

GOING TO THE CITY OF MY DREAMS (THE SECOND FULBRIGHT AROUND): MAKING FRIENDS, COLLABORATORS AND A FAMILY OF CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

A Fulbright in 1981 made it possible for me to go to Fortaleza, a Brazilian city I dreamt of visiting--after a previous aborted attempt. I made lasting friendships and collaborated with colleagues in areas of research new to me and on projects to help the residents of a slum and an Indigenous reservation. It also led to the creation of "kindred of choice," the bonds of which are stronger than those of kinship.

Keywords: Fortaleza • 'Kindred of choice' • Brazilian religions • Friendships • Fulfilling a dream



INTRODUCTION

In 1968, I received a Fulbright that took me to Fortaleza, a city in northeast Brazil. I dreamt of visiting this city since my first semester of graduate school. To this day I can't explain why. I had taken a class from an eminent specialist on Brazil, and this left me convinced that I wanted to do research there. When he described Fortaleza, something in me said, "I must go there." Thanks to a second Fulbright, after the first one was aborted, I did. I met friends and colleagues with whom I collaborated in new areas of research and established a kinship group that transformed a vague desire into a wonderful reality.

MY FIRST (ABORTED) FULBRIGHT

I was invited by the director of the Institute of Anthropology to teach and implement research projects he and I had been planning since we first met in 1965. Luis Fernando Fontenelle was a graduate of Brazil's War College. He had no training in anthropology. His father was an admiral in the Brazilian navy and his mother's family had deep roots in Fortaleza. Their contacts helped him establish the Institute of Anthropology at the Federal University of Ceará located in Fortaleza.

While working at a government health planning agency, Luis Fernando participated in research under the direction of a visiting North American anthropologist. He found learning about people fascinating and important because Brazil was modernizing. This made it necessary for scholars to learn the traditional ways of its people to help transition them into accepting contemporary medicine. After meeting, we spent long hours discussing the research I was doing, the discipline, and envisaging training new students to conduct research to learn about life in fishing villages, urban slums, and other local communities.

I eagerly accepted Fontenelle's invitation as opposed to that which I also was passionate—being a delegate to the Democratic Convention to be held in Chicago. As co-chair of the anti-Vietnam War movement on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and serving as a tenured-professor. I strongly believed the US involvement in Southeast Asia was wrong. I was shocked during my 1965 visit to Brazil when I accidentally walked into a room in the consulate and saw an American CIA operative teaching Brazilians in uniform to use electrical probes. I knew that the United States was supportive of the coup in 1964 when the Brazilian military overthrew an elected president; now I discovered that we were training the Brazilian military to apply the latest methods to torture their own citizens.

I was also involved in politics. With fellow Democrats I helped entice Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota to run for president. His campaign supported the students and promised to end the war. When Senator McCarthy won 47% of the votes in the first primary, President Lyndon Johnson decided not to seek election. Had I not gone to Brazil, I would have been a McCarthy delegate to the convention. I chose to go to Fortaleza instead; but I did not get there. A week before I was to leave, I received a telegram from Fontenelle saying, Not to Come! I learned later that an American political scientist doing research at the Institute conducted a survey in which he asked a random sample of respondents their opinion of the dictatorship. This was the year the generals decreed the infamous and repressive so-called AI-5, which institutionalized censorship, torture, and the murdering of their opponents. When the authorities discovered that Brazilian students, on behalf of a foreigner, were asking people what they thought of the government, there was a scandal. The political scientist was expelled, his questionnaires destroyed, and the Institute of Anthropology closed. Fontenelle resigned and moved to a mountainous area in the state of Rio de Janeiro. I regularly visited him to discuss our research and careers until the time of his death. Soon after, I was invited to teach in the anthropology program at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro. This led to a series of very different experiences.

CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

1968 was the year that Brazilian students and labor unions began protesting and demonstrating against the military regime and these demonstrations were spreading all across the country. When I finished my classes at the museum, I often accompanied students in solidarity as they marched down a major downtown artery, blocking traffic. Tanks stationed along the way bombarded us with tear gas and rubber bullets. I also met regularly with my university's chancellor in Rio de Janeiro. The chancellor was leading a project to reorganize Brazilian higher education. This project was supported by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and conducted in cooperation with the Brazilian Ministry of Education.

