In Search for Peace: a Guatemalan Story

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I arrived in the Aurora International Airport in Guatemala City just two days after the eruption of Pacaya, one of Guatemala’s majestic volcanoes. My plane was the second plane that was allowed to land in two days. The airport was closed due to the amount of ash that was covering the sky and the streets. From my window I was able to distinguish the silhouettes of tiny cars and people that were waking up a sleepy city. In less than two hours, the city would be completely awakened and its main arteries full of cars, motorcycles, bicycles, and pedestrians. Everything seemed so normal. This unreal tranquility would probably mislead the uninformed tourist or greedy businessman. This tranquility was more than what I was expecting.

Just a year and a half ago my countrymen and women were engaged in the longest and bloodiest civil war in Central America, a war in which 40,000 Guatemalans died and almost a million people lost their property. I grew up in the shadow of fear. I grew up in the shadow of war. Bombs and bullets characterized my childhood. I can still hear the thunder-like sounds of a grenade explod-
ing in front of my high school while we were praying to a god that seemed to be deaf and oblivious to our pain. The god who helps the powerful and betrays the powerless. I can also remember the day that the priest in charge of the school’s church was kidnapped and the two long years that we prayed for his safe return until we realized that he was never going to come back to us.

When I was able to leave the plane, I indulged my olfactory system with the familiar smell of historic barrios and lush green parks that was floating in the air. Even the bitter smell of the nearby city pollution felt sweet to my lungs. After all, this pollution was also part of my life for so long. I was able to indulge my eyes with the sad and courteous smile of my people. My heart was pounding in my chest. I was nervous. I was coming back home at a historical time. I was coming back to a Guatemala that had only recently signed the peace accords. These accords were signed between the government of Guatemala and the guerrillas on December 29, 1996; they ended 34 years of civil war and brought new promises of peace.

War...why? Why did we allow this to happen? After all, this civil war was not our war, even though we were fighting it. I can’t help feeling angry. Why? I keep asking myself, even though I had the answer. I know that if the United States would have never been involved in the coup d’état in 1954, which ended our newly found democracy, none of this would have happened. I can’t help hating Eisenhower, the Dulles brothers and the United Fruit Company for masterminding the coup that put an end to social justice in our country. They were blinded by power, greed, and self-interest, and failed to think that by doing this they were signing death warrants for 40,000 men, women, and children. They failed to realize that by intervening in the affairs of other nations they were expropriating our natural right of writing our own history. They failed to respect our humanity. I can’t forgive Nixon, Johnson, Ford, Reagan, Bush, and all of those that were involved in further violation of our future. They stole our hopes for democracy. I can’t forgive an entire nation that has done nothing to prevent their elite from continuing the oppression of powerless nations; it seems that they have misplaced their humanity under their nationalist pride and selfish comfort.

I continued walking through the corridors of the airport until I found the doors that would allow me to penetrate this new Guatemala. A sigh escaped
my chest. I crossed the exit door. I took a good look around and discovered a sea of people waiting for a loved one. I couldn’t help noticing their faces. They all seemed welcoming. I let a nervous smile die on my lips and continued walking. I looked up and noticed a big sign that had a white dove and the word Paz written all over in white letters. I could see signs like this one all over the place, and they reminded me that I was in a different Guatemala. The war had ended. We were tired of sacrificing our lives and our prosperity in a senseless war.

My family was waiting for me under the big dove sign. After hugging them and exchanging smiles we started walking toward our car. I could feel under my feet the familiar soil of my motherland. They helped put my stuff in the trunk. After a few minutes driving we entered la Avenida de las Americas and later we took the Roosevelt Avenue that will take us to our home. It was our shelter during the worst years of the war. I was on my way to relive childhood memories captured in the walls of my childhood home.

I slept fine that night. I remember that I woke up when I heard the roosters sing their melody. They were eager to wake the urban population and remind them that their own existence was tied to the land and to the simple life of Guatemala’s peasants. The roosters’ voices were rapidly mixing with the noise of the city. It seemed that they were fighting a battle between tradition and modernity. I have to admit that my mind was conquered by the materialist noise of modernity; after a while, I would not hear the melodies of nature. Modernity seemed to have won the battle; now I can hear just its alienating songs of “progress” and capitalism.

The first day, I walked for hours in the streets of downtown Guatemala. I was looking for this peace. I started my search in the Central Plaza where the Peace Accords’ celebrations were held. I could imagine people rejoicing, dancing, shouting, crying, while the government and the guerrillas were signing the historical accords inside the National Palace. I remember when my father sent me a couple of newspapers with pictures of the president of Guatemala, Alvaro Arzú, coming out of the National Palace after signing the accords and joining the party. On the first page of the paper there was a picture of him lighting a torch that symbolized peace. For a moment, I thought I could feel the euphoria that possessed my people at that moment. The war was over and we had survived!
I turned away from the National Palace and faced the historical Portal del Comercio. Miguel Angel Asturias immortalized this building in his book, El Señor Presidente. In its pages, he captured the pain caused by dictatorship right at the stairs of this building. I can only wish that this peace will prevent us from returning to our dictatorial past. I continued walking along the streets trying to look for that peace that I came to see. I tried to find clues in the graffiti painted in the walls of buildings and houses. A beloved friend told me once that graffiti was the newspaper of the poor. I think she was right. I could read the opinions of the anonymous and voiceless people in every corner, those opinions that will never make the newspapers. I probably read a hundred of them that day. Each one of them represented a stage in Guatemalan history. The messages ranged from declarations of love to messages that demanded the destruction of the military. I walked and walked and didn't find the peace that I was looking for. I probably frustrated myself looking for it. I thought that there would probably be something material and quantifiable that could show me that the peace we wanted was present. This materialistic feeling was probably a product of all those years spent outside my country. Blinded by it, I failed to see the freedom surrounding me. I failed to see the happiness that was stamped in the faces of people walking in the streets. I failed to see the new trust that people had in their futures. I probably was trying to find a big statue that would convince me that peace was here to stay. The reality was that the monuments for peace were built in the hearts of my people. They did not materialize in some reductionist art form. This time we will not allow any foreign power to steal it from us as it happened in 1954. That is probably why they have not materialized peace in any way. Finally I realized that peace was here to stay and the soil, fertilized by innocent blood, will someday provide us with a new harvest of social justice.