

Wednesday 07 / 31 / 2002

Both calve muscles shriveled into hideous cramps simultaneously bringing sleep to an abrupt halt. My slumber preempted, I pitched to the floor to ground one or both legs. The blanket did not yield. It had somehow lassoed both ankles and defied spasmodic attempts to clear either foot. I rolled onto the heart of pine floor. It hurt. I still had cramps but managed to free myself from the sheets and half crawled and walked to the bathroom. My roommate Corky did not waken from the noise. Each time I returned to bed the cramps also returned to torment me.

By 5:30 I gave up on the bed and shaved, washed and prepared to brush my teeth. Honduras makes you appreciate the gesture of running the toothbrush fully loaded with paste slowly through the tap water. We do have tap water. We have a shower and indoor toilets. We do not have potable water and in the toilet it often appears mud brown. Cuts created in shaving may allow the various bugs in the water access to your digestive tract and this is not a good thing. Our dirty tap is both hot and cold... sometimes. Manana.

Do not touch the tap water except to wash. We are provided bottled water in neat sealed five gallon cans. I remain suspicious that since only one company provides this service where do they find their water and what are they really doing to it to make it safe? A blue seal around the five gallon jug does not improve purity. The company dispensing it has a monopoly granted by the government. He is friendly to them. Most people also receive a five gallon dispenser. We do not. We pour ours moonshine style into our various water bottle containers. We miss often.

Fifty years of experience has taught me wet the brush and paste in the tap. Try and not do it. What happens if you forget to wet before adding the paste? Now you either start over or dip both in the water container creating a film on the surface. When finished, pour water onto the brush and clear you pallet without wasting too much from your water container. Easier said than done. A glass is as suspect as the tap itself for the same reason.

The group joined for Honduran Coffee made from bottled water. To brew, coffee is placed in a small, mesh sock that looks like a miniature old fashioned airport windsock. Water is boiled separately and then slowly poured over the sock transforming the very lightweight but dense ground charcoal beans into coffee not seen anywhere else in the world. When

poured the grinds coagulate into a gooey black molasses like mixture that taints the water with a strong coffee aroma, dark ebony color and rich texture. When the coffee pot is filled the coffee appears undrinkably strong. It is not. As strong and full bodied as it appears the coffee has no taste of acid or excessive strength. Unlike most people I drink my cup straight.

Serving the coffee is a big deal. Hondurans add heated milk to it. If combined cold, the coffee steadfastly refuses to change color. I do not know why it just does. Refrigeration is an afterthought. Milk is fresh or spoiled although some is actually pasteurized or so the container says. It is also sweet and thick almost like cream.

We meet as a group on the porch. It is unscreened but has lots of space extending around the front and right side of our apartment. This day was uncommonly beautiful. Grey and white clouds flecked the sky as the orangey glow of dawn arrived. The sun does not rise from the ocean. It arrives from the shore's edge and sets at the other end of the shore. Unsettling. The group reviews its plans for the day and what we will complete at the Church of the Holy Spirit construction site.

We began with a 15 x 20 foot rectangle and excavated a roughly ten inch wide and eighteen inch deep slit trench around the perimeter. We have now created a tic tac toe board in the interior. Mesoamerica rejects sequence. Digging the tic tac toe board first makes sense because you shovel dirt from the middle of the rectangle to the exterior. By digging the perimeter first, moving the dirt becomes more difficult.

Mixing concrete is another Mesoamerican work creation. When you only have shovels their way is best and in Honduras hoes are not available for construction. They do not have a mixing box for similar reasons. Mixing begins with circling a blank area with dry ingredients. Water is poured into the resulting caldron. Shovels move the walls forward into the water until no free standing water remains. Even though all the concrete work was at the other end of the site the Hondurans steadfastly refused to move the mixing area closer. Buckets hand carried deliver the water even though a water hose was readily available. I did not have standing to make or suggest any changes. Hondurans believe it serves consistency of purpose and brings stability to life. When work and tools are scarce making both last is important. These people survived Mayan genocide, Spanish savagery,

Catholic inquisitions and Hurricane Mitch. Hondurans know endurance and survival.

The trench dirt includes an ad hoc mixture of clay, brown dirt, rock and miscellaneous rebar and broken concrete from earlier forgotten structures on the same site. Rocks are found scattered throughout but concentrated in the upper right corner. My shoes are size twelve and size twelve is too long to stand square in the ditch. I have to use the pick and shovel with one leg straight in front of the other. The ditch is too deep to stand over it and dig. This makes my efforts clumsy and difficult and causes balance problems as well.

