

Truth and Reconciliation in Guatemala

By Matt Lowen

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Dear Family and Friends,

"A lifetime isn't long enough for the beauty of this world and the responsibilities of your life."

I have read these words from the poet, Mary Oliver, many times during the last couple months as I have chased death in the form of exhumations and one inhumation, accompanying various human rights groups in Guatemala. I have felt a profound fullness in the last months of work, and these words have provided a strong comfort. An acknowledgement of the unending moments of beauty and forever developing responsibilities of life. An honest confession to the impossibility of doing it all, but not a concession, nor a failure. It is the stories, that I have been trusted with, from dear friends and people I hardly know, that have me brimming yet not bursting. So here I offer two stories. One of an inhumation in Ilom where I lived for a year, and another of an exhumation in Sesaquiquib.

"This was my first born daughter," Francisco said with a smile that told a story of pride and pain so true I knew I would never forget it. It caught my breath and left it stuck in my throat hidden behind a half smile, until he turned his eyes back to the tiny bones as they were being placed in the child's coffin. I cannot begin to imagine the sea that was going through his mind at that moment.

"That's my father," and he nodded into the grave where three skeletons lay uncovered but for the clothes they had been wearing. "The one on the left," said Santiago, who was not old enough to actually identify the remains of his father. His mother had told him, and now he was telling me. I am sure he had memories of his father, but not enough only now to be looking at his father for the first time in twenty-two years, and mostly just clothes that would fall apart as they were lifted out of the ground.

So it is, that the stories begin. Often without question, suddenly, like the afternoon showers during the rainy season here in Guatemala. There is nothing I have found myself capable of doing when it rains stories, but to keep walking beneath the falling sheets, under the dark sky, through the mud, always believing that somewhere the warmth of the sun will show, and forever thankful for the brutal honesty of the seasons. Most importantly, I am aware of the importance of these people's stories being told, retold and listened to.

We were greeted with smiles and children. Always children, everywhere that we

went. They circled us as we walked, and chased behind us laughing as I remembered the children of Iloil doing. They never tired of the car alarm that would sound with only a slight pat anywhere until we finally turned it off. Old friends I had known greeted me in Ixil and shaking their heads smiling when I had to answer in Spanish. Though it was a solemn task of returning the remains of nine daughters and sons of the people of Iloil who had been exhumed from the public cemetery several months before, I was happy to be back to the place I had lived for a year even if only for a day.

One of them was Francisco's first born daughter. Ingrid was her name. She had lived to be three months old after the March 23, 1982 massacre that had kept the survivors of Iloil living on the outskirts of another community only a half hour away, with no houses and barely any food for a year. Refugees dangerously close to home, and too close to death. It is estimated that 150 children died during that year. That is almost one every other day. Of the nine children that were exhumed, they ranged in ages from three months to five years old. Delicately, the bones were arranged in individual child-sized coffins and sealed after each family stood by, sometimes offering words and stories as Francisco had done, "This was my first born daughter."

Miguel Angel stood in front of the Iloil family members of the deceased children. He looked kindly at the faces and said calmly words that I believe need to be heard over and over. "Your children left something for us. They left a story in their bones. And what they revealed to us, was that everything you told us that had happened, was the truth. That what you said took place twenty-two years ago, really did happen." For people who have been massacred, starved, then blatantly ignored even after the peace process, I can think of few other words that they need to hear more: that everything you say that was done to you, really did happen. It is the truth and we believe you.

Later, back in Guatemala City, I would read the report done by the exhumation team. Due to the moist conditions of the soil and the smallness of the bones, little could be told from a forensic point of view. However, the testimonies of the mothers who petitioned for the exhumation of their children told a story no mother should ever have to endure. When people are forced to live in exile from their homes, no matter how close, without access to their land, or shelter, the results are deplorable. These children did not die of incurable diseases or rampant plagues. There was simply no food. I heard those words so many times in the year I lived in Iloil that I nearly forget the gravity of them. Imagine not having the ability to care for your child when she or he is sick. Nothing to feed them with, barely any shelter and certainly no medicine. It was not enough to kill their fathers and rape their mothers, the military made their children starve. The report concluded by saying that there were no signs of "violent actions," which meant that they were not shot with guns. It does not mean they died quietly in the night.

