

Talking with . . .

. . . Ellen Urbani Hildebrand

An interview by John Coyne (Ethiopia 1962–64)
[Ellen Urbani Hildebrand](#)


Read Jacqueline Lyons [review](#) of *When I was Elena*

ELLEN URBANI HILTEBRAND'S (Guatemala 1991–93) memoir *When I Was Elena* looks back at her time in a rural village in the guerrilla-infested mountains of Guatemala. It tells her story, as well as the stories of seven other women in the villages where she lived. One of the aspects of this book that makes it particularly interesting is the way Hildebrand shifts point-of-view to tell the stories of the women she befriended. In reviewing the book, *Publishers Weekly* noted this narrative technique: "The tectonic shifts in perspective between her amiable voice and the quietly powerful life stories of the native women she befriends result in a rich mosaic of culture and character." This device alone makes the memoir special among Peace Corps books, giving it a scope that not many RPCVs have attempted.

Ellen first contacted me when she was looking for a publisher and I recommended The Permanent Press, a small New York publishing company that has published some of the best Peace Corps books. Ellen then disappeared and finished her memoir. It was published earlier this year.



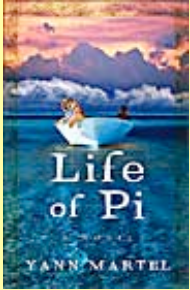
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I caught up again via e-mails with Ellen within the last few weeks. She lives in Portland, Oregon where she is the mother of two babies, as well as an art therapist who owns her own consulting company that runs therapeutic arts programs for cancer patients and their families. Her therapeutic arts work was the subject recently of an Oscar-qualified short documentary and is, writes Ellen, “fulfilling and, in fact, quite joyful.”

Some little-known, and quite revealing, personal statistics include the fact that she has dual American/Italian citizenship; once spent the night in a Honduran whorehouse (by accident, not by design); has never drunk a cup of coffee; dislocated her hip during college cheerleading tryouts; applied to be on the original *Survivor* (they didn’t want her, but she watched the show anyway); and considers ***Life of Pi*** by Yann Martel and ***Angle of Repose*** by Wallace Stegner to be the books that have most influenced her life to date.

Most of Ellen’s time today is spent with her two children, 1-year-old Clara, and 2-year-old Elijah. Life has not been easy for her lately. About six weeks before her Peace Corps memoir was published Ellen and her husband separated. They are now in the process of divorcing. As Ellen writes, “Anyone who knows me from Guatemala knows Frank — we met there. They’ll all be as shocked as I am that this is happening.”

Since the recent separation, she has moved into a new home in Portland and continues to think about writing. “I have more books in me,” she says, “but heaven knows when I’ll have time to write them. I did have a beautiful writing desk built-in at my new home . . . proving that hope springs eternal, yes?” Well, ***When I Was Elena*** is one wonderful start toward that goal.



Ellen with
Clara and Elijah

You lived in Guatemala at the tail end of a decades-long civil war, when there was continued guerrilla and army occupation of many areas. You were also there during three political coups in as many weeks. What was it like to leave a homeland of political stability and wake up the next morning to a world of civil unrest?

Surreal, obviously. Given my comparatively cloistered upbringing, there was a significant disconnect between what I saw and what I felt. The civil and political unrest that permeated the country never settled into me so fully as it settled into the people who lived their whole lives within its shadow. Though I witnessed the coups, the disappearances, those things always felt so far outside my realm of conception that I suppose I maintained a cognitive, and an emotional, distance. The fears that stalked me were of a much more personal nature — a specific person rather than a political possibility. That said, in our fears, though of an uncommon nature, I found a commonality with the Guatemalans I befriended. We all longed for safety, for security. Our socio-political affiliation didn't matter; whether a socialist, communist, or democrat, we each wanted to walk out our door in the morning and return home at night unharmed. Our fears were a terrific unifier and, oddly, created a firm foundation where we could live together in great empathy. We

realized that despite our evident surface differences, at heart we wanted the same things, and by relying on each other, we had a better chance of achieving them.

