

Welcome

These are just a few of my experiences (in chronological order) during a recent Mission Awareness Trip with the Christian Foundation for Children and Aging. Please visit their website and consider sponsoring a child or elderly person. I have seen the fruits of this charity and I simply cannot recommend them enough. They are changing the lives of the poorest of the poor.

By Joe Bliss

Moments

God answered my prayer on the morning of February 4th, the day before I was scheduled to fly from Cleveland, Ohio to Guatemala City. I knew it was true when I heard the familiar ring of my cell phone. I was in the bed of a hotel room, hundreds of miles from Cleveland. I had been praying, literally begging God to get me back home to Cleveland in spite of countless cancelled flights. I finished my prayer with a sign of the cross. Two seconds later, my phone rang. It wasn't God on the other end of the line, but it was His doing. The phone call was from one of my company schedulers. Normally, they bring nothing but bad news. In this case, and only because God was listening, they called to tell me my schedule had actually been changed for the better. I'd be getting home and I'd be going to Guatemala. I wasn't sure why God was working so hard to get me to Guatemala, but I could clearly see that He was. And a week later, as I flew home from one of the poorest countries in the world, I knew exactly why.

There are moments in this life when God gently knocks on the door of our souls, moments when He lifts us from the shadow of our own selves and into the light of what truly matters. Every once in a while and in spite of our own spiritual blindness, God allows us a moment to see. Before my feet ever touched the solid ground of Guatemala, I was as blind as ever. I was lost in the darkness of my own self, buried beneath the things of this world that don't matter and never will. His knock would come gently at first, the door of my soul so slow to open. But over time, over the course of one week, the knock became a push and the push became a shove until I opened my soul just enough to let His grace slip in. I wasn't surprised by the overwhelming power of God's grace. Who would be? What surprised me, the very thing that changed my life forever, was through whom His grace would flow.

For an entire week, I was confronted by moments when God would open my eyes by breaking my heart. Each moment came as a surprise because I was convinced that grace wasn't supposed to hurt. It would take a week of heartache, a week of choked back tears before I would grasp the point God was trying to make. Amazingly, and thankfully, I have a picture of each moment. Every, single one of them.

The Christian Foundation for Children and Aging (CFCA) is a charity striving to change the lives of the poorest of the poor. They are dedicated to restoring hope and dignity to the least of those among us. By sponsoring a child or an elderly person, those of us who have never known true poverty are able to get a glimpse into the lives of those who know it all too well. We become friends through the writing of letters. We offer a small amount of money to a family in need while they offer the only thing they possibly can: their love and their prayers. Somehow, over the past four years of CFCA sponsorship, I thought I was the one doing the giving. A weeklong mission awareness trip would show me just how mistaken I was.

Looking back now, I can only thank God for those moments. They are moments I must share because when grace hurts, lives are changed. If we stand at the foot of the cross, we'll know it's true. Although it took some time, I eventually figured it out. The Man on that cross knows the pain of grace, and He is the author of our moments.

