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To the many who have cared,

**"In days of unrest and strong racial feeling, we need a new discovery of the love of God. Let us anchor our hope in the thought of God's love. God's strength, by which He rules and guides the world, is the power of a persistent, undying love." Andrew Murray**

These words are taken from the November 6<sup>th</sup> entry of Andrew Murray's seminal book of Christian devotions, *Daily in His Presence*. The devotions, written over the course of 20 years in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, foremost sought to inspire his South African congregation to experience a spiritual revival. It is not uncommon, however, for the devotions to touch on an already present racial division which, a century later, would give rise to Apartheid.

Half way around the world and many years later, Murray's words still resonate. The United States is currently experiencing a level of division not seen for decades. More than a century and a half after the end of the civil war, racial and political unrest continue to divide the country.

I have spent little time in the U.S. since the onset of the pandemic – 30 days total during the past 32 months. The lack of a more consistent connection to my country and my culture has left me struggling, for my visits home renew and sustain me. Feelings of isolation have come and gone in the past, but have proven to be a more formidable foe, of late.

I returned to my native New England in mid-October. I carefully chose my brief stay to coincide with the equally brief period of peak fall foliage. It had been close to 20 years since I had witnessed the regional and seasonal beauty that, if not unique to New England, often finds its greatest glory there. Its allure is powerful, and people come from far and wide to experience an unabashed display of nature on parade.

Much of my time while home was spent taking care of business, both personally and on behalf of Only A Child. I often felt rushed and pressured to complete a long list of tasks in a short period of time. Nevertheless, I deliberately set aside moments for myself, to savor New England at its finest.

On my only Sunday there, I took an early-morning walk. The sky was overcast and warned of the threat of a heavy rain, predicted to arrive later in the day. The air was cool as befitting the season and a light, capricious mist came and went at will. The streets were empty.

I decided to wander, forgoing my usual custom of selecting a specific route in advance. Soon after, I found my way to a cemetery not too far from home. I entered through a secondary, discreet entrance unknown to many, a short block from my mother's childhood home.

The turning of leaves is a gradual process. Not all trees transition at once. I had arrived home to find the local foliage just past peak. Calvary cemetery, however, was slightly behind schedule, and welcomed me with a splendid display of fall color. My heart sang with joy. My wish, my longing to witness New England decked out in its autumn finery had been fulfilled.

I followed an uncharted path, letting nature dictate my route, drawn to individual and clustered trees, led as a lemming to an ever-shifting sea of color, steeped in beauty, totally at peace. I felt alive in a way that, following years of living in quarantine and lockdown and virtual reality, I had come to doubt I might ever experience again. My eyes watered as I was filled with gratitude. For the first time in what seemed ages, I felt one with all creation, despite the fact that there was not another living soul to be found.

I had intentionally found my way to my mother's childhood home on that Sunday morning. Having spent so much time away during the pandemic, my thoughts have wandered with increased frequency to places and times sorely missed and fondly recalled. The home had housed many happy occasions when I had been surrounded by loving family and felt a sense of belonging. Many of my loved ones have long since moved on to whatever awaits us beyond this earthly life. I feel their loss more acutely with every passing year. Perhaps a pandemic specific loneliness has fed my greater sense of loss.

I turned 65 in May. Now that I'm old(er), I find myself often times reminiscing when alone. There is a clear sense that much of my life is behind me and, as such, I've begun the process of winding down. How long that process will need to play itself out remains to be seen. But that is of little consequence to me. For the process, it seems, is natural and even necessary if my life is to come full circle and find its ultimate fulfillment. My life has been a rich one thus far, and I've no reason to believe it will not continue to be so.

Guatemala remains an inhospitable place in many ways. Violence continues to curtail private and collective freedom. The risk of assault remains a considerable concern. The overall quality of life pales in comparison to many other, more developed countries. The infrastructure is woefully inadequate to meet existing demand. Mobility, as a result, is significantly hampered. Basic social and medical services are in short supply and often unavailable to much of the population. Education remains the best option of a privileged minority. Discrimination against the country's indigenous majority is widely criticized. Racism remains a problem as well, although it is often expressed in subtler, less confrontational ways.

Nevertheless, I continue to experience an unwavering sense that my work is not yet finished here. My life seems to have been predestined to spend most of its adult years in Guatemala. In truth, it has been a life that often calls for the denial of personal wants and desires, while placing the needs of others first. Despite the fact that it is not always easy, there can be no denying that such a life has purpose and worth. More importantly still, it allows me to put my Christian faith into practice on a regular basis, through the daily living of that life.

Offering opportunity to underprivileged youths in the effort to offset the injustice of a divided society seems to me to be a worthwhile endeavor. Such injustice will undoubtedly continue despite Only A Child's efforts and whatever success they may ultimately yield. I understand and accept this. The work of transformation, even on a scale of one life at a time, is justified nonetheless, I believe, for it plants the seeds of farther reaching and longer lasting change. The value of every human life is beyond measure.

At some point during my recent stroll through Calvary Cemetery, I considered my life in Guatemala. I have long thought of myself as being a late bloomer. Throughout my childhood and adolescence and well into my adult years, I was plagued with self-doubt. The process of upending my life and beginning anew in another land with no support to speak of, left me confronting a sink or swim situation. To the surprise of many, myself included, I found the will to swim when nothing in my previous life had suggested that I would. I found myself and my place in this world while living in Guatemala. Whatever may come in my remaining years, nothing can or will ever change that. As such, I am properly grateful.

Since returning to Guatemala, I have reflected on the considerable time I spend alone, isolated both in the specific and the general sense. It has occurred to me that such time may be not only beneficial but also necessary, if I am to complete my responsibilities to the best of my ability. For much of that time, especially mornings, is spent in prayer and meditation, and reading the words of Christian devotion, including those of Andrew Murray. These solitary times guide and strengthen me to face the challenges before me, both the ones common to all of humanity and those specifically Guatemalan. As isolated as I may often be, I am never truly alone, for we all keep Divine company, consciously or not.

Thank you for seeing us through another year, our 28<sup>th</sup>. Your support has never been more appreciated, for all of us at Only A Child understand that it demands an unprecedented level of sacrifice and commitment in the midst of economic challenge not seen for many a year.

**... "The only means Jesus took to gain influence was through the manifestation of a serving, suffering love. Jesus saw the possibility for redemption in the hearts of even the worst of men and women. He understood that our hearts could never resist the continuous influence of God's love; that unbounding faith in God's love would be our strength and our stay.**

**Arguments and reproaches can never overcome a spirit of bitterness and hatred. Our faith in love as the greatest power in the world should prepare us for a life of unselfish service among our fellow man".** *Andrew Murray*

Merry Christmas. Happy Hanukkah. May God bless.

*George*

George

P.S. We have a one item *wish list* this Christmas. Our shelter is in need of a washing machine to complement our *pila*, or scrub sink, used to wash clothing by hand. *Pilas* are inefficient and the addition of a washing machine will significantly cut water consumption in a home housing 10 people on average, reducing our considerable water bill. You may contribute towards any part of the cost of the machine: approx. \$750. Please use the enclosed donation card to indicate that your donation is *wish list* specific. Thank you.