FOREWORD

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There are five reasons I jumped at the chance to write a foreword for Steve Reifenberg's memoir about living and working in the early 1980s in a home for Chilean children who would otherwise have ended up in a large institutional orphanage. Five reasons, five areas of curiosity, five questions.

First, anyone who works in countries or regions where there are many orphans—that is, in places where young parents are apt to die—needs to know more about how best to raise these children humanely. You don't have to read Dickens to doubt that large orphanages would be the best way to raise, for example, the millions of AIDS orphans now living in some of the places where I work as a physician.

A second reason I wanted to read *Santiago's Children* was that I knew its author had had an experience similar to mine: shortly after graduating from college, Reifenberg set off for a country far from home, a troubled but beautiful place in which he became engaged in a noble enough task. With only the vaguest of references and less than a hundred dollars in his pocket, he found himself helping run, under the guidance of a remarkable Chilean woman who said she was opposed to "the warehousing of children," a group home for a dozen poor children. I expected to read a lyrical account of two often frustrating and sometimes emotionally wrenching years, the story of a journey south to a place he didn't know, a journey with and among people, most of them children, who had known none of the security he'd enjoyed in a rock-solid, middle-class American family. Epiphany or, at the very least, illumination seemed sure to follow. I wanted to know more about Reifenberg's coming of age and to compare notes.

I knew that Steve—Tío Esteve to the Chilean children and to the tiny band of their fearless adult protectors—had arrived in Santiago, the tumultuous capital city of Chile, at a fairly harrowing time in the country's history. So, third: How would Chile's political crisis figure in so personal a memoir? Coming a decade after the coup of 1973 that put an end to Chile's experiment with socialism, Steve's tenure occurred at the time of a devastating economic downturn, a time of police interrogations, a time of curfews and harsh military repression of demonstrations, often involving deadly force. Would the book be solely about the joys of learning, however painfully, a new language? of making warm and enduring connections with children who'd seen the worst of a rapidly changing society? Or would Steve bring into relief, through his own experience and those of the children and their kin, the ways in which antidemocratic governance makes itself known in everyday life, sometimes through explosive violence and sometimes through less-than-subtle symbols of power, such as the tanks parked at the end of the road in full view of the orphanage? Would he somehow weave these strands together?

Fourth, would this be a good book to use in teaching? Scholarly treatises and historical accounts of difficult times rarely try to capture the everyday feel, the gritty anxiety of living on the edge, financially, with a dozen children to look out for; academic accounts are not good at rendering the texture of everyday life as violence and repression intrude. Teaching about the travails of democracy in Latin America is difficult to do when we are left to choose between shrill polemic, superficial journalism, and dry, experience-distant accounts. Certain novelists have managed to capture the texture of life under military rule, as has the occasional memoir. But Reifenberg was both an eyewitness and an externally placed observer, and he also learned a good deal about what was happening in Chile from materials gathered in his own country. On political issues, the often supine U.S. press was still better than the censored reporting that existed in the early 1980s in Chile, where newspapers, magazines, and human rights offices that called into question military rule or human rights abuses were shut down or worse.

Finally, I knew that the book had been conceived in journals written over twenty years ago. But Reifenberg had finished *Santiago's Children* much more recently, back in Santiago, where he once again lives. I was dead curious to see if he'd been able to follow the fates of all the children one would get to know in the telling. What were they all up

to now? What relationship did this dark Chile of the early 1980s have with the impressive advances of Chile today?

Santiago's Children is immensely satisfying on all five scores: for young Americans—and for young people from many other places who find themselves able, through the luck of the draw and accident of birth, to travel to places like Chile or Haiti or Rwanda—this memoir will serve as a gentle and self-deprecating guidebook. What happened to its author, the ways he grew and learned more about his strengths and weaknesses, are all there. The book is pitch perfect, as far as humor and detail go.

First, there are the children. You get to know them and to see them grow. Reifenberg spent two years as a surrogate parent and teacher in the home inauspiciously baptized Domingo Savio. (The name took hold before its founder, a vividly depicted young Chilean woman named Olga Díaz, discovered that the new namesake was an Italian boy who didn't live to celebrate his fourteenth birthday and was the patron saint of choirboys.)