Sunday, February 13, 2011

The Boy In Blue

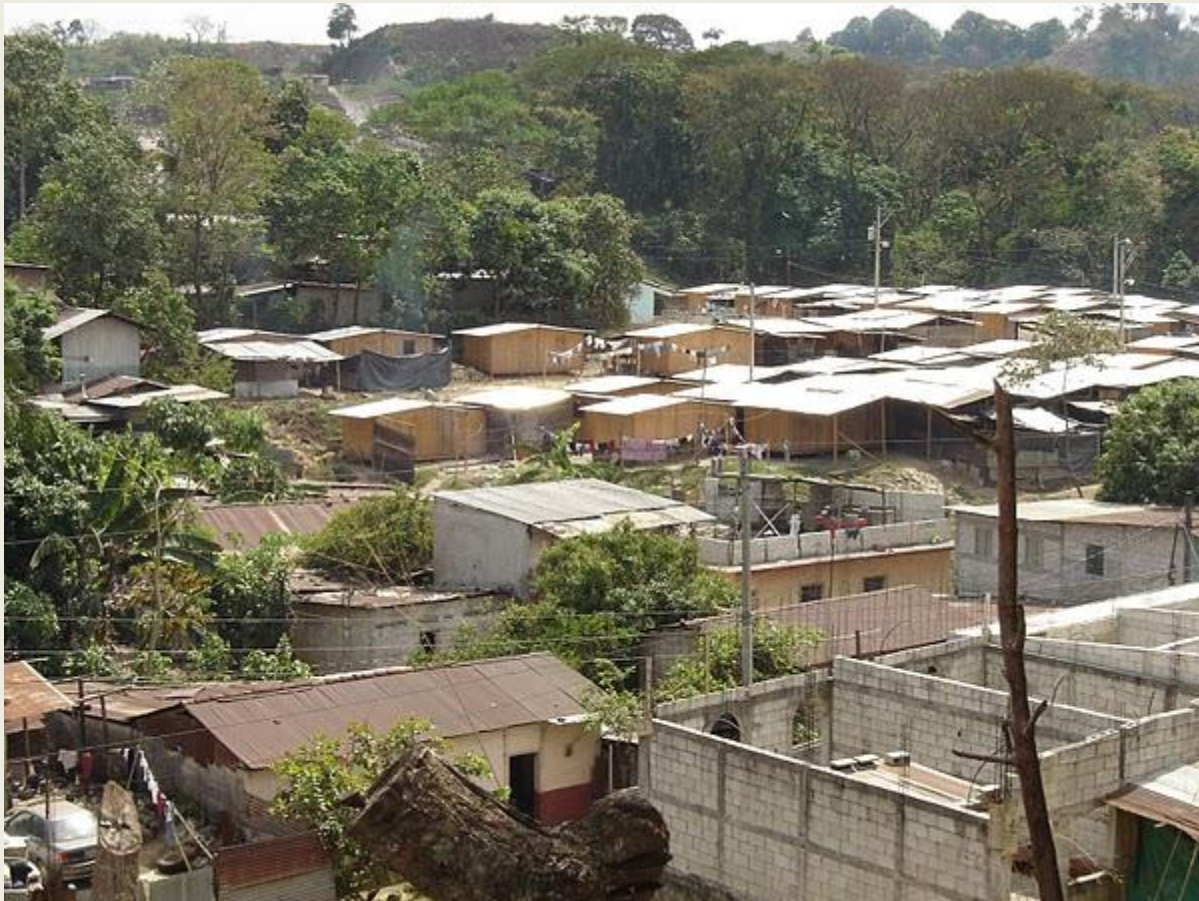
We entered the town of Patulul to the smiling faces and clapping hands of sponsored children. They greeted us with an expectation only children are capable of. Taking each of us by the hand, they lead us to a tiny, shaded area they had decorated just for us. We would sit in their presence and listen to them sing, watch them dance, and hear their stories.

I felt out of place, uncomfortable with the way they celebrated us as if we were the heroes and they weren't. The week was young and I had yet to find my footing, to recognize what it was that created such joy in people who have so little. I watched them celebrate and I pondered their lives. I wondered where they lived. I wondered what they had and what they didn't. Electricity? Running water? Food? I was surrounded by lives I couldn't comprehend, lives I had no way of identifying with. It seemed to me as if the only thing we shared was our humanity. They were created by God, just like me. They were loved by God, just like me. A question began to form in my mind that afternoon in Patulul. I tried to push it away, to leave the question unasked and, more importantly, unanswered. But it was there, I knew it was. Is my love for God, I began to wonder, just like theirs?

Before we knew it, we were being ushered to tables for lunch. There is nothing, and I mean nothing, more humbling than being served a beautiful meal by people who know what hunger really is. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, and for the first time in my life, I knew what His disciples must have felt.

I am not worthy.

As the afternoon drifted along, I walked to the edge of a small expanse of grass. It ended at a fence, leaving me with a view of the neighborhood below.



Below me was a scene that took my breath away, an image of poverty I had only before witnessed on

television. Directly in front of my eyes was a reality I could not comprehend. These beautiful people, the ones who welcomed me and fed me, lived in conditions I could not fathom. I stood on that hillside and for the first time I swallowed the lump in my throat.

I stared at these homes that were nothing more than shacks in the dirt, each one of them the broken reality for a family. A family of how many? Two? Three? Eight? In time I would get to meet some of these families, a chance to visit their homes. I didn't know it then, as I stood on that hillside beside my dad, but the people who live in homes such as these have a grasp upon something I do not. For a week, they would be my teacher. And I would fall in love with each and every one of them.

It was on this hillside, overlooking a cross so many must bear, when my heart started to break. It was my first moment, the first time God allowed me to see so clearly beyond myself and into the life of another. I looked below and saw him, the boy in blue. His image, his world, and his reality were painted forever onto the canvas of my mind.



I could not take my eyes off of him. He sat quietly in the doorway of his home, one hand slowly rocking the wooden, slatted door that served no purpose I could imagine. It was, however, the front door to his home. Our homes are our protection. We lock our front doors at night, protecting us from the world beyond. The child that I saw that afternoon, sitting alone and watching the world move about around him, would sleep that night with the protection of a flimsy, slatted, worthless door. Not even the weather could be held at bay.

