

Brazil News



No. 141
February 2003

Editorial

A Little Chamber on the Wall

Old Testament prophets were divine messengers, the link between God and kings, between God and His people, between God and individuals. At times they were given pleasant assignments, like going out into the hill country, searching out a young man and anointing him king. In a less favorable setting, they often gave messages of hope and salvation to captive Israel. Much of their work, however, was not only difficult, but often dangerous, as they boldly strode into the presence of kings, uninvited, and delivered condemnatory messages.

Elijah the Tishbite makes his debut in the Bible—and in King Ahab’s court—in an abrupt manner. His incisive message to the king: “As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.”

We have every reason to believe that the prophet looked the king in the eye and delivered this unpleasant message in a strong, authoritative voice. He didn’t look down at the floor and apologetically say, “Ahab, you know how it is, we prophets are obligated to tell others what the Lord has told us, and so I hope you’ll understand what I’m about to say...”

This doesn’t mean that Elijah didn’t inwardly shudder when the Lord first gave him this message. Nor does it mean he wasn’t relieved to exit the palace with his head in place. Any qualms he may have felt were confirmed by what the Lord commanded him to do once out of the palace: “Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there.” The Lord knew that once Jezebel became aware of what had taken place, Elijah would become the object of her consuming fury. He had to flee. And fast.

The ravens faithfully brought the prophet “bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook.”

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After a period of time, possibly months, Elijah fell victim to the curse placed on Ahab and his kingdom. In the absence of rains, the brook Cherith dried up. By then he was probably a mighty lonesome man.

Since the Lord sent the prophet to the brook Cherith, it's natural to believe that he rested at ease, fully assured that providence would see him through both the drought and the king's wrath. This assumption, however, overlooks the prophet's frame, that he was just as human as we are today.

We cite John the Baptist, a man conceived with a mission and who grew to manhood without ever losing sight of his special work. In the fulfillment of time, he began preaching in the wilderness. In spite of his unpolished exterior, he drew huge crowds. The day came, as he baptized, that the very one whom he announced, appeared in person and asked to be baptized. Thus John became the baptizer of the Son of God, a unique and most precious distinction. We believe he was absolutely unwavering in his conviction that Jesus was truly the Messiah.

Yet, some time later, as he languished in prison, he began to have doubts. He sent word to Jesus: "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?"

Surely Elijah must have become apprehensive as brook Cherith began drying up during the day, and yield but a weak trickle during the night. Finally nights may have been spent digging holes in the sand at the source of the spring in an effort to capture enough water to survive one more day. Unable to find water to drink, the ravens may have fled the drought area, thus leaving the prophet hungry, thirsty and desolate.

"And the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee."

Zarephath was a Phoenician village located between Tyre and Sidon. Here Elijah was able to enjoy the hospitality of a gracious widow and her son, and very likely have contact with locals. The consternation shown when the widow's son died indicate the deep gratitude he felt toward the widow woman God prepared to sustain him.

The prophet Elisha, endowed with a double portion of Elijah's spirit, unhesitatingly transmitted God's will to man and king. When the kings of Samaria, Israel and Judah united to defend themselves against the king of Moab, they felt the need of the word of a reliable prophet. Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, and the most sincere of the three, suggested Elisha be consulted. The idea found approval and the three kings sought out the prophet Elisha.

Perfectly aware of the perfidy of the king of Israel, the prophet contemptuously told him, "What have I to do with thee? get thee to the prophets of thy father, and to the prophets of thy mother...As the LORD of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, surely, were it not that I regard the presence of Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, I would not look toward thee, nor see thee." It was mighty strong language to use on a king who could, with a mere nod of the head, relieve him of his.

No, the life of an Old Testament prophet decidedly wasn't for the faint-hearted. Often it was a lonely job that demanded long absences from home, or possibly even the

forsaking of home. They must have felt keenly the isolation, the lack of a relaxed family life.

Enter what the Bible calls a “great woman.”

We don’t know her name, only that she was married, lived on the road to Shunem and that her home was always open to the prophet Elisha when passing through. She “said unto her husband, Behold now, I perceive that this is an holy man of God, which passeth by us continually. Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall; and let us set for him there a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick: and it shall be, when he cometh to us, that he shall turn in thither.”

By today’s standards, the furnishing of this little chamber seem a bit Spartan: a bed, a table, a stool and a candlestick. Yet on those days, it must have been considered a “furnished room.”

We picture the joy the prophet must have felt on his next visit to the home of the “great woman,” when she showed him his new chamber.

The home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus was such a stopping off place for Jesus. It was where he found His “little chamber.”

