

Ten Years After: Reflections on Returning to Guatemala

By Sharie Verdu

Recently my husband and I took our ten year old daughter, Clairelise, back to Guatemala, the country of her birth, the country that gave her that rich, café au lait skin, eyes like pools of night and her enticing smile. We thought the time was ripe for this journey as she is still a child but already beginning to bloom into adolescence.

We chose to arrange a tour rather than set off on our own for this first trip back and Antigua was our first stop. Antigua, the old capital of Guatemala and current hot tourist spot, had been the place we spent our first morning as parents. Nearly a decade before, we had numbly carried our new sleeping baby around the four hundred year old churches and changed her diaper in a plaza café just after the adoption was completed at the embassy in Guatemala City. Now we escorted Clairelise through the same plaza. It was like some form of time travel. Here we were replaying those momentous moments of the past with the future of that past standing next to us in the person of this clever and boisterous young girl gaping at the sights.

We were warmed by the spirit of Guatemala. However, it is a land of intense contrasts, a land full of magical and ancient beauty. We found the people to be generous and kind, friendly and genuine. We also found deep gouges of disturbing poverty amidst extravagant hotels and swinging nightlife. We saw first hand how thirty-six years of internal war wounds scar a society. As our guide shepherded up and down the jagged mountains he spoke of the curse of private and public corruption and bitterly described the politicians as milking the “cow” of Guatemala dry instead of nourishing it.

In Chichicastenango we walked amazed amongst the thousand year old rituals of the Mayans blended into the church services of the faith that conquered them. Markets ablaze with magnificent fabrics of every color and exotic foods in every town sent us into a frenzy of shopping. Looking out the van window, we were stunned to see farmers seeding their hilly fields by hand as farmers have done for millennia. And everywhere we went we saw the dear face of our daughter closely replicated in hundreds of faces and skin tones, all different from our own.

And, much to our surprise, nearly everywhere we went we saw American and Canadian parents with babes in their arms- Guatemalan babies in various stages of being adopted. At first it was delightful. I tried to strike up conversations with many of the beaming families. We would proudly show off our beautiful half grown daughter as if she were some kind of guidepost to their future life. The contact also seemed to reassure our own child that her way of becoming our family was not so strange. We saw so many adoptive families that we started to keep track until the numbers grew too large. After a time, it became disconcerting to see more and more adoptees in the arms of foreign parents. I began to be haunted by the sheer emotional and geopolitical weight of it. It seemed that Guatemala's largest export was its own children.

As I well knew, somewhere each of these babies had a birth mother, perhaps grandparents, or siblings for whom this adoption represented a wrenching loss or at the very least a difficult choice. And as the numbers grew, it seemed that each adoption became a symbol of the country's inability to provide for its own. It is out of such poverty and lack of resources that the babies bubble to the surface, needing homes where they can be cared for and safe, homes and lives that end up being far away from the place of their origins.

It seemed that to adopt from such poverty without somehow trying to do something to change the situation was inconceivable, almost immoral. We resolved to pursue connections we had been given, so that we could help support two boarding schools for rural youngsters and somehow give back to this beautiful place for the blessed gift of our daughter.

When we arrived back in Guatemala City for our last two days and without any planning on our part, we managed to end up at the hotel where we first met our daughter in the arms of her foster family. As I showed my daughter the spot where I first held her, she and I watched in curious awe as a large extended family relinquished their charge into the waiting arms of his new mother in much the same way it had happened that wild night nine years ago for us.

It seemed that the moment extruded too many emotions to witness. There was the sadness of the foster grandmother as she took the little boy into her arms for the last time, the embraces of foster mother to adopting parents, the small siblings happily running everywhere and the many goodbyes said over and over. We watched the exhausted new parents in that intense and strange moment when they were finally a family with their tiny

stranger. I couldn't help but notice how they seemed shell shocked and raw- perhaps from the parting, perhaps from long years of longing, perhaps from the impact of sudden and total parenthood- and how, looking back nine years, that seemed quite fitting.

Everything about this trip spoke to the complexities of adopting and the special complexities of trans-cultural adoption. We had discovered many of these intertwined issues as our daughter faced so many facets of growing up different in a culture not completely at ease with families different from the norm. We had grieved with her over the loss of her blood relatives, of the faces that would remind her that she had ancestors. We tried to comfort her as she keened over the absence of the mother she never knew outside the womb. We were all disappointed when, on this trip, our attempts to reconnect with her foster family failed.

Now that we tried to incorporate her country into our lives and help her find a connection, however slim, we found ourselves face to face with even more disturbing issues. We wondered how the Guatemalan people feel about their children in the arms of parents who do not even speak their language. Will the adoptive parents try to maintain cultural connections or will they abandon Guatemala forever as they finally hold their longed for baby? Do these parents really understand the far-reaching effects of international adoption? Do we?

Later when we heard some staggering statistics- one out of every hundred children born in Guatemala is adopted into the USA or Canada- we were stunned. I couldn't help but wonder if this was part of some divine plan to make the world less divided and more accepting of differences or, in a darker moment, whether there was truth to the charge that babies were for sale in Guatemala.

