

Words of Praise for The Unspoken Gift

What is a life well lived? To ask that question is to have the greatest courage to reflect and self-examine. Aldo traces his life's story from early childhood in Cuba, through the trials of his young exile from his native country, and to the tests of building and continually re-building and re-inventing his life in the U.S.. His powerful emotional journey stirs up our deepest fears as we find out how, because of the threats of the Communist regime in Cuba, his parents decide to send him to the U.S. knowing they might never see him again. His parent's greatest sacrifice is made in the name of saving the child's life – it emerges from and is sustained by the unspoken gift of unconditional love, the very sustenance of life itself.

*Ljudmila Mila Popovich, poet and critical writer
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The Unspoken Gift

How an Immigrant Cuban Child
Fulfilled His American Dream

By
Aldo Martinez

Cover Photo by Aldo Martinez, Jr.



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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my family, who has been part of my soul and responsible for giving me the love I have needed to have the courage to choose to live. We all have amazing stories to tell. My journey is a story of personal, professional and family triumphs; it is an imperfect journey through darkness surrendering to love in order to treasure life's challenges and uncertainties. My journey is not over, and it will not end until my last breath.

I dedicate these words to my wife, Susan, whose love has filled and fueled me and without whom I may not have been able to experience the peacefulness of true happiness. To Christine, Danielle, Aldo and Melissa, my children, for whom these lines have been written and who not only have taught me so much about love but who, by being themselves, I have grown to value and respect their judgment and conduct. To Simon and Samantha, my grandchildren, Christine's children who have already given me the gift of feeling the joy that my grandfather felt when he shared my childhood moments, and to my brother, Carlos (Migue), who has also traveled a journey through darkness and has triumphed and now lives his dream. Christine, Danielle and Migue share their dreams with their spouses, Brian, Greg and Toni Ann, respectively.

Finally, to my mom and dad who gave me the unspoken gift of love without which nothing of what has happened in my life would have been possible. I dedicate this book to all of them for giving me the greatest gift of all: love.

Introduction

My first memories are of bars. The ornate bars that decorate the windows and doors of many of the homes in Cuba, where I was born, are intricate and beautiful in design. But no matter how attractive bars appear, they imprison us in life. I became a prisoner of circumstances that I could not control: a dysfunctional family, a political regime that brought me face to face with death and separation from loved ones. As I grew older, these bars turned into cultural, language and ethnic barriers: prejudice that was sometimes subtle and at others time not very subtle at all. More often than we would like to realize, our bars are self-imposed; they result from our insecurities and lack of love. I chose to demolish my bars and break through to freedom. Once I learned to do that, I began to live my dream.

Chapter 2: Out of Cuba

After we moved to the new house every day seemed to bring something new into our lives. My relationship with my grandfather continued to grow. We often just played catch together, and I wanted to hear stories about him; I was particularly interested in his life as a teenager. His parents had sent him to study in the United States, in Pennsylvania, and I was impressed by the fact that he spoke perfect English. I realized there was a lot more I wanted to learn about him, and I enjoyed, very much, my time with him.

The only other stable part of my life revolved around my many friends on our block. As children, we lived in a world of our own, playing our games – Cowboys and Indians, soccer, baseball, emulating the heroes of the Cuban revolution, arranging each others' birthday parties, riding and racing our bicycles around our neighborhood, talking about school and all in all growing

ever closer to each other. As far as we were concerned, except for Christmas holidays, nothing going on around us mattered much.

Prior to 1961, Christmas was celebrated throughout Cuba, and in La Habana, particularly, in a big and pretentious fashion. People decorated their homes



My paternal grandparents,
Santiago and Manuala Paz

with such spectacular displays of nativity scenes and bright lights that entire neighborhoods were lit up with happiness and joy. My friends and I enjoyed walking along with great numbers of people; we were just horsing around and viewing the decorated homes and speaking with the homeowners about their decorations. In 1959 and 1960 there were competitions for

the best decorated homes, and my friends and I held our own contests by betting on the results. We always looked forward to these times with great anticipation. Christmas season was long in Cuba; January 6, Dia de los Reyes Magos or Three Kings Day, was even more important than Christmas Day. Yes, Santa Claus would drop by with toys on Christmas Day, but we also took great pleasure in having another crack at figuring out how our presents could appear overnight on January 6, because more gifts for the children were left on Three Kings Day than on Christmas Day. As we grew older, we did not want to admit who really gave us our gifts for fear that they would stop

coming. And they did. The presents stopped on Christmas of 1961.