Some of the kids were right off the street; all of them were in what Chileans termed "irregular situations." Some had been abandoned by a parent not able to get by; others were orphaned by political violence or by the grinding violence of poverty and economic crisis. Reifenberg lets us know what it's like to get more than a dozen kids ready for school each morning, and what it feels like to try, twice, in a desperate bid to raise money, to launch a family farm only to see the water cut off or, worse, your newly acquired draft horse die before the field is fully plowed. We see how tempers sometimes flare in tight quarters, sense the anxiety that accompanies a trip to the beach with a dozen unruly kids. Please God, the reader thinks, let no one drown! (No one does.) And always, the narrator's frustration at not mastering Spanish quickly enough, often to the amusement of the kids and neighbors.

Of course, it's not all fun and games at the Domingo Savio house. Bedwetting and fights occur; there are kids who don't want to do their homework and don't get along. There are also Steve's and Olga's painful speculations about what past traumas might account for current problems at the home or in school. There are kids who miss their families but know them to be too poor and fractured to care for them. The reader wonders if the orphans aren't somehow better off. Indeed, most painful of all are the tenuous links many of the children have with

their own families: siblings in precarious homes; a drunken father here, a beleaguered and beaten-down mother there; a revolutionary older brother caught up in the dangerous struggle against the regime of Augusto Pinochet.

Through these stories, we actually get to know a dozen children. The portraits are built piecemeal, but by the end of *Santiago's Children* we're left with memorable characters: the irrepressible Carlos and his brother Patricio, whose father is in jail and whose mother cannot take care of them; the studious and preternaturally mature Verónica; the naughty and spirited Marcelo; Andrés, a boy who can be relied on to carry out any threat and whose fear of horses is born when the doomed draft horse nips him prior to going to her great reward; Big Sonia, the amateur philosopher: "So, why do they always call God a he? It makes me furious!"; the quiet Karen, whose occasional utterances surprise Steve.

My favorite portrait is that of Sebastián, one of the older boys, whose down-on-her-luck mother and dissolute father are only a bus ride away. During Reifenberg's second year in Chile, Sebastián, by then fourteen, tries to be a parent to his younger cousin, whom he brings to the home on weekends. "Do you think it's possible," he asks Steve anxiously, "that maybe we could, maybe, let Daniel live here?" No, not everything goes well at the Domingo Savio house.

Despite the ordeals, it really is a loving home. Only the most stone-hearted will not be deeply moved by the account of Tío Esteve's departure, delayed for a year when he declines admission to a U.S. law school. The pain, his own and the kids', of his leaving Domingo Savio is lessened only when we learn in the epilogue at least something about each of the children he came to know and love.

Reifenberg is careful to focus on the children themselves in the first half of the book. But as the narrative moves forward easily and with a great deal of humor, political violence seeps into its pages. By that time the reader is a fierce partisan of these children and their neighbors, who live in a poor part of town. We start to ask harder questions. Wasn't it this repression that rendered some of these orphans parentless? What is the narrator to do when one of the mothers of the thousands of disappeared young activists entreats him, the American, to help her find her son? The wave of disappearances laps frighteningly close to the home. By the second half of the book the constant attack on civil and political liberties is as expertly blended into the text as the household struggles for access to the one bathroom and the arguments about who's going to do what chores.

Finishing the book, we discover we've learned a good deal about Chile. The country is in some ways emblematic of other troubled places in Latin America. The socialist government of Salvador Allende came to power in 1970 through democratic elections. In a pattern observed in many countries in Latin America, wealthy citizens joined forces with the military, which often benefited from generous overt and covert assistance from the U.S. government, to quash popular democracy. El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Haiti, even Argentina and Brazil—all traveled that *vía dolorosa*, with great loss of life and wounds that never fully heal.

Following the coup of September 11, 1973, General Pinochet ruled Chile with an iron fist for the next seventeen years. During the next decade, the period just prior to Reifenberg's arrival, the repression was so ruthless—many opponents (or presumed opponents) of the regime were disappeared—that public protest within Chile was muffled. Outside that terrified nation, however, Chile became the defining case in the international struggle for human rights. And if in fact the writer's goal was to understand the human rights situation in Chile, Reifenberg showed up at just the right time: by 1982, with the economy bottoming out as a result of ill-considered economic prescriptions from helpful American experts, he witnessed the first bubbling forth of public opposition.

