

Chapter Two

It felt like a genuine homecoming the moment I walked through the door of the Hogar Señor San José after three months away. Up to my ankles in corn husks, I approached Sister Edith who, with a surprised smile, got up and gave me a big hug. Children rushed around me hugging my legs. “Do you remember my name?” two or three asked. That morning someone had donated and dumped a large mound of unshucked dry corn that covered the dirt floor and everyone soon returned to shucking corn while we talked.

On my way to the Hogar, walking the familiar route between adobe buildings, I had encountered a couple of the kids on the street outside. As I turned the corner I saw Nicoll and Elia heading to the grinding mill lugging a pail full of corn kernels to grind into flour to make tortillas. When we saw each other we stared in wide-eyed astonishment. They dropped the pail on the street and ran to me with surprised cries.

Listening to Sor Edith, engulfed in down-home camaraderie and overwhelmed with emotion while we shucked corn, I nonetheless looked around with a critical eye to see that the living situation had not improved much since I was last here on May 15th, the day she and the children moved into their new home and I left to live in La Masica, Atlántida. Worse, a couple of dozen chickens wandered loose in the Hogar living spaces; the since-roofed kitchen, dining room, and two small bedrooms where the kids would go to search for eggs in the bedsheets and clothing. I once watched a chicken lay an egg on top of the dining table at lunchtime, then squawk its triumph in front of everyone while they ate. Another time a chicken walking on the dining table pecked the tortilla out of a child’s hand while the kid ate his lunch. No one noticed.

Where there are chickens there's chicken shit.

After I explained to Sor Edith that the Peace Corps had transferred me back to La Paz for the next two years and that I wanted to resume my Field Based Project, I told her where I wanted to begin: with her permission. One Peace Corps tenet is to engage following the recognition of a behavior that requires modification as unobtrusive as possible without drawing attention to oneself as the instigator of change. Kind of like guiding by example and effecting a different way of doing something without appearing to do so at the same time educating the person or group that will benefit by accepting that new behavior. The process requires much patience.

The chickens.

I explained how unsanitary it was having loose chickens around the premises and that it could affect the children's health. Would she consent to having a chicken pen built?

Sister Edith loves having wandering, scratching, pecking chickens underfoot and early morning crowing roosters broadcasting their presence to the world. In La Paz thousands of roosters city-wide collaborate at the crack of dawn, some earlier, especially the hundreds of fighting roosters who have much to complain about, living their short lives in tiny solitary cages.



The nun, who had a third-world, rural upbringing in the second poorest country in the western hemisphere, as have most everyone in Honduras, she has a traditional outlook on life tempered by an old fashioned, generous heart. She entered the nun's Convento Hermanas Franciscanas de Imaculada Concepción at age fifteen, educated as a teacher by the Franciscan congregation she

served in México, El Salvador and Honduras. Granted a one-year sabbatical in 2001, Sister Edith spent the time in the United States where she worked six months as a nanny for a wealthy family in Long Island, New York. She was there on 9/11 at the time the Islamic terrorists destroyed the twin towers in New York City. Then afterward she left to spend the remainder of her year in Atlanta, Georgia visiting relatives and worked a brief stint employed doing industrial labor at a cheese factory. Sister Edith also visited friends in Houston, Texas; friends who introduced her to a gambling casino in Louisiana, broadening her outlook on the world. All the time she searched her mind trying to reach a decision. Dressed as an ordinary civilian, she vacillated about remaining with the Franciscan congregation. She once joked to me that she was looking for a husband in the States.

The self-searching continued after returning to Honduras and rejoining the congregation. Sister Edith worked for a time as a teacher in Siguatepeque and then transferred to La Paz, to be closer to her nuclear family in nearby Cane. She taught at the Catholic High School, the Instituto Santa Clara, managed by the Franciscan Nuns. In La Paz she made a fateful decision. She once told me she had tired of praying every morning, teaching all day, then praying every afternoon, going to bed and repeating same, day after day, week after week, month after month. Life had become a mechanical routine. She could see no future to her life but ending it as a little old lady in an old home for nuns and she couldn't accept that future. She felt something better awaited but didn't know what it yet would be.

In June 2003, Sister Edith, at the age of thirty, submitted her resignation from the Franciscan congregation of nuns after fifteen years of service. The resignation had to be legally formalized in Rome and in November 2003 Sister Edith received the Religiosa de Votos Perpetuos that

released her from the promises committing her to a religious life. Sister Edith had been liberated. She received 5,000 lempiras (\$250) severance pay from the Franciscan congregation for a decade and a half of devoted service to the Catholic church.

