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Linda C. Osterlund

Associate Dean, Division of Counseling and Family Therapy, Regis University, losterla@regis.edu

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An Experience that Forever Changed My Worldview

Linda C. Osterlund
Associate Dean, Division of Counseling & Family Therapy
Regis University
(losterla@regis.edu)

May your heart be broken every day in El Salvador and may you bring back the broken heart with your yearning for healing and the desire for the *magis* back to our beloved Regis University.

Prayer offered by John Fitzgibbons, S.J.

I sobbed deeply – and unexpectedly, when I read this prayer out loud to my ICP-7 colleagues during one of our group reflections in El Salvador. I felt the brokenness (and consequent openness) of my heart, and the yearning and desire for healing – must also be something I share with others.

My immersion experience in El Salvador began with my travel from the United States to El Salvador. When I got onto my connecting flight from Houston to San Salvador, I was the only Caucasian person on the flight. I felt uncomfortable. That was the beginning of feeling uncomfortable for a week – amongst many other feelings I experienced. I sat next to Mario, who could speak English pretty well. He told me I looked nervous, but I should not be afraid. He described his life – he currently lived in Houston, but he was an El Salvadoran, and he was going to visit his grandmother, who had raised him. His mother had left him when he was young, he cared for his younger siblings, and his grandmother was like his mother. “I LOVE my grandmother” he said many times. He described how hard it was to lose his mother, but she would tell him, “It is better for you to stay in El Salvador, it isn’t safe here” (she lived in East LA). His mother would send money to his grandmother to care for him and his brothers. I would learn that Mario’s story was not unusual.

When I went through immigration, the officer asked me, “What do you know about my country?” With a slight edge, I humbly replied that I was there to learn about his country. As I walked out of the airport, I entered into an unfamiliar place, very aware that I looked different and spoke differently than most everyone around me. I tried to remind myself how others

experience coming from another country to the United States – feeling different, uncomfortable and out-of-place. There was a feeling of insecurity, I wasn’t sure if I was going to somehow “break the rules” because I wasn’t familiar with what to do. Mario waited with me until I found the driver who would take me and my fellow colleagues to our hotel. This hotel was in an area “like Beverly Hills” (Mario had told me). It was dark during that drive to the hotel, but I could see vacant stalls alongside the road where street merchants sell their goods, trucks were driving past us jammed with people standing in the back, some barely hanging on. Our driver slammed on the brakes when someone sprinted out of the bushes and darted across the highway in front of our vehicle. Our driver told us many people get killed running across the highway like that. I settled into my not-so-Beverly-Hills hotel, and feeling very blessed, and a little bit scared about the upcoming week.

Over the next few days, I learned about the history of El Salvador – the oppression of the poor, the wealth of the twelve families, the killing during the civil war, and the violent and conflictual aftermath that continues to this very day. It was shocking to hear that murders go uninvestigated, and private security is as big, if not bigger than the military/police force. It was uncomfortable knowing that the United States had a hand in paying for the military forces that were part of the oppressive effort – knowingly or unknowingly contributing to the killing of innocent people and extending a civil war that was so destructive in El Salvador. It was heartbreaking to hear of the massacre of Copapayo, and I cried about the trauma and loss that the survivors endured. It felt hopeful to imagine that retelling

the story would help the healing, and that the stories would help carry the message as a witness to what happened in El Salvador. I was a freshman in college when the massacre occurred, and yet had no idea of what the context was for the war in El Salvador. I learned how protected we are in the United States from the realities of war, and how we might play a hand in the devastation that unfolds in cultures far away from us.

It was incredibly valuable for me to visit the different political parties (FMLA and ARENA) as well as the United States Embassy. I learned more each time I heard someone speak – and felt confused by each party believing they were telling the truth, and describing the other as deceitful and responsible for the wrong in El Salvador. I felt drawn to sympathy for FMLA since they originally represented the oppressed (so it seemed) – but there were flaws in each camp. It was discouraging to hear the leader from ARENA say he did not think the parties could find common ground, and he had no faith in the current FMLA administration. Of course, FMLA said the same about ARENA. During our visit they were in the midst of a political campaign, and differences were being emphasized. During our visit to the US Embassy, it was surprising to hear that waste water treatment was not a priority, but the leader of FMLA said the US would only support privatized water treatment, a capitalist approach which would likely not benefit the poor in El Salvador.

