

Exhumation of Truth - Notes from Guatemala

By Brooke Casey

Friends and family,

I am currently living and studying Spanish in Xela, the second largest city in Guatemala, high in the purple and green mountains of the western highlands. I feel so blessed to have nearly three months to engage myself with this lovely and complex language before I head to Guatemala City in September for a final week of training with the human rights legal organization CALDH and then begin my term as an accompanier in the Ixil region. I've begun to understand just how remote the Ixil is through the responses of Guatemalan friends who ask where I will be working. They either say: "Ixil? Where is that?" or they get wide eyes and say "Oh, that's way out there!"

This morning I am sitting out on the concrete patio of my casa with laundry hanging all around fluttering in the breeze. The table on which I have splayed out my notebook has had one wobbly leg propped up by a worn copy of the Guatemalan Peace Agreements, the once bold seal of the United Nations on its cover now fading in the sun. A housemate and I laughed bitterly about the poignancy of this. "At least the accords are being used for something, eh?!" This sentiment, that little of substance has changed for the better since the signing of the peace agreements between military and guerilla forces in 1996, has been conveyed to me more than once by Guatemalans I've spoken with.

You have only to browse my vocabulary lists to know the tone of our conversations, or the daily notices in the newspapers--various words and phrases for gangs, rape, assault, poverty, governmental corruption, different kinds of weapons, and the well-known verb "herir", to wound or hurt. I was with a couple of friends in the small pub they own when they received the news that a friend's father had been gunned down in a spray of machine gun fire while pumping gas into his car at a station near his home. This just days after a young friend of their's was kidnapped here in xela, beaten and left to die with a slit throat at just 18 years old. Another father caught between two warring cocaine traffickers? Another youth lost to gang violence?

But these occurrences are not unique to Guatemala. There is violence the world over right? It just happens that here there is rampant impunity for crimes committed. As well, the same clandestine mechanisms for violence that existed during the war (ie: counter-insurgency specialists trained in torture techniques by U.S. military schools as well as the intellectual authors of civilian massacres) have now been turned loose to run rogue mafia-like assassin-for-hire businesses or to be congressional rep's (as in the case of former military dictator and committer of genocide, Efraim Rios Montt). I must mention here, by the way, that Montt's daughter, who has served as his political strategist for several years will soon marry Illinois Republican Congressman, Jerry Weller. Weller happens to be a member of the House Committee on International Relations and sits on the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee so naturally this happy union has caused some speculation over a dangerous political conflict of interest. Weller's response? Well, he wasn't available for comment but "his spokesman, Telly Lovelace, said the wedding, which was to take place after the November election, posed "no difficulty and no conflict." It's like a congressman who's a farmer and serves on the agriculture committee, or one who's on the finance committee

even though his wife works at a bank," Mr. Lovelace said. "It has nothing to do with policy.""
Uh, right.

The papers here are daily smattered with contrasting articles depicting both the seemingly constant assassinations in the Capital as well as captivating stories about political representatives arguing over what sort of matching shirts they should all wear to a catered meeting at the beach. Should they be button-down or T-shirts? What color? Decisions, decisions.

I attended a conference the other day in which a forensics anthropologist spoke to us about his work with the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Team, those who complete the exhumation of clandestine graves all over the country as part of an ongoing criminal investigation of civilian massacres during the war. The foundation, founded in 1996 after the release of the Truth Commission Report, states its two intentions as: (1) To support the legal system in pursuing cases against those who committed atrocities, and (2) To provide dignity to the people who suffered and survived these atrocities by allowing for proper burial and payment of respect. Since the process has begun, 2,500 bodies have been exhumed (about 20% of which are children under the age of 16, but not including babies still in utero.) Of these, 350 cases have been prepared for trial, 5 have gone through the legal process, and 1 perpetrator has been found guilty (in the case of one of the Rio Negro massacres.)

To initiate an exhumation, a request must be made by survivors or a community group in the area of the clandestine grave. The anthropologist we met told us that most often the silence is broken by women who want to clarify and make public the truth about the violence they endured and bury their fallen family members in a proper ceremony. But sometimes there is a polarization of the community in which some people want the exhumations and others don't. This may be because the perpetrators of the crimes live right next door to the survivors and don't want the truth revealed. Other times it is simply out of fear that the stirring up of old problems will only bring more trouble to the community, and still other times it is because the influx of radical Evangelical doctrine after governmental repression of Catholicism taught that the massacres were God punishing the indigenous for their sins and that instead of complaining about the violence they should be quiet and ask for forgiveness.

I am still haunted by the sad, down-turned eyes of the anthropologist, whose job it is to re-create the deaths of those who have fallen, to imagine what happened in their final moments. He told of a woman they found with a 7 month old baby wrapped in her arms and I can't get the image of that small bundle of bones curled into the larger nest of bones, out of my mind. He told us that when a community was fleeing from the army into the mountains, it was often difficult to escape with small children who ran slowly and had trouble swimming across rivers, and babies and dogs made noises that could cost the whole community its life by revealing their hiding place. So often the forensics teams will find graves filled with babies and dogs and children and the one or two women who stayed behind to die with them.

While most of the exhumations have been of civilian graves, the team has also completed the exhumations of several military and guerilla graves. And in fact I was privileged to attend the funeral of 8 guerrillas recently exhumed and buried in the indigenous village of Santa Anita. I was able to attend this ceremony because one of my teachers, a former guerrilla herself, was a

friend of the fallen. The rain spared us that day while we rocked and swayed to off-key Catholic hymns and firecrackers in a sea of bright flowers and photographs. One of the speakers at the ceremony was Rodrigo Asturias, former URNG (ex-guerrilla party) presidential candidate and son of Miguel Angel Asturias, Nobel-Laureate author. Later, a group of the village's youth performed a theatre piece depicting the reasons why their indigenous parents had joined the resistance movement and fallen for their beliefs. It was poignant to watch as the adults of the community witnessed their children discovering and embodying their roles in a war that occurred when they were just babies.

Well, I hope I haven't overwhelmed you with the length or content of this letter. As I close, I am reminded by the sounds of church bells and firecrackers and someone singing "happy birthday" down the street that as intense are the challenges facing the people of Guatemala, equally fierce is the determination to live and to laugh and to love. I am humbled and enlivened daily by the profound generosity and vision I witness both in the streets and in the community projects here. And just as often I am reminded how little I know and how much I have to learn. It is with an open and deeply contented heart that I wish you a beautiful July. I hope you are finding peace and inspiration in those around you. Please keep in touch and let me know what you are up to, and thank you again for your profound and trusting support of me on this path.

Abrazos,
Brooke

To read more on the Montt/Weller marriage, see: www.nytimes.com. To read about and respond to an urgent action update in regards to human rights violations here in Guatemala, see: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/urgent/newslett.html>

Brooke Casey will begin as CAMINOS' next acompanier in the communities of Ilom and Xix at the end of September 2004.