

## Nicaraguan Insights

We just returned from our Feb. 2010 delegation to Nicaragua. I have a ton of notes, and I plan to use those for something – but it makes little sense to try to share all of them. The other delegation members have provided some detail on our activities.

I would like to share some “insights”. One of the key reasons I travel is to gain new insights into the world, people, problems, etc. Nicaragua has been a very fruitful source of those. The following came to me during this trip.

## Why We Travel

People ask us this all the time. Is this a “mission” trip? Is it a “project”? What are you building? What are you bringing for people? I always say, “No, it’s different”. I never could grasp what a “mission” trip to a Latin American country is all about. They are more Catholic than we are, by far. They are more religious, more committed – more everything in the realm of religion. If there is a mission, it is what they do to our understanding of our religion while we are there. And, no, this is not a “project”. A “project” is where we come in from the North and build something, or install something, or give them something. We don’t do that. Many of the things imposed by the North are useless, or are seen as demeaning gifts. We don’t do that – at least not yet!

So, why do we go there?

### 1. **A new view on the world.**

After a week in Nicaragua, our eyes are focused a bit differently. We now have on new “glasses”, new “lenses”. I have been there 7 times now, and have also traveled to several other foreign lands – every visit gives me a new perspective. And this lens, this perspective changes my view of the rest of the planet. There are billions of people who are living at or about this economic level, with a similar history, similar problems, hopes and aspirations. If I never see them, never hear them, then, I really cannot understand them, or love them. These few people, this small group, give me a window on the others that I cannot get without actually going there and living with them. It changes **US**, and hopefully that will help in the long run.

### 2. **We Bless Them.**

We bless them, simply by coming and naming them. They have our respect, and eventually, our love. We build them up, we support them, and we bless them and call them by name. We come as equals; we accept their gifts, their hospitality, their food, their hopes and dreams. We affirm them. We help them process their ideas, to focus their energies, to be real people in this world where they are barely a blip on the world scene! And they richly deserve our blessing. Their faith, their hope, their efforts in the face of their problems, are simply incredible.

### 3. **We Help Them.**

I am not clear exactly how this works, but I am convinced that we do help. We do not bring large sums of cash, we do not put up walls, we do not teach, but we do help. We fund a continuing education and facilitation program conducted locally by AKF. This helps them to function as a

group, and gives them access to other local resources. And some of the help happens back home, as we confront our own problems, with theirs in mind. Some of it affects our government, our foreign policy, all the things done in our name. Some of it comes from the changes that happen in them, their ability to organize, to invoke change where they are. We can help, and we do, in many ways. New opportunities appear on each visit. The clothing issue was a major one on this trip.

## Contra War – role of Peasants and Indigenous Peoples

Carlos Pacheco talked about the role of the peasant farmers and the aborigines in the Contra War. He said, I am fairly certain he did, that it was largely a domestic revolt against the high handed tactics of the Sandinistas, who appeared everywhere, and tried to take charge of everything. That was news to me, so I tried to check this out a little bit. I could only find one book that talked this way about the Contra war. It appears to be written by an ex CIA agent, and the critique on it is that he is just trying to downplay the negative impact which our President's support for the Contras produced. There was clearly some involvement from the peasants, and the aboriginal peoples have still to make peace with the government, but I think it is a reach to say that the contra war was primarily waged by these two groups.

## ALBA

Carlos also had very negative words about ALBA. He feels it is funneling funds around from Venezuela in a less than transparent manner. I am sure he knows more about this than I do, but I find both praise and concern for the block of nations who are trying to act in concert.

As always, there is no black and white in Nicaragua, nor anywhere else for that matter.

## The US was “settled”, Nicaragua was “conquered”

No settlers came from Spain as they did to the English colonies. They did not bring their families. They came to pillage and conquer. The relationship with the “mother” country was very, very different from our experience. Nicaraguans see themselves as a subject people for the last 300 years. They have never been regarded as a partner with any rights. That leads to the next point, the Nicaraguan Güegüense.

## Nicaraguan Güegüense – a possible insight.

I love these people in Teustepe. Some of them are downright remarkable. They are strong, hard working, loving human beings. BUT – PERO – there are times when they absolutely drive me to distraction. At times they seem to be petty, childish, easily offended, selfish, backbiting, etc. You name the “childish” behavior, and I have heard it or seen it – and it drives me crazy. I can tell stories of ingratitude, of competitive jostling for favor, of gossip and innuendo. I am looking for a way to hold these two things in my brain. How can such capable, adult people **appear** to be so childish sometimes? What is going on here?

