

Survival by Solidarity

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While many people associate incarceration with “justice” in what are defined as criminal cases, my political struggles against injustice are what ironically led to my imprisonment and torture in El Salvador in September 1989 when I was 24 years old. I was employed in the mornings as a teacher by the Ministry of Education, and thus by the state, in one of the largest public schools in the capital of San Salvador. In the afternoon, I studied to obtain a Bachelor of Education at the National University of El Salvador. I became politically active in my second year. It was a tumultuous and repressive time in the country, and my university studies were impacting my thoughts and actions. I had been raised in a traditional conservative family headed by my sweet and sensitive paternal grandmother who influenced me greatly to obey the law and respect authority. In retrospect, my grandmother, like countless Salvadorans, had been brainwashed by the government propaganda that maintained oppressive control. So in my family’s conscience, state corruption did not exist. I discovered and absorbed “the truth” in my studies at the National University which had become critical, politically active and militant under the repressive and corrupted political climate and civil conflict that had paralyzed El Salvador as well as much of Central America in the 1980s. The university was committed to helping society move forward and away from the barbaric deception. Professors were openly critical and the university invested in social projects that helped the poor majority. I poured my heart and soul into the university’s human rights philosophy and activities.

STUDENT SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM

I initially joined the students’ association in my faculty of education. I eventually became a member of the executive. We led many projects most of which helped students, particularly poor students, with many of the barriers that they faced, including bus fares and other school related costs. I was later elected President of SECH (Sociedad de Estudiantes de Ciencias y Humanidades), which was the students’ association for all the humanities of the university. While we continued to support the student body internally, our country was in such a chaotic condition that our external work was solely focused on overcoming the repression. The university’s students and personnel were frequently facing persecution from the state’s military regime. A lot of the students, especially from the humanities, were being jailed, disappeared and killed. If you were

stopped, the soldiers would search for anything that was remotely “compromising” to find an excuse to detain you. So we felt that we needed to do something more practical than demonstrating on the streets and tried to bring comfort to the imprisoned students. We designed an incredible project to support the many students who had become political prisoners. We collected funds and food weekly. Every Wednesday, we visited our fellow students in prison. While the psychology students offered counselling to the prisoners, the law students took on their legal cases. It was a comprehensive project. Ironically, these weekly experiences in the prisons would later help me to survive my own confinement. During our conversations, the student political prisoners informed us about how to withstand the torture techniques and how to channel the emotional strength to endure. Their tips eventually saved my life.

FROM PROTEST TO ARREST

On the day of my capture, after teaching in the morning, I had gone to the university to attend a meeting with the student body. Upon my arrival, I was informed that four members of FENASTRAS, the national federation of Salvadoran workers¹ had been killed by the military. Our student association was very closely affiliated with this union which coordinated many projects in the communities. Our role was to provide education and training. FENASTRAS was a very strong, solid and organized umbrella union supported by Canadian and Swedish unions. FENASTRAS was organizing a demonstration that day on short notice in an effort to denounce the killings of its members and that of the female leader of a teachers’ union whose body was found raped, tortured, burned with acid and dismembered. I immediately felt a moral obligation to support the protest so we cancelled the meeting and I tried to recruit other students in the classrooms to join us. Only five of us went, including two of my closest friends and my mentor, a former president of the Education Students’ Association.

We arrived late at the street demonstration so we joined halfway through the march. The atmosphere was very tense. The demonstrators were very angry over the murders and were very determined to denounce the atrocities. The army followed the procession with very aggressive military vehicles and a large amount of uniformed soldiers. I was very scared because I knew that since the army had just killed the unionists, they were capable of anything. As we neared the end of the demonstration route, we noticed that the army had blocked the way to the FENASTRAS headquarters, a large impressive building constructed with Canadian and Swedish union funds. It was painfully frustrating to see that the

headquarters was in sight but it was completely unreachable. It quickly became obvious that there was nowhere to escape because the army had blocked all the streets. We were surrounded. The army started to push the crowd back and then attacked the people with batons, tear gas and plastic bullets. The demonstration disbanded. We were advised to remain calm and maintain our group to protect us against individual captures, however I could see that one of the students who had joined us panicked and ran away from the group. We learned later that he escaped. Many other *compañeros* were resisting at the back of the demonstration to allow the others to escape. Weapons were being fired, it was incredibly chaotic.