Just prior to my trip to El Salvador, Pope Francis declared Father Oscar Romero a martyr. During the visit, the people of El Salvador were celebrating the recognition of the impact of Romero's work. We visited the Cathedral in San Salvador where Romero was buried, his humble accommodations, and the site where he was assassinated during a small mass near his home. When we saw the Cathedral, it was absent of the beautiful artwork, which had been ordered to be removed by the current Archbishop in 2011. I was struck by what seemed like an act of misuse of power, ignorance, and insecurity. It felt hopeful to imagine that Pope Francis may recognize what is happening in El Salvador – and that he is brave enough to do something about it!

After group discussion and process with my fellow colleagues, I decided the people – those who had less money, power, and influence were the ones I trusted. They only told their lived experience, their truth. I remembered these thoughts when I heard the words of Paul Locatelli, S.J. (post-immersion video, from Santa Clara University) speaking about the integration of faith and justice – and when we are reconciled to others, especially the oppressed, poor and marginalized, we are then reconciled to God. And through the justice of solidarity we are living a virtue that enables *wisdom* and transcends politics, a virtue that the Jesuits at the Central American University (UCA) were living in El Salvador.


I felt sad about the assassinations of the priests, and couldn't stop thinking about what they were trying to do – through higher education – in a place where most people did not have equal access to education. I had a special interest in Father Martín-Baró, one of the Jesuit priests assassinated at UCA, and the only psychologist in El Salvador at the time. I am a Marriage and Family Therapist, and a leader in the Rueckert-Hartman College for Health Professions (Division of Counseling and Family Therapy) at Regis University in Denver, Colorado. Several years ago we identified the "Father Martín-Baró Award" for our division, given each year to a deserving student. I never knew the context or history of Fr. Martín-Baró, but learned as much as I could on this trip. I played out the story of the assassination over and over in my head, and when I got home I bought a couple of books, *La Verdad*,¹ the personal story of Lucia Cerna, a witness to the Salvadoran martyrs, and *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*² by Fr. Martín-Baró. My hope is to continue to learn about what is happening in El Salvador, and translate its relevance for my work as a Marriage and Family Therapist and as an administrator at Regis University.

My hope was primarily experienced with the students living at the Romero House and the students at the CASA program. At the Romero house, I was impacted by the story of Rena – the human relations student who traveled three hours by bus from her small farming village to UCA for her first year, until she was accepted into the Romero House – where she lived near campus. We had a lovely conversation – neither of us

speaking each other's language; but with a little help from the translator found common ground to discuss. The students in the CASA program were living with and learning from the El Salvadoran people, in the midst of a pretty violent culture. I was impressed by their commitment to learning and serving through "accompaniment" – a Jesuit principle that stuck with me.

When I left El Salvador, I was processing all of these experiences, and still am doing so. When I was in the line for customs and immigration in the United States, I overheard a couple of Americans talking about their "missionary" experiences in Honduras and Nicaragua. They were lamenting how difficult it was talking to the native people. One said, "I couldn't believe they didn't speak English, in Africa, at least more people speak English." After hearing this, I thought to myself – this only confirms the importance of learning with and beside someone – not because I am better or because I have something to offer them (which I think is disrespectful and perhaps oppressive) – but because of what they have to offer me – what I can learn from them. If those Americans were there to learn, they might have had empathy for the fact that there is not equal access to education, little resources for education in their own language, let alone for education in English. And now a bit of my own "AHA" moment, realizing that is how I approach those that I counsel (as a Marriage and Family Therapist), not that I have the answers, but I am there to accompany them in their journey, in their pain, a witness to their stories.

As a counselor educator, this learning translates into not only how can I apply this to my own practice, but how can I facilitate the growth of future counselors and therapists, so they can accompany others. And as an administrator in higher education, how can I impact my fellow faculty so that they can create an atmosphere of education which values the integration of faith and justice, and the solidarity of justice – through the accompaniment of their counseling and family therapy students? I have begun to answer that question by continuing to learn (the readings mentioned above). My initial strategy is to learn more about my fellow faculty members' perceptions, beliefs, and teaching practices through conversations, both structured/scheduled

and unstructured/spontaneous. A few fellow faculty members have explored the integration of Ignatian pedagogy in our program's practicum experience. I would like to take that a step further and explore how Ignatian pedagogy can be applied to counselor education and supervision in helping to develop the *wisdom* of the counselor for the future. 

Notes

¹ Lucía Cerna and Mary Jo Ignoffo, *La Verdad: A Witness to the Salvadoran Martyrs* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).

² Ignacio Martín-Baró, *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*, eds. Adrienne Aron and Shawn Corne, (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1994).