My daughter kept her dark eyes wide open, taking everything in and not saying much. I don't know if she felt grateful for her adopted life or longed for a more real connection with her past, or if she just wished we could find a McDonald's where she could eat something familiar. Time will tell as all of us process the journey that not only took us to Guatemala but also into our hearts and memories, hopes and dreams, and deep into awareness of the mysterious, compelling and sometimes distressing currents beneath the ocean of love and desire for family which brings us all to adoption in the first place.

Interview of Clairelise

(Clairelise has been part of a girl's group for adopted children for the past two years. What follows is an interview about our trip, conducted by IAC Center intern Liz Lombardo, a counselor that worked with that group)

Liz: *Were you excited about traveling to Guatemala?*

Clairelise: Yeah, I was excited to go on the plane. And I wanted to see Guatemala. I wanted to see what it was like.

Was there anything you particularly wanted to see?

I wanted to see if I could meet my birthmother, but that didn't happen.

Can you tell me a little bit about seeing the country where you were born and how that was for you?

There were mountains and waterfalls. That was really cool and was really colorful. Lots of colors of the rainbow and no black or anything like that. There was this one marketplace that was only blue. It don't think it was intentionally supposed to be blue but there were these tarps so in case it started to rain it wouldn't get wet and they were blue also and it was really pretty.

You saw the place where you met your mom and dad, right?

Yes.

What kind of place was it?

It was a hotel. A fancy hotel. It wasn't the hotel I stayed in but the two hotels were connected. I wished that we could have stayed in the other hotel to see if I could find the room that I came to there.

What was your favorite thing you did while you were there?

Well, there is this one hotel in Chichicastenango and it was a really old hotel...it was all made out of wood and these people were dressed in traditional clothes and they would knock on our door and tell us it was dinnertime and they would walk us down and it was really cool. They looked sort of weird in their hats and stuff. It was really a nice place because there were lots of beds in the room and there was a big door. My favorite thing was that there was a fireplace in our room and the man asked us if we wanted him to start

the fire and we said yes and then we read the last Harry Potter book around the fire. That was my favorite part.

Also, in our first hotel there was this really cool thing. There was a patio so you could walk out and be right at the pool. There were these macaw parrots right there and they would talk. They woke us up with their squawking. Next to the parrots there was a playground. I really liked that room.

When you were in Guatemala did you see other families adopting children?

Yeah, my mom told me that there were so many people that she was so surprised. Everywhere we went there were people adopting. There was this one girl, I didn't really get to know her and she asked me if I was adopted and I said, "Yeah." She was there adopting a little sister. We met families in the hotel that were adopting and we got to know them, sort of. I didn't really talk to them. I sort of just saw the baby and I wondered if he or she could be in a group for adopted kids like I am in with the girls.

Do you think that would be good idea?

Yeah. And I sort of wanted to tell the baby, "Remember this moment."

Why did you want the baby to remember that moment?

Because when I hadn't gotten to go to Guatemala for so long and I thought it would still be a long time before I got to go, I'd say to myself, "Why couldn't I remember the moment that I was adopted?" That would have helped me so much...but...

How old were you when you were adopted?

Eleven months.

Wow! That's really little... not a lot of people remember things from when they were that little, right?

(Laughs) Yeah.

When your visit was over and you were ready to come home, how was that for you?

I was excited to go back to my regular food because in Guatemala there was a lot of meat covered in all this sauce and I do not like meat. And everything was mixed with spices. I was expecting more Mexican type food because I like eating at Chevy's here but there was none of that. I tried to get spaghetti and they cut up peppers and sausage and put it all in. I didn't like it. Also, I was excited to go back on the airplane. I wouldn't like to stay there.

Why's that?

I don't know why but I figured that if I had lived there and I came to New Jersey, I'd probably want to go back to Guatemala.

Do you think maybe you'll go visit again?

My mom hasn't said anything about it but it would be cool if we got to go back again because then I would know what I was in for and then I would pack more American food.

Resources for Giving Back to Guatemala

Common Hope –promotes hope and opportunity in Guatemala, partnering with children, families, and communities who want to better their lives through education, health care, and housing.

www.commonhope.org

Books and Wings Foundation of Guatemala, Inc. supports libraries and education on Guatemala's Costa Sur

http://homepage.mac.com/tphoenix/Books_and_Wings

Mayan Families works with indigenous Mayan communities near Lake Atitlan on projects ranging from enrolling and keeping kids, especially girls, in school, helping single parent family's deal with HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, and basic health care. Mayan Families helps organize health and dental clinics and animal rescue services.

<http://www.mayanfamilies.org>

Foundations for Education, Inc. (Cimientos de Education) Supports various educational endeavors in rural Guatemala including a boy's boarding school that offers a four year degree program in bilingual intercultural primary education. Foundation director, Ramella Gonzales is working with the school to also incorporate a health program into the curriculum.

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