We then ran down a street and after two blocks, we entered a church along with some others and closed the doors. The parishioners were praying. We explained what happened and they said we could stay; they continued praying and singing. But I knew that we were not safe. People, including nuns and priests, had been killed in churches before. There were no sacred places with the army. We waited, petrified the whole time. In the meantime, the army blocked all the streets and closed everything in that very busy section of the city. When it got dark, they cut the electricity. I was very frightened. I had no experience in the movement, I was just a student. The unionists had experience with protests and police repression. For me, it was just insane. I started to realize that I would be paying dearly for having a conscience.

At what seemed to be around 10:00 p.m., the army used loud speakers to tell us to leave the church. We were not prepared to surrender because we could not trust them. We secured the doors even more. Then they threw tear gas grenades through the windows and started hitting the door really loudly. They started firing weapons for intimidation. The tear gas was horrible. I had felt it before but never in an enclosed area. I felt panicked by the asphyxiating effect. The army then entered the church in the dark. We were ready to resist in groups; we had positioned ourselves to be ready and had set the parishioners on one side for their safety. But they started hitting and firing at everyone at random. Even the elderly women who were praying were beaten barbarically. I could hear the women crying. The soldiers were attacking like animals. Then they distinguished the demonstrators from the parishioners and used full force against us. Initially we had grabbed things to protect ourselves but we had no choice but to surrender against such brutal force.

We were dragged out and lined up. I was fourth in line and my friend Danilo² was at the front of the line-up. He was hit in the head with the butt of a rifle and he fell to the ground immediately, bleeding profusely.³ There were so many blows. I was dragged by my hair while others were hitting me with batons and rifles. Others were kicking me endlessly. I was

left half on the sidewalk, half on the road. Then with the tip of a rifle, a soldier hit me in the testicles. It was a terrible blow; everything turned black and I could not breathe. I laid there being constantly hit for a long time.

After about a half an hour of barbaric beatings, swearing and diminishing verbal abuse, they started loading us onto a bus. From far away, I could see flashes of cameras. FENASTRAS had obviously mobilized the media. Its fearless female leader, Febe Velasquez, would do what she could to vindicate the union's image. When they put me on the bus, I was beaten on the way up the stairs. I felt a terrible blow from the butt of a rifle on my back ribs. The pain was excruciating, I fell immediately. For many years after, I have suffered strong pain in that area of my back from that one unforgettable blow. I struggled to grab the seat and pick myself up to get on the bus. I was kicked again. That was just the beginning of my ordeal. As our bus entered a military check point, there were flashing cameras from the media and the journalists said very loudly "FENASTRAS TALK!"

INTERROGATION AND TORTURE

We were taken to the police headquarters and one by one, we were blindfolded. Once I was blindfolded, I focused on the advice of the student prisoners. I knew I had to be careful about what I said and did. Then the hard part began. As I was lead up and down a ramp, I could hear the terrifying screaming of people in horrible pain, pain that could not be endured. At the bottom of the ramp, I was lead around a curve and then further down into a room. Then the interrogation started. The agony was endless. We were grabbed and beaten constantly. I received blows for no reason. I was already so tired from the stress of the demonstration and the beatings during the capture that I had little energy left, much less to withstand unbearable pain. Right away, the soldier grabbed me by my hair and yelled "You son of a bitch, you are going to tell me everything. I know you are from the fucking national resistance⁴ and we've been waiting for you. We're glad to see you – tell me everything now!" He started asking what I was doing. From the visits with the fellow student prisoners, I knew that in order to avoid spending years in jail, I should try to resist as much as I could. They had advised us on what to say and what not to say. They cautioned that once you give them something, they will continue relentlessly. Also within the student association, we had addressed the theme of state repression; we had prepared ourselves. My previous solidarity visits to prison helped me a lot. But regardless, I did not have much information to give. I was a school teacher and a

university student, not a militant. As a new student president, I had very little political experience.

