

Mara Komoska, July 24, 2009

Report for NYYM Summer Sessions about my work in El Salvador, August 2008, supported in part by the Sharing Fund

El Salvador enchanted me when I first visited as a college student in 1995, because in this tiny country it seemed that everyone we met had been touched tragically by the 12 year civil war. And yet, the people were so open, warm and generous. I felt impelled to understand how people could have suffered so much trauma and still continue to be so open, giving and joyful. During the week my class spent in El Salvador, we visited the office of the Comadres, the “Committee of the Mothers of the Disappeared and Assassinated of El Salvador.” There, we heard the testimony of Alicia de Garcia, the director and one of the founding members of the Comadres.

Her *testimonio* and the question and answer period afterwards changed my life. Alicia told us about her personal experience of having been kidnapped, raped and severely tortured by her own government. She told us that their office had been bombed eight times and that all of their files (documenting the cases of the disappeared) had been destroyed. We all sat there in shock after listening to her story. Then a classmate of mine raised his hand and asked Alicia, “Are you afraid to continue doing this work? Are you afraid to walk down the street on the way to your office because you know you could be kidnapped again or that the office could be bombed again?” Alicia thought about it a moment and then said, “No, I am not afraid, because I know that our path is just. I know that what we are doing is right. And Archbishop Romero said to us that the right path may be covered with briars, but that you have to tread it, because it is the right way; it is God’s way.”

I was amazed that people could be that brave. Hearing their stories changed my life and made me reevaluate my definition of strength. As I returned to New York, I worked to face my own fears and to become as strong as I could, the inspiration of the Comadres always guiding me. My experience with the Comadres has been a beacon of light in my life for the past fourteen years. In my heart, I always knew I would return to be useful in some way to these wonderful women and to learn more about how they can be so strong after suffering so much.

This past August 2008, with the help of the Quaker Sharing Fund, I returned to El Salvador to work with the Comadres.

I spent a month working with the Comadres and also with a group of disabled veterans with whom they are very connected. I am an ESL teacher and so that was the skill I offered to the Comadres when I called them last spring. There was more interest in English within the veterans’ group, so I taught the veterans every morning, afterwards heading over to the Comadres office to help them with the archiving of their pictures. They have pictures which span their entire 34 year history. The time I spent working with the pictures was also spent getting to know the members of the Comadres. There is Madre Alicia, still the director and the most active member of the group, and Patti, an

adopted daughter of Madre Alicia who lost her parents in the war and has been a human rights activist since she was ten years old. They are the people I worked with the most.

As Patti sorted through the pictures to be archived, she would stop to explain certain pictures. And we would talk, as people do when they sit together and drink coffee. She told me about Madre Alicia, about her own history, about her feelings about the ex-armed forces veterans that she comes into contact with regularly, about the history of the country and the Comadres, as well as their current activities. It was an invaluable learning experience.

I want to share with you a little bit of what I learned about the Comadres. To understand the Comadres one must understand the history of El Salvador. In El Salvador, as in so many Latin American countries, the history of exploitative and repressive governments run by wealthy elites stretches back to colonial times. Salvadorans have had a culture of resistance from the beginning. There have been periodic popular uprisings throughout their history. The Comadres came into existence in 1975, during a period of particularly brutal repression by their government. Students, union members, and anyone who was considered a “political dissident” by the government at that time were being kidnapped, tortured and often killed. This form of repression, used to silence dissent, is called “forced disappearance” and is still used in many countries to this day.

Forced disappearances increased in the 1970s, including one of Alicia de Garcia’s brothers. Later several of her children would be taken, tortured and killed, and she herself was to endure disappearance and extreme torture. It was during her search for her brother that she met other women repeatedly, and they formed an alliance; a support group that would identify who was missing and search for them collectively. This was extremely dangerous work ... but as I said before, Salvadorans have a strong and well-established tradition of resistance. Before his assassination in 1980, Liberation Theologist Archbishop Oscar Romero encouraged these women to organize themselves formally into a visible group. The women agreed. This opened them up to more persecution but also allowed their efforts to have a greater effect.

The Comadres’ work during the civil war, which lasted from 1980 to 1992, was varied, unrelenting and dangerous. Their main work was to document and protest the cases of the disappeared. The Comadres took photos to identify bodies they found in clandestine cemeteries and along the roadsides. They then prepared a file for each person, and brought the cases to the authorities and demanded that the cases be investigated. They went to prisons to search for the disappeared, and to provide support to the prisoners.

Their most visible and famous work was their protest marches to demand the release of political prisoners. They all wore black dresses and white handkerchiefs on their heads and held placards and banners bearing photos and names of the disappeared. They were a striking sight to behold. They were also very connected with groups such as Amnesty International which would put international pressure on the Salvadoran government to free prisoners.

