

My Journey from Torture to Harmony

Daniel

It was March nineteen eighty-something.¹ It was election day² and my friend Susan and I had gone out to take some pictures to make a documentary on the election events in El Salvador. I was an art student at the National University of El Salvador, so, naturally, I carried my sketch book with me everywhere I went. As we were walking by the University we were stopped by a group of soldiers who asked us where we were going and what were we doing. We said we were just taking pictures.

The soldier in charge said, “pictures of what?” We said “just pictures of the election activities. We wanted to make a documentary on how elections worked in El Salvador”. He said, “are you sure?” I said, “yeah”. He then asked, “What do you have in your bag?” I said, “My sketch book”. He took the bag, dropped it and started going through my book page by page. I do not remember what I had in the book but as he was looking through the pages, he not only changed the tone of his voice when he came across one of the pictures, he also said, “What the fuck is this?” I responded, “It’s my sketch book”. “No, no, no, what the fuck is this drawing?” As I looked at the picture I wet myself out of fear. The drawing was of a blindfolded man on a chair with hands tied behind his back and a sign on top of his head that declared: “If Nicaragua triumphed so will El Salvador”.³ I felt a chill from my head to my toes. I knew I was in trouble. The soldier got upset and angry and took our cameras and said “you are a fucking communist”. I said “no, I’m a student of the arts”. He said, “Where have you seen this drawing before?” “Nowhere, I heard about it from others”, I answered. He then opened our cameras, took out the film and destroyed them. This was the beginning of my ordeal. The soldier called someone and in less than a minute, an unimaginable sea of green appeared before us, with countless soldiers surrounding us. A mini van with tinted windows showed up and he said “get in, keep your heads down”; he repeated aggressively “keep your heads down”. So they put us in a van and took us to a military base.

At the base, they put me in a prison cell where there were some soldiers pretending to be prisoners; they were undercover soldiers. They were asking me why I was there but I would not give any information or say anything. After about two hours, someone came and told us to get out. They put us back in the van with our heads down and they took us to another military base. As we arrived, because I was with Susan, who was a Canadian woman, they politely said to us that they had to blindfold us for safety reasons. We drove down to a basement which was a very filthy, bloody, smelly place and that is where the language changed. I could

not see because of the blindfold. Susan was taken to another room. The soldier told me to take off my clothes and to put on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt that smelled like it had been worn by countless tortured, bloodied and sweaty prisoners before me. The strong and unique stench of the cell and the shirt are so ingrained in my memory and are so offensive to me that when I now smell strong body odour, I have flashbacks to that nightmarish time. I was facing the wall still blindfolded when they took my shoes and socks off. A soldier walked me through a hall to a very tiny room that had a hole in the floor for a toilet. The room was only about a metre wide by a metre and a half in depth. The soldier pushed me against the wall and, amongst other threatening and humiliating obscenities, said “if you fall asleep I’ll kick you, you cannot sit down, you are here for good”. He slammed the door and locked it.

My arms were cuffed in the front. I remained standing there. I was very nervous. At that point, I heard many voices including Susan’s as she was being interrogated peacefully. She was offered a blanket and a mattress to sleep on. From what I gathered she⁴ was across from my prison cell. They were asking her why she was with this communist man who was part of a big plot to destroy El Salvador. In the meantime, I heard a man screaming horribly, first from the pain of his head being bashed against the cement wall and then from the excruciating agony of having his ear cut off. I also heard other prisoners crying for help close by, who were also obviously being tortured. The door slammed again, a man came in and changed my hand cuffs to the back. Then, as he put a gun to my head, he said: “You guys are good in the mountains, what do you have to say for yourself. Maybe I should just kill you right here and now”. As he cocked the gun three times pointing it to my head, he walked me to another room and sat me on a chair. Another person came in and said “Daniel, I am a lawyer. I am here to help you but you have to co-operate. I will be back. I want you to stay here and do not move”. There was a silence and I could feel the presence of many people. I could hear the breathing of what seemed to be about seven soldiers. It was very quiet in that room and then all of a sudden one of them jumped on me and started to beat me, punching and kicking me; then I was thrown to the ground and almost lost consciousness.

