

Brazil News



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Editorial

The Fireman and the Arsonist

We admire firemen, those dedicated souls who live in a constant state of alert, even when off duty, who close both eyes to sleep, but never both ears. There is but one response to a call: "I'm on my way..."

Mealtime, family hour, an outing, scheduled activities, are all subject to abrupt interruption or cancellation. High winds, driving rain, growing snowdrifts, sleet and icy roads, dangling funnels, heat and cold, are part of the game—in fact, often they are the reason for the game.

Firemen must be resourceful. No two emergencies are ever alike in all their details. Fire and high water wait on no one, not even on firemen. Rapid decisions must be made and implemented. High risk decisions.

The work of firemen is negative by nature. When called to the scene of a fire, their job is to limit destruction, never to restore anything to its original state. Even in their finest moments, when they have saved a home from destruction, they may leave behind waterlogged carpets, charred furniture, broken windows and blackened walls. Their success is measured by what they avert, by what they manage to save.

The arsonist. Contrary to the fireman who serves his community and country, the arsonist is a criminal, a misfit, a monster, a satanic personification, if you will. He is a corruptor, one who derives pleasure from provoking needless, senseless destruction, and death. His specialty is setting fire to property. While he may at times work for hire, or to illicitly collect an insurance premium, many times he acts for the ghoul pleasure of seeing someone else's property going up in smoke. It is doubtful if any arsonist has ever been celebrated in verse or song, as sometimes happens with bandits and other criminals who achieve public sympathy.

The arsonist plans his projects with infinite care. The building or area to be set on fire must fit his specifications. He painstakingly chooses the materials to be used. The

timing must be exact. In the case of delayed ignition, the fuse or timer must be set just right. Above all, there can be no trail. But just in case something should go amiss, there must be a redundancy of alibis.

The feelings of admiration and gratitude which we feel for firemen most certainly doesn't extend to arsonists.

And the tongue is a fire.

In that terse phrase James identifies the “hot spot” in human relations. The tongue is a match and evil thoughts are the tinder. He says, *Behold what a great matter a little fire kindleth!* When the heart can no longer contain the pressure of evil thoughts, they, like so much tinder, rise to the mouth, where the tongue (the most foolproof automatic lighter in existence) ignites the words and spews them out, setting *on fire the course of nature.*

James says that *every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind. But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.*

So true! The tongue—the match, the automatic lighter—never loses its incendiary capacity. Its motto could surely be: Have match, will light.

In all fairness to the tongue, we must again quote James: *Therewith bless we God, even the Father.* What this means is that when the fountain of the heart issues good thoughts, the tongue will convert them into sanctified words. Thus the tongue must be both glorified and vilified as a servant, for it unfailingly and accurately translates thoughts into words, both blessing God and cursing men.

The tongue doesn't get converted; it never loses its dual function of blessing and cursing. The heart on the other hand, does get converted, indeed, it is replaced with a new heart. Alas, even after transplanted, the heart must continue closely enfolded in fleshy tissue. And so, even with the best of intentions, not always does it manage to produce shining thoughts, charged with purity and virtue.

It is unnecessary to ask the reader to remember occasions when undesirable thoughts suddenly burst forth from the heart and were ignited by the tongue. Most painful is the remembrance of our fellows choking in the acrid smoke of our verbal cannonade, of the charred feelings produced by our flame thrower, many times in the lives exactly of those whom we most love. (Paradoxically, these situations can be the easiest to restore. We know by the weight of our conscience that we have erred. And we know the path to reconciliation.)

This article deals with something much more subtle; it deals with those impure thoughts that we cosmeticize, to where we convince—or almost convince—ourselves that they are virtuous, or at least not noxious, and that they will not burst into flame when exposed to the tongue.

(Not unusually such a conversation is initiated with: “You know, I was just thinking...,” “I just heard today...,” or “I'm really concerned about...,” and then follow with a detailed dissection of a person or issue.)

The carnal interlocutor sees no flames, the spiritual does. To him comes the age-old question (now paraphrased): Am I my brother's fireman?

My brother's fireman. Do you know what that means? Recall the vow you made to give and take reproof. Very likely you thought at the time (and maybe still do) that a reproof is a formal visit in which you approach your brother with an error you perceive in his life and plead with him to amend his way. It surely can be that. But many of those visits could be avoided if we were truly our brother's fireman.

It doesn't require a Ph.D. to know that the best time to put out a fire is when it is just starting. Likewise the best time to come to a brother's rescue is at the onset of his problem. We believe that many serious problems in the brotherhood are expressed in their infancy as words aflame.

