

“People to People: Reflections on Cuba”

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My first real journey to another country was when I lived in Spain my junior year of college. It sounds silly, but on a certain level, you almost need to see it firsthand to “get it” deep down: that people are living very full lives in distant places. They are speaking other languages, praying to other gods, making other meals and building meaningful lives around things we've never considered. I wish everyone could get this direct awareness. It disrupts your sense of certainty, and *makes you listen more than you speak*. Like the story exercise for the children earlier, any time we get a chance to listen more than speak, is a chance to grow.

Travel, at its best, breeds humility. And this is how I felt about my trip to Cuba this summer. (Show image 1) Humbled. I didn't get the full story. Nobody can. And I certainly can't do it justice in the time allotted for a sermon, but I'll try. And then you'll take it up and do your own work with it, I know.

It was the ten-year wedding anniversary for my husband Nathan and me. And this week-long trip to Cuba would be the first time we left our two kids for more than an overnight. We were going with a group called “Global Exchange,” which organizes what they call “reality tours” all over the world. After I produced an *embarrassingly long* document on the care and feeding of our children for our babysitter, we hopped on a plane and met our fellow travelers in Miami. We were a tour of 6 people (an engineer, a city planner, 3 educators and a minister). We were delayed 8 hours in Miami, both coming and going. No delays in Cuba, coming nor going. *Just sayin'.*

We met our tour guide, in the Holguin airport and began a tour of the sites where events of the Cuban revolution took place. Driving down the highway, we took in images of people traveling on donkeys (show image 2), or crowded in public open air trucks (show image 3), or in those iconic 1950's cars (show image 4). These cars were gorgeous, but sobering symbols of the ways in which some of Cuba is frozen in the 1950's.

And the 1950's is where we spent a lot of our learning that week. We were in *Santiago de Cuba* during the celebration of their independence. We visited groups such as (show image 5) this band, "Los Hoyos" and heard their fabulous music for the festival. (show image 6) This sign they painted is a 90th birthday message to Fidel Castro, whom most Cubans refer to as simply "Fidel." It was hard to know how the average Cuban truly felt about Fidel. I sensed a combination of pride, disappointment, respect, critique and fondness...all mixed up.

As is the story of many Latin American countries, Cuba's starts with the presence of Mesoamerican indigenous populations who were colonized by the Spaniards. What followed was a long history of being overpowered by Spanish and then American greed for power and resources. In the late 1800's, Cubans fought for their independence from Spain and, with the support of the U.S., they were successful...*but now they were under the thumb of the U.S.* For a while, the U.S. occupied Cuba and made arrangements to protect our trade and defense interests, including sugar farms and the naval base on which the Guantanamo prison now stands. Bottom line: we've had our hands on the island of Cuba for decades.

Now, Fidel Castro grew up watching the series of Cuban leaders who governed after the US occupation, and he was critical of corruption and the suffering of those living in poverty. He focused on politics and law in his schooling, and in 1952, he ran for congress, but was thwarted by a coup staged by Fulgencio Batista. Castro and his followers staged an attack on Batista's government at the Moncada Barracks [show image 7] in 1953, but they were unsuccessful. Castro was exiled, and returned in 1958 with an even stronger movement that was able to overthrow Batista's rule. This was *the great revolution* that Cubans celebrate every July, just as we celebrate *our* independence day every July.

It was fascinating and humbling to learn about the safety net that Cubans are born into today. It's cradle to grave. Prenatal care is exemplary, and family planning resources are broadly available. And Cuba's infant mortality rate is *lower*

than that of the US.¹ *And when I say cradle to grave, I mean it:* the government pays for your birth and pays for your burial when you die. Ask me sometime about their burial process...

There are advances and protections of which the average Cuban seemed, on our visit, to be quite proud, including free health care and free advanced education. One man I chatted with found it odd that the US can't offer this to Americans. Life expectancy in the US is no better than Cuba's. For both countries, it is age 79. And the literacy rate is higher in Cuba than in the US.²

And I must say, travelling many roads in Cuba, I never saw someone clearly living on the street or appearing to have been forgotten. It did seem that, while people's homes (show image 8), and clothing were really humble, there wasn't the extreme poverty I've seen in other countries, including ours. And there weren't visibly huge *differences* in people's resources, as we see when we compare, say, (show contrast images 9a, 9b) the sidewalk of Tijuana with Mexico city mansions or (show contrast images 10a, 10b) LA's Skid Row and Beverly Hills mansions. The Cuban revolution attempted to level the economic landscape, bringing the extremely poor up, and reigning in wealth extremes.

There is no denying that this was done by seizing private property country-wide after the revolution; and that Castro's strategies for *maintaining* socialism have involved serious human rights abuses. For decades, Cubans haven't had full freedom to advocate for themselves, nor to choose their president, nor to watch the news they want to watch. Every Sunday, (show image 11) this group called "Ladies in White" attend mass together in Havana and walk in the streets to peacefully protest the imprisonment of their fathers, brothers and sons for political reasons.

The question is, *did socialism have to look like this?* Could socialism have been woven into a *democratic* Cuban fabric along the lines of the socialist

¹ Central Intelligence Agency "World Fact Book," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2091rank.html>

² www.findthedata.com, "World Country Facts"

democracies in Norway and Sweden? It's a question for a whole other sermon: what is the right balance between safety nets and the freedom to pursue ambition? How is Cuba off that balance? And how are we in the U.S. off on that balance?