On April 17, 1961, Cuban exile groups totaling approximately 1,400 men supported by the CIA invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs on the southern coast of the island in an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Castro government. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had first approved the operation, although by the time it was carried out President John F. Kennedy was in power. The invasion was intended to create the spark for uprisings within Cuba, but within days of the invasion the Cuban government had successfully secured the invasion zone or Playa Giron at the mouth of the Bay, and had killed or captured most of the invaders. Because after the Bay of Pigs Castro asked the Soviet Union to install nuclear weapons in Cuba for defense against the United States, this unsuccessful attempt to overthrow Castro would later spark the 13-day missile crisis in October 1962, which brought the United States to the brink of nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

I was ten years old at the time, and early that morning I sensed something was wrong. Neighbors were visiting each other before breakfast, and I do not remember going to school that day. There seemed to be a lot of secrecy among the adults. Something was happening that they did not deem they needed to inform us, the children. Word started to reach my family from neighbors that Cuba had just been invaded by the United States. My grandmother was agitated and scared as she attempted to contact my father at his work and could not reach him. I, too, grew scared as night fell and no one was able to tell me where my father was or what had happened to him. I imagined that he had been sent

to fight the invasion and realized he was neither a soldier nor knew how to shoot. I was afraid he would never come home, that he had been killed. For the next several days I grew more convinced that my father had died, and I cried often. Later, from neighbors, we learned that the chances were that he had been detained because similar experiences were taking place in several places throughout the island and thousands had been arrested by the Castro government to prevent a potential uprising of the people in sympathy with the invaders. But nothing was known for sure, and I was confused and felt so alone – what had happened to my father? Or what would happen to him? News came to us in pieces, and no matter how much information we received, I seemed to always have more questions than answers. They all revolved around what had happened to my father, but no one was interested in talking to me. Since my mother no longer lived with us, I could not communicate with her either, and also I did not know where she was or what had happened to her. The Castro government was saying that Cuba had been invaded by the United States, accompanied by Cuban exiled troops; that battles were raging, and we were at war. Cuba was under attack, and Fidel Castro was personally taking command of the Cuban defenses. The fighting was fierce, and many had died. Defeat American imperialism, was the cry, “Patria o Muerte” – “Homeland or Death.”

My father had never been involved in politics, and it scared me to think that the government was making a mistake and he would be killed. Three days passed without any word of his whereabouts – no one knew where my father was; I could not eat or sleep, and it seemed as if each day things got worse.

Then the news – the invasion force had been thoroughly defeated, there were many deaths, many taken prisoner and Castro was emboldened and raging.

He gave speeches saying all who were against the freedom of Cuba and the Revolution would be killed. Schools were shut down, and we had no clue as to where my father was. Rumors were circulating that the militia forces had taken people prisoner and were killing those who were found to be against the Revolution. I agonized – was my father among them? What would happen to me and my family if my father had been killed? I felt completely inadequate; there was nothing I could do. Abuela continued doing what she seemed to find very effective: crying out for mercy to all the saints. She was just out of control, so I sought out Abuelo.

“¿Esta tu hijo muerto?” “Is your son dead?” That’s how I put it.

“Todo se arregla.” “All will work out.”

At the time I felt that did not help me; although I felt calmer I still had no answers. But in his way, Abuelo was telling me that there was nothing we could do at the moment. He did not know whether his son would ever return home alive, but at that moment there was nothing he could do to control his son’s fate. All he could do was wait; whatever happened life would go on.

In the years since, I have revisited this experience many times, and I have come to realize that it is not what happens to us that we should fear, but how we handle it after it occurs. What we do today brings consequences in the future, and although we generally cannot control what others do, we can consider the possible consequences or reactions before we act so we can better understand what others may do. In any event, we need to go on, we need to persevere and be strong in facing what has happened. My grandfather seemed to know just how much he should and could say to me.

Finally on the fourth day, my father just walked into our house – my heart jumped! I felt so happy. He was unshaven, disheveled, weak, filled with disgust for

the things he had seen. I had never seen him like this but still, he looked just wonderful to me. He and I strongly hugged each other, and I did not want to let go. He did not say much to anyone about anything; all he would say in my presence was, "I was not allowed to come home."

One thing I failed to realize then, but looking back I now understand, is that my family's life completely and irrevocably changed the day my father came home. He was a different man, driven to a purpose, which at the time I did not know. The fact was that life for all my friends would also change in ways none of us could have anticipated before April 17, 1961.

