

Venezuela, summer 1967, common humanity.

There are moments in human existence, if only brief moments, where distinctions of race, education, class, position, religion or nationality matter not at all. A lesson one wishes to elongate for humanities sake, but all too quickly fades. For those who go through it, it remains an experienced truth clearly etched somewhere within us for future reference and edification.

I was to learn that a serious earthquake was one of these moments. The surprise, shock, immediate challenge and suffering cuts through to us all.

At age 15 I was extremely fortunate to spend the summer in Venezuela. The family I stayed with would become close friends through this life. It began when my father began a conversation with a patient at his hospital. They talked history and culture and he was immediately struck by the intelligence and depth of understanding this woman had. Matildalena Chumaciero was visiting New York City from Venezuela. They began talking about families and exchanged information. She had children and lived in a large family compound with other relatives in Caracas. Her sister in law Joyce was married to Federico Vegas and they had several children close in age. They talked about doing an exchange. My older brother Tim, a great pioneering and community spirit and storyteller, went the summer before me. Among other things he fell in love with Sylvania.

1967 was my turn. Among other things, I fell in love with Sylvania. The whole family, but especially their son, Federico was to become one of my close confidants and friends throughout life. He was also to become my favorite artist, painter of this age, a genuine unique eye that invited the viewer to come in. He taught me the first Spanish words you were not to be taught. At dinner when asked how my day was, and I mentioned I met Sylvania and she was muy puta, they almost dropped their soup. Federico and brothers were giggling. I said it again thinking maybe I said it wrong, but it was the correct pronunciation and Joyce had a talk with Federico Jr.

Whenever I find a great cafe con leche I go right to the Vegas kitchen in mind. The memory version is always a bit better. The potent smell of mangos, and avocados and bananas right off the trees in the yard. What they could do with bananas. I was not used to the concept of servants and someone else making my bed, and continued making mine despite the protests. I enjoyed their company, not to mention seeing if any of the fresh bread was ready.

Football and girls were definitely the new experiences grabbing my attention. The Vietnam war was going on in the distant background, but like most Americans, I wouldn't awake to the seriousness of it until January 1st, 1968, the Tet Offensive. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s perhaps most powerful American speech that year at Riverside Church I wouldn't know about until I donned headphones in 1986 in his dedicated library in Atlanta, Ga. I was a kid, mostly building muscles. The three albums I found in the Chumaciero house I would play often and think of home.... The Best of the Animals (John Burton singing House of the Rising Sun), The Best of the Mama's and Papa's (I'd been

to California, and yes I could dream of it.), and the Beatles Revolver album. The Chumaciero's went to Europe and NYC fairly often and were supporters of the Met Opera and the NY Philharmonic. Another grandson would become one of Venezuela's great jazz aficionados and radio personalities. The world was here.

After some time in the Vegas/Chumaciero city compound, my new family took me to their summer place on the ocean.

There was an outdoor movie playing. The movie starring Lloyd Bridges (in subtitles) was about, what are the chances, earthquakes. I was sitting near the entrance of the movie awaiting the arrival of Sylvania. She was late, missing so much. Lloyd was deep sea diving, planting sensors in the bottom of the ocean to detect and give warnings of any earth movement.

I didn't remember there being railroad tracks near our hotel, but sure enough there seemed to be a train coming closer and closer to our building. Yes, I told myself it sounded and felt like a train coming. Or was this a special movie effect upon us that would explain this? The sound continued to build, Lloyd was just sitting on a ship, and the ground began trembling more.

Distracting puzzlement began to grow until there was a sudden shift making all clear. The ground began deeply heaving, jolting. The lights went out, and the noise was deafening. I likened it to a wall of pots and pans crashing, magnified several times.

Watching the movie there must have been over a hundred people packed under this concrete slab that gave shelter in daytime to rain and sun. Human instincts are truly amazing.

The body got up immediately before it seemed to register that I was to get away from the building. I ran toward open space, the beach before us. Or tried to run. As a teenager and a confident athlete, easily embarrassed with imperfections or anything that might interfere with image, the fact that I could not keep my feet, falling on my face repeatedly, and barely able to even scramble on all fours for a minute, did not interfere. As my foot kept missing the disappearing ground, only to rise again to catch my face square, a few times, I suppose I could have questioned ever being a decent football player, but, pure survival was preventing any such previously common self-conscious thoughts from this developing ego.

