

A SIMPLE ROATAN REALIZATION

I believe this a story that needs to be told. But, since it has nothing to do with microscopy, I am not entirely sure in what category this particular offering will find its final resting place or even if it is acceptable. Under my current state of affairs, explained below, it's the best I can do, because right now I am just able to write as the thoughts are formed. Having found Micscape graciously tolerant of my drabble in the past and as I get very little feed-back, I believe most people view my offerings as somewhat trivial. But then, I have reached an age where I comfortably tolerate what others think of me unless they owe me money. Since I consider the Micscape readership and my solitary fan to be above average in intelligence I shall sally forth in hopes of a generous forbearance.

My two-month absence from offering scholarly literary musings is a consequence of a confluence of tumultuous life circumstances and their associated causal effects on both my wife and me, in this case, her severe upper respiratory complications from an adverse reaction to medication and me suffering the same demise of health due to my allergies or a local "bug" (she required emergency care and I should have). This resulted in weeks of incapacitation, recovery and my faithful wife's forceful adoring assurances that, in case I should stumble or fall, she would be there to pick me up as soon as she stopped laughing. Coupling this with the digital mental waterboarding I received from watching the news, thinking, reading the entire Federalist Papers, Thomas Paine's "Common Sense", "The Rights of Man" and Henry David Thoreau's "Walden, Or, Life in the Woods" and more thinking, has engendered an epiphany about life in Roatan.

NOTE!

I have a cerebral confession to make here. Ole' Henry's work did not impress me as much as it probably should have. After digesting his first chapter on "Economy", he seems a likable fella I would have a beer with. He wants to do as little work as possible to have time for genius and is pretty sure everyone else is missing the philosophical boat. He's also cheap but wants to live as comfortably as possible and he even is a bit miffed at the town counsel for not giving him a paid seat just to hear what he is thinking!! I mean.....well...Pfffttttt!!!! I go thru that every day! My kinda guy. I got bored reading about myself and have closed the book for later.... the meds are wearing off and I can get back to the story....

The disadvantageous aspect of the aforementioned physical travails is that absolutely no progress whatsoever has been made on the Laboratory. Thusly, the only relatable mental sustenance I have to offer as applied to the Roatan experiences responsible for my particular enlightening insight, starts with a wonderful science conundrum as authored by Brooke McDowney in a mother to daughter conversation:

She said, "Science is the rigorous progressive analysis by which we try to understand and explain the universe. It begins with observation and conjecture.... from which further observation generates an hypothesis...when hypothesis finally passes the challenge of all known

data, it becomes theory. Theory is the ultimate assertion that the burden of scientific proof has been satisfied.... however, theory is not above question...only faith is."

Her daughter asked, "So faith alone is unassailable?"

Mother replied, "That's the theory" `

I find the above interpretation of science convincing, logically sound and I am at ease applying the progressive analysis steps to my epiphany. Let us start with observation/conjecture after a year and a half here.

Like every place I have ever been, the Roatan Honduras experience can be defined by interaction with the local denizens of animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms as defined by Carl Linnaeus In his Imperium Naturæ, but to simplify, I prefer to regroup and separate Homo sapiens (also read this as "humanity, "humans", "people") from the Regnum Animale and everything else (the land and its people).

The Land:

I described Roatan in an earlier article as a 35-mile-long island of hills and valleys overlaid by a thick jungle fauna punctuated by even steeper hills and valleys, located 40 or so miles off the north coast of mainland Honduras. Honduras has been described as a "Third World Country" replete with the associated pejorative connotations ascribed by quite a few of the people I know stateside. But Roatan, being a separate island from the mainland is more of a resort destination and decies the cinema image of dark, palm frond covered tropical bars, populated by a few swarthy, sweaty men in dingy Panama suits and equally dingy Brisa weave hats, with sunglasses, amid a thick miasma of cigar smoke, playing cards and drinking rum under a slowly turning ceiling fan with a light waft of Latino music in the background.

