

# *Living Memory*

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Adilson was three years old when he joined the workforce of volunteers building the community creche. Wearing his giant hip high wellingtons, and a grin that stretched from ear to ear, he seemed to be everywhere on the building site. Sometimes carrying sand to the cement mixer. Sometimes stacking up bricks for the bricklayers. And other times playing in some corner in the sun, with the many children who spent their days making their own fun, as the building that would one day be their creche, grew slowly out of the ground.

All that, was back in 1986. By the time the creche was eventually opened in August 1989, Adilson, if he could have voiced his thoughts, might well have said; "My life and these walls are one. This creche will be mine forever".

Many times since then, I have thought about this child who made such an impression on everyone at the time. I often wondered what became of him and if I would recognise him if I saw him now.

Those were my thoughts as I passed by the same creche two days ago. And to my surprise, standing in the doorway of her home nearby, was Adilson's mother. Immediately, I put words on my thoughts. "How's Adilson?", I asked. "It's so long ago since I saw him". "It will be six months this month", replied his mother, "since he died". "What ever happened him"?, I asked. "He was assassinated by a bandit named "Carioca". Three bullets in his head. All because of a debt of R\$3,00. It's a terrible thing to bring a child into the world for him to leave it that way". And she turned her face away to hide her tears.

This is one of the grimmest aspects of the terrible reality of life in a favela. It's something that the people who live there face every day of their lives. Often as I pass through the alleyways that wind like a labyrinth between wooden houses, I see written on the faces I come across, the word "hell". And if hell could be defined as a place into which you are locked never again to be able to get out, then surely this is it.

By some irony of fate, destiny or providence, this is the place I have found myself associated with for almost a quarter of a century now. I'm not trying for a minute to suggest that I know what that kind of hell is. Or that hell is all there is to a favela. On the contrary, I'll never know what it's like to experience the kind of hell that Adilson's mother described to me. Or the hell of living on US\$80,00 a month. Or the hell of being born condemned to marginality because the colour of your skin is the wrong colour. Or the hell of rearing children as a single parent because the other one doesn't "exist", disappeared, or is in prison. Or the hell of trying to preserve children as young as eight from the drug culture. Or all the other hells that structural injustice and misery condemn so many people in this opulent land to.

On the other hand, of course, I have my own kind of hell. The traps and cul-de-sacs of my own life that are as enslaving as anything one could imagine in a favela. Except that at least I feel I have some access and means to do something about it. Whereas, the people of the favela have none.

So, what am I doing there? Pretending to be one of them? Pretending to comfort

them and cushion them from their misery? Satisfying and stroking my own ego? On a power trip amid the ruins of humanity where no one can really challenge me? Maybe a bit of all that, to be honest. And perhaps a bit more than all that.

What I would like to be about is somewhat different. Seeing ministry among them as the possibility of awakening in them, the power of their own "ministry". There is so much richness among them. Their compassion, their vitality, their amazing resistance in the face of so much oppression and death. Their legendary and irresistible hospitality. Their sharing of the bread of life. Their sense of triumph over adversity revealed in their capacity to celebrate in dance, song and festa. It is hard to be among them and not feel indebted, immensely. Without any false romanticism of "the poor can do no wrong" variety.

And that is what I feel. Immensely indebted. The *favelas* have been a school where I have learned some lessons in what is ultimately important. Namely, friendship, the precedence of the heart over the head, simplicity, listening, and maybe above all, belonging. A sense of place, roots, community. Values that the globalised mania that now besets the world, is set on destroying.

Some practical expressions of all this potential have emerged down the years. Projects with children in the arts and crafts, theatre, music, dance, pottery, painting, literacy, capoeira, judo, information technology, circus, kindergarten, youth groups, groups of reflection on politics, religion, Bible studies, culture, history, economy, housing, employment, alternative health and medicine, waste recycling, cooperative housing projects, drugs awareness schemes, sewerage projects, womens groups, black consciousness groups.

In all of this, the main aim has been empowerment. Handing over. Becoming dispensable. Moving out of centre stage. Learning that joy is in being rather than possessing. Not an easy lesson. But, if one is lucky to have teachers like I have had, some lessons at least, can be learned. To the benefit of all.