

Spring 2010

To the many who have cared,

“Do not turn to the god of sickness for healing, but only to the God of love, for healing is the acknowledgement of Him” (A Course in Miracles)

Everyday violence has reached a level in Guatemala where it seems that it is but a matter of time before someone you care for falls victim to it. Despite the fact that I have felt this way for several years now, those of us who call Only A Child home have managed to stay out of harms way. That is, until recently.

Our good fortune came to an end on the afternoon of December the 28th. Our youngsters had just returned to work that morning, after several days off for Christmas. Having spent the time happily together, we were eagerly awaiting the coming of the New Year. I had just returned home after completing several errands when my cell phone rang. I casually removed it from my pants pocket, in no way expecting the terrible news that awaited me at the other end of the connection.

“Hello George. It’s Marvin, “There was a pause as I waited for Marvin, the youngster who was calling me from our carpentry shop to continue. “Are you there George? Do you hear me?”

“ Yes, I’m here Marvin,” I made a determined effort to remain calm, for it was clear from the tone of Marvin’s voice that he was upset and struggling not to panic. “I’m listening. Tell me what has happened.”

“It’s Manuel. He’s been shot. They shot him.”

“Who shot him?”

“A thief. Manuel went to the store next door, to buy something to drink, and as he left the store, he was assaulted.”

The call I had been fearing for some time had finally come. I forced myself to ask the question that, more than anything, I wanted to avoid, “Is Manuel alive?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. No one is sure.”

“What do you mean you’re not sure? Why aren’t you sure?”

“He’s unconscious. And it’s difficult to tell if he is breathing.”

“Where is he now? Where is Manuel?”

“He’s lying on the sidewalk, in front of the carpentry shop.”

“And where are the others?”

“Next to Manuel.”

“What about the thief?”

“He took off after he shot Manuel.”

“Okay, Marvin, I’m on my way. I’ll be there in a few minutes. Has anyone called an ambulance?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Tell everyone to leave Manuel where he is. Don’t try to move him before the ambulance arrives. Do you understand? They might hurt Manuel if they try to move him?”

“Yes, I understand. George, I think I hear the ambulance coming.” Marvin seemed reassured by the sound of the siren wailing in the distance. His voice had lost much of its desperation.

“Marvin, I’m getting into my car. Tell the others it won’t be long before I am there.”

I drove as quickly as I could without becoming reckless, and pulled up to the carpentry shop just moments later. But there was no sign of Manuel or his companions.

The ambulance was also nowhere in sight. A crowd of curious neighbors and passers by lingered around the spot where Manuel had been shot. A small pool of blood remained, the only visible evidence as to what had happened. The crowd parted, so that I might enter the shop. I am fairly well known in the neighborhood and they understood why I had come. Not a word was spoken between us.

I found our youngsters huddled together, just inside the shop's door, looking distraught, nervously talking among themselves. "Where is Manuel?" I asked.

"The ambulance took him away," Marvin spoke for everyone.

"So quickly?" I found it difficult to believe. I had looked at my watch when I left my apartment. It had read 2:42. It was then just 2:50.

"Yes. They were only here a few minutes. The ambulance drivers thought Manuel was dead at first. He didn't seem to be breathing. But then he groaned so they put him in the ambulance right away. Rudy went with him." Rudy is Manuel's closest friend.

"Did they say where they were taking him?" I asked.

"Yes," Marvin continued to speak. "To The Roosevelt Hospital."

My heart filled with despair. The Roosevelt is one of Guatemala City's public hospitals, and the level of care there was widely known to be suspect. I nodded my head, to show I understood but kept my concern to myself, as I did not want to further worry the youngsters. "Did anyone see what happened?" I asked.

Several of the youngsters responded, each interrupting the others. Together, they pieced together an explanation. "Manuel went to the store to buy something to drink. Not long after, we heard the sound of several *pops*, then Manuel cried out. Rudy went to see what happened first, but we followed right behind him. We found Manuel lying on the sidewalk. The thief who had shot him was taking off. He was already half way down the block. We called out for him to stop, but he ignored us. We didn't go after him because he had a gun."

It seemed that the final admission was causing the youngsters shame. They felt they had failed Manuel by not pursuing his assailant. I wanted to assure them otherwise. "You did the right thing. There was little to be gained by going after the man who shot Manuel. Others could have been hurt. To the contrary, it would have been foolish." Heads nodded in uneasy agreement, but the youngsters still doubted as to whether they had done what was best, by letting the thief escape. I moved the conversation along, "Go ahead and change out of your work clothes. Let's go home. There is no point in returning to work today."

Later that night, after dinner, we gathered in the shelter's living room, to talk about what had happened. Manuel had been taken into the emergency unit for surgery, upon entering the hospital. One of the bullets had entered his abdomen. Another had hit his right thumb. Rudy had returned home earlier in the evening, with no further news. As is usually the procedure in the public hospitals, no additional information would be made available to next of kin until the following morning. Rudy had been told that waiting in the hospital would be pointless. He had been encouraged to leave.

