

The Philosophy of Opposite George

By Marco Cáceres

On November 3-4, 2000, the first annual Conference on Honduras was held in Washington, DC. Some 100 individuals representing about 60 groups from 22 states in the US, as well as Honduras and Germany attended the event. There were 26 speakers who gave presentations on a diverse range of topics having to do with either education or health care in Honduras.

The conference was styled after a professional business conference, with a total of five panels and time allocated for audience participation. Its purpose was simply to take stock of some of the projects being undertaken to help Honduras and find ways to complement efforts by meeting to exchange information. The event essentially provided an opportunity to "network".

The 2000 conference was a success. All of the speakers were well-spoken, knowledgeable about their projects, and passionate about their causes. There were no "flowery speeches", but rather solid, no-nonsense presentations--many in Power Point format. Everyone left the conference feeling as though they'd been a part of a very special event to find ways to improve and expand support for Honduras.

A few days after the conference was over, I began receiving e-mails from people interested in finding out about our conclusions. I told them that we were in the process of writing a "white paper" to summarize and analyze the proceedings and to determine the "next steps". The more I thought about this, though, the more I began to realize that there really were no "earth shattering" conclusions. After all, this was not meant as an academic exercise or a government hearing.

The goal was not to talk about the problems that ail Honduras and come up with a magic tonic to cure them, or some sort of "five-year plan". The goal was to understand what things are already being done to alleviate the problems and how we can build on these activities through improved communication and coordination.

Thus, I suppose the main "result" of the conference is that there is a new, loosely-tied body of people that have come together under a kind of a consortium at least tentatively called the "Conference on Honduras". The word "Conference" now refers to more than just a specific event. It refers to a living, breathing movement of like-minded individuals from all walks of life who share a common interest... to contribute their time, energy, and expertise for the betterment of Honduras.

The Conference has "adjourned", not "ended". It will meet again next November... again, in Washington. That decision in-and-of-itself is a second tangible result. There exists a strong belief that we should come together annually. More importantly, in my opinion, there exists a genuine desire to meet again and, as Captain Jean-Luc Picard would say... "Make it so." In the meantime, the "movement" continues to mature via the Internet.

As I sit and compose this piece, there are several other results in the making involving individuals who met at the conference and identified "common ground". Some of these

efforts may take years to bear fruit and may be widely publicized. Others involving something as quick as writing a check to provide funds for a project in Honduras have already happened in a discreet manner.

The point is that the so-called "Conference on Honduras 2000" does not lend itself to a traditional white paper or any other kind of documentation typically produced by a conventional conference. The reason for this is because the results of this particular conference are a "work in progress". The best, most accurate testimonial to the milestone event that has recently occurred is to write a series of articles regarding the evolution of the Conference and the accomplishments of its participants... And when one series comes to a natural conclusion, then there will no doubt be others that follow.

It is through these series of articles or essays that we hope to build our understanding of what is being done to help Honduras and how these things can be done better... What things work or don't work, and why? Through this process, we hope to pass along practical answers and constructive solutions to some of Honduras' problems... piece by piece by piece.

The underlying assumption, of course, is that there will in fact be practical answers and constructive solutions generated by the Conference.

One of the keys to ensuring that this happens is to always remain positive and focused only on those areas in which we can work together to make a difference. That's a very reasonable sounding statement, but if you analyze carefully what it means, it's not so easy to put into practice.

It means, for example, that we will avoid being negative and critical of each other. It means that we will choose not to discuss, one-on-one, issues that we clearly see we cannot agree on. It means that we will opt not to deal with those problems that are beyond our abilities to directly affect. To be effective, I believe a movement has to stay united. We cannot do this if the persons involved do not generally like and respect each other. Being negative and critical are human traits that tend to cause bad feelings and end up creating divisions within groups.

To be effective, it seems to me that a movement must use its time wisely. We cannot do this if individuals dwell on ideas or beliefs that prevent them from identifying synergies that allow them to support each other's work.

To be effective, I think that a movement needs to define and appreciate its limitations. Otherwise, there will be a tendency to try to address every single problem, and consequently risk resolving nothing. The vision on which the movement was originally founded will lose its clarity and, in time, the movement will sadly cease to exist. That's why the Conference on Honduras did not (and will not) discuss politics and tempting, highly emotional items such as corruption. What I've just outlined here is the basis for a kind of philosophy to which I will doggedly insist the Conference adhere. There is an episode of the sitcom "Seinfeld" in which George accepts the logic that, since everything he normally does turns out wrong, then it follows that everything he would do contrary to his norm should turn out right. "Normal George" is bad, ergo "Opposite George" is good.

The philosophy is simple. It assumes that it is human nature to be negative and critical. It assumes that it is our nature to be argumentative and wary of our differences. And it assumes that it is natural for us to prefer to talk about the big issues outside one's realm of influence rather than physically get involved and address the "do-able" stuff.

If we are to stand a chance in heck to make a true difference in Honduras, I submit that we have to adopt a new way of thinking and acting toward one another in order to remain a movement. We have to learn to follow a philosophy that, to many of us, seems unnatural. If we don't, then we will become just another group of individuals with some good intentions, but not really with any unique approach to dealing with a Third World country's problems.

Once we consistently find ourselves practicing the philosophy of Opposite George, we will be able to say... "We are different from anything else that has been tried in Honduras." Then we will honestly be on our way to creating that "unconventional movement" we spoke of at the conference.

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