The first interrogator accused me of many things including being part of a cell; he claimed he had pictures and videos of me. I knew that whatever I said I had to keep to the same story because they would try to break me with different interrogators and if I varied the story from one interrogator to another, it could be fatal. During the questioning, I was hit in the chest, stomach and testicles. I was grabbed by the hair all the time, but I was never beaten in the face. I told the inquisitor that I was a student of education and that I was only at the demonstration that day because another student had invited me to join an activity to raise awareness so I accepted but I did not know it was going to turn into a protest. He then grabbed my head and smashed it into the table forcefully and called me a “fucking liar”, stating that they had proof that I was in one of the videos burning a bus and that I had to tell him the truth or they would kill me. At that point, I remember hearing screaming by other people being tortured. I was interrogated for about half an hour. Then he left.

Afterwards, I was brought to a room with more people; I could hear others being interrogated around me. Then the second interrogator came in and pulled aggressively on my shirt, grabbed me by the hair and moved me to another desk where he accused me of being part of an armed group and wanted to know where the weapons were. He said “you son of a bitch, you are going to tell me where the weapons are, we know you are the one hiding the weapons”. I had never used weapons in my life. My political work was social and humanitarian. I went over the same account. At this point, I was really fearful and I was extremely tired but I stuck to my story. He told me to describe the guy who invited me to join the protest. I told him he was tall and skinny with brown hair. He tried to confuse me by saying that I had told the other interrogator that the recruiter was from FENASTRAS but I did not want to be implicated as part of the union; it would have certainly been fatal.

In the morning of the second day, I was really thirsty and I asked for a drink. The response was a blow to my chest. I was then faced with a third interrogator who was the “soft” one. He was playing psychological games and I think that he thought he was playing with me but I had been prepared. While I did not have the experience of other political activists, I knew enough to avoid being manipulated and to withstand the blows. I kept remembering the advice of the student prisoners that I had supported: “take as much punishment as you can because you don’t want to be here very long”. In some ways, I felt that this approach worked against me in the short term because I was badly beaten. My body was severely bruised everywhere. But in the end, the tactic saved my life.

Nevertheless, the second day was really bad both physically and psychologically. Early on that day, they brought me to walk up the ramps. Then they put me against a post and told me to sit. I was relieved because I had not had much of a chance to sit or rest since my capture. I thought they were being nice. With my hands cuffed behind me, I rested down with my back against the post. Then in came two very tough female soldiers. Together they interrogated and beat me continuously. They kicked me constantly with their boots. They told me they were going to show me the video of me burning the bus but when I denied my involvement, they kicked me in the stomach and chest. At one point, I raised my knee to make myself more comfortable but the women thought I was resisting them so they beat me more until they knocked me over on one side. One of them stepped harshly on my throat. I could not breathe and I choked. The abuse by the women was one of the hardest times of my detention. They would beat me both at the same time in places like the ribs, chest and stomach which made it extremely hard to breathe. It was very degrading. The beatings from the female soldiers were the harshest and longest.

I was moved to another room and set standing beside somebody. We stood there for a very long time. It was quiet and nobody spoke or moved. But all of a sudden, the guy beside me started to whisper to me. It was Guillermo's⁵ voice. He knew that I was in really bad shape and he was worried about me. He asked if I was okay. I did not want to answer because I thought it was stupid of him to talk to me but I understood that he was truly concerned and lacked the preparation I had. I quickly told him that I did not know who he was and to stop talking to me. But we both knew who we were standing beside and it was momentarily comforting. We confirmed this conversation upon our release. Ironically, I had been worried about him. When I heard the beatings he was getting during interrogation, I was really scared for him. His screams and cries were one of the scariest things I remember during those days.