I have a local analogy at hand. One of my sons severely criticizes his parents (ME!) for being so blasted Minnesota Nice, for burying or ignoring serious problems that he thinks we should confront head on. And every time he brings it up, I wonder what went wrong with his upbringing! How could he actually act the way he says he wants us to? Clearly a difference of perspective.

As for the Nicaraguan explanation, you may consider what follows a simplistic bit of sophistry, but it makes me happy! After seven trips there, I have a glimmer of an idea. I think it has been said, in indirect ways, by many of the professionals that we have heard during our visits over the years.

For more in depth on Güegüense, see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El\\_G%C3%BCeg%C3%BCense](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_G%C3%BCeg%C3%BCense). Maria Lopez and Aynn Setright both referred to it. Simply put, Nicaraguans have a long history of indirectly attacking and undercutting authorities. They have a bit of self loathing about it, because the authorities are, in fact, themselves. Their history is one of domination. There were no settlers from Spain that arrived in Nicaragua. The people that came were adventurers, conquerors. They did not bring families; they came to find gold and easy money. They enslaved the people, had children by them, and took what they wanted. This form of dramatic play, the Güegüense, was created during colonial times. It is the jester, a man in a mask, and the play is put on before the Spanish lords, in front of the Old Man, or the Large Spanish Woman, and it mocks them to their face. It is the way the world works. Someone else is in charge here, and my best approach to survive, to find a way to have some power, is to mock them, to make fun of them, to disrupt what they are doing. Just as U.S. residents tend to see the world as a problem to be solved, as **our** problem to be solved, the Nicas tend to see all of life as a kind of human comedy, or drama, where the best tools are indirect accusations, and behind the scenes power plays, and under the cover murmurings. It's the guy behind the mask that is the key. That is normal – that is how things are done. They also see most problems as being caused from above, and requiring intervention from above in order to fix them. They do not see themselves as capable of fixing them from below.

And it is not like this is a conscious thing on their part, any more than it is my conscious effort to bury problems instead of addressing them. It's how I work – it's how I think people should work.

OK, I realize that this is me playing amateur historian and sociologist, but it works for me. If you have a better idea, I'm open to it. Here's a relevant quote from Wikipedia:

Because deception for monetary gain is central to the plot of "El Güegüense", the play frequently is cited by newspaper editorials as a kind of symbolic archetype for perceived corrupt politicians or unaccountable public institutions. Unpredictable election returns also have been attributed to the heritage of the masked "El Güegüense" figure reflected in an electorate skilled at masking their true voting intent, notably so with the FSLN party's crushing, unanticipated defeat at the polls in 1990. While the role of "El Güegüense" as the highest expression of Nicaraguan folkloric art is secure, the overt theme of the play -entry into the aristocratic lifestyle through deceptive means- is frequently held at arm's length in political speeches as contrary to the current vision of national growth occurring through hard work, economic diversification, and manufacturing exports.

This is an article from Envio, which describes the play and its history:

<http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3151> .

The Güegüense is an old mestizo peddler—more indigenous than Spanish—who crisscrosses Mesoamerica with his two sons in the times of the Spanish Colony, buying and selling all kinds of

merchandise. In Nicaragua, the Spanish governor Tastuanes, is broke and in crisis. With his chief constable, his clerk and his councilman, he seeks to impose himself, to exercise control, to charge taxes. In response, the Güegüense plays dumb, turns the governor into his client, gets him all confused, tricks him, mocks him, doesn't pay him a cent and turns the tables on him time and again in hilarious dialogues. And he dances and dances and dances. At the end, his oral and commercial skills even enable him to marry his son Forcico off to Suche Malinche, the governor's daughter. That is the gist of this masterpiece of words, music and dance.

What does it mean to be Güegüense? Is it indeed the essence of being Nicaraguan? There is constant debate between those who reject the Güegüense as a vulgar, irresponsible and cunning liar, and those who embrace him as astute, roguish, a leveler and a rebel against authority. Although we fall on the side of the more positive reading of El Güegüense's verbal, dancing and political juggling, we also recognize both types of Güegüense in Nicaragua: the shameless scoundrel and the anarchistic rebel. One confuses to benefit from the lie and the other to mock and defeat the powers that be.