Nah.

We got a Wendy's, couple of malls, frozen White Castle hamburgers at the grocery store, large resorts like they have in Key West, over 300 dive sites around the island and bars with live entertainment or playing Nashville country music which, believe it or not, is the audio refrain much preferred by the local masses. The community here is afforded cable TV and wireless internet. You can get by quite easily just speaking English (mandatory courses are taught in grade school and up). Most of the main roads are paved but you will need a set of shock absorbers about once a year. No house or car insurance required and usually enough water just falls from the sky to preclude the occasional \$60 - \$80 purchase of 3000 gallons for the cistern. Electricity is affordable, does go out occasionally but generally for just a short while and only marginally more than we experienced in the states. Two cruise ships a day is the norm here, but amazingly, the 7,000 to 10,000 people disgorged get so dispersed to the available beach tours, para sailing, zip lines, diving/snorkeling, sailing, fishing, ATV rides, hiking, horseback riding, wildlife sanctuaries and my favorite visual entertainment of sport drinking, that, except in close proximity to the port, they seem to have minimal disruption of local traffic or notice by the general populace. Property taxes for our five acres and two houses run about \$168 a year. Yes,

there are regulations on what you can and can't do with your property but it does seem a bit more lenient than the Florida Keys. While there is petty crime here, it is considerably much less than communities of the same size in the states, probably because of the ubiquitous armed guards at every store, or is usually adjudicated by the local civilian justice, before it ever goes to court or the perpetrators are apprehended. It is seen as a moral offense against those in the Roatan body politic who depend on the tourist and expat dollars for sustenance or financial gain. Just like the states, there is governing corruption here but it seems to be on a more justly affordable and acceptable scale than I have seen elsewhere unless your behavior indicates you are a gringo cow and should be milked. We do actually feel safer here than the Florida Keys. It took a while, but now that the terror and fear of moving to a socialist governed "developing nation" with a different language, social norms and a severe economic class division has subsided with familiarity, my anxiety has dropped to a tolerable level which brings us to...

The people:

Ahhhh...this is the interesting part. At first, we only interacted with the local community thru advice or recommendations from fellow expats thinking it given without bias and a similarly naïve expectation of us, as gringos, being received by the native inhabitants in kind. This utopian ideology was quickly dispelled by the phenomenon of the frequency illusion, also known as the Baader-Meinhof effect, which occurs when we become aware of something and begin to notice it more frequently in our surroundings. Let me preface this attempt to have you, the reader, grasp what I am about to assert, thru scientific cognizance mind you, with the following quick dip into the manageable end of my philosophical pool:

I believe in reducing certain concepts gained thru scrutiny, to the lowest common denominator of equal but opposite wherever possible. I don't believe in organized religion (may God protect me from those that know the road to heaven) but I do believe in a secular reality coexisting with the hypotheses of spirituality, yin/yang, Wakan Tanka, and good and evil, among others. Life experiences have given me a common-sense view of the above conjectures to where I am morally secure and confident in my interpretations of them.

I also believe that animals possess a mind and spirit and that homo sapiens are further delineated from beasts by possession of a greater mental capacity with the ability to contain spirituality and a soul. I agree with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's exquisitely penned line that "A human being is a soul cleverly hidden in an animal." and it bolsters my contention that body and soul are, and can, exist as separate entities.

The only observable objective evidence I can present to support the existence of a soul is the fact that I perceive the presentation your material, physical existence thru my eyes, ears and on occasion the other three senses, and you do the same for me. My soul kooks out from behind my eyes as your soul does from yours. The healthier the physical body, the more the soul can perceive and the better the soul can present itself in the physical world. To quote the astrophysicist Paul Sutter,

"While not strictly a physical theory, the concept of consciousness as different and separate from the material universe does have a long tradition in philosophy and theology.

