

Sermon (Sarah)

You're a brave lot today. But don't worry, I am not going to spend my sermon time cramming in history you can read or learn from people more knowledgeable than I am. Today, I hope to use the lens of advocating for justice in Guatemala as a way for us to see how courageous love can and will transform the world, and the way in which all justice work must be connected to real relationships and collaborative networks or the development of collective impact. I hope you will find this is an invitation to thinking about advocacy and social change not as projects we do for others or to others, but as meaningful work of the spirit which we engage while in relationship with others.

My story of going to Guatemala goes back to the first time I did a research paper in junior high. I chose to research Central America, and in particular the Sandinistas and the Iran-Contra

Affair in Nicaragua. (Yeah, I was that kind of kid). Soon after, my step-dad worked with a young man from El Salvador looking for someone to help him get political asylum to remain in the United States. He was quite young, and I was quite taken with him. I suddenly had a reason to learn to speak more coherently in Spanish. My interest in Central America began to expand. Later, in college, my best friend was a young man whose family had moved to Texas from Honduras. Very quickly, I began to meet many, many others from all over Mexico, Central America and South America. Some were friends, some were students or staff connected to the community college I worked in--El Centro College. Their stories of their homes rooted in me, began to slowly work their way into my heart. Eventually, I had a co-worker from Mexico who invited me in 2000 to visit his home in the state of Guanajuato. I went, and experienced a world previously completely unknown to

me. Later that year I also was able to visit El Salvador and learn about micro credit programs and other agencies working for change there. Finally, my travels took me to Guatemala where I traveled with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and learned about Fair trade coffee and human rights, as well as the history of Guatemala and its struggles to heal and to function...

This is about relationships, then. All of the work we may attempt to do in the realm of justice making is, must be, about relationships. When we do not see ourselves in the plight of others, when we do not know and love others, when we cannot connect our lives to the lives of people and places that are suffering; we cannot do justice work. We may find our intellect is engaged in a kind of ethical analysis, but truly we will be unable to speak up and act on behalf of the Other if we do not see the interconnected web in our work. So today I want

you to consider that we are talking about something much bigger than Guatemala and genocide--today I want you to see in the particularity of this issue the more universal truths about the work we are called to do as we seek salvation in this life and live the unity that makes us one. If you care about prison reform, or immigration, or the environment, or American Indian rights, or racism, or...I can go on...then you must catapult yourself into deeper relationship with the people and places that are calling you to witness and speak up. Last month we talked about deepening relationship with one another, and this month I am calling you into deeper relationship with a wider network or web of people and places.

In Guatemala I met some amazing people, both those who were from the U.S traveling with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UU's from all over) and the people whose job it

was to teach us about Guatemala and the work they engaged there. The backdrop of the trip was about fair trade coffee, so we were also joined by Equal Exchange, which is a co-op that works directly with local farmers to produce and export coffee (and other stuff like chocolate) to the rest of the world from places like Guatemala. Most UU congregations sell this coffee and chocolate as a way to support this work and to also raise some funds for their own local work. Along the way we learned about ongoing work for land reform that would return the indigenous Mayas to land ownership and cultivation of land; we learned about human rights challenges and the history of the “disappeared,” about a culture of violence against women and drug trafficking, and how these issues could be mitigated through fair trade. We thought about our roles as consumers of products that come from places struggling with war and genocide, about our roles as citizens of a country whose policies

create and support instability and suffering in other parts of the world as a way to maintain economic and political power over others. We made friends with each other and with our hosts, and we began to carry new stories in our hearts--stories we vowed to tell and to remember.

We spent two nights in a Mayan village with members of the cop that worked with Equal Exchange. There were two of us per family, and we ate, slept and worked with our hosts. My friend Nguyen and I stayed together. We shared a bed in a tin roof building with our hosts and two of their grandchildren. The rest of the family lived down the road a few houses. They had another building for cooking in. The grandmother cooked over a wood burning stucco “oven” that made the room smoky and dark. There was a single light bulb turned on at night to sustain communal visiting. She also had another item which surprised

me greatly--a blender! She blended our beans just as she used other cooking strategies that were hundreds of years old. Outside there was a latrine and running water (only at night). Pigs, chickens, and other animals roamed freely more or less, joining us at times to squawk or otherwise comment on the human activities. Our hostess and I tried to speak to each other in Spanish, which was a second language for both of us, making our communication complicated and punctuated by wild arm, hand and other body movements meant to attempt to illustrate ideas. I think I provided some great entertainment the first night when Nguyen found a large spider over our bed and asked me to kill it or at least persuade it to another corner. I don't remember which I accomplished, but I do remember thinking..there are 20 more where this one came from...I did not say this out loud as I hoped she'd be able to sleep.

