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Privilege, Praxis, and Solidarity: Reflecting On a Journey From Romero House to El Salvador

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**PRIVILEGE, PRAXIS, AND SOLIDARITY:
REFLECTING ON A JOURNEY FROM ROMERO HOUSE TO EL SALVADOR**

**A thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors**

by

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UNFOLDING THE MAP: AN INTRODUCTION

I have known many wonderful individuals throughout my life. The people I have interacted with have helped form me into the person I am today. My family has taught me many things about how to live as a positive member of society, and for that I am thankful. My friends and classmates have brought me joy, and my many teachers have encouraged me to be a more thoughtful and deep-minded individual, someone who always asks “Why?” when presented with a question. I have learned much from the people I have gotten to know, but I have also been able to learn a great deal from various places I have lived. Growing up in Wyoming and being in close proximity to nature instilled in me a love of nature and helped to make hiking one of my most favorite activities. Visiting grandparents in Denver Colorado filled me with awe; the tall buildings and commuter trains were quite exciting for a youngster mostly familiar with sagebrush filled plains and vast expanses of nothingness. Returning to Denver as a young adult and Regis College student gave me a new opportunity to meet people and learn from the city. I really began to learn from this place when I became a member of the Regis University Romero House program, a service-based community of students with a passion for social justice. There I began to walk with and learn from the poor and marginalized of the Denver community. Later in my Regis career I studied abroad in El Salvador, a small nation in Central America. Again, I lived in a community of socially

minded students and got to learn a great deal from the poor and oppressed. Working with the poor has changed me and has forced me to ask many questions.

My first journey into El Salvador taught me, and still is teaching me many truths about what it means to be a person of wealth, a person with privilege, in a world so fractured by poverty, the structures of injustice, and pain. When I think about what I have experienced and how to make sense of it I am reminded of the words of my good friend Mario Miguel Gutiérrez Cubas, S.J., a Jesuit Scholastic with whom I studied and engaged in some pastoral work. He told me:

“Those of us in positions of leadership must be bridges between the world of the rich and the world of the poor, so that hearts might be changed.”

It is in this sentiment that I hope you read this work, recognizing that building connections is the only way injustice will cease in this world.

As I engaged with the many people I met in El Salvador I began to see that the world is more complex than I thought. I ate rice, eggs, and red beans at the same table as rural coffee harvesters but also dined on lobster and cake served on linen covered tables in La Zona Rosa, one of San Salvador's most expensive neighborhoods. I met young people whose parents made about \$150 a month and other young people whose parents owned a multi-million dollar import and export business. El Salvador is a land of extremes, where the wealthy and the poor virtually live on top of one another. Bearing

witness to extreme third-world poverty while at the same time living the privileged life of a university student and visiting Unitedstatesian¹ was quite challenging.

Bearing witness to the extremes of life in Latin America has changed who I am. Feeling helpless in the midst of extreme poverty and blatant oppression is a challenging emotion to bear, but by encountering the poor directly and learning from their struggles I am a better person. To say that living in El Salvador has marked me would not be accurate. El Salvador, and more specifically the Salvadoran people, have helped to change the essence of who I am as a person, as a human being. Now that I have seen what I have seen I cannot walk down the street and see a billboard or talk to a friend of mine at dinner without thinking about the poor and oppressed masses of this world, unable to actualize their full human potential. Witnessing events that shattered my idea of what I thought the world to be have forced me to question life more deeply. I am a better student now than ever and have been taught to see living as a classroom. Interestingly this lesson did not come from a lecture in a class or from a book I read a late evening in Dayton Memorial Library. This lesson came from walking with people who were different from me, talking with the marginalized and forgotten.

Sadly, in the global economic community El Salvador is not a unique place, severe poverty lives in the shadow of excessive wealth, and the wounds of years of civil war, the effects of colonial oppression and domination are still felt today. According to the 2010 United Nations Human Development Index, which examines factors such as life

¹ “Unitedstatesian” refers to an individual from U.S., as opposed to the term “American” which can refer to anyone from the Americas, including North America, Central America, and South America. The equivalent and widely used term in Spanish is “*Estadounidense*.”

expectancy and mean years of schooling, El Salvador ranks 90th out of 169 countries, almost in the middle of the list. The United States, in contrast, ranks 4th (United Nations 144). The fact that El Salvador is neither very high nor very low on the index demonstrates how the economic situation of the country is not unique, but rather average.

Learning this lesson and asking these questions have made my time as a Regis College senior quite difficult. I have felt isolated from many of my peers because we are unable to share openly about what we have seen. Many of the people I have met at Regis have not been forced to ask such deep and revealing questions about one's class, race, and role as a privileged person in the midst of a world of cruelty and injustice. Because I have had limited opportunities to share since my return I have had to look to other methods to process my experience. One such method has been this thesis. Herein I lay out for you to see, and for me to remember, a small view of the journey that has brought me to these deep questions. This journey begins where I, and if you have the time to read this, you, began: as people of privilege given many benefits we take for granted. My journey continues by exploring what happens when a person of privilege is invited to see the world from below, to begin walking with the oppressed in their struggle. For me this invitation came in the form of intentional service-based community, both here in Denver in a program called Romero House, and in El Salvador. Finally, I explore what one is to do with their newfound insight into the world: live a life of solidarity as a person in service with others.

I feel that my journey exemplifies the values of a Jesuit education and I am honored to share a slice of it with you. Returning from El Salvador has given me many

challenges and the act of elaborating this piece of writing has forced me to contend with many aspects of my personality and daily life like no exercise I have ever undertaken. I hope this work, the sharing of my experience, challenges you and invites you to explore more deeply life and education. I invite you to come along with me as I introduce you to some stories from the margins. This project is a chance for me to record very briefly the stories of many of the poor and oppressed who have taught me so much by the example of their daily lives, fighting the crucifixions of poverty and rising again every day.

“As every good educator knows, the answers are worthless unless the learner has the questions. The questions that count come from experience, especially from that experience of that who shakes my world to its foundations. What is indispensable is to help students, and the nonpoor generally, to **experience** the life of the poor—and reflect on that experience” (Brackley 12).

This work is a modest product of my reflection. I am glad you are along for the journey.

THE PRISM OF PRIVILEGE: THE POINT OF DEPARTURE

I have always been a person who has liked maps, I tack them up on my walls, I jot them down in notebooks, and whenever I find myself in a new place the first thing I do is look for a map. I like to know where I am and where things are in relation to me, a map helps me see where I am going and also where I have been. The appropriate place, then, to begin this journey of questions is with a map, to examine the starting point. The only point of departure that I am capable of claiming is the position of privilege and opportunity, a position that most students able to attend an institution of higher learning like Regis are also able to claim. Before getting into the transformative journey that can be service-oriented education, and before examining what it means to live a life of solidarity alongside the vulnerable in society I must make an attempt at understanding privilege and what it means to live a life with many opportunities and choices that others do not have.

I know that my exploration of a topic as broad and multi-faceted as privilege is only a small beginning, but the attempt is necessary in order to make sense of the following chapters on encountering difference and solidarity. Linda L. Black, David A. Stone, Susan R. Hutchinson, and Elisabeth C. Suarez, co-authors of an article published by the American Counseling Association provide a multi-element definition of privilege:

“Five core components provide the definition of this concept. First, privilege is a special advantage; it is neither common nor universal. Second, privilege is granted, not earned or brought into being by one's individual effort or talents. Third, privilege is a right or entitlement that is related to a preferred status or rank. Fourth, privilege is exercised for the benefit of the recipient and to the exclusion or detriment of others. Finally, a privileged status is often outside of the awareness of the person possessing it” (17).

