

Cuban-American dialogues: Letter from Miami

by [Margaret D. Wilde](#) in the [May 17, 2000](#) issue

The camera panned away from a garbage fire in the middle of the street and followed the young men who had set it. The men were calling to a nearby band of demonstrators. “The people are afraid they might be provocateurs, under orders from Castro,” said the television announcer. “This is rowdier than most Miami traffic jams, but it isn’t a riot; it’s the beginning of a catharsis.”

The disturbances that followed the removal of Elián González from his Miami relatives’ home by armed federal agents were indeed part of a catharsis, though not its beginning. The outpouring of emotion started months earlier, not on the streets but in homes and churches, away from the television cameras. Some people say they are angrier than they’ve been in years, but they are also talking and listening to each other more. If that continues, there is hope for dialogue within the Cuban exile community—which is probably prerequisite for dialogue with the rest of the city.

Of the more than 700,000 Cuban-Americans in metropolitan Miami, perhaps a third identify with the fervent anti-Castro old guard. At the other extreme, a small group (mostly younger and American-educated) favor normalizing political and economic relations with Cuba, although they remain critical of the Castro regime. In between are what some call the “silent majority,” who visit or send money and material aid to friends and relatives on the island, but avoid confrontation with the old guard.

There is little public discussion among these groups. “We don’t talk about dialogue,” says Quaker peace advocate Eduardo Díaz. “*Dialoguero* has been a fighting word since the 1970s,” he says, for it was a term applied to those who supported negotiations with Castro. Others point out that public disagreement was never an option for ordinary citizens in Cuba, and for Miami Cubans it seems disloyal—“like hanging out our underwear for everyone to see.”

Families have their own ways of communicating across the divide. “We know everyone’s viewpoint without making them say it,” a college student told me. “By the end of dinner we all understand each other, and no one goes away angry.”

I once heard two sisters talking about how they had persuaded their father to help pay for an expensive prescription that his brother in Cuba had asked for. “It was scary; I thought he would choke on his meat,” said one sister. “He knew all along that we were sending Uncle money,” the other reassured her. “It was hard this time because we couldn’t do it alone, but you watch: next week he’ll be asking how Uncle is doing.”

With Elián it was hard to separate the language of politics from the language of the heart. At first he was a safe subject of conversation: an innocent, five-year-old child, plucked from the sea in a miraculous Thanksgiving Day rescue. Of course he would stay, and his father would find a way to join him; how could the immigration agents gainsay a miracle? But when Juan Miguel González said he wanted his son back in Cuba, the conversation suddenly became complicated.

To deny the father’s right meant overriding the cherished principle of *patria potestad*—parental or, more literally, paternal authority. For some exile leaders, that was easy to do, since they were struck by the irony of Juan Miguel invoking a right that in Cuba is routinely usurped by the government. But many people were still reluctant to abandon the principle. Said a Cuban-born priest: “You can see how much we care about Elián, if we’re willing to go against *patria potestad* to save him.”

Beneath this debate lay devastating memories of family separation. Some 14,000 Cuban children were sent away by their parents in the 1960s on a church-sponsored airlift called Operation Pedro Pan. Others were torn away from loved ones by Cuban officials, never to hear from them again; or by the raging sea, as Elián’s mother was. Elián has been a reminder of how divided Cuban families are. It is too painful to talk about, and too important not to.

He has also forced the Cuban community to acknowledge its own unspoken political divisions. Most people agree that the old guard is losing numbers and energy. “The young have no memory,” one said ruefully on a radio talk show. “And they don’t learn their own history in American schools, only tolerance and political relativism.” Perhaps Elián is changing that, said another: “Young people, children—even the imbeciles who talk about ending the embargo—they’re all coming out [to

demonstrations at the González home], and seeing why we care so much. They're learning about their past, lessons they never got in school."

Those lessons include a litany of perceived betrayals by the U.S. government: the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the post-Mariel agreement to halt the flow of refugees in 1980, the downing of the Brothers to the Rescue plane in 1996. Now President Clinton hopes to normalize relations with Cuba in order to expedite trade agreements. It is already a done deal, many exiles said: Clinton would sacrifice an innocent child for the sake of the new world economic order.

"Folks are suffering right now," says Eduardo Díaz. "Elián reminds them of all the impotence they've ever experienced." Peacemakers call this unresolved anger and mourning, and they know that the appropriate response is to listen to people—without judging, offering reality checks, or pressuring them into dialogue.

That has not been the response of the Cuban exiles' American neighbors. A *Miami Herald* poll in early April showed that 76 percent of white, non-Hispanic Miamians and 92 percent of African-Americans favored Elián's repatriation to Cuba with his father, compared to 9 percent of Cubans. The survey director said that in 20 years of polling in Miami, he had never seen results that set Cubans and the other two groups so far apart. A week later, political analyst Max Castro admonished his fellow exiles: "When, after 40 years of preaching the cause, your neighbors in your community are the least convinced people in the world, it's time for a reality check and not just better public relations."

