

*Life is full of stories. Every day is full of stories. Some get told. Too many don't. I'm feeling the urge to change that . . . just a little.*

## Story 1

One current housemate started out a couple years ago as an occasional outpatient in my home, needing hospital care (factor 8 injections) for his hemophilia every couple months. Since then, he has become a full-time live-in out-patient, needing hospital attention almost every day. This is understandable, since his own home is at least five hours of travel--on foot, by buses and trucks--from the only hospital equipped to provide care for hemophiliacs. Much of that is on trails that I can hardly manage, especially during muddy season, May - November. Any travel can easily provoke nosebleeds, not a welcome predicament for a hemophiliac. This public hospital rarely has a bed available for him, and often no medications either. He has sat through many a sleepless night in the emergency ward, waiting, hoping (esperando . . . it's the same word in Spanish).

He is a great story-teller; he has many stories to tell. He's a great writer, too, so I'm encouraging him to write these stories. Some of his stories I think I can tell better than him, however. Since I have 4 eyes--well, 6, really--and he has only one, my vision, my perspective(s), is (are) no doubt much more diverse than his! He did have 2, until he was 12, when a playground-thrown stone removed one. That was 19 years ago. Nobody, least of all him, thought that would ever change.

During last February's election observation, one of the first-time observers, from southern California, had been a frequent visitor to El Salvador. She had come several times as a volunteer with "Eye Care", attending to hundreds of Salvadorans with eye deficiencies. She told me enthusiastically about these missions. Well, that would involve treating damaged eyes, not dead eyes, one would assume--or at least so I assumed. That was until another USA'n friend had come to my home for dinner, accompanied by a Salvadoran friend. She told of her daughter, who, as an infant, had lost her eye due to some illness. This Eye Care team had replaced that eye with a glass one, which didn't restore sight, of course. But looking good, while not the same as seeing well, is at least a welcome improvement. Intrigued, I called my housemate in to hear her story. It wasn't hard to convince him to pursue such a possibility.

The next morning we headed to the beach. This wasn't for a day of sea and sun, but because the Eye Care clinic had set up in a former Roman Catholic orphanage, facing the ocean. He had never been to this port city. Exploring a fishing/tourist town for the first time, along with the possibility of going home with a new eye, helped to sustain his weakened body to withstand a prolonged, sun-baked line-up. Once inside the walls of the shaded compound, and through the many check-in and check-up stations, I found my election-observer friend. She had her election observer t-shirt on--wrong mission! Tapping her on the shoulder, I complained that her people weren't letting me vote--again, wrong mission!

Our mission was accomplished just in time. Clean-up, closing and sunset were all happening as we checked out, and stepped out the gate. He had to return the next day for a slightly more custom-made model, and is still waiting for his permanent eye.

While sight wasn't restored, his view of himself--his self-image--underwent major healing. Always wearing sunglasses previously, because of his missing eye, he was viewed with suspicion by all, especially at night--drunk, drug addict, gang member, delinquent? In a violent country full of gangs and police and military, that can be at best inconvenient, more often dangerous. Being out after dark (6 p.m.) was never advisable.

So now, he could wear clear glasses, and look like an academic, rather than like the suspect, the culprit.



What a transformation this effected in his self-esteem and his attitude toward life. He waited for people to notice at first, then posted a couple photos and made some subtle comments on facebook. After a year of suicidal comments, then a couple years of bidding the world farewell with some frequency on fb (for good reason--most of his hemophiliac friends have died, well before his ripe old age of 31), these comments seemed refreshingly out of character. Responses were few, but some were most meaningful. A life-time friend, a philosopher by nature, now builder of bridges in the USA, commented on facebook: USA (translated from Spanish): "Debuting, congratulations! I have never seen you so happy." ES: "Hahaha, it shows, brother, haha." USA: "For sure, it comes from inside you."



"Artificial Eye"

And so it did. So it does. The physical realities of hemophilia continue to take their toll on such euphoria. But the Eye Care will have a life-long impact, certainly.

--better-looking, though not seeing any better . . .



## Story 2

This story goes back a ways--more than half a century, in fact. When I was 5 or 6, my blind grandmother taught me how to crochet. I was intrigued, fascinated with this intricate art. Cub scout knots were okay to tie with a few friends in the church basement, but crochet pattern books--these posed a truly challenging, kaleidoscope puzzle. I was determined to master every complicated stitch, every complex creation, right up to the table-cloth. Along with piano practice and making the family breakfast, this could easily fill the hours until the rest of the family would wake and rise. By the time I was 8, I had won the crochet competition at the Calgary Stampede. I recall feeling sorry for all those grannies who had dedicated their lives to this art, only to be beaten by an 8-year-old boy; I figured there probably wasn't a category for 8-year-old boys. Alas, I soon surmised that this was not a suitable sport for 8-year-old boys, certainly not in Cow Town, Alberta. So, I ditched my hook and thread, and dedicated my time to the somewhat more acceptable pastime of piano-playing.