Each one of these five elements is rich and deserves analysis, but before I can go further I must focus on the final piece of the definition: that privilege is often beyond the awareness of the person possessing it. This fact was true for me up until I entered into transformative immersions with the poor and marginalized. I discuss the immersions in the following chapter, but I need to lay out from the beginning that my point of view as I write this is one of someone called to the task of analyzing my privilege, a task that those who have not had an experience such as mine. I lay out in the next chapter will be unable to do. Although there is a great deal of my privilege still “outside of my awareness” I will attempt to make sense of it here and recognize it as my only true starting point.

A good friend and teacher of mine told me that the question of privilege is really a question of identities, how we describe ourselves and are described by others in society (Stookey). I think it is appropriate to look to a model of studying identity with which I already have some academic experience, the study of race. Although there are countless identity studies on gender, age, occupation, education level, and many more I was drawn to an article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh

which, through racial privilege, provides a good parallel with which to understand the question of class privilege.

The starting point for those of us reading this document is one of privilege, most of us have come from an environment not too far from the one observed in a 1987 lecture by James Roth, A professor of Sociology at Regis University:

“To be blunt about it, Regis students are mostly from a privileged class. Most Regis students have a considerable amount of money. They have lived in well-furnished and comfortable houses most of their lives. They have had plenty to eat, and when they have sat down to eat they have done so in pleasant surroundings. It has been remarked that the cars in the student parking lots are a lot newer, sleeker, sportier, and more expensive than the cars in the faculty parking lot...Not only in comparison to the rest of the world, but in comparison to the rest of the United States, most Regis students are decidedly well off. They are, in a word, privileged” (7).

Yes, it is true I have lived a comfortable middle-class existence as have many of my peers but the observation made by Roth, the critical examination of privilege is something that most students are unable to do by themselves. This gets to the element of the definition that “privileged status is often outside of the awareness of the person possessing it.” McIntosh explains, “I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege as males are taught not to recognize male privilege” (178). Indeed, living in a privileged sector of society, where everyone around you is similarly well-off, it can be easy to think of your lifestyle as, normal and average. McIntosh goes on by saying,

“whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow ‘them’ to be more like ‘us’” (178).

The concept “normative” is quite a peculiar one. Yes, compared to most of my peers at Regis, my middle class lifestyle is quite average. However, the norm of middle-class American life is really quite unique. An idea given to me by author Ivan Petrella gave me a way to put middle class life into a more global perspective. Entering my family’s annual earnings into “The Global Rich List” (<http://www.globalrichlist.com>), a website that calculates one’s position in the world based on income I found that my family ranks in the top 0.95% of the wealthiest people in the world. This may not surprise anyone, we already know to some degree that there are poor people all over this world. Each natural disaster or story of political conflict brings with it images of the poor suffering and dying. What these stories or numbers on a computer screen are unable to do is make clear is that the poor outnumber the wealthy by a great margin. The “normative” nature of privilege only remains so when the scope of the sample remains limited.

I gained valuable perspective on my class and what it really means to be a member of the “middle class” when I studied in El Salvador. For part of my time during my year of study I lived with a generous family that I met through the Jesuit parish at the University of Central America. The Sierra family as I will call them opened their home to me completely, providing me with room and board and treating me as a member of the family. The Sierras, unlike the poor rural *campesinos* I was already introduced to during

my first months in the county, are professionals and live in one of San Salvador's nicest neighborhoods, literally a block from the U.S. Embassy. The Sierras own a small engineering firm and live in an impressive home that they designed and built themselves. The home is well furnished, has wood floors (a very rare sight in El Salvador), and is comfortable and spacious. Their house would fit in well in any nice suburb in a U.S. metropolitan area.

On one level the Sierras live what looks a great deal like a middle class American lifestyle, they go shopping at Wal-Mart, go out to eat with regularity, and have two cars. One aspect that they do not share with most families like mine is that they live and work in a developing country, and as such can take particular advantage of their situation to live very comfortable lives. They live as professionals in a country where many citizens live in extreme poverty and lack access to quality education. Because of economic and even cultural factors the Sierras hire two sisters who come from a rural village in the north of the country to work as a nanny and cook. I for one know no one among my acquaintances in the U.S. who have two fulltime live-in servants. Coming from the middle of society in the U.S. and living at the top of Salvadoran society put my wealth into perspective and has helped me to recognize the truly privileged position in which I live.

Living in material comfort and having privilege is something exclusive to developed countries. The example of the Sierra family indicates how enclaves of great wealth exist even in developing countries like El Salvador. The largest difference I noted between the life of the Sierras and my life in the United States was a matter of extremes.

In my observation, my middle-class lifestyle, when compared with that of other United Statesians seems pretty normal. The lifestyle I saw in the Sierra household was not much different from mine, but they happen to live in a place where the void between the haves and have-nots is much wider. Whereas, when compared with many people in the United States my lifestyle seems quite normal, the Sierras live a life far different than many Salvadoran families.

The importance of this discussion of normativity is to highlight that thinking about one's privilege as a norm is in essence trying to make privilege, which is by definition exclusive, into its very opposite, a non-exclusive of everyone in society. This is another way of saying that conceptualizing privilege as normal is essential to making privilege "elusive" and invisible to those who have it.

As long as privilege remains invisible, the elements of its oppression also remain out of view. The aforementioned definition's mention of "exclusion" and "actions exercised for the detriment of others," helps to make us aware of how privilege can perpetuate violence and traditional social norms that do not promote equality. McIntosh reminds us that much of this oppression is unconscious:

"After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women who they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way" (178).

Viewing my daily life as being oppressive to others could be a cause for despair, after all, I do not want to intentionally do harm to another person, but being privileged does not mean one should feel bad for the opportunities life has afforded them, to do so would be a waste of positive possibilities. Fr. Dean Brackley S.J. states, “The middle class has a crucial role in the struggle for social change” (12). And indeed they do because “the [excluded and oppressed] victims need committed and educated persons to take up their struggle at their side, persons who can help to address the structural nature of injustice” (15). It comes down to the fact that unexamined privilege is oppressive but that we have the choice to employ privilege for the promotion of justice, which is a real blessing.

At the center of my argument so far has been the need for knowing, the importance of recognition in order to appreciate one’s opportunities. Looking again at the road map of my journey toward solidarity I must now extend this argument to encompass accountability. McIntosh again says, “describing white privilege makes one newly accountable” (178). I will talk about the journey toward recognition of privilege in further detail in the coming chapter, but I want to make my position on privilege clear in the beginning. Being privileged carries with it a weight of obligation. While the unprivileged are burdened by the unfreedom to choose their living conditions, what to do when they awake in the morning, or when their next meal will be, the privileged person committed to justice is unfree to let their analytical capacities go unused, and unfree to let their ability to communicate and effect structural change remain silent.

An additional piece critical to an understanding of privilege is the fact that it can never be taken from those who have it. Just as one cannot change their race, certain elements of privilege such as an education, or the physical benefits of having proper nutrition from before birth, cannot be taken away. McIntosh calls these advantages the “invisible knapsack,” and by their very nature as advantages it is impossible to eliminate or equalize them under current social and political systems.