However, until someone can figure out a way to test this concept of consciousness as separate from the rest of the physical laws in a scientific experiment, it will have to stay in the realm of philosophy and speculation.”

So... when I meet another human I comprehend them as a soul in that body, nothing more, nothing less, with no opinion good or bad, unless the soul manifests a reason to form such a view thru an utterance, or some other action. I have no conceptual thought of a more level playing field on which to discern whom I wish to engage with, or not. I would heartily endorse this postulation to anyone.

For me, there is one final adjunct here. The above critical observations result in a final disposition and categorization of that soul/human into two distinct collectives. In the first grouping, I prefer the people I engage with to be polite, reasoned, as truthful as circumstances allow, and place more credence in what they know than what they think. They should also have some modicum of decency and morality. Lacking all of my preferences, I place them in the second classification called “Jerks”. You may substitute any scathing explicative epithet of choice here, but I simply rate them as a class 2 human on a scale of 1 (tolerable sometimes) to 10 (intolerably offensive) to indicate their degree of jerkiness (herein referred to as “DOJ”). The universe has provided a liberal sprinkling of this spice into the recipe of humanity. Being a jerk is truly all-inclusive as it knows no boundaries of race, religion, creed, sexual preference, intelligence age, etc. etc. etc. Anyone can be one, even if not a lifetime achievement they can wear this sobriquet on occasion. Again, I have such reasoned faith in my judgement as to be able to make such a pronouncement.

Now that you know *how* I think, here is *what* I think to date, from behavioral observation, of the local populace and social structure:

There is a minority of wealthy and very influential Honduran individuals and families that constitute the bulk of businesses on this Island and the resulting majority of less economically endowed work for them. This portion of the working masses also consists of temporary mainland personnel, swells and shrinks as circumstances dictate and therefore day workers can be plentiful or not but the day rate pretty much remains at about \$25, a little less or more, depending on skill level of the work performed. While settling in here, we have been using recommended workers to clear brush on the property at \$350 a month whether they did any actual work or not, do drywall and cabinetry in the guest house (nine months to complete the job) remove garbage from the property at \$60 a month and have been taken advantage of simply by not being aware of the social norms, language barriers, acceptable compensation or not subjecting the laborers to adequate supervision. (Workers here don't do what you expect, only what you inspect). After a couple of months, we let them all go. The overall impression we (“we” meaning the island communal of North American Caucasians or “NAC” for brevity) seem to give to the workers, is if you are not Latino, then you have money, won't miss a little here and there, or notice shoddy workmanship, short cuts, or the water truck delivering 2500 gallons when you paid for 3000.

There are also the government bureaucratic, almost autocratic restrictions and machinations to navigate through for permits, licenses, residency status and the like. A real pain, but not insurmountable. (I'll tell you about the psychoanalysis required for a driver's license at another time, it's a hoot!).

So, all in all, except for the pay rate, it's pretty much the same as what we endured in the Florida Keys.

To my disconcerting dismay, the less than stellar reputation that the Gringo/NAC expat faction holds among the workers, seems well deserved. It is embarrassing to be grouped among them. About 99% of this contingent that I have personally met, are class 2 people that run the gamut on the DOJ scale. From this group, I have witnessed undeserved exhibitions of arrogance, insults, disdain, anger and even racism directed at the laborers here. We truly are the "ugly Americans" at times and it is no wonder there is a lack of respect and incentive to give their best effort for us. They are also buttressed by the fact the labor laws here are very pro worker and if no signed agreement for pay and services, the word of the worker has much more sway than he employer. Be this as it may, Kathleen, our cohort in this adventure, Bri and I, all agreed we needed someone to help us with the more physically arduous tasks of hauling dirt, digging plant and post holes and such. Between the three of us we could afford the \$25 a day.

Tommy, a Keys property management client of my wife, with a house down here, and a deserving class 2 level 1-3 person, who always gives us advice on "how to treat these people", was letting go an electrician's helper from his crew of 10 or 12 workers because he was not up to the task. Tommy has more money than sense and said the only thing this man was good at was cutting tile which we didn't need but he could perform the more menial tasks satisfactorily. He needed work and we decided to give him a try.

