



HEADSTRONG

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CASS' CORNER

What I Was (or 'Living a Boy's Adventure Tale')

At 48 years old, I have been around for nearly half a century, now. I, as so many others, have had challenges aplenty in life. I have had wonderful times, have enjoyed (endured?) existence. There are ups and there are downs. I could quote the name of a currently popular television show, re-titling it, to "This Is Me."



When I do not know where or when to begin, I do my utmost 'to start at the start.' The beginnings of my recollections, anyway.

For this effort, I shall begin in the Miami International Airport (Florida). This is where I am about to get a 'crew-cut,' as per my Dad's 'insistent suggestion.' "It will look good on you, Cass." I had always been led to believe that the brush cut was most often used in uncomfortably hot environments, but you know what? I was nine years old. Anything my Dad suggests. It must be the best idea. . .

Here we are, then, flying from Miami, Florida, to Cartagena, Colombia, aboard an Avianca Airlines flight. I would venture it was 'summer 1979.'

No, no, no. . . taking this route would bore you, as my readers. Let's just hit the highlights: We were staying at Cartagena's Hotel Caribe, I remember that. We were waiting for our car, an International Harvester Scout II, to be shipped across, from Miami, to Cartagena. It took quite awhile for our transportation to arrive; we explored, instead.

Within the first week or so, I recall . . . don't know where, precisely, she located the series, but I was an avid reader. "Swallows and Amazons" was the series, Arthur Ransome was the author. Overall, I'm guessing there were about a dozen books or so, in the series; I wound up reading them all, eventually.

I remember 'one night,' when we visited the 'ruins' of an older citadel or fortress, in Cartagena. This was forty years ago, so please excuse any inaccuracies that I quote here, but I 'shall be careful.'

It was dark, I remember that. We were on the walls of the fortress and, blurted out over the loudspeaker, I remember hearing, bellowing through the Caribbean night, "Don BLAS Di-e-go. . . !" Suppose it was pretty cool, to be a nine-year-old, exposed to this sort of ancient history. (It turns out, upon further investigation, that it was Don Blas de Lezo that I recalled hearing, that night. Don Blas de Lezo y Olavarrieta lived from February 3, 1689 to September 7, 1741. He was a Spanish admiral best remembered for the Battle of Cartagena de Indias, in 1741. Spanish imperial forces under his command resisted a siege by a large British invasion fleet under Admiral Edward Vernon). This is a mere detail from my earlier life, however. Let us continue.

Too many memories, so many overly-vague details from my past. Let's make it easy and I'll simply share that I was fortunate enough to be able to spend six months, in travels throughout Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. I remember having my photo taken at a big 'model of the Earth' or some such thing, when we were in Ecuador. Oh, before that, I recall a sort of forest/jungle sojourn I undertook with Dad. At the

top, we were able to explore some ancient ruins from natives of the past. Venturing DOWNWARD. . . well, that was one of my first jungle adventures. . .

We made it INTO the actual jungle, headwaters of the Amazon River. . . To put it in more modern-day terms and comprehension, heading into the spot from where we would begin this adventure, I recall my nine-year-old self walking across the river, with the water up to my chest. . . Harrison Ford's character from "Raiders of the Lost Ark" had nothing on me!

I remember, too, venturing from the village well within the jungle, with a native guide. Hot. Sweaty. Exhausting, as we continued our traipse, with other visitors from around the world, from France, from Germany, from Austria, England. . . The hike was exhausting and taxing, physically. We approached a slow-flowing portion of the river, where we as uninformed and inexperienced tourists thought we could just run in and cool ourselves! I had been a competitive swimmer, already, in my youth, so my mother told our guide. Monkeys, I remember, too. . . reaching up and squeezing their paws between the planks in the wooden floor, pulling my underwear out of the hut and onto the ground, with them!

Our native guide drew from his sleeve, it seemed, something that appeared similar to a modern-day firecracker. Lit it, threw it into the river, where we saw the underwater explosion. Fish floated to the surface, stunned from the underwater blast. Seemed quite a number of fish. Our guide picked one up, though, a 'smaller' one. . . maybe six to ten centimeters long. There were also, to our surprise, a number of piranhas stunned by the stick of dynamite tossed into the river!

Our guide picked up one of the piranhas and one of the first fish I spoke of. He held the head of the fish up to the piranha's mouth and, even after the explosion, the piranha devoured the fish, from head to tailfin, mechanically. . . it was a machine.

I was lucky enough to be able to spend my tenth birthday, in a city called Cuenca, Ecuador (I BELIEVE this was after our visit to Huaraz and Huascaran, the mountain and the city, originally. . . a devastating avalanche poured down the mountain called Huaraz and devastated Huascaran, boulders littering the ground, for as far around us as we could see. . .).

We visited an enormous amount, a huge number of Indian ruins, from the Colombian coast, to ruins in Ecuador and the well-known and established Macchu Picchu, relatively near Cuzco, Peru.