The weather is predictable. Clear and hot in the morning and hotter in the afternoon with clouds and rain appearing from four in the afternoon to late at night. It will normally rain and rain hard during this period. It will rain. The question is when and how often. A heavy monsoon deluged the ditch last night. This transformed it into pliable mud. Rocks, concrete, rebar and weeds that defeated our every effort on Tuesday quickly surrendered in their sodden condition.

The heat and humidity are incredible. By ten in the morning it reaches one hundred degrees and one hundred percent humidity with a bright tropical Sun. You pray for a breeze and for some clouds. It takes the water out of you. It takes the air out of your lungs and then it takes you. Kathryn caught me as it was ready to take me. I was awake but I was not there. She poured cold water on my neck. I did not feel it for almost five seconds. Only then did it depart. It happens that fast.

Young church students in their early to late teens help with the project. Bright eyed, intelligent, Coppertone tanned skin, and with flashing white teeth that seem to reflect the sun's rays when they frequently smile. Beautiful black hair adorns their heads. The color is uniform but curls are not infrequent. They work in the heat and they work in the humidity. They work after the gringos quit. They work. They are very patient with us. It is remarkable. They laughed that today we are working them too hard. High praise.

Mark is Jamaican. Put a basketball uniform on him and he will fit the role. There is no fat on his six six frame bulging with muscles. His grandparents live in Honduras and raised him. He is always cutting up with the others.

Honduran people do not appear to see black from brown. Spanish or light skinned is desired. They love fat ugly Spanish women and ignore their own. Mix black with white to create brown. Brown is beautiful. I compare tans. They laugh and say there is no comparison. They are right.

The church provides breakfast and lunch. This morning we had Honduran refried beans, scrambled eggs and fried bananas. Eggs are either served or still inside the chicken. You can taste the distinct difference in them. The beans are refried but a dark almost crimson hue compared to the light brown hue of the Mexican variety and they complement the fresh eggs. The church also sends out cut watermelon and seven varieties of papaya for us to eat while working. A Nachia is yellow, cherry shaped and has a grape like seed. When eaten it has the consistency of a blueberry and is very sweet. I ate these by the handful. The church gives us their best. We are blessed.

Heat, sun and humidity compel us to quit at noon. My shorts and T – shirt contain pounds of moisture. I am whipped. It is dangerous to take a shower now because you crave the opportunity to fill your mouth with shower water. It is so easy to do. Don't touch the tap!

Corky, Kathryn, Becky, I and Bob have been selected to go kayaking at the Punta Izopo National Park. I resist going but the kayaks hold two and we are five plus the guide. For the team I am committed. The guide is full blooded Honduran Indian. His eyes are dark brown almost black, the close cropped, thick, straight hair glistening anthracite, the beautifully tanned swarthy skin lacks blemish or wrinkle, and his stocky, compact frame extends less than six feet in height.

The journey to the park begins on a modern asphalt two lane highway. Road striping provides for a bicycle lane on each side. Bicycles, feet and horses successfully compete with cars, buses and trucks in Honduras. A horse drawn cart is passed.

We ride in a third world vehicle. Honduras is where vehicles go to die. They live here long after they are salvage yard material in the states. The church receives building materials in dump trucks that began their existence in Miami. Panel trucks from Michigan have been observed. Many yellow school buses have retired to Honduras. Our vehicle began life as a Land Cruiser 297,000 miles and twelve years ago. Other than the odometer no other instrument appears to work. The windows are opened by grabbing the

window pane and pulling. The defroster has been replaced with hands rubbed on the badly smudged windshield. This nicely complements the many cracks in it. It reeks of decay and accumulated entropy.

We leave the highway in a sweeping left turn onto a dirt road. The third world returns to remind us we are no longer in Montgomery. The road is wide but has not been maintained or graded since the last election and elections occur in Mesoamerica with the same frequency as wealth. There is no road. The Land Cruiser creeps through the washer board and chug holes at a tortuously slow pace, protesting every bump.

A Garifuna village appears and transports us to Africa. Thatched houses remind me of a tourist brochure. Many children are clothed in shirts only. Garifunas began when a slave ship capsized off the coast and washed a community onto the beach. Unclaimed, they chose to continue the lifestyle they had in Africa. This includes fishing and agriculture. Voodoo is practiced by some. We do not stop as they do not want many visitors.