The “little chamber” that the “great woman” had built for the prophet Elisha doubtlessly had a determining impact on his life. As he traveled dusty roads under a scorching sun with divine messages for haughty kings, he must have many times thought about the pleasant little chamber that awaited him, where he could rest, surrounded by the warmth of a caring family. Even though it might be a day, a week, a month, or more, until he would find himself on the road to Shunem, the thought of a refuge for body and soul surely recharged his depleted spiritual batteries many times.

Through the ages, many little chambers have been built by great men and women and lovingly dedicated to those who needed an extra boost. As life stories are told, especially by leaders, not uncommonly they dwell on a small chamber someone erected for them.

On the other hand, we will probably never know how many lives have been lost in the fog of oblivion because someone was unwilling to take the time and put forth the effort to erect a little chamber. How many potential leaders in the church never blossomed for lack of a great man or woman to build a little chamber.

We find it difficult to believe that a leader could possibly have a lonely life. Surrounded by people, leading people, aiding people, instructing people, listening to people...

Yes, leaders—sound leaders with a happy family life—sometimes are very lonely. You see, like the prophets of old, duty at times carries them into uncomfortable situations. With a burden on their heart they travel a dusty road to deliver a divine message to a brother with a slight wobble to his walk. As their human lips attempt to transmit what they feel, suddenly they find themselves under attack, personal attack. Not only is their message rejected, but they, the message bearers, are also rejected as unfit for the position they hold.

This hurts. Deeply. They know that God’s servants will not always be understood.

But when the same thing happens twice, or even three times in a short period of time, doubts begin to eclipse the sun. Am I an imposter? Is my calling merely of man? Have I somehow lost the way? For the welfare of all, should I resign my office and melt into the shadows?

He tells the Lord his fears, he searches the Scriptures, he shares with his fellow-laborers...

The Lord, the Scriptures, his fellow-laborers, all point in the same direction. Courage, they say, such is the life of a servant.

And then it happens. A “great” brother, or maybe a “great” sister... And here we stop to explain the term “great.” It means a great heart. The great woman who built a small chamber for Elisha possibly was neither rich nor famous nor beautiful. And so, a great brother or great sister, may actually be one who shuns the limelight, one who speaks timidly. “Great” refers to a sanctity and quietness, that, like heavenly microwaves, penetrate and warm the heart surrounded by a shell of doubts and fears (and unlike natural microwaves, melt the shell away).

Yes, then it happens. This man of God, beset by fears, enters the small chamber erected by a great brother or sister. As he expounds the word on Sunday, he sees, toward the rear of the church, a sister drying her tears. He has seen this before. He knows that the message which he transmits is life and light to her. What would this sister do if he grew discouraged and faded away into the fog? Even though he is feeding her soul, he discovers that she is also feeding his soul in the little chamber prepared for him. He knows that after the service she will linger in the aisle until he comes by, when she will timidly greet him. No, she won’t say much, if anything—just “The Lord bless you.” But in those words he finds a bed, a chair, a table and a candle.

Next to ministers of the gospel, few people need a small chamber more than school teachers. Especially those who teach away from home.

As they look over the top of their desk, they see timid eyes, tired eyes, sad eyes, eager eyes, questioning eyes, defiant eyes... They have been hired to teach; that is what they are being paid for. What somehow doesn’t seem to be included in their paycheck is the finish work they have to take care of. They must finish sanding rough edges off of children, and then try to get some varnish on—something the parents somehow neglected to do, or didn’t see the need to do. They must take students to the office and administer unpopular punishment. This is difficult, but much more difficult is the visit they knew they will receive at four fifteen that same afternoon.

Which brings us to the parents. Most parents are a joy to work with. But not all. There are those who interpret the grades put on the report card, not as an indicator of their child’s academic performance, but as a sure indicator of the teacher’s competence. The lower the grade, the more incompetent the teacher. They don’t hesitate to stride into the classroom and make sure the teacher understands this; maybe even demanding that another test be given.

Teachers must deal with board members. With the best of intentions, misunderstanding can muddle the waters.

Teachers must work with other teachers. Often live with them, when teaching away from home. It's amazing how cramped a large house can become when spirits don't blend.

Teachers have the rare opportunity of shaping lives that no one else can. They can also shatter lives. Beautiful stories are told by men and women who attribute their happiness and success in life to the special efforts of a dedicated teacher, a teacher who built a small chamber for a troubled little heart.