Let me introduce you to Juan Funoz:

He is 57, strong as a bull, does not speak a word of English and proved immediately to be a hard worker. He embodies the pervasive Latino macho patriarchal concept of the man being not only the responsible head of the family, but also being more adept than the opposite gender at most things like driving and intelligence. However, as they have with me, Bri and Kathleen have tempered his belief in his superiority of the latter two considerably.

As the days proceeded, we were steadily overcoming the language barrier. Kathleen was learning Spanish and I had my trusty translation app on my phone. I soon found that my silver-tongued vocabulary did not always transcribe as intended. Upon being introduced to Juan's wife, I now understand the look on their faces when I expressed my sincere pleasure and honor to meet his better half into the phone and it was loosely translated as "I want to spank your sister". I was politely informed a simple "Mucho gusto" (nice to meet you) would suffice.

Aspects of Juan's "inner man" (Soul) were slowly becoming apparent. He hitched a ride in a truck to and from our house with other workers from a nearby home construction and arrived with his razor-sharp machete at 10 minutes to seven faithfully, Monday thru Friday, never took

more than an hour rest for lunch in the shade, never left the property before four, was more eager to impress me than the girls, so I became more of the go-between for services required. I wanted more from him than his shy schoolboy quiet nod of acquiescence to my requests. I wanted to know what he was thinking. I started asking his opinion on work related things. From his initial reaction, I don't think another gringo has ever asked him this before and when I complimented him on a job well done, he elicited a huge smile with a noticeable swelling of his chest. Now we were getting somewhere.

Tommy, who is also 57, got married last year to Marley, a 21-year-old Honduran girl (go figure). She is friends with Juan and speaks perfect English. So, I started asking her for information that I couldn't glean thru my direct conversations with him. I learned that Juan is among the poorest of individuals on this island and he and his wife cook for the family over a wood fire (Juan actually asked permission to take dead wood from our property to cook with - wow!). Beyond that, it would be impolite for her to inquire further as Juan is not proud of the fact he is poor. He has a roof over his head and a cell phone, but probably no electricity to charge it with as that is the first thing he does after coming to work. I'm sure he has no running water as we are used to, he cleans himself thoroughly with our garden hose before heading home.

In the ensuing days Juan completely outpaced Tommy's rather anemic assessment of his abilities. After showing him how and where I wanted a ranch style log fence, he constructed a hundred feet a day from scratch, including cutting the trees with his mighty Excalibur and digging the post holes. Juan was so attentive and eager to please we would actually run out of tasks before the week was done. He would run to the gate to open it upon our return from where ever, haul anything we had up to the house with a smile on his face and text us when he needed further direction. We were happy and Juan said he was happy working here because it was the first time he didn't have to pay a foreman from his salary to work on his team. Another wow! He soon became indispensable. Explaining things to him in a way that translated correctly became a fun challenge. We bought him new work shoes which he is very proud of and only wears to church. After a year, we decided to give him a raise by requiring him to only work four days for the same pay as five. He could then do odd jobs elsewhere on Friday and Saturday for extra money. Once I assured him, he was not being let go or getting less pay, just getting more time, he smiled broadly and expressed many, many thanks. Our Canadian neighbor (I refer to him as Dee), on the other side of the road running past our property, needed some trimming work done and had requested Juan to do it. Dee is overweight (obese) and sweats a lot. Juan asked our permission to do the work and we happily agreed.

No good deed goes unpunished and Murphy's law is in charge down here.

After the first weekend of his extracurricular work, I drove by and could see Dee was having him climb two to three stories high in his trees to cut branches. When I spoke with Juan, I could see he wasn't entirely comfortable doing it but wouldn't say no for fear of losing the work. I implored him to be careful and he assured me he would tie himself to the tree when up there.