I could not count⁵ the days from the confusion, but I can surely say there were probably only about five to ten minute breaks between the beatings and the long interrogations. It was extremely intense, relentless, agonizing and exhausting. The pain from the handcuffs around my swollen wrists was excruciating. Every time that I moved from the blows, it seemed that the handcuffs tightened. My lips were dried and bleeding. I was so thirsty. I remembered that there was a toilet in the cell so I

managed to drink a little from it, but not much because there was very little water in it. I asked one of the guards if I could have some water; he took me back to the torture chamber and after another beating he offered me water in a cup. I started to drink it but I realized that there was something diluted in it, so I stopped, but the guy said: “you wanted water, now you drink it son of a bitch”, so I did. Then I felt dizzy immediately and my head felt like it was about to explode. I was there for a little over a week with no food, no water, no sleep, no sitting and the constant thought that I was going to die.

One day they told me that my wife and two daughters had been arrested and they were prepared to kill them if I did not cooperate – meaning I had to accept all the accusations. That was the most challenging moment. I immediately felt defensive and vengeful. I also cried out of desperation and frustration, feeling helpless and disempowered. The cruel threat against my family had gone too far. Another day they took me to another place where I was forced to keep standing. A very tall officer came and told me that he had in his hands some pictures showing me attacking military bases, and setting buses on fire at a street demonstration. For some reason my fear was gone, I did not have much left anyways, so I responded that if he had evidence of that, it was his responsibility to take me to court and press charges: “Your duty, sir, ends right there, and it is up to the judge to decide my fate”. No military likes to be challenged by a civilian, much less admit when they are doing something wrong, so he grabbed me by my hair, lifted me up in the air and smashed me against the floor as he said, “in here you are just a piece of shit”. Then he proceeded to push me very forcefully into my cell. I could not stop the fall to protect myself because I was so weak. As a result, I hit my head against the brick wall so hard that I lost consciousness.

I do not recall what happened after that. All I remember is that when I woke up, I was sitting in front of somebody who said nothing for about half an hour. He just moved papers around, as he watched my reaction to it. He then broke the silence and told me to sign somewhere on a sheet of paper because I was being released. I was still blindfolded but I took my chances because I was exhausted from the violence; I was hungry, thirsty and worried about my family. I felt that this was the only option to get out. So I signed them and then he read what I had just signed. I had just allegedly admitted to several serious, albeit fabricated, charges including the use of heavy weapons. Then he said, “you are going to court”. I thought he was kidding, but they did take me to court. I was very scared not knowing what could happen in court. But it was there that I could see my surroundings for the first time after about eight days of torture. At first, it was a horrible shock, because I could not see anything.

I thought I had lost my sight. Then slowly my vision was blurry and finally I could see the secretary of the court who told me very quietly not to worry and to tell her about what happened to me while in captivity. She caringly but cautiously assured me that the ordeal was over, that I was not the first, nor would I be the last prisoner at that place and that they knew what took place in that basement. Not only did I speak, but I also showed her my bruises, as the man who brought me there watched closely from a distance. There was no evidence on the charges, so I was told that I would be released. From court, I was transferred to a minimum security prison. On the way, the soldiers used every moment of the ride to torture me psychologically. Rather than following the direct and shorter route, they took the long way up a mountainous road and frequently threatened to throw me off the cliffs.

I spent three days in the minimum security prison. Initially, I was placed in a maximum security cell with the most dangerous ‘criminals’. Among the five men in the cell, one guy who seemed to be in charge, and whom I actually feared at first, spoke instantly to me in such a reassuring way. He told me not to worry because he knew that I was a political prisoner. He assured me that I would be safe in the cell. Not only did he give me a book of poems, but knowing that I was completely destroyed physically, he instructed the other cellmates to spread out newspapers across the wires of the mattress-less bed and told me to rest. That paper, as thin as it was, felt so comfortable. I fell asleep immediately. Later that evening, I woke up to the noise of thirty other men being forced into our cell that was made for about three people. They all seemed to have known each other, including the original five men in the cell. They exchanged greetings with nick names. As this mob settled in, the cell leader continued to protect my space on the bed. I was so thankful for the rest and safety that ironically some of El Salvador’s most dangerous ‘criminals’ were providing me compared to the brutal treatment I received from the state military who are supposed to protect the people and preserve democracy. The next morning, as many of the prisoners were being transferred out of our cell to another prison, the leader took a moment to reassure me that although he would never be released from prison, I would be getting out and I would be okay. I will never forget the kindness that this man showed to me.