I watched this child and I wondered what chance he has at life. Where will the years take him? I realized that day that our birth is a lottery. I was born in the United States. I grew up wanting for nothing. I didn't deserve that blessing and I certainly didn't earn it. I watched this child and wondered what thoughts must

fill his mind. What worries does he carry? What hope does he cling to? What are his dreams?

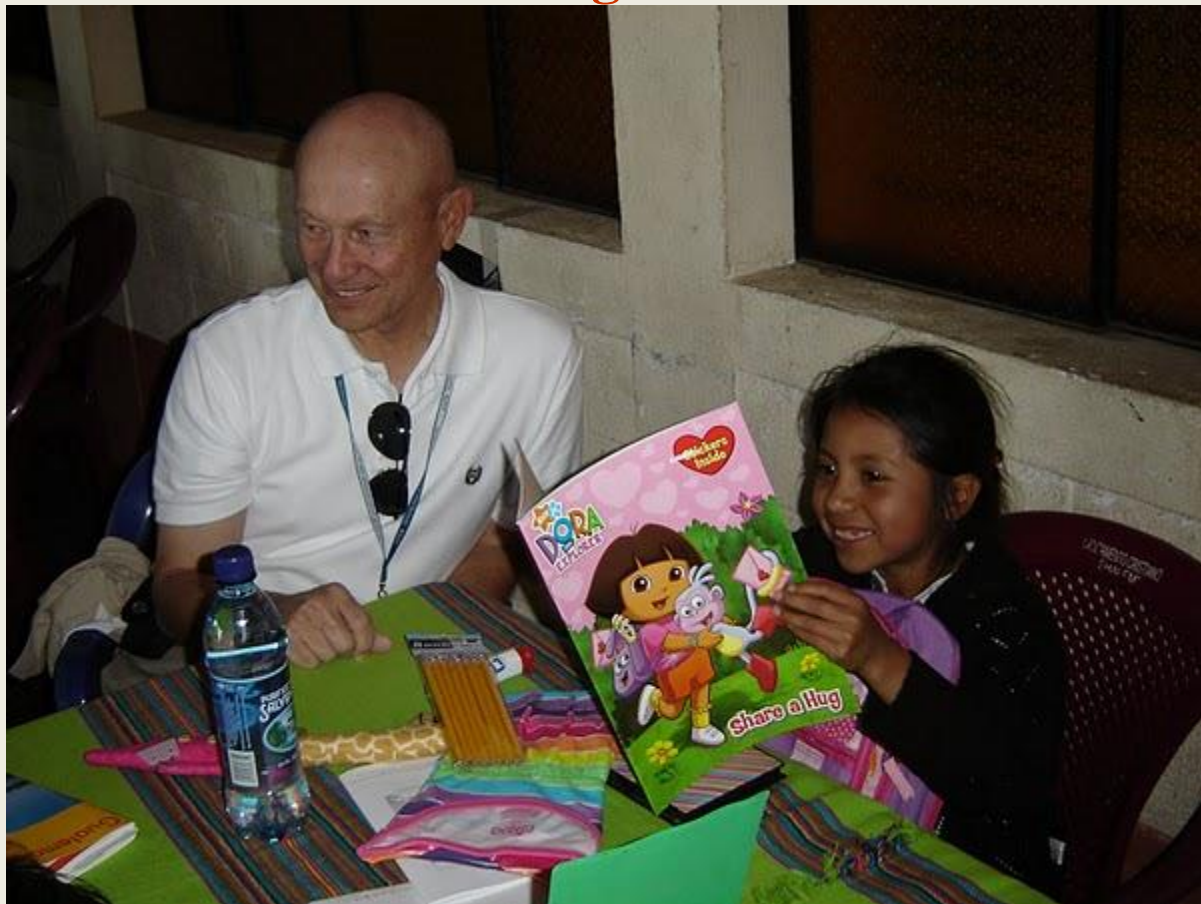
The boy in blue was born into poverty. The struggles he must endure and the obstacles he must face are so far beyond that which I could possibly understand. I stood there with a helpless, breaking heart. I don't deserve the blessings I have.

Every day since, I have thought about that boy. Where is he today as I type these words? He and I are the same in so few ways. We were born upon the same earth. We were created and loved by the same God.

The boy in blue taught me a lesson on that hillside in Patulul by showing me the one similarity we have that I could not deny. I didn't deserve what was given to me the day I was born. And for reasons only God could possibly know, he didn't either.

Saturday, February 12, 2011

Mother Teresa Was Right



Mother Teresa used to say that a life could be changed by nothing more than a smile. I wasn't so sure I believed that until I met eight-year-old Elida.

