

An Educational Adventure in El Salvador

A student came to me concerned about how to deal with a new educational experience. She was enrolled in a course appropriately titled An Adventure in El Salvador. Our adventure was only at the end of its second day but we had already spent one night at a delightful beach resort where we were offered surfside horseback riding before breakfast and, now on the second evening, were returning from an evening spent with orphans and other residents in a rural community where to own a horse would be a sign of considerable wealth.

We had enjoyed a bountiful buffet supper at the resort. Tables were set about under palm trees and the chef was an artist with the food—the broiled fish was appetizingly displayed and was the tastiest I have ever eaten. Our supper at the orphanage, by contrast, was a single fried egg, a spoonful of refried beans, a tortilla, and a cup of sweetened coffee. We enjoyed ourselves at the beach resort but we enjoyed others during the evening at the orphanage.

Kelly came to me during the bus ride back to San Salvador and said, "I think I'm being educated. I saw the resort and now I have seen orphans and poverty. I see the contrast and know that it must mean something, but I can't put it together. What am I supposed to do with this? What is the answer to this situation?"

I responded something to the effect that I was pleased that she felt the experience was educational, that the reality of life is often inscrutable, that no one else seems to have had the answer in El Salvador, and that if she found the answer to let me know. I also pointed out that education from life is quite different from education by textbook or in a classroom, that there is tremendous pressure in school (and it is too easy) to simplify ideas to the point where they lose their relevance. I further stated that when students are provided with textbook simplifications it tends to turn life into an intellectual exercise and thereby absolve everyone of responsibility. Responsibility, I told her, goes beyond an intellectual exercise in the same way that education changes when it moves from the classroom into real life.

The contrast between wealth and poverty was a recurring theme throughout our three week adventure in El Salvador. We were personally involved with people at all levels of society. My students were all folk dancers and so we were able to earn our involvement, as well as accommodations and meals, by giving demonstrations of our dances and inviting participation in the sim-

plest of them. Folk dance is a wonderful medium for sharing with people and we found the people of El Salvador, whether privileged or destitute, ready for music and dance now that peace had come.

We had so much to learn from the Salvadorans. They knew the insanity of war. They had been a part of that horror for twelve years. They had experienced hell on earth and wanted no more of it. Through that experience they also came to know what it takes to make peace. First, one must be willing to die for it; peace will not come if people are not totally committed. Secondly, one must share life to nurture peace; selfishness creates the seedbed for violence. ~~war.~~

The Salvadorans amazed us with the matter-of-fact way in which they shared the recent reality of violence. Students at the Jesuit University showed us gory photos of their slain teachers; a former guerilla fighter told us of living in the fields and hills without home or food for his family; nuns described coming into an orphanage abandoned by the government to find no food on the shelves and babies with soiled diapers and no bottles. They all wanted us to know that people are capable of great cruelty and that there must be another way to live. But how? That was Kelly's question.

Kelly came to me a few days later. She had thought out part of the answer. She said, "Its in the name of the Lutheran orphanage we first visited, *Fe y Esperanza*, Faith and Hope." Wow!

Without faith and hope, there would be no peace. That is why the Salvadorans spoke of unspeakable terrors so ~~matter-of~~ matter-of-factly, why they told of American support of the death squads with no bitterness, and why they were so unselfish in helping each other rebuild. Bitterness, distrust, and fear are incompatible with faith and hope. Living with hope, living in faith is the only way to live sanely.

Yes, I believe Kelly received an education.

Steven Borish, in his book Land of the Living, gets to the heart of the educational process as understood by N.F.S.Grundtvig, modern Denmark's founding father. "One can learn the facts and the theories of received tradition in the classroom, and these might prove useful, but they can be no substitute for Life's Enlightenment [*livsoplysning*], which can only be taught by life itself. Herein lies a paradox for educators: it is, and must be, the deepest task of our lives to acquire this Enlightenment for Life, for only through its realization will we be able to distinguish light from darkness, truth from lies, and the

cause of death from that of life. Yet this liberating insight is something no schoolroom lesson will ever teach us." (p.167)

Another student, upon our return to Kentucky, pointed out what a fine line there is between peace and war, between light and darkness. We had just returned from a land where the line was palpable. The student noted that we take what we have in the United States too much for granted and don't realize how easily we could cross the line and lose it. Peace cannot be legislated; it requires faith, hope, unselfishness, and trust. El Salvador taught us to be more responsible as citizens in order to create a more just society and thus ensure peace.

I want to encourage educators to undertake education for "the deepest task of our lives." Such a quest is at the heart of the Folk Education Association of America. It requires a different pedagogy from that which we have inherited from much in the world of academics. It requires experience with real life in addition to the analysis and research. It requires that faith and hope override narrow compartmentalization where economics stops with the dollar, psychologists stop with personality, and coaches stop with wins over losses.

Folk educators know that life is complex beyond comprehension. Faith and hope must be an ingredient in the deepest type of education because it must reach beyond comprehension. Our educators need to be encouraged to share their faith and even their fears with students. Attempts to remove spiritual experience from education are seriously misguided in addition to being impossible; people are spiritual and a denial or suppression of that side of humanity does violence to our greatest potential as teachers of Life's Enlightenment and our ability to see the flowering of humanity.

Folk educators learn to respect innate common wisdom, such is their faith that each life is divine. They understand that homegrown wisdom is more to be trusted than the bureaucratic. It is at the level of everyday life that wisdom is generated; bureaucracies are too far removed from reality to make intelligent judgements. Similarly, education needs to be taken back into living communities; relegating it to classrooms and to what can be graded on an exam robs it of its most desirable outcomes.

Fortunately, students are a continuous supply of surprising wisdom. Folk educators learn to listen to students. What an important insight Kelly gave to our class. My students were wise enough to have faith in our adventure. They had to pay in cash what amounted to a third of the cost of the adventure

and received no *academic* credit for the experience— the course was deemed worthy of Short Term credit only. A parent tried to scuttle the tour because of her fears for our safety. But the students had faith even though it's hard to see why; only three of the sixteen had been overseas before and seven had never been in an airplane. I overheard them confiding to each other, after it was obvious that we were having a rich and wonderful experience and that their faith in the adventure was immeasurably justified, that it was incredible to think that anyone would have denied them such an experience. How fortunate teachers are to have opportunities to meet again and again with the wonder and wisdom of youth.

I write this on the crest of joyful excitement following our return from El Salvador. The experience is too much to be contained. Perhaps it can encourage others to break away into educational adventures which will fulfill our deepest task!

John M. Ramsay
Berea College
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