

Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos, Honduras

Townley Chisholm

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The orphanage run by NPH in Honduras has 450 children as well as a hospice for people dying of AIDS and a nursing home for old people with no relatives. The orphanage is unusual because no children are ever allowed to be adopted; they stay there with their brothers and sisters until they finish their educations and choose to leave. Children come to the orphanage because their parents have been killed (Honduras has incredible levels of violence and the daily papers are full of gang-related murders), or their parents are too poor to feed them, or their parents died of AIDS or their parents have left them behind to find work in the US. The orphanage is one of a chain of orphanages in Latin America established by Father Frank Wasson, an American priest who could not bear to leave hungry children uncared for.

NPH Honduras sits on a 2000 acre ranch in the dry, volcanic landscape of central Honduras; the jumbled cinder cones and volcanic ridges rising up to big mountains look like Mordor from *The Lord of the Rings* only with lots of pine trees everywhere. The children live in mudbrick dormitories built as hollow squares with beautiful gardens in the center and a different dorm along each of the 4 sides of each square. About 25 kids live in each dorm or “hogar” and each hogar has its own bathroom, sleeping room full of bunkbeds, large room for eating and doing homework, and patio area for doing laundry. And each hogar has its own adult caregiver whom the children address as Tia or Tio, aunt or uncle.

Our group of visitors contained 14 eighth-grade students from a little school in Exeter, NH (one of whom was my daughter, Sarah) and 4 adults. We spent our mornings at the orphanage working either in the central kitchen or on a large chicken house which we refurbished by taking down the old chicken wire and replacing termite-eaten wood with fresh lumber. The work was hot, dirty and disgusting since we were breathing a fair amount of powdered chicken poop as we took down the old wire and pulled out all the nails. But the orphanage grows a great deal of the food that the children eat and the gardens, cattle and chicken operations were very important to the community. Each afternoon we had lunch and a siesta and then we spent late afternoons and evenings with our assigned hogars.

I was assigned to the Noah’s Ark (Arca de Noe) dorm which houses 13- to 15-year-old boys and I was worried about getting to know these kids because I spoke practically no Spanish and neither did Matt, the 8th-grader from Sarah’s school who was assigned to that hogar with me. On the first night I took along my Spanish dictionary and some paper and, when I couldn’t communicate via language, I drew a map of the US to show them where Boston is and I drew animals to illustrate what I was trying to say. The boys are used to having visitors who don’t speak much Spanish and they did their best to be patient with my inability to communicate. Having the paper also allowed me to write down their names which was a huge help in remembering their names then and remembering their faces now. Some of the boys had lived there for years and had siblings on the ranch;

others had only been there for days or weeks. I was very surprised by how happy they were and how much they enjoyed joking and talking with each other. We ate supper with them each night and the meal always arrived in big Coleman ice chests; each boy would put his plate on the serving counter and then Jose, an older boy, would divide the food among the plates. These were adolescent boys and they were always hungry, so food was very highly valued and there were never any leftovers... sort of like the situation you've just experienced on expeditions. Anytime there was a shortage of cheese or tortillas, Jose made sure that we got served first (and the most) since we were guests, and he was very careful to make sure that everything was divided scrupulously fairly.

You might think that these kids had every reason to be happy since they were living in a safe, healthy place with enough food and with people who treated them well and who were trying to give them good educations. But these boys had also seen terrible violence in their lives; some had seen their parents being murdered. I don't know how I expected them to behave, but I was surprised at their resilience and their ability to enjoy being together. There were, of course, limits. One boy, Jesus, always sat by himself, never interacted with other boys and struggled to control his anger. Another boy, Juan, had an incredibly animated face and was always joking, but in the rare moment or two when he and I were alone he gave me long hugs that made me wonder what love he had experienced – or never known – that drove him to seek affection from any benign, vaguely grandfatherly figure like me that came along. People in Honduras routinely have their first children in their late teens or early twenties so that they are grandparents by their fifties; the boys in my hogar assumed I was Matt's grandfather.

Father's day in Honduras is celebrated on the feast day of St. Joseph and we happened to be at the orphanage for the event. I was a little curious to know what father's day is like at an orphanage and thought that maybe the adults would downplay the day since so few of the kids had fathers. But, no, the kids spent a lot of time making happy father's day cards for somebody; I never could figure out for whom. The whole community gathered for mass at the church which was built into a hillside like an amphitheater with a roof (for the rainy season) and just one wall behind the altar. A building beside the church held the sacristy and on its walls were written in Spanish these words: "Who am I that I should be so infinitely precious to you?" What does that quote mean? Why is it appropriate for the spiritual center of an orphanage?

All the children from each hogar sat together on one of the concrete benches that lined the amphitheater, and the boys from my hogar were sitting right behind the boys from the special needs dorm. The music was wonderful with 3 guitars, a violin, a recorder and drums accompanying each hymn (by the way, 14-year-old boys don't sing hymns much in Honduras, either). But the priest was pretty stuffy and as the mass stretched on past the hour mark, one older retarded boy drifted from one adult caregiver on his bench to another. Boys near him were beginning to laugh at him and he was starting to hit at them when his main caregiver, a man of perhaps 25, came over, knelt in front of him and put his face right in the retarded boy's face to give him a smile of incredible affection and tenderness. He whispered a few words and the boy followed him back to their seats for the rest of the mass.

I had thought a good deal about what to do for the boys in my hogar. We were told to take no gifts the first night so that we could meet them without making them think that we were just sources of stuff. On the second night I took soccer magazines because their only reading material seemed to be their textbooks and because soccer is the great passion for Honduran males. Honduran soccer magazines have lots and lots of the stories you would expect about star players and teams. I didn't realize until the kids were reading through the magazines that they also have lots of photos of very curvaceous women in minimal swimsuits... a lot like Sports Illustrated, come to think of it. One night I made peanut butter and honey sandwiches as an appetizer and for our last 2 nights I made chocolate chip brownies which the boys liked a lot, and, again, divided exactly fairly.