On the third weekend Juan sent us a text that he had cut his arm and the doctor said he shouldn't work until the stitches were taken out. Dee said he took Juan to the doctor and he would be OK in a week.

I finally got the details a few days later. Seems while Juan was piling branches from the trees, Dee was using Juan's machete to cut brush and after a mighty swing it slipped from his perspiring hand and sliced Juan's right forearm to the bone, severing some major blood vessels. He required a tourniquet, and Dee drove him to the hospital so fast it frightened Juan more than the cut. He spent some time getting stitched up and the Doc said he could go back to work when the external stitches were removed.

Juan texted a week later saying his wife wanted to meet us and when we met that afternoon, we had Marley translate and it turned into a sea of emotions. Juan was in a genuine state of despair. He had the external stitches taken out (by whom I do not know) in hopes of getting back to work because although liable for Juan's injuries, Dee kept telling him he didn't have much money. And Juan said it made him feel bad. WHAT!!!?? This was Juan's arm, 12 external and over 50 internal sutures to veins ligaments and tendons. he was not able to even hold a tool and his wife pointed out a fluid sack just below his elbow.



Juan was justifiably terrified and worried. There is no unemployment, workmen's compensation or welfare here. He was at this point very depressed wondering if he could support his family selling vegetables (very low pay).

At this point Bri went over to Dee's and had a come to Jesus meeting as only she can preside over, and wouldn't leave until she extracted Dee's grudging understanding that we would take

over his treatments, he would not only pay Juan's medical expenses but also pay his full weekly pay from not only our house but his too, until recovery, as long as it takes....or....he would probably lose his house and property when Juan sued (remember the pro-worker labor laws?). When she came back, we assured Juan he would be taken care of and if Dee didn't follow through, we would help him with the legal process to sue. Juan and his wife looked at each other for a second and he turned to us and said, "I will not sue. That is not the kind of person I am."

I want to go to his church!

There is a happy ending however. I took Juan back to the doctor, got him rebandaged, reassessed, and started taking him to his ten sessions of physical therapy the next day, two sessions a week for five weeks. The sessions were intense, painful and I was his cheering section throughout. The therapists thought I was crazy. They said a gringo taking such good care of a worker was extremely rare to them. Juan introduced me as his "Boss" to a young therapist who got a tear in her eye when I corrected the introduction and said I was not his boss, I was his friend. We all had a grand time teaching me to count Juan's exercise repetitions in Espanol. Bri was relentless in texting Juan between treatments to keep up with his exercises and we had the therapist's blessing to use our veterinary cold laser machine to promote healing.

A little compassion, kindness and a "Good Job!" complement goes a long way down here. Juan was the perfect patient, intent and determined to heal. His progress was more than encouraging and after five weeks was approved for light duty and he showed up bright and early that Monday so we went to settle up with Dee. When he started with, "When can Juan finish up with the trees and branches at my house", without so much as a "How is Juan?" I decided he had rung the bell on the DOJ scale and hit him with the bill, total for doctor bills, medication and therapy was L26,400 (I gave him the amount in Honduran Lempiras just to observe the apoplectic expression I knew it would elicit). That amount translated to \$1,056 and I left him with the assurance Juan would never work for him again or his family would make sure he would have a tough time getting workers at any price.

Juan has been improving ever since and is now about 95% recovered, just some pain if he overexerts.

Juan and his wife now refer to us as their "Angels", they pray for us and we have a dedicated helper/friend. I am not entirely sure why I was compelled to write this essay. Perhaps it is because I have been and am continually impressed by this simple man and have seen nothing as noteworthy on the news. Juan and his personal brand of integrity deserve honorable mention in a world that is sorely lacking thereof. That is my epiphany.

Next month: Probably more excuses for no lab progress.

Comments at gilhelm@metsonmarine.com are always welcome. Cheers!

Joseph Wilhelm

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