We said that natural firemen are "those dedicated souls who live in a constant state of alert." The very same thing can be said of spiritual firemen. Because they maintain daily contact with the Lord, they are quick to see flames and smell smoke in the words of others.

We insert here, that contrary to natural firemen, this doesn't mean they immediately turn on their red lights and siren. No, a spiritual fireman is discreet. He works as silently and invisibly as possible. Also, contrary to a natural fireman, the spiritual fireman's work is positive. Not only does he extinguish fires, but he also restores. His reward is not a medal on the chest, but the joy of seeing a soul restored.

Giving and taking reproof. The truth of the matter is that most of us don't especially like to give reproof, and much less take reproof. Let's change the wording just a bit: Being our brother's fireman and letting him be our fireman.

You're out cutting wheat and your neighbor, driving by on the road, notices a thread of smoke rising from the back of the combine. He drives right through the ditch and up to where you are working, motions for you to stop and runs toward your machine brandishing a fire extinguisher. Quick action saves not only the machine, but likely the standing wheat as well.

Now, was that a burden for your neighbor? Did you resent his action? Of course not, on both counts!

Why can't the same thing be true spiritually?

It absolutely can be.

Sometimes we say something that isn't a hundred percent pure. It may be something we heard about someone. We decide to pass it on to another brother, who happens to be a fireman on duty. Several things can happen:

He listens to what we have to say, but instead of replying, changes the subject.

He makes a kind remark about the person we have just defamed.

He says something like, "I hope that isn't true. I think a lot of that brother."

Sometimes it's just a tactful, meaningful silence.

It takes a mighty hard heart to resist or resent that quick, gentle puff from the brother's fire extinguisher. Possibly there is no reproof more effective than that which is lovingly given at the exact moment of the transgression.

The neighbor driving by the wheat field could have called the fire department on his cell phone and continued on his way with a feeling of mission accomplished. Similarly

the brother could have notified the preacher about the improper spirit he felt in his brother, and, of course, mentioned the deep concern he felt for him. He could have, but then he wouldn't have been a fireman.

We repeat: Unlike the work of the natural fireman, which is negative, that of the spiritual fireman is positive, constructive and restorative.

This would be an excellent note on which to close this little article, but we continue.

The spiritual arsonist.

It isn't hard to identify a professional arsonist. He is someone with an elephantine memory and an even better imagination, both of which he uses to catalog his version of the faults of the entire brotherhood.

A professional arsonist is a modern version of the old town crier, who walked the streets announcing the latest happenings. If you stop and listen, very long, you'll feel dirty. And unless you take a good bath with plenty of soap, you *will* be dirty.

Spiritual arson is a spiritual crime. It is a deliberate attempt to build or fan an unholy fire. Thus, like it or not, when a spiritual arsonist is permitted to run free in a congregation setting unholy fires, the smoke from the flames casts a pall on the disciplinary process of that place. To feel that arson isn't reason for discipline, and that other fruits must first manifest themselves before action can be taken, is like saying that a natural arsonist shouldn't be arrested if he doesn't steal or commit any other significant crimes.

The amateur arsonist.

This arsonist has his heart in his sleeve. Whenever he sees someone with a long face or a sad tale to tell, he extends his shoulder as a convenient wailing wall. There can be virtue in this, as well as good intentions. But, possibly because of personal feelings of inadequacy, such a person gravitates to those who have a bone to pick with humanity (or maybe vice-versa). Contrary to the professional, the amateur often has a sincere desire to be of help, but possibly just doesn't know how. And so, as he listens to a tangled story, instead of giving sound direction and an occasional puff from the fire extinguisher, an overdose of sympathy is given. And the flames wax just a bit hotter.

The arsonist/fireman.

Some time ago I read an article (I believe in *READER'S DIGEST*, but in spite of having gone through an enormous stack of old magazines, I couldn't find it). This article told of a city in which there was an epidemic of fires, obviously the work of an accomplished arsonist. After thousands of dollars of damage and countless hours of detective work, it was discovered that the arsonist was a member of the fire department. He would set a timed blaze so as to have plenty of time to be on duty when the call came in. Then he, the arsonist, would assume the role of the heroic fireman and help extinguish the fire.

The spiritual arsonist/fireman follows the procedure of his natural counterpart. He ruthlessly agitates and then piously conciliates. But unlike the spiritual fireman who works as inconspicuously as possible, this pseudo-fireman makes use of the light of the fire he himself has lit to draw attention to himself as a conciliator and champion of the downtrodden.

