

## **“Holding Onto Family: A Grandfather’s Musings Part 2: Our International Family”**

UUCGV Sermon by  
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July 28, 2024

Last July about this time, I talked about holding onto family. Our family, Jan and myself, and our three adult children. And their spouses. And our 4 grandchildren. And the challenges of raising them over the last 50 years in our turbulent, fast-changing times. The successes, the legacy wounds, the learnings, the forging of family values. A grandfather’s musings; probably not that different from many of you here.

But that was our immediate family. Not our other family, our international family, to which we remain deeply connected in ways we never dreamed possible. By which I mean connected to the world in the most intimate way possible. By exchanging our children with those from other families in other lands in the interest of building peace. For all children and all families. And ending war.

This was the dream, the active hope, of war veterans, specifically the ambulance drivers in 1920 and 1946 amid the ashes of two world wars in which they rescued and transported to safety hundreds of thousands of soldiers at great risk to themselves. Called the American Field Service (AFS for short), they established a program of intercultural exchange for high school-age children aimed at increasing understanding of other cultures and peoples by becoming sons and daughters of other fathers and mothers in other countries for a year.

It was a grand strategy for eliminating the “Us and Them” thinking that had killed so many. And that strategy was built on a framework of compassion and openness to others, a core family value in all world religions.

An impossible dream, some would say. A luxury for the rich, others would add. An unacceptable risk for our precious children in an uncertain world, many might declare. But it took hold and grew over the years, ultimately reaching another war veteran and his young family in Houston in 1989 just as a massive wave of globalization began to transform the world. Jan and I signed up and quickly got deeply involved with Jan serving as a volunteer liaison in the Houston chapter of AFS.

Through that role, working with host families for 30 exchange students from all over the world, Jan and I came to understand how powerfully the exchange experience pervaded the community, spreading from family to family, relative to relative, classmate to classmate, friend to friend, exchange student to other exchange student. We also came to understand the process, the program structure designed for a year.

The first six months was *adaptation*; the second six months was *living fully into* family life and culture. It took this long to work. Convinced, we ultimately sent 2 of our own and hosted 6 from other families over the following 10 years.

Here are brief profiles of 4 of them. I will then conclude this talk with a few observations on how this experience reshaped our family and could impact others in a way that could re-ignite hope in a world dislocated by those waves of globalization and divided and darkened by fear.

**Fabian** was the first, son of a fish seller and his wife in Santos, Brazil. Curious, articulate in formal English as well as Spanish and Portuguese, interested in history, but passionate about music, “Fab” as we called him embraced the opportunity and our family wholeheartedly. And our refrigerator which we scrambled to keep stocked; no easy task with a hungry 18-year old on the prowl. Our grocery bill doubled, confirming the adage among exchange students that “AFS” stood for “Another Fat Student”. An accomplished violinist, his music enriched our household almost as much as his unending questions about us, our values, our lives.

**Catalina** was another, daughter of a rose cultivator/exporter and his wife in Quito, Ecuador. She had been our daughter’s host sister in Ecuador then came to stay with us. Also curious, articulate in 3 languages, enthusiastic and outgoing, “Cata” was passionate about the environment in general, but urban agriculture in particular. She saw great promise in its small, neighborhood farms that could not only improve nutrition but transform the widespread poverty in her beloved Quito high up in the Andes with its smoking volcanoes.

But she was also passionate about art and the Andean music that had so captivated our daughter. That music with its haunting melodies played on indigenous as well as Spanish instruments pervaded our household much as Fab’s had, but differently. She too had many questions about us, our lives and the policies of our country, including the drug trade, that were so strongly impacting hers.

**Marco** was yet another, son of a newly divorced, single Mom in Lisbon, Portugal. Raised in a disciplined way to be a proper young man, Marco was really an artist, heart and soul, who exploded with creativity in our home. His drawings and sketches were everywhere; his designs hung from the bedroom ceiling and festooned the walls where he and our oldest son became close friends and co-conspirators, ambushing us constantly with new creations. He and our son carried their creativity into the natural world on campouts. An indelible memory remains: both boys calling out with glee high up two pine trees in rural Texas overlooking a fast-flowing river all too ready to swallow them up should they fall.

And then there was **Conny**, daughter of German immigrants who had migrated to Curitiba, Brazil a century before. Fun-loving and outgoing, she was hard not to like. But she was also serious and passionate about music and the cello she mastered to play it. And the piano in our front room. Her exuberance brought joy into every room.

She shared her passion for music with all of our children, and the cello particularly with our youngest son who was learning how to play his own, smaller cello. Soon there were dual cello melodies and words of encouragement echoing through the house.

