

September 24, 2005

Dear Everyone,

It didn't really hit me until the other day.

I mean, I understood intellectually what had happened in the place where I will be living for the next five months, but somehow it wasn't until then that things slipped into focus.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I just completed my first month in the Ixcán region of Guatemala. This area is in the north, the community where I work being only a two hour walk from the border of Chiapas, Mexico. It is hot, it is deforested jungle, one of the few parts of Guatemala whose terrain is not defined by dream-like volcanic mountain ranges. This is the lowlands, its climate, its flora and fauna new to me.

There used to be tigers here. And jaguars. Monkeys. Alligators. I guess there still are, in the more remote areas, although of these (to me) exotic and mysterious creatures I have seen no trace. I suppose as their habitat disappears, they flee further into those bits that (for now) are just too damn hard, too damn far to be worth planting.

The community where I work is a farming community. There are about 360 families, and nearly everyone farms. Those few, such as teachers, who work for wages generally pay someone else to work their parcela (fields). They still need to eat, and although food from the parcela is supplemented by things from the stores, it is still directly from the earth that people get what they need to survive. The biggest crop is maize (corn), and this forms the staple of people's diets.

The community where I work was not formed by chance. It was settled by a Catholic priest from the U.S., Padre Guillermo Woods, and a group of landless campesinos (rural subsistence farmers) during the 1970s. They worked their asses off, sweating in the jungle to build their farming cooperative. Houses were put up, fields were cleared and planted, a school, clinic, and cooperative store were created. The community was doing pretty well for itself at this point. Cardomom was selling at a decent price. All their hard work was paying off.

But there was a war on. The war was supposedly against the various guerilla armies that had sprung out of Guatemala's viscerously inequitable land distribution. But in reality, it was a war against the Mayan population, against anyone who dared to challenge the system where Mayans were essentially an expendable rural labor force working on the big fincas (farms) for slave wages. And although the community was probably started more from a desperate need for land than a desire to challenge the Guatemalan elite, by being successful, by being independent, challenging this system is exactly what they were doing.

One day in 1980, the entire leadership of the cooperative was murdered by the Guatemalan army.

One year later, the army came back.

And what happened next is what didn't really hit me until the other day. What still probably hasn't really hit me.

One year later, the army came back. They came back and they slaughtered at least 360 women, children, and men. I say at least, because I have been told that there were likely entire families killed, such that there was no one left to remember their names. No one left who even remembered their names.

The survivors fled into the mountains to form Communities of Population in Resistance (CPRs) or to Mexico to the refugee camps. Many more died in these places from disease and malnutrition, and in the CPRs they were constantly fleeing the army. People lived for thirteen years being hunted like animals. In 1994, two years before the signing of the Peace Accords, the refugees negotiated their return to their communities, and began the work of rebuilding what was lost.

If you walk down the hill from the little wooden building where my partner and I live, you will cross the center of town. If you walk past the little general stores, past the community meeting space, and take a right at the pasture, you will come to a little area fenced off and shaded by tall trees. Inside, you will find a memorial to the hundreds who were murdered the day the army came back.

I ventured into this space for the first time the other day. There is a hole in the chain link fence that you duck through. Inside, it is quiet and still. Benches surround the memorial, shaded by trees, covered with dead leaves and the occasional candy wrapper. Nothing moves but the silent battalions of leafcutter ants, stoically disassembling the trees.

The paint on the memorial is chipped and peeling. My head is full of thoughts about home, about dinner, about letters I need to write. I casually walk to the side of the memorial and begin to read the names of the people who were killed.

And that is when it begins to hit me. The names are the names of people I know. This must have been his father, because the name is his. Or her mother. Or the entire family of the man I ate with last night. Some of them are listed only as "daughter of #227," or "Maria XXX, wife of #114," because this was all that could be remembered by those who survived. "I remember he took his three daughters to market with him that day, but I don't remember their names." And that is all that is left of them.

What do you do with this? What does a community do with the ghosts of 400 murdered mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters?

I think people respond in different ways. Some try to forget. Some never return. Others try to pick things up, keep going, try again. A few try to seek some sort of justice. One way people are attempting to do this is through a legal case accusing former dictators Romeo Lucas García and Efraín Ríos Montt of war crimes and genocide. And, as you may recall, this is why I am here in Guatemala. I'm working as part of an international team of human rights accompaniers, who work to provide safety and support to the individuals who have chosen to participate in these cases as witnesses.

In terms of what we actually do, it can be as concrete as accompanying people to meetings about the cases in other cities, or as amorphous as simply *being* there, in the community. I am still learning. I have a lot to learn.

For the time being, I am mainly trying to get to know the community, the people, the history. To understand where different people stand, who is opposed to the human rights crowd, who is a supporter. And to do this without judgement, for who the hell am I to say what is the "right" way to react to your community being raped, tortured, and massacred?

This has been a hard month for me in many ways. I have been really homesick, struggling with my Spanish, with all I have to learn. But despite these challenges, I remain extremely grateful for the opportunity to participate in this work, to learn from this experience, to get to know this place and these people. I am grateful for the love and support of everyone back home.

Thank you for everything! I miss you all so much!

Love,  
Laura

P.S. For more information about Guatemala, and the accompaniment project, please check out NISGUA (my organization)'s website at <http://www.nisgua.org/>.

P.P.S. Also, feel free to email me! I occasionally have the chance to check my email, and it is always nice to hear from people back home. Also, next month I will be able to send a few pictures from the community, but I am attaching one now from when I was in language school in Xela. Much love!!!