Given the backlash against U.S. foreign policy, what do you think about the Peace Corps today? And, as follow-up to that question, how prepared are you to take on the informal role of Peace Corps ambassador that is often bestowed on RPCVs who write about their experiences?

In truth, the Peace Corps is remarkably successful in maintaining an apolitical perspective, though I'd be a fool to deny there isn't an American agenda attached to its mission. It promotes — among other things — self-sufficiency, independence, creative thinking, and a free-market economy; all cornerstones of the proverbial “American way.” This, and its relative appearance as a highly moneyed venture in the foreign countries where it serves, can leave it vulnerable to misinterpretation by the world's poor. But the beautiful thing about the Peace Corps is that it focuses on building bridges to understanding. In opposition to diplomatic or military maneuvering, it values and promotes individual relationships with people — not just with countries or governments. The political jargon being tossed about so freely nowadays — Axis of Evil, Evildoers, Liberation, Revolution —

you know who that doesn't include?
That doesn't include Rosa, who isn't worried about anything more complex than how to feed a family of eight with food enough for four. Or Lucinda, who has six children and a field to harvest without a husband, because he became "a disappeared" last night. Those are the people the Peace Corps exists to serve. So in answer to your question: Am I prepared to be an ambassador for that sort of ethical, forthright, people-centered American intervention abroad? You're damn right I am.

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Talking with Ellen Urbani Hildebrand (*page 2*)

You write of the damaging impact of U.S. military involvement on local villagers in Guatemala and other Central American countries. Having seen firsthand the effect on the lives — and attitudes — of the civilians this intervention was meant to benefit, what consequences do you foresee as the result of current, similar U.S. policies in other parts of the world?

You can pick up a newspaper in any city in this country, on any given day, and read about the sad, but typical, turn in sentiments that those who have been “saved” experience when they start to perceive the liberator as equivalent to the oppressor. But in a letter I recently received from John Nichols, author of *The Milagro Beanfield War*, he touched on a consequence of foreign military intervention that I think few people have fully realized. In reference to his own experience in Guatemala, he said: “In general, it’s probably a major crime for our imperial government, or country at large, to be sending its blond, blue-eyed dogooders to our starving satrapies around the globe. What I learned in my brief adventure as a blond, blue-eyed representative of the United States was to never again visit a Latin American (or other Third World) country as anything other than a person actively protesting the

United States' economic, cultural, political, or environmental policies in that country and elsewhere." His observation is a keen one, and aligns with my own perspective. I think one of the major, yet relatively undiscussed, impacts of current U.S. foreign policy is that it is endangering Americans abroad. One is no longer safe if recognized as an American in many parts of the world.

Why do you think the Guatemalan culture hasn't significantly changed or modernized despite ongoing international aid?



[In Guatemala](#)

Quite possibly because there was nothing wrong with the culture that needed changing in the first place. Not that I don't think there is great merit — and one could argue need — in eradicating certain preventable diseases, in establishing and maintaining hygienic living conditions, etc. But the international aid that is introduced in countries like Guatemala is often determined and delivered based more on the perceived needs of the giver rather than the receiver. For example: Do children learn better in enclosed concrete buildings than they do in open-air huts? My experience has been that the structure has little impact. But show most Americans a picture of poor children studying in a bamboo lean-to, and they will lament that the children need a schoolhouse. So an outsider intervenes, with a full heart and good intentions, and builds a schoolhouse

out of imported materials that can be neither repaired nor replaced when the benefactor leaves, and the recipients are never again satisfied with the lean-to that had served their needs adequately before they were convinced otherwise. The real question, the hard introspective question, should be: Whom does this type of aid truly serve?

You had to work hard to overcome many Guatemalans' preconceptions of you, and Americans in general, based on images they'd been fed through television and movies. What is your perception of the way America represents itself to rest of world via pop culture and the media?

The country I live in, and the one Guatemalans perceived me to have come from, are two dramatically different places. The Hollywood world of all sexy, all pretty, and all wealthy has never been a reality for me, yet it was a mien I could rarely escape from during my years abroad. Regular folk like myself are — at best — done a disservice by the glamorous images foisted upon poorly educated populaces; these people have no reference points allowing them to distinguish between the fantasy of film and the reality of life in the United States. What Americans consider to be escapist entertainment is considered by most Guatemalans to be a fact-based primer on life in America. That is our fault, for we have only rarely provided them with a more honest picture of ourselves.