Sister Edith may have been liberated from the bureaucratic convent routine she had come to disdain but her personal relation with God remained intact. She gave up the nuns' habit and adopted a light-brown colored symbolic religious dress maintaining the head covering that gave the appearance of a nun. And Sister Edith continued to live a life of poverty. She had reached the rank of a nun educator completing the three required university educational stages: two years study as an Aspirantado; two years study as a Noviciado; two years study as a Voto Permanente and taught school for 6 years. She chose not to live with her mother in Cane and sought a room in which to live in La Paz. A lady offered a room for rent, but never charged her the rent money. "I didn't spend much time there," she told me.

"It must have been quite a change," I told Sister Edith as we sat discussing that self-induced rent in her life. She had been living in a convent with eight other nuns for two years in La Paz one day, then when her resignation had been made final she found herself out on the street, alone, clutching her financial pittance.

To make matters worse, the supervising nuns forbade her from visiting the convent to visit her friends. No longer welcome, they feared she would contaminate the new entering nuns, most teenagers, cloistered from the public. Sister Edith had been blemished by the outside world, her ideas suspect.

Then, to add insult to injury, the supervising nun submitted Sister Edith's final evaluation to the Comayagua diocese where all church records from the surrounding Catholic community

parishes were kept. She accused Sister Edith of rebellion. Obedience is Blind. Catholic doctrine permits no questioning of authority. Sister Edith made the mistake of questioning her teaching assignment. She taught classes at the Catholic high school from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m. every day, not allowing her time for anything else in her life. She wanted to take additional university courses but her schedule thwarted her desire to improve herself.

Sister Edith had no opportunity to review her final evaluation that had been submitted to the Bishop in Comayagua. The only avenue to be able to read the evaluation was to ask for an appointment with the Bishop to ask his permission to read the final document. He refused to meet with her. She persisted and talked with the parish counselor in La Paz asking for his intervention. The parish counselor, who committed suicide not long afterward, told Sister Edith that the Bishop told him that Sister Edith would only be able to read her final evaluation over his dead body.

Sister Edith told me she cried and became depressed over being labeled a rebel in her final evaluation from the congregation of nuns preserved forever in the church's repository of records. As the years progressed further nuances on this theme would be revealed as both Sister Edith and I matured while the Fundación Señor San José grew in stature and recognition.

An excellent read describing an austere life in a Catholic convent in the early 1600s is a book written by Dava Sobel titled 'Galileo's Daughter'. The eldest of Galileo's three illegitimate daughters, born Virginia in 1600 she was thirteen when Galileo placed her in a convent near him in Florence, Italy where she took the name of Suor Maria Celeste. 124 letters have survived of Suor Maria Celeste's correspondence with her father over the years providing revealing glimpses of the convent that she never left until her death on April 2, 1634. Galileo himself had been

placed under house arrest by the Holy Office of the Inquisition where he spent his final years, accused of heresy, for writing that the Earth moves around the sun, a premise that infuriated the clergy. After 350 years Galileo was pardoned by the Catholic church on October 31, 1992. Blind obedience challenged carries a heavy penalty.

In order to earn money for her keep, Sister Edith invested a portion of her severance pay and began to make and sell pupusas (a delicious Honduran hot cheese tart) in the central park. The central park, the nominal center of town, is a large city square bordered by the Catholic church, the Parroquia Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, the alcaldía (city hall), two elementary schools, a cultural center, a protestant church, and other commercial establishments.

For the next year Sister Edith would make her pupusas in borrowed kitchens and sell them in the park. She spent many hours sitting on a bench reading and studying her religious literature and praying in a small children's park a block from the central park. She told me that one day the park gardener approached her and asked why she sat there every day. Hearing her story he advised her to go to the alcaldía and speak with the alcalde where she could submit a solicitud (request) asking for a place to live. Sister Edith had not yet thought of a specific mission to pursue but the alcalde offered her a home after she offered to serve in some way. On August 16, 2004 she moved into a small house catty corner to the central park where community people would stop by and consult about religious matters. The first two children to live there, a brother and sister, Leroy aged 4 and Merlin aged 9, arrived in 2006 after Sister Edith's mother told her their drug-addicted mother had abandoned them. Four years later, when Merlin got to know me, she told me a bit of her story. When two-years-old her mother left her with an aunt. One night, the drunk aunt threw her into a roaring bonfire. Merlin showed me the burn scars on her neck

and shoulder telling me someone pulled her out of the fire saving her life. The alcalde now had a home where at-risk children of dysfunctional families could be placed, and Sister Edith found her calling in life.