That same day, I was transferred to the grossly overcrowded corner for political prisoners where I learned of the clear distinction made between political prisoners and common ‘criminals’ in the prison. We were well warned not to cross the line between the two populations. Just a few metres from where we were held, in a very open and visible area, there was a platform with holes that served as the toilets. There was absolutely no privacy for anyone who had to go to the bathroom and there

was no barrier to shield us from the smell or germs as we lived and ate immediately in front of this area.

“Daniel, you’re out!” I heard the words so suddenly and unexpectedly. I felt paralyzed. I was escorted to a room where I was fingerprinted, and told to read and sign the release papers. They were actually release papers. I felt empowered to sign what was truly leading to my freedom. I was picked up by my wife, two daughters, the pastor of our church and some friends. Despite the relief of my release, my family went through hell afterward as we bounced from one safe house to another. My daughters could not understand the chaos and confusion of such an unsettled life. It was an anxiety-ridden time. At that point, I did not show much of the trauma, perhaps because the turmoil of the war was so pervasive in our daily lives. Despite not being able to continue with either my job or my university studies, I managed to get a contract as a driver for a construction company.

A year after my release, just when my family started to feel safer and more comfortable with my freedom, I was arrested again. This time it was definitely a wrongful arrest. I was volunteering at a weeknight meeting at our church in preparation for Sunday school. The meeting finished at 10:00 p.m. and the pastor asked me to accompany another volunteer to another church office to get a second truck to transport the many volunteers back home safely at such a late hour. A young boy about the age of fifteen joined us enthusiastically for the ride. Just as we arrived at the other office, a van with tinted windows stopped abruptly in front of us. I ran frantically to the door of the church office and just as I went to knock, an M16 was pressed against my head and I was warned not to knock on the door or I would lose my life. I was grabbed by the hair and shoved forcefully to the floor of the van. The little boy was rounded up with us. He was petrified. As we were driven to our destination, my fear intensified and based on many things that the soldiers said and did, I really did not think I was going to escape alive. I was hit several times in the head with their guns. They threatened to kill us immediately. They were apparently driving us up to the highest mountain in the capital of San Salvador known as Devil’s Door, where many prisoners were known to be thrown down the cliffs to their death. They used this threat against us. I was quite scared. I prayed to God for my kids.

We were taken to the same basement of my first arrest and torture. I recognized the smells and the voices immediately. At that moment, all the memories came back. I knew that I would go through hell again. The procedure was familiar. First, they blindfolded us and removed our clothes. But they took the other guy first. He was a hard combatant, not easy to bend. It turned out that he, my fellow Sunday school teacher, had

been identified as a member of the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Marti Para La Liberación Nacional). He was obviously being watched and it was a fateful coincidence that our paths crossed at church. After they started to torture him, they took me but this time I went to a desk first.

The voice at the desk penetrated my soul. There are some things in life that one never forgets, like the smell of a perfume or a person's voice. "Your name?", he said. It was the same guy who had tortured me the first time and he knew it too. He asked "Have you ever been in this place?" Why would I lie? I had no fear because I had not done anything wrong. I was at the church. He informed me: "You are at the Policia de Hacienda". "Yes, I have been here before", I replied. I knew the direction the interrogation was going to take but this time I feared it somewhat less because I knew that there were probably about twenty people waiting for the church car to bring them home. I knew that everyone at the church would know about our kidnap-style arrest and disappearance, so I felt hope that the church people would mobilize immediately on our behalf. I also felt comfort in knowing that the pastor of Emmanuel United Church, Reverend Bill Smith, whom I had come to know well through my projects in the church, could be a helpful ally.

