CHAPTER 8: *LEARNING THROUGH LITERATURE*

Aid to understanding comes in many guises. Over the years I have read hundreds, probably thousands, of books and articles that have dealt with different aspects of social and economic development. Most of the articles were sharply focused and centered around a single aspect of a situation. I used them mainly to help understand and deal with selected aspects of a development problem in a particular country at a given time. Because of the topicality of the material, I remember few of these articles. When a professional assignment was completed, I usually gave them away — most frequently to host country colleagues.

Although their shelf life was short, many of the articles were helpful at the time. Less rewarding were most of the books I read — or at least dipped into. If they dealt with analytical techniques, articles in professional journals were usually available that were more tightly written and more up-to-date; if they sought to explain the dynamics of a social situation, the analyses lacked sufficient understanding to be useful. Worst of all, few of the books gave me the sense of becoming wiser.

In pursuing my career I came to realize that an indispensable ingredient a development consultant must bring to the task is a profound awareness of the culture in which one is asked to operate. This awareness involves knowledge of such critical matters as the country's history, its economic and social structure, its principal social and religious alliances and enmities, and, with specific development programs, the likely winners and losers. Whether the issues being addressed are as diverse as environmental management, decentralization of government, privatization of industry, or simply the installation of specific pieces of social infrastructure, knowledge of the nuances of such concerns is an indispensable part of one's intellectual equipment.

In reflecting upon the handful of books that have profoundly influenced my thinking about development, and upon which I continue to ponder, I realized how diverse their form, but how marvelously informative they are. They include chronicles, social commentaries, compilations of short stories, novels, and anthropological studies. They are, however, of a piece: They help in understanding the social and institutional climate within which development efforts take place. They also concern themselves especially with the situation of the very poor and the difficulties and frustrations inherent in trying to improve their condition in different cultural contexts.

Without question the initial choice in my pantheon of excellence is the biography of *Ishi* by Theodora Kroeber (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961). I read it sometime in the early sixties with a surge of pleasure, the vibrations of which persist in my mind to this day. The book deals with an American Indian of the Northwest who was discovered in 1911 after years of isolation — the last surviving member of his nation.

Ishi came out of a Stone Age culture and, according to his own testimony, was not a particularly distinguished member of his group; yet he was able to live through the decline and ultimate extinction of his nation and to come through the trauma of that experience emotionally and intellectually intact. His overall sensibility and sensitivity — and his subsequent insights into the character of the urban America in which he lived for a number of years — were astonishing. I was offered a profound insight: that simple social structures or the use of primitive tools do not necessarily mean simplicity of nature or intellect. Subsequently, I was to learn from field experiences in Latin America, Africa and Asia that there are no ethnic groups who are stupid — often uninformed or more usually misinformed, but never dumb — and never unfeeling. It was not the realization that the peasant farmer scratching a living from the arid soils of, for example, the Sahel of Africa is made out of the same clay as I, or is equal in the eyes of some divine providence. I had long accepted all of that. Rather, it was the realization that his intellect is as keen, his perceptions of his needs as sharp,

and his basic humanity as worthy as the most enlightened and privileged person in my own society.

The next several books deal with Latin America and represent an effort to understand some of the underlying difficulties the countries of that region confront in trying to improve the general well-being of their people. One of these difficulties is attitudinal — both on the part of the governing elite of these countries as well as on the part of those from the more economically advanced countries which have historically dominated Latin America. A second major obstacle to social and economic development is the rigidity and general unresponsiveness of the region's archaic institutional arrangements. In reality, these two overarching impediments confound most developing countries.

The first of these books is the memoirs of Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963). Diaz was a military captain who accompanied Hernan Cortez during the conquest of Mexico. His chronicles of that adventure serve as a primary source for all subsequent efforts to trace and understand the domination of an empire of millions by a handful of would-be nobles.

It is a fascinating tale of derring-do, captivating in large measure because of the matter-of-fact style in which epic events are related — events that had a cataclysmic effect on a major region of the world. What comes through is not Diaz as an evil person; on the contrary, he was obviously brave, pious, honest in his dealings, and loyal to his commander and companions. However, the closed mind of the conqueror is evident. Diaz never doubts the superiority of his own culture to that of the Aztecs, that his religious beliefs are sound while theirs are spurious, that his customs are civilized while theirs are barbarous, that he acts rationally after mature reflection while they behave in an essentially childlike manner acting upon emotion and whim. His is the classic tale of the militarily strong failing to perceive and appreciate the inherent excellencies of the militarily weak.