Yet, these very teachers who so often provide shelters for trembling little hearts, many times need a little chamber in which to take refuge. Great men and great women can help teachers navigate stormy seas by keeping the porch light on in the little chamber, with maybe a little snack waiting on the table. Young sisters away from home for the first time decidedly need a little chamber where they can sort things out. The candle on the table should always be burning brightly when they enter the chamber.

Nurses. God must smile as He sees dedicated nurses offer little chambers to patients whose life depends on an infusion of courage. They work with those who can't sit up to the table, so they must fluff up the pillows on the bed where they will spend the rest of their days. And keep the candle burning brightly.

Nurses have the privilege of holding the hand of patients whose lives have suddenly been turned upside down by an accident (sometimes there is no hand to hold) or a debilitating sickness. When a young man or a young lady awakens the next day and the reality begins to sink in that he/she will no longer come and go at will, oh, how wonderful when the caring nurse can make the little chamber just as comfortable as possible.

Children and young people have the option of providing their peers with little chambers. Or torture chambers. We often describe children as angelic, yet not all children fit that description. Otherwise, why would two she bears have come out of the woods and mutilated 42 children? Because of their superior intelligence, of all of God's creatures, children can be the most cruel. And children can build some of the most beautiful little chambers ever seen.

Andy Spratt, a fifth-grader, had to face life with two strikes against him, plus a cracked bat. His dad was in prison and his mother took in washing to eek out a bare existence. Contrary to most stories, his clothes weren't neatly patched; they were plain full of holes. He wasn't clean, in spite of his poverty; as a rule he was at least one bath behind, maybe two.

Andy was a nice, likable boy. What really mattered to him in life was being able to be part of the boys of his age group. The price exacted by his buddies was steep. He was expected to offer himself as a punching bag for every kind of practical joke and ribbing imaginable, a price which he willingly paid.

Then one day, sort of out of the blue, one of the boys remarked, "You know, Andy isn't our type; let's not have him around anymore." The idea grew with the speed of Jack's prodigious beanstalk and the maliciousness of ragweed. Yes, Andy would have to go; by common assent he was expelled, in absentia, from the group.

Weekends the boys spent together. On this particular weekend, they would go camping in the woods behind Ben's place. The boys' mothers approved of these "safaris" and helped pack lunches, always remembering to fix an extra lunch for Andy.

Since Ben was hosting this safari, it fell upon him to inform Andy that he was no longer part of the gang.

The gang was already in camp when Andy came riding up on his old girl's bike. The tires consisted of pieces of garden hose wired to the rims. As usual, his cloths were soiled. Yet he was happy. Happier, it seemed, than usual.

The boys quickly hid in the tent, where they would be able to listen to what was happening. What Ben did in the next black minutes continues to hang over his head even now, many years later.

Instead of returning Andy's smile, he remained impassive. It took a bit before the little boy caught on that something was definitely amiss. And then, seeing he was in for bad news, he stoically prepared himself for the worst. But what he heard was worse than the worst.

"Andy, we don't want you," Ben heard himself telling the boy.

Andy was used to being kicked around. He didn't ask why. His lips trembled; his eyes filled with tears. He didn't beg. Slowly he turned around, picked up his bike with garden hose tires, and rode away...

He rode away. Not only did he ride away. He withered away. He dropped out of school, and out of sight. And then no one ever saw Andy Drake again.

In all fairness to Ben, we must say that he has repented of his cruelty. Today, an adult, he is acutely aware of all Andy Drakes he meets in life, and never misses an opportunity to build a little chamber for those unfortunate souls whom he can touch.

Now we flip the coin. Yes, a boy can build a little chamber for his own brother. The author to this story, **Jason and Tommy**, is unknown.

Jason and Tommy didn't have a typical relationship as brothers. Jason was 14 and Tommy was 10. Jason wasn't just Tommy's older brother, though; he was his best friend in the whole world. While most older brothers wanted nothing to do with their younger brothers, Jason would always try to invite Tommy to participate in his activities. Tommy loved his big brother. They were true pals.

Beside his brother Jason, Tommy didn't have many friends. Tommy often wondered what he would do without his older brother. You see, little Tommy had been born with a cardiopulmonary disease. This had stunted Tommy's growth and had robbed him of his youthful energy. It wasn't that he didn't want to play baseball, tag and all the games that the boys his age played, it's just that he got tired real quick when he did. Knowing this, the other boys never wanted Tommy to be on their team. They would fight over whose team Tommy would have to be on, and he was often labeled as a wimp or sissy by the healthier boys.

But things were different around his older brother Jason. Sometimes Tommy and Jason would play their own game of baseball. Jason was a good athlete and everyone

wanted Jason on their team. However, Jason would only consent to play if they would also let Tommy be on his team. If the other boys said no, then Jason and Tommy would both leave and do something together.