Oddly, the arsonist/fireman believes he is doing a noble work. What he ignores is that his efforts do not bring the victim into closer fellowship with the brotherhood; they do not bring about a true or lasting sanctification in the victim's life; and finally, that in his own life they create a deep resentment toward his brethren, for he believes that a good share of the problem can be attributed to their inability or unwillingness to understand the victim.

The spiritual arsonist needs help. He is an unhappy, frustrated person. How does one go about helping a spiritual arsonist?

In the natural sense, can you think of anything more intimidating to an arsonist, than a large, really good fire department that seems to always get to the blazes before the fires have had a chance to spread? The arsonist fears this more than anything else, because the fire hasn't had a chance to destroy the evidence of his work.

Similarly, a brotherhood of alert, active firemen can frustrate the work of arsonists. Instead of concentrating their efforts on the arsonists, they keep a sharp eye on their victims. The arsonist knows when to keep quiet, but the victims seldom do, which gives a beautiful opportunity to alert firemen to trigger a gentle puff from their fire extinguishers on their words. If each time they begin to repeat "what I heard," they find themselves looking down a fire extinguisher hose, a little bell will begin to ring.

Hopefully a bell will also begin to ring in the arsonist's heart when he finds that most of the houses in town have a sprinkler system installed. Once he realizes he is out of work, he may come to his senses. If he doesn't, he deserves help. After all, he is a brother.

Now a just a word to spiritual firemen. The fire extinguisher we have been talking about has an interesting characteristic. It has almost no pressure—so little, in fact, that one has to get right up next to the victim for it to do any good. It is calibrated to give just a gentle puff. That's all it takes.

There is always the temptation to uncoil the big hoses, hook them to the fire engine, and really give the victim a dousing. It may put out the fire, but there is a good chance it will snuff out life too. Remember, the work of a spiritual fireman is positive, constructive and restorative. That precludes the use of heavy hoses.

If you, good reader, have felt just a twinge of conscience as you read these words, if you feel that you haven't always really been your brother's fireman, take courage. This article wasn't written for saints, but for firemen who wish to learn and grow and thus be ever more useful in the kingdom. ▲

Religion

Mennonights

My spell checker tells me I have a misspelled word. In what could almost be interpreted as a bit of imagination, it suggests "Menno nights," an innocuous little term, as a fitting alternative...

If you read on, you may gain a new respect for my spell checker's spiritual understanding.

The name Mennonite today has approximately the same descriptive value as the word pickup. If someone says, "I bought myself a pickup," you ask, "What kind?" It may be a big double-cab affair, a little compact, an all-terrain vehicle, a Ford, a Dodge or a Toyota. It may have all the bells and whistles, and then it may be a no-frills model. It may be a used vehicle that was picked up for 500 dollars, and it may have been special ordered for 25,000 dollars. But it's still a pickup.

If a stranger calls you on the phone and says, "I'm a Mennonite," what do you know? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. To be a Mennonite today can mean driving a horse and buggy, or it can mean being a political agitator. It can mean being a woman wearing a veil, or it can mean being a woman with closely cropped hair, in the pulpit preaching the gospel, administering baptism or communion, or performing a marriage. It can mean being someone who blends seamlessly with his background, or it can mean being someone easily identified because of obviously adhering to an alternative life style.

And so, when the voice at the other end of the line says, "I'm a Mennonite," you have learned nothing. What is a Mennonite?

A number of years ago we had some visitors here on the Colony from the Mennonite World Conference. After they left I began receiving MWC literature, as well as occasional questionnaires, none of which even remotely fit into our concept of the Gospel or what it means to be a Mennonite. Glibly they discuss religious issues as though they were a science, in technical terms, as though religion can be reduced to formulas and equations...

...And that rings a little bell. Isn't it true that we put a lot of value on experience? When faced with difficult or delicate problems, we call on seasoned brethren to pool their spirituality, convictions and experience to look for a solution. Have you ever stopped to think why none of these brethren have ever felt to write a book, or a manual, based on their experiences, that would give the formula for dealing with similar problems in the future? If this would have been done for the last 50 or 100 years, we could have a bookcase loaded with spiritual jurisprudence. Now, in the computer age, the content of those books could be cataloged and as problems arose, the computer would give a printout of the volumes, pages and paragraphs to be consulted.