Imagine my delighted astonishment when I discovered that crocheting was the pastime of choice at one of the small-town men's prisons we were working at in El Salvador, some 10-15 years ago. Since then, it has spread throughout the male prison system with a passion. Spectators at a prison soccer game, or participants in one of our seminar sessions, cause no eyebrows to raise as they concentrate on their crocheting. And so it was one Friday a few weeks ago, starting with a new group of "retired" (like alcoholics, no-one is ever an "ex"-) gang-boys, sharing a

prison amicably with their life-and-death "retired" rivals. Quite likely the youngest, and undoubtedly the most restless, of the 15 participants, "J" spent much of our sultry afternoon session crocheting. Intrigued and curious, I asked to see his amazing production after the seminar. I told him my own childhood story. Within a couple weeks, he had made me a personalized wallet: "I'm sorry, could you pay for the thread, please?" Well, of course.



8-year-old boys in Calgary shouldn't be crocheting (well, so I assumed--to their credit, nobody ever told me that [maybe my parents] , as far as I was aware). But 18-year-old boys--gang-boys, in prison--in El Salvador can and do crochet. Where is the justice? I might just have to take lessons from this guy, and pick up where I left off. Look out, Calgary Stampede grannies!

--an earlier photo, from a different prison, not "J"

## Story 3

Over the past few years, our mini-prison-team was often invited to lead seminars with the youth of a colleague pastor's congregation. There are 2 or 3 dozen youth in this tiny church. Since their worship service finishes by 10 a.m., we had long Sundays to delve into diverse themes, using an endless and entertaining variety of interactive methodologies. Sometimes we all went on swim outings for a change of pace. After preaching there recently, I invited whoever wanted to join me to the local airshow, which claims to be (one of?) the best in Latin America. Air shows were nothing new to me. With Dad, we would climb on our garage roof in downtown Calgary to watch the RCAF's (Royal Canadian Air Force's) Golden Hawks display during the Calgary Stampede, just a couple blocks off the parade route. But this was a first for the 4 guys who joined me that afternoon. While I was mesmerized, gawking in awe at the woman standing defiantly on top of her plane, while flying loops, I couldn't understand why my young companions were stuck texting . . . something to do with a generation/technology gap, no doubt.

A couple weeks ago, I was back, chatting for an hour after worship. Heading to an all-day celebration of World Dance Day, I was looking forward to some solitude and reading while being distracted by the dance competition. About 15 minutes down the road, I couldn't resist the urge to head back and invite some company to join me. I stopped and called my pastor-friend. No answer. So, I headed back. They were all busy divvying out bursary funds, but some thought they might join me. I waited. Late morning, 4 joined me. The auditorium where the event was to take place was deserted. Nobody. No activity. Closed. Adjoining the same parking lot was MARTE, the art museum. It was also quiet and deserted, but at least it was open. Well, if an airshow couldn't hold these 15-20-year-old guys' attention, what chance would an art gallery stand? I mused. Oh ye of little faith . . . They were fascinated. One guy couldn't take enough pictures. Another was an inspiration with his insightful interpretations. The life-size space capsule crafted out of thousands of pieces of diverse recycled garbage was a hit, of course. But much more subtle art also intrigued and inspired. Having often visited these galleries in solitude, I was more entertained watching and listening to them and their comments and reactions.

From there we went to MUNA, the anthropological museum, also open, and one of 3 capital venues for full Sunday afternoons of live entertainment. We took in: a documentary on Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez, who had just died; a belly-dance team presenting and teaching, over which an Egyptian performance I recalled from a seminary pilgrimage held nothing, and which sparked much good-natured banter, as to who would be the most gifted belly-dancer among them; a rural drama team passionately portraying the war-time massacre of their village; a live presentation of an artist-friend of mine from decades back. Each of the galleries merited an unrushed scrutiny as well. In the one on religion, they recognized the Lutheran "cathedral", in the photo display beside the Roman Catholic cathedral, somewhat more modest. They were impacted into awe and reverence by the Mons. Oscar Romero gallery. Too young to have experienced any of the armed conflict (1980-1992), they pressed me for my story, my experiences, my version of the war, including arrest and imprisonment and expulsion, then wondered if I'd be willing to share my testimony with the rest of their youth group. The final visit was to a gallery filled with inspired and inspiring student contributions on the theme of migration--young folk fleeing their homeland in search of the "American dream", and all the hope and horror that that entails. Visitors were invited to write on the walls with the chalk provided. One of the guys in our group wrote: "No one of God's creatures is illegal anywhere in God's creation." Amen.



--more enthused by art shows than air shows

Anticipating tomorrow's (ad)ventures,  
Brian

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As I dropped them off, back in their marginal neighbourhood, where they dare not cross certain roads if they value their lives, I marveled at the richness of our day together, pondering: "What if I hadn't turned back to invite them to join me? What if I hadn't sacrificed my afternoon of rare and precious solitude? Thank God for impulses. Thank God for urges. Thank God for Sunday afternoons free of plans and schedules. Thank God for spontaneous friends willing to fill such afternoons with unexpected, memorable treasures.

Thanks be to God.