I think the solid lesson here is that relationship issues are their problem, and they need to deal with them in their own way. It is not our place to criticize that, or to try to meddle. If they bring things to us that appear to be dissension and discussion, they are simply using their standard techniques to try to gain advantage over each other. We are not part of that game, and we should not play it. It would be like them advising us on how to change our foreign policy of intervention. It's a difficult problem, outside of our area of expertise. We need to leave it to them. They have been working it out for 15 years, with the help of the training and advice of AKF on leadership and personality conflicts. They will figure it out, or NOT. We don't all need to operate the same way to achieve good results.

Elena chose the reading from Paul about the Body of Christ, because Paul had similar dissension in his audience 2,000 years ago. This is normal, this is life, and we will all grow through it.

### **Change is Possible, but it is hard and takes a long time!**

The vision of Jeffry Sachs of the Millennium Villages that we could eradicate poverty in 10 years is way too optimistic. The one positive project described by Carlos Pacheco has been under way for 17 years, and it is not complete, by any means. This is a cooperative women's' group that has gained considerable presence in their region. They are moving, but it is slow – and that is positive, because it will likely be permanent. And their example is spreading to other communities. While we were in Nicaragua, we saw some amazing examples of development, locally accomplished. Each one required many years. The primary input from outsiders was encouragement and support, with a few ideas and some information added to the mix.

The Arts school we visited was so amazing – but it has been there over 20 years, and the people running it now grew up in it. They know how it works because they were children when they started as students. They are prospering, and they are spreading, but it did not happen overnight.

The discussion with the public interest lawyers in Teustepe was very informative in this respect. The Teustepe Community is interested in becoming a nonprofit corporation, in order to own property in the

name of the entire group. They also need some legal entity to hold their funds, and manage their investments, loans, etc. I have helped a non-profit draft its documents in a single meeting. This team of lawyers is going to take several months, and many meetings lasting several hours. And they know what they are doing, having done this many times before. It just takes that long for a foreign, risky idea to take hold in the population. A nonprofit appears as a no-brainer to us, but to the Teustepeans, we might as well be asking them if they want to start a local stock exchange! Just imagine the looks you would get from our own community if you appeared with that as your topic of discussion for our next meeting. What? Why? How on earth does that work, and why would I be interested at all?

The lawyers explained how it works, how it is different than joint ownership, different from a cooperative. They talked through the complexities of land titles in Nicaragua – where they are modestly more complex than here, given the history of war and government confiscation, and lack of records. It will take that community several months to get their heads around this, what it is, and how they may want to structure it. And this is just typical of anything like this in that world. It takes time. Nothing is direct, nothing immediate – things simply do not work that way.

### **Artistic expression – dance.**

I was simply stunned by the arts school. The dancers had such fluid movements. The young people were so alive, so confident, so capable. At first, I was thinking, how can they train all of these people to be artists in this economy? The odds of them being able to make a living doing music or dance are very small. But it is not about making them professional artists. It uses their interest and talent in arts to form adult, capable human beings, who are going on to other careers. It is like an explorer program for the arts, starting in preschool, and continuing on into college. What a brilliant idea! They have formed hundreds of Nicaraguan young people, and given them a sense of pride and accomplishment, and an understanding of how to affect and influence their world. Amazing, simply amazing. I wish my grandkids and kids would have had an opportunity to participate in something like this.

### **Treat beggars with respect.**

Elena suggested that an easy way to do this is to engage them in conversation – especially the young ones. What is your name? Where do you live? How many people in your family? Do you go to school? They always seem puzzled that I speak any Spanish, but they do talk with me. The down side is that they tend to follow you around for a while just to listen to your odd accent! They also try a little bit of English! Their English is about the level of my Spanish in High School – Adios. Buenos Dias. Gracias!

### **Microloans are not THE answer.**

Mike Woodward of Jubilee House spoke to us quite a bit about sustainable development. They had started a micro-loan program, but they decided that this was not enough to really change anything. It does not generate any new wealth. When people in Teustepe get a loan, they are modestly better off. They can buy a few more clothes to sell to their neighbors. But no new money comes from it. It just moves money around. To generate wealth, something must be produced and sold – farm products, manufactured goods. To this end, they are setting up organic farming cooperatives. The higher price they can command will justify their presence in the market. And the organic manufacturing of apparel is

a similar approach. The downside of this is that it takes a considerable investment to create an organic farming operation, and even more for a manufacturing operation.