School had just ended and it was summer now. Curt, Nathan and Ron wanted to go on an overnighiter in the mountains. Naturally, they wanted Jason to come along also.

“Let’s go ask him if he can go tomorrow,” Ron spoke up.

Curt was quick to respond. “What if he wants Tommy to tag along? It will slow us all down, and we don’t want to spend the whole time hiking to the campsite.”

Nathan was the first to speak to Jason at his house. “Hey, Jason, the three of us are going on an overnighiter up Adam’s Canyon. Are you with us?”

“Sure I am!” Jason was excited. “I’ll have Tommy’s pack and my own ready to go tonight,” he said.

The three boys looked at each other, wondering who would tell Jason that Tommy wasn’t welcome to come. Finally, Curt spoke up. “Hey, ah, Jason... this hike is just for the four of us. Tommy would slow us all down. Nothing against Tommy, but why don’t you leave him home this time?”

Jason saw Tommy through the corner of his eye. Tommy was standing by his bedroom door, listening intently to the whole conversation. He was bravely trying to hold back tears of rejection.

Jason stood up and said, “I’m sorry, guys, but if Tommy isn’t welcome, then I’m not going either. You guys have fun.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” said Ron. “It’s okay with me if Tommy comes. We can leave a little bit earlier to give us more time.”

The guys agreed on a departing time for the next morning, and left.

Six o’clock came early the next morning. Tommy was ready by 5:30 a.m. This was to be his first real hike.

Within the first quarter mile, it was obvious that Tommy’s progress would be slow. He wanted so much to please Jason by walking fast, but the faster he walked, the sooner he would have to rest. The other boys were anxious to get to the campsite, and often found themselves leaving Jason and Tommy behind.

“Here, Tommy, my pack is light. Let me carry yours, too,” Jason said, with concern for his brother.

Embarrassed, Tommy gave Jason his heavy burden. “I’m sorry,” said Tommy. “I’m doing the best I can.”

“I know, Tommy,” Jason said as he rustled Tommy’s hair.

After two miles, Tommy was struggling with fatigue. He was sweating profusely and fighting for air. His chest felt tight, too. *I’ll go a long way before I stop to rest this time*, thought Tommy.

The other boys were out of sight now.

After five more minutes of walking, Tommy fell to his knees. “I gotta stop,” whimpered Tommy, with tears of frustration cutting clear streams through the dust on his face.

“That’s okay,” said Jason. “Take all the time you need.” Jason was obviously worried as he saw Tommy struggling for breath.

“Jason! Something is happening inside my chest! It hurts awful bad.” Tommy was slumping over on the ground in pain. Jason slipped the packs off his back and rolled Tommy over. Tommy’s tense body relaxed suddenly as he looked up into Jason’s eyes that had tears now, too.

“I love you an awful lot, Jason.” The struggle was over now. Tommy’s little body had given up. The tears came freely from Jason’s eyes as he tightly hugged his brother.

“I’ll miss you, Tommy,” Jason softly whispered.

Forty-five minutes later, the tears were still trickling from Jason’s eyes when the other boys returned.

“Hey, Jason, we though you guys got—” Ron stopped short in the middle of his comment. A chill ran down the boys’ backs. Jason was supporting Tommy’s silent head in his lap, caressing the tear-stained face of his little brother.

“Is he...is he dead, Jason?” Ron asked tenderly.

“Yeah,” Jason said, as another tear fell quietly from his eyes to Tommy’s face. “He was doing his very best for me.” Two more minutes passed in silence. “I’ll carry him down now,” Jason said, as he gently lifted the lifeless body in the cradle of his arms.

Nothing was said for 20 minutes down the mountain trail. Finally, Curt tapped Jason on his shoulder, “I’ll spell ya and carry Tommy for a while. You must be getting tired now.”

“No,” Jason kept walking. “He ain’t heavy...he’s my brother.”

The same as individuals can construct little chambers, so can families. The Seven Wonders of the World pale when placed next to a “builder family” specialized in little chambers. What sets these families—“great families”—apart from others is not some chameleonic quality that enables them to dress up in a different personality for each type of person they encounter, or that comes to their home. They don’t wear one set of clothes for the rich and another for the poor.

These families are great because to them everyone is equal, and so they don’t feel themselves above or below anyone else. This means that they can be themselves, no matter who happens to be in their home. It also means they don’t make all kinds of excuses to visitors about a messy house, old carpets, the meager meal... Rather, their actions show that they are thankful for all that they have, even if it’s messy, old and meager. Visitors tend to feel at home in such a home.