Last year during my experience in El Salvador this “knapsack” that I carry often filled me with guilt and a constant desire to ask why I had so much and the Salvadoran *campesinos*² I was talking with had to struggle so greatly to fulfill basic needs. One example that I often return to when thinking about this question relates to one of the most basic human needs, food.

In February I had the opportunity to take a break from my studies and spend an entire week with a *campesino* family in the hills about 45 minutes south of the capital city, San Salvador. I would be staying on my own for the first time with Santo’s family. In preparation for my stay I bought what I thought would be a good amount of vegetables, some rice, and a few beans so that I would not be a financial burden on the family. Santos was grateful for the food I brought but it didn’t last as long as I had thought it would, within a few days I was eating of the family’s personal supplies. Although they were very gracious and generous and I ate my fill of bean soup, corn tortillas, and coffee with sugar in it, over time I began to yearn again for a green salad or a glass of milk. My body began to feel the impact of eating very few vegetables and

² Rural farm workers.

relying almost exclusively on the staples of beans, rice, corn, and coffee. While I ate these foods, that while rich in protein, lack in vitamins and other nutrients I began to think of how I would be back in the city in a few days and could drink a fruit smoothie. Although I was fully enjoying my time with Santos and her family, eating her simple diet, I knew that I would be back home soon. I felt lucky to be able to choose my diet, to have that privilege but I also felt challenged by the fact that Santos had no choice in what she ate and fed her children.

There was tension between wanting to be with Santos and not wanting to offend her or seem too high-maintenance by commenting on the nutritional value of the food, but also knowing that a diet routinely deficient in nutrients can lead to health problems and susceptibility to disease.

I will always be a privileged person but that does not mean that I cannot try as hard as possible to recognize what I have carried invisibly on my back all my life thus far. It is the unpacking of this knapsack that becomes a true and powerful search for self-identity. This unpacking is also one of the first steps in equalizing the divide between the privileged and disadvantaged that weighs down current society. I myself am in the midst of this unpacking process, especially as it relates to my experience of the class differences in this world.

The Bias of Privilege: The Challenge of Seeing the World Completely

We see from where we stand. We all have experiences and beliefs that form how we interpret what we encounter on a daily basis. The term we often use to describe this natural filter of interpretation is “bias.” Nothing we ever say or do will be without some

form of bias or judgment. The important thing is to begin to recognize the invisible filter through which we see our world and try to be as open as possible to new ideas and points of view. The comforts of privilege can allow one to see a very limited view of reality. One of the challenges of living in such a prism is to not be content with what is comfortable to view, preferring to ignore or discount that which challenges us to grow in sight.

As this chapter maps out some of the perhaps not-so-evident features of privilege it is appropriate to discuss the issue of bias by looking at a map, in this case the famous Mercator projection. Author Ian Petrella in his book Beyond Liberation Theology uses the famous 16th Century map projection of the world to demonstrate how our way of seeing the world can be limited.

“As most of my students confess, when they think of the size of different countries and continents, it’s Mercator’s picture that comes to mind...The map, however, provides a distorted picture of reality. They are often shocked to learn that while in the Mercator projection Greenland looks almost twice as large as Africa, in reality Africa is almost 14 times larger than Greenland...It dawns on my students that the Mercator makes the wealthy and white parts of the world seem much larger than they really are. They realize that the Mercator gives no sense of how small the islands of wealth and whiteness are in relation to Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Asia, the poor and non-white majority of the globe” (80).

Gerardus Mercator, as a Flemish map maker may not have been aware of the distortions his map produced but we can take from his example how our biases tend to distort reality. The power, like for Petrella's students, comes from the recognition of the limitations of our perceptions. Realizing that privilege is my starting point is powerful because once one is aware of their origins one becomes more free to engage in dialogue and relationships with those one encounters.

Privilege is quite a wonderful but also overwhelming starting point for a life. The abilities and choices available are something to be thankful for in the highest sense, but at the same time, being aware of such choices demands action and does not permit apathy. In order to begin to see the truth behind what privilege provides and demands one is called to continually question, to never take any aspect of life at face value. The very privilege of social analysis, when used constructively, can work to free the privileged and isolated individual and move them toward a life lived in relation to others. With this thought in mind and what I hope has been a constructive analysis of the privileged starting point, it is appropriate to begin looking forward to how one achieves new sight.

PRAXIS: THE JOURNEY TOWARD RECOGNITION

In the previous chapter I spoke of the starting point for this journey, a position of privilege. Privilege can be isolating and can keep the privileged away from critical engagement in the world, but this negative attitude is no longer one which I believe. There is hope for those isolated and burdened by the intangible pressures of privilege. The hope comes in the act of stepping outside of the familiar comforts and sights of life in the prism and engaging with the world, “waking to the true nature of reality” (Petrella 78).

Although my life and education have been steeped in the Catholic tradition there is no better or complete a story to outline this chapter than the parable of the four signs, the story of the awakening of Siddhartha Gotama, the central figure in the Buddhist spiritual tradition:

"Born into the riches of royalty, prophecy dictates he will become a great religious leader. Determined to thwart destiny, however, his father shields his son from the facts of life that could stir introspection and dissatisfaction with things as they are. In the palace Siddhartha lives surrounded by sensual pleasure - food, women and wine are never lacking - while the city streets are filled with smiling people so that he would never know pain. Siddhartha thus grows up ignorant of old age, disease and death. One day, though, he sets out with his chariot into the

city and comes across a grey haired and shriveled figure trembling over a cane. Amazed, he stares wide eyed at the apparition and turns to his charioteer for an explanation. The figure is an old man, the charioteer explains, the ravages of old age are inescapable. Shaken, Siddhartha returns to the palace. The next day he sets out again and comes across someone whose diseased body oozes from the flesh. He's told that the figure is a sick man and that no one can avoid the affliction of disease. Distraught, Siddhartha heads home. On the third excursion he sees a funeral procession. He confuses the procession for a parade but is puzzled by the wailing tears. His charioteer explains that someone has died and that death is the inevitable fate of all things. He returns to the palace stricken with grief. Finally, on a fourth trip, he comes across a religious wanderer whose peaceful gaze touches the Buddha to be. He resolves to follow the man's example and become a wandering renunciant in search of a solution for life's afflictions. That very night, after taking one last look at his sleeping wife and child, Siddhartha leaves the palace to return no more" (Petrella 78-9).

My university education has been for me a journey similar to that of Siddhartha, I have had the great opportunity to be educated by the lives of the poor and oppressed of this world. As a student of Jesuit Catholic education I did not learn about the poor and their challenges from textbooks or literary masterpieces, I learned from the poor by walking beside them and beginning to see life as they see it.

In this chapter I hope to explain the steps I took to leave the comfort of campus and the protection of library walls and place myself into challenging and as Paulo Freire

terms them, “revolutionary” situations. The need to be connected to reality is central to a justice-oriented education but the manner in which that reality is experienced by privileged students for the first time is important. If certain factors are not kept in mind as students enter foreign situations for the first time, there can be negative side effects both for the students and for the people the students are trying to help and learn from. I will begin this discussion by sharing with you how I was constructively invited to see “the view from below” within intentional community. I will explore the benefits of community as a place for reflective expression and why reflection is important when engaging in serving others. Finally I will explain why engaging in service in a humanistic manner rather than a hierarchical one is important for the promotion of justice.