After that, they took me into another room where they were interrogating a woman who was fairly young. From what I gathered, she was one of the very active women in the unions. She was completely subjugated; she was yelling and crying; she was really broken down. She begged the soldier to stop hurting her because she could no longer stand the pain. She even offered that he could do "something else" with her, if it would stop her suffering. Hearing her pleas was devastating. I felt powerless and wished I could have protected and saved her. Then I heard noises that sounded like aggressive sexual fondling. I felt horrible for how degrading and painful it was for her. He then grabbed her quickly from the room and took her away. As they were leaving the room, I felt

her barefoot step on one of my feet. Because I was blindfolded, I could not see her, but her foot, just like Guillermo's voice in the other room, reminded me that we were still human and alive. When we were released later, this young woman confirmed that she had been raped.

Toward the end of that second exhausting day, while sitting in a corner of a room, I was suddenly and shockingly attacked with a "capucha". They put a bag over my head and choked me. It was horrifying. Panic and suffocation paralyzed me. I felt like I was dying. I passed out. When I woke up, somebody grabbed me again by the hair and started to beat me. The beatings were non-stop; the blows to my groin area were also frequent and debilitating throughout my ordeal. On the third day, they started to manipulate me with my wife and children. In particular, I remember them taunting about what they were going to do with my wife because she was so pretty. They threatened to take away my children. I had been captured three days after my daughter was born and my son was a year old. They used the young age of my daughter against me, questioning why I was involved in political things when she had just been born. The truth was that the day of my capture started off as a routine work and school day. I had been responsible to my family in that way. I had not anticipated the turn of events related to the state repression and subsequent protest as I was not a militant. But they tried to use guilt against me. The threats against my family were devastating. I felt angry and desperate. I was close to breaking; it was one of the most painful torture techniques. I felt paralyzed by the nightmare of not knowing if my family was safe. I was never able to shake off the worry about them. The third day was full of psychological pressure. But my story remained coherent: I was a teacher who worked for the government and I was a university student of education. I never deviated from that account. But I also never told them that I was a student leader; withholding that detail saved my life while I was being detained, but it would later put me at great risk after my release. We had been threatened that if we lied to them, they would kill us.

On the fourth day, I went to court. My lawyer was the President of the Institute of Human Rights from the Department of Law at my university. He was part of the support team that students had created to assist victims of human right abuses. But he had been captured, detained and tortured by the authorities before and he had been warned that his life would be in danger if he ever showed up in court again. He disregarded this threat and showed up to take our cases. He was a brilliant man who was risking his life for our sake. In the meantime, in court he insisted that my blackened body be examined by a doctor. It was, but only as a routine procedure; I was never given any medicine for my recovery. My time in

court seemed only useful in justifying my detention because according to the law, the authorities could not detain people without reason. So my brief trial served to document the state's alleged grounds against me. I was forced to sign a false confession that included charges of burning a bus, weapons, explosives, subversion and working with the FMLN.

IMPRISONMENT

My first day in prison was terrifying. When I entered, I felt lost, disconnected and overwhelmed. I was never a violent person and the prison culture was foreign to me. I was a husband, father, teacher, student, musician and a government employee with a good salary. I had had the comforts of a protective apparatus. I was now locked in another world among El Salvador's toughest 'criminals' in a maximum security prison. While I was no longer tortured or beaten in prison, the psychological warfare was crippling. The guards ensured that you knew you were under their domain. But what scared me the most was the fear of being killed by other prisoners, some of whom were informants of the army. During the day, I felt safer among the political prisoners who stuck together; we were organized, disciplined and punctual planners who protected each other everywhere. For our safety, we ate together and went to the bathroom together. We never left each other unaccompanied or unprotected in the common areas. It was the resourceful and respected political prisoners who got me a thin mattress on my second night to help let my broken, bruised and throbbing body rest above the cold cement slabs we had as beds. I was the most visibly beaten political prisoner at the time. The solidarity among the political prisoners was comforting and strengthening.

My deepest fears though came at night. I was afraid of both prisoners and soldiers. I was petrified of being stabbed by my cellmates. But they were not the only predators I feared. We could be taken at any time by the soldiers who moved political prisoners randomly at night as an intimidation tactic. Since they would only grab one person at a time, we felt so vulnerable in isolation knowing that anything could happen and no one would ever know in the darkness of the night. I was moved four times this way and each time, I re-lived the barbaric interrogation days again.