The Peace Corps Volunteer, Nick, who introduced me to Sister Edith and the children, would arrive on occasion in 2008 to read stories to ten or twelve resident children as did I after I arrived on March 15, 2009 while our team of Peace Corps Trainees completed Field Based Training and helped clean the children's new home on Saturdays.



Sister Edith consented to the building of a chicken pen after considering the value of better hygiene for the children and recognizing that improved health conditions translate into fewer diseases, infections and sick kids. That affirmation cemented the beginning of an ongoing journey establishing a deep friendship and the pursuit of a quest that has proceeded for several years.

I recognized, by instinct at first, that the journey I chose to follow opened a door for me as well. Without hesitation, I stepped through and eyes wide returned to long-silent memories of my youth: I have never looked back. The influential years of the traditional Hispanic California home that shaped my upbringing no longer exist. In effect I took a step back in time in order to try and recover that life that no longer existed. In my early years I watched my grandmother, squatted, leaning forward, a metate (an inclined three-legged granite grinding stone) between her knees, as she ground the dried corn kernels with an oblong granite stone from corn cobs whose

seed she herself had planted and raised to maturity. Like Sister Edith, my non-English speaking Mexican grandmother prepared all her meals from scratch. My grandma made her tortillas from her ground corn, used cheese she churned from her milk cows, ate eggs laid fresh by her chickens. She would prepare a delicious meal from the wild cottontail rabbits I hunted with my .22 rifle in the nearby fields.

Of course, the correlation between two epochs separated by several decades is not absolute. The world of the 1950s/60s in terms of technological development in contrast to the world of 2009 to 2017 manifests a giant difference in activities of daily living between the two. The variances are exaggerated in societies as far apart (figurative and literal) as the US versus Honduras. The distinctions, however, in the 21st century are becoming less so. There has been a tremendous narrowing of cultural and technological progress between the two.

While I can state that in spite of Sor Edith's traditional orientation concerning life's necessities and activities, she was quite eager to accept modern developments that have changed countries around the world. Their citizens are not ready to give up their cell phones, cable television, modern films, the wonders of advanced medicine, automobiles and pickup trucks, refrigeration, etc. Yet her frugal habits attest to her stubborn insistence of instilling those traditional and religious ways of life in the children under her care at the Fundación Señor San José.

I can further state that La Paz, the administrative capital of the departamento of La Paz, where I choose to live, is much like the California city in which I was born and raised as it was in that time of my birth. There are 18 departamentos that comprise the country of Honduras for a total population of 8 million. The size of the administrative capital cities varies. From La Paz's

approximate population of 50,000 inhabitants, including mountain aldeas, with not a single traffic light in the community, to the country's capital city, Tegucigalpa, of a million and a half citizens.

Beginning my reconfigured two-year Peace Corps commitment in La Paz, I sought out the local medical and community health care facilities as I proceeded to identify and record priorities and necessities as we trainees had been trained to do by Peace Corps staff. It proved a challenge.

The Hogar San José with its twelve children was, of course, my first priority. So, after my HIV training and experience in La Ceiba, my nursing background, and to comply with the goals of my own internal Peace Corps bureaucracy requiring three-month progress reports, I pursued their programmed role only to discover that no one expected my presence. The one community person whom the Peace Corps could find to sponsor me as a counterpart was Ana.

When I met Ana Bulnes at the high school where she taught in the Health Program, she asked me if I could put together a program to train sixty students in their final year of a diploma in Public Health at the Instituto Lorenzo Cervantes, the training to be addressed specific to the topic of HIV/AIDS. The future graduates were scheduled to live in five different mountain communities for three months, at their own expense, and were obligated to design public health projects that would benefit the local community, to include HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention classes to the elementary and secondary school students in the mountain aldeas.

“When do you need the material?” I asked.

“Next week. The students leave for their assignments the week after that.”