During the civil war, the Comadres received significant financial support from the international community. Their members travelled all around the world telling their stories. They were the first recipients of the Kennedy Prize in the 1980s.

In 1992, the Peace Accords were signed, officially ending the war. After the signing of the Peace Accords, the international human rights community turned its attention to other parts of the world and by 1995 the Comadres stopped receiving any form of financial support.

When I asked Madre Alicia about the current financial situation of the Comadres, she said, "That is a very grave problem." She said that when groups come to listen to their stories, they pass a basket around for donations. And there is a group of nuns in Wisconsin who send them \$1500 a year to pay a Spanish psychologist who has been working with the Comadres members on large-group traumahealing. But that is the only financial support they receive.

And yet they persevere. It is truly amazing how much they do with so little. Tragically, most of the cases of the disappeared that the Comadres have documented have not yet come to trial. This is largely because of a General Amnesty provided by the Peace Accords which prevents anyone who has admitted to committing war crimes from being prosecuted. The right-wing ARENA [Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, or Nationalist Republican Alliance] government's position on investigating unsolved cases of disappearances and killings was, "The war is over. Look forward, not backward. It is time to forgive and forget." The Comadres' position is, "We can forgive, but we cannot forget." They say that all they want is justice; not revenge. They want the cases to be brought to trial, and for the perpetrators to serve a short sentence of about five years. Madre Alicia said that what has motivated them all along has been the strongest bond in the world – the love of a mother for her child. She said that the pain of losing a child and not knowing what happened to that child is worse than any other pain that she could endure.

After my stay in El Salvador last August, I gave a donation to the Comadres. \$500 of the money came from a section of the Sharing Fund designated for projects of individual Latin American Witness. Madre Alicia told me that they used the money to help to place more names on a Memorial Wall in San Salvador to commemorate the disappeared and assassinated (which was constructed with no government support), they traveled to the countryside to conduct trainings in basic health care and first aid, and to pay for a third group to work with the Spanish psychologist on traumahealing.

At the end of my stay, Madre Alicia told me that the way in which I could be the most useful would be to tell as many people as possible about them and their work. She said that I could be a representative of the Comadres in the United States. So, I intend to continue this work.

As I said, I also worked with a group of disabled veterans from both sides of the civil war who run a Cooperative Credit Union together. That is where I taught English. At first, I

was nervous to work with veterans. Because of my pacifist beliefs I have shied away from contact with the military in the past. But I learned so much from working with the veterans every day. Several of them, in completely different parts of the country, who did not know each other, said the same thing to me. They said, now the war is over. Now we cannot afford to hate each other. Now is a time to remember that we are brothers and to make peace. Now is a time to forgive and forget.

Nowhere was that sentiment more palpable than at the Cooperative Credit Union. After the Peace Accords of 1992, the veterans (from both the revolutionary forces and the military) did not receive the pensions that they were guaranteed in the Accord. They found that, in order to have strong enough power and influence to pressure the government, they needed to work together. So they formed an alliance and have been able to secure much of what they were promised in the Accords.

Several of the veterans there told me that they had formed a kind of reconciliation just from working together on a daily basis, but that they were interested in participating in a more formal reconciliation process. In April 2009 I met Val Liveoak of Friends Peace Teams. She has been doing AVP in El Salvador, Colombia and Bolivia and is just this summer launching HROC (Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities) workshops in Colombia. The HROC work is based on AVP and is reconciliation and rebuilding trust work originally developed with Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and Burundi. I have been in contact with Val and hope to connect the people she has been working with in El Salvador with the disabled veterans when I return next month.

I had an amazing trip last summer – even better than I had expected, thanks to the indefatigable and joyful spirits of the people I met. I plan to continue giving talks about the Comadres and the disabled veterans. If your Meeting is interested in hosting one of these talks, please contact me. I want to thank Witness Coordinating Committee and the Sharing Fund for considering this work a priority and I hope that NYYM will continue to do so.

Epilogue:

Now a new day is dawning in El Salvador. An historic change occurred in the government of El Salvador this year. On March 15, 2009, Mauricio Funes, a presidential candidate from the former revolutionary party, the FMLN, won the presidential election. This is the first time in all of El Salvador's history that someone not from the ruling elite, someone not interested in lining his own pockets or those of his business cronies, has been elected. So, it seems that there is great potential for things to change in El Salvador, and for the Comadres. Funes has said that he will dedicate his presidency to Monseñor Oscar Romero and his "preferential option for the poor." I know that there are many hearts in El Salvador and all over the world sincerely hoping that he does.