It isn’t unusual for this kind of a family to have a whole row of little chambers on the wall of the house. Over the years, many find refuge in these little chambers; some for days or weeks, others for months or years.

May God preserve these great families in each congregation, for so much depends on them as they quietly and cheerfully maintain their little chambers. May He also preserve teachers, nurses, and everyone else we have mentioned, for when unbeknownly opening the chamber of their heart to the least of these, they are entertaining the Lord. ▲

[I would be interested in receiving experiences from those whose lives have been enriched or rescued in a little chamber on the wall.]

Culture

Business in Brazil

[This clipping from the New York Times, by Tony Smith, was sent to me by a reader. If you are interested in Brazilian culture, read carefully what Smith has to say. I find it to be a very accurate portrait of how things work in this country. Insertions in italics are my observations.]

When Telefónica of Spain took over São Paulo's creaky, state-run telephone monopoly in 1998, it installed millions of phone lines in record time and for a fraction of the price customers once had to pay. Yet instead of kudos, all the Spanish executives seemed to hear from their Brazilian clients were complaints that the company could not even spell its own logo properly. In Spanish, it might be Telefónica, the Brazilians said, but in Portuguese it should be Telefônica.

A mere question of style? To some, maybe. But popular disapproval of what the news media viewed as orthographic arrogance soon ran so high that Telefónica made a public mea culpa and had the logo reworked to change the accent mark. "I don't think it was intentional, but it certainly wounded Brazilians' pride," said Newton Campos, a former marketing manager at Telefónica who now represents Instituto de Empresas, a Spanish business school. "There are still many, many people out there who believe we speak Spanish."

Although Brazil's 175 million people make up half of South America's population and half the continent's economic output, foreign visitors frequently find—and show—they know precious little about the country beyond the stereotypes of sun, samba and soccer. And as Telefónica's faux pas showed, perceived insensitivity can be costly.

Brazil's business culture is firmly anchored in the West. More than 400 of the Fortune 500 companies have operated here for years. São Paulo, the vibrant business capital, is just as much a melting pot as New York. In addition, Brazilians, famed for their warmth and relaxed attitude, usually go out of their way to put outsiders at ease. A visiting businessman, therefore, can easily be lulled into a false sense of security, believing that because everything seems to be just like it is at home, it is—or that, because Brazilians are Latins, doing business here must be just like doing business in Florida, Southern California or Mexico.

That is far from the truth, according to Richard Hayes, who has been an American banker and financial consultant in Brazil since 1964. "It's not like doing business in the Far East or Saudi Arabia, but there are cultural differences," he said. "Spotting them depends largely on how sophisticated the visitor is." As a rule, he said, Brazilians do not like to be lumped in one basket with the rest of Latin America; neither do they share many of their Latin cousins' anti-gringo sentiments. "Because this is a big country, it doesn't have an inferiority complex like many smaller Latin American countries," Mr. Hayes said.

However, assuming a Brazilian will want to negotiate a deal in Spanish if his

potential partner speaks no Portuguese is a no-no, as is the classic mistake of believing Buenos Aires is the country's capital.

While most gaffes are not deal killers, they can be more damaging than you think. Kirstin Myers, chief executive of Globond, a global business networking community, says it is perhaps easier for foreigners to stumble than it would be in more formal societies like China or Japan because the locals seem so laid back and unlikely to bear a grudge. She recalls that, when working in Brazil for Internet Securities Inc., a business-information provider, she got the idea that punctuality did not matter. She found out that it did after turning up 10 minutes late for meetings with executives a few times and being kept waiting for 40 minutes or told she would have to reschedule. "I soon learned I was being punished for not showing respect," she said.

"A lot of this casualness and informality can be misleading." Foreign executives are often bowled over by Brazilians' spontaneous friendliness and informality, only to be frustrated later by just how long it can take to close a deal, thanks to cumbersome bureaucracy or simple delaying tactics. Enrolar, literally meaning "to roll up," or entangle someone to win time, is a common tactic, but it will always be done with a smile.

[Without the word "enrolar," with its many nuances, Brazil would grind to a halt until another similar term was coined. To say that someone is "enrolado" means he isn't trustworthy or likes to take people for a ride. And to say that someone who is defaulting on an obligation is "enrolando" means he's stalling for time—and probably won't pay, ever. The term, "mais enrolado do que Bombril"—"more twisted up than steelwool" means you never, ever, want to do business with him.]