Two days after arriving in Guatemala, we had the honor of meeting Elida, my dad's sponsored child. We met her at the Shalom Center, a small retreat along the shore of Lake Atitlan, just outside the village of San Lucas Toliman. Elida arrived at the center with her mother and older sister. They had traveled two

hours, waking up at four in the morning, to meet us.

I was excited and apprehensive about the meeting, not knowing what to expect. My dad has sponsored Elida for a few years. What he knew of her came from the words of her letters and the pictures he had received. When she walked into the room, my dad recognized her immediately. If there was any apprehension among Elida and her family, they hid it well. I watched her embrace my dad and I saw the joy on her mother's face. Her mother hugged me. Her sister hugged me. Elida hugged me. They were so gracious, and they were so beautiful.

Elida seemed to me like any eight-year-old on the planet, until I saw her smile. There is a particularly special thing about Guatemalan children – it's their smile. They love to smile and when they do, there is an overwhelming joy behind it. You don't simply see a Guatemalan child smile, you actually feel it. Like a warm pillow smacked against your face, their smiles are a physical force.

We sat and talked to Elida and her family with the help of an interpreter. I sat beside her, transfixed by the smile that so often graced her face.

I wanted to bottle her smile up, to somehow get my hands on whatever it was that made a smile like that possible.

I watched as Elida opened up the backpack my dad had given her. Inside it were the most simple of gifts. Coloring books, crayons, a stuffed giraffe, pencils, a soccer ball. They are the kind of things a child in this country takes for granted, I know I did. She pulled the package of pencils from her backpack and held them in the air for her mother to see, her face blessed with that holy, supernatural smile. Elida thanked us, her mother thanked us, her sister thanked us.

Elida's mother told us that daily prayers are being said for us and for our family. She let us know that her hope and her prayer was for God to bless us abundantly. Over and over she gave voice to her hope that we would be blessed. *Us, of all people.*

I felt so insignificant next to this gracious woman and her child. They live from day to day, from meal to hopeful meal. They have so little and yet they give so much. Their kindness is tangible. What thanks can possibly be given to a person who offers you all that they have, literally? So I smiled, and I wondered if they could tell that something was missing, that my smile wasn't anything like theirs.

Elida gave me a gift that day. For the first time in my life, I believe I saw what a real smile looks like. When we have everything, when our lives are filled with the things of this world, a smile is an easy thing. And it comes from a superficial place. What I saw on Elida's face wasn't easy or superficial, it was real. Her smile wasn't just the result of our visit or our gifts. It wasn't the result of anything she could place in her hands. Instead, Elida's smile came from somewhere deep within. I imagine it a peaceful place, a pure place, a place so poor that nothing can get in the way.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit," our Lord once said. "For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." For once, I understood.

Elida's smile changed my life. Mother Teresa knew the poor, and she was right all along.

Friday, February 11, 2011

Saint Francisco



Francisco isn't really a saint; he just acts like one. I had the pleasure of meeting Francisco on February 8, 2011. It is a day I will never forget.

We took a boat ride across Lake Atitlan that day to visit some sponsored children at the small village of San Antonio Palopo. From above, San Antonio Palopo looks as if it could be a luxurious, lakeshore resort town. One need only get closer to take in the reality of this tiny Guatemalan town.

As would be the case in every town we visited, we were greeted by smiling, cheering, singing children and their families. They were celebrating us before our boat ever reached the dock. Each of us was once again taken by the hand and lead to where these humble people would entertain us with their songs, their dances, their customs. And, of course, their otherworldly smiles.

As we sat and watched what they had prepared for us, the townspeople seemed to collapse in around us. From every direction they came, women, men, children. They have a way in these small towns of welcoming strangers without saying a word. Their faces speak entirely for themselves. We were always welcome, and we were always treated with a kindness and a respect that I've never experienced before. Though I didn't know it yet, somewhere in that bubbling crowd of people was Francisco, a child sponsored by the CFCA.

It wasn't until we were lead to another beautiful table for another beautiful meal that I saw him. Francisco is only four years old, so if you weren't looking down, you could miss him entirely. Thankfully, his smile made up for whatever he lacked in physical stature. There are few words in the English language to adequately describe the aura that surrounded young Francisco. The people in our group, myself included, were drawn to him like magnets. He emanated a peace, a love, and a joy that seemed to come from a place we all long to know. Francisco became a star; everyone wanted a picture of this child, the one with

a smile that defied all reason. I watched as he went from camera to camera, pose to pose.

There is a peculiar thing about smiling Guatemalan children. They love to smile, and they do it continuously. That is, until you want a picture. As soon as a camera is lifted up, before the lens even has time to focus, their faces often become expressionless. Smiles could be a tough thing to capture, unless you were taking a picture of Francisco. His smile, it would turn out, was permanent. So I got in line, waited for my turn, and snapped my photo.