What is Service Learning?

For the purpose of this work it is necessary to define service learning, especially for my readers not already familiar with this concept which is central to Jesuit education:

“Academic service learning is a pedagogical model that intentionally integrates academic learning and relevant community service.’ There are four key components to this definition. First, academic service learning is a pedagogical model; first and foremost it is a teaching methodology, more than a values model, leadership development model, or a social responsibility model” (Howard 22).

This is to say, service learning cannot be a mere philosophy but has to be built in to how courses are structured and delivered to students:

“Second, there is an intentional effort made to utilize the community-based learning on behalf of academic learning, and to utilize academic learning to

inform the community service. This presupposes that academic service learning will not happen unless a concerted effort is made to harvest community-based learning and strategically bridge it with academic learning” (Howard 22).

Just doing service is not sufficient to promote learning. The transformative power of engaging with reality is only harvested when the students serving are supported by their academic learning:

“Third, there is an integration of the two kinds of learning, experiential and academic; they work to strengthen one another” (Howard 22).

Again, this third point reinforces the idea that service out of the class room and academic pursuits within are reciprocally linked, both benefit each other:

“Finally, the community service experiences must be relevant to the academic course of study...Serving in a soup kitchen is relevant for a course on social issues but probably not for a course on civil engineering. All four components are necessary in the practice of academic service learning” (Howard 22).

Implementing this type of educational structure, where service with the poor is directly in conversation with authors in the classroom is quite a challenge. The structure of the education system has to be modified to allow for service, and the students at the institutions must be willing to take action rather than remaining unaware. Although some students’ “eyes glaze over when we try to share the suffering—and the hope of the poor either here or abroad,” (Brackley 12) an education that promotes justice must include their voices.

Why is Service Learning Important?

Service learning is valuable not because it gives students answers but because it prompts important questions. As Brackley recalls:

“The questions that count come from experience, especially from that experience of the other who shakes my world to its foundations. What is indispensable is to help students, and the nonpoor generally, to **experience** the life of the poor—and reflect on that experience” (12).

Experiencing the life of the poor through the act of service can be life changing, because it can begin to humanize poverty and injustice in a way no book, lecture, or movie can. Bringing the lives of the marginalized from abstract concepts to concrete realities is quite powerful. This type of learning encourages students to have more empathy for those suffering in the community around them. Teacher Roberta Rhoads recounts the service experience of one of her students:

“A junior majoring in psychology talked about how people often distance themselves from homeless people by making reference to ‘those people’ as if they are somehow better than the homeless. This student also commented on how the service project had left her with a different view of the issues: ‘I feel entirely different about homeless people than I did previously. I understand better some of the circumstances that contribute to people losing their jobs, or their homes. But I also understand that many of the people I’ve met through this work are not helpless victims. They are more than capable of working and maintaining a normal life if there were just more opportunities’” (Rhoads 43).

Service learning is a wonderful opportunity wherein students can begin to see the “other” not as someone to be feared, ignored, or neglected, but rather as an extension of the “self”, where the issues of the poor begin to be understood as issues that in some way affect all of us.

In addition to being valuable for students, particularly privileged ones, service education is, or ought to be important to institutions of higher learning because as Brackley says, service is the role of a university.

“The university does not fulfill its function today unless it allows its students to break out of their narrow world, to broaden their horizons and formulate the questions they really need for a university education worthy of the name. Middle-class students need the poor more than the poor need them. They need the poor to break (open) their hearts and turn their world upside down” (13).

Praxis: Beyond the Humanitarian Toward the Humanistic

So far we have begun to see how when service is integrated into university study it does a great deal to raise awareness among students and help them begin to see the poor as “regular folks...who are really quite like us” (Brackley 13-14). We have also seen how it is the responsibility of a university to do all it can to raise consciousness and act as a bridge between wealth and poverty. Also, the need for reflection on the encounter with the poor has been mentioned several times. It is this crucial point that I will now explore in more detail.

To help me explain the value of reflection as part of service I turn to the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian academic and advocate of popular education of the 20th Century.

He terms the integration of reflection with service, or any type of action as “praxis.” Praxis is the act of experiencing the world, reflecting upon that experience in order to gain insight, and then acting on the insight to change the world for the better. Praxis is a cycle of observation, critical thinking and questioning, and transformative action. Praxis for Freire is an act of liberation. “Authentic liberation—the process of humanization—is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire 79). There are three elements in this quote which highlight the value of praxis: humanization, liberation and transformation.

First, in addressing the topic of humanization it is necessary to examine the dichotomy between the terms humanitarian and humanistic. I see the differences between these two terms as a matter of orientation. Humanitarian refers to a hierarchical relationship between the person serving and the person being served, where the person serving occupies the position of power and the person being served is in a subordinate position. Humanistic, on the other hand, is a model for service that is relational and horizontal, in that those serving and being served learn from each other in an equal relationship.

When I think of humanitarianism I am reminded of the pleas for funds through organizations like the Red Cross that appear after news broadcasts whenever a natural disaster strikes somewhere in the world. In these advertisements there are almost always images of hungry, hurting people pleading for help. The poverty of the people on the TV fills me with sadness and so I give a few dollars in the hope that by me giving a little bit

of my wealth I can help someone who is poor. While this type of aide may be helpful in emergency situations it allows the person serving (writing the check) to not engage with the person on the screen, to not look at the structural reasons as to why that person is so vulnerable. A humanitarian service model denies the chance for analysis of structural oppression and subsequent action for just change because it in itself maintains an oppressor versus oppressed relationship.

Another term related to my definition of humanitarian is charity. Mere charity like the act of me writing a check to help disaster survivors does not demand an analysis and subsequent commitment to act to reform the social structures that keep the rich rich and the poor poor.

I recall an example of this type of charity in the community of Cantón El Cedro, El Salvador. This poor rural community made up of coffee-picking families was badly impacted by a series of strong earthquakes in 2001. Most of the town was destroyed and many houses collapsed. A small foundation in the United States, set up by a man and his wife who had traveled in El Salvador some years prior to the earthquake, began to donate cinderblock houses for the people of Cedro. Ten years later, during my visit, more than two thirds of the town's people now have a sturdy cinderblock house. While the donation of houses is a wonderful thing and the act of generosity of the couple should not go overlooked, the charitable act does not address deeper structural issues present in Cedro such as why the houses of the rural farmers collapsed and the homes of those living in San Salvador's wealthy neighborhoods are still standing strong? Or, why the poor are forced to live on steep and insecure land prone to landslides? These are the

questions charity does not address. Furthermore, since the ultimate aim is to work toward justice and a reformation of oppressive structures the positive feelings associated with donating houses can have a counterproductive effect. One could feel good inside about charitable giving and leave their commitment to the poor at that.

By not addressing structural issues, charity, although it may elevate important pressing needs like housing in an earthquake zone, does not work to address the patterns of paternalism. In order to not engage with others paternalistically (hierarchically) but rather relationally (horizontally), service must go beyond charity and engage a dialogue between those serving and those being served. It must be service that is humanistic, service that is humanizing rather than merely humanitarian. To humanize means to allow men and women to more fully live their lives as members of the human family. This means freedom from dehumanizing oppression (Freire 103). As a privileged person, one with the ability to write checks, humanistic service demands direct action and a yearning to directly get in touch with those in need, something charity and humanitarianism does not.

