



Coffee Chronicles

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CUPS OF COFFEE — THEN AND NOW

— by John Will



I remember it so very vividly because it happened hundreds of times. Arrival at a Honduran village, the welcome extended by the host family, gathering immediately around the rough-hewn kitchen table, and cups of coffee being shared by all. A way of greeting; a way of joyful sharing. As a UCC missionary assisting the Evangelical and Reformed Church of Honduras back in the 60s, there was no thought of fair trade, though the circumstances certainly warranted such consideration. For Honduras was then called the land of the 70s. 70% of the country's people eked out a living from the land and 70% of the adult population was illiterate. Living standards and money shortages were

such that 70% of Hondurans died of diseases that could have readily been prevented — with more money and better education. Still, the people were most hospitable, a people of great personal integrity and respect.

Now . . . fast forward forty-five years. There had been numerous trips to Latin America in the interim, but now the focus is on Mexico, the southernmost state of Chiapas, and a faith journey through fair trade and free trade taken in January by some nineteen of us, including me and my wife Han, that taught us far more than we personally could contribute to the scene.

One would imagine that during the course of years much would have changed. In some cases, joyfully, not much had changed. People were still outgoing and friendly, sharing of themselves in many ways (yes, even with cups of coffee). In some cases, sadly, not much had changed. Indigenous peoples make up some 30% of the population of Chiapas, 82% of these do not complete primary school, and 55% of the adults are illiterate. Further, 60% of the indigenous school-age children do not have access to education. Most of the homes have dirt floors (reminiscent of Honduran villages half a century ago), over a third have no electricity, and 60% of the women still cook with firewood. Sadly, a very low average income of only a few hundred dollars per year leads to malnourishment and high infant mortality.

You would think that in the midst of such a scene there would be much wringing of hands and a fatalistic attitude toward life. Far from it! Though quite realistic about the many challenges of the day, there was a very evident spark of pride and dignity among those we met. And much of it centered on the creation in recent years of co-operatives that have bound together those in rural areas as well as those in towns and cities as they seek a greater well-being for all.

Coffee farmers, with only small plots of land, can pool their crops via co-operatives and thus ensure a guaranteed base price for their coffee, transportation to market, and a relationship that will continue from year to year. They can also pool knowledge as to ways of improving crop yields, of promoting sustainable agriculture, and of exploring means of diversification. They likewise, by the vote of co-operative members, focus on ways of improving community well-being, with the construction of primary schools and basic health clinics.

This is new and exciting — for the people whose hard, arduous labor is now bearing more positive results — and for those on the outside looking in who see change being effected in ways that really count. And this moves on up the chain, from the local growers to those in the towns and cities who have set up co-operatives for dry processing, grading, and shipping abroad of the one product, coffee, that they are so proud of. We visited one such co-operative in a medium-sized city and witnessed the care taken to ensure that quality is in no way sacrificed but is consistently maintained.



But before a tour of the facility, though, we were introduced, one by one, to everyone who worked there — from those in the office, to those manning the testing, grading and sorting machines, to those moving shipments in and out of the warehouse. All were equal participants in the co-op, each person's job essential to the functioning of the

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Witness for Peace Focuses on Fair Trade

by Shannon Hanley

“We need to see ourselves in partnership with others around the world,” stated Mattie Kropf, as she concluded her presentation to the congregation at First Congregational United Church of Christ. It was an emotional event bringing tears to some as photos and stories were shared about the Delegation to Chiapas in January. Mattie is a Lowell high school Junior and member of the church that I serve as Director of Christian Education. Mattie and I shared the experience of a recent trip to Mexico where we participated in a Witness for Peace Delegation focusing on Fair Trade and coffee production.

During our trip it became clear to me that the coffee process is back-breaking work and that families are commonly making less than \$600 per year for their efforts. The delegation illustrated the coffee process from crop to cup, showing what work goes into growing, harvesting and transporting the green beans most of which will eventually be roasted and sold in the United States.

The trip showed me the extreme poverty faced by coffee farmers in Mexico and around the world. As I understand it, nearly 20 million families in fifty countries depend on coffee production for their livelihood and nearly 84% of those families live in poverty. This is personally unacceptable

because these people are my brothers and sisters.

I have changed and am encouraging others to change as well by becoming responsible consumers. I knew it before the trip that the more items we purchase through Fair Trade the more people at the beginning of the shopping experience benefit. We have had a small fair trade store at our church since 2005, but this delegation made it real.

Fair trade honors all people, not only the grower or artisan, but whole communities and even the consumer. I feel better when I know I have spent my money on a product that has helped rather than harmed. I regularly challenge my friends and associates to think about the person who suffers because we want to pay the lowest price for everything. Our “good deal” might mean that somewhere, someone is going to bed hungry. I don’t want people to feel guilty; I just want people to be aware that coffee farmers are just like us. They want the same things: honest wages and to be able to feed their families and have good quality of life.



Mexican Coffee Farmers, African Artisans, and pecan growers in the US are the same as I am. We need to focus on the similarities not the differences. The people we met in Mexico are working

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whole. We also toured, on the grounds of the co-op, a newly-completed dormitory, where some forty young people coming from towns and villages around to study at the university will have a comfortable and safe place to stay while a student. An eye to the future — and what can be done when people of like mind and heart come together for the common good.

Much still distresses me about the Latin America I know. A great many people work very hard and have very little to show for it. Change comes at rates that can be agonizingly and discouragingly slow. However, the change that fair trade has now introduced is a positive sign. It is keeping people on their land doing what they know and love to do best. It holds high the dignity and worth of the individual and creates respect for the labor they perform, banding folk together in ways that count both socially and economically.

Is it enough? Most assuredly not! But it sets the stage; it lays the groundwork for things yet to come – in sustainable agriculture, in diversification, in preparing many for leadership roles in a changing world scene.

I still think of those many cups of coffee shared around Honduran tables. I can add to those now the ones we shared with newly made friends in Chiapas. I even carry it a step further each time I drink a cup of Equal Exchange “Body, Mind and Soul” coffee harvested by farmers of Chiapas that has made its way to our table in Burleson, Texas, via fair trade co-operatives in Chiapas and those here in the States. Won’t you share a cup with us — and think of the many hands that have ensured its rich taste? ☕

hard to produce quality coffee, work for social justice and to improve the communities they live in. We, as consumers, need to meet farmers half way, by buying fairly traded products and working for social justice.

Cooperatives around the world are working to improve the lives of the world’s poorest citizens. They don’t solve all the problems, but it is a great start. There are fair trade items and stores popping up around our community as well as across the country. Shop with your heart and it will make a difference. Mattie regularly tells people “I am changed by the experience. You can’t see what we have seen and not feel differently. Now I want others to feel it too.” She is right, I am forever different. I appreciate the opportunity to learn more and share in this Witness for Peace Delegation. ☕

Those who wish to delve into the opportunities and the challenges that fair trade presents may want to read the following blog about Equal Exchange Small Farmers: <http://smallfarm-ersbigchange.coop/2009/01/06/is-fair-trade-tea-from-plantations-an-oxymoron-some-tea-estate-workers-think-so>. It highlights some of the challenges to plantations entering the fair trade system.



This particular article speaks about tea, but the same challenges exist for all fair trade products. Don’t forget to read the comments following the blog. There’s a lot of great detail around the topic in the comment section. ☕