of outgoing popcorn and not of faces, and wondered if Margi had brought with her at least a dozen lads.

She began to worry quite soon about SPOILING. She worried the moment they stepped foot on U.S. soil, in Miami. She had let them free in the airport, recognizing Miami as "Little Cuba" and knowing they would be able to communicate in Spanish. She had given each of them two dollars to find something to eat. They came back, one with a five dollar bill, gift of a taxi driver, another with free pizza, and two others scandalized because their chocolate candy bars had cost them over a dollar! True commentary on life in the States, she thought.

A stopover in Oklahoma

Their initial destination was Tulsa. When they finally arrived after the long connection of flights, they had been awake and interacting nonstop for 24 hours. Margi and the boys were greeted by Bev Barge, the priest who had managed the donations of band instruments to *El Hogar*. They were driven to his home, an upper-middle class residence with a swimming pool. She settled them in and suggested to the boys that swimming and taking naps beside the pool would be adequate and they were not to bother or to beg from the lady of the house.

Margi went upstairs to change, fell sound asleep on the bed, and awoke three hours later. When she came downstairs, she found all the boys dressed in brand new clothes, from caps to shoes, belts and watches! They had been to the store and back. They looked at her as if to explain, "We didn't know how to say no." Margi found they had also eaten several times in three hours. When she asked Bev's wife how all this was being communicated, she told Margi that they simply arrived in the kitchen and pointed to their mouths. Probably they had pointed to their clothes as well, with all fingers!

Shopping in California

When the group arrived at our host family in Anaheim, we were invited to a discount membership warehouse of immense size. Margi needed to do some shopping for Honduras, and this was the perfect chance. Just past the entrance they were greeted with a giant display of foot-long raw-hide dog bones. Here she was with four boys, all of whom had once known real hunger. Denis and his mother had lived on banana peels they picked up from the parks

thodical and secure, he will probably be the best of welders. Fredys was close at hand. He had spent most of the day with Ruben, but did the Tea Cups and a few other rides in the immediate vicinity. The bumper car area was close to the meeting place, and Fredys needed to keep his eye on it, for he was a classic worrier. Jose Angel was even more adventuresome, and he had gone back to all the places I had shown him. He had wanted to get his fill, and had wandered from ride to ride wanting each to be just as exciting as the first. He had discovered they were not. He was disappointed that the world could not give him as much joy and happiness as he thought.

Denis, however, had not shown up, and did not reappear for hours. When Margi did lay eyes on him, she was frightened and angry. He had been absolutely everywhere and had no excuse for not coming back to reality. She wanted to reward him for his ingenuity and punish him for his lack of consideration. Margi told him that they had finished eating and were on our way to the night parade, and that he would simply have to be hungry. She talked on as the group walked past one of the seemingly scores of restaurants and took a short cut through the outdoor dining section. There, on the tables, uncleared, were bits and pieces of french fries and pickles and halves of sandwiches and hamburgers. Margi knew exactly what would happen. Denis announced, "Look at all this food. It must just be waiting for me." Margi smiled. He picked it up and bagged it for a snack. They all seemed to understand that in the land of plenty things were different.

To this day we ask, "What is so different about the land of plenty, the United States?" Suffering and poverty here simply are more concealed. If I have gleaned one thing

from my readings of my heroes Thomas Merton and of Mother Teresa, it is the question of the choice of our surroundings. If I choose to look at the newspaper and TV ads, I am choosing to stretch my wanting. If I choose to walk daily on dusty roads and watch children squat outside miserable shacks, I am choosing to bathe my consciousness in a different kind of light. Last year the gigantic Mall of America shopping complex opened in the Twin Cities where we now live, and I have been there only twice. Twice is enough, I think. Where I want to be, and know I should be, is in the waiting rooms of hospitals, in the shelters for the homeless, or serving food at a soup kitchen to the hungry. I occasionally volunteer as a counselor at the county hospital's emergency room. Everything shows up there, particularly on weekends and holidays. It gives me life for the week.

16

No Comprendo

no sabe

Language builds bridges, giving us a sense of social and cultural context in which to live and understand our experiences.

Margi recently took a job in a local community college teaching Spanish. As she encouraged her students to produce Spanish sounds, words, verbs, and phrases, she would see them begin the class with gusto; and after forty minutes of exercise, she would see their eyes begin to glaze over, their voices wane. They would stop producing, exhausted.

Everyone who goes to work abroad and is not already fluent in the language experiences this overload, and it's certainly the experience of children coming to this country in an adoption program. However, they do not recognize it as the major source of fatigue, susceptibility to infections and depression they experience soon after their arrival, or as part of culture shock.



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I contrast language classes with what happened to us when we went to Honduras, and what happens to my two kids daily when they go to school. There is no forty minute cut-off time when the class stops and everyone walks out the door into the world of their native language. Living in a foreign country means eighteen hours a day of listening, talking, straining and pretending your mind is not exhausted. Visiting a foreign country with no language whatsoever leaves one exhausted, too, perhaps from boredom, perhaps from trying to capture the non-verbal clues, perhaps from feeling just plain lost and second-best.