That is Francisco on the left, the one with a cowboy hat and a smile so broad I worried my camera wouldn't capture it. Francisco's face was stuck in a state of permanent joy. It was contagious, it was powerful, and it was so pure. When we sat down to eat, Francisco dissolved into the crowd and eventually disappeared.

We spent much of the afternoon in San Antonio Palopo. Traveling through the town gave us a view of things that couldn't be seen from a far away photo. The town stretches up the side of a steep mountain. It's the same mountain that sent a landslide crushing through the town two years ago. Fifteen people were killed, including five sponsored children. The landslide left a thick, permanent scar through the heart of town. People who had nothing to begin with, were left with even less.



Their structures, their homes, have no foundation, no stability. These people are utterly defenseless against the weather. They have never had the security of a home that actually protects them, something we continuously take for granted. On this day, we would get to visit the home of a sponsored family for the first time.

Reaching the home would prove to be a challenge by itself. San Antonio Palopo is a maze of battered sidewalks and steep climbs. Just to reach the entrance of the home we went to visit, we had to climb a steep hill of rocks.



I climbed to the top of those rocks and moved to the side. There was hardly room for a family, let alone a large group of visitors. The house consists of two non-connected rooms, each about eight feet by ten feet. There are two beds, neither of which have a mattress. A tiny, barely covered kitchen stands separate from the rest of the "house." There is no door to the kitchen. When it rains, the kitchen will know it. The family shares a restroom that is nothing more than a covered hole in the ground.



This tiny, battered home with its two beds is inhabited by a mother and her six children. I choked back tears. I wanted to scream at the only thing my eyes were able to see: the poverty, the injustice. I didn't scream though, and I didn't cry. Because standing there, with a smile that saw so far beyond poverty and so far beyond injustice, was little Francisco. I was standing in his home, and his spirit devoured me.

He stood before us, an indescribable ray of hope. And he was so proud. Proud to have us visit his home, proud to show us all that he has, proud because his eyes and his heart were able to see that which I could not.

Francisco's father passed away two years ago, leaving his mother alone with six children. She explained to us that Francisco wears traditional Mayan clothing, unlike most boys, because that is what his father used to wear. The cowboy hat perched so proudly on his head belonged to his father. With every word, his impossible smile grew. His mother explained how her entire family is supported by Francisco's sponsorship. As always, she promised us her continued devotion to prayer on our behalf.

I stood in the presence of this mother and child, soaking in the lessons they were teaching. Slowly, very slowly, Francisco began to make sense to me. The joy that he so effortlessly carried and the love he so freely shared came from the very source of true joy and true love. It came from God. Francisco does not see the things that he does not possess. He can't. What Francisco sees, the very things we so often miss, are the only things that ever matter – faith, hope, and love. He possesses an uninhibited, unspoiled, pure, and relentless love. It's this love, I believe, that springs forth in him an overwhelming joy. I believe it because I saw it, I felt it. And because Francisco has nothing, nothing gets in the way.

We can possess that same love. We can be a beacon of that same joy. If only we can rid ourselves of all the things that don't matter. Because we have everything, everything gets in the way. If Francisco can be

happy, why in the world can't we?

Before I left Francisco's home, I took one last picture. I wanted to remember that smile. I wanted to remember what true love and true joy look like. For as long as I draw breath, I will never forget that little boy.

Francisco may not be a saint. But I think he should be.



Thursday, February 10, 2011

A New Perspective

Guatemala is a beautiful, rugged, and mountainous country. Large expanses of flat, fertile land suitable for farming were very rare in the areas we traveled. Amazingly, nearly eighty percent of Guatemala's land is owned and farmed by only twenty-two very wealthy families. The vast majority of Guatemalan people are not only poor, but also forced to live on just twenty percent of the land, most of which is difficult, at best, to inhabit. The towns we visited and drove by were nearly always scattered among the hills and mountainsides (where they are severely prone to landslides). Countless families live in perpetual fear of losing their homes and their lives to a landslide.

Santiago Atitlan was one of these towns, large in comparison to many of the places we visited, and scattered high onto the hillsides. We walked a great distance in Santiago Atitlan, having another chance to visit the homes of families sponsored by the CFCA. There are very few roads as the town gains altitude, the people left to travel on foot great distances to get to both their homes and their places of

work. We found ourselves breathless and tired as we climbed higher and higher, a climb so many adults and children must make daily.