Despite my hope, I endured excruciating physical pain during the interrogation. Similar to the first time, the beatings were relentless. But this time, the psychological tricks were not effective because I knew that I had done nothing wrong. I confidently explained the circumstances of my involvement in the church Sunday school and the mere coincidence with the other person targeted during the arrest. In the meantime, I would learn later that the church had hired a lawyer, written to the government and had drawn international attention to our plight. The boy, thankfully not tortured, was released on the third day. I was released on the fourth day. I was told that the International Red Cross was waiting for me outside. I did not have to sign any papers because there was absolutely nothing against me. It was noon when the International Red Cross representative arrived. With a gun to my head, a soldier escorted me to the gate. He told me firmly to follow his orders. He instructed that he would take my blindfold off as we arrived at the gate and warned me that if I looked back it would be all over. As he said this he clicked his gun at the side of my head. I understood the message. As the blindfold was removed and I was thrown out of the gate, I was shocked by the blinding light after four days with a blindfold on indoors. Totally blinded by the sunlight, I crawled on the ground towards the encouraging and guiding voice of the Red Cross representative who assured me that I was okay. It took me at least half an hour to see at least partially.

I was taken immediately to a security house. The church had already

started to make arrangements for my family to leave the country. It had also already criticized the Canadian government for taking too long to process my refugee claim and for thus not having given me the chance to leave El Salvador after my first kidnapping. It took us a week to give away our belongings. In a secured place among many other sponsored torture survivors and refugees, we were informed that we would be leaving the next day. Despite our excitement, we were subjected to one final torture before our escape to Canada. We had been warned by our caregivers that we must keep in a tight unbreakable line at the airport. Refugees had been known to be re-kidnapped at the airport. So not only did all the refugees keep together in a larger group but within our individual families we held each other tight. We kept our children tight between us and held our hands hard. The warning was warranted. At the airport, we were cautioned about the presence of certain people. I myself noticed a man from the political prisoners section who had been suspected as a spy in the minimum security prison where I was held. Upon seeing him, I trembled and wept as I held my wife and children more closely. Those final moments were so stressful. I felt betrayed because freedom seemed so near, yet it could have been taken away so swiftly again right at the last minute. My fear was so intense. But thankfully, the plane took off and we landed in Canada.

Upon our arrival in Canada, our first challenge was the culture shock which included a new language, a new and “suspiciously” quiet society and city, new weather and no family or friends. Nevertheless, we were well supported through the church⁶ community and our plight had gained both television and newspaper attention. We were relieved and grateful. Yet, despite the assistance and the sense of safety for my family, my ordeal had left countless unhealed scars. I battled frequent nightmares, depression, anger, sadness, frustration, despair, loneliness, isolation and erratic behaviour. My ability to trust was broken deeply. I also could not stand people asking me more than one question at a time. I was paranoid about being recaptured and people in military uniform were a great challenge to my sense of safety. I was imprisoned everywhere.

My capacity to cope was totally stripped away. I remember the first day of my cleaning job when my boss gave me tools and supplies, and told me to go downstairs and clean the rooms. I was by myself and as I walked through the hall in the basement, I heard the echo of my own steps; that place and the sounds brought back fresh memories. I immediately threw away my tools and I ran as if I was being chased by vicious dogs. I never returned. Another reaction that shows how profoundly I was affected involved me going often to a traffic light during rush hour and pressing the cross walk button for hours on end. I never crossed the street.

I just pressed the button because I felt like I had the power to control the light. Because my power was completely taken away during the torture, changing the traffic light was one small, albeit seemingly bizarre way for me to regain control.

My wife and children suffered tremendously as a result of the chaos related to my torture and the post-traumatic stress symptoms. It was as if one day they were flourishing and then all of a sudden someone cut their legs off and they fell incapacitated to the ground. They too were imprisoned by my scars and symptoms. Communication with my family started to break down. I spent most of my days in the basement by myself, to a point where I did not talk at all for days. Suicidal thoughts were more frequent and life had no meaning to me. I also mistreated⁷ my daughters and that is what hurts me the most. I feel like I have ruined their lives forever and I am deeply sorry for that. I wish I had known what was going on to avoid the depth of the damage.