It is, however, the reason friends or spouses who travel or work together find their adjustment a bit easier. It is the reason *gringos* seek out *gringos* in foreign countries, or that foreign Spanish speaking students here in the U.S. feel so at home when we invite them to come and share a meal with us and talk about life in their own language. I sometimes compare the concentration needed for a foreign language as equal to that of solving a Rubric's cube. There is the frustration of not remembering the words (or moves) you once had in your head, the feeling that nothing will make sense or work out if you do not get it right, and the fear that if you let up and allow your mind to rest or wander you will lose it all. But a Rubric's cube can be done in the privacy of your room, and Spanish has to be spoken in public, for all to hear and see.

There is a lot of stage fright involved in learning to speak a new language. I would feel secure that the grammar and vocabulary patterns were being ingrained in my brain, and then I would lose them in new circumstances. Six years after having lived in the country and spoken the language daily, I was introduced to the president of the country, and I could hardly complete a coherent sentence. I would be interviewed on the radio, listen to myself later

and be able to pick out five mistakes per sentence. I would stumble at fund raising events, pull a total blank when a government official would ask me a threatening question, try to get away from people at cocktail parties that I really would have loved to meet.

But when my adrenalin was up from anger or threats to my survival, I was amazingly fluent. I discovered this most interesting phenomenon the first time I was stopped by a traffic cop on the street. I was driving a group of people out of the city to a nearby town, and the officer motioned me over to the roadside. He demanded my driver's license for "stopping too close to a stop sign", and then told me about his need to buy some presents for his children. It was just a week before Christmas. Anger swelled inside me when I realized that I would get my license back only if I gave him \$20 or so. Failure to give him some money would result in a minor traffic ticket, but would require waiting in long lines at the traffic court, explaining what happened, repenting, and paying a fine—all the while hoping that my license had not been completely lost in the first place.

During the brief exchange I realized this cop was after me as pure game. He wanted either a big bribe or a lot of fun out of me. I let out with a Spanish diatribe about taking advantage of missionaries, those who came into the country to do some GOOD and got nothing but trouble and guff. I was so amazed at my own eloquence that I hardly wanted to stop. Within seconds my license was back in my hand and the man was trying to comfort me in my anguish. When it was all over I felt like I had just come back to consciousness.

Struggling with Spanish

Using Spanish to comfort and counsel other people was very difficult for me. In English, I often feel that I cannot

find the right words to say. In Spanish, it was worse. I could only say "I'm sorry," and stop. Perhaps that is why Hondurans thought we were good listeners! One day a lady came to the gate at *El Hogar* very, very distraught that some man on the bus had just reached into her purse and extracted her coin purse, leaving her penniless. There were tears and exclamations and pleas for help. A volunteer of three months was at her side, and some of the kids were within hearing distance. They came to report. The volunteer had not understood, for she answered saying, "Yes, yes, what a beautiful purse...how lovely...but, no, we don't wish to buy one." The exchange went on for several minutes, and the lady, calmer now, left!

Dealing with public officials, especially at airports, can bring on a panic in me that causes a marked decline in my language ability. I tremble at customs inspections. I can't understand what people are asking. I would try to peer ahead at those in line in front of me, listen attentively, and make my mental vocabulary list. There were words for documents and certificates and identification cards and immunizations and deeds and police records and licenses that would cause me to tremble and fumble and give up before it was even my turn.

Doesn't anyone speak English?

I wasn't the only one confused and bewildered while standing in line. Some friends of ours were coming back into Honduras after six weeks of intensive language study in Guatemala. It was a refresher course in Spanish, and they now felt they had the language "under control". They arrived in the airport the same day the country was expecting some 200 U.S. demonstrators-for-peace. There was a big to do about it all, and the government had just issued orders to all the immigration officials not to let any "reli-

gious" or "peace advocate" personalities into the country, period. It was all over the newspapers, and everyone was on edge.

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The ambiguous meaning of some words can lead to confusion and misunderstanding, as well as to some interesting experiences.

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Our friends, however, had not seen nor heard anything of the matter. They were just happy to be back. They deplaned from a flight that had NOT originated in the US and at a time when none was expected. However, caution was the word...and they were asked: "Are you religious? Are you peace supporters?" They understood the question to mean, "Are you good religious people who believe in peace?" They looked at each other and said, "Yes, of course." Within the next ten minutes they THOUGHT they heard things like, "What are you doing here?" "Do you not know that what you are about to attempt is against our laws?" "Do you know that there is a warrant out for your arrest if you enter our country?" "You must cooperate and leave on the next flight." June, in her total bewilderment, looked out over the crowd in the airport and yelled: "Does anyone out there speak English?" So much for six intensive weeks of Spanish! Soon they were on a plane to Belize City.

The tolerance of the simple *campesino* for language interpretation, on the other hand, is seemingly endless. I would watch people standing in line. Already weathered by the sun, hot and tiresome waiting was nothing to them. I would see them get the once-over for not having a document properly filled out, and never balk. They were like humble

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school children who would accept the paper back and try to do it over, usually without understanding what was expected.

