

SALVATION IN CROSSING OVER
A gift from Colombia

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Janna Hunter-Bowman

"For you are saved through faith--the gift of God," Ephesians 2:1-8.

Ephesians 5:25-33

"Go, said Jesus, your faith has healed you." Mark 10:52

We usually sat in uncomfortable plastic lawn chairs packed close together. It didn't matter if you sang in key or even knew the tune, just so you sang loud. The Sunday service at the Mennonite church I attended in Bogotá, Colombia, was hours long and usually culminated in an altar call. Then, after the service was over, came the requests for money and political favors that I could not grant.

If I were traveling to the countryside I wouldn't have to wait until Sunday for a service. Most Protestant churches had "worship" three, or four times each week and would often have a Pentecostal flair. When I traveled with Ricardo Esquivia or Peter Stucky, then director of Justapaz and Mennonite Church Colombia President, respectively, I would likely be taken for their wife.

I had many personal struggles with the churches in Colombia. Yet, Colombia's people of faith caused me to reflect on God's invitation to salvation. I had to ask again: What does it mean to be saved?

LEARNINGS:

In all its imperfection and woundedness, I want to uplift the Colombian church and this unexpected gift that it gave to me. I left the U.S. with something different in mind. I was disillusioned with the U.S. Mennonite church that seemed largely content to be an historic peace church rather than an active agent for God's justice and peace. By contrast, if North American Mennonites know anything about the Colombian Mennonite church, it is likely related to its illogically courageous peace witness.

Active Christian peacemaking that I saw in Colombia is an area of authenticity that had a deep spiritual impact on me. But why would I choose to define my immersion into the reality of Colombian friends in salvation terms? As Michele Hershberger asks (God's Story, Our Story: Exploring Christian faith and life) Faith and Life Resources 2003, Salvation of what kind--saved from what, saved into what ---saved to be what?

Colombians didn't instill in me a zeal for some eternal bliss waiting enticingly on the other side of violent death. Rather they gave me a yearning for the relationally and spiritually redemptive work of Emmanuel ("God with us") in the "here and now."

This less common understanding of salvation speaks of an intimate encounter with the living God in times of vulnerability. And what I experienced necessarily entailed a collective experience or maybe an ongoing process.

I can't explain all this theologically, but I experienced the reality of God with us because I

know God was. So I will share two personal stories of women whose faith challenges my own. These are two of the living texts that, in my own faith journey, demonstrated physical and spiritual aspects of salvation.

STORIES:

1. Deya

I know Deya as a generous and patient friend. This forty-year-old single woman with an infectious laugh taught me to cook traditional foods from her native Caribbean coast.

Life is not easy for Deya. She struggles to find work and make ends meet. Her chronic health problems are due in part to high stress and malnutrition. She came to the capital city of Bogota to live with an aunt when she was a teen because her family had no money to support her. She grew up with hunger and she didn't attend school beyond the 2nd grade.

At night -- before her drunk father returned to their dirt-floor house -- she had to choose between being hit or spending the night outside in the jungle. She usually opted for the outdoors, and taking her chances with poisonous snakes.

In the past 6 years or so the armed groups have killed 33 members of her family. Deya's story of mind-numbing violence is one I might not believe if I didn't know her personally, and too many others with similar stories of loss and violation compounded by economic hardship.

My family-parents and 18-year-old sister and 23 year-old brother-- spent Christmas 2003 with me in Colombia. They had the distinct privilege of eating Deya's cooking and hearing a detailed, heart wrenching account of her story.

She took us on a journey from the place where we sat in Bogota, to the place she lives every moment --in the presence of her family's persecutors. She gave us a glimpse of her struggle to be free from the brutality and inhumanity of her past.....of her attempt to create a future for herself that honors those she loves but breaks out of bondage to those who would crush her hope for justice and her own spiritual freedom.

My family was taken aback by the raw honesty and intensity of the narrative and the sacred space that airing it created. Silence and tears followed. My Dad broke the quiet by asking how we and their church could pray for her.

Deya hardly paused before responding: "When I visit my home town I face the killers of my family on the streets. I know who they are. At times I am filled with incredible anger and hate towards them. (She clenched her fists and shook.) Pray that I am never overcome by rage. Pray that I, too, don't kill.

Her contribution to my evolving understanding of salvation is the necessary presence and interdependence of both spiritual and physical components. Deya is seeking the New Testament meaning of "heal and save."

Deya yearns to be set free from the violence that plagues her family and torments her innermost thoughts. She acknowledges human weakness through confessing her potential to take another life. But at the same time she embraces the hope of continual transformation available through the power of a loving God and sacred community. She understands that the very lives of her persecutors may depend on it.

2. Alicia, Nun from Putumayo:

Sixty-year-old Alicia has risked her life on multiple occasions to provide refuge to local peasant families being persecuted by the armed groups. One of the groups told her she would be a military target if she continued. Her response: "kill me, go ahead and kill me." She explained, "I knew the community outrage would be enormous if they did just that...and I was not going to stop our work."

Despite how closely she has lived to it in her 32 years as a nun, Alicia is clearly still indignant with death. She looked at me squarely in the eyes with a penetrating stare and said, "As a Christian, I have the right to defend life." (...But I cannot fail to mention that her belly-laugh is as memorable as her piercing eyes.)

After meeting her in January 2004, just months before returning to the U.S. I wrote in my journal: Sometimes I'm convicted by the most basic of lessons even at this late stage in my Colombia chapter: The faithful of Colombia risk their lives and lose them to be true to their convictions while in North America we have a hard time relinquishing comfort. Our physical comfort and material wealth is insulation not only from pain and suffering, but also from God's entering into these times when our humanity becomes acute.