Talk about scrambling. I reviewed the pertinent material from the recent thorough classroom Peace Corps training and over the next few days and nights created a program that complied with

Ana's request. I scheduled four days of all-day-long classes to four separate segments of students. Then I recruited enough Peace Corps Volunteers assigned to neighboring communities and the local staff from the La Paz branch of the Jovenes Sin Fronteras to help teach the classes. On the fifth day the students themselves taught the same classes to other fellow colegio students, the same classes they would teach to the isolated student populations of the mountain aldeas after each student group created a teaching manual to use during their three-month assignment living in the communities amongst their peers. Our investment educating sixty students concerning the dangers of the HIV virus thus expanded the knowledge pool to hundreds of students.

Mornings, Ana, my counterpart and also a nurse, taught health classes at the high school and evenings she worked as a nursing supervisor at the local hospital. We would develop a lasting friendship.

I returned to live with my previous host family in La Paz and remained in their home for seven months, sharing meals and gossip. Their home was just three blocks from the Hogar San José where I spent the majority of my time helping the nun.

As I integrated into the community scrutinizing priorities and necessities I, of course, began to meet more and more citizens, including a contingent of military personnel. A development that coincided with my first major project; the construction of a chicken pen. Over a period of weeks I established contact with a group of Special Forces US Army soldiers who visited the Children's Home on their free time as humanitarian volunteers interacting with the locals bringing the children pizza and small gifts. The soldiers were on six-month rotations at the Palmerola Air Base, the Joint Strike Force Command whose mission included the monitoring and active pursuit of narco-trafficante activities from South America through the Central

American corridor interdicting the flow of narcotics into México and the ultimate destination, the waiting lucrative U.S. North American markets.

We at the Home, of course, had no money. The nun received no financial assistance for the children's maintenance from neither the city, the national government, nor the Catholic church. The nun provided the basics in the early days by sending out the children with paper cups soliciting money on the streets: begging. On weekends she and the children would sell pupusas cooked on a donated griddle set up on a corner of the central park near the church and the initial alcaldía-donated home the children occupied.

After I took advantage of a squad of half a dozen soldiers who visited one weekend, they volunteered to provide the materials and the labor to build our chicken pen. It took them two weekends to build a large enough pen to house two dozen chickens and a resident rooster.

My counterpart, Ana, expanded my community participation in different areas. I accompanied her and the colegio Health Program staff into the mountain aldeas for monthly supervisory visits of the assigned students living in the communities and designing health projects for the local inhabitants. She also eased me into participation with a local volunteer hospital support group that focused on poverty-stricken expectant mothers ready to deliver their babies. I joined the volunteer group's weekly meetings to discuss and plan to help alleviate the many problems attendant to a large, poor population with few resources and no money. A vacant home had been donated to the hospital support group by the alcaldía. The expecting women and often several family members would arrive there from their isolated mountain homes in the days prior to their babies delivery at the Hospital Roberto Suazo Córdoba a few blocks away. The accommodations were stark. The families would cook meals over an open fire on the ground. There were no beds

or furniture. Most of the few donated utensils for cooking had been stolen. The support group had been able to pay an auxiliary nurse \$50 a month to be on call for emergencies but she was seldom around. If they could pay, the expectant family was expected to donate \$1 a day for the accommodations. They almost never paid. They had no money. Just enough for paltry meals.

Living in a third-world country awakens one with a jolt of reality: like a punch in the gut.

Sister Edith's decision to accept and care for at-risk children with no government support is a testament to her strong faith and to the ancient Franciscan Doctrine of deprivation.

Saint Francis of Assisi spurned splendid wealth to found his Order of Friars Minor on the principles of poverty, obedience and devotion in the early thirteenth century. The rich, privileged young Chiara Offreduccio, or Clare, his first female follower joined him in the spring of 1212. He cut off her golden hair and sent her begging in the streets of Assisi. Clare sequestered herself for life in the convent Francis built for her at San Damiano where she slept on the floor and ate next to nothing. She wrote:

The sisters to whom the Lord has given the grace of working should labor faithfully and devotedly after the hour of Terce at work which contributes to integrity and the common good ... in such a way that, while idleness, the enemy of the soul, is banished, they do not extinguish the spirit of holy prayer and dedication to which all other temporal things should be subservient.

[RULE OF SAINT CLARE, chapter VII]

Mother Clare died August 11, 1253

Recognizing a priority for the children of the Children's Home to be an adequate diet vital for healthy growth and development, I focused my attention to available local resources.