According to Matthew Henry, back in the olden days legal transactions weren't recorded in writing, but carried out before a quorum of elders or judges, who were witness to the proceedings. The "deal" was closed by a symbolic act ("a man plucked off his shoe, and gave *it* to his neighbour: and this *was* a testimony in Israel," as happened when Boaz purchased the parcel of land that had belonged to Elimelech).

Curiously, this custom has been carried through the ages in God's church. Other than for conference reports (beginning in Jerusalem), very little has been written about how problems were handled. This information has been prudently shared with other laborers, at the appropriate moment, or shall we say, at the city gate with the elders.

The reason for this is simple. Spiritual solutions can not be computerized or cataloged,

because each one depends on the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit decides, man discerns. Spiritual solutions aren't a science, they can't be reduced to formulas and equations.

Most amazing in the literature which I receive from the MWC are the constant references to anabaptism, but rarely to nonresistance. Social problems rank high, but "worldliness" seems to be an outdated word.

In the last Courier (the MWC official paper) received, the last page lists ten "Questions Facing Mennonite World Conference on its 75th Anniversary." They are, in brief:

1) The possibility of becoming a "Mennonite World Communion." The question they ask is: How would becoming a "communion" change Anabaptist-Mennonites as a global fellowship?

2) Funding for MWC is calculated according to each country's GNP. Since over half of the members are non-North Americans, will North Americans be willing to pay their "fair share" (which because of their higher GNP will be the lion's share), without "controlling or steering MWC's work?"

4) The possibility of establishing "partnerships" with churches in Africa and in the South, as is happening in North America.

5) The churches in the South (South America, Africa, etc.) are wanting to establish new kinds of partnerships with churches in the North. It appears that many of these churches in reality are looking for additional ways to access resources that current partners are not making available. How will MWC deal with this?

6) Do Anabaptist-Mennonites in general have the theology, the history, the style, and the will to do more joint, cooperative activity? Or are Anabaptist-Mennonites too congregationalist for global activity?

7) In the South the majority of church members don't know much about MWC. How will MWC inform people at the congregational level about its vision, goals and mandate?

8) What role will technology, especially e-mail and the Internet, play in helping Anabaptist-Mennonites around the world experience greater "family-ness?"

9) Church leaders in the South have been influenced by a philosophy of centralization and a top-down style of leadership. MWC, on the other hand, is an organization with a "communion" model of partnership. How can these differences be resolved?

10) Where will the MWC main office be in ten years? If the office moves to the South, will the North support such a change? If the leadership comes from the South, will the North lose interest in the organization?

Do you get the point?

In 1964 the right-wing Military staged a bloodless "revolution" in Brazil to thwart the threat of a communist takeover. The first Colony families arrived here in 68. I remember distinctly the good impression we had of this Military government. In no way were we ever harassed or restricted in any form. Rather I feel we were favored for our religious beliefs and political neutrality. Our contacts with government officials on all levels were both cordial and productive.

The last issue of Courier tells the story of the MWC conference held in Curitiba (where we now have a mission). And I guess that is where the name Mennonight first

hit me. The Dutch press reported “repressive actions” and the “torture of priests by the Brazilian government.” This last charge may well be true, since a segment of the Catholic clergy was very definitely leftist at the time and actively agitating. The Dutch Mennonites questioned whether “having and attending a world conference in Brazil might be construed as support for a repressive political system.” The Dutch decided to boycott the conference in Brazil. “There was support for this position among some German and North American Mennonites.” It was “doubted that there could be an authentic conference without freedom of expression.”

With reluctance it was finally decided to have the conference in Curitiba, with the Dutch sending only a token delegation. “Politics, albeit quietly, was discussed too.” Fifteen “oppressions of poor, landless, and especially indigenous people” were identified. The group appealed for a “new infusion of the Holy Spirit that will show us that to keep silent before these injustices means to accept them.”

If these “children of Menno,” as they boldly call themselves, were to come face to face with Menno Simons, would he know them? Would they know him?

Recently an American Mennonite minister stationed in São Paulo came to the Colony to do research on a book concerning the Mennonites in Brazil. He was a very fine man and we had an enjoyable time together. During our conversation I mentioned that our young men are exempted from military service. He seemed surprised and wanted to know how we went about getting this exemption. It seems strange that this Mennonite minister would be writing a book on Mennonites, all the while permitting his charges to serve in the army, apparently thinking there was nothing the matter with it.

Am I suggesting we quit using the name Mennonite?