We picked coffee beans on the hillside in the morning, and saw the whole spectrum of activities connected to this harvest-- extracting the bean from the cherry, drying and sorting, roasting, tasting, and preparing for sale.

We played tag with the kids and we visited a large operation where beans arrived to be sorted and exported; we tasted coffee. We bought beaded jewelry and artwork and textiles. We drank weak coffee and we contemplated the lives we had visited.

We visited the place where the names of the disappeared are etched in stone walls, much like the Vietnam war monument.

It's hard even now for me to understand the level of violence and cruelty that was perpetrated in Guatemala in the early 1980's. The main perpetrator, according to writer Kate Doyle of The Nation was "Ríos Montt, now 86, began a seventeen-month rule from 1982 to 1983, after he grabbed power in a coup and

then unleashed a bloody counterinsurgency against a guerrilla uprising and its alleged civilian supporters in the rural highlands... the conflict engulfed huge swaths of the country, but the current case against the Ríos Montt administration is focused on human rights crimes committed by Ríos Montt's army in the Ixil region of the department of Quiché, where 1,771 indigenous Mayans were killed and some 29,000 displaced in a scorched-earth strategy designed to destroy the Ixil communities once and for all.

As the prosecution made evident during the trial, the army's tactics were planned, coordinated and carried out according to a set of strategic and operational documents issued by the Ríos Montt regime. "Plan Victoria 82," for example, issued internally by the high command in June 1982, called for the "annihilation" not only of armed guerrillas but of the Mayan people who aided

them with food, shelter and information. In the context of the regime's extreme anti-communist ideology, the Mayan population was identified as an "internal enemy" and therefore a legitimate target for military attack. Judge Barrios, presiding over this case last May, described the consequences of that strategy when she read the verdict [in the May trial against Montt]: the Ixiles were subjected to massacre and forced disappearance; systematic rape; the killing of children, women and the elderly; the burning of their homes; the slaughter of their animals; the destruction of their crops; massive displacement; and death by hunger, sickness and bombing when they sought refuge in the mountains." The verdict of guilty was overturned soon after this, and the fight for justice has continued. (Guatemala's Genocide on Trial [Kate Doyle](#) May

22, 2013 The Nation

And now, as lands have been usurped or otherwise lost to the small farmers, we see large plantation like residences basically forcing the labor of the indigenous peoples--with no wages, no health care, nor retirement benefits,...it is clear to me that slavery is definitely still operating in the world to bring wealth to some at dire cost to others. The violence that still festers in Guatemala is pernicious, born in drug wars and violence against women and girls--perhaps a kind of hangover from war and disappearances, as if some of those still living are unable to reclaim a sense of neighbor and family, a sense of connectedness or wholeness. Women face the worst of it, and we met some organizers trying to address this and help women. The members of Manos Campesinas co-op spent their money not only improving the lives of individual families, but also reaching out to their community through programs for the education and training of women and girls that focused on

empowerment and ending the cycle of violence in communities.

Today in the world of social change, we are witnessing a shift from trying to solve problems as individual organizations with limited focus and resources to figuring out how to collaborate and leverage “togetherness.” This means taking an adaptive approach to problems and using our social capital and resources--that’s a sociologists way of saying our deepening connections and relationships--to tap into an energy and strategy they have coined “Emergence and collective impact.” This shift asks us to engage “a quality of inquiry” instead of “a quality of decisiveness” in our leadership. One article I read said we must be “intentional in our efforts” and “curious in our convictions.” I chose to use Guatemala and the fight for justice and reparation there as a topic this month because it draws me

into a conversation with various groups here in Laramie at the University and more broadly (which I now invite you into as well) and because we have the unique opportunity to meet a courageous person and connect with the work of a courageous group willing to speak truth to power and willing to demand that we remember and act to honor the memory of those who were brutalized; willing to demand that we think about the decisions we make here in the U.S. and how they impact people all over the world. I don't invite you into this as an act of ethical showboating or to be righteous. I invite you into this conversation as an act of love and relationship--with people here, with leaders like Rigoberta Menchu whose life is featured in the movie we will watch Thursday night, with leaders from Guatemala we have the chance to meet, with immigrants we meet whose lives have similarly been terrorized by war and

genocide, and with other organizations that seek to make human life more humane in a multiplicity of ways.

In our opening story we thought about these three questions:

“When is the best time to do things?” “Who is the most important one?” and “What is the right thing to do?” we are told that the time is now, the important ones are those standing next to us and the thing to do is stand next to them. In the story we find that we may be standing with someone unexpectedly-- someone whose work and life depends upon us to reach out and care for them. The recipients of our care and courage will shift as we move through the world and encounter new people and new crises. To me, this story tells me that we are in relationship as soon as our paths cross.

Here is the question I leave us with: Will we be able to respond to each other with the same immediate concern and willing heart as Leo does?