"In the U.S., negotiations are done with a good deal of tension on both sides of the table," said Erwin Russel, director of Advent International, a private equity firm in São Paulo. "In Brazil, you need to invest more time and you need to be tough without losing a sense of elegance or even tenderness."

Some Americans and northern Europeans feel overwhelmed by what he called "this steamroller of human warmth" that rumbles through even the most preliminary meetings. "Within five minutes, you find yourself talking about stuff that would be considered, if not exactly intimate, at least quite personal in the Northern Hemisphere," Mr. Russel said. "Setting the scene for a deal here is all about affinity." Visitors should try not to recoil if they are suddenly embraced or feel an arm creeping around their shoulder, said Carlos Heckmann, head of Enterprise Florida Inc., Florida's trade office in Brazil. "Brazilians are very physical," he said. "We love to hug. It's a gesture of [appreciation], nothing more. In the states, you would only ever hug a really good friend."

[When two American relatives or friends who haven't met for years greet each other with a perfunctory handshake, that to Brazilians isn't the tip of the iceberg. It is the iceberg. For two Brazilians to greet each other with a quick handshake would, almost certainly, indicate a serious breach in their friendship.]

A common mistake made by businessmen coming from more developed countries is to underestimate the sophistication of Brazil's business elite. Peter

Stern, a New York-born management consultant who has lived in Brazil since 1980, said foreigners often forgot that before Brazil adopted the inflation-slaying real in 1994, decades of erratic economic policies, a series of stabilization plans and a succession of new currencies had made Brazilian executives some of the world's most flexible in making profits in the most adverse circumstances. "The rules of the game would change every 6 to 12 months," he said, "making this place the best possible training ground for executives." Brazil's business elite are probably "the most flexible, the most versatile, the most imaginative and the most nonrigid in the world," Mr. Stern said. The Brazilians themselves call this apparently innate flexibility *jogo de cintura*, which literally means "the waist game," but which perhaps would be best interpreted as the talent to keep the economic Hula-Hoop turning. In the past, that would frequently include resorting to the *jeitinho*, or "little way of doing things," a synonym for anything ranging from using personal contacts to outright bribery to get things done.

[In most situations, the "jeitinho" is pretty much above board. In his biography, Adolph Hitler says that when his dad said, "Never!" he would say, "Nevertheless." Similarly, when an official or a businessman says, "No," we don't turn around and walk off with our tail between our legs. We say, "But wait..." Personally, when in the US, I find the American concrete "No," quite distressing.]

With a gradual but constant fall in corruption levels over the past decade, the *jeitinho* today involves more personal charm, and even some outsiders are finding it has its benefits. Brazil is the only country in the world, for example, where shoppers at Wal-Mart can buy large-ticket items with a series of post-dated checks, a habit dating from Brazil's inflationary years, when consumer credit was virtually nonexistent. "It's all about not having to say 'no,'" Mr. Russel said. "It's all about finding a solution that works."

[I needed a cordless phone and found one that I liked today. It was advertised as "1+2." That means one third cash, one third in 30 days and one third in 60 days (In this case the first third would be a check and two remaining two thirds could be checks or on the credit card). I told the salesman I couldn't handle that one; could he make it 1+3? The salesman, anxious to make a sale, said, "I'll check with my boss." In a jiffy he was back. "How about 1+2 on the credit card?" That was what I wanted from the start, so I walked out of the store with a cordless phone, and the salesman was all happy about the commission he made on the sale.

I think what takes the cake is when something is advertised with two prices: cash and credit. Needless to say, the cash price is always cheaper than credit. After the proper preliminaries and the salesman feels he has the deal about wrapped up, one innocently asks, "How much time do you give on cash?" If the salesman gives you that What-do-you-mean? look, you—if you're not a Brazilian—must smile knowingly and say, "Oh, I learned this here in Brazil." Often you get at least 10 days time on cash.

Long live the *jeitinho*! ▲

A Story

A Gesturing Contest

[My office assistant, Eduardo Vieira da Silva, gave me this story, or rather, legend, that is said to be many hundreds of years old. As often happens with ancient legends, this one also comes in a number of different variations and versions.]

A very rich man offered a large prize to the person who could carry on the best “conversation” with him without speaking a word, only gesturing. Crowds of people showed up to try for the prize, but no one was able to understand the rich man’s motions.

There was a school near the rich man’s palace. Many of the scholars tried for the prize, but no one even came close to having an intelligent conversation.

One morning when the milkman came by to deliver milk, one of the students, hoping to have some fun, suggested to the milkman that he should try for the prize. This he did hoping to get a good laugh out of the backward milkman. The other students, seeing what was going on, joined in on the fun and soon they had him convinced he was capable of winning the prize.