At worst, when held accountable to that distorted, typically sexualized image, it can result in real personal harm, especially to women, as detailed in *When I Was Elena*.

What were your preconceptions of Guatemalans before you arrived in-country, and how successful do you think you were in overcoming them?

I knew very little about Guatemala before I arrived, aside from a few glimpsed images in magazines extolling the landscape and the quaint nature of indigenous life. But let's be honest: A life of abject poverty isn't quaint anywhere, and since 99% of the Guatemalan population — including the entire indigenous population — lives in poverty, that notion got dispensed with pretty quickly. Other things I never fully adjusted to. I still fail to understand why, beset by the same level of poverty, some people choose to live as neatly, as cleanly, as possible, while others allow themselves and their surroundings to deteriorate. I hated the machismo; the sense that in many men's eyes I was nothing more than a sex object. And while the slower pace of life is something I struggled to embrace at first, but then did fully, the plodding pace of business and government left me consistently stymied. None of these things are entirely unique to Guatemala, however. Those characteristics that are unique to Guatemalans, the traditions and superstitions, the daily

rituals, the *cariño* of the people — those are the things I loved.

Why did you decide to join the Peace Corps in the first place?

My motives were entirely selfish. I wanted to learn a foreign language. I wanted a novel adventure, and knew there would be few other times in my life when I'd have the opportunity to step out of my typical life and take off for an unfamiliar place. And I felt — in the way only a naïve, presumptuous 22-year-old can — that I already knew my own country well enough and could learn more by moving abroad. On that count I was both right and wrong: I wouldn't trade the lessons Guatemala taught me for anything, but there was, and still is, much to discover about my homeland.

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Talking with Ellen Urbani Hildebrand (*page 3*)

How do you think this book will be received by RPCVs?

If anyone can appreciate this book, certainly RPCVs can. They don't have to agree with my impressions or share my experiences, but I trust they will appreciate my motives in writing about those years. How the Peace Corps as an organization, specifically as a governmental organization, will receive the book . . . I can only speculate. I would hope it is received as a truthful portrait of an institution that is at once both flawed in minor ways and fabulous in the important ones, as many goodwill institutions are. For you will find no greater advocate for Peace Corps service than I. I know of no more remarkable vehicle by which Americans can acquire a diplomatic understanding of the world, while at the same time recognizing that idealism alone cannot eliminate suffering. Despite the hardships to which it exposed me, I still count it as one of the smartest, most wonderful things I have ever done.

Do you recommend the Peace Corps to anyone? Why should someone join the agency today?

To build character. To discover courage in oneself. To learn what one's core strengths are and to

become comfortable in one's own company. To acquire a sense of self-reliance and resilience and fortitude. And, finally, to expand the myopic brand of nationalism that staying too long in one place can subversively impose upon oneself.

Lets go back to your book again. Why did you write it?

My primary goal in writing this book was not so much to toss my own voice into the literary fray, but to repay the trust and friendship extended to me by the women of Guatemala by speaking of, and for, them. These women are virtually silenced, by means of illiteracy and conditioning, and they live within a culture that is also largely unheard from. I originally made the same mistake I think many do, which is to minimize the value and the example of Guatemalan women. I failed to appreciate their strengths in person; I was still too immature at that time in my life. It wasn't until I had some distance, some time, some age-won wisdom, that I came to respect their quiet brand of fortitude. Setting their stories as a counterpoint to my own experiences seemed to be the way to throw their lives into greatest relief. What I am most proud of as a person, and then as an author, is my willingness to appreciate the plight of these women and endeavor to empathize with their perspectives. I feel that is what makes ***When I Was Elena*** a wholly unique accomplishment.

This book is intriguing in that it is authored by you, but comes across as if it is written by eight very different women. How did you pull that off?