Medical Spanish

These same humble people would also never laugh at the struggling *gringos*. One day on a medical caravan in a small village, I watched a *gringo* nurse's aid try to organize the crowd of some fifty people waiting their turns in the blazing sun to see the doctors. She was not well versed in Spanish, but she thought she had learned from listening to so many people that the word *apunteme* must mean "give me an appointment". When she realized the line was too long and the doctors would have to quit, she stood before them and announced in her loudest voice, "*No mas putas hoy*", thinking she was saying "No more appointments today". What she had said was "no more whores today"! No one in the group snickered, laughed, OR MOVED.

Language after 40

We have all heard that languages come more easily for children, which makes us believe that the past-forty crowd will have a VERY difficult time learning a new language. I have come to believe that difficulty in fluency comes with overdevelopment of the left brain, and that is why age seems to be a major factor. With 40 plus years of logical reasoning under our skulls, it is indeed difficult to allow the music of a language to flow in and out. One day I heard the boys at *El Hogar* discussing the matter. At the time we had several "older" volunteers with us who were struggling to make sentences, and the boys were having to guess at what they were trying to communicate. One boy said, "You know how older people can't run as fast and

climb hills and stuff. They lose it. Well, that's what happens with their words too. They lose them and they can't say stuff as fast." Hearing this, I began to ask them how old they thought each of us was. I was especially pleased when they told me they thought I was around 20.

Informational exchange

One of the greatest difficulties in learning a new language is to have to accept that we have not understood. Time after time I would listen to people get angry at each other in cross-language situations. The anger would initiate with the person who did not understand. People would become angry at themselves for not understanding, but the anger would be projected onto the explainer. I knew it, and I knew it was happening to me. If two boys came to me in a tattle tale situation where I had to take action, the one who gave the clearer explanation would always win. I would become more impatient with kids who had done something wrong and could not give me an understandable report than I would with those I could understand. I could see people doing it to me. Clerks behind desks who had to fill out forms as I gave out information would get ostensibly angry and impatient when I did not understand them or gave unintelligible answers. It felt awful. Frustration, impatience, and misplaced anger can turn informational exchanges in foreign languages into nightmares.

With children, however, this usually does not happen. They are used to being misunderstood in whatever language. Adults don't expect children to catch on immediately. I notice, for instance, how completely secure Marty is when he recounts something he has heard, be it a simple story or a very important set of directions from school. One day, as I was particularly worried about how he was fitting into Church, I asked him about Sunday School class that

day. I knew they had talked about the story of the Good Shepherd, and I thought he might have identified with the lost sheep. He started, "It was about this shepherd who had 100 sheep, and 99 of them ran away because they were bad. And only one stayed, and Jesus picked him up and held him in his arms and said to the other 99, 'See, if you hadn't run away, you would be in my arms too.'"

Feelings of frustration with language are, of course, rewarded on the day you realize you are really living the language. You find yourself talking to yourself in Spanish, not English. That, so they say, is the day you have "arrived". I can remember the magic I felt when we brought the first kids home to *El Hogar* and I would give out chores to do. I would explain. They would listen, then they would head for the brooms or the buckets and actually follow my directions. My words felt like some kind of magic. "It's working, it's working!" I would exclaim to myself.

The music of Spanish

The experience of languages is very similar to our experience with music. I noticed it in my two children after only three month's exposure to the English language. They speak to us in Spanish, and to each other in Spanish, but they speak English in the shower or while they are vacuuming or carrying out their chores. They actually talk out loud to themselves in English, as if singing to themselves. They also speak to the cat in English, even though they know and remember that the cat is Honduran by birth!

They learn new words and sayings more quickly if it gets them somewhere...especially to center stage. After only two months in the United States, Gilbert discovered the magic of riddles. He had no idea of the pun-on-word meaning of the riddles. He only knew that if some words he

memorized made others break out in a smile or wonder why they weren't smart enough to know the answer, then these words were worth learning!

Marty has acquired patterns in English that now cause him to translate BACK into Spanish what he is thinking in English. In a very short time, his Spanish has lost not its grammatical structure, but the vocabulary. He uses the right Spanish grammar but with the wrong words. He does not usually mix the two languages as some younger children may do. Rather, he stops mid-stream in speaking and tries to remember the word. He has had to learn lots of new Spanish words for things he previously did not know existed, like snow, frost, icicles and heating systems. For me, it has been much the same. In nine years time of speaking Spanish twelve hours a day and English only at night, I found I had lost a lot of English vocabulary. In the midst of a fund raising speech back in the States, I would find myself fixated on a Spanish word I could no longer "find" in my own native tongue.

I felt lonesome for opportunities to speak Spanish when we first returned to the United States, even though we did for a while continue to speak Spanish with the children at home. It was a strange kind of emptiness, and I filled it by taking up several musical instruments and looking for foreign students. The closest I can come to explaining the joy of fluency in a language is to liken it to a performing instrument or being proficient at a sport. There is elation, hard work, arriving at an altered state of consciousness while speaking or performing, and even coming to a physical sense of well being. It is definitely worth the price of going beyond the beginning lessons.

