

UUCA's human rights observer/accompanier, Ali Boggs, finished her 6-months of work in rural Guatemala in August. (*Accompaniers provide an international presence to Guatemalans organizing in defense of their rights in a variety of contexts, including genocide cases.*) Here is her final eloquent Friends & Family letter, sent on October 5th, to all of us – her sponsors in the U.S. Please take time to read it. Thank you for your continued interest and support of UUCA's human rights work in Guatemala. Guatemala Project Steering Committee, Chris Sutton, Chair

Dear Friends and Family,

I'm months and miles away from my experience as a Guatemalan accompanier, but the pain is still there, a deep ache residing just under the rib cage. It's silent, except for when I call it up again, and all I have to do is remember. Words, faces, the way the light fell on a certain afternoon. Accompaniment was not easy, and it satisfied none of the expectations people here in the U.S. seem to have for young, idealistic travelers. Yes, I did live in the jungle and eat copious amounts of eggs and beans, but my experience was far from the romantic humanitarian adventure that many here seem to imagine. More than anything, it became a struggle to come to terms with the disjointed realities I was living, and the struggle was first and foremost a spiritual one. I've decided to be honest in this letter. Rather than give you facts, I want to talk about how I felt in Guatemala, how I feel now, and what I've learned from those feelings.

Recently an article was published in *Guernica*, critically looking at normative "reconciliation" practices used for survivors of genocide. Jean Amery, a Jewish writer who was captured and tortured by the Gestapo and survived, describes the violence of torture as a mutilation that doesn't go away after the physical act itself is finished. He goes on to say that in genocide, victims "lose their 'trust in the world,' ...a belief that the world will defend your right to exist..." This trust can't be regained until perpetrators assume the full responsibility of their acts- in all of their incredible horror and pain, and "only then could the victims' 'extreme loneliness' be eased." Forgiveness and reconciliation in the form of restorative justice courts in Rwanda, or Guatemala's attempts to acknowledge survivors on specially chosen national holidays, may ease perpetrators' consciences and make us, as concerned outsiders, feel better. But what about survivors? How do genocide survivors in Guatemala feel, almost 30 years after they watched as loved ones were brutally massacred?

I remember speaking with one woman in a community near Chimaltenango. We breezed through the usual small talk- crops, kids, food- before she told us that she was sick. We asked her what was wrong, and she didn't really specify. "Ever since the violence," she said, "I've been sick. It made us all sick, and it has no cure." She described how her sister had died of "susto," soon after being witness to the massacre in their community. There is no direct translation for "susto," in English. Literally, it would mean intense fear, or terror, but in Guatemala it was both a spiritual and physical sickness that could prove fatal. As we sat there in silence, I was filled with a deep, aching despair. It

seemed to leak in from all around me, as the woman looked down at the floor and then back at us, a weary smile on her face. "Thanks for your visit," she said.

Is it naive and selfish for me to hope for a cure for unimaginable terror? Almost every survivor I spoke with said how she or he was still afraid that the same things would happen again, that all of the violence would repeat, like some sort of reoccurring nightmare. I remember being struck by this, as from my limited perspective at the time, a lot had changed in Guatemala since the genocide. For one thing, there were no longer military-mandated patrols in every community, and the last formal massacre had taken place in the mid 1990's.

However, the genocide in Guatemala, like most mass-killings, was based on a simple logic, a decision: certain people were deemed worthy of life, and others weren't. That decision has never been taken responsibility for or even acknowledged. It's impossible to meaningfully justify and equally as impossible for us to comprehend, but it happened all the same, and it's still happening, but differently; in the continuing denial of education and land, and in the silencing of pained voices who want to speak of their trauma and be recognized. Very little has changed since 1982. Some of the same people who were once deemed unfit to live by the government are still alive, and they're still the same people they were when the massacres happened, so why wouldn't it happen again?

