

Spring 2008

**“If human love does not carry a man beyond himself, it is not love. If love is always discreet, always wise, always sensible and calculating, it is not love at all. It may be affection, it may be warmth of feeling, but it lacks the true nature of love.”**

Oswald Chambers

To the many who have cared,

Living in Guatemala, I have witnessed a level of human suffering I never imagined I'd ever see. Moreover, the life I'd known prior to coming to Guatemala had done little to prepare me as to how I might respond to such pain. I was not aware at the time to what degree my life would be spent caring for others. Yet when one is faced on a regular basis with people who are struggling with hardship of every conceivable sort, it is all but impossible not to feel compelled to do something to alleviate their suffering.

My willingness to care has been tested for all it is worth. I have been called on to help both strangers and loved ones alike, often with such frequency and such intensity that I felt utterly depleted, left with nothing more to give. During such times I asked myself why do we care? Why do we need to care? What would happen if we stopped caring? I do not pretend to have all of the answers to these questions, but I have gained some understanding at least for myself.

I believe we care because the wellbeing of our humanity depends on it. At the heart of the nature of being human lies the capacity to look beyond our own needs and concern ourselves with the needs of others. When we exercise our compassion, we not only connect with our humanity, but also protect and nurture it, helping to ensure its very survival.

To be sure, there are other benefits to be reaped from being kind to others, for example, the pride and satisfaction that often follows doing a good deed. Still I have found that genuine caring has no expectations of receiving anything in return. If we give of ourselves seeking to be compensated, we tarnish the act of caring, corrupting its intent while robbing it of its meaning. The beauty of its true nature is lost. I could talk with you of the countless times I've been given the chance to care, but one in particular stands out.

Christmas can be a difficult time for some of our youngsters. Like many here who struggle around the holidays, their memories of former Christmases are filled with sadness and lonely times spent without a loving family. Their first Christmas with us can be all but unbearable. In many cases the young men are confronting their past for the first time without drugs to block the pain which always comes back to haunt them.

José, a 16 year old who came to us last year in early November, was such a case. As the holidays approached I watched him closely, searching for a sign that he was struggling. Sure enough late one afternoon just before Christmas, José became ornery and picked a fight with one of the other boys. I led him to a quiet place so that we could talk in private. “What happened?” I began knowing full well what had caused the problem.

“It was his fault,” José responded seething with anger, refusing even to acknowledge the other boy’s name. “He provoked me. He was looking for trouble.”

The truth was José was the one who was looking for trouble, wanting to give me reason to turn him out onto the street. José could no longer manage his rage and despair without drugs. He needed his crutch. I presented him with this possibility, choosing my words carefully, not wanting to anger him further. But José refused to consider that he might be looking for an escape and insisted that it was best to send him away. Our conversation continued for the better part of an hour, José not budging in the belief that he would be better off living in the street. Then all at once he cracked. The rage that had been controlling him suddenly gave way to the grief that had been behind it. “I’m no good,” he sobbed. “It’s a waste of your time and of mine to continue. I haven’t changed and I never will. I’ll never be any good.”

“I don’t agree,” I said softly but with conviction, trying to show him he might be wrong while at the same time letting him know that I was on his side. “I’ve known you for close to two months now, and I think you’re a good kid. I honestly do.” “Then why haven’t I done anything with my life,” he countered quickly. “Because you haven’t had the chance to do so,” I said. “If that’s so, then why doesn’t my family want anything to do with me?” José pleaded choking on his words. “Why don’t they care about me? Why don’t they love me?”

We had now come to the heart of the matter. José’s family has had little to do with him. His mother in particular, has rejected him since he was a small child. “I don’t know,” I answered honestly, “it makes no sense to me. Again it seems like you’re a good person.”

“I’m sorry George, but you’re wrong,” José insisted. “If my family thinks I’m useless, it must be so. They must have reason to feel that way.”

“Perhaps they are mistaken,” I continued to choose my words carefully not wanting to offend Jose by insulting his family. “No George, they would know,” he shook his head in disagreement. “They would know.”

We continued to discuss the possibility that Jose was not the lost cause he and his family believed he was. After a while Jose began to consider that the life he had previously known did not have to be the life that was yet to be. “Do you really think I can change,” he asked cautiously? Up until that moment I had kept a distance of a couple of feet between us, sensing that José had needed some space. Feeling it was safe to do so, I eased closer to José and rested my arm on his shoulder. “I honestly do,” I answered. “In fact, I have no doubt.”

We continued to talk until dinner. There were moments when we fell quiet and sat in silence, yet still remained engaged. Jose finally acknowledged that he had been desperate to return to the street in search of drugs. They had been his closest companion in recent years, seeing him through many a difficult time. I offered him an alternative. “José, if you are ever sad or lonely, if you ever just need someone to talk with, let me know. Even if it’s in the middle of the night, call me. I’ll come right over. I promise.” “Really?” José still needed to be reassured. I gently lifted his head, which had been downcast through most of our time together. Looking him directly in the eye, I answered his question, “Really.” José improved significantly after that. He not only stayed to spend Christmas with us, but also managed to enjoy it.

It seems to me that we need to care because we are nourished not only by what we take in, but also by what we give out. We care because in doing so we make a statement both to ourselves and to the world, affirming first our own worth and then the value of all life as well.

On most evenings, it is customary for me to be in the shelter with our youngsters. Like many a family, we spend our time relaxing together, watching TV, or enjoying a game of ping-pong or Parcheesi. At 7:00pm we gather for dinner in the dining room. Usually by 9:00 I leave for my apartment, tired but contented, ready to call it a day. On one particular night, I returned home not yet ready to turn in. The evening at the shelter had been a memorable one, filled with good will, good cheer and good conversation. We had lingered at the table long after dinner to enjoy each other’s company.

Now back in my apartment, I stepped to the bedroom window. Due east the city rested some three miles away. My eyes focused on the lights dotting a hillside on the far side of the city. Suddenly I felt at one with the world. Drifting into reflection I realized that, in and of itself, my life was an all but invisible speck lost among the countless other specks that had ever been or would ever be. It might seem that such a realization would have filled me with despair, but it had the opposite effect. I was filled with joy and a level of peace that I have not experienced at any other time in my life. For at that moment I also grasped that my life was a tiny but important part of something far greater. I was able to see that in essence we are all one, countless members of one collective soul, and *that* is what ultimately gives our lives their meaning.

This understanding has led me to conclude that it is our responsibility to watch over both our local communities and the world at large. By taking care of others, we also best take care of ourselves. We reach out to others when they are hurting so that they may know the love of God that lives in us and through it, find comfort and healing.

Not long ago I recalled my conversation with José and thought to myself this is why Only A Child exists. This is why we need to continue our work in Guatemala. My thanks to you for continuing support us so that we can be there not only for José, but for all of the 'José's' who come to us looking for someone to care.

Sincerely,

George

P.S. If you have already seen our enclosed flyer, you know that our annual fund raiser is coming up on Saturday, April 5<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 pm. Our fund raiser remains an important and necessary event, as it continues to make possible so much of the work we do, the kind of work that matters so much in lives like Jose's. Please plan to be with us on the evening of the 5<sup>th</sup>. Your presence means more to me than I could say, but if you cannot attend, please support the event as best you can. Thank you. If you have any questions, please call me at 781 642-9317.