It is common for adoptive parents to feel concerned when their older children lose their Spanish or when the

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children they adopted as infants have no motivation to learn Spanish, the language of their native country. Parents usually conclude, and perhaps rightly so, there is a subconscious resistance to their adopted child's past and native culture. This sense of rootedness in Latin America and being proficient at speaking the language often need to be put on hold while the child sorts out the part of her/him that is *gringo* and the part that is not. Hopefully, in time there will be some movement in the direction of appreciating this cultural heritage.

17

After Adoption

baggage from the past

A wellspring of life stories often erupts after an adopted child finds a secure enough place to let them flow.

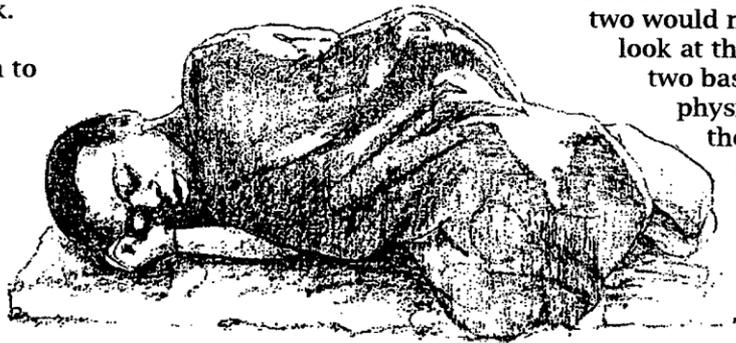
On January 28, 1988 our adoption papers on Gilberto and Marty came through the Honduran courts. Finally, after six months of work, the two boys were officially members of our family. We knew, as we chose to leave our position in Honduras after nine years, that taking two boys with us would not be an easy emotional or legal task.

Margi and I made the decision to adopt rather than to have our own children when we began the work in Honduras. We were in our early 30's at that time, and we realized very soon that reclaiming the lives of street boys is a task that taxes the heart and all available energy. It was not a work to be taken on in a

cavalier fashion; so many lives were dependent on our fidelity to the ideals of the program and our sense of commitment.

The Difficult Choice

There were 120 boys in our program, some as young as 5 and several as old as 16. Selecting which two would not be simple. We decided to look at the ten boys in the Center who fit two basic criteria: they had special physical or emotional needs that we thought we would have the resources to address, and they had been truly abandoned by their parents (as distinguished from the many who had simply run away from a bad



home situation to the streets). We spent time with each of them, getting to know them and listening to their stories, their dreams, their disappointments. We focused on two, Martin and Gilberto.

Having made our tentative choices, the problem remained of how to announce to the others the futures of these two particular children—which would mean we would be leaving all the others behind. Consciously, we tried to leave any publicity to the last minute so as not to upset lives and feelings. And so it was that most of the paperwork was done on Gilberto and Marty, two orphaned boys, before we even told them we wanted them to be our sons. Their replies to what I had hoped would be a most momentous question were simply: “We already guessed.”

What I had not guessed about Gilberto, and what Margi inadvertently wiggled out of him, was this life story. He had been brought to the orphanage by a *campesino* woman’s son who now lived in the city and taught school in our neighborhood. “This boy”, he had told us, “has been living with my mother for the last three months. She took him when someone else was going to turn him over to the police. He’d been out in the fields harvesting. And now, the coffee harvest and corn harvest are over, and no one wants him, nor can my mother feed him. She is also very poor, and this boy eats a lot and is almost blind, and so I said I would bring him to you.” All of that we could believe. It did seem strange that the lady and her son had known nothing of Gilberto’s life ‘before the harvest,’ and somehow had not bothered to ask. When we asked Gilberto what had happened, he told us that he had had a father, but when the man “took up” with a new woman, they didn’t want Gilberto around. He was left with a grandmother who thought she could use him, but didn’t want to bother much. “She always beat me on the head,

and I would fly out of there with my ears ringing, and I got lumps on my head. I think that’s when I began to go blind, and she didn’t want me when I couldn’t see.” He seemed not at all angry. He appeared to have neither love nor hate for this woman. That was simply how it was. He continued the story: “I would run back to my father’s place, and then one day my father took me to market and lost me on purpose, and I couldn’t find my way back. I searched for lots of days. Then I found a man who said he would take me with him to harvest coffee and corn.” He related it all so matter-of-factly.

We believed it all without further thought. During the adoption process, we halfway expected a father or mother or relative to answer the radio and newspaper banns that announced this abandoned child had been found. We also didn’t want it to happen, because even if a parent has abandoned his child and totally lost track of him, and prospective adoptive parents like us come on the scene, the real parents sometimes try saying “no,” and then suggest some big payment. This is where much of the Central American adoption scandals begin—the point where a lawyer, to facilitate things or to simply get an irresponsible parent to give over custody, pays on the side. It didn’t happen, however, and I stopped wondering why.