Many of Castro's followers, including his own sister, Juanita Castro, thought that his revolution was for a democratic socialism. Juanita was interviewed when her brother died, and she said she initially believed in his motto, "We will have bread with freedom," but when Fidel declared himself a communist and accepted subsidies from Russia, his sister broke ties with him and joined the ranks of the disillusioned Miami exiles.³

Castro's alliance with Russia had a massive impact on U.S.-Cuba relations, and American administrations tried to ruin Castro from many angles. The CIA has confirmed multiple U.S. assassination plots against Castro, in addition to plots intending to simply humiliate him. (Show image 12) *There was actually a plot to get a chemical into his cigars that would make his famous beard fall out.*⁴ This is verified in multiple sources. And then there was our CIA-backed *Bay of Pigs* invasion, which failed to overthrow Castro and solidified Cuban mistrust of the U.S. To this day, every year on "Dia de la Defensa", Cubans practice drills to defend against invasion. *Invasion by us.*

Driving around, we saw that not a single billboard that advertises a product or luxury. They all carry messages of revolution, national pride and self defense, like this one: (show image 13) Translation: "Now, yes, we'll win the war".

And in 1962, this defensive attitude *must* have played a role in Cuba's allowing Russia to set up missile bases directed at the U.S., which were dismantled once President Kennedy agreed to dismantle *our* missiles in Turkey that were pointed at Russia.

³ Robles, Frances. "Fidel Castro's Sister, An Outspoken Critic, Takes No Joy In His Death" The New York Times. November 28, 2016

⁴ De Palma, Anthony. "Fidel Castro, Cuban Revolutionary Who Defied U.S. Dies at 90", The New York Times. November 26, 2016.

The story of the relationship between the US and Cuba is a lot of quid pro quo, and I don't think either side can claim they've always interacted admirably.

When Castro died in November, President Elect Trump tweeted "Fidel Castro's legacy is one of firing squads, theft, unimaginable suffering, poverty and the denial of fundamental human rights"⁵ There is truth to this, and.....if we're calling it like it is, some of these words can accurately describe how our inmates at Guantanamo have been treated...many of whom have never been charged or tried. *The territory we occupy in Cuba is by no means the moral high ground.*

The US trade embargo on Cuba came up a lot on our trip. People will argue over whether it's our embargo or Castro's leadership that has crippled the Cuban economy. *I say, that as in all conflicts, including our most personal conflicts, we always need to look at our part.* Our embargo has hurt the Cuban people and has been ineffective in getting Cuban leaders to transition to democracy. In addition to not trading with Cuba, *the U.S. penalizes countries that do.* It would take a miracle to build a healthy economy with such limitations. President Obama has urged congress to dismantle the embargo, but he has been blocked by the majority in congress.

Now, I can get pretty hopeless when I think of our obstructive congress. And that's why I got such a kick out of reading the background behind the Cuban and American prisoner exchange that led up to the agreement between Barack Obama and Raul Castro to normalize diplomatic relations 2 years ago. The humble and savvy Pope Benedict was a major player, writing to both leaders and hosting secret negotiations at the Vatican.⁶ And the wife of a Cuban prisoner being held by the US was also an unexpected influence. Some of you may know this unusual story that this woman wanted to have a baby with her husband who'd been captive as a Cuban spy in the US for 15 years. She felt she had little time left as she approached age 40. Part of the journey toward the accord between the US and Cuba involved

⁵ Donald J. Trump, @realDonaldTrump, [www.twitter.com](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/800000000000000000), November 26, 2016.

⁶ Miller, Zeke and Elizabeth Dias. "How Pope Francis Helped Broker Cuba Deal", Time Magazine, December, 2014

Senator Patrick Leahy arranging for the prisoner's sperm to be brought to a fertility clinic in Panama where his wife waited. When he was released on the day of the prisoner exchange, and stepped off the plane to shake Raul Castro's hand, his wife, who was also standing there to greet him, was 9 months pregnant.⁷

You see, diplomacy can get pretty darn personal. We've gone from trying to remove Castro's beard to helping to impregnate someone...all part of our convoluted story with this island nation off our coast.

All of this is to say....that because of all this history, I felt uneasy as I walked down the street in Santiago de Cuba. I couldn't be mistaken for a Cuban. I mean look at me: I might as well have been wrapped in an American flag! And no matter how genuine my smile or how smooth my Spanish skills might be in a given exchange, I am part of a very complicated relationship with this country.

While I shared a laugh or two with Cuban people I met, it mostly seemed appropriate to be quiet, and let them talk to me if they wanted to, and some did. And yes, there were moments when I sensed that the ugly and complex behavior of our leaders could not totally define how *we* related. And sure enough, I did learn once again, that people are living very full lives in a distant place. They *are* speaking other languages, praying to other gods, making other meals and building meaningful lives around things I've never considered. And a few Cubans now know the same of me.

And times they are a-changing. While President Obama was struggling to build affordable health care for Americans as a birthright, Raul Castro was building pathways for small businesses to emerge in Cuba. Our best meal of the whole trip was at a new restaurant run out of a family's home! We ate out on their balcony. (Show pic image 14)

Even in all the uncertainty of a Trump presidency, I'm still heartened by the agreement that Pope Benedict, Raul Castro and Barak Obama came to, and all the

⁷ LeoGrande, William and Peter Kornbluh. Back Channel to Cuba, The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana, University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

networks of people it took to make it happen (in spite of our congress). I'm not naïve about the wrecking ball that Donald Trump is threatening to unleash on much of the left's progress in recent years, but the shift unfolding between the U.S. and Cuba may be bigger than one administration, and may have that unstoppable momentum that being on the right side of history gains.

As the story continues, I hope to find the moments when it is time for me to speak up, and moments when it is time for me to listen...to listen for the story that emerges as our two nations find their footing in a new dance.

May the humanity that comes of knowing one another better prevail.