The students, together with the milkman, set out for the rich man’s house. Word spread fast and before long a large procession had formed.

The rich man invited everyone into an immense hall and the contest began.

The rich man raised one finger; in response the milkman raised two fingers.

The rich man raised three fingers, to which the milkman raised a clenched fist, giving the impression he was ready for a fist fight.

The rich man showed the milkman an orange; in response the milkman took a piece of bread out of his pocket and showed it to the rich man.

Ecstatic, the rich man embraced the milkman and gave him the prize, saying that he was the only one intelligent enough to understand his sign language.

Once outside the palace, the students clamored around the milkman to find out the meaning of his “conversation” with the rich man.

“It was the stupidest thing I ever saw in my life,” began the milkman. “The man raised one finger, telling me he was going to poke out one of my eyes. So I raised two fingers to show him that when I got done with him, he would be blind. He then raised three fingers, telling me that he would rip my face off, and I told him that I would bash his face in. That scared the man and so he offered me an orange as a peace gesture. I then showed him that I had bread to eat and didn’t need his orange.”

Curious to see if the rich man had understood the conversation the same as the milkman, the students went back to his palace to see what he had to say.

“I raised one finger to say that there is only one God, and he raised two fingers, saying that God is both God and man. I then raised three fingers to show that in reality God is made up of three persons, to which the milkman replied by making a fist,

showing that these three are one True God. Finally, I showed him an orange, which represents the forbidden fruit that caused man to be cast out of paradise. The milkman then showed me a piece of bread, which symbolizes salvation when broken during Communion.” ▲

Life in Brazil

Standing in Line in the Bank

What is the longest you have ever stood in line in the bank? What would you consider to be unacceptable? Five minutes? Ten minutes?

I do 95 percent of my banking on ATMs. It's the five percent that make banking interesting.

Carnival in Brazil begins on a Friday evening and ends Tuesday noon, when banks and businesses open after an extended weekend. It's a known fact that even on a normal weekend, it's not a good idea to go to the bank on Mondays and Fridays, because usually they're quite full. On a Carnival weekend, don't even consider such a thing. Yet, there I was on Tuesday afternoon, after Carnival, with something that couldn't be done on an ATM. There was no option, but to get in line.

I mention here that the Banco Itaú agency in Rio Verde where I have my account, is quite large. It has some 15 ATMs and seven or eight tellers on a busy day. Because of advance automation, both the ATMs and the tellers are very efficient.

Anyway, when I went to get in line, there were approximately a hundred people ahead of me. I knew it would be a long haul, so went back out and to the bookstore on the corner, where I quickly shopped for a book. A new bestseller had just come in, *Prenda-me Se For Capaz*—Catch Me if You Can (at least, I think that is what the title is in English), the story of Frank W. Abagnale, by Stan Redding.

Book in hand, I returned to the bank and took my place in the sinuous line (see below), where I remained for two hours and fifteen minutes, slowly worming my way along.

But no! It's not as bad as it sounds. In fact, beside the book I had to read, there was another very positive benefit. It's amazing how many old friends a person meets in the bank on a day like that. The only problem was that in the back and forth line, we would meet, talk for several minutes, as we slowly moved in opposite directions. Maybe twenty or twenty-five minutes later, we would meet again, after each having finished one more loop on the serpentine line.

If there is such a thing as a distinguished criminal, Frank W. Abagnale would fit that description. He was high-class, a gentleman, a lady's man, who didn't slink around in the shadows. Always acting alone, out in the open, Abagnale managed to swindle Pan Am Airlines, banks, institutions and individuals out of some two million dollars by the time he turned 21.

If to love one's job is a virtue, then Abagnale wasn't entirely devoid of virtue. To walk openly, gentlemanly, walk into a bank with forged documents and minutes later (not two hours and fifteen minutes later, like some people) walk out with ten grand of cold cash, that was smilingly handed to him by unsuspecting bank officials, was an accomplishment akin to planting a flag on top of Mount Everest.

Abagnale didn't pull that one once or twice, but hundreds of times, with varying amounts of cash, all over the United States, all over Europe.

Abagnale's favorite ruse was to pose as a Pan Am pilot in an impeccable uniform. This handsome teenager, who looked older than his actual age, soon found that when in uniform, his victims scanned his face closer than the false documents he presented. That is where his quick wit and angelic face shone like so many dollar signs.

