



ROBERT ALEXANDER

Readers Write

FENCES

SIX YEARS AFTER THE END OF WORLD War II my family moved from the U.S. to Japan. Our new home had previously belonged to a Japanese nobleman's daughter, who now lived with her family in what had been their servants' quarters. Despite this odd turn of affairs, they treated us kindly and taught us their customs. Outside the house's compound, however, people were not always so friendly.

At nine I was the oldest child, and I often took my three younger siblings on excursions into town. One day we had been to see bolts of silk drying in the fields about half a mile away when a

group of Japanese children surrounded us. They yelled at us and then followed their taunts with good-sized stones. I gathered my sisters behind me and picked up my little brother, and we ran for the safety of the eight-foot-high concrete wall that surrounded our house. By the time we got inside, several stones had found their mark, and our parents bandaged our bruises and consoled us as best they could.

A few days later we were playing in the yard when we heard mocking voices. The children who had thrown stones at us were now sitting on top of our wall.

Just as we were about to retreat into the house, our mother and father came out carrying hot chocolate and cookies. They spoke little Japanese, but they motioned for the children to come down and lifted the tray of cookies toward them. Slowly the children slipped off the wall and accepted the treats with smiles and quick bows of thanks.

By the time we left Japan a year later, my siblings and I were playing regularly with the neighborhood children, our past hostilities forgotten.

*Susan Shumway
Corvallis, Oregon*

AS A PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER I USED to commute on horseback through tropical forests, in the shadow of a conical volcano, to the village of Las Pilas, Nicaragua, where I worked with rural women on health-education and community-development projects. Lydia — a small indigenous woman, sunbaked and wrinkled beyond her forty-seven years — taught me all about life in Las Pilas. I'd dismount at her home of gray wood planks and dried palm grass, and her children would take care of my horse while she brought me to meetings, introduced me to neighbors, and told me about the needs of the village. Lydia always wore a dress that was ragged but clean and freshly pressed with an iron heated over an open fire. Upon our return to her house, she'd serve me heaping portions of black beans, rice, tortillas, and fried plantains and a tall glass of coffee made from beans roasted in a clay pot.

The town had no source of potable water, so villagers walked several miles each day down steep, muddy trails to the shores of Lake Nicaragua, where they bathed, washed their clothes on lava rocks, and filled tins with water for cooking and drinking. The burden of hauling water fell to the women and their barefoot children, who stayed home from school to attend to the chore. The water could be made safe only by boiling, which required the added labor of gathering wood, something few had time to do. I knew without asking that Lydia had boiled the water for the coffee she served me.

One afternoon, when I brought my horse to a halt at Lydia's door, I found her standing at the center of a crowd of men and women, looking uncharacteristically agitated. She explained to me, with barely suppressed rage, that the *patrón* who owned the land on both sides of the trail from Las Pilas to the lake had erected a wire fence across it, blocking the villagers' path. To restore access to water, a young man from the village had cut the wires, and for this he had been arrested and taken to jail in the nearby town of Altagracia.

Lydia dug her sandaled feet into the dusty ground and turned to the crowd. "I may be poor and *meant* to be poor," she said, her voice trembling, "but I am a

human being, and I have my rights!" She waved her arm, and the crowd moved toward a dilapidated bus set to leave for Altagracia, where they would demand a hearing by the mayor.

By sundown the prisoner had been released, and access to water — such as it was — had been restored. Lydia showed me the power of even one small person taking a stand.

*Jeanne Lemkau
Yellow Springs, Ohio*

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Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

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Pretending	January 1	July 2010
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