What I recall most about the daily routine of prison life and what was the most damaging for me, beyond the fear of the horrifying bloody violence, was the degradation and humiliation. In the tiny, hell-hot and grossly overcrowded cells, we ate, slept and shit in the same confined area. While we did not spend 24 hours in our cells, the hygienic problems

were stifling. Also, our daily portion of beans was topped with the white powder apparently intended to control our testosterone.

Nevertheless, what I observed on a daily basis was our common humanity. While I was inside Mariona, one of El Salvador's worst prisons, I realized that we, both 'politicals' and 'criminals', were all human and all abandoned and deceived by our state and society to varying degrees. It was our common humanity and my own experience inside that reminded me of the desperate need for support programs within the jails. My penchant for education remained intact both despite and as a result of the chaos around me.

FREEDOM AND FEAR

I was released after a month at the penitentiary. As I walked out of the prison, I was greeted by family and friends, including Febe Velasquez, the FENASTRAS leader. But the sight I remember most and which brings me to tears now as I recall it, was the image of my wife standing there waiting for me. It remains a fresh and clear memory to this day. I remember exactly how she looked and the two-piece yellow outfit she was wearing. Seeing her then and there remains one of the greatest moments of my life.

My lawyer fled to Guatemala immediately after my release. He had taken care of all the paperwork to secure my freedom. I was lucky because most prisoners in Latin American jails are there for countless years without ever seeing their lawyers. Helping me put his life in greater danger. He now lives in Canada and works as a social worker. Febe was killed a few weeks after my release. She, along with dozens of other unionists and activists, including the young woman whose sexual abuse I had to witness in prison, died when the Salvadoran army blew up the FENASTRAS headquarters. Febe's state-orchestrated murder was a particularly significant loss which drew global attention by organizations like Amnesty International. She was a strong, fearless, charismatic, inspirational, genuine and active union leader. She was respected and valued everywhere by everyone. She was a particularly impressive role model for women.

In the days following my release, I reunited with my family and returned to work. Ironically, my salary came from the same state that had detained and tortured me. My grandmother found my scars and bruises very troubling. She had mixed feelings about my situation. While she was angry about the risks of my political involvement, she still cherished me as the gentle, respectful and loving grandson she had always been proud of.

Three weeks after my release, the “authorities” returned for me. I had been proud of my tenacity during my detention which seemed to have fooled them. But they had obviously discovered my identity as a student leader. It was an ultimate insult for which they sought revenge: more severe torture and certain death. The threat made against me that if I lied, they would kill me was being carried out. They had come to apprehend me at school one morning but I had an exam at the university that day and I had obtained permission to leave earlier, so I was not there. What fate! They interrogated the principal. Two brave female teachers immediately informed my wife, who, along with our children, went straight to the university to warn me. We have never returned to our home since that day. I was told by my neighbours and a sister who lived in our barrio that a driver and two guys sat in a 4x4 tinted window truck for a week outside our home.

Our lives fell completely apart. We lost our home, our jobs, our families and friends. We were on the run constantly to protect ourselves and our relatives and friends who hid us. For my wife and children’s safety, I fled to Guatemala in November 1989 and I did not return to El Salvador until many years later. My decision to flee was not an easy one. I struggled between my family’s safety and my loyalty to human rights activism. Although profoundly frustrating, the state’s repression had made my two greatest passions incompatible. As a last resort to stay in El Salvador, I considered an offer of “safety” of rebel life in the mountains. I was not a violent man but I never wanted to leave El Salvador, my home. It was a profound struggle. But the final decision to leave was made based on the guidance of my one year old son. One morning, I was sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to decide what to do; I was even asking God, “what do I do?” At that moment, my little son walked in from the living room. He put his hands on my lap and then hugged me. That was my breaking point. I made my decision in that moment and I left immediately. A tiny human being showed me the way.