The jump off point is reached. A crudely made barbed wire gate blocks the road. A key unlocks the gate and we enter a compound containing a small farm and the boat house. Two large, horned black bulls stand as guardians between us and it, but they prove obliging and slowly permit entry. Each pair grabs a kayak. There are no life preservers. They are carried to the shore a distance of roughly twenty feet and slid to the stream's edge. We push off without getting in the brackish, sulfur laced water. The water surprisingly permits a view roughly a foot down despite its dark appearance.

The kayaks generally require a light person in front and a heavy one in the back. I play the role of a heavy. It takes several minutes to master the paddling and turning of these boats. The guide is impatient and starts down river without us. We struggle to catch up. My boat was last in the water and we are furthest behind.

The river runs from the Gulf of Mexico. It is roughly sixty feet wide in the main channel of undetermined depth. It is becoming still. The guide spots a crocodile crossing the stream ahead of us. We give right of way.

One half mile later the guide heads us left into a narrow finger stream. It becomes dark almost immediately as jungle swallows daylight and the boats. It is gloomy, still and eerie. Picture a height of plant life double the size of

the Everglades. Increase vegetative density by 100% and add twenty degrees temperature. No air moves although unseen trees are heard rustling with an equally unfelt breeze. Cobra infested Banyon trees with their choking, ground covering roots surround us and reduce the narrow channel. Thick, impenetrable vines hang off the trees and each other to further reduce height and width. The jungle begins to grab for the oars and block our progress with submerged tree logs. It is quiet. There is frighteningly little sound and no one speaks.

The guide announces we have reached a fork in the stream that means you can go in but you have to find your own way out. We decline the challenge. Quickly.

Retreat has almost become impossible The stream did not have enough width to turn around and reversing course quickly trapped us between submerged logs and clinging vines. Vines hung everywhere and clutched for possession of our oars. Birds and monkeys mocked our efforts with loud cries. It was almost dark. Minutes of frightened effort finally freed us from the morass. We gently passed through the sunken logs and headed for the light. Reaching it we rejoined the main stream and headed upstream to the coast. We heard the surf roar before the ocean appeared. A high sand embankment separated us from the beach. We landed, pulled the kayaks out of the stream and scrambled up the sandy slope.

Reaching the pinnacle provided us an unbelievable, primeval view. Seashore as far as the eye saw in both directions. Volcano shaped hills punctuated the horizon on the land side of the beach. To our left a mammoth rainstorm pummeled the land and water under it. A distant circular shaped mastiff stood heavily obscured by the rain and clouds. To our right beach curled like the edge of a circular wristwatch from the hours of twelve to six. Man was not present.

We crossed the mottled brown beach and plunged into the surf. Small waves disguised a strong undertow. Our feet found shells. Thousands of perfect sand dollars covered the sea bottom as if placed there by an intelligence.

The massive storm drew near and we reluctantly concluded the swim. A pick up truck appeared and slowly passed by us on the beach. It was full of Hondurans waving and smiling at us. Turista loca. We crossed the beach and stumbled down the embankment to our boats. It was drizzling.

We reached the boathouse as pitched fork lightning heralded the storm's arrival. A few minutes later the Land Cruiser headed for Tela. Our guide fought the absence of closed windows by rubbing his hand on the fog covered windshield. It was opaque. A passing tractor trailer rig dumped an avalanche of water into the windowless opening soaking the guide. We reached Tela without incident and he delivered us to our digs. He did not have to. He simply did it.

Rain pelted the tin roof. Honduran coffee was prepared and we sat on the deck enjoying the beautiful sound of the harsh rain pummeling the tin. The rain drowned out all conversation attempts. As the coffee expired the storm relented and produced a magnificent multicolor rainbow.

Dinner found the entire group joined and marched into Tela. A trek before now, the walk has lost its significance. We hear a high school band playing the punta. The punta merges mixtures of southern swing and Latin American soul. It involves gyrating marching movements not unlike those that brought Grambling and Southern bands to prominence.

The Spaniards taught Mesoamerica to build walls around every structure and Hondurans dutifully followed suit. This enclosure housing the band formed a large parking area with two wide black metal gates. The gates fully opened and people watched the band perform. We stopped. I noticed three Anglos, two females and one male of high school age. Each was blonde headed, long legged and lean. They provided instruction and expertise to the Honduran band when they should have been taking notes. My attachment to them seemed tenuous. Gringos.

We ate hungrily and cheaply. The rice dishes with fish and baked barbecue chicken proved favorites. One *Salva Vitae* hit the parched drought in my mouth. *Si estoy Salva Vitae*. Compliment followed the return march. It is a privilege to be a part of this and with such a wonderful group of human beings on the team and in Honduras. God forgive me but I did not believe they existed.