By no means! If we would truly be children of Menno, we cannot be children of the night. We cannot be Mennonights, (nor Menno nights, as my spell checker suggests). To be worthy of this name, we must be children of the light... so, why not be Mennolights?

(My spell checker asks me if I might not prefer Menno lights. Sounds good.) ▲

A Brazilian Story

By Filadelfo Borges de Lima

*[The author is a local writer and historian. The story he tells is taken from his book, **Veredas Rio-Verdenses**, in which he records not only the spectacular happenings in Rio Verde, but heart-warming, down-to-earth incidents as well. We have omitted minor details that would be of importance only to those who are familiar with local culture.]*

The Reward

For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind. These words of wisdom teach us that he who sows virtue will reap virtue. The Bible teaches us that he who gives to the poor is laying up treasure with God. Walter freely gave and received in abundance.

Walter Silva Araújo—that’s his name—was born on March 18, 1948... For a time he was a chauffeur. This was during the sixties when there wasn’t so much as one square meter of asphalt on any road in the southeastern part of the state of Goiás. The truck he drove belonged to another man. Whenever he charged for work done, no one doubted his word. If he charged for ten trips, it was because he had made ten trips.

While he had never felt hunger pangs, neither had he ever lived in luxury; he never ran from work and was always just with his fellowmen. Walter got along well with the *chapas*, the men who made a living loading and unloading trucks. He liked to take along some small gift for those who carried sacks and more sacks of rice on their backs, which was the principal crop raised back those days. The Southeast hadn’t begun to produce soybeans yet.

He was hauling grain from a fazenda [farm] between the Verdão and Monte Alegre Rivers, to Cibrazem [a government storage facility] in Rio Verde.

On this road there was a little country store known as Venda dos Bambus. The owner had the nickname of Tatá. On one of these trips Walter noticed four people on the roadside trying to catch a ride — a man, a woman and two children. He pulled over and the man asked him where he was going.

“To the Venda dos Bambus,” Walter told them.

“Could you give us a ride?”

The day was far spent and soon it would be night. They all climbed in and as they were driving along, one of the little boys mentioned that they hadn’t had anything to eat since the day before and that they had no money to buy food. It was evident the hunger pangs were quite real by now.

Walter was touched by what he saw. How could he be indifferent seeing how hungry they were? We know for a fact that some—many, in fact—have no feeling for such. Hunger exists because it brings good results in election booths. It’s a lucrative business. But Walter, a fine man, was moved by what he saw.

They stopped at Tatá’s store. By now it was night. Tatá and his family were having their supper. Walter asked them if there might be some leftovers for the hungry family. No, there would be no leftovers, and no interest was shown in fixing at least a simple meal—very simple—since empty stomachs don’t ask to see a menu. There was some *Mané-pelado* [a coarse cake made of grated, raw manioc] on a shelf, so Walter asked that they serve it to the hungry family, together with soft drinks. One of the boys, in spite of the gnawing hunger, was embarrassed to accept the food. Seeing this, Walter told them: “Eat all you like.”

Walter paid for everything. The family ate all they could hold. And Walter hit the road again.

Time went by and one day Walter went to a fazenda near the town of Quirinópolis to pick up a load of eating beans. It was in the same old truck. A teenage boy was with him. Everything was going fine until something went wrong with the truck. They stopped and got out of the truck. It was getting dark and Walter was under the truck, trying to figure out what was wrong. He would be able to fix the problem, but it would

take a little while, so he told his helper, “There is a house just down the road. Please go over there and see if they could fix us some supper, because it will be late before we get out of here.”

As he walked to the house, the boy couldn't help but wonder: Was it possible there would be a delicious supper all prepared, but the people of the house would refuse to give them any? Walter would gladly pay for the supper. It didn't take long and the teenager was back, together with the man of the house and his young son.

“Boa tarde,”

“Boa tarde,” replied Walter from under the truck.

The boy said to his dad, “That's the truck, dad.”

Walter didn't understand what the boy was trying to tell his dad, nor did he attach any importance to it.

“Dad, I tell you, that's the truck,” the boy insisted.

Walter kept on working under the truck. The man leaned over and told him that supper would soon be ready.

“The *patroa* [literally, boss, as the wife is sometimes called] is getting things around.”

“Yes sir.”

Before returning to the house, the man informed Walter, “As soon as supper is ready, we'll let you know.”

“That's fine. I'm sorry to be bothering you.”

