

# commentary

from other pens...

## Praise of Castro's programs draws critics' wrath

By George Gedda

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — Kind words about Cuban President Fidel Castro are heard only rarely in this town; so it was something of a departure the other day when World Bank President James Wolfensohn lauded that country's social programs.

"I think Cuba has done — and everybody would acknowledge — a great job on education and health," Wolfensohn told a news conference. "They should be congratulated on what they've done."

Not surprisingly, Castro's critics see things differently.

"Mr. Wolfensohn's woeful ignorance of conditions in Cuba is breathtaking in its magnitude," said Dennis Hays, an executive vice president of the anti-Castro Cuban-American National Foundation.

"In addition to being factually wrong, does he really mean to imply that extreme repression can be justified by a self-reported uptick in socioeconomic indicators?"

Said Cuban-born Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart, R-Fla., Wolfensohn's remarks are "beyond insensitive, beyond belief. Cuba had tremendous advances before Castro in health and education. ... I'm certainly going to share this with my colleagues." This was an unobvious reference to the World Bank's dependence on congressional financing for its programs.

But Philip Brenner, a Cuba expert at American University, said Wolfensohn was on the mark.

"Cuba's success is all the more remarkable because that has come in the face of U.S. hostility for 40 years and of the collapse of its trade agreements when the Soviet Union disappeared," Brenner said.

Wolfensohn, an Australian-born naturalized U.S. citizen, is not the first bank leader to praise Cuba's social programs. Robert McNamara said a decade ago, long after his retirement as bank president, that he had "immense admiration" for Cuba's social programs.

Bank statistics, based on Cuban government reports, suggest that Cuba ranks with many developed countries in certain categories. According to the bank's "World Development Indicators, 2001" the 1999 infant mortality rate in Cuba was 7 per thousand live births, equal to that of the United States.

Cuba's illiteracy rate in 1999 was listed at 3 percent for men and 4 percent for women, figures comparable to industrialized countries. And, as Castro likes to point out, education and health care in Cuba are free.

Wolfensohn noted that Cuba was able to register social gains without the benefit of World Bank advice. It is virtually alone worldwide in shunning membership in the bank and its sister institution, the International Monetary Fund.

Bank officials point out that Wolfensohn's words are not a blanket endorsement of the Cuban system. He prefaced his praise with this qualifier: "If you judge a country by education and health. ..."

The bank has a much broader definition of a country's well-being. Its philosophy holds that education and freedom from disease are important, but so are economic and political freedom.

A bank official noted that Cuba has chosen to improve its social indicators at the expense of its economic progress.

Castro contrasts the social safety net he has created with widespread misery elsewhere, putting the worldwide death toll for children at 40,000 per day.

A World Bank official responds: "There has never been a famine in a country with a free press." Perhaps the worst famine of recent years has occurred in a communist ally of Cuba's, North Korea.

Critics also note that millions of Cubans rely on charity, mostly from friends and relatives in Miami, for their well-being.

**EDITOR'S NOTE** — George Gedda has covered foreign affairs for The Associated Press since 1968.



## An early compass for life



joan ryan

• commentary

Most of what we know about life seems to grow inside us like bones and veins, steadily expanding over the years without our noticing when or how. For example, I know that failure defines a moment, not a person, and that, given a choice, the movie starring Harrison Ford is generally your best bet. I can't pinpoint how I came to know these things. They seeped in slowly, and one day, when I needed to know them, they were there.

But we have signpost moments, too, when a piece of wisdom arrives with the swift impact of a telegram. We know immediately that our lives have changed, that whatever we do from now on will be shaped in some way by the words.

My signpost moment arrived in the unlikely person of my cousin Irene. She was the older of my Aunt Sally's two daughters. We saw them mostly at First Communion and weddings. I was always in quiet awe of Irene. She was five years older than I was and, with her olive skin and high cheekbones, looked like an Indian princess. Her sister, Jane, was my age and much more lively and outgoing than I was, so I was drawn more to the regal Irene. She seemed so sophisticated and cultured, perhaps because she was heading to graduate school — a first for our family.

I didn't see Irene much as we got older, but my mother would pass along information in our weekly phone calls. She was moving up in her marketing career in New York City. She got married. She moved to Washington, D.C., for a better job. She and her husband became Eucharistic ministers at their neighborhood Catholic church. Irene never failed to send Christmas cards to my parents; my father was her godfather.

But a few years ago, my mother told me Irene's husband had been hit by a bus in London and suf-

fered brain damage that stunted his short-term memory. Then Irene's father, to whom she was extremely close, died of cancer.

I didn't know until later Irene had been struggling with alcoholism since college. My mother hadn't mentioned that. After her husband's accident and her father's death, Irene apparently began to lose whatever grip she once had on her addiction. She and her husband separated. Sometimes my Aunt Sally would call the D.C. police from Florida to have them check on Irene when she didn't answer her phone for days.

In recent months, she had not been working. She was trying to get into a rehab center, but the insurance company was balking. Two weeks ago, she ended up in the hospital after too many pills and too much alcohol. She left the hospital on Sunday, her 46th birthday.