It was there in Santiago Atitlan that I realized my perception of what “poor” is was being drastically changed, shattered really. And it seemed to be changing by the minute. I have visited many cities in the United States and seen some of this country’s poorer areas. Nothing I have ever seen in the States could even remotely compare to the level of poverty I witnessed in Guatemala. And yet, even as I traveled deeper into the poverty of Santiago Atitlan, I was met with the same bright faces and beautiful smiles I had come to love. Although we were as foreign as one could imagine, being a large group of heavily breathing, relatively tall Caucasian folks, we were still met with nothing but welcoming smiles. As I told my dad that night, it was as if I was acquiring a physical addiction to the smiles of Guatemalan poor, especially the children. Their smiles were like an injection of something holy, something sacred. I simply couldn’t get enough.

The first home we visited that afternoon in Santiago was that of a family of four. It was the home of a mother and father, two parents working together to provide for their two young children. Their home was tucked quietly away in the trees at the end of a narrow, dirt pathway. The home itself was constructed of nothing more than old, corrugated tin and bamboo. The family shared one, tiny room with one wooden bed. The home had dirt floors, something I now knew was the absolute norm in this part of the world. There was no running water and no electricity, and their food was cooked outdoors, over an open fire.



The father in this young family works the fields when that work is available. Field work is seasonal, leaving this man (and many others) without stable work for much of the year. When not working the fields, he helps prepare yarn for his wife’s weaving. He allowed us to enter the one room of their home and watch the process he uses for preparing the yarn. I watched in amazement as his fingers flew at lightning

speed in a maze of movement I could have never repeated.



The yarn he prepared was then used by his wife to weave table runners and the traditional shawls that all Guatemalan women (and girls) wear. Her days are spent sitting outside weaving, using nothing more than a milk box for a chair. I watched both of them work, and I began to wonder – what would it be like to labor in this way all day, every day? And what if all I had to show for it was a tiny shack with dirt floors? What if I had no mattress to collapse onto at night? What if a good meal was a rare meal, in spite of how hard I worked? Would I, I couldn't help but wonder, find the strength to face the rising sun each morning? And could I do it with a smile, the way they do?

Her weaving, we would learn, is the family's entire form of income for much of the year. She explained that she is able to weave one shawl per day, thanks to their teamwork. Without her husband preparing the yarn, her work would be much slower. Together, their goal is to make one shawl a day and to sell one shawl a day. If they can accomplish their goal, they will take home about two American dollars a day. Even if they were able to sell one shawl a day, the most income they could count on is sixty dollars a month. Sixty dollars for a family of four.



As I made my way back down that narrow dirt path, I couldn't help but appreciate the fact that we would only visit a miniscule fraction of the lives affected by severe poverty. I wondered about the families we wouldn't see and the stories we wouldn't hear. What about the families who didn't benefit from sponsorship?

Thankfully, we had a wonderful opportunity to visit a family who has benefited a great deal from the work of the CFCA. One of the programs run by CFCA is that of building new homes for the most in need. The homes, while being very simple, are a massive improvement when compared to the usual living conditions in Guatemala. The new homes have solid, cement foundations. The walls are built with sturdy brick and have actual glass windows. Lockable doors and a secured metal roof provide a family with far more security than most. Amazingly, one of these homes can be built for around \$3,500.



The home we visited that afternoon belonged to a family of seven. The home had three large rooms, and for the first time we saw beds with a mattress. The father in this family is a fisherman. He took the day off so that he could be there to show us his home and to thank us for helping. Much like Francisco, he was so proud to show us his beautiful new home. I had the opportunity to capture his image in a photograph; it is an image I will never forget. This man was as thankful, as happy, and as proud as anyone I have ever seen. He stood before us, glowing with a radiant, joyful smile.



That man's smile spoke volumes. It was a transforming moment for me, a moment when my perspective on poverty and life was radically changed. I stood there in a state of awe at how my views had changed in only a few days. I realized that had this home been the first place I stepped foot into after arriving in Guatemala, I would have been heartbroken at the poverty, at how little this family has. Instead, I stood there with a smile on my face and a realization that hope and dignity can be restored by nothing more than solid walls and a reliable roof. Compared to so many of the homes we witnessed, this family was living in relative luxury.

When I walked away from that visit, I could think of only one thing – my own home. I live in a beautiful house with running water, electricity, and comfortable beds. I have more blessings than can possibly be counted. The smile of a poor man in his humble new home proved that. The beautiful people of Guatemala were not only showing me so clearly what I have, but more importantly - *what I need*.

For me, the cry of the poor has a beautiful new face and a powerful new voice. The face is so easy to love, and the voice is one that must be heard. The cry of the poor demands a response. If we listen with our hearts and respond in love, we just might learn the lessons they teach.