Not surprisingly, the mood was somber. Not only did we know nothing concerning Manuel's condition, we had no idea if he was still alive. But everyone spoke, the youngsters recalling specific details from the incident that continued to trouble them. And as each of them spoke, their companions listened with genuine concern, respecting what they had to say. We spent nearly 2 hours together, and at the end of that time, I felt that everyone believed they had been heard. Not only had the gathering achieve its intended goal, which was to offer comfort as needed, it also helped to bring us closer together.

I had asked the staff to be with us that night. As we left the living room, I spoke with our psychologist, Luis Alfredo, in private, "Is there anything else we should do?"

"No," Luis Alfredo shook his head. "I think it is best to simply let everyone go to their rooms. It's late and the youngsters might need some time to think before they sleep."

"It's going to be a long night, not knowing how Manuel is. Any chance the hospital will call with an update?"

Luis Alfredo considered my question for a moment, "No. Not unless Manuel passes away during the night. Whose number does the hospital have?"

"Rudy gave them the number to my cell phone. Honestly, Alfredo, I don't know how I'll respond if that call comes through. Can I call you if I need to?"

"Of course. Don't give it a second thought. "

"Thank you."

The night passed slowly. I spent it restlessly, sleeping in short spurts. I kept my cell phone on the night stand and my Bible by my side in bed, so though it would be readily available to give me comfort if need be. Each time I awoke, it was with a feeling of dread that the phone might ring at any minute. But the call never came through, and later the next morning, just before 10, we learned that Manuel has survived his surgery and was in stable condition. But nearly a yard worth of his intestine had been removed and he would need to wear a colostomy bag for several months.

Visiting hours at the public hospitals are very limited, much like they were in the U.S. several decades ago. It was not until 2 days after he had been shot that I was able to see Manuel. He was frail and struggled to speak. Our visit lasted just 10 minutes, but nevertheless it reassured me to see that he was alive and in good spirits.

Aware that our youngsters needed to be similarly reassured, I drove to the carpentry shop after leaving the hospital. They had known I would be stopping by and came to greet me as I entered the shop, peppering me with questions as to how Manuel was getting along. I stayed with them for some time, answering all of their questions, after which we once again recalled all that had happened. It had been a trying time for us all.

Manuel spent nearly a week in The Roosevelt, after which, his physician decided that it would be safe for him to travel. We then transferred him to a private hospital, for in many ways, the care at The Roosevelt had been badly lacking. Following 3 days of observation and reliable care, Manuel was ready to come home. Manuel and I entered the shelter on a Wednesday early afternoon. Walking through the front door, I felt relieved to know that Manuel was back with us, safe and sound. The other youngsters were at work when we returned and would not see Manuel until later that evening. They found him resting comfortably on the living room sofa, which is where he would spend the next few days. It was a very happy reunion.

In the time that has passed since he was shot, Manuel's recovery has been remarkable. Just one month after the assault, he returned to the carpentry shop, putting in half days. Two weeks after that, he was able to work full time. I have accompanied Manuel to his appointments with the surgeon who has overseen his care since he entered the private hospital. On every occasion, the surgeon has felt compelled to comment on how rapidly Manuel's healing has progressed, at times shaking his head in wonder.

I feel that Manuel's healing began in earnest on the day he returned home. And I also believe that every member of his Only A Child family had a hand in his healing. From the moment Manuel entered the shelter after leaving the hospital, he was surrounded by people who welcomed him and watched over him. They showed Manuel how much he meant with words of encouragement and words of concern, with small gestures and acts of kindness that said, without a doubt, that they cared about his life.

Just as any loving family would.

Through all that they said and did, the love of God was manifested through Manuel's companions, and that, as much as anything, was responsible for his miraculous recovery.

We live in a world that can seem to be increasingly more impersonal and lonely. Therefore, it can be easy, at times, to feel invisible and wonder if anyone cares. Such doubts are compounded when a person has grown up on the street. Still, it seems that it is possible to have a roof over your head and still feel homeless. For it is the lives we share with others, wherever we may live, that ultimately make a house a home.

It was on February the 1st of 2000 that Only A Child first opened its shelter. From the beginning, it was our desire to give all of its residents a true home. It was also our goal to provide everyone who lived in our home with a genuine family, a first for many of them. But it was clear that for this to happen, the youngsters themselves would need to play a major role in creating and caring for the family. That is why, from the moment they enter the shelter, our youngsters are taught to be responsible for the well being of their family. As such, they must contribute time and effort daily towards meeting the needs of the family, whatever they may be. In return, it gives them something to belong to, a place where they are respected and cared for, a place where they can grow and develop an identity complete with confidence and self-esteem.

Never more so than during these past 2 months has it been evident to what degree we have accomplished these goals. The experience of Manuel's shooting and subsequent healing has been challenging for every member of our Only A Child family. But it has ultimately been a triumph for us, as well. And it gives us genuine reason to recall and celebrate 10 years of offering a home to those who other wise might not have had one. Once again I say thank you, for without your support it simply would not have been possible.

Sincerely,

George