But moreover, the Old Testament meanings of salvation (again, as noted by Michelle Hershberger)- help in time of distress, deliverance, bring to safety -- finds resonance in this community's life. Alicia and the community members were physically vulnerable-together. They depended in faith utterly on one another for safety, refuge and any sense of security. In an individualistic, affluent society, it's harder to feel the need for such mutual vulnerability and inter-dependence. This, too, separates us from God who looks to enter the lives that open to God's Spirit.

Deya and Alicia are two women who have decided: death stops with me. They actively resist the temptation to let themselves be defined by the evil deeds that threaten them and have deprived them of those they loved the most. To these women, faith is far more than the right politics or an intellectual commitment. It shapes the fabric of their lives. It is their daily bread.

3. One story of my own experience in "letting go, being held, and staying safe." In Colombia I was removed from life in the U.S.-- my sense of power, my comfort zone and community. Stripped of these things, I learned to depend on my neighbors, on God, and Jesus' model in a new way for me.

One example: My job monitoring US policy and working with the peace church program took me to remote parts of Colombia. I relied on the guidance of Colombian colleagues to tell me where I could travel responsibly as single "gringa," as not to put myself in undue risk or jeopardize the local community.

When traveling to a new place, local church people I'd never met were always waiting to pick me up at the airport and escorted me for the duration of my trip. There were a few times when I felt scared, but I was never alone and thanks be to God and thanks be to community, it was my faith paradigm that's been reworked, not my body.

Through physical vulnerability and relationships with people like Alicia and Deya, I think I better understand the words of Peter Stucky, President of Colombian Mennonite church, when he says "we are all in a fragile little boat in the middle of a tempestuous sea, and we don't have a separate salvation. We survive together, or we sink together."

Peter discovers relevance in what the Apostle Paul says about husband and wife in Ephesians 5, that in our neighbor's well being is our wellbeing, and that our neighbor's suffering is our misfortune as well. (Now, very curiously our President George Bush mentioned this in his inaugural speech: the best way to ensure our liberty is to work towards the liberty of other people.)

Throughout my time in Colombia Peter Stucky and I had an ongoing conversation about the importance of North American Christians voyaging into a world of vulnerability and dependence. Before I went to Colombia I was very ready to get out of the United States for awhile, and I sensed that it would be very important in my life. But towards the end of my time I had had a deep sense that I had a spiritual redemptive experience.

Peter once said that salvation consists of meeting God, having an experience with the living God. It is during this intimate encounter that God "converts us to God's project." When we examine scripture we find God located where people are marginalized, outcast and disadvantaged. That's where God is dwelling, accompanying and working. It is the God of justice and grace. Now back in the United States in the church, I venture to say that this journey, the crossing over (tracks here in the US, but my experience war-torn Latin America and the distance is significant)- is essential.

In working with delegations, I've been witness to others who, when getting out of their comfort zones, and cross over are transformed.

I met my friend Hoyt a year ago at the Hymn Sing for Peace on the capital lawn. Hoyt Maulden grew up as an army brat, and is a new Mennonite who works as a contracted computer programmer at the State Department. He was one of the participants in the delegation Ricardo and I led last month.

He's given me permission to share the following reflection on his journey in crossing over written since he's been back: "I hadn't yet seen the Colombian Mennonite SERVICE and PEACEBUILDING in its natural habitat-only in the demeanor and faces of people who have been (and live) there-Janna, Bonnie, Jenny, and Ricardo. They had been changed; I wanted to know what had changed them."

Three quarters of the way to the trip he looked at my quizzically and said, "I get it. This delegation is not about us helping them. It's about learning from them and changing our paradigm."

He wrote:, "It's our hearts that are the problem. We, MennoUSAmericans, must resolve to ACT, to change our hearts so that we can join our lives with those who suffer. There is a link between materialism in the U.S. and the destructive, self-propelling and self-destructive militaristic policies we promote around the world. I am beginning to understand how 'the comforts of life separate us from Him' as I was told more than once by Colombians."

Hoyt struggles with the question-must we suffer, lose all, to be close to God?

He goes on to write, "One 10 year-old boy told me his only wish in life was that when Jesus returned, that "He would not forget us." I truly hurt for him; I gave him some awkward assurance. Then the light bulb went on. It hurt my heart and made me secretly envious. This young boy didn't seem to know that Jesus is much more likely to forget ME!"

"Will I allow myself to be transformed? Will I diminish my reliance on the comforts of this life?"

"Maybe I need to think on that 10 year-old boy and fear his question for my own life."

I prepared this sermon for World Fellowship Sunday over a month ago. Our relationship to people of faith elsewhere is relevant to our salvation. As a community, a congregation, Mennonite Church USA, and Christian U.S. America, how is faith saving us day by day. How is it shaping us, our policies and lifestyles? In this seductive land of half-truths, it's too easy for me to forget how sisters Deya and Alicia do salvation.

I need the community to remind me to seek and be salvation in this country. I'm struggling to figure out how a community not immersed in the suffering and courageous peacemaking I experienced can be the body of Christ sufficient to meet this paradigm. I don't have the answer. But it must have something to do with giving ourselves over to being the "little Christs" Ricardo Esquivia described to me. We have Jesus' model and can claim the Spirit's power. We should be able to do all that Christ did, and more because the Holy Spirit is come.

If, after crossing over, we want to stay on the other side. If we want to continue the salvation experience God invites us to enjoy and that our sisters and brothers around the world deserve and require of us, it will take a community of Little Christs. My prayer is that we, as a congregation, continue to respond to the every-day alter calls and live in saving grace here and now.