

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AN EMERGING DIRECTIVA

“Through the twelve years of war there’s been the forced captures of civilians and the military roadblocks that didn’t allow food and medicines or other goods to pass through up into this zone. But nonetheless, despite all these obstacles, we have been able to continue to move forward to build.”

Early the next morning, it was still dark when I was awakened by the sounds of splashing water next to my head. I was confused. It sounded like a waterfall outside the bunk house. It took a few moments for me to realize that men were dumping cans of water on themselves in the shower stalls, sending the contents cascading to the floor.

With all the noise, sleep was impossible, so I got up and looked out the open front door. The sun wasn’t up and a heavy fog covered the road in front of the dorm, partially obscuring the shacks beyond. Across the way, shrouded in mist, a line of men, dressed in work clothes with straw sombreros on their heads and machetes at their sides, ambled down toward the macadam road to an awaiting bus.

Fully awake, and the splashing water stopped by now, I grabbed my towel and walked around to the back of the bunkhouse to check out the showers for myself. The three stalls were empty. In the first stall, I undressed, placed my clothes and towel on a hook, dipped the ladling can in the drum of water, stood a moment with my bare feet on the flat stones, took a deep breath, then dumped the cold water on my head.

By 6:30 we had assembled in front of the dorms, then followed Sinclair a short distance to a building set back from the road. Inside men ate breakfast at long wooden tables. We sat at one of the tables and a woman from the kitchen poured us coffees. Then from a large pot she ladled out beans and rice on paper plates and placed them in front of us.

Groaning about a lack of sleep, we poked at the food. Torriera, not feeling well this morning, was doing her best to keep up appearances, while Reid and Willison, over their bouts with stomach cramps, ate with gusto.

“How much rape and incest is there in this country?” Ventura asked Sinclair.

“There is a good deal of it,” Sinclair replied. “Both in the homes and in the streets.”

Ventura thought for a moment. “There is need of a good sociological study of the people of this country,” he said. “Is there one?”

Sinclair looked up from his coffee. “Segundo Montes.” Then he outlined the schedule for the morning. “We’ll walk back to the dorm, get our gear in order, and drive up to the pavilion to interview a spokesperson from the cooperative. After a tour of Segundo Montes, we’ll have lunch, then drive to Perquín.”

Back at the dorms it was too early for the morning interview, so Willison and I walked across a field to where the land dropped off. Cloud formations obscured much of the valley in the distance, but closer to where we stood was a field of corn and below a stream flashed in the sun.

“I’m going to explore this path and see if I can get some photos,” said Willison, who besides being an experienced world trekker and avid sportsman, turned out to be a serious amateur photographer. I circled back to check out the community *baño*.

Opening the door and peering inside, I decided to wait for the bathrooms at the pavilion, wondering who if anyone was

responsible for cleaning up the soiled newspapers littering the dirt floor. With dysentery and diarrhea rampant in the country, wouldn't the leadership council be on top of the situation? Whoever was in charge, it wasn't happening.

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The morning meeting was scheduled for around 8 o'clock, and we drove past the open air market, the community bank, a few scattered buildings, then turned back up the hill. In one clearing several people waited their turns to draw water from a well, and off to the side a young woman stood over a pail washing her upper body. The scene reminded me of a Gauguin painting.

The top of the hill was drenched in sunlight, and the air was heavy and sweet. We left the vans, skirted around puddles from the rain the night before, and sat in the pavilion, filling three picnic tables pushed together with notepads, pens, water bottles, cameras, and tape recorders.

A representative from the cooperative, a young woman, possibly in her late twenties, with broad cheekbones and dark hair falling to her shoulders, sat next to Sinclair. The tape recorders made her nervous, and she asked Sinclair why they were there.

Sinclair translated her question, and Reid responded, "For my students in my classes."

That assured her enough to allow the recorders to be turned on.

*Testimony of the Segundo Montes
"Public Relations" Representative*

I want to give you a very warm reception here at the community of Segundo Montes. For us, it is very important to have visiting groups because it has been our consolation through the years to have international visitors. It might be helpful for you to understand a little bit of our history, why we left El Salvador, and what our life was like in the Colomoncagua refugee camp in Honduras.

In 1979-1980 a civil war is unleashed. The attempt was, more than anything, to destroy the rural areas, such as Morazán and Chalatenango. The situation was intolerable, and people couldn't survive here. We were obliged to leave the country and go to our neighboring country of Honduras.

The first group fled from here on December 13, 1980. The second group fled December 14, 1980. The first group was four hundred and fifty people who fled. The second group was six hundred people. We got to Colomoncagua, and that's where we began to live again. The Catholic Church received us, and the *campesino* communities received us. However we were received very poorly by the Honduran Army and the Honduran government.