I made it to the water's edge, tremors still forcing us to keep low and ready to shift feet. Exhausted from falling, I found there that a number of older ladies had already made it to the beach before me! My Spanish was still rudimentary, yet for these moments I remember only fluency and understanding every word around me. Does the brain just go to another level? They grabbed me and asked me to get down and pray. They repeated that the world was ending. Some pleaded for mercy. Hail Mary's at "our hour of death". Genuine Catholics.

I stared at the sand and felt that at any moment the earth would crack open. To my right about 30 yards away were break waters, big dark rocks. Whatever guidance was coming from above had me pull away and run as best I could latching my arms around the first big rock. How safe and stable it seemed to me.

I then thought, perhaps recalling from the movie, about a title wave. Surely, it would be coming, but what to do? I didn't want to go near that dark 20 story building in front of us.

I heard crying next to me. It was a boy I had met that day. He cried that his little sister did not get out from under the concrete slab in time. They were together watching the movie as well. It was quieting down now and still terrified, he pleaded through his tears for help to find his sister. He told me she must be dead. I reassured him otherwise, knowing I had no idea. We just want to believe the best?

We ran up to find that sadly, sure enough the entire concrete overhang was no longer above, it and some of the side of the building covered the ground before us. There were some car lights flickering in the distance and lending some visibility, but it created moving shadows and images, and when looking for bodies, the eyes played games. We didn't hesitate and began lifting and clearing the broken rubble. I don't recall having any time to think, but do remember with each stone, greatly hoping I was not going to find a body. You hope no one died, and not here. Walking by us were injured people, some blood soaked. Each tremor brought yet another window pane or wall down crashing. Names were being called in the dark.

I'm not sure how long we did this when I heard my own name screamed. I jumped. It was my Venezuelan mom, Mrs. Joyce Vegas. I'd find out later, she had been going insane looking for me and about how she could ever write a letter to my mom explaining that her son was dead. The pure relief she had of finding me in the dark was now coursing through me. She had her own children as well to take care of. She had no time to hear my arguments about how I had to help my friend find his sister. I was whisked away, turning to assure him that "I'm sure your sister got out. You'll find her." He looked very sad and kept lifting stone.

I only got a few yards. Mr. Vegas, to become one of my mentors in life from that night, a powerfully strong man and handsome by all standards, came up to me and in that moment changed my life with a look. He believed in me. He gave me trust.

I wasn't conscious of it at the time, but he allowed that rare space in life for us to decide our own fate. He gave me an opportunity to make my own decision, a critical decision about my own life. Whether dead or alive soon, so quickly he believed I would make the right choice, to decide whether I would hold within me either a history of cowardice, or service to another. He did not order me, or tell me. He offered me an opportunity to risk it all for something beyond me, an opportunity to be "a man", an opportunity to help. With his towering strength, unspoken, and in a flash, his courage infected and guided me toward courage, toward doing the right thing. I am very lucky for that encourage-

ment. It grows and helps balance the discouragements of life. Family makes us all so vulnerable. He had the strength to ask for help.

He had three of his young children, three little girls, still up in the apartment and he needed help to get them out. The building was disintegrating further with each aftershock. Everyone was saying it was about to fall.

“Let’s go” I responded, but don’t recall any enthusiasm, just dread, until that moment you cross over the fear. A phenomenal experience I’m sure you’ve had on some occasion. Transcending fear, not intellectually, just finding yourself there after the jump ahead. It’s truly a “zone” and rare heightened moment of lightness and awareness, once over there’s little to hold you back. It helped to have Mr. Vegas, the kind of platoon leader you’d trust and follow into any battle.

I remember thinking I won’t come out of here, this is goodbye. Goodbye. It’s a thought that changes your life once you move ahead into it. It’s true, that everything else afterwards is kind of a gift. There will be other such times in my life, but this was perhaps the clearest and the first. There was just a mini second pause to do some review of my life. You send love and thanks out, and move. I remember crossing the threshold entrance to the dark crumbling building thinking yes, any moment now could be the last. The awareness of all became acute. With Mr. Mr. Vegas next to me, somehow there was no other way it could possibly be.