In Guatemala, I was at least in Central America and close to home but it was heartbreaking to be away from my wife and children. I worked there for about eight months with the Carmelita Sisters as part of a UNICEF project educating street kids in the capital. Despite having relative safety and a job, I suffered from what I now understand to be symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. I was haunted by my ordeal. My body was so fragile. I had frequent black outs. I would lose consciousness and pass out without warning. Friends and co-workers were very concerned. But these symptoms disappeared once I was reunited with my family who eventually came to live with me. Prior to their arrival, my own mother who was living the United States had offered me passage to the U.S.

through a coyote.⁶ I had a lot of pressure from my mother and siblings to accept the offer. It was tempting, but I could not leave my wife and children behind. Some of my inner peace was restored when we were all back together. I no longer had blackouts.

BEYOND IMMIGRATION AND HUMILIATION THROUGH THE GIFTS OF SUPPORT AND SOLIDARITY

My family moved to Canada in August 1990. I had never intended to leave El Salvador, our home. But having my family all together and safe in Canada was our main priority and it meant so much. Despite the generous help we received to resettle, the move came with great losses. Within the first year, both my mother and grandmother died. It was extremely difficult emotionally and I resented that the repressive Salvadoran state had deprived me of precious family moments.

The early years came with other challenges. My first job was as a cleaner. I later worked in the food industry as the executive chef of a Canadian university. While I was grateful for the means to care for my family, I was a teacher. I had graduated from the best teachers' school in El Salvador. My fondest memories were of teaching and it was the profession I had taken to heart. I had also been very well respected as a teacher in the communities where I taught. But cleaning and cooking were not the issues. I knew that I had to do that for my family. So it was not about what I was doing; it was about how I was treated.

Other long term degradation came with the racist comments and belittling attitudes of supervisors, co-workers and clients. Other issues like lack of raises or differential treatment compared to Canadian-born co-workers angered me. These types of things were damaging and diminishing, and made me sometimes feel worthless. The patronizing comments about how we should feel thankful for being in Canada were also frustrating. I am and always will be grateful for our refuge in Canada. But no one can deny the extent of the losses that we suffered both personally and professionally. Our right to grieve those losses does not erase our gratitude. But I have learned to restore my own dignity knowing that I was a cherished and respected husband, father, grandson and teacher.

In addition to the challenges of adjusting to new life in Canada, the huge scars of torture left me vulnerable. It still haunts me. The flashbacks and nightmares remain, although now with less intensity. One of the greatest changes I experienced was in my demeanour. Prior to my detention, I was known as a gentle and thoughtful person, characteristics that made me a favoured grandson and nephew, as well as a cherished

friend to many. The torture changed me. I was a very different person afterwards. I became angry, ugly and explosive. These characteristics surfaced more in Canada. In El Salvador and Guatemala, we were still living in such war-based turmoil that my emotions did not have time to settle. But in Canada, my wife was no longer living with the same person she had married and she suffered tremendously as a result. My wife was imprisoned as much by torture as I was. But she had had no part of my activism. I felt guilty for submitting her to all of the suffering; she too had lost her family and career because of my detention. Yet through all of my blown fuses, she patiently supported me, cared lovingly for our trauma-affected children, and allowed me to make and live with my own decisions. She is a source of strength and I owe her for being such a solid pillar. I also owe my children, especially my eldest son, who were also victimized by the after-effects of my torture and detention. I am thankful for their resilience because there is only so much guilt that a father can hold about how his own brokenness affects his family.

Humiliation was probably one of my greatest post-torture struggles and it fuelled my anger for two reasons. First, I was humiliated by the degradation and powerlessness I felt during my detention and torture. I was ashamed of the resulting broken and dysfunctional state I was in. I was resentful of how the government's abuse had debased, disempowered and disgraced me – it had shaken my dignity. The second humiliation that I experienced was my own sense of betrayal against the friends that I felt I had abandoned when I left El Salvador. For such a long time, I felt like a traitor. I have deep regards for friendship and solidarity; once one establishes a link of solidarity, it becomes sacred and it is something that you honour. I had become very sensitive to these commitments in my human rights work at the university that had addressed such deep human suffering. I felt that there were some boundaries that should never be crossed. So I struggled for years with guilt because I thought I had let my “*compañeros*” down by leaving El Salvador. I had especially left them behind in the worst and roughest time. I felt responsible for my friends who died during the conflicts when I was not there to help. I also had left family unprotected in El Salvador; my wife later told me that during the final military offensive in 1989, a bullet struck the wall just above the heads of our two sleeping babies. I was shocked upon hearing this. I resented that my political imprisonment had deprived me of being present to protect my family and to defend human rights at a key historical time in my country. I had been completely restless in Guatemala knowing that I could not do anything to help because the border was closed during the final offensive. The attacks of guilt were the worst then.