In December of 1981, the Salvadoran Army undertook a military operation, massacring about a thousand *campesinos* in the town of El Mozote in the province of Morazán. This forced more and more people to flee into Honduras. From 1981 to 1984, the population within the refugee camp grew to eight thousand four hundred people.

Life in the refugee camp was very difficult. It was costly. It cost our blood, our lives, and people were killed there. This obligated us to become more united, to make greater efforts to resist the repression of the Honduran Army. In some ways, life in the refugee camps over those nine years gave us a lot of advantages. In other ways it was very costly. Some of the advantages were that we were able to educate ourselves. We went from a population which was largely illiterate farmers to people who had vocational training.

Because of the need for unity we created an organization that was very vertical in terms of leadership. Decisions were made at the top and transmitted to the bottom. There was no circulation of money in the refugee camp. Everyone worked in exchange for the assistance they received. The United Nations High Commission for

Refugees gave us assistance so we could live, and the different agencies gave us training in different skills. Thanks to this, this is what the future will be for us here in El Salvador.

We had always said we wanted to return to our country when there was peace. We stayed very tuned in to what was happening here in our country. As Salvadorans, it is really not in our nature to remain on the outside as spectators. We looked for ways to insert ourselves. After looking at different changes, such as President Arias of Costa Rica's initiative to bring peace to the region, and then things such as the Conference for Refugees in Guatemala, we made the decision to return. Those kinds of reforms were looking towards the future of peace in Central America.

During the Conference of Refugees meetings, we elaborated our proposal to return, and sent it to that meeting. Then we began negotiations and discussions with the Salvadoran Government to discuss the conditions upon which we would return. We reached an agreement to return to our country on November 9, 1989, but because of the offensive we couldn't go on that date.

Since we had been preparing for the return for two months and we had all packed our goods, the people were disappointed that we couldn't go back. So those who had the greatest courage decided to return on November 18, walking during the middle of the offensive. On December 9, another group left from the camp to go home, also walking. We got right up here to the top of the hill where we are standing, and that's where we stayed, working, settling the land. It was very hard for those two months.

Then from January 14, the returns were much more negotiated, based on a tripartite agreement between the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the Honduran and Salvadoran Governments, and the refugees. It is probably necessary to add that during the first two

repatriations there was no support from any international organization. During the subsequent repatriations, there was support.

Returning to your country is really hard, but now with the support of the international community, people made the effort to make it happen. We are not talking about things being costly or requiring a lot of work. What I mean is that through the twelve years of war there's been the forced captures of civilians, and the military roadblocks that didn't allow food and medicines or other goods to pass through up into this zone. But nonetheless, despite all these obstacles, we have been able to continue to move forward to build.

When we got here there were eight thousand five hundred people divided among five different settlements. There was a need for organization, a new treaty organization, to adapt each year to the changes. One of the things we arrived at in terms of organization was an assembly which sets up broad guidelines for the direction of the community. The assembly is made up of two representatives for every two hundred people in the community. In addition to these two representatives of every organized sector, there are other projects. The assembly consists of about three hundred people, and that is the highest decision-making group in the community.

Initially this group was set up to meet every six months, but we've been meeting every three months. It is this group that names the leadership committee by a secret ballot. The leadership committee, the *directiva*, is named for a two-year period. Their function is to discuss and define the implementation of each of the projects. The *directiva* is made up of thirteen people, including myself. And ten of the thirteen who make up the *directiva* are also the heads of separate organizations here.

And if Colomancagua could be characterized as decision-making from top to bottom, here decision-making is always from the bottom, giving orders and

directives to the top. The social organization is separated from the productive organizations. Anything that has to do with services is in the social group. The business group is in charge of both production and marketing. The finance group is the bank. Then there is a development or fund-raising group, which has to do with administration, relations, and project writing.

In the first two years of our work here, I think we were trying to reproduce the model of direction which we experienced in Colomoncagua as community organizations. But in reality there's been some very significant changes in our model. In Colomoncagua, it was training. Here it has to be producing. We've been doing feasibility studies here on how to increase the efficiency of work, of productivity. If you had known our work previously, and then when you see the projects we have now, you'll see the differences. For example, there is the hen project, or the egg laying project, which actually brings in a lot of income for the community. The brick making factory. The metal works, making pots and pans and things, and also factories for shoes and clothing. And ninety head of cattle which give milk. We really are interested in increases in productivity and efficiency because the money or the salaries that people earn are based on those incomes. Currently we've finished the stage of provisional housing, and we're beginning to build permanent housing. The education project is pretty much in place. The health work has many more limitations, but we are making progress and doing what we can in that area. Of all the services, those are sustained by the community here.

