

Winter 2018

To the many who have cared,

Our sense of possibility is often grounded in what life has shown us up until that moment. Experience feeds expectation. Time and place shape the world around us as well as the conclusions we draw based on what we have seen and heard. We are, to a significant degree, the products of the neighborhoods we have walked, especially during our younger years. And the company one keeps, as much as anything, influences not only who we are, but also, who we aspire to be.

While a traditional education remains a priority at Only A Child, we also expose our residents to the invaluable lessons which only life can impart. Given their modest backgrounds, our young men have much catching up to do. The rural areas from which they come are cut off from the world at large and, as a result, limited in scope and possibility. Without exception, the moment came when it dawned on each of our young men that such was their reality. Sooner or later, that awareness was followed by an understanding that they wanted more from life than the circumstances they had known would likely afford them. That understanding brought them to our door.

Theirs is an attitude of anti-entitlement. Life has in no way led them to believe they were privileged. It wasn't even suggested. The lesson learned at an early age is that accomplishment and success are the result of hard work and self-discipline. And on the rare occasion when opportunity presents itself, should it come calling at all, one must be ready to take hold of it firmly, which is why our young men come to us prepared to not only seize the day, but more, every waking moment of it. Fate has smiled on them when they least expected, leaving our young men determined to make the most of their unforeseen good fortune.

The phenomena of suddenly nomadic people traversing entire countries in search of a new life has returned to the news in a prominent way. Like many issues of the day, it has fueled strong opinion, debate and further division. However one might feel about such immigration, there can be no doubt that the issue will not likely go away anytime soon. What sets the current wave of immigration apart from previous efforts is size and visibility. In the past, such efforts were usually measured by the dozens and led by *coyotes* or persons who smuggle Latin Americans across the U.S. border for a high fee. The journeys were ragtag, covert and perilous. Those who undertook them traveled in fear of being discovered and imprisoned, or worse. Central American immigration's present manifestation numbers in the thousands and travels down the main streets of the cities and towns it encounters en route to the U.S./ Mexican border. The journey is not only out in the open, it has been extensively reported, at least in the Americas.

For the most part, Guatemala was sympathetic to the cause of the *caravan* immigrants as they crossed this country. Food, shelter and medical care were provided by a compassionate people who readily understand the struggles faced in this area, known as Central America's Northern Triangle. Coverage in the national press was prominent and positive. For although the long-distance wandering has changed in numbers and form, the motivation driving the need for it remains the same: the immigrants journey thousands of miles under still daunting conditions to escape a kind and level of violence that can be terrifying; they leave family and home fleeing from a crushing level of poverty as well as all of the unrelenting hardship it brings. The immigrants walk away from everything, as little as it may be, hoping to find a better way of life, understanding there is no guarantee they will succeed.

I have come to believe that the main issue is not whether the U.S. government has the responsibility to welcome the caravan immigrants. In recent years, the Northern Triangle – Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala - have ranked among the 5 most violent not-at-war countries on earth. It is not unusual for them to hold the top 3 positions in the rankings, a dubious distinction if ever there was one. Corruption on a government level is often criticized, but dishonesty in the private sector is common as well, at least in Guatemala. Armed assaults remain a serious concern for the average citizen. Boarding a public bus is a risky if not life-threatening proposition. And in general, there appears to be an ever-growing disregard for the concept of law and order.

Unsurprisingly, international business is reluctant to set up shop in the Northern Triangle. Chronic instability does little to promote employment on a basic level, never mind economic prosperity. Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras are each in need of a long overdue collective examination of conscience. Amazingly enough, to the best of my knowledge, no one in Guatemala has found the gumption to begin an honest discussion confronting the situation.

When an issue remains in our national consciousness for an extended time, the citizenry tends to form unwavering opinions concerning it. As such, we tend to react rather than respond to further developments bringing fresh insight to the issue. These letters have never sought to be political, nor does this one. It merely strives to offer an impartial take on a subject on which I have a unique and hopefully worthwhile perspective, having lived decades first in the U.S., then subsequently in Guatemala. This letter seeks to promote fresh thought and renewed consideration concerning a subject that warrants our objective attention. Our humanity asks it of us.

In an effort to offer our young men a comprehensive education, I invited them to attend a book fair in July. Our time included sitting in on a discussion of a just published book. That in turn led to our beginning a modest library in our home. Books were in short supply in the public schools our youth attended. During the past 6 months, three of our residents have taken the entrance exams at San Carlos University. One of the exams focuses on reading and comprehension. Each of the young men faced the exam ill-prepared and failed it on their first try. Undaunted, we began to purchase newspapers, magazines, novels and text books containing essays accompanied by exercises to strengthen comprehension. Unfazed the young men read tirelessly late into the night, until the early hours of the next morning, on the weekend.

In October, two of our three young men passed their final exam and will commence to study at San Carlos University in January. The third still has one exam before him and will retake it soon. Reading and comprehension remains a formidable challenge for him. If he's discouraged, he does not show it.

Mission team regularly visit our carpentry shop. During a recent visit, one of our residents, Jonathan, was speaking to the team as he and companions routinely do. Jonathan is one of the young men who will enter San Carlos early next year. Jonathan, who loves to read, affirmed how much having books at his disposal in the shelter aided him in his studies. He also confided that during a recent visit with his family, he gifted his 12-year-old sister 2 books, then took the time to read with her. Jonathan loves his sister deeply and worries that she may one day become a statistic. His goal is to prevent her from becoming yet another 15-year-old girl facing an unexpected pregnancy.

Only A Child has entered a new phase in its existence. Our primary objective is to provide university level education to youth coming from predominantly rural areas and impoverished backgrounds, for they often come of age with low expectations, both of life and of themselves. Our hope is that, upon completing their studies, our graduates will return to their communities and serve as examples for other young men and woman coming of age a few years behind them. Their task will be to create a level of expectation and hope uncommon to the neighborhoods from which they come. Jonathan, it seems, already understands the importance of mentoring and has begun the process with his sister.

Fleeing Guatemala, or El Salvador or Honduras, for that matter, will do little if anything to alleviate the dire straits faced by these countries and their citizens. Change can only and must be cultivated within its borders. Only A Child remains a small but powerful seed promoting such change.

My Christian faith remains the driving force behind all I aspire to do, both for myself and for others. The life of Jesus as recounted in the gospels inspires every moral standard I set for myself. His unwavering example guides and encourages me, even in moments when I doubt I am up for the challenge before me.

Thank you for seeing us through another year, our 24<sup>th</sup>. Only A Child has continued to stand firm during the past 12 months, resisting the urge to flee challenging circumstances and difficult times, working to bring hope and opportunity to a troubled land.

Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukkah. May God bless.

George

P.S. December is a time when we generously reach out to others. Charitable organizations benefit from this spirit of giving. Only A Child continues to operate on a bare bones budget, existing one year at a time. I ask that you remember us when considering where to bestow your kindness at year's end.