Fab, Cata, Marco, Conny. Memories of their time with us 30 years ago warm us still. But not just memories, for they are adults now with spouses and children of their own. And we are still in touch with all of them, still involved in their lives and they in ours. Fab and Marco have become lead symphony violinist and celebrated mural artist in Sao Paulo and Lisbon respectively. Cata and Conny have become teachers and activists in urban agriculture and multi-lingual education in Ecuador and Germany respectively. It has been something we never expected: an intercultural exchange for a year had turned into an international family for a lifetime.

But it was not easy. The experience impacted our immediate family in multiple ways that were mostly positive, but difficult. Incorporating a new foreign-born teenager into our family every other year and sending two of our own to live with other families in the same time period was hard. It took a lot of work and required a lot of support from other families. And it needed a well-structured program to guide and reassure us as we all explored this new dimension of family.

Sibling rivalries and frictions erupted and were occasionally intense as parental attention got stretched and re-focused. We as parents, and our children too, struggled to adapt, to embrace, to share with, to love other children who acted, spoke and dressed differently. It did not always work, especially when Dad was gone, away on industrial consulting projects all over the world during much of this time. But most of the time, it did.

So it's fair to ask, as I am sure some of you are asking, was it worth it? Did the benefits outweigh the risks, now looking back? Was the family system strengthened or weakened by the exchange experience?

For Jan and me, it was difficult but very positive, a feeling that has grown through the years. Seeing the adults our children have become—inquisitive, open, profoundly linked to the world through friendship and marriage-- we believe the benefits for our family far outweigh the risks we took. And what do our adult children think?

We think they agree, but the full answer is probably still evolving and less knowable, certainly by us. Lifelong exchange relationships exist for the two oldest; a bicultural marriage thrives for the youngest. Multi-cultural relationships are well underway for the grandkids.

But let's expand the context now and re-connect with the dream of those AFS ambulance drivers amid the ashes of two world wars. Was what we did as a family worth it in terms of building a better, more peaceful world? Even though it was a tiny piece in the overall puzzle of ending war and reducing hate, did it fit in, did it work? Were those ambulance drivers right?

I have asked myself these same questions over and over again for 30 years, always hoping for a resounding YES! to justify the risks we took as a family. Did our actions change anything? But all I had heard was the wind in the trees. *Until....*

- *Until* we bid farewell to our last exchange student and I returned to Vietnam in 1999. I had been invited by my former enemies to train them, help them find their way as a newly unified country independent of both China and Russia. And there I met my former enemies face to face and began to understand what the "American War in Vietnam" had done to their families, their children, their land still littered with shrapnel from our bombs and residues of Agent Orange in their forests and their infants. The "Us and Them" rhetoric that so many of my countrymen believed, was in fact false; a mis-use of patriotism to justify a political calculation.
- *Until* I/we lived through the two tragedies of 9/11 in 2001—the attack and our response to the attack—the latter rekindling the "Us and Them" rhetoric anew with the "wars against terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq, another mis-use of patriotism to justify political calculation.
- *Until* in 2015 I had the courage to begin telling my own Veteran war story in sermon after sermon to you and others, stressing the disastrous consequences of "Us and Them" thinking in terms of moral injury, suicides, and the massive increase in civilian—not military—deaths as "collateral damage" in our wars for honor and country around the world over the past 60 years.
- *Until* in 2016 we elected a paragon of "Us and Them" thinking under the banner of making our country great again by withdrawing from the world and de-constructing the "administrative state", a curious way to address the challenges of globalization and a rapidly heating planet. Another mis-use of patriotism to justify a political calculation.
- *Until* now, when divided, demoralized and confused, we contemplate an institutionalization of "Us and Them" thinking, turning the AFS post-war dream of 1946 into a nightmare of reality in 2024. Again, a mis-use of patriotism to justify a political calculation.

So now I understand. When I asked myself "Was it Worth It?", I was asking the wrong question, or more accurately, asking for an answer in the wrong way. Those Veterans of war, the AFS ambulance drivers, knew a deeper truth: that ending war and building peace was hard work that could only be done by *many*, working *together*. Not by *one* family, *alone*.

That it would take effort by hundreds of thousands of families over multiple generations, each with its tiny piece, to complete the puzzle if indeed it could ever be done.

And so, yes, it was worth it, our little piece, that I offer you in this short story. All of us can participate in multiple ways in solving this puzzle, piece by piece, but first we must share that veteran dream: that “Us and Them” thinking is false; it ultimately doesn’t work. At the end of the day, there is only “Us” and we desperately need to realize this if we are to survive.