The government has not apportioned the assistance it should in any community. So our efforts are in the direction of how can we reach agreements with the government so they cover the services which are their obligation. It's as if the crises and emergencies really never end, and we are working on a permanent basis fulltime.

“Maybe that could be a brief background,” Sinclair said. “We’d like to ask some questions.”

Q) Could she say a little bit about the development of this political structure from something that is very vertical? She said that when they were in the refugee camp and even when they were first here it was very vertical, and then they had something that was very democratic. Could she talk a little a bit about how that more democratic structure developed?

A) It was a different situation in Colomancagua. And it required a different model. We were surrounded by the military, we couldn’t leave, there was no money, and there were the needs for a lot of unity and efficiency in our life there. Basically all our problems were resolved by Agency money. Our communities here have been based on the needs to be able to do marketing, to be able to operate in a free country, to operate where there’s no openings, and the need to change.

What we need to do is to strengthen and give impulse to participatory democracy because without that there is nothing here. And also we don’t want to be a closed community. We want to be open and to be seen well by the rest of society and the surrounding communities. It is necessary that we integrate into other communities in a good way. Nor do we want to be an isolated community that has more privileges and more assistance.

Q) When the directors are named, is that based on the recommendations by the people, or do they campaign?

A) They are elected by secret ballot. Two hundred people have a meeting, and they are the ones who elect the two representatives.

Q) Tell us how it was they were able to stay here when they came, and why they were not displaced by the government or others.

A) When we came it was in the midst of the big offensive. But most of the fighting was in the capital and not here in the countryside. We could defend ourselves by staying in the community. We were large enough to protect ourselves through community organization.

“Just as an example,” said Sinclair, “I was in the camps when they came back, and one of the things they brought back were these two wooden tablets. And I asked them what they were, because I wasn’t quite sure. They said they were windows or doors. And after a while they showed me. It was a little printing press. They had block letters carved out of wood which they could line in there. It was like a little mimeograph, and they could print out human rights violations. If they were to be attacked, they could print a thousand of these things and distribute them everywhere. It shows what community organization can do.”

Q) Are teachers paid by the government?

A) The government doesn’t pay the salaries of the teachers. There are some volunteers, as well as some agencies paying those salaries. When we returned from Colomoncagua, we had international volunteers giving training to the teachers. There are one hundred and forty teachers for a student population of a fraction over two thousand students from kindergarten to sixth grade.

Q) What about social organizations with certain services? What would the services be in those social organizations?

A) Health, education, social communication, the community organizations, urban development, and public relations. And I represent the relations.

Q) Could she talk a bit more about economic models? Whether the workers in the shoe factory are paid an hourly wage?

A) When we speak about alternative models, we really refer to alternative models for ourselves and not necessarily

for other parts of the country, because here we really don't have a high degree of training or skills, so we do it as a program for us but not necessarily for others. And the land up here in Morazán is not that fertile, so the only alternative is to strengthen efforts like the clothing factory.

There are different salary levels according to people's responsibilities. The salary for workers, for most of the people, would be about three hundred and fifty colones. About forty-three dollars a month. Very low salaries. But the agencies don't give any monies for salaries. What we pay salaries with is from the goods that we produce and sell.

It's a real struggle because the process of developing this alternative takes years. It's not something that happens in a day. We lived with a refugee mentality for ten years, which was ten years of receiving. We understand that we are probably a little backward in that sense. It is not easy to leave behind some of the attitudes that the people had.

Q) What about the assembly election process?

A) Everyone in this assembly has to be named from the group they represent. And if there is an absence, the General Assembly cannot name someone else to substitute for them.

Q) Do the people who become directors make it known that they want to serve as directors, or are they called upon by the others in the assembly to serve?

A) Let me give you an example. We are all members of the assembly. Within this group we all know each other, and we can nominate someone in this group to be voted on. Since we are all members of the assembly, any of us is qualified. Anyone who others judge to be qualified and capable and interested in doing it would be elected. Thirty people are nominated. And out of the thirty nominated, thirteen people are elected.

Q) How is the leadership set up?

A) The leadership would have a coordinator, an assistant coordinator, and a treasurer, and the others would represent the different areas.

Q) Is there any problem about documentation? I'm thinking of the voting in 1994 and so on. Is there a problem?

A) Only two thousand people, all under ten years of age, have the appropriate documentation, like a birth certificate from El Salvador. The rest of the adults, there will be one hundred people who have Salvadoran identification.

Q) Does this cause a problem then if they want to vote?

A) It's a concern for us. The government has had two laws which call for the documentation and voter registration, and as soon as they are published in the official government journals, then we'll move forward in looking for other documentation.

Q) My understanding is that the government wanted to put all kinds of services up here. Why is that not happening, and what kinds of services do they want from the government?