Debris was falling from the ceiling. The concrete particle dust was thick and pervasive. It was very dark save for an occasional flashlight someone had flickering somewhere, or again, from car headlights outside. There were enough holes in the building that some of these headlights became our moving guideposts. The elevator shafts were caved in. The staircase was full of rubble and you could slip or fall into the elevator shaft if not careful. Injured people were crawling down as we slipped up past them. Some pleaded for us to go back down.

When we got to the apartment the three girls were all huddled in a crib in the center of the room with a maid crying but over them in protection. She was greatly relieved when we showed up. Brave good person. Was I to take one and he two? He ran in and grabbed a bed cover, then quickly placed all three into it, easily lifting them all, perhaps to both our surprises. At such times, your own children, adrenaline did it’s super-human thing. He did not need me after all.

As we headed out, I remembered something muy importante (not). Grandma Chumaciero made the best pies of anyone in the world. She had told me she made one that day. Now empty handed and having past that threshold, there was a kind of giddiness that entered, or perhaps a way of actually tasting something of what heaven must be like, a little. Quickly I opened the refrigerator door. Mr. Vegas called my name to come along quickly. He wouldn’t stop but wasn’t going to leave me. As I yelled to confirm I was right behind him, and with no time to find a utensil or plate, I put my cupped hand deep into the banana custard pie and grabbed as much as I could. I’m not proud of this

shifting priority, starting down hallway steps wolfing this down. It was a sublime gift, and her work was again most appreciated.

As the corridor's wall outside the apartment was mostly knocked out I could look down on cars and people stirring below. Some were shouting up to come down and get out of the building immediately. I was on my way, but began to feel invincible, then recalled something else muy importante. Sylvania was late for the movie. Her parents apartment was not far from ours, one up or down, I can't remember now. She may be trapped in there? Stepping over debris I made it to her door, locked. I began banging and calling her name loudly. "Sylvania, Sylvania! Are you OK" (all this night is in Spanish). I listened for any stirring and continued calling, until I noticed the wall next to the door was a different shade of darkness. I leaned over to discover that the wall next to the door was no wall at all, it was gone. Feeling now a bit more ridiculous rather than a knight on a horse, I peered into the apartment and whispered "Sylvania?" A quick search showed no one home. I scrambled down the stairwells, mostly pushing myself down on my rear end, alternating back to all fours, and joined the family in the parking lot.

Gathered we managed through the never ending night to drive to the compound in Caracas. The buildings there were low and well built. All beds were moved to the center of the room and we were given instructions to get to the door-well if any movement was felt. I don't remember sleeping.

The next few weeks were all about community involvement, rescue, and cleanup. There were hundreds of stories to hear and share, everyone was somewhere and knew someone somewhere else. Human communication was full throttle over the weeks. The next morning, those able and old enough in the house went to a local catchment area where a relief station was being set up. People brought whatever supplies and food they could spare. Someone gabbed me, saying they were exhausted and asked if I could take over directing traffic. Cars and trucks were coming into this spot from several angles. It seemed confusing and congested, but I cherished being given the task, not feeling capable to understand and communicate much, I felt tremendously lucky to be able to do something. I gave it my full attention, worked out all kinds of organizational plans in my head. it worked. There was flow. He gave me a whistle, and a white sash. I had my hands waving, pointing, and on that first day people were very patient, tolerant and respectful. We were stunned. We all wanted to help the suffering all around us. We were the fortunate ones. People were generous today. Most went by thanking me. For hours this was a great shot in the arm.

The whole week there was nothing on the TV or radio that wasn't glued and focussed on this event. Often blank screens with very somber music playing. The tidal wave never came (epicenter was inland). A couple of thousand people had died. The large hotel next to us had just doubled over. The top half pancaked then crashed down covering the front of the building. People who immediately ran out of the building like I had stood little chance. For several days before and on that day I was playing with some of the kids that lived in there. I kept thinking of them. Charima it was called. For over a

week they would show some of the shots of their attempts to rescue people. I was hoping for close ups to catch a glance of some of the faces I knew in there. I remember someone was rescued a week after, still alive. It was big news. I would review ways I would survive in my mind. Could I?