Liz Balmaseda, another Cuban-born columnist, reflects a more widespread view. She sees indifference to the Cuban cause as "simply another surfacing of America's anti-immigrant undertow," especially against the exile community with "its Miami-generated political clout." The public, she says, "doesn't hear the rest of the story. It doesn't hear about the refugee parents whose children are still stuck in Cuba because the Fidel Castro government refuses them exit permits. . . . It doesn't hear about the would-be rafters who are jailed for simply trying to leave the island." Instead, the press has reduced "our enormously painful history to a few clever, recyclable phrases."

A woman in front of the González home wasn't blaming the press. She shook her head sadly as people shouted slogans into a reporter's microphone. "I agree with

what they're saying; that's why I'm here," she said. "But I would say it differently."

"Then why don't you?" a man near us snapped at her. "Who stole your tongue?" "People like that," she said, turning away from him. "They do all the talking. We don't even try any more."

The struggle over Elián has produced two new forms of political protest, however: a human chain, which was well practiced but could not form in time to stop the sudden, early-morning raid, and a "rolling blockade" of cars driving slowly on major thoroughfares. The rolling blockade was harder to defeat than the human chain, but it also produced more backlash. Cuban-American leaders likened it to the Montgomery bus boycott, but many African-Americans called the comparison a mockery of the civil rights movement—and commuters called it economic strangulation. "Civil disobedience doesn't come easily to us," said one blockade driver. "We haven't seen it work, and we're afraid of making more enemies. But it was new at first to black people too, and they learned; so can we."

Some liberals and moderates distrust the Democracia Movement, which organized both actions. Until now, the group was best known for sailing sport-fishing boats with banners into Cuban waters, a potentially provocative tactic; and its leader, Ramón Saul Sánchez, was once associated with violent anti-Castro groups. "It looks like the old guard in sheep's clothing," a liberal activist told me. "But I'd like to be proven wrong. If they are still teaching nonviolence after the Elián battle is over, I'll be a believer too. A lot of people will."

"Dios te salve María, llena eres de gracia." Besides political slogans, prayer was the most common language in the struggle for Elián. Outside the González home, Catholics distributed rosaries and led the Hail Mary; a few yards away, shouts of "*Aleluia!*" and "*Amén, Señor!*" bespoke a strong evangelical presence. Catholic and Protestant clergy took turns at a makeshift pulpit every evening, and on Friday they led worship together. "Each of us is willing to sacrifice," Francisco Santana, the family's priest, told a *Herald* reporter. "When we have a service in common we avoid mentioning the things that divide us, like the devotion to Mary, and we center ourselves in our faith in the Lord Jesus."

In contrast to the fervent advocacy of some Cuban-American clergy, the Catholic archdiocese and most Protestant leaders tried to maintain neutrality. Auxiliary Bishop Agustín Román, who has publicly intervened in other crises, said that the

Catholic Church must work with the whole González family. Protestant pastors felt “caught in the middle,” one of them told me. “There are many Cubans in our congregations, and also many Americans who strongly support the father. We were really embarrassed by the National Council of Churches’ taking sides with the father.”

The district office of the United Methodist Church was also embarrassed when an agency of the church set up a fund for voluntary contributions toward the father’s legal expenses. It was unfortunate, superintendent Clark Campbell-Evans told me later, that the denomination “took action without first coming here to listen; that was the wrong way to proceed.” He said the Cuban-American reality is “vital to us as a community of faith; we have to learn to hear and honor their stories.” United Methodist officials have since promised to come for a Miami meeting, Campbell-Evans said.

On Easter Sunday, Miami officials, who were under heavy criticism for allowing police participation in the federal raid the day before, announced plans for a Miami-Dade Mosaic Initiative, led by “dozens of ethnic, civic and religious leaders and economic empowerment agencies.” Robert Simms, a former director of the Community Relations Board, said that, based on experience with the African-American community, successful discussion requires leaders in the grieving community “to step forward and articulate the concerns of those who are offended. . . . You let people vent. Then you bring in leaders who can transfer pain into an action plan.”

The plan promises wide participation rather than a blue-ribbon panel, but it may not work as quickly as city leaders hope. There are differences between this crisis and the ones caused by African-American grievances in recent years. By the 1980s, after long experience in the civil rights movement, the black community had strong leaders and a relatively unified vision. Cuban-Americans are more polarized and less comfortable with public dialogue. And while African-Americans were slowly making their grievances heard, Cuban-Americans were becoming convinced that no one would listen to them. It may take time to reverse that distrust.

Most non-Cubans see Elián’s story as a private tragedy turned into a political football by opportunistic politicians; Cuban-Americans see him as a symbol of their own private tragedies, which are in fact political. “We’re all footballs,” said one. “If you haven’t been kicked around as we have, by both Washington and Havana, you won’t

understand.”

After 41 years in which a few Cuban-Americans have done most of the talking, the Cuban community shouldn't be rushed into an “action plan.” It needs time for more venting and dialogue.