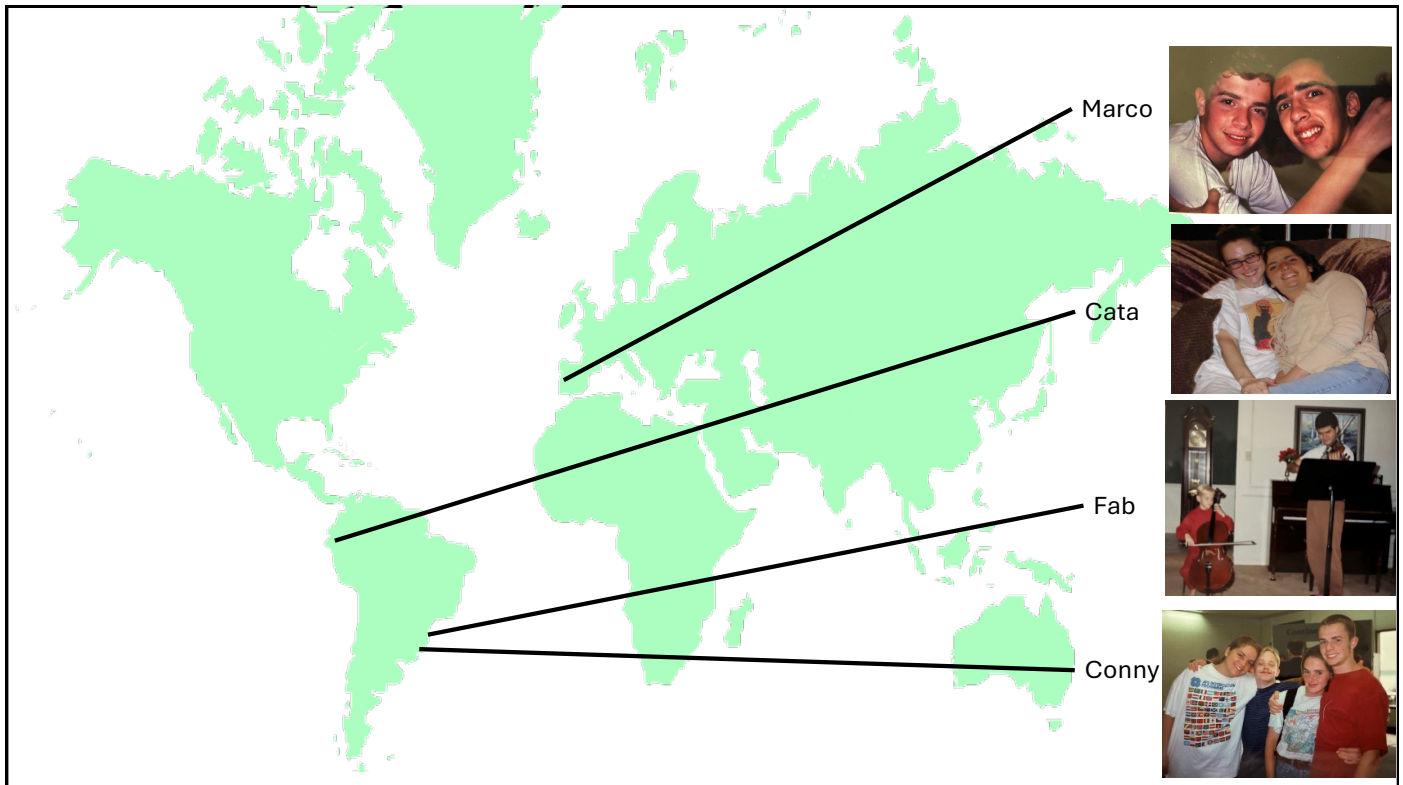
And in this statement is another tool in our collective toolbox. The story. The one I am telling you now. And the duty to tell it, share it as widely as possible. For it is a story from the heart as well as the head and hits us all in our families; in our hopes and dreams for our children and the world they will become part of. The story of a dream that has already become a reality for many and could for many more.

A few closing words. First, AFS intercultural youth exchanges are only one way to proceed. There are many other, less intense, but no less valuable, opportunities to reach the same goal. One of them is right here in GJ in the work being done by the *Foundation for Cultural Exchange (FCE)* created by Anna Stout 20 years ago.

There are many others for both young and old, including story-telling to my 5<sup>th</sup> graders at Dos Rios Elementary like other members of **Spellbinders**, here in the Grand Valley. All break down “Us and Them” thinking. Check them out. They are one of the healthiest tool sets we have for “holding onto family” in these scary but fascinating times. But they are challenging, not easy. Educational not recreational. And they are urgently needed now.

Finally, I want to leave you with a few images that I hope linger.

Thank you, dear friends.



- Two Middle-Aged Men, An Industrial Consultant From the US, and **the Enemy** --a Chemical Engineer From the Vietnamese National Oil Company, Discussing the Past at The Memorial in Xuan Loc 24 Years later, on 30 April 1999.



- Two Middle-Aged Men, A Veteran and Consultant From the US, and **the Enemy** and His Wife, at Their Home, in Hanoi in May 1999, 30 Years After the American Had Arrived in Vietnam as a Soldier.



- The Middle-Aged American With the Daughter of **the Enemy**, About the Same Age as His Own Daughter, in Hanoi in May 1999, Remembering the Past and Hoping for an End to War and a Better World in the Future.