It was February in Honduras. We were out of a job. Our positions at the orphanage were already taken over by others. The two boys had officially left the orphanage and now shared our one room apartment. While awaiting the final adoption papers, Margi decided to dedicate some time to taking the children on some day trips to explore and learn of their own country, at least from the bus. She asked Gilberto several times if he would not like to attempt to find his grandmother and father where he THOUGHT he remembered them living. Finally, he said yes, and so one morning they headed for the bus station. She was totally prepared to simply

take a day's bus ride and perhaps not find anyone. It would be okay, because Olancho was a lush area of the country, and we would see green, for a pleasant change from the city's total brown. As she stepped up to the window to buy the tickets, Gilberto tugged on her arm and said in a very strained voice, "No, don't buy the tickets to Juticalpa, instead buy them to Catacamos." Stunned, she did as he instructed and didn't say anything. She simply got on the bus, and he sat down quietly beside her. And then she waited. She could feel he was struggling to come up with some kind of an explanation, and she gave him time. Several hours of travel time remained until they would be back at *El Hogar*.

Which story to believe

Then it began: "All that stuff I told everyone was not true. I've been telling lies, I've been telling lies. I had to make things up..." He pulled her ear down to his whispering mouth, "...because I'm not from Honduras. I'm from Salvador, and I'm scared because Hondurans hate people from Salvador. There was a war." He acted like he couldn't explain much more; he looked around the bus to see who might have heard and then lapsed into silence.

Margi wondered for a minute if he knew something she didn't know about Salvadoran or Honduran spies looking to capture each other. No, she thought to herself, this poor kid is living on the myths of past wars, on what big people tell little people and on what remains inside them to taunt them.

Honduras had a lot of identification checks on buses, especially on the routes near El Salvador, which were intended to trap Hondurans who had crossed the border to

buy shampoo, underwear and soap in El Salvador at a cheaper price. These goods would be brought back to Tegucigalpa for resell at double the price. Further, some products made in El Salvador were not available in Honduras. Lazaro, our buyer, once told me he purchased 50 pairs of Salvadoran underwear from a lady in the market. She kept them hidden under the table for her special customers for only a dollar a piece. These border inspections sometimes took forty-five minutes, and you had that shaky feeling that they would find just any item and proclaim it contraband, or tell you your identification papers were worthless. Margi had seen them haul a guy off the bus because the picture on his card didn't look like him. He came back on within minutes, however, which she presumed was the amount of time it took him to pass the bribe money on. Gilberto would not yet understand all of this. What he needed was reassurance that Hondurans would not jail Salvadorans. Now, safe with a *gringa* soon to be his mother, he had more confidence.

As the bus roared out of the city, Margi still had no idea why they were heading for the interior of Honduras, but she certainly felt they were in for an interesting day of conversation and explanation!

Gilberto was silent for almost an hour. Margi figured he was waiting for her to begin the grand questioning, so she did. "How come we're going to Catacamos instead of Juticalpa?" she asked. "Because that's where she lives...my grandmother," he replied. "Why did you always talk about Juticalpa?" she inquired. "Because that's where the guy picked me up to go work in the fields...he lived in a roadside stand there," Gilberto replied. She tried to piece things together: "Oh, so that's where you ended up on your way looking for your Dad after he lost you in the market?" "No," he said...and there was no explanation.

A little while later Margi had a chance to sort some of it out. From somewhere in this shack of three rooms, the lady had uncovered a birth certificate on Gilberto. Margi already had it in her hand when she remembered that the lady had told her Gilberto's mother was still in jail for trying to cross the border to GET his birth certificate. The facts weren't always easy to piece together. Besides, it would be hard to stay in jail for more than two years, because space was usually needed for punishing other people, and with no close family around to bring her food at the border, she would have been a drain on the economy.

Confrontation and emerging truth

Gilberto and Margi were alone now, walking back into town to make a copy of the birth certificate. Margi had used her authoritative voice once again to purchase time to sort out the truth.

As she and Gilberto made their way, he talked in short painful spurts. "She is always just that mean. She lies, she lies. Yes, I ran away, but she lies about that radio."

Margi let him talk. She tried to piece things together in her mind. She felt awful about him having to see his little brother and sister in the midst of all of this. And they had been in rags with no shoes...and home from school with no food to eat, probably until nightfall. The contrast felt worse when Gilberto and Margi sat down in a cafe next to the copy machine and had a coke and ate the sandwiches they had brought along. She tried to blank those thoughts from her mind as she began to make a copy of the facts of the birth certificate on a piece of scrap paper she had in her bag. (The electricity in town was out, and the copy machine, the only one in town, was useless). Margi devoured the information..."City of Birth: Jerusalem, El Salvador; Date:..." She

stopped, looked several times at the torn yellowing document, and then realized she had a 15-year old sitting next to her rather than a 10-year old boy. No wonder he could find the shack. No wonder he could be out working in the fields, no wonder...lots of things. She decided not to tell him she knew how old he was, as if it would make a difference. To Margi it would, because he had only finished first grade and she wanted him to be still young enough to not have to cope with so much so soon.