All around there is an incredible sense of having been violated. I struggled with this feeling for most of my time down there, mistaking the heaviness I felt for sadness or hopelessness. I'm not suggesting that what I felt wasn't a mixture of many different, indescribable emotions, but it touched at something that went beyond them all, something that seemed integral to how we imagine ourselves as humans. It was the heaviness of having become invaluable. This was the legacy of concrete physical acts, such as rape or murder, but it touched at something far more devastatingly soulful- the ways in which people's lives and the lives of their loved ones were shown to be no longer important enough to sustain. As houses were burned and people were killed, entire communities were being violated of the collectively imagined right to *life itself*. For me, feeling the way that this trauma of negated life was being enduringly experienced by community members was a form of second-hand trauma that has affected me soulfully, and I know that it will take time and experience to heal.

If reconciliation, as it is known in the "human rights" world today, is impossible, and the legacy of "susto" left by incredible acts of violence and violation will continue to haunt survivors, if perpetrators refuse to assume responsibility for the terror they instilled, and continue to threaten the lives of survivors with dams and mines, then what is accompaniment all about? Why was I there? I started to feel more and more like the need for accompaniment was just another terrible legacy of the genocide, a reminder that people still didn't feel safe. The safety that people expressedly felt in my presence didn't seem to be grounded in the current Guatemalan reality I was becoming more and more familiar with- a collaborative effort by various heads of government, transnational

corporations, drug-traffickers, and large-landowning families to exert power in whatever way possible. I was starting to see what little value my passport would actually hold in any conflict. However, that didn't really seem to matter, as I was struck again and again by how undeniably real the sense of safety my presence provided was for the people I spent time with.

I think accompaniment also made people feel more hopeful. Many people told me that our visits made them feel like people still cared and like they weren't as alone anymore. I remember one of my last nights as an accompanier. My partner Lisa and I went to have dinner with a family in Santa Maria Tzeja. I had always felt connected to Manuel and Dolores and their family, like we were somehow able to reach out and find each other in that painful mess of borders, history, and identities, although, like with any human relationship, it seemed so rare and fragile. When we came in that evening Dolores told us, "now we're going to do something special," and brought a tremendous chocolate cake to the table. "For your going away celebration," she said. As we devoured the cake (I probably had four pieces), Manuel told us how in 2 years, on his 80th birthday, he would finally tell everyone the complete story of what he had seen in his life so far. He started to tell us some of it, but it was clear that he was getting tired. Entire decades were ignored, and certain moments were infused with soft-spoken but animated political tirades, and all the while Dolores had fallen asleep in the corner. As we left the house that night, I remembered how months earlier Dolores and Manuel had invited us to spend the Thursday of Semana Santa with them down by the River Tzeja, and how we had eaten chicken soup and bread with honey. It was a beautiful day, thick with sun, and it felt so wonderful to be sharing all of it with them- not as survivors of genocide, not as refugees, not even as activists- but as people, just trying to create some sort of liveable space together. I will never know what accompaniment meant to them, but I do know what it meant for me. It meant that moment by the river, and that night as we stuffed ourselves on cake and could hardly keep our eyes open, and all of the other moments in which I was learning to live and love better.

There is so much healing that remains to be done- for victims, for perpetrators, for all of us. The world is big and unfair and so much of it makes so little sense. I don't think anything is going to erase the incredible terror and pain that Guatemalan genocide survivors relive everyday. I don't think I'm going to be able to stop powerful people from making decisions that cause other people pain. But there are still so many things I, we, can do - the connections we can choose to make everyday to the humans all around us, the ways we can allow ourselves to grow to love each other better, with more respect and more joy, the ways we can show each other, even in the smallest ways, that our lives are valuable, at a time when that value is increasingly put into question by systems that favor capital over lives. Most importantly, we have the incredible ability to *imagine* new and better worlds and ways of relating to each other. In the words of Eduardo Galeano:

"Although we can't predict what time will bring, at least we have the right to imagine how we would like the future to be. In 1948 and 1976, the United Nations published extensive

lists of human rights; but the overwhelming majority of humans don't have more than the right to see, hear, and be silent. And what if we began to exert the never proclaimed right to dream? What if we were to imagine, just for a little while?"

In homage to the new worlds we have yet to imagine, and in solidarity with all those who still have the courage to imagine them,

Ali

Susie, Linfield. "Living with the Enemy," *Guernica*. July, 2010.
http://www.guernicamag.com/features/1853/linfield_7_1_10/