Wednesday, February 9, 2011

The Rhythm of a Life

In the heart of Santiago Atitlan, hidden behind the façade of a building and out of view, live three women and two little girls. The men in their lives have either passed away or abandoned them. They share one cramped room, hidden from the view of passersby on the street. The floor of their home is stone and dirt.

They have no electricity and no running water. Their restroom is outdoors, hidden by a tattered and torn blanket. Their home barely stands atop a tiny piece of land. It is upon this land, their one solid possession, that they hope to one day have a home with real walls and real windows. A home with a roof that need not be held down with large stones and wood. They dream, day in and day out, for that which we rarely consider, the very things we take for granted and so often without thanks.

The three women work hard for the very little they have. Their days are a rhythm of struggle and work. Cramped in a tiny, stifling kitchen, they work on the floor making the one thing they can sell – tortillas. In Guatemala, small tortillas are served with every meal. The demand is high, so these women work hard. The rhythm of their lives is something that lies beyond my ability to comprehend. I cannot put my feet in their shoes for even a day, because I cannot fathom the lives they live. I don't have the strength it would take to even imagine it.

I stood in the presence of these women for mere minutes. I watched them work and I felt the heat of their kitchen. Within these women hides a strength and a conviction I can only dream of possessing. Upon their faces I saw the smiles that defy reason, smiles that come from a place I have never been. So I did nothing but stand still and watch. I lifted a camera to my eye, wanting only to capture the moment, to somehow prove that I had been in the presence of these heroic women.

There is an actual rhythm to their work. To form the dough, these women slap their hands together like the beat of a drum. It is a kind of music, the sound of hard work and undying hope.

Next to them, and staring up at me, was one of their beautiful little girls. I snapped my photograph and forever captured her image. Her eyes are like that of every child, filled with hope and curiosity. What the photograph could not capture, the very thing that struck me so deeply, was the rhythm she kept with the clapping of her own hands. There was no dough for her to form, no work for her small hands. And yet, she joined her mother, her aunt, and her grandmother, by adding the sound of her own rhythm to their work.



I listened to the sound of their work, and I pondered the life of this little girl. Will she get the education she so desperately needs and deserves? Can she rise up against the odds that are stacked so solidly against her? One in one hundred Guatemalan children will go to school. Will this little girl, I wondered, be the one?

We should pray for her and for the millions like her. We should pray that the cycle of poverty and oppression will be broken. While our pity will make no difference, our compassion most certainly will. *We can make a difference*, and forever turn the rhythm of poverty into a rhythm of hope. If we only help one little girl or one little boy to find hope, we have changed the world. It may only be the world of one, but it's the world nonetheless.

Tuesday, February 8, 2011

If At First You Don't Succeed...



I got a little bit lost in Santiago Atitlan. I was only lost for a couple of minutes, but it was during this time that I took one of my favorite photos from the entire trip. It ended up becoming one of my moments. As our group snaked its way through the narrow alleyways of Santiago, we became widely spread out. We were on our way to visit a sponsored family and my mind was reeling at the life lessons I was learning. I believe my distracted mind led me to make a wrong turn. I came around a narrow corner and realized the people I thought I had been following were nowhere to be found.