For days afterward, my aunt couldn't reach Irene by phone. When a friend went to check on her, he found Irene at the bottom of her basement steps with a gash in the back of her head. He doesn't know how long she had been dead.

When my mother called with the horrible news, I thought about the courses our lives take. We can't know what forces inside and out will shape us, what blessings and demons will emerge from backstage to edit the script. I could never have predicted Irene's life would follow the path it did, and I could

never have predicted that this cousin I rarely saw would affect my own path so profoundly.

When I hung up with my mother, I tried to remember the exact circumstances under which Irene delivered her piece of wisdom to me. I was in the final months of a tumultuous freshman year of high school in Florida. Irene must have been down visiting from New York. I had moved with my family to Florida just two years earlier and was still figuring out how to fit in. Drinking helped.

I became part of a crowd that got together at a neighbor's house every Wednesday morning before our split-session classes began at 11. My neighbor's mother bowled on Wednesday mornings, so we had the run of the place. We would arrive at school half in the bag and spend first period darting back and forth to the rest room. My grades, needless to say, weren't what they could have been.

"You only get to do high school once," Irene told me one afternoon during her visit. "What you do now stands forever."

Her words, as obvious as they might sound, hit me like a bucket of ice water. I felt a buzz of urgency that has yet to go away. The words followed me through the rest of high school, college, jobs, marriage and motherhood. They became my compass.

I only get to do this once, and what I do now stands forever.

I wonder if those words were her compass, too, and if the events of her life yanked her off her path, sending her in directions she never intended to go. And I wonder if she had any idea that one moment more than 20 years ago, shared with a cousin she rarely saw, would stand forever.

Joan Ryan is a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle. Send comments to her e-mail at joanryan@sfgate.com.

## The risks of that 'night out'

I'd like to talk to you middle-aged guys about the risks of a night out. I don't mean an evening with the guys. Those go pretty smooth. Sure, you've totaled the car a few times and been arrested twice, but usually the worst thing that happens is finding the designated driver face down in the chip dip.

A night out with your wife is a little more high risk. She wants a chance to reconnect and share her feelings, which puts a lot of pressure on an evening of pizza and bowling, especially when you just want to bowl and eat pizza. But you sure don't want your lack of interest to be interpreted as a lack of interest.

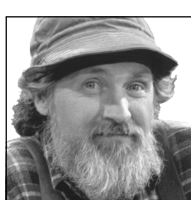
So here's how not to blow it. Don't start explaining your side of things. Just listen. Or at least look like you're listening. She'll let you know when she's done. Just be smart enough to smile, and thank her for sharing. She'll appreciate your sensitivity. Hopefully, she's not sensitive enough to know that you're not.

### THE LUCK OF TIMING AND VICE VERSA

You know there's always a buddy who'll tell you how much he made selling his old Howdy Doody lunch box just after you threw yours out. Of course this is the same buddy who sells meat out of his truck and always wants to borrow a twenty from you.

You just really don't want to hear about those "boy you should have" situations because it can drive you nuts. It's like when an old girlfriend, who still looks like she belongs on a calendar, calls looking for a little company. Sure the track is still there, but that train left the station about 25 years ago.

Don't beat yourself up over lost opportunities.



red green

• north of forty

If everyone lined-up who could have invested in Trivial Pursuit or could have married an investment banker or whose mom gave away their Spider-Man #1 comic, you'd be looking at most of the world. Knowing when to do what and why is mostly a matter of luck. That's why it's called luck so you don't confuse it with normal.

### STATEMENT MIDDLE-AGED MEN NEVER MAKE

I spend a lot of time talking to middle-aged men and I've noticed there are a bunch of things they never say. Here are just a few of them:

- "It's all my fault."
- "I don't know anything about that."
- "You drive."
- "I don't need to use the bathroom right now."
- "I've had a lot of luck."
- "I never felt better in my life."
- "I wish there were more young people in the neighborhood."

### AND MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP

You know a lot of us middle-aged guys are reading the obituaries and discovering that guys a lot younger than us have dunked their last donut.

It's kind of scary considering all the abuse we've racked up. When you count up the scars, the cars, the bars and the times we've seen stars which, depending on how many fingers you have left, could take some time, it's a wonder we're still ticking.

But I wouldn't line up for wings just yet.

Compare a 1952 automobile with this year's model, and you'll find something rare — metal. Back then they built those babies out of steel, not plastic and foam and corrugated cardboard. Sheer over-engineering made those old clunkers last.

They built a lot of us around then, too. I think you can see where I'm headed with this. I'm not saying that we're any better than the lower mileage young guys are. I'm sure they handle themselves fine. They're fast, agile and probably a lot easier to deal with on a long road trip. All I'm saying is that as I go down the highway of life, I'm happy to have the extra weight. Especially the way I drive.

Quote of the Day: "If it's true that you learn from your mistakes, I must be a genius." - Red Green  
Red Green is the star of "The Red Green Show," a television series seen in the U.S. on PBS and in Canada on the CBC Network, and the author of "The Red Green Book" and "Red Green Talks Cars: A Love Story."

## berry's world



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