My healing and release from these imprisoning feelings came from

the very friends whom I feared had resented me. Once the country had stabilized after the peace accords were signed (1992) and a democratic election was held (1994), I returned to El Salvador in December 1996 to face my demons. I was still scared, devastated and ashamed about abandoning my political responsibilities. But my friends were extremely generous and non-judgmental when they welcomed me home. I credit them with helping me get out of my slump. They held a dinner reception for me and each of my university friends expressed one positive thing about me. I felt deeply touched and honoured. I found it remarkable what human beings can do for each other. There I found forgiveness, healing and peace. I returned to Canada a different person and their precious gift helped me to move to a different stage of recovery and life. It was that same bond of solidarity with my *compañeros* that I thought I had broken, albeit understandably due to brutal state repression, that had actually restored me closer to health and happiness.

But the impact of torture and political imprisonment is still very present even after twenty years. It has affected my perception and experience with law enforcement authorities and facilities. Before I explain recent flashbacks, I recount a related incident with Canadian police twenty years ago. Very shortly after I came to Canada, I started to work as a cleaner on a night shift. One night, as I finished at midnight, I missed my bus. I knew neither English nor the area but I started to walk to find my way home. As I walked along the street, I was picked up by a police officer for no reason. I had been told that Canadian police were friendly. But this cop was less than polite to say the least. He drove off with me in the back of the cruiser and I became completely paranoid remembering what I had undergone with police in El Salvador. Luckily, the cop dropped me off at a gas station but without providing any other assistance. While seemingly a minor incident, the paranoia from the torture had left me feeling very vulnerable.

More recently in 2009, I experienced flashbacks and vulnerability again because of the law enforcement personnel, prison cells and courts that I have encountered in my community placement as a social work student. In one of the counselling series of a drug treatment program that I lead, one of the participants was a police officer. Despite the fact that I was the group facilitator and therefore supposedly in control of the situation, his presence made me extremely uncomfortable. I struggled not only with the fact that he was part of the “law”, but his arrogant mentality was also difficult to bear. I had to work hard to cope with my issues and it took a while before I felt comfortable with the cop in the group.

Similarly, in my placement with a drug court, I was entrusted to escort prisoners to and from their cells. But I soon learned that the feelings of

paranoia have not disappeared. The first time and each time, I went to get a prisoner from the holding cells, I felt cold and my heart would pound. I immediately connected to my own experience of imprisonment and I felt very nervous. I had flashbacks of the horrible images of prison life. I have avoided going to the local detention centre within my placement because I am not ready to re-enter a prison. I do not want a traumatic reaction to screw up my placement and employment. I still need to work through a lot of issues. It is still difficult to detach, even twenty years later. But I am determined to persevere because of the common humanity that I see among prisoners and non-prisoners. I have also found comfort in my academic work where I have discovered the humanistic counselling approach of Carl Rogers that is client-centered, unconditional and supportive, and from which I have learned to break down boundaries and to allow my much needed healing.

RECONSIDERING JUSTICE

Although I know what happened to me was a gross violation of my human rights, I never had a strong desire to pursue a formal justice process in my case through court. While a part of me has always wanted some level of acknowledgement and accountability for what was done to me, my immediate and long term concern was taking care of my family's safety and keeping us away from further risk of fatal repression. I also never saw my own personal case with the relevance that I probably should have. Instead, I saw mine as one of thousands; my situation was neither unique nor extraordinary. Perhaps I have underestimated my own experience and its impact, but so many other human rights violations in the context of torture were so monstrous compared to my ordeal. Horrible, horrible things have happened to people I know in El Salvador and elsewhere. So many families and especially mothers have suffered so much during the war in El Salvador. I thus want justice not so much for myself but for all.