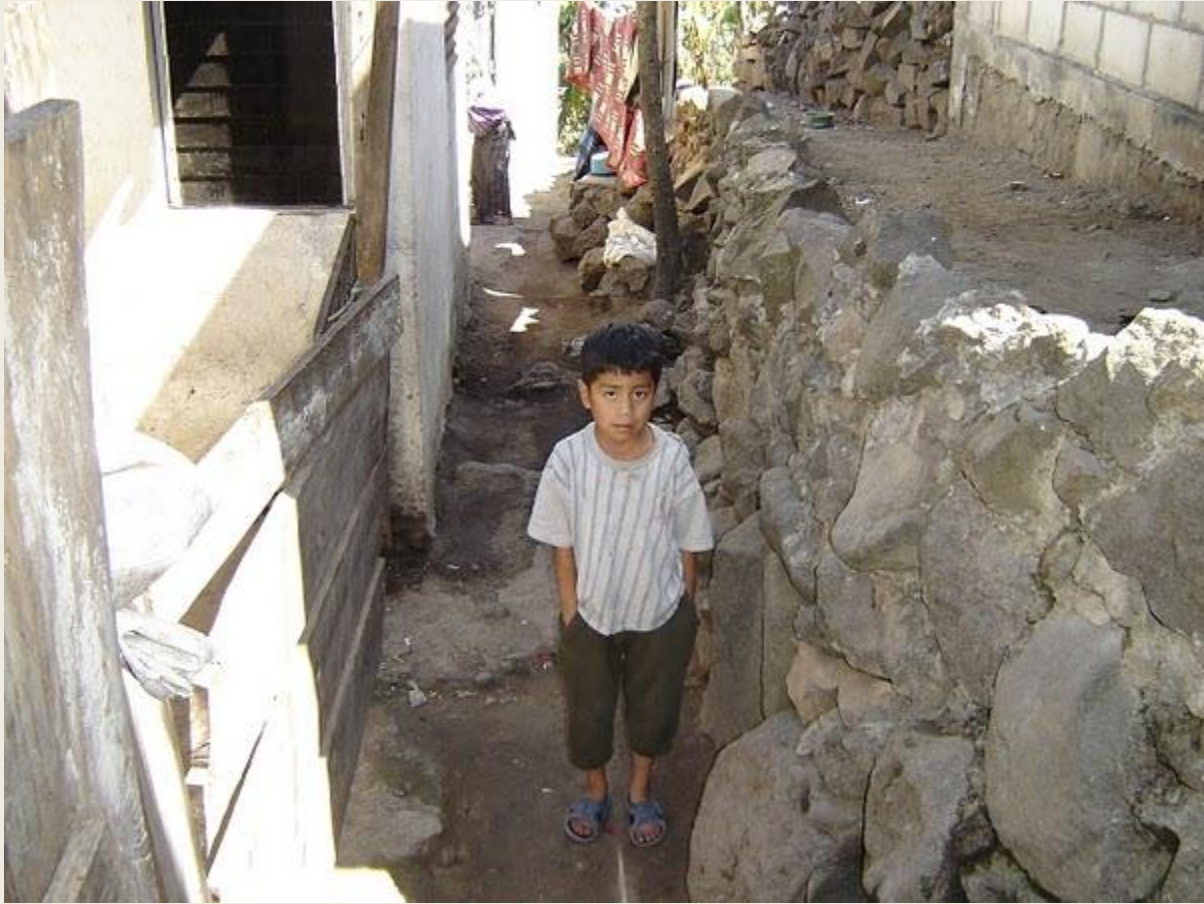
I stopped where I was and looked at the scene you see in the picture above. I found myself staring down a narrow alleyway. Two children peered up at me, the stranger that just stumbled into the very place they call home. The little boy had been walking towards me, headed for the small staircase at my feet. When he saw me, he stopped dead in his tracks and stuffed his hands deep into his pockets. I found the scene so surreal and strangely beautiful. That's why I took the photo. Just before taking the picture, I used one of the very few words of Spanish I actually know.

"Hola," I said, and then I smiled.

The little girl was tenderly cradling a dirty doll that had no clothes. When I spoke, she looked up at me with those beautiful eyes and gave me another hearty dose of Guatemalan smile. As always, my soul was lifted to a place where God can be felt. The little boy, it would turn out, wasn't as quick to smile. But I wasn't about to give up on him.

Since I had arrived in Guatemala, I had yet to find a child that wouldn't return a smile. In fact, most of them were the first to smile. I looked at this little boy standing with his hands buried cautiously in his pockets, his face as serious as any I had ever seen. I knelt at the top of the small stone staircase and pointed at my camera, smiling and trying to convey my desire to capture a smile of his in a photograph. He stood, expressionless.

And so I did the only thing I knew to do – I just kept on smiling. I knelt there like a smiling fool, hoping this child would find the courage to smile back. After a moment, I started to see it. The corners of his mouth began to move. I saw the subtlest evidence of a smile, so I took another photo.



After taking his picture, I turned my digital camera towards him, inviting him to look at the photo of himself. We had learned that children in Guatemala love to see their photos. Most families have no photographs at all, and they certainly don't have cameras. He crept to the stairs, hands still in his pockets, and looked at the image of his almost-smiling self.

And that is when I received the very thing I had hoped for. He looked down at the photo of himself, and I watched as the brightest, broadest, and most infectious smile spread across his face. He looked from the camera to me and back again, the smile I had known was in him never left his face.

The smiles we were offered during our time in Guatemala were a gift to all of us. Words simply cannot describe the effect that the smiles of the poor can have on the hearts of the materially wealthy. When I stood up to leave, that little boy was still smiling. I would have taken a picture for you to see, had my heart and mind not been contemplating the gift I was given.

Because of the smiles of those two children, I was overcome by the undeniable presence of God. I stood in the midst of their poverty, my heart overwhelmed by a depth of love I have never before experienced. The love God holds for the poor spills forth into the world through the grace of their smiles. I stumbled into that grace, lost in the town of Santiago Atitlan. The smiles of two children found me there. And by their grace, I found the love of God. It became a moment for me that no photograph could capture.

I could finally see what was missing from my life. In the midst of their poverty and because of their smiles, I could finally understand the poverty of my own.