Finally everything was ready. They called Walter; he and the boy went to the house and washed their hands. The man of the house had a mysterious air. “We've got an account to settle,” he said to his guest.

“An account...?”

“After supper we'll settle our account. Go ahead with your supper.”

Walter was just a bit worried. This fellow has an account to settle with me? What kind of an account? I've never seen this man before. These thoughts ran through Walter's mind as he ate in silence.

“Would you care for a drink to wash your supper down?”

“Come to think of it, I would.”

The host placed a bottle of *pinga* [the Brazilian version of tequila] on the table. It was good quality stuff, made in a home still.

“It has hot peppers in it. Do you like it hot?”

“I sure do.”

“Have all you like and then we'll talk.”

Walter was more baffled than ever. He asked his hosts why they weren't eating supper and they answered that they already had. “We have early supper here,” the lady of the house informed him. His thoughts ran wild. And this thing of settling an account. What account? Had he stepped into a trap? Looking around he felt a little better when he saw that the host was trying hard to hide a smile. He became more at ease.

“Your name is Walter, isn't it?”

“That’s right, my name is Walter.”

The host wasn’t managing to wait until supper was over to settle his account.

“Walter, you may be surprised to know that I have an account to settle with you...all of us, my wife and children too.”

“I don’t understand. What kind of an account?”

One of the children, unable to contain himself, burst out:

“Do you remember the couple and two children that you helped out one day long ago?”

“I remember.”

“Well, today we’re going to settle that account. That day, Walter, you *killed our hunger* [a literal translation] and today we’ve killed your hunger, as well as that of this boy who is with you.”

The man’s voice was racked with emotion. His wife couldn’t hold back the tears either. The warmth of their hearts radiated throughout the room. It seemed there was nothing too good to show their appreciation to the truck driver.

The supper was a simple meal. The people who served it were also simple. The meal was prepared over the fire of gratitude. They not only gave Walter supper, but invited him to spend the night in their house. They said, “This is your house. Spend the night here and leave in the morning.”

“I can’t. I must get back to Rio Verde as quickly as possible. There will be more opportunities for me to stop by and see you. You have been wonderful to me.”

“Nothing of the sort, Walter. We’re only doing our duty. We’ll never forget what you did for us that day.”

Once again they invited Walter to spend the night there, and again he explained he really must be going, that he would visit them again another day. He had a lot of distance to cover to reach Rio Verde.

“But why the hurry, Walter?”

“I have a lot of business to take care of, Antônio.”

They talked for a little while after supper, after which they were served some delicious coffee. The beans had been roasted over an open fire and were ground in a hand grinder screwed to the wall.

Back at the truck, Walter crawled underneath, and together with his helper, Geraldinho, finished his job. Then they shook hands with everyone and promised to return, which they did several days later. It was around 2:00 o’clock, on a hot afternoon. They were given a delicious *merenda* [snack]. As he was shaking hands to leave, he was given a present: a *leitão* [young pig, considered a delicacy] just right to be slaughtered.

“What’s this about, Antônio?”

“A present.”

“And this...?”

It was a hanger of bananas, plus this and that.

“Dona Maria, you shouldn’t be giving me all this.”

“I know it’s not much...”

Best of all was their friendship. Sincere, pure, honest friendship, born of gratitude. ▲

Culture

A hospitable people

The story you just read by Mr. Borges de Lima accurately portrays a beautiful aspect of the Brazilian culture: that of hospitality.

When we first moved to Brazil over 30 years ago, we knew no one, and no one knew us. Back those days it definitely wasn't in vogue to wear a beard, and yet we—and Fidel Castro—wore beards. As already mentioned, this was during the years of the Army takeover, a perfect setting for people to mistrust us. Yet it never happened. Rather, on all levels, we were recipients of the most sincere hospitality.

With today's faster pace of living and westernization of society, and especially business, some of the finer points of this hospitality are going the way of the Mohicans. This is unfortunate, but modern living makes people more practical. And less compassionate.

Regrettably, there are those “practical” souls who see Latin hospitality as...well, almost as an annoyance, as something that must be put up with.

Hospitality is “Cordial and generous reception of or disposition toward guests” (AHD). Let's notice:

Greetings. For Brazilians, a handshake isn't something to get over with. It's a ceremony that often mirrors the degree of friendship between those meeting. When relations are cool, it can be a perfunctory, western type handclasp, with a brisk nod of the head. However if there is any degree of intimacy, the *abraço*, with its many variations, becomes a necessary accessory to the hand shake. It can mean tapping each other on the back while shaking hands, or it can, in the case of long absence or intense friendship, mean a full Brezhnev style bear hug that can be prolonged for a minute or more.