My wife and I went for counselling but it did not work for me. While I respect counsellors, they seem to be just making a living out of people's pain to a point where survivors end up victims of another problem: psychological dependence on professionals. It is like the Alcoholics Anonymous organization where people can no longer have the power unless they visit and revisit the "professionals". In some instances I felt that the professionals were recreating the dynamics of interrogation or refusing to be considerate of such a painful experience. My counselling experiences were mostly negative. I also spent two weeks in North Bay in a centre for survivors of abuse; it helped to a certain degree, but again I had to continue going to meetings in my own city. My empowerment never seemed complete. I had to be my own self-helper but that took me a long time.

Eventually my marriage ended in divorce, which, ironically, was the beginning of my turning point. At first it was just another torture for me. I remember wanting to jump off of the 18th floor of my building, but it did not happen; the love of my daughters was stronger and deep inside I also loved my wife. I carried a lot of burdens on my shoulders. I was bent right over from the pressure and I was barely propped up by a small cane; that cane was my creative art and it kept me alive. My outlet was drawing, poetry, painting and music. As life went on, I started to talk to some people and read books; I began to do fitness. I felt that freedom was on my way.

Justice in my country is currently unachievable and I would not waste neither time nor a single penny on its pursuit. Picture this: the assassination of four American Nuns, the assassination of the most prominent Jesuits, the assassination of Bishop Romero, the assassination of thousands upon thousands of men and women, and nobody has been seriously brought

to justice. In comparison, who am I? Not that I do not value my rights and dignity, but if the perpetrators are still in power, how can I even contemplate justice? Furthermore, I am aware that my torturers were following orders and were themselves subjected to cruel and threatening methods that fuelled their emotions and violence which made them comply with their authorities. They were also victims of this tornado. I am not excusing their actions, but I am recognizing their circumstances.

While I did not seek formal justice through the courts because I knew it was out of reach, I did need to restore peace in my life. I figured out what my troubles were and who my enemy was: my own self. I also learned how to let go. First, I had to forgive myself for hurting me, my loved ones, and others who cared for me; forgiveness, although it was not easy, was my salvation. I returned to El Salvador in 2002 and I participated in my own exercise of 'letting go'. I parked my car in front of the prison where I was detained which is still a police institution. There, I released all of my burdens. Within the safety of the car and in the company of a travel companion, I tearfully yelled at the government, the torturers and the soldiers. I raged about how they had destroyed my life, ruined my family, separated me from my kids and country, and robbed me of my studies and degree at the National University of El Salvador. Then, I verbalized my forgiveness, that I was closing that chapter of my life right then and there, and that I was not going to let them bother me anymore. I forgave and let go.

I also wrote a letter to the government of El Salvador, explaining my situation, describing the abuse I was put through in prison, and holding them responsible for the events, including the consequences of that experience. But I also wrote that I wanted to forgive them. I did not ask for justice or compensation. I did not even expect any answer. I just wanted to close that horrible chapter in my life and move on. I admit though that for the sake of closure, mine and all survivors of torture and all the traumas from that war in El Salvador, it would be helpful if the government of El Salvador, as well as the actual perpetrators sincerely apologized and repented. For me, it is not about compensation or the jailing of the torturers as that would be revengeful. But I seek an admission that recognizes their wrongdoing and the devastating losses for the families. Those kinds of admissions and responsibilities would be fantastic and they would be the beginning of a huge change. Such actions would demonstrate that they are willing to genuinely reconnect with Salvadoran society. Justice for me would include changes in the law to ensure that torture survivors and their families are guaranteed effective counselling that fosters genuine empowerment and real independence. I want them to be responsible for the consequences. In my case, I want them to recognize that I lost my studies and my career as an art teacher.

Who will ensure that my daughters receive good counselling so that they can return to their emotional stability?

