

Fall 2009

To the many who have cared,

In recent letters, I have touched on matters that are common to us all, regardless of where we were born, be it the relative safety of the suburban U.S. or a crime-ridden barrio in Central America. These are the issues that have troubled humanity for centuries and will continue to haunt us for as long as we exist. They are the *big ones*: the need to create our place in the world, the need to find meaning and purpose for our lives; the search for love; the death of a family member and the struggle to heal and survive the loss. In an effort to help you to better understand how such issues play themselves out in present day Guatemala, I have attempted to place them in the larger context of living in a country still trying to find its footing after being immersed in a brutal civil war, which lasted the better part of a half century.

Our summer letter told of the efforts of Manolo to come to terms with the death of not only his aunt, but also an older brother whom he had never known. Death has continued to hit close to home at Only A Child. Two of our other youngsters suffered difficult losses. Jose recently lost his much-loved 15-year-old sister to kidney disease. Not too long ago, Hansel's mother succumbed to a lengthy battle with ovarian cancer. Then in mid-July, Hansel was dealt a second, more devastating blow. His girlfriend Edith was repeatedly stabbed and killed by a former boyfriend as she returned home from work one evening. The former boyfriend did not act alone. His 2 brothers, as well as 2 of his friends assisted him. Sadly, such attacks on young women are not uncommon in present day Guatemala.

In the case of Edith, she had left her former boyfriend upon learning that he had been unfaithful. Despite the fact that his infidelity had caused the demise of their relationship, the former boyfriend not only refused to accept responsibility for his actions, but also Edith's right to decide that she no longer wanted to be with someone she couldn't trust. He repeatedly threatened to harm her if she did not return to him. Edith's parents were planning to send her away secretly to live with family at the time of the attack. An uncle of Edith's had been accompanying her to and from work and was with her when she was killed. But the assailants overwhelmed him, and his efforts to save her proved futile. The uncle was seriously hurt and spent 3 weeks in the hospital recovering from his injuries, which included 2 broken ribs and a broken arm.

Hansel did not learn of Edith's death until the following afternoon, although he suspected something was wrong. Edith had been calling him every evening, to let him know she had returned safely home. When he failed to hear from her the day before, Hansel became worried and called her late into the night. Efforts to contact Edith's parents were also unsuccessful. Hansel called me from work upon learning of the murder. He was extremely distraught, and I was unable to calm him to the point where I could understand what he was trying to tell me. I would not learn of what had happened until several hours later, when Hansel returned home and we spoke in private. The news left me stunned, but it also infuriated me. It wasn't just that the murder was senseless, but also that it was carried out in such a despicable and cowardly manner.

In Guatemala, there is little time to prepare for the rituals that follow the death of a loved one. Embalming is not customary so, if someone dies early-Monday, they will likely be waked later that same day and buried the next morning. The entire process passes very quickly, depriving the family of the deceased the chance to deal with their loss until well after the burial.

On the morning in early-April when Hansel's mother passed away, I spoke with our youngsters while they were at work at our carpentry shop. I not only wanted to give them the news, but also discuss the possibility of their attending the wake and funeral with me. I felt it was important that we come together to support Hansel as he grieved. It seemed that the presence of his friends within the program would have added meaning for him. Our youngsters not only agreed, but also genuinely wanted to be there for Hansel in his time of need.

The waking of a person generally begins late-afternoon and continues uninterrupted throughout the night and into the morning, until the family and those gathered with them leave for the cemetery where the deceased will be buried. We arrived at the church where Hansel's mother was being waked just after 6 P.M. A modest gathering of family and friends stood in small groups and talked quietly among themselves. Hansel sat to the side of the church with Edith, looking sad but at peace. He had been by his mother's side often during the final weeks of her illness, and had used most of his salary to help offset the cost of her care, incurring significant debt as a result.

I sat down next to Hansel. Our youngsters pulled up chairs and gathered around us. We expressed our sorrow at the death of his mother. Hansel was clearly pleased to see us. The time passed slowly, as it often does at wakes. By eight o'clock I thought it would be okay for us to leave. The night was taking hold in earnest, and as the wake was being held in a somewhat dangerous area, I felt it would be unwise to further delay our journey home. Hansel walked us to the ancient S.U.V. that has seen us through many an important event over the years.