The events that transpired after that date were dramatic and horrifying to me. I had never imagined that individuals could act in the ways that I saw in the next few months. The Catholic school I attended was taken over by the government militia. I was in class when the soldiers entered the school. Soldiers were posted at all doors leading out of the school, soldiers patrolled the surrounding streets, and another group of soldiers entered the chapel and broke into the sanctuary and started to remove all religious signs and statues, throwing the chalice with the Holy Eucharist on the ground. I think that was the most frightening thing of all. Who were these people? In Cuba just about everyone was Catholic and understood what a grave mortal sin defiling the body of Jesus was, and yet these soldiers were doing it! If they could do this to Jesus, what could they do to me and my friends? We were nothing to them! I have never felt more scared and vulnerable than I did that day.

After this incident, a new school opened there, and later the building continued to be a place of fear and injustice by serving as a jail. But in 1961, my father took me out of that school, and I did not return to any school for another 10 months, when I left Cuba and arrived in the United States.

One by one, all my friends were leaving Cuba. During the next three months, four of my friends on the block left the country, including a beautiful girl on whom I had a wonderful crush. She, with her older sister, younger brother and her parents, went to Puerto Rico. Her father was a pharmacist. I have never seen any of them again. Christmas 1961 did not exist; it was done. Castro had declared he was a Marxist Communist and Cuba would be a Marxist Communist country. The only thing that my family explained to me was that a Marxist Communist does not believe in God, and as I thought about that I wondered how someone who had worn rosary beads on his day of triumph could now say neither he nor his country would believe in God – how could someone first believe in God and suddenly denounce Him? How could someone just order everyone in an entire country to stop believing in God? How could that happen? Regardless, I came face to face with how Castro could control others: just tell them you own them, have your troops march into schools and change them. These were actions that had been unimaginable a few months before, but suddenly people just executed such orders. Castro said he wanted freedom and yet he allowed and encouraged violence against those who did not agree with him.

I was starting to connect some dots – 1959, the looting and violence my father showed me; 1961, the takeover of my school, the arrest or detainment of people without reason. I did not feel good about where I was. On top of that, I continued to deal with the aftermath of my parents' divorce, with constant battles regarding visitation rights with my mother, since my father had retained parental custody. I was also trying to understand the one-by-one loss of my friends as they, with their parents, fled Cuba.

Also during this time, a new development that had started a year earlier gained prominence and influence

in our lives – the Defense Committee was established by the Castro government to keep an eye on the “safety” of our neighborhood, and it would maintain vigilance over the movement of the people in the neighborhood. The house to our right became such a place – two sisters, spinsters, who pretty much lived in seclusion, suddenly became the most powerful people on our block. Any house where people gathered, the sisters had to be informed of the purpose and identification of those attending. No one could take in a relative without first obtaining approval from the local Defense Committee staff. Our neighborhood and block had changed; my birthday in July, when I turned 11 years old, was much different than in prior years. My friends had dwindled from 12 to seven, and we spent much of our time talking about those who were gone and thinking about what would happen to each of us. Our parents had already warned us not to say anything bad about the government, and I had a lot of anger and trouble about that – I wanted to say what I wanted and did not like to be silenced – bad times for extroverts!

By December 1961, there were five of us left, and when I left two months later in February, 1962, only three friends were still in the neighborhood. During my last several months in Cuba I felt increasingly less and less in control of my surroundings. We were no longer planning and enjoying our birthday parties. Our parents would not discuss anything with us for fear we would tell each other and somehow their plans would come to the attention of our Defense Committee. Everyone lived in fear, and we began to hear that the Castro government was rounding up children our age to take them to camps where they would be indoctrinated into the Marxist principles or shipped to the Soviet Union for further education – that meant we would be separated from our parents, and the Revolution, not our parents, would be

responsible for our upbringing.

In January, swearing me to secrecy, my mom and dad began talking to me about leaving Cuba, and at first I thought that like my friends who had previously left with their parents for Spain or Puerto Rico, that I would leave with both my mom and dad. Although they had said nothing about my grandparents and I did not know whether my grandfather would also be leaving, for once in a very long time my mom and dad were in complete agreement. Not only were they not fighting, they seemed friendly towards each other – divorce in reverse, I thought, and I was all for it!

“When are we leaving?” I asked. Their response deflated me and scared me at the same time. My parents’ plan was to send me out of the country alone, without them, by way of our church, and as they would often repeat, “We don’t know when we can join you in the United States, but we will do everything we can to do so as soon as we can.”