Through this process, I realized how important it is to be sincere without being disrespectful with your enemies or the ones you have differences with. I also learned how important forgiveness is as a way to move on. Forgiveness does not mean that I forgot about or approved of the torture that I endured. But it allowed me to move on. Forgiveness was key to my reunion with my family. It was not easy and it did not happen overnight. I begged for forgiveness from my wife and daughters, and I took responsibility for my actions and reassured them that it was not their fault. I wanted to rebuild our family. But it was a challenge because so much had changed. We needed to dust off emotions, re-evaluate our situation, and find ways to bring comfort, trust and healing back into the family. It took me months to remove the burdens from my shoulders and feel really confident. My wife and I remarried. Our new journey has been wonderful and I thank my wife and daughters for this new start as a more harmonious family. Peace within is more perceivable now.

When I reconciled with my family, I felt that justice was done. But then I was asked by the Canadian Centre for International Justice (CCIJ)⁸ to share my testimony in a video documentary in order to help bring about justice. It was not until that point that I realized I had in a way been a bit selfish. I had resolved my own world but the world around me was still in pain and still subjected to atrocities. So in an effort to be an ambassador for justice and peace, I agreed to participate in the video project. I want to help fellow torture survivors, and more importantly, I want to put a stop to the endemic torture in all countries. I want to do so not only verbally but also through my paintings. I try to use art as a medium to create awareness of the deep sadness that imprisons people and families after torture. I also want to promote what I call a real democracy in which no one gets hurt for thinking differently or for even thinking the opposite of what I think. War, power and corruption are not the way. Rather, we need to create a dialogue, to open lines of communication between people in a peaceful way - that is where our people power lies. In a genuinely peaceful society, justice would mean equality, fairness and inclusiveness, not bribery, tricks or corruption.

Although my imprisonment and torture took away many things in my life, the perpetrators could not take away my creativity, my artistic skills, and most of all, my love for my people. I have returned to El Salvador many times to help with whatever I can. I have tried to be an ambassador to promote peace, justice, harmony, happiness and hope, especially for those who are in more difficult situations. I have been able to share my creativity through special Christmas events for children and through the opening of a youth centre. I have been able to facilitate poetry, drawing

and running contests, and to teach painting, drama, English and music to impoverished children and youth. I have more plans for community centres to help families with breakfast programs, recreation, art, skills training and cooperatives. While my imprisonment and torture halted my career, and thus affected my income and ability to help financially, I still dream of continuing the social justice and development work that I was so passionate about before my ordeal. In the larger scheme of things, I hope that my humble efforts help to overcome government corruption and wars that create more poverty, more destruction and more hatred, all of which create the dynamics for more prisons and more torture. On a more personal level, I want to give back to people what belongs to people, and at the very least, I want my daughters to be able to say proudly, “that was my Dad”.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The year was 1988 or 1989. I am being intentionally vague to reinforce the effects of my memory loss. It is also part of my self-defence and coping efforts not to remember the details of my ordeal.
- ² The election day was heavily militarized due to the civil conflict that El Salvador was experiencing in the 1980’s under a very authoritarian and oppressive military-oriented state.
- ³ In the 1980’s, the resistance movement against El Salvador’s right-wing military rule was inspired by the political victory of the Sandanistas (leftist revolutionaries) in neighbouring Nicaragua.
- ⁴ Susan was released on the third day of her captivity and she returned to Canada. We met a few times when I first arrived in Canada and then we lost track of each other.
- ⁵ My family recalls that I was abducted for over a week, between eight and ten days.
- ⁶ I take this opportunity to thank Iglesia Bautista Emmanuel in El Salvador and Emmanuel United Church in Canada for all their hard work for my safe release as well as their role in making arrangements for us to settle in Canada and the opportunity of a new start.
- ⁷ Since I was so agitated because of my own struggles, I was short-tempered with my daughters. There was no quality family time and communication was hostile.
- ⁸ The work of the CCIJ is explained in the Prisoners’ Struggles section of this issue.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel was born and raised in El Salvador. He was an undergraduate student in Fine Arts at the National University at the height of the civil war when he came to Canada with his family as refugees. An artist and musician, Daniel obtained his Performing Arts Diploma from a Canadian college and is a lay minister in a Christian church in Canada. Internationally, Daniel is an ongoing supporter of youth art programs as well as an advocate for peace and social justice.