

Spring 2009

“We have been created to love and be loved.” Mother Teresa

To the many who have cared,

Life, as it plays itself out in Guatemala City, is a challenge to put it mildly. The city is overcrowded, leaving it noisy, polluted and tense. Poverty and the neglect that accompanies it have left the downtown area and many of its surrounding neighborhoods crumbling with disrepair. Crime-related violence, which is an ever more common occurrence, make the simple act of leaving your home a risky proposition. Worse still, assaults on public buses happen with such frequency that for those who ride them daily, it is all but a matter of time before they are robbed usually at gunpoint.

Being immersed in such a hostile environment can take its toll on you. Fear and suspicion breed and even thrive under such conditions. It can be difficult to trust a stranger when danger awaits you at every turn. One easily falls into the habit of watching those who cross your path with a wary eye, even as you understand that most people mean you no harm. Suspicion creates division. Division leads to isolation, leaving a person feeling disconnected and at times alone.

Although I remain a foreigner in Guatemala, I have lived here for many years and am no longer a stranger to this land. Yet it remains difficult to not get discouraged at times. Given the nature of my surroundings, I often find it necessary to call on every resource at my disposal to find the courage and strength to carry on.

Such conditions only serve to compound the struggles of those living in the street. In Guatemala the homeless, children and youngsters included, are largely ignored and mostly forgotten. They exist on the margins of their society and as a result, are prone to feel that their lives matter little. Loneliness is commonly their closest companion. Despair follows them like a shadow.

When a youngster enters our shelter, he comes looking to escape such isolation, cautiously trusting that with our support, he will leave the streets once and for all. A youngster turns to us for companionship and acceptance, as he searches for a place to belong, as he hopes to find a home. But the process of rebuilding a life is not a simple one. Life in the street is a matter of survival. It is reduced to meeting the challenges – and there are many – of making it through another day. Surviving trumps living and as a result, the distinction between them is often blurred, leaving one to believe that surviving and living are one and the same.

At a certain point I ask a new arrival to talk with me of his dreams for the future. My question is often met with a confused look and the question, "What do you mean?" Their response is logical really. Life in the street has been their enemy. It has battled them at every turn, offering mostly hardship and disappointment, leaving their hearts and their spirits badly bruised, sometimes broken. The future is a daunting proposition. It is best to give it little thought. Therefore, learning to trust in a future that holds promise can be difficult, if not intimidating.

Before they can move forward with their lives, the youngsters must come to terms with their past. Once again they ask us, sometimes with words often not, to help them as they confront the pain they have long kept buried within them. Little by little, they manage to cope with all that they have suffered. They begin to learn not just to survive, but also how to live. Our youngsters find the nerve to turn to the future and dream.

If this process of building a life is to take hold and ultimately succeed, long held self images of worthlessness must be challenged and eventually changed. Many of our youngsters come to us with the lowest of self-esteem, doubting their ability to do anything constructive with their lives. Oftentimes the way others see us has a major impact on how we see ourselves. Those who matter most to us act as mirrors, reflecting back what often becomes our self-image. Given that our youngsters have largely been viewed with indifference, it is easy to see why they hold themselves in such low regard. Only A Child works to reverse such self-defeating beliefs by reflecting back to our youngsters an image that affirms their worth as human beings. They need to be shown that someone cares for them before they can care for themselves. We all need to know that we are loved.

Their healing would be left lacking if our youngsters did not, at some point, come to concern themselves with the well being of others. As imperative as it is that we know we can be loved, it is just as important that we are able to give our love in return. Otherwise our humanity never fully matures, leaving us underdeveloped and incomplete. We never become whole.

It was several years ago that this first became clear to me. I understood that if our youngsters were to become well-rounded and caring adults, they would have to develop this give and take. Their healing would not come full circle until they shared of their humanity.

I decided to provide our youngsters with the opportunity to learn this firsthand. I offered their services as volunteers at a home for the elderly and mentally ill, run by Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in Guatemala City.

