



Summer 2008

To the many who have cared,

Several blocks from our shelter, there is a public park called La Democracia, or Democracy Park – an odd choice of a name given Guatemala’s recent troubled political history. Huge in size and just restored, La Democracia contains dozens of soccer fields as well as an Olympic track, basketball courts and a baseball stadium with a field that stretches nearly 400 feet to the centerfield fence. La Democracia is most likely the largest and nicest park in all of Guatemala.

Given that we are so fortunate to have such a park so close to home, we try to make use of it as often as possible. A couple of evenings during the week we visit the park and our young men join with other youngsters to engage in pickup soccer games. Our younger boys, Bryan and the sons of Cesar and Maria, our shelter’s live-in parents, sometimes sit and watch the game. More often than not, they ask me to take them to a kids’ play area filled with swings and slides and large sand boxes.

As many of you know, our young men go to school on the weekend, participating in back-to-school programs for young adults. I spend Saturdays with the younger boys in an effort to keep them busy. We have a routine that seldom changes. I arrive at the shelter at 8:30am to gather the boys to assist me with our weekly grocery shopping. As there is much to buy, we usually return to the shelter a couple of hours later. Once the groceries are unpacked and put away, the boys and I continue on to visit La Democracia.

Most Saturdays we spend our time at the swings. But when it is especially warm, the boys prefer to go to a wooded area at the back of the park, which they call *el bosque* or the forest. El bosque fills many acres of land and its floor is covered with fallen trees and branches. It also boasts a great selection of bugs and insects, making it a pretty good place for kids to play.

Occasionally there are other families gathered in el bosque, but we usually have it to ourselves. On a recent morning, however, we arrived

to find an old man sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree. Beside him was a boy, still and quiet, looking off into the distance. The old man and I acknowledged each other with a nod of the head and a smile, but did not speak. My three companions, Bryan, Zender and Estuardo, dared a quick glance at the boy, but also said nothing. The boy for his part viewed us with disinterest mixed perhaps with a bit of fear. My boys wasted little time getting down to the business of exploring el bosque. I followed them mostly observing, but every now and then I joined them in a task such as the building of a fort using broken tree limbs and branches. The old man and the boy also moved about el bosque, but eventually returned to the fallen tree. The boy who watched my three guys on the slide began to look bored. I thought it was time to break the ice.

I approached the old man and began a conversation. He was somewhat reserved but not unfriendly. The old man lifted himself up with difficulty and came and stood by my side. He was unusually tall for a Guatemalan, not quite six feet, and very well dressed for a trip to the park in tan slacks and cocoa brown polo jersey. His skin was tanned and relatively wrinkle free given his age. His full head of silvery hair had been combed with great care. This was a man who still took pride in his appearance.

An easy warmth was quickly forged between us as our conversation continued. It drew the curiosity of the four boys who came over to listen in. Introductions were given and shortly after all of the boys went off together to play. The old man and I sat together on the fallen tree, watching the boys. With time we began to speak of more personal things. He was curious to learn how I had found my way to Guatemala. I gladly shared my story and answered his questions, then listened with equal interest as he had done for me.

As the old man spoke, I couldn't help but notice that he had a quiet self-assurance and unassuming dignity. He had a kind of bearing, a calm yet strong presence not easily found these days. It inspired respect from others. I concluded that I was in the company of a gentleman. The gentleman was eighty-two years old, and as I had imagined, retired. For many years he had held a responsible position in the Guatemalan government. He had invested his money wisely and owned a substantial property, where he rented rooms and small apartments. This allowed him to enjoy his retirement in a relatively comfortable manner.

The boy was eight years old and the son of one of his former employees. But the boy's mother had not wanted him and the father was not involved either, leaving the boy with no one to raise him.

Other members of the boy's family had approached the gentleman and asked him if he would assume responsibility for the boy's well being. Despite the fact that he was well into his seventies by then, the gentleman consented to do so. He confided in me that it was not easy for him at times and also acknowledged that in some ways that it was difficult for the boy as well. Still he assured me that he did not regret his decision to raise the boy like his son. For him there was no doubt as to whether he had done the right thing.

Lunchtime was approaching and it was time for us to leave. The gentleman was ready to go also and with noticeable embarrassment admitted that he was not sure that he could find his way back to the park's entrance. We made our way together, moving slowly to accommodate the gentleman's pace. The boys, who continued to play as we walked, stayed close by running all around us.

There are refreshment stands that sell soda, juice and light snacks set up throughout the park. It is customary for me to buy juice for each of the boys before we leave the park. I offered to treat the gentleman and his son too. He politely declined, but his son accepted my offer. Soon after we reached the park's entrance where we said goodbye and parted company.

Walking home, I couldn't help but compare my life to that of the gentleman's. We had both been called on unexpectedly to care for children not our own. Each of us had willingly taken on the challenge, knowing that in some ways it would not be opportune with regard to time, place and circumstance. Both he and I had understood that our decision to say yes would bring significant change to our lives, some of it expected, some of which we could not begin to imagine. Yet the decision had been a sure one for us, one that many years later we had not come to regret.

I have also wondered if other children and youngsters will still need my care thirty years down the road when I am in my early eighties. (Let us assume I will still be alive and reasonably healthy at that time!) God only knows and only time will tell. But I trust that if it is so, I will accept the challenge and strive to do my best. As always thanks for continuing to help Only A Child to watch over these children and young adults who have no one else to care for them. I cannot imagine taking on this task - at any age - without your support and encouragement. God bless.

Sincerely,

George