On May 11, 1983, Reifenberg watches, both moved and perplexed, as the residents of his barrio, after nearly a decade of silence, begin banging together pots and pans, joining other neighborhoods to produce a din that roars through the poor parts of the city. These noisy protests sometimes attracted indiscriminate gunfire (generating, in a single instant, two more orphans to take into the crowded house). Tío Esteve's neighbors were not alone in their opposition to the military government; students and church groups, the mothers of the disappeared, and many union leaders also pressed for the restoration of democratic rule.

Reifenberg uses personal narrative to examine, through his own experience and that of the children and their surviving families, the seedy and violent side of military rule: disregard for civil and political rights; widespread practice of torture and assassinations; and exile. But we also see the resilience of both children and adults, and their willingness to make sacrifices at great personal cost. As the epilogue suggests, Chile has made great strides since the end of the dictatorship in 1990. In 2006 Chile elected Michelle Bachelet, not only its first woman president, but also a socialist doctor who lost her father to torture under Pinochet's auspices.

An American friend in Chile gives Steve Reifenberg a scrap of paper with a few lines from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke copied on it. The poet's advice has served Steve well: "Ah! but verses amount to so little when one writes them young. One ought to wait and gather sense and sweetness a whole life long. . . . For verses are not, as people imagine, simply feelings (those one has early enough)—they are experiences." By waiting a couple of decades to write about his voyage south, Reifenberg is able to offer something much more than an affecting account of his experiences in the Domingo Savio home and personal glimpses of military rule in Chile.

As Reifenberg later discovered at Harvard, where he came to serve as executive director of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, so many students are trying to figure out how to make a contribution in some meaningful way. We're all liable, especially when young, to undertake quests in search of a personal sense of self-efficacy—to feel that we've made a meaningful contribution. It's possible to focus excessively on the process—Reifenberg touches on this in a rueful but kindly consideration of another group of young Americans trying to "live in solidarity with the poor" by avoiding hot show-ers. His own rich experiences standing in line outside the Domingo Savio bathroom, waiting his turn behind a lot of squirming kids, led him to conclude that this was a conversation, no matter how earnest, that he'd just as soon be spared. Being desperately sick for a time taught him how little he could do to meet lofty goals when he was incapacitated and led him to the realization of how often the poor are sick. Through his book, we see him coming to understand just how huge the obstacles are. The book is also honest about the frustrations. Surrounded by lives trammled by poverty and repression, he begins to see just how privileged and protected the lives of North Americans are. More honestly still, Reifenberg traces the links between such privilege and the privations of others. In the case of Chile, the connections are direct and damning.

Reifenberg's central message, though, is optimistic, encouraging. The effort doesn't have to be Herculean, he seems to be telling an audience contemplating great deeds in faraway places. A big step in the quest is taken, simply enough, by investing time and energy in something decent and then sticking with it. It's important to be willing to engage in things you care about, even if those efforts do not always lead to obvious victories, and to continue learning in the process.

For this reason, especially, the book will be a wonderful resource for students, young and old. I now teach mostly medical students and

physicians, but in my experience their concerns are not very different from those Steve felt, as did I. It's hard to imagine someone who finds himself an outsider in one of the tougher neighborhoods of Latin America or Africa or other foreign parts of the world—or someone interested in learning about one of those places—who would not find this book immensely instructive and moving.

The world changes. For the past several decades, the United States has had unfettered influence in Latin America and in many other parts of the world. If an empire exists today, it has been built by the United States. All empires come to an end, it's said. Over the past decade, dramatic, violent events—war and terrorism and even genocide, as in Rwanda in 1994 and Darfur today—seem to have occurred whether the United States willed it or no, a never-ending cycle of disasters that turns ordinary citizens into helpless viewers. But it's not necessarily so.

It is a good sign that there seems to be growing interest among students and many others in understanding what the rest of the world is like and how it got to be that way, and thinking about ways to try to make it better.

Santiago's Children reminds us that even modest efforts like those of Steve Reifenberg might at least palliate the pain encountered in a place like Pinochet's Chile. Certainly efforts such as his, and the lessons drawn for this kind of international experience, would be preferable to the current ham-fisted approach to U.S. foreign policy and to the conventional development enterprise. Often these policies are steered, and none too gently, by economic ideologues who don't often apologize when they make yet another about-face whose costs are borne by others. I can't help but wonder what might have transpired if we'd approached these same problems and policies with the good will, humility, and willingness to learn that run through this book.

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