The next book, written by Mexico's great literary figure, Carlos Fuentes, is, *Latin America: At War With The Past* (Montreal: CBC Enterprises, 1985). In this book, Fuentes deals with the themes suggested by Diaz and shows how many of the self-defeating attitudes and institutional rigidities prevalent in contemporary Latin America are rooted in the histories of those who came to the continent from 16th-century Spain. Social snobbery, opportunism, an exaggerated sense of masculinity and a predilection for the authoritarian use — and abuse — of power were defining characteristics of those who established the norm for the social behavior of the elite as well as for those who aspired to such status. So, too, was an aversion to the creation of civic, democratic communities, town halls and municipal freedoms and an affinity for establishing rigid, vertical institutions dominated by a small coterie of insiders at the top. Much of the contemporary history of Latin America involves indigenous efforts to overcome such institutional rigidities and self-limiting dispositions.

Currently, continuing failure to appreciate the near intractability of cultural attitudes undermines international development efforts and causes widespread consternation within international aid agencies. From the time in the 1950s that the Marshall Plan concept was extended to include countries of the Third World and a host of multilateral and bilateral efforts were launched to improve conditions within the poorer countries, it has been assumed that economic and social improvements would change popularly held attitudes respecting the work place, public institutions, and what constitutes acceptable social behavior. Carlos Fuentes' tract on the manner in which attitudes rooted in feudal Spain continue to shape events in Latin America is thought provoking as well as eminently readable. Equally relevant is his review of the way in which the persistence of colonial attitudes in the United States continues to cloud judgment and trigger unilateral actions on the part of the American government that subvert democratic efforts and encourage authoritarian behavior in Latin America.

As a group the urban poor have been a special concern of international development efforts. The situation of such families, how they go about

organizing their lives, what values they espouse, and the kinds of efforts they make to lift themselves out of poverty are critical issues. Nowhere are these better explored than in Oscar Lewis's classic study of a poor Mexican family, *The Children of Sanchez* (New York: Vintage Books, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1961).

Lewis used a tape recorder to capture the intimate and revealing autobiographies of Jesus Sanchez and his four children. It is a profoundly moving story of heroic, but ultimately unrewarded efforts, to escape from the suffocating grip of poverty. All of the institutional weaknesses of the society — administrative incompetence, corruption, and bureaucratic stagnation — as well as the pervading cult of machismo, social snobbery, and official indifference are arrayed against them. But the resourcefulness, intelligence, and incredible energy of the family are marvelously displayed. In nothing else that I have read is it so evident that for any effort to improve the situation of the urban poor significantly, it must tap the resourcefulness and energy of the people themselves. It cannot rely on broad policy brushes wielded from afar by a political and economic elite. Comparable to *Ishi*, *The Children of Sanchez* is not a polemic. lt does not deal directly with programs of induced development. Rather, it dramatizes the inherent genius of even the most disadvantaged and is suggestive of the kinds of efforts required to enable the poor to advance themselves.

The other major category of families that engages the special attention of those involved with development is the rural poor — those who live and labor outside of the major cities of the Third World and who earn their living from small scale farming and minor enterprises. In the context of Latin America, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's masterpiece *One*

One Hundred Years of Solitude (New York: Avon Books, 1970) is profound — as well as outrageous and macabre. As a fable, Marquez's book turns the world inside out and consistently stretches credulity. Yet, for the poor living in the tropics and subtropics — which means the vast majority of those living in the world's less developed regions — when it rains it rains

until mildew corrodes every inanimate object, and houses collapse and are washed away, livestock are drowned, communication is cut off, commerce falters and people come to feel that it has always rained. Conversely, when the dry season comes it passes from offering deliverance and delight into the gradual shriveling up of life and the onset of a stupor that denies rational thought and purposeful movement.

Equally compelling is Marquez's appreciation of the disconnection of those who live outside the mainstream of urban contacts and communication systems. Information from the outside world arrives for them in the guise of rumor, disjointed and meaningless, or as propaganda impossible to verify or refute. The rural poor are, indeed, conservative. They live so close to the margin that the smallest miscalculation can bring total ruin, and the infrequent presence of the outsider — bureaucrat or consultant — is as unreal in appearance, speech, and information as an apparition. There are no caricatures in Marquez's fable, only perceptions distorted by living at nature's and society's edge.