She looked at her watch and decided they had better get back to the shack. She had promised the lady to return quickly, offering to leave her valuables in exchange for the loan of the document.

They approached the shack again, another 45 minute walk that didn't seem so long this time because Margi recognized the landmarks. There was a guy in the door, bare-chested... Would the woman have looked for friends, acquaintances? Was it Gilberto's grandfather? Margi and Gilberto walked in to see even more people inside. Margi waited for some recognition on the part of Gilberto. There was none. She handed the lady back the document and thanked her. Margi had wanted to give Gilberto more time with his brother and sister; they had talked about it on their way back. "Talk with them, remember them as they are. Show them you care. Promise them you will keep in touch." But the two children were no where to be seen. Margi felt she couldn't make any more conversation. The woman didn't introduce the other people looking on, the three men and several children. Margi asked a few more questions, and then added, "Well, I think we have to go now to catch the bus."

The lady glared at Margi. She hesitated, and then started, "No, you are not going to take Gilberto. He has to

stay here.” The men moved in. One blocked the door, while the other took Gilberto by the arm. Gilberto began to struggle as the man yanked him closer to the grandmother. Margi was totally stunned. She had a quick flash into the future. She was alone in Honduras. I had gone on ahead to finish up finances for *El Hogar* and sign a contract for a new job I had taken in Ames, Iowa. Margi had plane reservations for the flight in two weeks to the United States, hoping against hope that the adoption papers would be done and our family could leave. Would she be in court, in jail, still out in this remote village trying to claim this kid? Would everything change? Would it be necessary to make a trip to Salvador? The woman looked at Margi as she held onto Gilberto’s other arm. Gilberto was mad and scared. He looked at Margi expectantly.

Margi’s adrenalin and fury raced. She was “practiced” in angry retorts these days. She was becoming habitually short on temper with the people who were doing the most bureaucratic adoption we had ever imagined. She started with an “angry” Spanish that was always well punctuated, controlled, and very threatening to people. Margi sounded like the government incarnate, “Maam, you now have no official control over this child. The abandonment bans have been published by the Judge of Minors of the 8th District, and since they were not answered, official custody has been given to us and Gilberto is the ward of the Home of Love and Hope. Now if YOU want to end up in court or in jail because of a false claim, I will be happy to go back into town and arouse the judge to come.” The grandmother snapped back, “You can’t do that. These are my friends. They are military, and they know him.” Margi knew she was on shaky ground, and she offered a further threat, “What will happen is that all of you will be punished for allowing a Salvadoran child to live in Honduras without

immigration papers. You are in grave danger, and in worse danger for having tried to hold us here.”

Margi paused for a moment to try and figure out the woman’s motives in the midst of all of this. Did she want money from us because we are *gringos*? Was she trying to be obedient to Gilberto’s mother? Was she out for revenge against a grandson who had defied her by running away? Margi had not let her know that Gilberto was about to be adopted by us. His leaving the country would have set up another dynamic, the one Margi most feared. The woman might decide Gilberto was worth pursuing because someone else wanted him, and that could lead her to blackmail, to accusing us of stealing the boy, to months of delays as the courts got around to deciding whom to believe. She interrupted Margi’s thoughts, “I am responsible to the mother for him. He ran away. I want to hold him here until I can contact the mother.” Margi seized on the opportunity. “That is fine. I will have the Judge of Minors of Tegucigalpa contact her. Tell me how you communicate with her. How soon can we reach her? Which radio station do you use?” (Most *campesinos* communicate in emergencies by public broadcast radio.)

She changed the subject, which brought Margi to believe she really didn’t communicate with the mother at all. She added, “But I don’t even know who you are! Where is this place in Tegucigalpa?”

Something in Margi moved her to be cautious in this situation. She thought it best to protect Gilbert by not informing the grandmother about the orphanage or where Gilberto could be found. Margi intuitively disliked and feared this lady, and she did not want her to pursue her chase. The orphanage staff had worked through several cases of kidnap allegations and extortions, even after courts

gave us exclusive custody because of abuse. This was sure to be one of those cases. She somehow trusted that the woman would not use extortion. This was a simple *campesino* lady to whom money and possessions were meaningless. But there was something strange going on between her and the mother and the possession of Gilberto. Margi did not want to be in the middle of it; she wanted to be years away from this mess. Margi clearly stated our rights to the boy, "Because we have been given custody, the only way you can find Gilberto in the city is to go to the Judge of Minors." Margi then gave her the address, realizing the judge would not help her locate Gilberto. She wondered if they were now free to leave, her heart still racing.