### **Sweat shops are not all bad.**

There are no simple answers, and there are no black and white players in the developing world. Sweatshops are not all bad. They are the only jobs there are, and they are jobs, and they do pay. They do not pay enough to live on, but they do provide some salary from external sources. Peasants in the countryside will get up at 3:00 am to board a bus to go to the city to work, and then return home at night the same way. The free trade zones attract foreign investment and do provide jobs. They provide no other benefits to the country. And in many cases, even the construction jobs are done by foreign workers, not the locals. But it does bring in some economic growth.

The problem is that when the market sours, when cheaper labor is available elsewhere, the investment company easily pulls up and moves out. The key is to create the same type of operation, in the same free trade zones, but owned and staffed by a cooperative organization of local people. The clothing manufacture is one example, the filtron manufacturing is another. But it literally takes several hundred thousand dollars to get one of these operations off the ground, even with a crew of local volunteers who will work for no pay until it is up and running. Now if we could just get our neighbors to only buy “fair trade” goods from these free trade firms.

### **Solar Ovens simply do not work.**

Mike Woodward talked about these as well. It looks like a natural. Every Nicaraguan home has a woman laboring over wood fire in a kitchen with no good chimney or ventilation. (I think the introduction of chimneys would help enormously.) They have a serious deforestation problem – everyone burns wood for cooking. And they have abundant sun. So they brought in some solar cookers. When they returned to check on them, they noted that the cookers were being used to store the wood. What is wrong here?

Well, we are in the topics. The sun moves rapidly for a 12 hour day, and it is not always in the southern part of the sky – it moves around quite a bit. The cook has to continually come out to monitor the oven to get it to work properly. And it sometimes burns the food if it is not attended. When she is cooking in the kitchen, inside the house, this is not such a big problem. And, after all that, when she serves the meal, the family complains. This rice and beans doesn't taste right. It has none of that old, smoky flavor that makes it so tasty. They use virtually no spices in it – other than the smoke.

And, as Mike put it, deforestation is a problem, but it has not made it into the top 500 concerns of the average family. Survival comes first – trees are later. And I might add, litter comes much later! The country is covered in plastic bags!

### **We are all in this together.**

This was absolutely drummed into me on this trip. Poverty in Nicaragua is a negative impact on our economy, on our opportunities, on our earnings. The Scandinavians appear to be the only peoples on the planet that really grasp this. We run into their efforts everywhere. And they are not there to foster

trade, or build a factory – they are just trying to help in ways that do not harm, that lift up and inspire. I am convinced that their culture was formed by centuries of depending on each other to survive in the frozen north. They realize that we are all inter-dependent. Norway is damaged, as long as the people of Teustepe do not have water, or adequate access to education and jobs. Sweden is less because a child in Teustepe will not have access to the education they need to participate fully in their life's work. Picking up the drunks in St. Paul and housing them and caring for them is cheaper than letting them wander the city and end up in jail or the emergency room with major problems. The issue here is that the costs and savings are all spread around differently. We all benefit, but no one is willing to make the investment to get the return for others. We seem to grasp that a little bit better in the area of education. We seem to realize that our competitiveness in the world, in our nation, depends on the quality of our educational system. But when push comes to shove, we cut that along with everything else. We are “disinvesting” in ourselves, instead of putting more investment into the long term benefits of education, health care, etc.

I would like to find a group, a book, a research study that tries to explain this simple fact – something a bit more profound than that Canadian Sage, Red Green – who regularly says: “We’re all in this together. I’m pulling for you.”

### **I do NOT like beans and rice 3 times a day!**

But I am polite! I ate some of it without fail, and I graciously thanked my host.

### **I am NEVER going to be fluent in Spanish**

It's just too much work at this point in my life. I have let go of that goal. I can understand it well enough, if it is spoken clearly. But I am translating in my head all the time, and not very well. I have problems with the tenses, and with Italian getting in the way. I finally let go of the idea that I am going to be good at this, and accepted that it will be ok to stumble around in this tongue. The Nicaraguans are very gracious about it. The worst thing I get is a weird look when they don't recognize the words I find.