

The Spiritual Practice of Awareness: Universal Kinship, Peace Building, and Prayers of Intercession

1 February 2022

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Greetings to you on this first day of February. May the Lord Give you Peace. I was having a phone visit with a friend the other evening and we were lamenting the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan that the Catholic Relief Service and other agencies are reporting. The question arose, once again, of what use are our tears in the face of such a tragedy that left us feeling overwhelmed and helpless. Then I remembered an essay I wrote several years ago after returning from a trip to Nicaragua and I shared it with my friend. I share part of it now with you.

Some years ago my grown daughter, then a teacher, and I went to Nicaragua to volunteer for a month at a community center in the heart of Managua. Our days were filled with the laughter of school children, songs, and stories, and evenings with our host family that lived across the street in the section of the city known as Batahola Norte. While there we visited the city dump. Here is part of the essay I wrote several years after my return:

“The city dump, known as La Chureca, the largest open-air landfill in Central America, covered about four square miles on the banks of Lake Managua. We had not set out that afternoon to go there. It was by chance, or holy coincidence, that we were having an afternoon coffee in a cafe and struck up a conversation with the thirty-something American next to us. He introduced himself as Jeff and he worked for a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in the states. He was in Managua to coordinate one of the projects his organization had initiated at La Chureca. He asked us if we wanted to see this part of life we would not usually encounter. Since my daughter and I are endlessly interested in the varieties of how life unfolds within the whole human family we gladly got into his jeep. At the small office of his NGO, we stopped to pick up a woman in her twenties, Nadine, and headed to the outskirts of Managua and the entrance to La Chureca.

I was stunned. There were small fires and smoke everywhere, giving an eerie feel to the day. As far as our eyes could see there was junk - thousands of plastic bags, discarded glass, metals, food, and dead animals. The smoke made it appear as if the earth were undulating, so calling it a sea of garbage was more real than allegorical. There were children and men and women and cows and dogs working in this sea. We had decided to put our cameras away in respect to the privacy of the people there, and in reverence to the life in front of us, but the images were recorded in my memory. The animals' work was to forage enough food to make it to the next day. The peoples' work was to forage enough salvageable metal, plastic, and glass to sell in order to buy food to make it to the next day.

Nadine had grown up on the dump as a Churequera, the name given to those who lived there. She was the daughter in one of the four hundred or so families who made their homes out of discarded cardboard and metal poles. She lived away from the dumps now and worked for an organization that was providing education and some recreation to the children still living there. She told us about the hundred or so trucks that arrived daily to dump the city's garbage, and a metropolitan area of 2.2 million people produces a lot of garbage. In addition to municipal waste, however, La Chureca was also the landfill for industrial refuse, some of it toxic and hazardous. A slaughterhouse on the other side of Lake Managua released the remains of its animals into Lake Managua and onto the dump. Some of the dead animals we saw were not from the slaughterhouse. They had died, instead, from heat, hunger, or toxic fumes. All the people living and working there were at great risk of harm from the lethal gases that permeated the atmosphere.

Not all the people we saw lived there. Some lived in other parts of Managua and came to the dumps for their daily labor. In a year, multiple thousands of dollars were harvested from the sea of refuge, and a worker could hope to make a dollar a day for his labor in hell. Over half of the laborers were children.

I opened my window for a moment and inhaled what smelled like sulfur and lead. Jeff advised me to close it for our protection. I wept from the fumes and a deep sense of shame. All the old and ever-present questions of inequality raised their voices from the smoking ground and begged, once again, for answers. I closed the window for my protection but if we are all in universal kinship with each other how do my sisters and brothers on the dumps protect their lungs? I traverse La Chureca and exit for an evening of rice, beans, and Spanish soap operas with Senora Connie. My cousins on the dumps cannot go home. They are home. I travel back to the United States and write this essay. My kin on La Chureca may not even learn to write.

Since my youth I have been told, sometimes lovingly, sometimes condescendingly, sometimes as a scold that it does no good to think or talk about these human tragedies. And, in many ways, I agree. But, at the same time, it seems somehow wrong not to know and acknowledge the pain in members of the human family. I am always consoled and sometimes comforted to know that in response to every tragedy there are responders - ones such as Jeff and Nadine and the teachers and social workers at the school at La Chureca and the parents of the children who tried as best they could to save their young ones from the harshness of the lives they lived as child-laborers and the governmental and non-governmental agencies that alert the rest of the human family to the consequences of natural disasters and human made political and economic systems.

I have returned to Nicaragua several times since 2005 but never returned to La Chureca. It closed at the end of 2007 and was sealed over sometime after that. A new system for waste removal was initiated with the help of the Spanish and other

governments and NGOs. The families were relocated and hopefully integrated into the lives of their new communities.

I carry them still in my heart, right next to the billion starving people on the planet, the 1.3 billion who live in extreme poverty, the 22,000+ children who will die today from preventable causes, causes rooted in poverty, and the 750 million people who can't even get a drink of clean water. Perhaps some of us are called to remember these members of our human family, to work for them, to hold them in prayer.

On this, the eve of my 75th birthday, I actually think I would feel just a little less isolated if I were dying on the dumps of some city somewhere and I thought that a little old lady was sitting at her kitchen table in California, praying for my safety and well-being and lifting me up to God.

I will trust in that truth and honor it.”

So, dear sisters and brothers, as part of our call to build peace in this world, let us lift up our prayers to God for all those who suffer and know that there is a truth there, and a deep belief in the power of prayer.

Peace and All Good,

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