While I enjoyed interacting with my colleagues at the museum and made several lifelong friends, the students were another matter. It was difficult for them to see beyond the fact that I was an American whose government was responsible for the dictatorship that was imprisoning, torturing, and killing their teachers and colleagues. Moreover, the chancellor of my university was directing a project that would transform their future education.

As we were preparing to return home at the end of our stay, the chancellor invited my wife and me to a dinner party. Also invited were military appointees to positions in the education ministry and others who supported the dictatorship. My wife, who was friendly with the chancellor's wife through their activities in Planned Parenthood, was seated at dinner next to the chancellor. After desert, she turned to him and in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear and said, "Joe, how can you live with yourself and sleep at night with what you are doing to those poor students?" His face turned red and there was dead silence as we rose to leave. I was not one of the chancellor's favorite people when he returned to Milwaukee.

A SECOND FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE

Eventually I did get to Fortaleza. After a series of research projects that took me to other parts of the world, in 1981 I received a second Fulbright that made it possible for me to teach at the Federal University in Fortaleza. While there, I began a study of Kardecist-Spiritism, a belief system codified by a French intellectual and brought to Brazil in the late 19th century. Kardecist-Spiritists believe, among other things, in reincarnation and that the living can communicate with the dead.

The generals still had not stepped down. Another generation of students were periodically protesting, often shutting down the university. During one prolonged strike, I was able to accept an invitation to give a series of lectures on ethnographic methods at the Faculty of Education of the Federal University in Porto Alegre, the capital of Brazil's southernmost state. The director of the Fulbright program in Brazil supported the trip.

In Porto Alegre, I developed lasting friendships with members of the Faculty of Education and Kardecists who helped me pursue my interest in their belief system. In 1988, I received a third Fulbright. During this Fulbright, I taught in the Department of Anthropology at the Federal University. Sadly, the Director of the School of Education, with whom I was planning a research project, died before I returned. I remained close to his widow and children, becoming a godfather to his son.

THE MATERIALIZATION OF DREAM: MEETING FRIENDS AND COLLABORATORS

When I returned to Fortaleza from Porto Alegre in 1981, I met two young scholars who recently returned from Europe. Both had PhDs in psychiatry and were completing PhDs in anthropology. I spent time with both, helping them organize their anthropology dissertations. This was to start a lifelong relationship that was to go beyond friendship. I became exceptionally close to Antônio Mourão Cavalcante (Mourão as he preferred). He grew up a Roman Catholic Brazilian on a fazenda in the interior of Ceará. I was North American Jew, raised in Brooklyn, N.Y. We realized that we saw the world and lived our lives in surprisingly similar ways. He regularly took time from his psychiatric practice for us to conduct (anthropological) research and write joint publications. While doing fieldwork and analyzing data, my family spent time with his in Fortaleza developing a closeness with his children. He and his wife were especially comforting when our eldest child was killed. Over the years we vacationed together in Brazil, the US, and Europe. We established what we termed as a family “of choice.” I am godfather to two of his children. My children and grandchildren and his remain close and continue visiting on a regular basis. When his son was doing a residency in Miami after completing his medical training in Brazil, he was hosted by members of our (biological) family.

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NEW AREAS OF RESEARCH

Mourão and Adalberto Barreto introduced me to “folk” or popular Catholicism. One of its features was that people make vows (promises) to saints to elicit their help with problems, mostly illnesses. When a request is satisfied, the petitioner goes on a pilgrimage to the saint’s shrine and “pays” what had been promised. In their company I spent time in Canindé, a small town in the interior of Ceará where there is a shrine to St. Francis of Assisi. It is visited by more than a million pilgrims annually. Thanks to the support from the order running the shrine in the 1980s and early 90s, Mourão, Adalberto and I organized seminars on popular religions in which eminent Brazilian, North American, and European scholars participated.

On my visits to Fortaleza, I stopped in Rio de Janeiro to visit another godson. José Carlos Ribeiro, introduced me to his Umbanda center. I learned about this syncretism (mixture) of African religious traditions and Kardecist-Spiritism. Later, when he changed to Candomblé, -- considered a “more African” variant of Afro-Brazilian religions, I was able to observe him being initiated.