When I Was Elena is a literary endeavor, not an act of journalistic reporting. It is a personal, creative work, and as the craftsman of that work, I assumed authority for developing the narrative in a way that was most advantageous from a story-telling perspective. In the years-long process of deciding how to do that, long before I ever wrote a single word, it slowly dawned on me that speaking in the voices of those other women would be most compelling. Realizing I couldn't switch back and forth between my voice and theirs without developing a sizable personality disorder, I got my own stories out of the way first. Then I embarked on what turned out to be a fascinating process of "becoming" those other women while I wrote. I felt like a medium; everything about them came alive for me again. I could hear their voices while I typed; I could feel the weathered skin on their hands and smell their hair. It turned into the return trip to Guatemala that I had not yet managed in person. By far, though, the most surprising, and rewarding, outcome of "becoming" them for the book is this: I finally, fully, appreciated the concealed strengths in them to which I had previously been blinded. It was a humbling, heartening endeavor.

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With all the talk (and writing) recently about memoirs — specifically whether the author is obligated more to hard fact or to his/her interpretation of events — how do you respond when asked if your book is entirely true, or whether it is a work of creative non-fiction?

I suppose it is easier for me than for other memoirists, in that it is obvious I am not eight separate people, and therefore parts of the book are by necessity fictionalized. In my own stories, there's some temporal distortion, with the order of events rearranged to accommodate the narrative flow. Also, in an effort to minimize the introduction of superfluous characters, I took the liberty of erasing many cohorts. As for the other women, there are obviously some re-imagined parts, as I was forced to fill in details I wasn't privy to in order to flesh out their stories. But I maintained a commitment to basing even those added details on truths I came to know from the lives of actual people; nothing is made up. The result is that some of the characters are hybrids — based primarily on one person, but including incidents culled from others' lives. As for the riveting nature of their stories, I chose each of the featured women based not only on my association with them

and their impact on me, but also for the way in which each of their stories could challenge and provoke readers. I needed seven; choosing six was simple, but I agonized over the seventh. I decided at length to include another American to balance out my point of view, and then I considered a Peace Corps office worker, an embassy employee . . . I don't know why it took me so long to realize it should be another Volunteer. Once I set upon that idea, it was clear what story she would tell, and that character, therefore, is the greatest amalgam. Given the trauma her story addresses, I felt I had no right to base it entirely on any one person; the hard facts of that story are all altered.

The lives of the Guatemalans you write about are short, hard, and unchanging. One woman is described as “thirtyish and looking forward to a life done living.” In stark contrast, here you are, at 37, setting off on a whole new career with the publication of your first book. To what do you ascribe such dramatic differences in the opportunities afforded you?

The idea of reinventing oneself — of taking up a new career or relocating to a new town — is something that never crossed the mind of any of the Guatemalans I knew. (With the one glaring exception, I must note, of their dreams of perhaps someday emigrating to the United States.) Yet for Americans of my generation, reinvention is not just something we consider; it is something we expect to

do, perhaps frequently. This difference in our expectations, then, is an element I think is particularly crucial. Let's use, as an example, a female teenager. A typical fifteen-year-old Guatemalan girl expects to soon be married, having children, harvesting squash. She expects to do this very same thing for the rest of her life. A typical fifteen-year-old American girl expects to have an enormous cell phone bill. She anticipates the possibility of college, but has no idea where, and couldn't begin to tell you what she'll be doing in ten years. Some might call that spoiled, others lucky or blessed; still others would call it cursed. Not to exclude the impact of economics, social structures, or political institutions, one could argue that, within reason, we actualize what is expected of us.

Men and missionaries take a pretty hard hit in your book. How do you respond to the charge that you've just put a literary spin on male- and religion-bashing?

I like most men, and have loved my share. As for missionaries, though I don't favor the practice of evangelism, I do, with limited reservations, respect the munificence of their intentions. I don't know how anyone could fault me, however, for chafing at the ilk of men and missionaries I encountered with frequency in Guatemala. So I will make no apologies for what I have written. It is my truth.

Fair enough! Thank you, Ellen, and good luck with this book and all the books to come.

Thank you, John. And thank you for sending me to The Permanent Press. They have been wonderful.

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