Additionally, it must be mentioned that praxis is not about doing something *for* others but rather learning with and through others. During my immersion experiences in El Salvador I had to constantly remind myself that being present, observing, and not jumping up to act at the first opportunity was more helpful for all concerned. Being present to others and allowing them to lead is far more educational than trying to walk as a leader on an unfamiliar path.

I once had the chance to go visit the home of the two sisters who worked in my house in the city. Both they and I were excited to make the six-hour bus journey from San Salvador to the Alto Lempa region north of the departmental capital of Santa Ana. Throughout the trip I had to let Ana lead the way because I had no idea where I was going. At one point we had to cross the Río Lempa on a rickety “*puente hamaca*” or hammock bridge like the ones seen in Westerns and adventure films. Even on the bridge, where I could see the other side and it was impossible for me to make a wrong turn, I had to let Ana guide me. She knew exactly which boards were stable and which ones to jump over. Deferring to her guidance allowed me to arrive safely at her home, and the same is true in any unfamiliar praxis situation. Those serving have much to learn from those being served, one must just remember to slow down and allow the people around you to be your teachers.

Praxis: More Clearly Seeing Ourselves Through Others

The reason contact with “the other” through humanistic relationships is so important is because, as Freire writes, through the knowing of the other is how we come to know ourselves. “The discovery of the other [is necessary] in order to discover ourselves” (Freire and Faundez 71). My educational journey has been quite enriching because I have made it a point to meet and engage with people from many walks of life, moving toward a deeper self-identity with each interaction. The power of service education is that it opens students to diversity and this diversity, when reflected upon, encourages tremendous growth. “We went abroad, not in order to discover the secret of others but to discover the secret of ourselves” (“Learning to Question” 72). This notion

of “the other,” the person who by factors such as culture, age, and socioeconomic level, is unlike us is really about the value of comparison. Through comparisons we come to see the world more clearly.

To put this concept of comparison of one’s self with “the other” into more concrete terms I reflect back on a journal account of one of my first personal experiences in Cantón El Cedro, El Salvador in August of 2009. I am sitting on the tile floor in my house in San Salvador preparing a backpack for what will be my first overnight visit with a Salvadoran campesino family. I am weighing in my mind what I should bring. My family photos definitely find a place as does my journal but I am wondering how many pairs of pants to bring or changes of shirts. After all, I do not want to be seen as the rich American coming to visit, bringing along far too much stuff. I finish packing my bag and head out to the taxi that will take me on the journey of more than an hour outside of the city to where I will be spending the weekend. After driving for a while up a steep winding dusty slope I arrive in Cantón El Cedro, a small village of coffee pickers who survive by subsistence farming.

I am to be staying with Santos and her family. Santos is the head cook of the community center where I have been spending a few days a week accompanying the people of El Cedro. As I approach her house, which is down a steep hill from the center I cannot help but reflect how different her world is from mine. The house where I live in the U.S. is on a quiet street, and I can park my car in the driveway and be standing on my front porch by only walking up a few steps. To get to Santos’ house I make my way down a slippery and trash ridden footpath more than half a kilometer from the road. I

arrive sweating and my pants are muddy from having slipped a few times. Santos invites me to rest on a chair in her living room as she prepares some coffee. I look around me and take stock of her humble house. She is one of the lucky few in her community to have a cinderblock house after a foreign aid group donated several after an earthquake in 2001 but the three room house is still quite simple. The house seems no larger than about 200 square feet and is inhabited by her and her husband, her two daughters, and two of her sons. In each small room divided by a curtain there hangs a single light bulb. In my house back home in my bedroom alone there are at least two bulbs in the fixture on the ceiling and another two in lamps on my desk and by my bed.

Even from this initial introduction to life in Santos' community I could not help but begin to see that this world is very unequal, more unequal than I had previously considered. Before meeting Santos I had never before spoken to someone who lived daily without running water or who cooked every meal with wood gathered from fallen trees in the forest. Visiting Santos and her family was the first time in my life that I really saw extreme poverty with my own eyes, really witnessed extreme marginalization. To read about poverty has value but to witness it with one's own eyes the impact is much deeper.

Although this initial experience of life with a poor Salvadoran family was difficult to understand at first, continued experiences like this one began to teach me to be more thankful for what I had been given in life. Santos' material poverty jarringly alerted me to the presence of my material wealth and her lack of education and inability to read or

write more than a few words has reminded me to not take for granted my ability to engage with the written or spoken word.

This example speaks to the transformative value of praxis, by observing before immediately doing, by listening rather than speaking, by being present to an everyday reality that is different from one's own, the student returns a changed person.

Intentional Community: A Model for Praxis-Based Service Learning

The discussion thus far about praxis and service learning at universities has been informative for individuals interested in engaging, perhaps for the first time, in praxical encounters with others. It is clear that encountering the poor in an actual way can be a valuable learning experience. Also, the question of humanitarian charity versus humanistic praxis is one that invites us to examine our own lives and actions and work for change.

One model to foster the introduction of the privileged to the life and worldview of the poor is through intentional service-oriented community. Intentional community is broadly defined as "A small, localized, often rural community of persons or families pursuing common interests or concentrating on certain basic values" (American Heritage Online). The type of intentional community for which I advocate is that which has the encountering of the poor through service and engaging in praxis at its central purpose.

For three semesters of my undergraduate education I had the privilege of living in two intentional communities centered around praxis. My introduction to community living began as a sophomore in the Regis University Romero House, an intentional living community founded in 1992 to introduce Regis students to the urban reality of Denver by

embracing the values of social justice, simple living, reflection and faith exploration, and accompaniment of the marginalized. The house is named after Salvadoran Bishop and Martyr Óscar Arnulfo Romero, a firm advocate of the poor and a denouncer of the repression of the state. Romero was murdered on March 24, 1980 because he spoke truth to power during the buildup to the Salvadoran Civil War. I will examine the life and path of Romero in greater detail in the coming chapter. I also lived for a semester while in El Salvador in a program identical in structure and mission to Romero House called *La Casa de la Solidaridad*³, founded to mark the ten year anniversary of the martyrdom of six Jesuit Priests and their housekeeper and her daughter who were murdered because they were speaking out on behalf of the poor and challenging oppression. Both Romero House and La Casa de la Solidaridad strive to carry on the prophetic voices of these martyrs by educating students to live lives oriented toward helping others and speaking out against exclusion.

The living communities I describe here are structured in such a way that they serve as a safe bridge between privilege and the challenging encounter of the other. Romero House-type communities hold living together with others engaged in a daily encounter with the poor as their central charism, but several other structural elements of these intentional communities include specific time during the week to leave the house and do work that puts one in touch with the marginalized. During my time in El Salvador I would go to visit people like Santos in Cantón El Cedro at least two days a week, and while at Romero House I volunteered at a food bank in the neighborhood. In addition,

³ In English, *The Solidarity House*

programs must have specific times for reflection and the sharing of experiences. These can include evenings of faith sharing, communal dinners, and chats around the house with fellow housemates. Also, each intentional community in which I lived was oriented around classroom study, so in addition to walking beside people like Santos several days a week I also had an academic sphere in which to make sense of what I was experiencing. In essence, this type of experience based communal living and learning environment is the ultimate integration of service with learning.