Malnutrition robs the human body of ingredients necessary for brain development affecting the ability to study and learn. The availability of protein is critical, the body requires proper sustenance for strong teeth and bones.

A few donations from concerned citizens did arrive at the Hogar San José. There were used and broken toys, discarded clothing, some food products like the donation of cartons of broken unsalable eggs. Occasional fruit products would be dropped off, like overripe bananas, mangos, citrus fruits. One kind old gentleman who worked at a local farm would bring surplus vegetables like squash and cucumbers. The problem with the well-meaning gifts was that they were seasonal and sporadic. To her frugal credit, Sister Edith would winnow out the unusable trash and garbage setting aside food items the kids could eat. Clothing was separated into wearable and salable. She would sell the worse of the used clothing and toys to people even poorer than the children living at the Home.

After a few weeks I learned that the United Nations World Food Program had an office in La Paz. The Programa Mundial de Alimentos (PMA) had started storing bulky 50-pound sacks of the five basic food requirements in the previous home occupied by Sor Edith and the children, the same home from which they had been evicted. The building had never been remodeled as a museum and instead had been converted to function as municipal storage space. Sor Edith still had the keys to the front door.

A common refrain I encountered as I expanded my presence and met different agency and community folks in search of resources for the Fundación Señor San José's development turned out to be that Sister Edith and the Foundation were not legal and therefore not entitled to receive donations. She was not even considered to be a nun but an opportunist by many people in the

community: an opportunist taking advantage of sympathy for needy and abandoned children.

Vicious rumors fueled by malicious gossip ran rampant. I once told Sister Edith of an egregious lie someone had repeated to me. “May God forgive them,” she replied with a straight face.

For example, when I approached the governmental department that stored and managed wood and lumber illegally harvested by poachers who ravished the country’s forests, the supervisor told me he could not donate wood for a chicken pen because Sister Edith and the Foundation were not legal. They were not recognized as a legal entity by the national government.

The director of the PMA that stored the food for poverty-stricken rural mountain communities told me the same thing when I made an appointment to talk with him about the possibility of food for the children at the Home and he explained the surplus food was meant for students and families in poor, rural isolated mountain aldeas. He asked who I was and what interest I had at the Fundación Señor San José. Explaining that I had been assigned for two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I mentioned the activities with which I had involved myself after recognizing them as priorities, including an English class I provided the Home’s older residents. I also argued that many of the abandoned and at-risk children were originally residents of poor rural communities, countering his statement that the World Food Program was intended to provide the five basic foods — flour, beans, rice, cooking oil, corn — only to isolated rural communities. Not only that, I added, the nun received no financial or other support from governmental or private agencies. The children needed to beg in the streets for alms in order to eat food that did not reach the level of basic necessity.

After reviewing my credentials, the director asked me to submit a formal written request addressed to the United Nations World Food Program asking for the food supplement for the

Foundation children stating my role as a US government agent, which I was as an employee of the US State Department.

At our next meeting the PMA director told me the request for food assistance to the Fundación Señor San José had been granted even though the Children's Home lacked the proper legal status. Further, he added, he and his seven employees had been ordered by their regional headquarters in the nearby colonial capital city of Comayagua to enroll in English classes, a new requirement for UN employees in Honduras. Two or three had registered for classes at a bilingual school in Comayagua but complained the English teacher did not provide proper instruction and they learned little English. Hector Colindres, the director, asked me if I would conduct an English class for his staff. I agreed to weekly classes, one afternoon a week after they got off work. The next week Sister Edith was able to use the front door key to her former home and we retrieved a 50-pound sack of food for each of the five basic foods, which we would do monthly for the next year at which time the donation was terminated by a new, less generous PMA director who claimed the children did not qualify for the food. Each 50-pound sack was moved one at a time on a wheelbarrow and transported the two long city blocks to the Foundation home by Sister Edith and me.

One rule, of many, the Peace Corps implemented for all Volunteers was a prohibition against the operation of a motor vehicle. Volunteers were also prohibited from hitch-hiking or even riding in the back of a pickup truck. Safety issues, the honchos said; although the rules were widely ignored by Volunteers who had to either walk, ride a bike, or wait for often irregular bus service, especially in isolated rural areas where most PCVs were assigned. The restriction against driving any vehicle, however, was enforced, a violation of which meant immediate dismissal

from Peace Corps service.