I recall Mom being sick but Dad taking me out on the lake; we visited Lake Titicaca, in southern Peru. Was this the lake with the man-made, floating islands, where Dad actually delivered a baby (don't worry, he is a physician)? Or was that another lake?

Mom was sick and stayed on shore, but Dad and I ventured on what would now be termed a 'rickety' old boat, eventually arriving at an island in Lake Titicaca, from where we could see the snow-covered Andes Mountains, stretching into Bolivia. . .

Fast-forward and we ended up in the small skiing town of Durango, Colorado. Dad was setting up his private practice there, hematologist/oncologist/internal medicine specialist that he was. We arrived just in time for me to begin Grade 5. Well. . . in all honesty, it was the middle of the year, but I was allowed to continue from that point, being fortunate enough to miss the first half of the school year (suppose our South American adventure was an education, in itself; I recall, early on, Mom insisted I keep a diary, each day, writing about our adventures and the happenings of each day).

I continued my competitive swimming; we did a whole lot of skiing in the wintertime. . . we received free season passes, as Dad was the on-mountain, on-call physician at Purgatory (the ski area). Life was good.

Continued my education, as we moved into a new house before my sixth-grade year, when I was still ten years old. My youngest sister, Emily, was born while I was playing a flag-football game, in 6th grade (friend Tony Jackson heard before I did and was the first to inform me that I now had a new baby sister, joining brother Zachary). I just kept going to school. Seventh grade, eighth grade, ninth grade. .
. straight A student.

Then there was high school. I was still in advanced classes and fared 'fairly' well. . . I had a lot of fun in school. Continued, on the swim team; kept on skiing a good bit.

Would it be 'another fast-forward' to move ahead and through the first semester, which I completed, and into the third quarter of the academic year? I grow a bit more vague here; we are nearing the end of March. Sometimes there was snow and sometimes there was not. My old buddy, Bob Benner and I visited the stables in town; Mom kept her horse there. 'Rocky,' I believe she called it, though the first name, if I recall correctly, was something along the lines of "Rocky Mountain Gold Miner" or some such thing.

There was a school dance that night; I remember that. Bob and I 'went' to the dance, but we 'were a bit too cool for such events,' at that time. Somehow we made it downtown, to the Gaslight Theatre, where Friday the 13th, Part 5 was showing. The remainder that I share, regarding my accident, is simply from things I have heard, notices I have read . . .

Movie ended and we secured a ride home for Bob, who lived in Hermosa, a village about eleven miles north of Durango. We arrived, and we dropped Bob off.

Venturing back INTO Durango, the roads, I have been told, 'were somewhat slushy,' being the end of March, in a Rocky Mountain ski town. Blah blah blah. . . I understand we were driving behind a pickup truck of some sort. The vehicle driving north on Highway 550 swerved left and brushed against the pickup, in front of us. Came around it and hit us, head-on, in the Audi 5000 we were in.

Life is over, right? Well, sort of . . . in a way . . . I was comatose for thirty-seven days, following the accident. From what I've since been told, I 'was too badly injured' for the hospital in Durango, to sufficiently take care of me. I was transported to San Juan Medical Center, in Farmington, New Mexico, for my comatose month. Flown, I can only presume, following that month, to Phoenix, Arizona, where I was cared for at Good Samaritan Medical Center, for another month. My late grandmother flew home with me, to Durango, where I passed an additional month, in hospital.

I was lucky (do I not seem absolutely 'overcome' with good luck, by this point. . .?) to be able to take part in a swim meet, the day after I was released from Mercy Medical Center, in Durango. I joke, now, that they 'only let me swim the 50 free, and they made me start in the water, not allowing me to dive in,' at the start, so how could I have even been EXPECTED to win. . .?

Finished the race, though, and was excited to have the people on the surrounding pool deck rise to their feet, in applause, upon my completion of said race. Life is good.

The idea for this piece was suggested by my lovely wife. "Instead of writing about CTE (chronic traumatic encephalopathy), or sports, or whatever, why don't you write about yourself? Not just

'yourself' but about 'what life is like, from the perspective of someone who has never known life, WITHOUT brain injury'. . .?

Does that make any sense?

Things settle, you know? I continued living with my parents and family, in Colorado. Graduated high school, moved to Minnesota, where I went to St. John's University. Returned to Colorado and continued my education, at the college there, at Fort Lewis College. Moved on, 'back to Phoenix,' where I stayed with grandparents before moving into my own house and continued my studies at Grand Canyon University, eventually earning bachelor degrees in English/Writing and Communications/Broadcasting (minors in Spanish and in Humanities).

Perhaps I was lucky? Maybe blessed with high intellect? Something some may consider a good sense of humour, as well as adventure?

I have said it, over and over again, in our Hamilton Brain Injury Association meetings: It doesn't matter what point you are at, in your recovery; we each have to do our best and simply continue. I think there was a song once, the chorus of which said, "You've got to put one foot, in front of the o-ther. . ."

We continue. We keep going. Each individual's tale is different, but I can say I realize how fortunate I have been, in being able to live MY own . . . "Living a Boy's Adventure Tale."