Living in a service oriented community devoted to encountering a new reality and engaging in praxis can be quite challenging, emotionally and spiritually. Just as one entering a new culture must undergo “culture shock” one entering into walking with the marginalized goes through a period of challenging adjustment. This adjustment invites despair and frustration alongside feelings of excitement and joy. In order to healthfully process the challenging aspects of entering praxis the community can be a base of support, a sounding board for positive and negative emotions.

One example I vividly remember from my time as a Casa student took place while I and the two other students I was paired with were driving up the dusty road toward Cantón El Cedro. Two days a week, myself, and two other program participants: a girl named Anne, and a girl named Katherine would travel in a pickup along with a middle-aged nun and her driver up to Cedro. Having driven the road dozens of times without incident this weekly ritual had become commonplace. One morning however, a very traumatic event that I will never erase from my memory occurred. By sharing this experience I do not at all want to paint a negative picture of El Salvador, it has some of

the most generous and beautiful people I have ever met, but the following events demonstrate the challenges of venturing into unfamiliar territory as well as the positive power of communal support. One particular morning while driving up the twisty dirt road our pickup was forcedly stopped by an armed gang of young teens. We had just driven past the El Cedro School and around a bend in the road when three armed kids with masks, two with pistols and another with a rifle jumped from behind some bushes and aimed at our car, forcing it to stop. Don Jaime, our driver, was ordered to get out of the car and the teens stole his watch, his cell phone, and all the cash he had in his wallet. Miraculously the boys did not take anything from the nun or from us three in the back seat of the cab. After a few minutes the teens let us go and they ran back into the brush on the side of the road. Needless to say every one of us was visibly shaken by the ordeal.

This negative experience was quite an emotional challenge, but I thank God for the supportive community I had around me that was able to help me heal and come to terms with what it felt like to be on the other end of a fire arm. That evening we held a community meeting to explain what had happened, and the simple act of sharing our trauma with the group was healing. In addition, several housemates came up to offer hugs and words of encouragement. One friend of mine, Joseph, who had lived in El Salvador on a previous occasion, shared a similar incident of violence that had happened to him. It felt good to know that I was in a group that shared a common experience and a common desire to support one another. In this case I was able to, through my community, healthfully come to terms with the act of violence committed against me.

This is an example of how community life can be a positive learning opportunity and good doorway into a new and different way of seeing the world. Intentional community is not, however, without challenging components. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, integrating service into an academic environment can be difficult, and the same is true for intentional community.

Praxis inherently demands a relationship with reality, but also requires a space for reflection, and practically this poses some challenges. It can be quite difficult to balance educative action in service and reflection. I know from experience that it is difficult to balance life as a student who has papers to write and classes to attend, and life as a member of a greater society outside of the university. Fr. Vincent J. O’Flaherty, S.J., who helped found the Regis University Romero House program, wrote in a proposal letter, “Maintaining a healthy balance which takes into account school responsibilities (and the need for healthy recreation) and community/ neighborhood commitments will present real challenges” (“Some Proposals” 7). There were some weeks when I simply had too much homework to finish to be able to devote myself to the people I was meeting at the food bank. Similarly, there were times when a special event like a funeral or graduation ceremony in Cantón El Cedro forced me to miss a class here and there. Fortunately the other members of the community are similarly challenged and we can learn from our shared experiences.

Intentional community has a great ability to serve as an introduction to face-to-face solidarity and transform the lives of its members. The space of reflective expression that I have mentioned as being key to praxis happens in several ways. In one aspect

certain reflection takes place naturally between members of the community as they talk about their daily actions in the course of living in close quarters and sharing household tasks. I loved washing dishes at Romero House with my housemates because it gave me the opportunity to get to know the other members of the program on an individual level. Similarly, while doing laundry in the *pila*⁴ in Casa Silvia, one of the houses in the Casa de la Solidaridad program in El Salvador I would chat with the members of my new family about what they were encountering in their experiences outside the house.

Corinne McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson mention the spiritual growth process in community. In a dream, Gordon reflects on a teaching by an experienced guru in front of a large assembly. In his dream he realizes that the teaching does not have to come from a guru but can be found in daily interaction:

“But then the most amazing part happened. I blinked again, and this time I was in an ordinary house with only a handful of people present. And I understood that again I was hearing the same teaching, but this time there was *no* teacher present. *The teaching was the dirty dishes in the sink!...*it’s the way in which we do the most mundane tasks in our life that help us grow the most” (31-32).

Even if there are strong relationships formed between individual members of communities, there still remains the issue of the cohesion of the group as a whole. When there are many individuals living together, in the case of my time in El Salvador the whole program had 23 student members, the challenge of total-group relationship becomes more difficult.

⁴ Large sink for washing.

Salvadorans use the term *confianza* to describe cohesion and relationships within groups. *Confianza* can literally be translated to mean trust, but *confianza* brings with it a deeper meaning. It implies mutual or shared confidence in one another, a faith in the diverse members within a relationship. In small or individual interactions *confianza* can grow quite quickly but in larger groups collective *confianza* requires some special nurturing. Key elements in both intentional communities in which I have lived have been specific planned group reflections and community nights. These meetings helped to grow the trust that all members had for one another. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, writing on the subject of community quotes an intentional community member that exclaims, “waking up and knowing that 48 people love you...it gives you all sorts of energy” (Kanter 126). I can attest to the beauty that as *confianza* grows develops and deepens among members of a community the energy increases. *Confianza* is a necessary element in order for reflective expression to take place without restraint.

Communication, what I have been calling “reflective expression” is essential if there is to be praxis, and in a community, in order to have this space of expression there must be a sense of *confianza*. Since whole-group *confianza* is usually never present in the early days of community life a facilitator can be helpful in guiding the group and encouraging *confianza* building. A group facilitator or more experienced member in the community can also be helpful in guiding members through their steps in the praxis immersion process.

O'Flaherty puts the idea of a coordinator thusly:

“One member of the staff of the community we were planning should be someone, man or woman, slightly older than the students, who would maintain the house, coordinate its activities, help present it to the wider community, function as a sort of big brother or sister, in other words be a *donnee* to the Jesuit or Jesuits living and working in the community” (“Memoir” 14).

An exact definition of the term “*donnee*” aside, the “big brother or sister” in an intentional community of students is invaluable. Not only can they help improve group dynamics and mediate internal conflicts they can be a valuable guide and mentor. My friend Joseph, whom I previously mentioned, played the role of house coordinator during my time in La Casa de la Solidaridad and his gentle guidance will be remembered for years to come.

Another key role for the community coordinator, particularly in a community of students who have never before lived in situations of encountering the marginalized or entering a new and foreign culture, is to act as a bridge between the students and their new service environment. From my experience in Romero House, someone already familiar with the neighborhood its residents and the problems they face, can better orient the community and its members. The students may know that they need to ask questions, after all they are trained question-askers, but exactly which questions to ask is not clear.

While service communities can be valuable and serve as a bridge between the isolation of privilege toward relationships with others there is also the powerful danger of elitism. Persons participating in praxis as part of a community must always be willing to reexamine themselves and work diligently to become more humanistic toward others.