We returned to the church the next day, a few minutes before ten. Not long after, we were asked to move to our cars, to wait for the procession to depart. Most people cannot afford to buy and maintain a car in Guatemala, so it is customary for the family to rent a bus to provide transportation to the cemetery. The procession is usually organized in the following manner: the hearse, the immediate family, the rented bus and finally, those with privately owned cars. Our S.U.V. filled the final spot, both among the privately owned cars and in the overall procession.

The poor, who represent the vast majority in Guatemala, are buried above ground, in mass tombs, stacked 8 high and 4 to 5 across. The space is rented on a yearly basis, and if the family is unable to pay the fee, the remains of their loved one are removed and thrown into a mass grave. Upon reaching the cemetery, we huddled around the spot where Hansel's mother was to be laid to rest. Several abandoned niches nearby pocked the tomb, waiting for other families to rent their space. The sight of their emptiness left me feeling lonely.

I found my place next to Hansel, on his right side, and placed my arm over his shoulder. Edith was to his left, holding his hand. Hansel cried softly, a low, unbroken moan. His companions from Only a Child stood nearby, their heads bowed. The church's pastor offered prayers, while many present quietly prayed along with him. At prayers end, the casket was lifted and gently slid into the tomb. All flowers were also placed inside, around the casket. A pair of masons, who had been patiently waiting, stepped forward and, one brick at a time, began to seal the tomb. It is a custom which shocked me when I first witnessed it several years ago, as I imagined that the finality of having the tomb sealed before their eyes must be wrenching for some of the loved ones. It is not unusual for family members to break down at this point, but the sealing of the tomb continues uninterrupted nonetheless. It can be very difficult to watch.

Hansel planned to spend the remainder of the day with his family. While riding back to the carpentry shop, the youngsters and I took the time to share our thoughts and feelings. It had been difficult for some, but no one regretted the decision to attend the wake and funeral. Although it was not spoken, I sensed that our youngsters were proud of what they had done. I felt proud of them as well.

Hansel's girlfriend Edith was born in Jutiapa, a department several hours outside of the capital. Although she had lived in Guatemala City for 10 years, Edith's family decided to lay her to rest in the place of her birth. Hansel chose not to attend the funeral, not due to the distance, but rather, because Edith's parents had blamed him for her death. They reasoned that if Hansel had not become close with Edith, her former boyfriend would not have killed her. Hansel shared this with me when we spoke in private, on the day that we had learned of Edith's death. I was angry that they would say such a thing, knowing how much added grief his sense of guilt would cause Hansel. I had to let him know how much I disagreed. "That's absurd, Hansel. It isn't true. Edith's boyfriend would have killed her anyway. He could not accept the fact that she left him. It was a blow to his pride. He did not respect a woman's right to make such a decision. He did not value Edith's life. Even if Edith had not been seeing you, she would not have returned to him, and that is what he couldn't handle."

"But her family believes that I am responsible." Hansel was still troubled.

"Perhaps," I continued. "But they are mistaken. They responded very slowly to the situation. Edith's former boyfriend had been threatening her for 8 months. Her parents should have taken steps to protect her much more quickly. I imagine that, on some level, they know that now, but are not yet able face their guilt. That's why they are blaming you. Try to understand, Hansel. It must be horrible for them."

"Yes, I suppose so." Hansel considered what I had said. "But I hope they won't continue to believe that I was responsible for Edith's death."

"Me too, Hansel. I hope that they will be able to accept the truth." Several days later, Edith's parents did recognize their mistake, and apologized to Hansel.

Following the news of Edith's death, Hansel spent 3 days in bed, inconsolable, at times sobbing uncontrollably; sleep offering the only escape from his grief. I would talk with him when he was awake, then pull up a chair and sit quietly next to his bed, while he slept. It somehow felt right. The following Monday morning Hansel returned to work and gradually seemed to improve. But as the one-month's anniversary of Edith's death approached, Hansel regressed, and apart from working, returned fulltime to his bed. I knew I needed to talk in private with him once again. "Hansel, I'm worried about you. You seem to be getting worse. You're sleeping all the time. You don't come to dinner. You're not eating."