Justice for me in this sense means acknowledgement, but one that addresses the collective violations of human rights. We cannot effectively move towards a different political scene in El Salvador without addressing the past. Political and social institutions will only go in a different direction if they mature and strengthen by admitting the past and providing the necessary opportunities for all to heal. In this way, the truth must be told not only through formal apologies by the government but in school books and classrooms. The struggle for justice, especially criminal justice against perpetrators of torture in countries where dictatorial or military right wing governments have been installed for a long time is a very risky

business for new democratic forces emerging. Unless there is a basis to sustain the country to move ahead, it is almost political suicide. Bringing torturers to justice will likely never happen fully or fairly. So the most realistic option would be to get as close to acknowledgement as possible. In a broad sense, history must be told. The images of the mothers of the disappeared⁷ and of the fearless leaders like Febe Velasquez have to be vindicated, and that would be the ultimate expression of justice within our possibilities. I still have fresh memories from childhood of decapitated people on the street and of the courageous mothers who went to protest and ask for their disappeared children. These women need to be recognized. They must be known and we must know them. Their stories must be part of the conscience of the country; these women stood up in the darkest times of our history; they are the ultimate expression of justice.

As a victim of these ordeals, in the long run what would bring me peace and justice is if I do something that brings comfort to myself and others. These matters do not have borders. When we experience this trauma, we are cut off from the normal course of life and interrupted from what we know. Restoring ourselves is a life-long process. I personally need something that will link me to my past in a constructive way. My anger and resentment over what my government took away from me through imprisonment has moved me closer to a more human sensitivity towards injustices. When I graduate as a social worker, I plan to assist in social justice and development projects that bring witness to what is happening. For me the concept of justice that I can relate to is fighting for change and that always gives me hope, and hope for progress can never be lost.

CONCLUSION

I was captured, detained and tortured twenty years ago. This reflection in 2009 is the first time I have revealed any details of my ordeal to anyone, not even to my wife, children, political comrades or other fellow torture survivors and never to a counsellor. This revelation was never on my agenda. I had buried my suffering deep within out of survival. I have shared this experience hesitantly, cautiously and partially. But I hope that my reflection on my ordeal as a political prisoner and torture survivor has shown the complex realities of the plight of imprisoned people who, on the one hand are rendered so vulnerable by such structurally powerful repressive states, and yet on the other hand, have unbreakable spirits to survive and overcome, both personally and in solidarity with others. Our collective endurance and our shared justice are found in the hopeful message that “the people united will never be defeated”.⁸

ENDNOTES

- ¹ FENASTRAS: Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Salvadoreños.
- ² Pseudonym to protect his identity.
- ³ His bloody condition saved his life. We learned later that he was brought to a hospital and released.
- ⁴ The soldier referred to a militant organization.
- ⁵ Pseudonym to protect his identity.
- ⁶ Coyote refers to someone who smuggles illegal immigrants most often from Central America to the United States.
- ⁷ The mothers of El Salvador founded COMADRES, to help address the disappearances of their children and other human rights violations during the civil war in El Salvador.
- ⁸ This expression is a translation of the revolutionary song “El Pueblo Unido Jamás Sera Vencido”.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrian López was born in the village of Olocuilta, El Salvador in 1965. He graduated from the Normal School of Teachers Ciudad Normal “Alberto Masferrer” at the age of 21. While studying education at the National University of El Salvador, he became involved with the struggle against human rights abuses during the worst years of the country’s armed conflict in 1987. As a student leader of the Department of Education, he became a political activist and the President of the Student Association for the Faculty of Sciences and Humanities. After being tortured and imprisoned, he fled the persecution of the repressive Salvadoran regime to seek political exile in Guatemala. While living in Guatemala, he worked as a teacher and social worker with street children through a UNICEF sponsored outreach program. He immigrated to Canada with his wife and children in 1990. He holds a Canadian college diploma in Social Work and is currently in his fourth year of a Bachelor degree in Social Work at a Canadian university.