We served in whatever way we were needed every Wednesday morning and early afternoon. Our tasks were many. We mopped floors, changed bedding, and washed the residents clothing by hand before hanging out to dry. It was our responsibility to serve lunch and complete all phases of the cleanup that followed. With time our youngsters took on more challenging and rewarding

responsibilities: feeding the residents who could no longer feed themselves as well as bathing and shaving those who needed such assistance.

But most of our time was spent visiting with the home's residents. We talked with them, listened to those who could still speak, or simply held their hands. It was difficult for our youngsters at first. They struggled, not only interacting with those who were mentally ill, but also with experiencing a level of intimacy that was new to them. But they adjusted eventually and became more comfortable spending time at the home. In their own way, our youngsters came to look forward to the visits. Perhaps this is why.

Upon arriving one Wednesday morning, something unexpected happened. It was a month or so into our term as volunteers. After entering the home's substantial grounds, one travels a long walkway at the end of which is a patio surrounding a statue of the Virgin Mary. At either side of the patio sits the residents' quarters, each including a fenced-in courtyard. Every week as we made our way up the walkway, we greeted the handful of residents gathered in the gardens just inside the entrance. But on that particular Wednesday morning, as we reached the patio we found a large number of the residents waiting for us at the fences surrounding the courtyards. At the sight of our youngsters they began to smile and clap as they called out to greet us. A few of the more nimble among them literally jumped for joy. I was amazed to see how happy the residents were to know that we had returned. Their welcome could not have been more heartfelt. It was nothing less than a revelation for our youngsters. I doubt anyone had ever responded to them in quite that way before. We ultimately visited Mother Teresa's home for more than two years. From that morning on, the residents never failed to be waiting to greet us warmly.

The effect of our visits was immeasurable for everyone involved. Most of the home's residents had no one to come and see them. But they knew that every Wednesday they could depend on our coming to spend time with them. They had something to look forward to. Our visits gave them hope. In return, our youngsters were made to feel like they were something special. They felt valued and respected. They saw that they were lovable, opening the door for them to begin to care for and even love themselves. Long held images of shame and worthlessness were called into question. It was possible for our youngsters to see themselves in a new light. But there was more. No matter how much we have been hurt and even broken, we still retain the ability to comfort others when they are in pain. Our youngsters learned that they too were capable of easing the suffering of another. Perhaps they could have a hand in healing themselves as well.

I have little doubt that our youngsters could empathize with the feelings of loneliness that plagued the residents of Mother Teresa's home. They knew firsthand what it meant to question your life's value and meaning. It was because of their pain, rather than in spite of it that our youngsters not only related to the residents' struggles, but also felt compelled to try and respond to them. Our youngsters were highly experienced in the school of suffering, leaving them uniquely qualified in the art of healing.

Or, as I have said to our youngsters on several occasions, it is all but impossible to escape suffering in this world. But we need not suffer in vain. For it is through our suffering that we deepen our ability to feel compassion for the suffering of others.

I first came to Guatemala seeking to ease the pain of children living in the street. Never did I imagine that they would also minister to me. But they have and they still do, all the time. I began this letter by discussing the difficulties of living in Guatemala City. Our youngsters provide me with companionship and a genuine concern for my well-being. They are my family. They lift my spirits when I am disheartened and make me laugh when I have had a trying day. My life would surely be more difficult and lonely without them. Guatemala City would probably get the best of me. But thanks to the refuge that together we have created within the walls of Only A Child, it is often possible to forget the harsh reality that awaits us just outside the door. When we are together, we are able to take leave of it, if only temporarily. But it is long enough to make a world's worth of difference. It seems, that in the end, I depend on them nearly as much as they depend on me. We have been brought together to watch over and sustain each other.

As always, I thank you for continuing to believe in our efforts to bring healing and hope to our youngsters so that they in turn may bring healing and hope to others. God bless.

Sincerely,

George

P.S. If you have already seen the enclosed flyer, you know that our annual fundraiser is coming up on Saturday, March 28th. With the current financial situation, it has never been more important that this event be successful. Please make every effort to attend as having you with us means more than I could ever say. I realize that many of you may also be struggling in the current economic crisis, but I hope that you will continue to support us as best you can. If you have any questions, you can call me at 781 642- 9317.