

BIO

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ESSAYS / PROSE

DEAN NELSON

Cow's Head Revisited

After a few days in Honduras, a moment of clarity seeped into my heat-soaked brain.

I wasn't that worried about my son's moving to Honduras after college to teach literature in a bilingual high school. When he was growing up, I had taken him to some pretty challenging places around the world while I was working on book projects: Tanzania to hang out with some Black Panthers living there in exile from the U.S.; Kosovo soon after the NATO bombing stopped; Macedonia during its civil war; Yosemite to backpack for a week. On his own, he had traveled to Venezuela, Suriname, Malawi, New York, Nashville and elsewhere to work on movie projects. He had lived with families in Uganda and Rwanda for a summer. He knew how to survive in other cultures.

Even when he told us recently via Skype that he had been mugged at 7 a.m. on his way to school, and the man with the knife boldly asked, "Do you want to die today?" my wife and I felt that it could have happened anywhere. It was troubling, but not unprecedented.

The people in his Honduran neighborhood factor crime into their lives. Many live with bars on their windows and doors. Most of the businesses have armed guards and close up shop after dark. So do many of the homes. The house in which he lives is provided by his school, and comes with a round-the-clock guard carrying a rifle. That guard's predecessor was murdered right outside the front door of the house, and the two-foot wide bloodstain is still visible on the sidewalk.

It felt similar to where I moved when I finished college – urban Detroit – during the years it was called the murder capitol of the world. In my neighborhood, the grocery store consisted of a maze of narrow one-way aisles to minimize looting. At the cashier's window, you put your groceries on a rotating wheel and turned it to the cashier who sat behind bulletproof glass. You put your money in a steel drawer, and the cashier pulled the drawer in, put change in it and pushed it back to you. She put the groceries in a bag and spun the wheel back out where you could retrieve it.

The post office was even more difficult. The bank? Forget about it.

But living with crime and the threat of violence was not what triggered my moment of clarity.

While my wife and I were visiting the school where my son teaches, and enjoying chicken nachos in the eating area, a ninth-grade girl came up to our table. "Meester Nelson, could I speak with you a moment? My dad says you need to get that cow's head out of our neighborhood. He says it's a health hazard."

Confused, I turned to face the girl. Who knew my name down here in Honduras? What was she talking about? And what would I know about a cow's head?

But she wasn't looking at me. She was looking at my son. Oh yes: the *other* Meester Nelson.

He had just finished making a short film with his students. He has made movies since elementary school: stop-action animation with a self-destructing snail; a *Godfather*-type gangster movie where actors responding to his casting call thought he was a university film student when he was really still in high school. His high school teachers in San Diego would let him make movies instead of writing book reports. He did a movie version of the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," and of the classic *A Tale of Two Cities*. In college, his movies made it into film festivals and won awards.

When he graduated from college and took this teaching job in Honduras, he instructed his students to read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. It wasn't such a reach for the students, as they were able to relate to the slaughter of their own indigenous people over the past centuries. He also taught them *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Crucible*. Burning books and people for having different ways of thinking were easy topics for people who just experienced a political/military coup.

He was there for just a few months before he started writing screenplays again. He wrote one that involved a girl who wished she could go back in time to undo a cruel act to a girl who had just moved to Honduras from the U.S. He approached his principal about using his literature class to make a short film. "It will give them experience in another kind of storytelling," he said. The principal agreed.

Friends from San Diego, who had worked on movies with him before, flew down with all of their equipment, and production began. They rehearsed with the students and members



Myan Ruin, Honduras

of the community. The military assigned soldiers to guard them and the equipment; he shot all the footage in a week. My wife and I arrived as the filming ended. The movie involves a time machine that explodes, sending a flaming cow's head through the air. Someone called the local news media to report that students were doing experiments with cows. We offered to help clean it up while we were in town. Apparently we needed to do this sooner than later.

Disposing of a cow's head that had been set on fire a week ago, and had been baking in the scorching sun and partially devoured by vermin, is not as easy as it sounds.

But that wasn't my moment of clarity, either.

After satisfying the neighbors that the area was safe once again, my wife and I spent the weekend with my son and his fiancé in a mountain city filled with Mayan ruins. We wandered through the grounds of a civilization that had flourished and then floundered more than a thousand years before, and discussed power, corruption, worship and philosophy. He and his fiancé made all the arrangements for the three-hour bus ride, the hotel, the taxi drivers, restaurants and this national park. Neither my wife nor I speak Spanish. We were completely dependent on them.

That was my moment of clarity.

I remembered that my parents visited my then-newlywed wife and me after we had moved to Detroit. They were concerned about our safety and wondered if we knew how dangerous the world really was. Then they saw that we were living on our own, happy in our jobs, loving each other, involved in our neighborhood and connected to a faith community, without their having to tell us to get to work on time, eat our vegetables, pay our taxes or lock our doors. Both my wife and I had absorbed our parents' advice and were living as responsible adults. We had grown up.

Saying goodbye to my son at the San Pedro Sula airport, I felt as if I was channeling my own father when I told him goodbye at the Detroit airport more than 30 years before. I sensed back then that, once he had seen for himself, he was satisfied. He knew that I was going to be fine. I grabbed the hair on the back of my son's head and pulled him to me, kissing him on the cheek one last time. He had grown up. He was going to be fine.

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