Our building was eventually demolished. I had heard that all under the concrete slab got out alive. They found no one there. My friends little sister must have made it. I'd never get to know, about her, or any I met and played with. Sylvania was OK, and some weeks latter we were to meet, awkwardly, because everyone knew I liked her. We were taken to a movie. I just remember the haunting lead song of the movie "The Look of Love". Oh, Lord, I was bursting but could barely look. I remember earlier that earthquake day swimming out and bobbing in the waves together, her English was non existent and my Spanish was so bad we just smiled and made gestures, and communicated mostly in French, a language I had studied a tad bit more of and now forget completely. I never saw her again, but heard years later she was married very young. Of course.

Mrs. Vegas was very good. She made it that night or the very next morning to a Western Union station and telegraphed my parents. (I guess there were no phones at the time working internationally?). My mom got hand delivered the message early that morning. She opened it and thought, how nice of them. "The Vegas's sent us a telegram saying everyone is well. And that we will be in touch. Stop. Joyce and Fred Vegas" It wasn't until she picked up the International Herald Tribune and saw a column, Earthquake in Venezuela!

Thank you Mrs. Vegas. She not only has remained a stunningly beautiful woman inside and out, she remained a completely responsible and trustworthy person caring for a large flock and making each of us feel special.

I would return home somewhat changed. I looked at everything a bit differently. Material things certainly had less importance to me. I valued people more. I saw our image as just a part of us, a part that could change under circumstances. But as most teens, I still had difficulty in knowing where I was in it all. That remains true. I swore then to never live or work in a high rise, and I never have. Even peering from visits to top floors of the World Trade Towers, I would imagine I was in an airplane and would assure myself nothing would happen during my visit.

The girl I had liked back home was with another boy now. He had a car. Inside I was somehow more isolated, shy or vulnerable. Was it partly knowing the world can suddenly change so? Although I had two friends who died earlier, I knew a little more now about our impermanence. I also learned some things which would keep magnifying for me the rest of my life and become part of my convictions about this world we live it.

The lessons that repeated for me:

In times of severe crisis we communicate often without words, and for the moment, rely on each other totally. These moments, as written in my opening sentence here, nullify

all our differences, even if so briefly. We are in common, in union. We benefit and save each other. We share a higher purpose together. We experience this not just during war, terror or adventure gone badly wrong, it's in natural disasters and tragedy of all kinds.

In Venezuela 1967 there were huge and obvious social class distinctions clearly visible along the main roads, manned machine gun turrets on hillsides overlooking the shantytown and huts built with any material found all along the local hillsides, people walking to work, but the distinctions were less visible or palpable for these few days. You would often not know who had several homes, cars and servants vs those who lived in a shanty shack, worried about how to feed their children the next meal. I'll never forget the comrade of all pulling together clearing rubble, helping the injured, moving supplies, but especially the good will shown from all to all. Pure natural service and compassion. The sadness is the awareness of societies divisions drifting back too quickly, but I'll never ever forget the eyes, the hands, the care, the intention to serve, the power and value of humanity that had nothing to do with money or position. I've seen this now time and again. It proved to me that equal value of each of us.

When you experience this oneness, however short or long it lasts, it isn't some wishful idealistic theory. It's real. It happens. It's true to you.

When a catastrophe hits us, humanity immediately adjusts together. That's the common impulse. There are some who take advantage once in safety, but that has much to do with the kind of leadership that's been present beforehand.

If there is a mighty storm, earthquake, natural disaster, someday a meteor?, an unknown pathogen killing scores in it's path, an explosion, yes we take cover, but we quickly re-adjust and come together, even if briefly. There are few exceptions but we have pulled together like this for many tens of centuries, eons. The world has many vital crisis, common challenges today. We can be ruled by our lower instincts, or we can pull together now. We have learned much more today about our common humanity. Our family member next to us may be the strangest person we know in a given moment, but we are not strangers to each other as some paint us and want us to believe. We know how to help each other. We always have. It is the leadership among us that makes such a difference. In rare democracy, it's the people that keep the leaders responsible, accountable and in service for the good of the whole.