

Innocence in Brazil  
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Foster Brown

### **The Will versus the Means – a few lessons from Friar Heitor Turrini**

This past Saturday I traveled with a Brazilian friend, Cazuza, to Sena Madureira, 140 km NW from Rio Branco, Acre in Brazil's westernmost Amazon. Our mission was to pay field assistants of Vanessa Sequeira, a Ph.D. student who was murdered a year earlier in the Toco Preto settlement project. The wet season and various other factors had delayed our visit and Saturday was nearly a year to the day after her death. I had felt that this trip would be a pilgrimage of sorts; I didn't realize that it would provide lessons for life.

We went first to the town of Sena Madureira to meet with Friar Heitor Turrini, an 82-year-old Italian missionary with the Servants of Mary (Order of Servites). Friar Heitor had arrived in Sena Madureira in 1950, and aside a few stints in the Philippines and China, as well as in hospitals in the US as a patient, he has devoted his life to the poor and to protecting the Amazon. He and Father Paolino Baldassarri have become noted figures in this part of the Amazon for their dedication and outspokenness. The Friar offered to go with us to Toco Preto and pray for Vanessa.

Our departure from Sena was uneventful until we stopped at the house of Amado, a cattle rancher with over 3,000 hectares of pasture. Frei asked us to stop for three little minutes that later became over an hour as Amado and his wife graciously offered us lunch. In return, the Frei gave them a lecture about stopping the destruction of the Amazon. The rancher responded that he had seen the light and had already decided to stop deforestation.

As we left the ranch, Frei Heitor offered us two options – the faster route via the asphalted highway to Toco Preto or the more 'poetic' route. While the Friar tried to disguise his preference, the choice of word poetic was a clear sign, so we continued along the old Sena Madureira-to-Rio Branco road to the settlement at Toco Preto. On the way, we nearly got stuck in ankle-deep layers of dust. Every time we passed someone on foot or on bicycle, the Friar would ask them if they were deforesting and then urge to stop doing so and keep the forest alive.

Around one turn, we came across a secondary forest that had burned on the right side. The fire had jumped the road and had entered 20-30 meters into the secondary forest on the left. Two thin columns of smoke floated above the burned forest, a sign that the fire wasn't completely out. At that point, I was about to lament about uncontrolled burning and drive on, when the Friar asked me to stop because we



needed to put out the fire. Before I could get my machete out, the Friar had rolled up his pant legs, grabbed a branch, and was crossing the road. Cazusa and I asked him to wait a few minutes while I used the machete to clear a trail to the smoking dead trunks where the fire lingered.

Once at the trunks, I could see that we needed more tools and returned to my truck and brought a hoe, ax, gloves and protective glasses. Vincenzo, an Italian truck driver who was visiting the Friar and had come with us, was a little bewildered by our actions. The Friar watched him for a few seconds and then decided to give him a lesson in fire-fighting. When I asked him what would be the lesson, the Friar responded “I’m teaching Vincenzo never to burn the forest.” He then proceeded to grab a branch and beat a recalcitrant trunk with red embers into a black mass (See the video).



Then we heard a chainsaw start into operation. Friar Heitor decided to talk with the workers and headed off as Cazusa, Vincenzo and I pounded, cut and buried the embers until they stopped emitting a spiral of smoke.

As we finished our work, the Friar returned and asked if we could spare 10 little minutes to talk with the chainsaw gang; he hadn't been able to locate them. He could see from my expression that I didn't think that it was a high priority item when we needed to get to Toco Preto and pay the debts before dark. The Friar, however, knows how to win an argument. He said, “The best honor that we could do for Vanessa would be to stop the deforestation.” I was trumped and we started to drive back on the road.

On the way, we met an old-timer coming up the road, pushing his bike. The Friar waved him over and asked him if he was deforesting. Then he proceeded to ask about the family where the chain saw was operating. He learned that the man of the family was making posts, not clear cutting. Friar Heitor asked the old man to pass on the message not to deforest or burn and then said that we could proceed to Toco Preto. Relieved, I then drove up the road, heading to Toco Preto where the Friar led a prayer in remembrance of Vanessa in the local church.



In a half-hour, the Friar taught me lessons for a lifetime. Due to his leadership, within twenty minutes we had stopped a fire from penetrating into the forest. I had seen the problem, lamented it, and was about to drive by when the Friar made us stop and follow him. Once on the problem, we had all the means to address it – machetes, hoe and ax. We could probably have extinguished it even if we only had a branch. What I didn't have

initially was the will strong enough to solve the problem even though we had the means to do so. The Friar's message was clear: many of the problems that we face in this world could be solved if we just tried. To recall an old aphorism, most of us would rather curse the darkness than light a candle.

The Friar's second lesson focused on remembering the deeper reasons why we do things. The real reason for this trip was to honor and remember Vanessa; the payments were just a detail. I had become goal-oriented, i.e. wanting to make the payments before nightfall, forgetting that Vanessa had been in harm's way because she wanted to help prevent the destruction of the Amazon. In truth, our stomping on fire embers honored Vanessa's memory more than getting funds to certain persons that day.

The Friar is impatient; he feels that he has only a few years of life left, and he wants to make a difference. He is adamant about stopping the destruction of the Amazon and has been working on a publication called "The Amazon That We Do Not Know" that he hopes will spread the message. The initial printing is for 40,000 copies and he hopes to have it translated into Spanish, English and perhaps Italian. This is just for starters. The next goal is to get Al Gore to come and visit Sena Madureira to promote rain forest protection.

I am learning that if there is will to make things happen, then the means also happen. So maybe Al Gore will be coming to Acre.

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