She tested the waters, "We must go." The grandmother balked, "But I will not let him go. He stays with me until the mother comes here." One explanation was never enough for Hondurans. You had to go through it lots of times—the same thing over and over—just to make sure. And so Margi repeated what she had said about custody, not quite so emotionally this time, for she felt she had spent her energy and that she was winning her case. At least Margi had convinced herself with her masterpiece of an argument. She also no longer feared these very macho men who were posing as military. The grandmother listened and asked again who Margi was. Margi was irritated that she didn't understand. Would she lose this whole thing because she couldn't make herself clear to a *campesino* woman? In her fright and confusion, Margi fumbled in her purse and to find one of our business cards. Amid the pile was also a business card that belonged to an adoption agency in Elgin, Illinois. We had met the representative a few weeks before on his visit to Honduras to look for adoptive children. She picked it out and handed it to the grandmother, who looked at it carefully and seemed satisfied. It was obvious that she could not read. Margi could always tell that look in peoples'

eyes. Even if she could read, the English and the form of business cards would be little more than a security measure for her. Later, she would show it to someone else. The thought of the man in Elgin rushed into Margi's mind. Then she made her move, and she and Gilberto quickly left.

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On the path to the road, Gilberto wanted to run. He wanted Margi to hurry, to gallop, anxiously looking back to see if they would chase after him.

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Once in town, he was no less perturbed. He wanted to hide until the bus left. The boy kept asking how long before they would leave the area. He kept telling Margi not to believe her. She would change her mind and send people after me. "Could she find me in the United States?" he asked. Margi wondered how well that child would sleep during the following nights.

When they got back to Tegucigalpa, both were exhausted. Margi put Gilberto and Marty to bed, and then left to find a co-worker from *El Hogar* with whom to share the story. She talked on and on with me into the night. "That could have been the story of any one of our 100 boys," we decided. How precious is a life, how much out of our own hands!

Gilberto surely will return to his own people eventually. I am not sure when he will be ready, but I do know that he will need to repeatedly open those wounds of childhood. The terrors and hurts of the past visit us all. We wonder when we as adoptive parents might be heaping new hurts onto old. Parenting is truly a dance with life.

18

Tours

by accomplished guides

Children with no connections to families make family out of what they have.

Usually I loved to stop whatever I was doing with the children and talk to visitors from the States. They were my lifeline to reality. But this day I was badly in need of time in the office without interruptions, and so I asked Roger to give the usual tour to an elderly U.S. nurse visitor who



had just called from a downtown hotel and asked if she could come to see what El Hogar was.

Roger frowned. He was twelve, and he knew how embarrassing it was when I made him use his twenty-word English vocabulary. I had set up a whole English class based on the one sentence variation: "Do you want to see the kitchen?" "Do you want to see the rabbits?" "Do you want to see the library?" "Do you want to see the goats?" But close behind Roger was Emilio, the "ham". He would volunteer, "I'll do it, I'll do it." And so it went. Emilio was only seven, knew not a word of English. He simply took the lady's hand and walked. I watched them walk through the kitchen. I watched them come out. I saw Emilio open the door of the tool shed and they went in. I went back to my work chuckling! A half hour later the lady came back, the tour finished. She told me with tears in her eyes that she could not have had a more precious guide. I knew she had been exposed to every bathroom, every closet and the inner workings of the chicken coops. She had mud on her shoes but a delight in her voice. She had experienced a boy proud of everything his home could show her. She had not needed my statistics about homeless children, details of our approach to rehabilitation, or the finances of running such a program.

Tailored tours

After a few more months of trial and error, it became the vogue to be a GUIDE at El Hogar. The boys would always get out of class or work to do a tour. They would get special attention, and that was worth anything. They would speak in Spanish, and our guests would have folders in English to read along. It was like a guided nature trail; there were fifteen stations to show visitors. It

wasn't that we wanted to avoid the tool shed and the closets. Rather, there were aspects of the facility we didn't want them to miss. High on our list of priorities were things like the handprints in cement outside each dorm which showed that the boys had helped to build their own dwellings, the irrigation system we had set up in the gardens, the water we caught from the roofs, the compost piles, the Shepherd-Sheep certificates that designated older boys taking responsibility for the little ones, the merit board that showed daily progress in class and self control, and the duty lists that proved that we cleaned, cooked, washed and sewed every day.

If the tour group was big, we sometimes welcomed them with the marching band at the gate, put on a program which included Honduran dances, or presented them with woven bracelets made by the kids. But most of all, I loved it when we ended in the little tree chapel. The guests and their El Hogar guides would be invited to come up and reflect. We all climbed the ladder and entered the 15-foot round, bamboo chapel and sat to talk and pray.

The chapel is interesting. We had designed the building like a Mongolian yurt. There was a simple cross hanging from the cone-pointed ceiling, a burl slab for an altar in the middle, and a pendant of the Holy Spirit to commemorate the parish who had donated \$3000 for its construction. Their priest had come to visit and asked the boys: "Where do you go when you want to talk with God?" One boy told him he climbed a tree on the property and sat on a branch. That was the start of the tree chapel, built by the boys and a volunteer, and later blessed by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. The newspaper reported, "High church blessing by high church prelate."

Tour groups become listeners

The kids somehow knew it was safe in the chapel to let the hurt out. I would ask the visitors to share any reflections they had about their visit, or to ask the boys, via translators, any questions they had—personal or otherwise. The boys often expressed that they felt blessed as they heard how people loved this Home and all it stood for. When asked any personal question, they would typically begin to tell their whole story...rejection, loss, hunger, the “bad things” they had done to survive, and ended with the “good things” that were now happening to them. Reclaimed lives made God very tangible for those who spoke and for those who listened.