When friends meet, they inquire about each others families. Not uncommonly they will individually name each child and the other will give a brief rundown on each. A typical greeting...

Pedro: João, it's been a long time...

João: It sure has! How are you?

Pedro: I'm fine, thanks to God. And you João, how are you making out?

João: I'm very well too, thanks to God. And tell me Pedro, how is [your wife,] Sofia?

Pedro: She wasn't too well several months back. In fact, she had to have surgery, but now she's much better, thanks to God.

João: Thanks to God! And how is [your oldest daughter] Fátima?

Pedro: She's in São Paulo studying to be a doctor. Manoel is finishing high school. And tell me, Pedro, how is [your wife] Júlia?

João: She's fine. She wanted to come with me, but it just didn't work out.

Pedro: And the children, how are they?...

So it goes.

Meals and sharing.

If you come to a Brazilian's home during mealtime, they will effusively invite you to join them. Especially in the past it was standard practice to always be prepared for unexpected visitors.

It is considered rude to eat something in front of someone else without offering to share. In the case of a meal, the person offers his plate and asks, "Aceita?" (Will you accept?) If it's an ice cream cone or a soft drink, the same thing is true. [It would be the height of rudeness to accept.]

One of my most embarrassing moments occurred many years ago, in the beginning of Colony history, when a couple from the US came down to look at land. We went to the house of a prospective seller. For some reason the lady took along a bottle of pop, which she drank in their house. Needless to say, she didn't ask, "Aceita?"

Cafezinho. Literally, little coffee. Cafezinho is served in little cups and is a bit stronger than the stuff drunk in N America. In fact, it is stout enough that often only a little bit is poured into the little cups—maybe two or three micro sips. Some businesses have a counter where customers can serve themselves to a shot of coffee. When visiting someone, it is standard practice to serve cafezinho. Contrary to what some believe, it is neither impolite nor offensive to not accept the offered coffee.

The most impressive, however, is the kind of hospitality Mr. Borges de Lima writes about. Of all the impressions I have of the 31 years lived in Brazil, this is one of the most precious.

In our day and age of refrigerators, freezers, electric stoves, mixers, microwave ovens, and volumes of cookbooks, it is absolutely unbelievable how that someone, without a single modern convenience, could start from scratch and have a delicious meal ready to serve in an hour's time.

We begin with the house, a wooden structure built with an ax, a hammer, and a hoe. All the materials, with the exception of possibly a pound of nails, came from surrounding trees and palm trees. Now let's get one thing straight. These houses weren't huts or hovels. They were spacious (several bedrooms, a living room and kitchen) very comfortable. The foot thick thatch roof kept these houses cool on the hottest days. The floor, hard packed earth, was dampened each day and swept.

I have often said that I would have, without hesitation, taken the president of Brazil to one of these homes for a meal. Since there was often no cupboard, the kettles and other utensils were hung on nails on one of the kitchen walls. Meticulously scrubbed with homemade soap and a fine sand, these aluminum kettles shone brightly, without the slightest trace of smoke from having been used on a wood stove. For the silverware there was a rectangular piece of cloth hung on the wall, with narrow slots sewn in just the size of the handle of the knives, forks and spoons, which were stuck in upside down. The stove was a raised platform along one wall of the kitchen, often made of termite mounds and plastered. A special cast-iron stovetop was placed over the firebox. The heat on these apparently primitive stoves could be controlled more efficiently than

on the most modern ranges. Food could be kept just at a simmer, or a large kettle of water could be boiling in a matter of minutes.

This brings us to the food. A typical meal could consist of: rice, beans, manioc, squash, macaroni, fish, pork, smoked sausage, chicken, fried eggs, a lettuce salad—all produced (or caught, in the case of the fish) on their doorstep, not to mention the times when venison or other wild meat would be served. About the only thing purchased in town would be the salt and macaroni. The sugar and coffee would usually come from the boss's *fazenda*.

When we moved here and there were no roads in the area, we often traveled by horse, or maybe by Jeep. We would get to a place, the kind of place just described, and stop to ask for directions. But there was no such a thing as getting directions while on a horse or in a Jeep. We would be invited in and asked to sit down. Then while we talked to the man of the house, the lady would quickly stoke the fire and heat water for *cafezinho*, which she would soon serve to us, piping hot. After drinking the coffee, we would say, “Well, we must be on our way.” Our host would reply, “It’s early. Dinner will soon be ready.”