One of the studies I did with Mourão was of a recently deceased doctor from a municipality neighboring Fortaleza. His grave was visited by people who told us they came to place flowers on his grave and thank him for curing them (after his death). We wrote a book (in Portuguese) as an example of the way folk saints--not always recognized by the Church--come into being. We were invited by the mayor of the city, where the doctor lived, to launch the book at city hall. It was especially gratifying for me to have the doctor’s family and friends receive our work as positively they did.

My second Fulbright grant opened doors to numerous projects that I would not have participated in otherwise. These projects had a dual impact on my academic career. First, they significantly expanded my research horizons. Second, they provided me with valuable new materials to incorporate into my teaching. As a result, I was able to enhance the content of my courses.

ENLARGING MY FAMILY IN FORTALEZA

Adalberto and Mourão introduced me to Father Bonvini, a missionary priest. As I got to know Father Bonvini, I learned about his decision to live and work in a Brazilian slum. His choice deeply resonated with my own beliefs. As a Jewish person, I believe in the concept of *Tikkun Olam*, which means “repairing the world,” or working to make the world a better place. I saw a strong parallel between Father Bonvini’s mission and this fundamental Jewish principle.

We discussed our similar viewpoints when I was in Brazil and when he visited me on his way to the Lakota Sioux reservation in South Dakota. He had been adopted into a Lakota family in the early 1990s. He incorporated into his personal life and therapy their understanding of spirituality, which resonated with me.

Rino Bonvini become an additional member of my family in Fortaleza. We refer to each other as brothers. With Mourão, we developed a series of projects in collaboration with the residents of the favela to provide mental health therapy, especially for women deserted by their mates, and to help lift them from poverty. In one project, done with the help of extension workers from the Federal University, a group learned to make cakes, snacks, and meals that local businesses pay them to prepare for their employees. In another project, we worked with people in the favela and in an Indigenous group to raise food. Through another university program, the women learned to prepare nutritious meals with what they could grow themselves. In still

another project, we collaborated with the Pitaguary, a decimated Indigenous people living on a reservation in a municipality neighboring Fortaleza. This project aimed to revitalize their culture by incorporating aspects of Lakota ritual and spirituality.

At 92 years of age and no longer able to make frequent trips to Brazil, thanks to Zoom and WhatsApp, I am still able to learn and collaborate with my brother, repairing the worlds of people I would not have known had it not been for the second Fulbright that brought me to the place I had dreamt of going since my first day as a graduate student.

CONCLUSION

My experiences in Brazil, made possible by the Fulbright award I received in 1981, have shaped my entire career. I shared what I learned from these trips with students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee until my retirement. Upon moving to New York City, I became involved with Columbia University Seminars, where I've presented my research to faculty members-first locally, and now globally via Zoom. As co-chair of seminars on Brazil, Studies in Religion, and Contents and Methods in the Social Sciences, I continue to engage with and invite scholars I've met over the years. The Fulbright not only fulfilled my long-held dream of visiting Fortaleza but also led to deep personal connections. I developed a chosen family and lasting friendships that have enriched my life, broadened my scholarly perspectives, and allowed me to contribute to helping some of Fortaleza's needy residents. I'm profoundly grateful to the Fulbright Commission for this transformative experience that has had such a lasting impact on both my personal and professional life.

FOR FURTHER READING

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BIOGRAPHY

Sidney M. Greenfield is Professor of Anthropology Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Co-Chair of three Columbia University Seminar. He is past president of two sections of the American Anthropological Association. Greenfield has conducted ethnographic research in Barbados, New Bedford, and Brazil, and ethno-historical research in Portugal and the Atlantic Islands. He has nine written or edited books, five video documentaries, and approximately 150 articles and reviews in books and professional journals. He appeared as himself in the 2009 movie, "My Last Five Girlfriends." He was awarded Fulbrights to Brazil in 1968, 1981 and 1988 and a fourth for Nigeria in 1996 that he did not take. He can be reached at: Sidney.greenfield@gmail.com
