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To the many who have cared,

Monday, March 17<sup>th</sup> marked the day when COVID-19 became the new reality in Guatemala. By mid-afternoon word began to spread that several people had tested positive for the virus, compelling the government to order the closing of several locations, at least one of them prominent. The message was mostly passed along by word of mouth, in hushed tones of suspicion and disbelief, as if the mere mention of the situation could bring unwanted consequences on anyone who dared speak of it. Within 24 hours, however, little doubt could linger that the Corona Virus had found its way to Guatemala, bringing with it a kind and degree of upheaval that would be the order of the weeks to come.

The changes came with stunning speed and in great numbers. By weeks end the country was in quarantine, compelled by a government issued mandate that no one leave home except for reason of absolute necessity. The border had been closed. All classes, in public and private schools, daycare through university were cancelled. Those institutions that could were urged to adapt to online classes. Social and cultural events were cancelled. Most businesses and all commercial centers were shut down. Supermarkets, pharmacies and banks were allowed to continue to function, with restrictions, as were utility, Internet and petrol-related businesses. And in a country largely dependent on the government to get around, all public transportation was halted indefinitely. On Sunday, March the 22<sup>nd</sup>, a 4 PM to 4 AM curfew was put into place, perhaps the most unexpected and unnerving restriction of all.

Closer to home, our house parents, Rigoberto and Sandra, returned to their family on Tuesday, March the 18<sup>th</sup>. The same day I moved into our shelter to watch over our youths. I had given them the option to pass the period of quarantine with family but they opted to stay at our home, so they would not fall behind with their studies. Our shelter has long possessed a computer lab and, in January, we upgraded to the highest wi-fi velocity offered for home use. It proved to be a fortuitous decision as the national system has faltered under an unprecedented level of demand. Academically speaking, the new model struggled to take hold. Schools on every level, including university, had little time to prepare for so drastic a change. For a time, online studies offered almost no direct teacher/student communication. Materials for review were submitted via a platform, to be followed by daunting amounts of homework to be completed and submitted. Actual online classes were almost non-existent.

The transition was a demanding one, especially for our University of San Carlos students. The dynamic that had long defined formal education was completely disrupted. The social aspect of study, the give and take between teacher and student, the shared environment of a classroom, the ritual of individuals coming together in the pursuit of knowledge gave way to long, long hours spent in isolation before a computer screen, processing information with little feedback or human contact. The new model left our youths emotionally and physically spent.

The nearly unrelenting demands on their time benefited them, as well, however. It left them little opportunity to dwell on an abruptly upended and uncertain future. Boredom and self-pity were kept at a safe distance. Everyone, yours truly included, remained busy and productive. Our home is blessed with a generous, second floor balcony. To help maintain spirits high, we began to eat breakfast *al fresco*, on the balcony. We also came together late afternoons to share homemade smoothies, making use of Guatemala's semi-tropical climate, and its resulting abundant and inexpensive supply of fruit. We continue both traditions to this day.

That's not to say, however, that we have not struggled at times. My house mates have not seen their families since last Christmas. Plans for them to return home for several days during Holy Week were cancelled. With travel between the country's many departments restricted, and no public transportation, there is no reason to expect they will be free to visit with family any time soon. Such knowledge has undoubtedly produced moments of despair, as did a recent end-of-the-first-semester hiatus from their studies. Unprecedented free time during the time of COVID-19 gave way to wandering thoughts, which gave way to worry and anxiety – too many worst-case scenarios to consider. The school year's second semester begins this week. Our youths will welcome it, despite the fact that classes will continue online, all semester long.

Personally, I have learned to live with constant fatigue. Moments of genuine exhaustion, combined with little time to myself, tend to make me cranky. But such moments pass after a good night's sleep and my housemates seem to understand that they are reasonable, given the present circumstances.

The past few months in Guatemala have demanded flexibility of its residents. The ability to adapt to change again and again, and then again, has proven to be of immeasurable benefit. We've had rotating curfews, one to three days of official lockdown per week, travel between the county's many departments closed, reopened, then closed again. For a time, residents over 60 years of age were under official lock down. At present those fortunate enough to own a vehicle can only make use of it three days a week, the days dependent on the last digit of the vehicle's plate – an even/odd system. All travel on Sundays is prohibited, when the country continues to be shut down.

Despite all of the government's efforts to control the spread of COVID-19 the number of people daily testing positive has more than doubled in the past two weeks. July and August are predicted to be peak months, but even so, no date has been given in terms of when we might expect a leveling off of the number of newly infected. Upon first relocating to our shelter, I expected quarantine to last two, possibly four weeks. We will soon begin week seventeen. Rigoberto and Sandra have yet to return. The proper time for them to do so has not presented itself. Even so, I do not regret my decision not to send our young men home, and to personally assume responsibility for watching over them. The goal was to keep them current with their studies, to lose no time unnecessarily. That goal has been met and, whatever is yet to come, will likely be met through the end of the school year, mid-to-late November.

Early on, Guatemalan president Alejandro Giammattei called for the country to come together in fasting and prayer on Saturday, March 21<sup>st</sup>. I immediately thought it a good idea and gathered my housemates together to inform them I would not be preparing breakfast on the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, explaining that I felt it proper that we support the initiative. I also stated that our home would be

technology free between 8 AM and 12 noon. That included no time given to homework: no laptops, no cellphones, no books other than the Bible or personal books of devotion. Time was to be spent in their rooms, in reflection, meditation and prayer. There was a somewhat tentative consensus that my decision was proper.

I chose to return to my apartment where, for years, I have begun my days quietly alone, save the company of my Maker. Saturday morning, I confidently left my housemates alone. I returned just after noon to prepare our usual Saturday morning breakfast. The house remained quiet and only came to life when we gathered at the table for lunch. Occasional, low key conversation continued throughout the meal, but there was an unmistakable air of reverence not usually found at the table, leaving me to conclude that each, in his own way, had been moved by the experience.

Upon returning to prepare lunch, I came upon one of our youths, Jonathan, at his desk, copying a verse from the Bible into a notebook. I asked if he might share it with me. Jonathan informed me that it was *Isaiah 5:9* "So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light but there is darkness, for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows."

I have never felt so isolated. The border to my home land has been closed off. I am solely responsible for watching over 9 young lives, my usual support, our Only A Child staff, in quarantine with family. Guatemala can only provide minimal social safety nets for its people. My biggest concern from the beginning has been that Department of Health would ultimately collapse under a level of demand for care that they could not meet. It is, at present, happening. As things stand, only those with life threatening symptoms can be cared for in public hospitals.

Once again, I turn to my faith, this time to help me face a strange new world that I often struggle to recognize. Once again, my faith does not fail me. I remain calm and at peace, trusting that a Higher Power watches over us all, always.

This Saturday morning tradition of fasting and prayer remains in place, at present. I have come to think of it as the godly form of solidarity. These surely are trying times for the world. Age, gender, race, creed, economic and social status, we all share the same struggle. The details may vary and some are more vulnerable than others, but the uncertainty and anxiety we face are known by one and all. No one is spared. Let this be our common ground. One world under God, indivisible...

May God bless,

*George*

George

P.S. Despite not being able to hold our spring fundraiser, your generous support of our appeal on its behalf has enabled us to continue to function while pay our staff while they are away. Even so, I expect we still face a long road ahead and therefore ask of those who can, that you please support our work at this time.