This process of self evaluation must exist from the beginning, from the moment a central mission of the community is defined:

“Defining the group’s mission as one of service also promotes a certain elitism or sense of superiority, which enhances in-group feeling and reduces external threats; occupying the ‘helper’ role places the helper in a dominant position with respect to the helped” (Kanter 192).

In order to limit this possibility there must be an intentionality towards praxis rather than merely service. This is quite complicated and is a very delicate line to walk. In one regard community can be the perfect place for praxis, but if not treated with care community can merely perpetuate the very injustice it tries to work against.

Final Thoughts on Praxis

Privilege can be distorting, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, but an encounter of “the other” can be a transformative experience that increases ones compassion for others and an awareness of the self in the world. Just like Siddhartha Gautama changed after being touched by the poor, after leaving the security of his privilege and entering more fully into reality, I too feel changed. I have come to believe that integration of a service-based educational model can do for students today what the chariot did for Siddhartha, as long as the service remains humanistic, equalizing, and liberating. I know in my heart that intentional community is a wonderful way for students to engage in praxis and become transformed by the people they encounter. My analysis so far in this work has touched on privilege and the educational power of praxis, but just as Siddhartha was challenged to act because of his new knowledge we too are

called to act. Praxis is a great tool to encounter structures of inequality and reflect upon them, but the next step must be action to promote justice. Chapter Three explores in detail this call to action, which I call solidarity.

SOLIDARITY: A RELATIONSHIP OF TRUTH AND EQUALITY

There are many ways to define solidarity. According to Aysen Candas and Ayse Bugra solidarity is not easy to define, but in the course of my analysis I will attempt an objective analysis of what it means to live a life in solidarity in society:

“Solidarity is a complex and nebulous concept with multiple meanings. While it is at times discussed as a sentiment, akin to love, friendship or altruism, it might also designate institutional practices often associated with redistributive arrangements that characterize welfare states. Solidarities forged around group interests, such as “class solidarity,” are often taken as paradigmatic. Or solidarity may refer to a sort of bond that holds together a complex society differentiated by a structure of divergent interests. Mutual trust among people who share a common institutional context might define a solidaristic society, but the existence of solidarity could also be attributed to ascriptive identities or myths of common descent” (294).

There is no denying that we live in a complex and diverse society, and although divisiveness does occur especially on racial, religious, and gender lines (often the same lines that define privilege).

Solidarity can be essentially broken into several categories, or to say it another way, “levels” of understanding. Carol C. Gould, writing in the *Journal of Social*

Philosophy summarizes the analysis of Kurt Bayertz. Bayertz, a prominent sociologist who focuses on the study of solidarity, breaks the term down thusly: His first level of solidarity, the base instance of solidarity is “a relation among humans, conceived as ‘one big moral community,’ or as universal solidarity, in other words, as a fraternity among human beings generally” (Gould 151). Gould states here that all people are united in a base solidarity of simply being human, of living breathing and walking this earth.

To further emphasize the importance of our universal humanity as an instance of solidarity I am reminded of the words of Fr. Francisco De Roux, S.J. In his talk de Roux reflects on the importance and universality of human dignity:

“In this sort of development human dignity is the focus, but dignity cannot be increased, the whole of the dignity is there. In any human being from the very beginning, in the kids who are starving now in Sudan and the Republic of Congo, in the undocumented families living in Denver. You don't increase your dignity because you have a Masters Degree of Regis University. You don't get more dignity because as a Latino you obtain the legal documents of the United States, or because you become the president of this nation, or because you become Pope or you become very rich. No, we have already, all of us, the same dignity, we cannot develop human dignity. What we develop are the conditions so that everybody, every human community can freely affirm and protect and freely express and share the dimension and the significance of the dignity they have” (De Roux).

Dignity is yet another way of describing the universal human solidarity we all have in equal measure, it perhaps is the manifestation, the demonstration of the unity we all have equally as members of the human race. Violence and exclusion occur when some members of the human family are seen as possessing more dignity or less dignity than others.

Bayertz goes on to define another level of solidarity, a solidarity that is more exclusive yet still holds together with diversity. He mentions the ideal of civic friendship, being united as part of a civil society. “In response to the problem of conflict, solidarity is like “the ‘inner cement’ holding a society together” (Gould 151). This expression of solidarity could be defined as a national identity, a union more exclusive than the global human community as laid out in definition one. Members within a nation are often united by language, culture, political movements, and geographic location (although in this modern era of travel members of a nation can be dispersed across continents). As a caveat to this type of national solidarity Bayertz also mentions “the use of the concept prevalent especially in Europe, as the solidarity of the welfare state. Here [solidarity] designates the responsibility of compatriots to help the needy among them, not out of charity but in virtue of the ties that bind fellow citizens to each other” (Gould 151).

Gould’s synthesis of Bayertz has so far helped us to understand solidarity from the point of view of the human family and the point of view of a civic society held together by altruistic institutions. Bayertz’s final theorized instance of solidarity can be summed up by what could be called “group” or “movement” solidarity:

“Another sense of solidarity occurs when people form a group to stand up for common Interests. Descriptively, for Bayertz, this can include negative manifestations like a band of criminals or more positive ones like social movements, whether of labor, women, ecology, and so on. Normatively, this use involves a reference to justice and the achievement of rights, and ‘involves a commitment against an opponent’” (Gould 151).

This final instance of solidarity proposed by Bayertz is the one I want to focus on and analyze because I have come to view group solidarity as the one most accessible to those born privileged, the solidarity most open to individual choice. What I mean is that certain solidarities such as those conferred on us through what Candas and Bugra call “ascriptive identities” are not easily changeable (294). In order to strengthen the understanding of group solidarity and why I most identify with the above definition I feel it is necessary to briefly talk about choice. Choice is essential to the understanding of group solidarity because there are some groups one can choose to be a part of and other groups to which one belongs naturally. This notion of choice is known as ascription versus affiliation:

“Ascriptive identity groups ‘organize around characteristics that are largely beyond people's ability to choose, such as race, gender, class, physical handicap, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age.’ By contrast, affiliative identities are—or at least appear to be—within people's ability to choose. Affiliative identities result from choices of academic discipline, graduate school, mentoring networks, and employing institution. Of course, these affiliative choices are circumscribed and

limited by ascriptive identities, so that white academics from the upper classes have more access to professionally valuable affiliations than do academics of color or those from the lower classes” (Renn).

I cannot choose what class I was born into, the color of my skin, the gender given to me at conception, or the age group I occupy at the present time. I can however choose to be in solidarity with those outside of my ascriptive communities, I can affiliate in solidarity with others. As we have seen in the previous chapter, praxis and the new world experienced when working alongside “the other” can open up many opportunities to align oneself with new communities. Experiencing these new places and environments is enriching in many ways and invites new thinking about solidarity.

Essentially this question can be viewed from two angles, what Lawrence Blum defines as “in-group” and “out-group” solidarity. What he means is that just because someone is ascriptively not part of a particular community, not part of the “in-group” does not mean that they cannot live and act in solidarity with that community from an “out-group” perspective. Blum writes:

“Whereas one cannot have a sense of community with someone with whom one does not have an ongoing relationship, the idea of solidarity allows someone to show solidarity with a group (or individuals) with whom this individual does not have such a relationship” (54).