Hansel rubbed his eyes, trying to shake the lingering remnants of sleep. "I know but..."

I waited for Hansel to finish the sentence, but he did not, so I continued. "I know that you lost Edith under terrible conditions. You'll need time to heal. It will not be easy, I won't lie to you. But you cannot give up, Hansel. Edith died, but you are still alive. And although you may wish it were otherwise your life will continue. You can decide to try and walk away from your life or choose to work with it, so that together you can find a way to cope with what has happened."

Hansel placed his head in his hands and began to cry. "I feel like I've lost my future. We were planning to get married next year to begin our lives together. We were saving to buy furniture. We had plans and now I've lost everything. I have no future anymore."

"Your future has changed profoundly Hansel, but you still have one. You have to find the strength to go on with your life. Edith wouldn't want you to suffer this way. She wouldn't want you to stop living because she had died. She wouldn't want that for you."

"I know," Hansel reluctantly agreed. "but I feel so alone."

"But you're not alone. You have a family here. The others value your friendship and care about you. They want to help. You have so many resources right here to help you deal with your pain. But you're refusing to

use them. You are pushing us away. God is watching over you, Hansel. He is taking care of you. He hasn't forgotten you."

"It's true, but..." Once again, Hansel was at a loss for words.

"It's not like it was before you came to us. You're not alone." (Before entering Only A Child, Hansel lived by himself in a rented room. His loneliness was so great that, several months into the arrangement, Hansel stopped eating and became anorexic.)

Hansel nodded his head in agreement and whispered "si" but his yes lacked conviction.

"I want you to start to come to dinner Hansel." Hansel winced in response. "I know you don't feel like it, but yes you have to. You're not going to begin to feel better unless you make the effort to feel better. You've got to find the will to take care of your life." Hansel joined us for dinner that night and has come to the table every night since we spoke, nearly 2 weeks ago. He still returns to his room after dinner on most nights, but he remains awake. And with each passing day he lingers a little longer at the table, talking with me and the others. Just the other night, I heard the sound of Hansel's laughter coming from the kitchen, a sound I hadn't heard for quite some time.

When I first traveled to Central America, I imagined that my life would be challenging in ways I could not yet comprehend. It has proven to be true. Hardship can be unrelenting here. Heartbreak seldom takes a holiday, and sometimes strikes with such frequency and force that it can feel almost unbearable. But I have learned a good deal about human resiliency, and our ability to carry on and even prevail against the worst kind of adversity. Life in a country like Guatemala can sometimes seem like a foe. Therefore, it would be easy to become disheartened and embittered by the seemingly constant battle to not let life get the best of you during its most trying moments. But time and time again, I have seen people here not only manage in the middle of such difficult circumstances, but also find the ability to respond admirably and even courageously. My Guatemalan friends and family have taught me and inspired me to face my own challenges with courage and resolve.

I trust and hope that Hansel will not only survive his recent tragedy, but also with time, gradually rebuild his life and once again find happiness. If Hansel does in fact someday feel that he has healed, it will be, in good part, due to the concern and support of his Only A Child family. Hansel is no longer living alone in a rented room. He has a home with us. And if Hansel is able to once again find happiness it will also be, in good part, due to the concern of each of you. For if you did not care about Hansel and his companions, if Only A Child was not here for them, they would, most likely, all be alone in one way or another.

But perhaps Hansel said it best in a letter he wrote to me 2 years ago, after graduating from high school. In closing the letter Hansel stated, "What I want most for my future is to better myself everyday and continue with my studies...But the most important thing to do at this time is to thank Only A Child for the chance to change my life and to also thank all of the people who have given, so that all of us here can go forward with our lives and our dreams. You will always have a place in my heart, even though I will never meet you."

Amen. God bless.

George

P.S. Given the current economic environment, we have decided to forego our annual pledge drive this year. However for the first time in our history, we closed our fiscal year in June 2009 with a significant deficit, therefore please make every effort to support us to the best of your ability. If you would like to become a monthly sponsor, please contact me personally at: onlyachild@aol.com.

P.P.S. We will print Hansel's complete letter in the next issue of our email newsletter. If you do not already receive it, please send your email address to onlyachild@aol.com to be added to our mailing list.