In fact, during this time, my father applied to leave the country and was fired from his job. My mother, since she had a business, faced an even more difficult path to leaving. They both told me there was no way, even if they would never see me again, that they would continue to expose me, to risk my future in a Communist country run by evil people where I would never enjoy the benefits of freedom and opportunity to live my life the way I chose, to the best of my abilities. My mother often told me to follow her footsteps and do what I thought correct, not necessarily what society expected of me. I paid attention to her because she had shown that to me by being a young business woman in Cuba in the 1950s and early 1960s.

So, my parents’ “brilliant” idea to spare me from the grasp of Castro’s government was to fly me out of Cuba by myself to Miami, Florida, where people unknown to

them would pick me up and take me to a camp with other children approximately my age and perhaps never see me again! At first this sounded so desperate to me, and scary. I was completely without any control of anything, and my future was being decided for me by others. While two of those people were my parents, who I knew loved me very much, there were suddenly others involved in my life who didn't even know me. I did not know it at the time but I would have about six weeks to take all of this in before my departure, and to my surprise I would have an amazing reversal of expectations from the day in December when my parents first told me I would leave the country alone until February 6, 1962, when I left the country, never to see it again until September 2009, 47 years later.

Operation Pedro Pan, as it became known, took place from 1960 to 1962 and was coordinated by the U.S. Department of State, and some say that Castro spread the word that the CIA was also involved and the Catholic Archdiocese of Miami. It involved placing approximately 14,000 children who were sent away from Cuba without their parents into the hands of the church and placing them in foster homes all over the United States; some with relatives or friends, others in group homes in about 35 states.

I am not exactly sure when my mental approach changed regarding going to the United States, but I remember very vividly that for me, my departure day started the day before, on the night of February 5. I had struggled with how badly I felt each time one of my friends had left without saying goodbye, so I was determined not to have my remaining friends feel that way. I betrayed my father's instructions not to tell anyone, and on that night I told them. I did not understand why I could not mention it to my friends, since everyone knew that my father had filed his papers

to leave Cuba and had consequently been fired from his job. He had been labeled a “gusano” or “worm” because he was giving up on the Revolution. Already the girl I had a crush on, Argelia Garcia, had left without my telling her how I had felt about her, and I was now leaving the two brothers I was closest to, Alberto and Armando. So, I told my remaining friends that I was leaving, and we said our good-byes. We shed tears together, recalling all the good times we had and promising we would never fight against each other if the United States had to fight Cuba. Although we did not discuss the possibility of never seeing each other again, I knew that since some of their parents were for the Revolution, we probably would never see each other again, and we never have met.

That night I also sought out my grandfather, and I spent a significant amount of time with him. We played catch in the central hallway of my house, and as I heard my grandmother crying at times, he smiled and complimented me on how well I had learned to play sports and told me that I should continue to play and always improve. He told me that he knew the United States and I would like it very much. He said that he and my grandmother planned to follow us to the United States and we would be together again someday. He expected to see me do very well there; he was not sad, he was happy for me. He mentioned that no matter what happened everything would work out for the best – “todo va a estar bien.” “It will be okay”, he said in Spanish. He told me to just do my best and never give up. “Be yourself,” he said, in everything, just like in sports. He explained to me what a great sacrifice my mom and dad were making in letting me go like this. This was the first time I had spoken with my grandfather in quite a while, but he made me feel important and that I had to do well always.

My father put me to bed that night, and all seemed

quiet. So much had happened since those early days in 1959, less than two years before, when he drove me through the streets of La Habana to show me the violence condoned by the Revolution, until he and my mother told me in December 1961 that I was going to leave the country. I did not completely understand why all this had happened, but this was the first time since those days in 1959 that he and I spoke father-to-son. I have never forgotten his words and how I felt.

“Your mother and I love you very much, and it is because we love you that we will risk never seeing you again,” he told me. “We have both begun to file papers to follow you to the United States. We want to be with you, but if we are not able to join you, I want you to know it is not because we have not tried; it will not be our fault, but the fault of the Cuban government.”

He told me that good people would be responsible for feeding me and providing me with a home, and I would be taken care of. He explained to me the program, which became known as the “Pedro Pan flights,” and said I would not be alone; other boys and girls would be there with me.

“We want you to go to the United States because neither of us wants you to ever be forced to become a Communist. We want you to have the freedom to do what you think best with your life, and we want you to have the freedom to believe in God.

“As you grow up we want you to always be honest and always do good towards others. Never give up hope; you are now in control of what you do – don’t do stupid things.”

