

Until you walk in someone else's shoes… it's easy to talk about world events without really feeling what they mean to the people living through them. This week, as we watch what's happening in Venezuela, where people are grappling with uncertainty, hope, fear, and the long effects of years of hardship under an authoritarian government, I'm reminded how personal history shapes the way we see theses moments.

I repost here something I wrote on December 1, 2016 that still feels just as true today.

> "For beginnings. This has been quite an emotional week for us Cubans and anyone whose life has been affected in one way or another by the tyrant that Castro was. This week we celebrate not his death but the beginning of a world without him. We celebrate not immediate change but the resurgence of hope for change.
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> My parents were in their late 30's when their world was shaken to the core. They uprooted, kids in tow, leaving everything behind, including my grandparents, for the sake of giving me and my siblings a chance to live free. For them, *el dolor Cubano* hasn't all been about the time my dad and blind grandfather (yes, blind) were jailed, or dad's time spent laboring the sugar cane fields, or my brother and sister being pulled from school and sent to labor camps, or my being forced to pledge my allegiance to the tyrant at the start of every school day, or about the confiscation of all of our properties and possessions. All of it, punishment inflicted on those denouncing the communist party and upon submitting exit papers to leave the island, which punishment went on until the time the permit was actually granted and you boarded that twin engine plane.
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> Mostly, their pain has been about the countless lives lost in the fight for freedom. About the loss of country, loss of motherland. And about the separation from family and friends, some of whom they never saw again. We left Cuba on November 22, 1969 enroute to Spain where we knew no one. We left that day *con una mano alante y la otra atrás*, with only the clothes on our backs. My parents left that day *con el corazón en la boca*, with their hearts in their throats, but full of hope and banking on their unwavering

trust in the Lord. I've often put myself in their shoes and have felt a shiver up and down my spine. Oh, the uncertainty of it all. Although my pain echoes theirs, mine is fixed on the sacrifices I saw them make. I admire them for their strength, courage, and resolve, for their vision and hard work, and for what they accomplished in new lands as they began again and again. First in Madrid, then in Miami.

My grandparents, father, and sister did not live to see the end of this tyrant whose brilliant hideousness destroyed *la perla del caribe*. But Mom got to. Unfortunately, nowadays, her mind doesn't know what day it is, as her condition progresses. But this week she has recounted to me, clearly, snippets of stories she's told me through the years about our lives in Cuba y el tirano Fidel. "*Yo sé que ahora yo estoy muy confundida, pero hay ciertos momentos en la vida que quedan grabados en la mente de uno y nunca se borran.*" "I know that now I'm very confused," she said, "but there are certain moments in life that remain recorded in one's mind and are never erased." Ain't that the truth!

Today, my kids are well aware of the symbolism of this tyrant's death. My husband and I have shared with them plenty about Cuba's history and our families' struggles. We have passed on our traditions, and we have instilled in them the value of freedom. They know to respect their flag and stand in salute at the sound of The Star-Spangled Banner. Lauren and Danny grew up on the Cuban breakfast of champions: *café con leche,* and on *arroz con frijoles*, first puréed when they were babies. Yes, they are Americans made with Cuban parts. And they too understand the elation and hope in this historic moment.

Our families' experiences and stories, both wonderful and grueling are many, as are those of thousands of other exiled families who, like us, felt compelled to record them, while they worked hard to begin again and again. And what of those who remain in power in this captivating and oppressed island? Well, one day their demise will come, no doubt.

> But today, on this Thankful Thursday, I am grateful for all of our beginnings, and especially for the beginning of a world without him. He who destroyed and altered so many lives; this torturer who will not torture again, this oppressor who will not oppress again. Justice is the Lord's."

Today, friends and family, these words fill me with gratitude all over again. I thank God for resilience, for faith, and for the freedom our families' sacrifices made possible. And I have hope in my heart for those who are still walking toward theirs. May we remember to withhold judgment altogether when we are not the ones walking in their shoes.

"I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work."
-Ecclesiastes 3:17

"Whoever survives a test, whatever it may be, must tell the story. That is his duty."
-Elie Wiesel





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