

It Was the Best of Times....

April 24, 2015

Some English guy, Dickies, or Dicksburg, I guess it was Dickens, wrote this book that I read in High School. In high school, most of us were stupefied by the oxymoronic opening line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,..." It is cruel to expect a high school student to appreciate the wisdom contained in the classic phrase. For them, it is simply inane to describe anything as both the best and the worst. Only with lived experience does the inherent ambiguity of life become clear (or perhaps more completely muddled). With time and memory, failures are redefined successes, disappointment becomes hope, and life itself is elusive and mysterious. To gain wisdom is to be humbled. Wisdom is perhaps simply knowing that neither our intention nor expectation determines outcome. For all of our planning, our critical considerations, our need to control all variables, our intentional designs, outcomes are always a surprise. Some might call this Karma, or God, or simply mysterious principles of the universe. It is the worst: an unanticipated outcome for which we now must take responsibility. It is the best: something far beyond our limited design.

This aura of best and worst engulfed us this past week. Our board president, Attorney Wayne Waite, and the board secretary, Mr. Dwight Armstrong, arrived in Honduras on April 13. They were stretched this way and that in high powered meetings with Honduran government officials, US embassy representatives, university deans, local mayors, humanitarian organizations, Shoulder to Shoulder staff and supporters, and so many others. Draining as it must have been, they did find moments to refresh their spirits. The children at the Good Shepherd Bilingual School greeted them with the exuberance of youth. Dwight, a man of the earth, had the chance to breath in the rejuvenating air of a Camasca farm. Both of them had a moment to relax in our humble home in Concepcion where we listened attentively to their life stories and witnessed their admirable commitment to Shoulder to Shoulder. More meetings and visits followed them on their trek back to Tegucigalpa. Dreams and anxieties, the beauty of mission and the challenge of execution, the satisfaction of achievement and the weight of planning for the future, traveled with them, filling their heads and hearts in preparation for the board meeting.

On Saturday morning, the Hombro a Hombro Board (the board for our Honduran NGO) began its deliberations. Laura and I were asked to attend. We believed we would be there for Saturday and leave on Sunday. But we were asked to stay on first until Monday, and then again until Tuesday. We hadn't brought enough clothes and ended up washing them in the sink. The discussions were inspiring and animated. There are such great opportunities present to Shoulder to Shoulder in its mission of empowerment with the people of Intibucá. Our work in education is bringing hope to children. The potential in agricultural development and food security promises a path to prosperity in the Frontera. Our collaborative work with brigade partners and our expansion in new service areas bring well-being and health to the isolated and forgotten. The value of our present service and these golden opportunities for future service enliven us. But lest our euphoria swell our egos, serious challenges also confront us. Like any charitable organization, our slim and stretched resources threaten our goals. We also see our faults. We could be better organizers. We could be better communicators. Simply, I suppose, we could be better. On top of all this there is the stickiness of working collaboratively. The others, our partners, always have designs different than our own. Why can't they just recognize that we are right and stop inserting their own thoughts? (It's a joke)

So we have the best, and so we have the worst: our hearts exploding with joy and our minds crippled with angst. It would be so nice if our deliberations followed a clear and linear path. But rather our deliberations are circular, popping from one theme to the next, always elusive and exhausting. What should be our response? Should we follow our hearts? Should we follow our heads? These questions forever elude any answer.

Monday afternoon I'm soaping up and rinsing out my few articles of clothing in the hotel room's sink, feeling very sorry for myself. I despise doing laundry, even more so when I have to do it by hand which is more often the case than not here in Honduras. The questions weigh on my head and heart. Again feeling sorry for myself, I ask myself, "Why does it need to be so hard?" The answer I receive humbles me. It is hard because it is important. Ease is not the goal. Purpose, meaning, justice, and connection, these are the goals. These are not easy. I realize that anything in my life that has lasting value is difficult. It is only in recognizing and accepting the challenges, standing in the storm if you will, when dreams are dreamt and missions exercised. This interplay between the best and the worst is how we realize the integrity of service and justice. More mundanely, I feel some shame knowing that most Hondurans wash their clothes by hand without complaint. My petty ego needs to get out of the way.

Shoulder to Shoulder is doing incredible things to empower the people of Intibucá. Shoulder to Shoulder will invest in even more meaningful missions, deepening relationships of trust and commitment with the people and associations in Intibucá and Honduras. It is the best of times. None of it happens without facing strong head winds. We will design and plan, consider and decide, and seek out donors and partners to share our mission shoulder to shoulder. This, as necessary as it is, will not yield success. It is not the keenness of our minds, nor the professional quality of our planning, nor the wealth of our endowment, that secures the rightness of our mission. It is the integrity of the heart. If we maintain the integrity of our hearts, our dreams will wake. The results will not appear as we had envisioned. They will be so much better than the limits of our minds. They will flood our hearts with joy.

Indeed, these are the best of times, these are the worst of times... And the story continues...