The book that more than any other demonstrated for me the difficulties inherent in trying to advance the development process in Latin America — and by logical extension to other regions of the world where cultural differences depart substantially from one's own — was the wonderful, wacky saga of Moritz Thomsen's experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in a small fishing village in Ecuador, *Living Poor: A Peace Corps Chronicle* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969).

Thomsen at the age of forty eight sold his pig farm, joined the Peace Corps, and sought to do his bit for international social uplift in Rio Verde, a tiny, coastal village in Ecuador where six chickens represented wealth, and where, even if there were money to buy, there was often no food to be bought. As an agricultural expert Thomsen struggled valiantly, and, according to his perceptions of the issues involved, sensibly, to raise the income level of the villagers. All for naught. Worse, far worse, his efforts left some families poorer and more bereft of hope when their small

entrepreneurial forays failed. His is a marvelous, cautionary tale, told with compassion and humor, of how much understanding has to be brought to a development situation and how long and frustrating is the journey to that understanding — if, indeed, the journey is ever completed.

Shifting attention to another major region of the developing world, black, Sub-Saharan Africa, several books helped to acquaint me with the general culture of that region and did it in a manner that threw into relief universal issues encountered in development efforts. One such book, and the one I found utterly fascinating, was Jomo Kenyatta's, *Facing Mt. Kenya* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1956). Originally written as Kenyatta's doctoral dissertation at Oxford University and republished after he became president of an independent Kenya, his book deals principally with the social controls at work among the Kikuyu, the dominant tribal group in Kenya. It is a meticulously drawn portrait of a tightly-knit, traditional society where virtually every human act is prescribed and the closest possible surveillance is established to insure adherence to the strictures of the group.

The book is not only absorbing as a first-rate anthropological study of the principal tribal group in one of the leading black-dominated countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, but also because it was written by the man who, subsequent to his university studies, lead the bloody Mau Mau insurrection in East Africa against the British colonists and later, as the revered president of Kenya, guided that country through its first decade of independence. Throughout the reading of *Facing Mt. Kenya* one is led to ponder the social upheavals engendered when increased family mobility, rapid urbanization, and other dislocating factors remove long-established social controls and radically change the nature of social responsibilities.

V. S. Naipaul's, *A Bend in the River* (Middlesex: Penguin Books,1980), is a logical successor to *Facing Mt. Kenya*. It is a haunting novel, terrifying and brilliant, set in a small town in a mythical state in Central Africa. It could, however, be any of a dozen actual countries of the region. The protagonist is an Asian-African, a Muslim and entrepreneur of modest

means. He has escaped to the interior from the East Coast during the initial stages of independence and the galvanic upheavals following in their wake. Village life has been rent, commerce has been interrupted, and the political system is being jerked around by authoritarian forces. No one is safe; nothing is predictable; society has come unstuck.

Almost grotesque, as the book lumps together virtually all of the contemporary failings culled from the many countries of the region, the book drives home the sense of uncertainty, discontinuity, and self-doubt that form major pieces of the context in which development efforts have to be programmed — and, later, evaluated.

To understand the special development concerns of Sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly the near messianic dedication to principle by the best of the leaders of the independence movements, it is important to comprehend the bitter struggle for independence from the white colonial powers — particularly Great Britain — with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personalities. One can grasp major pieces of the contemporary reality of Latin America without knowing a great deal about the wars for independence from Spain and Portugal. ln black Sub-Saharan Africa, however, one cannot begin to understand contemporary reality without a knowledge of its struggle for freedom from white domination.

That knowledge is wonderfully captured in Fergus MacPherson's absorbing biography, *Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia: the Times and the Man* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). Kaunda was a titan in the movement for African independence and played the leading role in the disengagement of the British Protectorate of Northern Rhodesia from the UK and its establishment as the free state of Zambia. He was a man of compassion and conviction who believed devotedly in the nonviolent creed of Mahatma Gandhi and the teachings of Jesus Christ. As the first president of Zambia and a strong personality, he helped guide the region along the doctrinaire path of African socialism. Unfortunately, the socialist dogma was a failure, but the purity of thought behind it, the zeal with which it was

applied, and the resulting lack of pragmatism in its application find their best expression in the thinking and action of the charismatic leaders of the fight for African independence.