Often events happened with visitors that no amount of planning could have engineered. If visitors were with us on Sunday, they joined us for worship at the big church. They heard boys read and could recognize the Scriptures in both languages. Our guests joined them in boisterous singing, for to sing with that many animated boys is verily to dance. They got and gave hugs. They often said they somehow knew what the boys were saying when they stood before the group and asked God for what they needed. After Church, many boys went out for the afternoon. They jumped on city buses and scurried all over the hillside barrios of the city to find their foster families or a relative—and perhaps even a parent who longed to see a son now cared-for, healthy, and being educated. If there were adventuresome gringos with us, I would ask the boys to invite them along.

Tours of real life suffering

It was this kind of Sunday afternoon visit that brought a visiting dentist to Frenky’s mother, dying of

breast cancer without any medical help or sanitation. I went with them, for I was delivering some morphine that a doctor friend had passed on to me one day, saying, prophetically, “You’ll find a use for this some day.” It was very hot, very dusty dry, and Frenky led us into a stench filled suffocating hut where hundreds of flies were attacking the woman’s open, pus-filled breast. She moaned in painful response as her own mother knelt beside her and prayed a litany, “Mother of God, deliver us.” We asked them not to stop the prayer, but they did, and I wondered if the morphine I was about to give would desecrate. Poor people were not afraid of death or pain, I thought. Rich people with medicine can make us well, they must have thought.

Frenky’s mother died a month later at Christmas. Dr. Willhide, the dentist, his family, and his church paid for the burial, food for the rest of the family, and a sponsorship for Johnny, the littlest boy who joined Frenky at El Hogar. Now, as I sit at the bedside of a dying cancer or AIDS patient through the Hospice program, with morphine fed intravenously by pumps, I notice a hospital-like cleanliness in the home. The impressions all meld together. We sit before suffering. We ponder being sons and daughters of the God who would have us work together here on earth.

The boys at El Hogar take us by the hand to show us what happens when people work together. Emilio or Roger, Frenky or any other of a hundred boys could have taken us on a tour to show us suffering besides hope and joy.

The importance of birth country visits

Adoptive parents often have a visit with the birth parents of their child during their visit to the country. Many of them begin to see, or touch upon, life through the eyes of another. The memories and the emotion overwhelm them.

They wonder if they should tell their growing adopted children what they saw. Others read the story on paper when they finally see the abandonment or relinquishment decrees or read the social worker reports. They wonder what will happen when or if their daughter of ten or twelve years of age reads it, too. Those who arrange for their adolescent children to travel back to their native countries have many of the same doubts. I often refer back to a biblical phrase I never quite understood when I was young, "And Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." Now the meaning comes clearer. Just as I, as a parent, keep all of the past of my adopted children's horrors in my heart, they, too, have the right to have them in their hearts.

but never final words

Our experience in Honduras taught us to look at the world through some other eyes than those of European history, European questions, European assumptions, and European culture. This is not to say that these are wrong assumptions and questions, but that they are limited. They are one set among many. Adoptions of children from abroad give us the opportunity to see through African eyes, Asian eyes, or Latin eyes and to ask a different set of questions about our world. We live in the world age, becoming a global village. What this is asking and demanding of us all is still unknown.

We left Honduras, after nine years abroad, not wanting to leave, but also not wanting to build empires unto ourselves as founders. As we returned to the United States, we thought we would be "international" in our thinking, for we had had time enough to learn to straddle both cultures and to see things through other points of view. As we returned, we expected to experience reverse culture shock, and of course it happened. For example, we could not play the game "Trivia" because we had missed most of the trivial happenings of the last ten years. We always cooked Honduran food when we had guests over because we had no idea how to use fast foods elegantly. We felt lonely, "out of it;" we knew people were simply listening to us with a polite ear when we talked of our adventures. We had something close to panic attacks in big department stores or supermarkets where the choices were simply overwhelming. Margi felt comfortable making household purchases at garage sales and food purchases at farmers' markets. People gave us

clothes for our kids and bits and pieces of furniture for our house, and we felt better not "buying new."

Within a few months we could say that on the surface we had adjusted to living in the United States, at least in terms of the consumerism, customs, and the popular culture. However, continuing, even today, to tug at us were the two haunting refrains: "We are responsible to all of the worlds, first through fifth," and "The things, people, job, and milieu we choose to surround ourselves determines how free we are to serve and make a difference." Those refrains cut right to the quick, to decisions as significant to our lifestyle as not wanting high salaried jobs, or as small as resisting looking at the catalog "wishing books" or ads on TV.

Is the future of the world identical with the future of western democracy, medicine, and economics? Our unconscious self-interest and our own definition of success can prevent us from hearing the wisdom of other cultures, and this is the source of much suffering in the Developing World. If we support the status quo because we enjoy the fruits of it or because of an endless desire for control and dominance, then life freezes. And, as Desmond Tutu says, "...to plead neutrality is always to take the side of the oppressor."