

Learning the living language of humanity



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

From ninth grade through high school I took Spanish classes. Some of it was a comedy of errors and that first year was terrible, but Mr. Lundberg was patient and I finally began to catch on, finishing with a good grade and fairly good sense of the language. That encouraged me to continue studying Spanish with Ms. Cain for three years of senior high.

Choosing more impractical subjects (like theology) in college, I didn't continue Spanish, but backpacking around Europe after graduation took me to Germany, Switzerland, Italy, France and Spain. Staying in Barcelona and Madrid

felt familiar as I recalled the history and culture from Spanish classes. It was satisfying to use some of what I learned in school, able to understand conversations, read signs and menus, and string words into imperfect but intelligible sentences.

There were many opportunities to practice my basic "Espanol" as a chaplain.

While serving as a jail chaplain in the San Francisco Bay area we saw a large number of ethnicities coming in and out the "revolving door" of incarceration (carcel: Spanish for jail). With a large immigrant population, many from Latin America, I spent countless hours listening to "broken" English and conversing in "broken" Spanish. Detainees appreciated that I would make the attempt to understand and converse. We often had Spanish-speaking inmates attending weekly services, so I made feeble attempts to be bi-lingual. This caused

puzzled expressions and laughter but also smiles and nods of gratitude—everyone could feel they were included. At least I was trying.

Roberto, from El Salvador, joined the group one evening and immediately helped translate the readings, songs and conversation. As I spoke with him at his cell during the week I sensed that he respected my attempts to communicate with other native Spanish speakers and I told him how grateful I was for his assistance. Roberto wrote out translations of readings and songs I would give him through the steel bars and by Sunday he would have copies for me. He didn't have much else to do with his time awaiting trial ... for murder.

Yolanda, from Guatemala, spoke little English but she attended the groups in the Women's Unit, singing, giggling and sometimes crying. She missed her children, which was easy to understand, no matter the language. Yolanda's joyful

nature was contagious in the cell where we met with other women. I actually looked forward to those small circles, locked inside with "criminals" like Yolanda—most of whom had not been convicted of any crime.

In street chaplaincy we met even more people who spoke Spanish. Jose, from Mexico, was a kind and gentle man we first met in the free dining room downtown. He became a regular at our weekly Wellness group and Sunday circle in the park. Jose had a bright face and even brighter attitude though he lived "in the bushes" or under the freeway with a lot of people who shared his precarious situation with the difficult job of looking for work day after day.

Jose really made our day when he would appear at the chaplaincy office door with a big "sonrisa" (smile) and, frequently, "una palabra de sapiente" (a

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word of wisdom). That wisdom might simply be: “Tenemos no hogar, pero tenemos humanidad” (we have no home, but we have humanity). When we would tell him he was a wise man, Jose chuckled and replied, in English: “one thing I know—I know nothing” (quoting Socrates).

If we were speaking with someone

else, Jose would simply stand in the doorway quietly waiting. What was he waiting for? Connection, I suppose, with people who wouldn't judge him, chase him or arrest him. He would never fail to say, with a grin, “Thank You, Mucho!” Though he had nothing but the clothes on his back, Jose never asked for anything, unless it was for another person or to ask if any of us needed anything! He would help us move furniture or assist someone getting into our van to take them to the hospital, shelter or new apartment. He would assist in translat-

ing for another person, teach us a new word in Spanish or give us a lesson in a Latino custom.

My Spanish comprehension and conversation has grown rusty again with lack of practice. It's especially difficult to understand when a person talks a little too fast. But when we take the time to listen, really listen, I think we can understand just about anyone, in any language.

I'm not sure I ever fully appreciated the Spanish word “sonrisa” until I met Jose. His smile was in every way a “sun-

rise.” And he gave us both his “corazon” (heart) and “presencia” (presence). A truly good-hearted hombre.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.