A) In terms of education, the government really hasn't made any efforts. They just talk. In health there seems to be more interest, but we question how much is interest and how much is propaganda. In terms of electrification, yes there are plans. It's part of the national reconstruction plan, but we are in the third stage of that, which would be the fifth year, so there's nothing imminent. In terms of water there are no government plans. Roads? They have been building some roads up here, although it's not too much. In regards to telephones, it's really that things happen bilaterally. We'll go speak with a particular department in this region or in this department capital and try and work things out. But in terms of a central government role in helping us with services, there's been no negotiations or discussions.

Q) In the "returns" that she talked about, she said they had the means to defend themselves. Does this mean they were totally non-violent? Were they prepared non-violently, or were they prepared militarily?

A) Non-violent.

Q) Could she just briefly describe what health services they have, and what the government has stated they might help with?

A) In the refugee camp in Colomoncagua, there was a group of health promoters and health personnel who were trained within our population. Doctors Without Borders supported our work in the refugee camp and are supporting our work here. There are about two thousand consultations that happen on a monthly basis. Ten percent of them are referred to Doctors Without Borders. We've received outside assistance to buy medicines, and also Doctors Without Borders have been supplying some medicines. It's not as if the government has offered or come here, but we have sought them to begin these negotiations. We were very insistent with them for their involvement, and they did come here, and they did a survey of what our needs are, and there have been no concrete results from that. What they have done is a vaccination campaign, but anything beyond that has not happened.

Q) How much assistance is coming in?

A) There are different figures on how much assistance we have because it comes from different agencies. Just the European community would be the housing program that comes to about a total of a million colones, or about one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Within some of the productive enterprises, the investments have been about five hundred thousand colones, or sixty thousand dollars. More generally, because I don't think I have the figures for each area, all the work we have done here has been through outside assistance. And it's not been through any governmental help. It's been through international assistance and solidarity.

Q) Is it up to the government to administer outside funds and deliver services?

A) It's been our experience that the government's use of funding has been handled very poorly. We have funding

for a two-year period. I'm not sure when it started, but it ends halfway through next year. But in terms of answering your question, we feel the government really has a responsibility to cover the social services, health and education particularly. In regards to assistance for the productive enterprises and the community work, I think that should go directly to the community. The government has always looked at this very suspiciously, even as belonging to the FMLN, so I don't think it would be good for them to handle that money.

On other kinds of projects such as health and education, we're not really sure where the Ministry of Education is. We've asked them for letters of support, and sometimes we get it, and sometimes we don't. It's a very shadowy kind of situation. It's hard for us to make decisions when there's no clarity. And there's also a difference, I think, between the response of involvement with basic healthcare here for the community, but they shouldn't be involved in our work to become more productive.

Q) Relative to the social control, relative to violations, meaning thefts, violence, or general uncooperativeness with the collective conscience or the agreements of a particular society, what type of social control would they have for these violations?

A) In terms of those who do not want to be part of the collective conscience or the collective work, they can follow their own individual work, do a little bit of farming, or put up their own individual stores, and there's no problem. There's another group that is also dedicated to more individual initiatives, and that is because the amount of work in the collective is not big enough to keep everyone productive. But to the degree that people work together or on their own is up to the people. There is space for everybody.

Since the cease-fire, there has been a growing social decomposition here, a slipping way. There's been more drinking, a little bit more theft, more street disturbances. It's

a large job to keep the public order here. If someone beats someone up, for example, and draws blood, that person will be arrested for seventy-two hours, and the victim, through a process, will be indemnified by the offender.

In anything that's more extreme, such as a death, there is a crew that investigates it here, and takes the information to the local judge and the judge would assess the information and decide if there is enough evidence to warrant issuing an arrest. In other cases, such as a young person who steals something, after we've done an investigation, there will be a meeting with the young person, and if he or she recognizes and accepts responsibility for the actions, there will be a general meeting, and the young person has to make a confession in front of the whole community. These are the different procedures we have to correct any kind of problems that come up.

The story of the people of Segundo Montes echoed much of what we had already heard at Tierra Blanca, Hacienda California, and Nueva Esperanza: the urgent need when the civil war broke out to flee the country to safety, the brutality of the Salvadoran Army and its "scorched earth" policies, the mixed blessings of years spent as refugees in a neighboring country, the desire to return to their native land to rebuild their lives, and finally what transpired when they arrived on Salvadoran soil with little more than the clothes on their backs.

The spokesperson's job was to paint a positive picture, but even if only half of what she said was true, Segundo Montes was a successful collective. They had managed to eke out a subsistence living with the support of the international community, had developed their own structure of democratic governance, and at the same time they were working on projects that would allow for future self-sufficiency.

Our plan, for the rest of the morning, was to visit several of those projects.