Sure enough, the kettles on the stove told the story. Dinner was being prepared. So while dinner was being prepared, the man of the house would show us his garden and little fields. He would take us down to the river and show us where he had his *seiva*—where he would feed the fish so that anytime he wanted to go fishing, he was quite sure to catch something. Soon his wife would call, “O almoço está pronto” (Dinner is ready).

We would eat dinner, and once again say, “Well, we really must be on our way. Our host would reply, “It’s early. Wait just a moment. My wife is making more coffee.” We would drink more piping hot coffee.

Again we would try, “We must be on our way.” And again, “It’s early.” Now they would hand us a burlap bag with bananas, squash, manioc, and maybe some dried meat. “We really must be going.”

“It’s early. Wait and the wife will make some more coffee.”

This time we would somehow manage to get going.

There are two lessons to be learned:

- 1) A delicious, wholesome meal doesn’t depend on a host of electrical and electronic devices and a bunch of exotic recipes.
- 2) To not have money doesn’t make people poor. And to have a lot of money and everything that modern technology has to offer, doesn’t make them rich. ▲

This & That

On Sept. 2, Richard & Edith Mininger had their sale. Because of Edith’s health they have returned to the US, where they will be living in Moundridge. The Colony here owes much to Richard & Edith for their labors in our midst. We will miss them, yet we understand their reasons for leaving and wish them the very best in N America.

On Sept. 3, the Rio Verdinho Cong. had a farewell for Richard & Edith, open to everyone from all three congregations. In the evening there was a joint meeting at the Rio Verdinho Cong., where Richard had his farewell sermon.

Fyanna, Daniel & Anna Kramer's daughter is living in Pirenópolis, giving classes in an English school belonging to Leide & Marta Peixoto. They are converts awaiting baptism.

On Sept. 12, there was a baby shower at the Rio Verdinho Cong. for Elizabeth, Mrs. Kevin Warkentin.

On Sept. 16, the town youth and their leaders spent the afternoon and evening at the falls by the Kramers.

Teresa, daughter of Arlo & Priscilla Hibner, is on the mission in Curitiba, teaching the missionary's children.

On Sept. 22, there was a meeting at the Monte Alegre social hall with the people from Perdigão. The plant superintendent was there and explained what their project would entail for the Colony. Ironically, different ones are interested, not so much for what can be made with the barns, as for the free fertilizer that will come as a byproduct. I mentioned this to one of the Perdigão men. He replied, "Well, we're not in the business of selling fertilizer factories, but if that is what the people want..." They would like to come up with a hundred chicken barns here on the Colony. There may be a few pig barns too. At any rate, a year from now this Colony will look and smell different than today.

John & Sheila Kramer, the missionaries from Acaraú are out to attend the wedding of Sheila's sister, Brenda, to Frank Coblentz, way out in Mato Grosso. (That wedding is the biiiiig news for the next issue of BN).

Sam & Erma Coblentz, Frank's folks, and Dan & Clara Coblentz, his grandparents, are out for the big day. Sams spent a few days in Patos, Paraíba, where they spent a number of years on the mission, before coming to Rio Verde.

Stan & Mary Schultz drove to Cuiabá, the capitol of Mato Grosso, to pick up John & Dorothy Burns, Jonathan & Lisa Toews and daughters, and Earl & Patricia Toews. From there they will go to the Boa Esperança colony for the wedding. Glenn Hibner from Boa Esperança also met them there. Earl spent several years in Brazil as a young boy when the Colony was founded. He then moved to Lapa, in the state of Paraná, with his parents, where they lived for a short time. Now he and his wife returned to Lapa to look things over. We're looking forward to a report on their findings.

Things are changing in Brazil. It used to be that to renew the license on my car, or any other vehicle, for that matter, involved paying a despachante (a person specialized in cutting through red tape), doing without car papers and running on a temporary document for a month or more while the new ones were being processed (and not being able to leave the state), taking the car to the license department to make sure everything was working, etc. In the last several years this has become less complicated, but this year I got a form in the mail, which I took to the automatic

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teller in my bank. It read the bar code, paid the yearly fee out of my account, and in less than a week the updated documents were in the post office. Not bad. We'll get there yet.

The rains have begun. Or have they? They began just a bit early this year and some farmers have begun planting corn. I understand that a few are even planting soybeans. Others are waiting, not quite believing that these early rains will continue on through.

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