

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Parlez-vous Francais? With the New Year bursting upon us, it's a new day full of new opportunities and new challenges. For many, it's a time for turning over a new leaf, making a fresh start—a time for New Year's resolutions of all kinds.

Finding new resolve for personal improvement and positive personal change is always a good thing. As the New Year breaks in, is there one goal in particular you are hoping to accomplish in 2010?

High among my goals is becoming conversational in French. My spouse, Yvette—a native of Panama (where Spanish is the national language)—is half French (maiden name, *Dubois*); and forever, it seems, we have wanted to become fluent in her grandmother Dubois' native tongue.

Although I have vacationed in France on three occasions over the years, and spent ten days in Haiti on a mission-related project in the early eighties—where, along with Creole, they also speak French—my visits have never been long enough to pick up the language.

However, thanks to a four-month Sabbatical leave funded through a Lilly Foundation grant to my church, Yvette and I will be spending fourteen weeks in Aix en Provence, France in the late spring-early summer of 2010. We can't wait.

A few months ago, en route to visit our first grandchild near Colchester, England, we scoped out Aix (which had been highly recommended by a friend) and loved the energy and pulse of this vibrant city (about thirty miles from Marseilles in southeast France). Already, we've rented an apartment near the town center and are busily preparing ourselves for this wonderful adventure.

Learning a new language is always a challenge, of course, but I've been this route before. The overarching key is to have an immersion experience where you are compelled to speak the language as an unfolding part of your daily routine.

When I spent two years in the Peace Corps in Panama in the late sixties, I remember how tiring it was during those first months of learning Spanish. I have vivid memories of forcing myself to initiate conversations with people, always urging them to correct me along the way. After three months of intense, daily practice and study, I was on my way.

Following my time in Panama, I spent thirteen months in Portugal (playing basketball for a sports club, *O Futebol Clube do Porto*). By then, having developed a professional fluency in Spanish, Portuguese, which bears many similarities to Spanish, came easily. Again, the key was the immersion experience.

Here in South Florida, non-Hispanics comment all the time on how *they want to learn Spanish*. While our bi-lingual social context makes this very possible, still, it's more difficult than it sounds because English remains the primary language.

Having a plan. With my Sabbatical experience on the horizon, I began working on my French in earnest in early September of 2009. My strategy, which seems to be going well, has a number of component parts which I recommend to anyone serious about learning a new language (in this case, *French*).

Early on, in addition to disciplined study and an occasional French movie or TV show, emphasize pronunciation. It's important to learn to make the sounds, along with the inflections, as correctly as we can. Good pronunciation greatly facilitates the learning process. I'm seeking to do this with French by listening to tapes in my car as I drive about in my weekly duties as a local church pastor.

After attaining a minimal ability to speak, the next step is to find a conversation partner, someone whom you can get together with on a weekly basis for conversation and guidance. When I returned from France and England in early November, 2009, I happened upon Pierre, a native of France and a long-time resident of Miami Lakes, at Shula's Athletic Club. Every Tuesday, I spend an hour with him—mostly listening and practicing the most basic conversation in preparation for our *French* experience.

Lastly will come the actual experience of living in France, beginning in a few months. Soon, we'll be buying French bread from the local *Boulangerie*, shopping for fruits and vegetables at the outdoor *marché* and joyfully immersing ourselves in the exciting ambience of summer *en Provence*.

Stay tuned for twice-monthly updates starting sometime in May. *A bientot!*