Abagnale soon knew a lot more about what the long string of numbers on a check mean than most bank managers. Thus he would give a hot check in, say, New York, but only after altering the code to where it would be sent to California for compensation. He knew exactly how many days he would have before his first bouncers would make their way back. Until then, he would confidently go from bank to bank exchanging worthless pieces of paper for live cash. Then, he would skip the country and do a rerun of his act hundreds, or thousands, of miles away on a new set of victims.

Quick wit, honed by innumerable pinches, was Abagnale's greatest defense. Always operating under an alias, he once scribbled his right name and address on the back of a forged check. That evening he suddenly realized that he had carelessly cashed the check in a nearby bank. Knowing that the check would be sent out the next morning for compensation, Abagnale returned at opening time with a hyped up story about how he had cashed the wrong check. His plan was to return the money and get the check back before it was sent out.

He had cashed the check in uniform, and now, in civilian clothes, he wasn't recognized. He asked the bank official if someone had cashed a Pam Am check the previous afternoon. Yes, he was told, and the FBI had been notified...

Without missing a beat, Abagnale told the bank official, "Yes, that's why I'm here. I'm an FBI agent and need to see that check." He went on to explain that by law he would have to take the check with him, but would leave them a photocopy. Did they have a photocopier? Could he use it? He quickly took a copy of the front only, handed it to the official, and left the bank.

Five minutes later a legitimate FBI agent showed up to begin work on the case.

One day while in France, he was recognized by a flight attendant, who, knowing he was wanted by the police, quickly notified the pilot of her plane, who in turn notified the French police. He was arrested, tried, and sentenced to a year in prison. After six months he was released and sent to Sweden to stand trial for his forgeries in that country. The judge took a special interest in the case, and instead of sending him on to Italy, where he was wanted by the police, managed to send him back to the United States, which would avoid his being sent from

country to country in Europe and standing trial, something that would drag out for years.

The judge went to where Abagnale was being held and in a singular gesture of kindness, told him he was going to put him aboard a non-stop international flight to New York. Since people don't usually flee from airplanes, he told him there would be no accompanying guards. The flight crew would be notified and he would ride first-class, near the cockpit, so that flight attendants could keep an eye on him. The FBI was notified and would be waiting to board the plane the moment the door opened, to take their man.

Abagnale boarded the plane, wandered about during the flight, but lo! when the door was opened and FBI agents came aboard, their man was not to be found.

The plane was a VC10 Viscount. Because of his broad experience as a Pan Am impostor, Abagnale was totally familiar with this plane, as he was with the Kennedy Airport. He knew that in one of the lavatories, there was a trap door just above the landing gear. He also knew that after landing, while taxiing to the terminal, at a certain point the plane would come to a near stop. And so, in the dead of night, as the flight was coming to an end, Abagnale locked himself in the lavatory, waited for the plane to slow down, opened the trap door and dropped three meters down to the tarmac. Once again he was free, for a short time. Finally he was caught and imprisoned for a short time.

What can we learn from this story?

It makes time go fast when standing in line for over two hours in a bank.

Crime ended up paying for Abagnale. Once out of prison, he became a consultant to law enforcement agencies in the US, a position which he has held for over 20 years.

Abagnale, a mere mortal, took thousands of people for a ride. Satan, a spirit, watches us day and night, hoping to take us for a ride to eternal destruction, where there will be no escape. Jesus said, "And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch." Or he'll catch us. ▲

Updates

O Caso Vilma

Vilma's case. You will remember Vilma, the woman who kidnapped a newborn baby in a maternity hospital by posing as a social worker. Since then the police have found that another of her "children," was acquired in the same way. DNA tests have proved that she is not the biological mother of either. Confronted by this in court, she explained that what apparently happened was that when "her" baby was born, it died. Her husband, now deceased, she says, must have picked up someone else's baby and put in the place of her own.

The police didn't buy the story, the judge didn't buy the story, and much less the public. Today she is in jail, awaiting trial. It's probably the safest possible place for her.

She can no longer appear in public for fear of being mobbed, or even lynched. To many she is practically the devil incarnate.

Pedrinho, now 17, the little boy we wrote about, is slowly gravitating to his biological parents. He is considering going to live with them. Jamilly, the daughter, now 23, remains quite loyal to her pseudo-mother. ▲

Our President

Our president continues to surprise the country. Not only is he showing a lot of common sense, but a disposition to tackle some sacred cows that other presidents chose to ignore. One of them is our banking system. Banks today are charging 10 percent per month for many of their services. With inflation at less than 10 percent per month, they are making money—big money. President Lula is beginning to take shots at the bankers.

Instead of the dollar hitting 5 to 1, as was predicted, today it is less than 3 to 1. There is a good chance it will stabilize in this neighborhood. ▲