The book that for me best summed up the repeatedly dashed hopes, personal anguish and deep introspection with which one is forced to deal when involved with development efforts was Maria Thomas's collection of short stories, *Come to Africa and Save Your Marriage: and Other Stories* (New York: Soho Press, Inc., 1987). Ms. Thomas's style is ideal for the task — wild, raunchy and contemporary, and she catches the flavor of life for a host of expatriate types who labor to help make contemporary African society viable. There is the Peace Corps volunteer emotionally and physically exhausted from vaccinating thousands of Ethiopians against disease in order that they can die more slowly from starvation. There is the veterinarian from Texas whose macho behavior leads him into foolish violence and the need for a quick exit from the country, courtesy of a timid American consulate. There is the American linguist who seeks to improve the communal water system in her neighborhood and sees her efforts prove counterproductive as petty jealousies and interfamily rivalries rend the group. Thomas's stories are strongly wrought vignettes of outsiders struggling on alien soil — often learning more about themselves than about those whom they are presumed to be assisting.

During the early 1980s, when I first started to work in Pakistan and another major region of the developing world, the Asian Subcontinent, I quickly became aware of several behavioral patterns that I had not sufficiently foreseen but which have a powerful effect on development efforts. The first of these is the enormous role that religious observance plays in everyday life. The second is the extreme autocratic behavior of everyone who appears to have even the slightest claim to authority. (The reverse behavior, obsequiousness in the presence of a superior, is equally evident.) The third is the sense of violence that pervades the environment. Bombs always seem to be going off; people are continually shouting at one another, pushing and shoving; felons are lashed or mutilated; and the drivers of the

innumerable motor rickshaws and motor buses appear angry and continually threatening life. Several extraordinarily insightful books help place such attitudes and behavioral patterns into a context in which it is possible to see their connection with efforts at social and economic development.

The first of these books is *Militant Islam* by G. H. Jansen (New York: Harper & Row, 1979). Jansen puts Islam into historical perspective with such clarity that one begins to appreciate why and how Islam plays so much more central a role in the life of a society where it is dominant than does Christianity in an analogous situation. One special significance of this on development efforts is that, in an Islamic society, church and state are one, and the religious implications of public policies and programs are constant considerations. For example, because of the subservient role of women in Islam it is difficult to build their participation into community development efforts. In addition, assistance from non-governmental agencies, whose support can frequently be instrumental in the advancement of local community efforts, is often problematic, as many are sponsored by non-Islamic religious groups.

Islam is a prescriptive religion with detailed rules about what can be done and what can not be done — and what the penalty is if one transgresses. Such a philosophy may not in itself produce autocracy. However, in the context of the Asian subcontinent, where authoritarian rule has predominated for millennia, it seems to reinforce the rigid bureaucratic behavior and highly structured administrative forms characteristic of the Islamic societies of the region.

The natural companion book to *Militant Islam* is V. S. Naipaul's *India: A Wounded Civilization* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976). It is an anguished inquiry into the attitudes, perceptions and behavioral patterns of the Hindus in India and the effect these have on development efforts. It is a depressing picture drawn by a gifted artist in torment over the continuing plight of India. Naipaul, of Indian descent but born and raised in Trinidad, returns to the land of his ancestors and sees a society that glorifies poverty, exalts the

nonintellectual life, and demands strict adherence to the social dictates of a caste system. In a society as ancient and complex as that of India, Naipaul's effort at portraiture has to be taken as a rough sketch; yet it is profoundly provocative for what it implies about efforts to develop and deploy appropriate technology or to reach out and energize communities to undertake common enterprises.

The final book, *A Quiet Violence: View From a Bangladesh Village*, by Betsy Hartmann and James Boyce (San Francisco: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1983), is an extraordinarily perceptive and captivating examination of life in a rural village in Bangladesh. It looks at who wins and who loses when foreign aid comes to the village via a deep tubewell program, how central government bureaucrats involved with social programs interact — or fail to interact — with the villagers, and how popular attitudes and perceptions and bureaucratic rigidities inhibit efforts to improve the situation of the poor and disadvantaged of the region.

Moritz Thomsen breaths life into his tale of development efforts in the tiny fishing village of Rio Verde through a sensitive awareness of his own activities as a volunteer worker. Oscar Lewis catches the struggles of the Sanchez family in central Mexico City through extended personal interviews that are meticulously recorded. The authors of *A Quiet Violence* gained their insights simply by living for a year in a small Bangladesh village and observing life about them. The result is a thoughtful, first-hand account of how exploitative attitudes, institutional rigidities, and insensitively applied development efforts combine to prevent the poor from escaping from their condition. Although the setting of the story is a tiny, rural village in one of the poorest countries in one of the poorest regions of the world, the universality of the situation — including the obstacles encountered in trying to improve it — makes it an ideal book in learning to appreciate the inherent difficulties of international assistance.