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To the many who have cared,

After months of deliberation, I decided to return to the United States in mid-June. My objectives were simple, to be vaccinated one time (Johnson & Johnson) against the Coronavirus while bringing up-to-speed numerous matters, both personal and on behalf of Only A Child. My last visit stateside predated the onset of the ongoing pandemic and I ultimately concluded that it would not be prudent to further delay my return. Still, my decision was a tenuous one that I regularly reconsidered and often times, in the middle of the night, agonized over until the eve of my 5.30 AM departure.

I have long embraced the concept of solidarity regarding my work in Guatemala. Early on, I concluded that I would need to share the lives and struggles of the population Only A Child served, if its work was to have a lasting impact. My calling was a vocation long before I came to identify it as such and understand the depth of my commitment. While I originally did not envision that, 27 years later, I would still be here, I never doubted that, however long my tenure would ultimately prove to be, my dedication to this cause would be unfailing.

By choosing to distance myself, if briefly, from those who shared my life at present, I felt I had also chosen to take a hiatus from the solidarity I had long espoused. Compounding the conflict surrounding my departure was the understanding that I hardly could have chosen a less opportune time to take leave of Guatemala. I would return to my native Massachusetts to co-exist with a population in which nearly 70 % of adults had been vaccinated against the virus. At the time of my departure, less than ½ of one percent of the adult Guatemalan population had been similarly protected.

I wrestled with a persistent doubt that I had decided to cut and run from the crisis, if only for 8 days, abandoning my Guatemalan family in the process. Try as I often did, I struggled to conclude if my decision had been made in the best interest of the program, or rather for personal benefit. Ultimately, I decided it was both. I had dedicated myself to preserving the continued existence of the program during a time of crisis, at significant cost to my physical and emotional health. To a certain degree, the wellbeing of the program is dependent upon my personal wellbeing. By looking after of myself, I would also watch out for the best interests of Only A Child.

Sixteen months' worth of taking care of business awaited me upon my return. And although I had Only A Child related matters to tend to, much of the business at hand was of a personal nature. I got to work on the night of my return, after a 13-hour journey. I began with a simple task, sorting through a cardboard box filled with personal mail, to sort the junk from the genuine. Shortly before dusk I decided to take a drive.

Route 117, heading west from my home town of Waltham, quickly turns bucolic and remains so while traveling through the affluent communities of Weston, Lincoln and finally Concord. It is a calming ride

that I had long envisioned taking while locked in Guatemala. The night was balmy and I rode with the windows down, enjoying the solitude as I mostly had the road to myself. After crossing a bridge spanning the Sudbury River in Concord, I decided to retrace my steps and head home. I turned on the radio. It was tuned to one of Boston's National Public Radio (NPR) stations. Shortly after, a story came on concerning the pandemic. It focused on the rising concerns for the deteriorating conditions in Latin America. It referred to the already widely known struggles overwhelming Brazil, Venezuela and Columbia before moving on to consider similar concerns in less high-profile countries in Central America, specifically mentioning Nicaragua and Guatemala. My heart sank.

The U.S. / Guatemalan border had been closed for six months during the early stages of the pandemic. Throughout the past several months when I considered returning to the U.S., I monitored the state of the virus back home and in Guatemala, concerned that its unforeseen spread in one or both of the countries would require the reclosing of the border. I feared leaving Guatemala only to be locked out, while away. Those fears returned in full force after hearing the report on NPR, despite the fact that, according to the Guatemalan Ministry of Health statistics, the situation was under control there at the time of my departure.

Before turning in for that night, I arranged the tasks awaiting me by priority, enabling me to shorten my stay at a moment's notice, should it be necessary. I would give myself every chance to tackle all items deemed necessary to complete, before returning to Guatemala. The following morning, I was vaccinated. I then turned my attention to preparing the carpentry shop product I had brought back with me for delivery, as those who had ordered it before our shop closing, had waited a year and a half to receive it. I returned to the mail still requiring my attention.

Little by little I chipped away at the list I had prepared. In between I visited with family as well as a few nearby friends. I felt pleased with my progress and with each passing day, the issue of a premature departure became less of a concern. Then four nights before my scheduled return, I had the first of what would become a recurring dream for the remainder of my time in Waltham.

The setting was Guatemala City, in the aftermath of an unspoken event which had left the city if not destroyed, then unmistakably damaged in ways not readily apparent. Large numbers of people wandered the streets, in search of understanding, looking for answers. I was among the wandering, as were our youths. We hung loosely together, separated but each within the sight of the others. At some point, however, we drifted apart. Anxiously I searched for them, fearing they would be harmed. But the longer I searched, the further I seemed to drift from them. I would then awake with a start...

In the end, it was not necessary that I return before planned. The anxiety I felt for fear of being separated from our youths stayed with me until my connecting flight from Dallas lifted off for Guatemala. Normally, upon returning to the streets of Guatemala City after being away, I am filled with dread for the understanding that I have returned to a country overrun with violence and, in doing so, put my life in danger. Not so, recently, for as I watched familiar neighborhoods pass by from inside the cab taking me home from the airport, I felt strangely at peace. This, despite the fact that the ever-present violence awaiting me was compounded by the additional threat of an ongoing pandemic which would likely continue unchecked, for an indefinite period of time.

As is the case in many countries at present, the Guatemalan government and Ministry of Health has struggled to implement a plan to vaccinate the adult population. Initial attempts to purchase the 18 million vaccines needed has been badly mismanaged, resulting in endless finger pointing as to who holds the blame. Numerous reports have stated that efforts to coordinate the distribution of vaccines has been plagued with mismanagement. People make appointments at specific sites, for a pre-determined hour only to show up and find the location closed, with no explanation. But the Guatemalan people themselves are not without fault. Reports have also surfaced claiming that, on a regular basis, up to 50 % of those who make appointments to be vaccinated, simply don't show up at the assigned time, leaving those staffing the designated vaccination locations to scramble in nearby streets, in search of last minute replacements.

According to statistics, If the rate of vaccination continues at the pace as it has to date, Guatemala's adult population will not be fully vaccinated until 2029. Thus far, the failed effort to move the country forward has only served to further dishearten many, our household included. Indeed, morale seemed to be higher before the country began its plan to vaccinate its people.

In a e-letter to a friend sent in February, I addressed the challenge of keeping one's spirits up while facing the many COVID-related difficulties, at that time. Unfortunately, the letter remains relevant at present in Guatemala. I wrote: "The days seem to meld together here with routines varying little from one day, week, and month to the next. One wakes up most mornings not in anticipation of what the day will hold, but rather, considering what specific challenges are to be faced and how to best manage them, while staying healthy and safe. Much of our time is spent keeping life at a distance, rather than embracing it. Constantly being on the defensive can be exhausting. While the many restrictions we face are necessary and wise, they leave one feeling less-than enthused with so limited and repetitive a routine. I often battle inertia. Despite the fact that I remain busy, I feel as if a substantial part of my life has gone AWOL. Of course, I realize I'm not alone in such struggles, to the contrary..."

While back in Massachusetts I observed that a cautious but unmistakable optimism had taken hold, a sense that all of the collective effort to keep the Coronavirus at bay had begun to pay off. Optimism remains in short supply in Guatemala, painfully so. These letters serve to inform our readers, and hopefully, motivate you to continue to support our work. I also ask for your prayers at this time. We continue to face a long road before us, with no end in sight, and will need all the help we can get.

May God bless.

*George*

George