The children rise at 5 am every day to do chores around the hogars before breakfast and school. We stayed in the visitors' accommodation at some distance from the dorms, and every morning I woke early and could hear little pieces of singing from the hogars as the kids started their days with a prayer and a hymn. School lasts until 2pm for the younger children; the older ones go to academic classes in the mornings and then go to workshops to learn trades such as shoe-making, tailoring, metal-working and wood-working. Children with lots of academic potential are sent to high school in the capital, Tegucigalpa, and a few go on to the national university and become doctors, engineers or teachers.

The highlight of each day for the kids is the late afternoon when they have free time to do whatever they want to do; for the boys that is soccer. The older boys played soccer on a paved, fenced field the size of an indoor soccer facility, and they had impressive skills, though they tended to hog the ball a little instead of using their teammates. Our group of 8th-grade Americans included some serious soccer players and they formed a team that played intense games against the older boys of 16 and 17, games that were pretty even because the Honduran kids took it easy on the gringos, because the gringos had better teamwork and because the Hondurans are tiny. I kept having to readjust my guesses for ages for these kids; boys I thought were 8 or 9 were really 13. We brought down a selection of soccer cleats, and I was surprised to see boys of 16 or 17 selecting size 5 or 6 cleats.

The big soccer game always had an audience of adults, littler kids and boys who were waiting to play. I began watching the 2 smaller soccer games next to the big game. One of these littler games was very free form with vague goal-like areas and players that ranged from Esteban, one of the oldest kids in my hogar, to much littler kids to mentally retarded kids. This game flowed around the trees and onto the basketball court where the third game was played and nobody seemed to mind the resulting chaos. But that third game on the basketball court was the best. Boys from my hogar divided themselves into 3-man teams and played king of the court; whichever team scored the first goal got to stay on the court and the other team was replaced by a waiting team. The court was made of asphalt and not very big, but I will never forget watching those boys play. If 10,000 hours of practice are required to achieve mastery of a skill or a sport, then these boys had surely spent those hours; their ability to control the ball, to roll it back and forth under

their feet to fake out opponents and to pass precisely – all at high speed – was beautiful to watch. And their delight in playing the game they loved was palpable. They never stopped laughing; everything was funny. Whether it was a mistake or a good play or a goal or a great fake, the boys were laughing their heads off in pure delight. I have never seen people take so much pure pleasure together in an activity, though games at Pasquaney and certain choirs I have sung in come close. But if artistry is the creative use of consummate skill, then this was soccer as high art and the happiness they achieved while playing together made it all the more beautiful.

Earth's population is 6.7 billion people and that number is rising daily by 217,000 new people (that's births minus deaths each day). 80% of those people are poor and live in third world countries like Honduras. These poor people in poor countries have lots of children, in marked contrast to countries like Spain, Italy, Japan and Sweden where the average fertility rate is 1.3 children per woman, well below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman. There is no question that Earth has more people than its ecosystems can sustain; the only way we can feed all these mouths is to cut down more forests, make more pollution, add to global warming and drive more fish stocks to extinction. In the process we will certainly decrease not only the ability of the planet to support endangered species but also its ability to support us. We need to slow down population growth in poor countries where per capita consumption levels are not high and to reduce consumption and population levels in developed countries where per capita consumption of energy and raw materials is clearly unhealthy, patently unsustainable and arguably obscene. But my visit to Honduras leaves me with two abiding questions:

1. What is necessary for happiness? Does the endless pursuit of more material goods and greater comfort make consumers happy in developed countries such as the US, Europe and Japan?

And

2. What should I or must I do now that I know a few of the names and faces that make up the mass of third-world humanity? How can I give these few kids a better chance? These questions can be re-stated on a larger scale: what moral responsibility do we all share to help poor people both here at home and abroad?

Psalm 47 describes God as “the great King upon all the earth. He shall subdue the peoples under us, and the nations under our feet. He shall choose out an heritage for us, even the excellency of Jacob whom he loved.” But if we gain an heritage, who has lost it?

On a crowded planet with nearly 7 billion people, does this winner-take-all approach work? History suggests that military victors thrive and reproduce while military losers suffer, die and fade away; examples range from the Turks who replaced the Greeks of Asia Minor to the Europeans who replaced the native peoples of North America and Australia. The process continues today as the Chinese government moves millions of Han Chinese people into Tibet and Xinjiang to overwhelm the native cultures and populations of those regions.

The scale of these challenges is immense and overwhelming. But I can do a little. I can look for ways to help my local community and I can learn more about distant communities. And I can think carefully about how my spending and consumption habits affect the environment and how they reflect my values. If millions and, later, billions of other people make similar choices, then perhaps there is hope, hope for a better life for the poor and the rich and for a greater respect for this planet and the awe-inspiring life forms that share it with us.

There are less than 1000 Bactrian camels in the wild

Less than 350 North Atlantic right whales

Less than 40 Amur leopards in the wild

Less than 250 Siberian tigers in the wild

Albatross populations are in free fall. A third of all amphibian species on the planet are at risk of extinction. The list goes on and on. I do not think it is possible to protect habitat for species without simultaneously making sure that the local human populations have a decent standard of living. Psalm 47 ends with these wonderful words: “for God, which is very high exalted, doth defend the earth, as it were with a shield.” And he does so through us... through our choices about what kind of world we want to live in and how we want to live in it.