The children died with high fevers, vomiting, green diarrhea, white diarrhea, foam around the mouth, convulsions, and hair loss. Sometimes there was discoloration of the skin, blood in the stool, oftentimes for days before death finally took these children. It was a terrible death, and from what I was told, a hopeless one. My friend Antonio, the older brother of Ingracia, told us, "I was fourteen when I saw my sister die, and even though it happened after the massacre, these children were still killed by the military. It was lucky that I didn't get sick as well." What is left in the wake of war is not the end, but the beginning of suffering that too infrequently makes the evening news or morning papers anywhere in the world.

Kneeling beside the edge of the shallow grave in Sesaquiquib, that was now open exposing three skeletons, with Santiago still next to me, I took in the intensity of the whole situation. These people had been buried in haste by their family members, after the guerilla army had tied them up and shot them. Leaving, the guerillas had told the rest of the community to have them buried before they returned or else they would kill everyone. This was the second of the graves we had found. There would be four more, and in all twenty people, roughly buried beside family and friends, with a respect rarely given to those murdered during the 36 year war for the simple fact that they were buried by the community and not their murderers. But what good does respect do after death? I screamed inside. Santiago still grew up fatherless like countless others. He had not been helping the military like the guerilla soldiers accused. If anything he had been sympathetic to the guerilla side and the revolution. Regardless, he was not a combatant, and therefore painfully innocent.

Days later, after all twenty of the bodies had been exhumed, the remains were ceremoniously carried to the church, where Catholic mass was held before we would depart to Guatemala City with their loved ones so that the forensic team could perform the necessary tests and prepare the report. Dwarfed by the size of the church and the enormity of the occasion I sat near the back, listening to the prayers of the people as they remembered their family members.

Suddenly, in the quiet that is not exactly a quietude, but a subtle reverence that I often find in a Catholic church, I found myself whispering the words of the Lord's Prayer in English along with the mixture of Spanish and K'echi. The boxed remains of twenty people, all massacred on May 30, 1982, sat in the front of the church in a way that was surely more orderly than we ever are in life. Candles burned dangerously close to the cardboard boxes, with newly made crosses all bearing different names but the same date, carefully leaned up against them. I wanted to see with these peoples' eyes that afternoon, as if I ever could.

So I said those well worn, but recently unfamiliar words to myself more than anything, in hopes of gaining some perspective. I stumbled over the words until

I came to "and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us..." Candles flickered and scorched the edges of my soul with those words. Did these people before me really believe in the forgiveness of those who had shot bullets into the heads of their brothers and fathers? What about the mothers in Ilom who were not there – would they be able to pray those words with conviction? Could they even dream of forgiveness this afternoon, or were these simply rote words they had learned to practice and now they rolled off their lips without a thought to the application? I kept saying that particular phrase about forgiveness over and over, wondering if I could believe it, hoping it was possible, but staring at the boxes full of bones and clothes, physical memories of a too horrible reality. Even though I had helped pack those boxes with the remains of their family members, I couldn't imagine the gravity of what was really held inside, and even less I couldn't imagine what it would mean to forgive those actions. Around me the prayers kept rising in the solemn air of the church, and I kept wondering about the possibility of forgiveness.

Now more than a month later, still pondering forgiveness, I found editor Sy Safransky's words in the March 2004 issue of The Sun Magazine:

I don't know what's harder to fathom: the atrocities committed by the Nazi's or a prayer found written on a piece of wrapping paper in Ravensbruck, the largest concentration camp for women in Nazi Germany. The prayer asks God to remember "not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us. Remember the fruits borne of this suffering: the loyalty, the humility, the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown of this. And when they come to judgement, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness."

Perhaps the people sitting in the church in Sesaquib were able to forgive. Maybe they meant every word of that prayer just like a bird means to announce the beginning of a new day, and I should have known better. But I honestly do not know, nor am I the one to tell you anything more than simply a story.

In peace,
Matthew Lowen