I asked many questions – What would happen to them when I left? Would he and my mother be arrested? When would Abuelo and Abuela follow? I asked him if I did anything wrong in the United States would he find out? He said “yes” to this, and smiled. I also asked where

I would stay in the United States and he explained that I would go to Florida where I would stay for a while before they placed me in another state, like New Jersey where my Uncle Higinio, my mother's brother, lived. He kissed me on my forehead and said he would wake me up soon because the plane was leaving early in the morning and we would meet my mother at the airport. I was already packed with a small bag, a carry-on, which was the only luggage I was allowed to take with me; no jewelry or watches, just a small amount of clothing. As my father left my room I felt happy and excited; I was going on an adventure that would determine what kind of person I would become. I knew what my parents expected of me.

Given the environment that had become my day-to-day life, going to the United States seemed the key to my future. I went to bed feeling ready and important. Something was happening to me, and even though I did not totally understand it, I did like the idea. In effect, at 11 years old, my father gave me control of much of my life. Without threatening me with punishment, he empowered me to trust in my own instincts and live my life. As parents today, what would it take for us to do that? When and how do we begin to empower our children to be responsible for themselves? When do we overprotect or shelter our children from life? How much responsibility do we give our children?

I have learned that in facilitating the growth of my children the answers to these questions revolve around creating a balance between the existing circumstances, the environment and the individual child. I realize today that at age 11 I had a lot more control than I realized. Most of that control lay in what I could do in response to the events taking place around me. I definitely compromised

my desires by not objecting to my parents' wishes, maybe because their actions were sufficiently explained to me and I knew that I had my family's complete support and trust.

Breakfast on the morning of February 6 was nearly an impossibility. I sat in my home, attempting to eat as usual when I had no idea how this day would end. The next memory I have is of my mother sitting with me at the airport until the time came when I was asked to leave my parents, pass through into a room to be searched and walk to the boarding station. My heart was racing. Except for my parents, everything and everyone seemed to be out of control. There were five or six of us children boarding the plane, and they and their parents all seemed to be crying or yelling or cursing. The people processing us did not speak to us in a friendly tone. They treated everyone who was leaving with disrespect.

By contrast, my parents were calm, and they did not show me tears. Through a glass partition we waved goodbye and threw kisses – I saw their smiles – how strong they were! They were with me; they thought I could do this, and in doing so they gave me confidence that I could. Although it may seem heretical, I found myself looking forward to boarding that plane to Miami and my next phase in life. This was the first time I had been in an airplane, and as the twin engines roared to life and the plane took off, I saw for the first time my homeland, my birthplace, from high above and realized that I might never return. I said a silent goodbye, and looked to the front of the plane.

Acknowledgement

The lines that follow would never have been written but for the patient and insightful dedication of Karen Miller. Karen, you not only coached me and pushed me to face my past but made me dig deep into my soul for the feelings that my memory deciphered. You knew how significant those feelings were to me and to those who may be helped by this experience and explained to me how to express them.

I will always be grateful to you for guiding me in this therapeutic and rejuvenating journey.

About the Author

As you read *The Unspoken Gift*, you have come to understand the setting for Aldo Martinez' success in life and in his career with the New York Stock Exchange. The intimate portrayal of his early experiences set the path for a commitment to family and community that continues through today. For close to 40 years, Martinez worked at the New York Stock Exchange, first on the trading floor, and then in regulatory and legal matters. While at the NYSE, he headed two departments tasked with developing surveillance criteria and investigation of potential illegal insider trading, market manipulation, frontrunning and other trading abuses in equities and derivatives. He became the first Hispanic to rise to the level of Vice President at the NYSE.

Martinez' high ethical integrity, extensive knowledge and interpersonal abilities have led him to develop a respectful and caring attitude for those with whom he works, resulting in their individual professional development including facilitating divisional NYSE training programs and other training opportunities. Internationally, Martinez has worked to expand the reaches and strengthen the cooperative ties among securities and commodities exchanges and markets throughout his efforts in a cooperating mutual regulatory assistance network of exchanges called the Intermarket Surveillance Group (ISG). He is the founder of AJM Advisory Services consulting in Market Surveillance matters in Australia, Montenegro, Ukraine and Serbia as well as in the United States. He is a graduate of Seton Hall University School of Law and St. Peter's University

in Jersey City, New Jersey, where he received his bachelor's degree in business administration, and now teaches Derivative Markets, Corporate Finance and Investment Analysis at St. Peter's University.

Martinez has served on a number of corporate boards and has been involved in a wide variety of community activities, including serving on the Board of Regents of St. Peter's University in Jersey City, New Jersey and on boards of several advisory school councils as well as having worked with Junior Achievement of New York. His family continues to support him by encouraging and insisting that The Unspoken Gift be shared with many.