Blum also cites the example of attacks on the Islamic community in a particular city, an example more relevant today than ever:

“Suppose that in a particular city there have been a rash of hate incidents directed toward Muslims—people yelling to them that they are not welcome in the community, spray paintings on buildings saying ‘go back to Saudi Arabia’ and the like, perhaps physical harassment as well. Let us suppose that the Muslim community within this particular city has a standing sense of solidarity within its own ranks. Those not in the Muslim community cannot participate in that group solidarity as they are not members of the group. However, they can express solidarity with the Muslim community. This out-group solidarity may be expressed in several ways—for example, holding a public meeting or demonstration in which the out-group members protest the actions targeting the Muslim community, or writing letters to the local paper” (55).

This example demonstrates the power of affiliation; the power present when disparate groups stand together in a movement of solidarity. The beautiful reality of group solidarity is that one can transition from being a member of the “out-group” to the “in-group.” If we understand that groups are defined on the basis of ascription or affiliation one has the choice to affiliate. This process may first begin as an instance of “out-group” solidarity but it can progress to “in-group” over time.

A powerful example of this transition can be drawn from the life and work of Óscar A. Romero, a Catholic Bishop who became an advocate for the poor of El Salvador in the years leading up to the Salvadoran Civil War in the 1970s and 80s. Romero, born to a working-class family in Ciudad Barrios, El Salvador in 1917 became a Bishop in 1970. He was known for being rather conservative and progressive clergy and laity

within the Salvadoran Catholic Church were weary of him being named Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977. Nidia Díaz recalls in Oscar Romero: Memories in Mosaic by María López Vigil,

“I worked with several progressive priests in a campesino organization. We were in a meeting when the news arrived about Romero’s appointment. Although we hadn’t talked about it we’d all been afraid it would happen and it did. We saw it as a great triumph for the ruling class, and we prepared to confront it” (qtd. in López Vigil 83)

Just a few years earlier during the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965) the Church reaffirmed what came to be called the “preferential option for the poor,” that the focus of the church should be preferential toward the poor because of their more precarious position on the margins of society. Many thought that Romero would impede rather than advance the preferential option and for this reason his appointment was praised by the Government and conservative factions within society and at the same time decried by progressive ones. At first Romero remained loyal to the wealthy ruling class, he remained isolated from the world of this poor and oppressed countrymen and women. Gradually, the political situation in El Salvador began to intensify. Tensions between the government and popular campesino organizations began once again to come to the surface. A massive state crackdown on the rural poor indigenous population in 1932, in response to popular uprising was fresh in the memories of many Salvadorans, and these unresolved tensions began to come to light again in the 1970s. As the state once again responded with increasing violent pressure against its citizens Romero began to change.

Often in the mythology surrounding Romero's life one particular event is singled out as the fulcrum of his transition, the murder of Fr. Rutilio Grande. Padre Grande was a close friend of Romero and was working as a parish priest and popular educator among El Salvador's rural poor. Although the martyrdom of Grande had a deep and lasting impact on Romero his transition to a life working with the poor was more gradual. One of my favorite stories of Romero's commitment to the poor and forgotten of his country was the fact that he always took time to visit with campesinos. He took time for the vulnerable because he knew that others with their material needs already met could wait a little longer. Miriam Estupinián recalls a scene where Romero was late for a meeting:

“Monseñor, the meeting can't start until you go in.’

But just then, he noticed a little old woman sitting there on a bench. She looked really upset.

‘I wanted to talk with you Monseñor,’ she got up slowly ‘I come from a place beyond Chalatenango [a departmental capital near the northern border with Honduras, very far from San Salvador]...’

Immediately he put his arm around her and walked side by side with her, listening to what she had to say.

‘Monseñor the Bishops are waiting for you!’ the secretary reminded him with more urgency in her voice.

‘Well tell them I'd like them to wait or come back tomorrow. But I'm not going to make this woman wait for me.’” (qtd in López Vigil 175).

Over time Romero began to identify with the poor and marginalized of his country, not because he himself was poor by ascription but because he believed the right thing to do was to solidarize himself with the oppressed and work as *la voz de los sin voz*, a voice of the voiceless. His standing up, his leading of a movement, his sharing of “common interests” with his poor countrymen put him in the line of much criticism and oppression. Death threats against him increased but Romero in a strong act of solidarity refused personal security detail. In an exchange between him and a military security officer Romero said,

“Colonel Garcia, as long as you don’t truly protect the people, I can’t accept any protection from you...Why don’t you use those armored cars and security guards for the family members of those who have been disappeared, been killed, or put in jail?” (qtd in López Vigil 395).

The threat of violence against his life was the same violence that many of the poor were experiencing and do still experience in their poverty every day. Romero was a persecuted leader, sharing by choice in the persecution of his people. This shared experience of marginalization resulting from aligning oneself with a marginalized group is the action that invites one from merely expressing “out-group” solidarity to now living in “in-group” solidarity.

This choice is a radical and powerful one and it is in this way I believe affirmative ties in solidarity, rather than ascriptive ones have more ability to transform unjust situations. The fact that I have to choose to be in solidarity with someone indicates a personal transformation, an individual change of heart. The “choice” speaks louder than

the ascription and indicates a further advancement on the path of solidarity towards seeing the self in others.

Now we have a clearer definition of solidarity, helped by the understanding of the value of social movements (Bayertz) and affiliation in and out of groups (Gould). We are also fortunate to have the example of the life and work of Óscar Romero to draw on for inspiration. Now I would like to take the concepts defined by the previous authors and lay out how I have come to view the path of solidarity. As with any journey, the journey of solidarity is one of stages, a series of stepping-stones along a path that never reaches its end. Another analogy is that solidarity is a continuum, and to one extreme live people who are completely self-isolated. To this extreme live people isolated from others, in many ways one side of the continuum is the “prism of privilege” that I have mentioned previously. As students and others engage in praxis, experiencing diversity and “the other” they begin to move out of their “prism” and more deeply into interconnectedness with other people.

Of all of these definitions, the one that is most apt to transform this world through liberation is that of Paulo Freire, he states,

“Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture. If what characterized the oppressed is their subordination to the consciousness of the master, as Hegel affirms, true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them those beings ‘for another.’ The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category

and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor—when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis” (Freire 49-50).

Out of this entire discussion I want the theme that you reading come away with to be the importance of choosing to solidarize yourself with marginalized groups. I hope it has been clear that when working alongside those suffering injustice, despite the challenges and sadness there are also many opportunities to rejoice. My journey is just beginning and despite the difficulty I feel blessed to have been able to begin walking. I now hope you will begin to walk too.

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PRIVILEGE, PRAXIS, AND SOLIDARITY

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The lives of the poor and marginalized of this world have been my best teachers. Walking alongside the vulnerable of society as a member of the Regis University Romero House program and studying for a year in El Salvador I have borne witness to poverty, suffering, and injustice, but also to much hope and redemption. This thesis is a reflection on my journey and provides a roadmap for others wanting to explore social justice. I ask what it means to become aware of the privileges one has and how such awareness is fostered. I explore the Freirean concept of praxis, which is reflection and action to change society, and I examine how intentional communities and academic service learning can raise awareness and serve as effective models of justice education. The third element of this thesis explores solidarity, that is, living in increasingly equal relationships with others. Using martyred Salvadoran Bishop Óscar Romero as an example I explore what is possible after one engages in praxis and becomes aware of their privileged position.