

# TALES OF WAR IN RURAL EL SALVADOR: A SOCIAL WORK RESEARCHER'S REMEMBRANCES OF POST-WAR EL SALVADOR

Margaret Oakes, Ph.D., University of Nevada, Las Vegas

*As another war explodes, the author recalls her trip to El Salvador where she worked as a research assistant on an international project on the health effects of war in rural El Salvador. The author weaves in stories from native residents with descriptions of the places she visited and her experiences in order to give readers a feel for the environment in which the war took place. It is an attempt to make both people and place take on real characteristics rather than the statistic representations that often are all that remain in our minds after a war.*

Before the war in Iraq began, I heard little of how the violence would affect inhabitants of that country. As I watched the war news on television, my mind wandered back to the time I spent in Nicaragua, during a war, and in El Salvador, after a war. I couldn't help thinking of the people of Iraq, those victims, whom neither the press nor the politicians mentioned, who would continue to suffer profoundly from the effects of that war.

As I watched the war against Iraq on television, reporters interviewed our soldiers but made only vague references to the thousands of civilians fearfully awaiting the bombs. My mind wandered back to the three small towns in El Salvador where I had collected data for my dissertation in 1995, three years after the war had ended. I remembered the tormented, plaintive stories of those simple country people, stories told in painful tones, where simple words stretched to wails and moans as they recounted their experiences during a twelve-year war.

## San Salvador

As a research assistant on an international investigation of the health effects of war, conducted in part through the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in San Salvador, I arrived at the guest house of the university. Next door, I encountered my first reminder of the war so recently ended, the museum set up in the former residence of the four priests

killed in the same place towards the end of the war. According to most accounts, death squads with associations to past government forces, who were supported and funded by our government, had carried out this murder. It was an eerie feeling. Standing where it took place I stared at vivid pictures of the crime scene. One of the victims, Ignacio Martin Baró, a priest originating from Spain and a social psychologist, would come up again and again in my research. He served as a priest for a time in one of the towns where I collected data and was deeply loved by those with leanings toward opposition movements during the war. His internationally published writings on the social effects of war became an important explanation of the effects of war, not only on individuals, but on society as a whole.

The second event, although not directly related to war, had links to violence inherent in the aftermath of war. The Department of Public Health, a newly formed department at the university and headquarters for the research project, had a brand new van donated by a German organization. A few days before our scheduled date to travel to the first town along the border of Honduras, armed men hijacked the van. The driver, a professor, managed to escape, leaving her purse and the vehicle behind. Violence and crime continued to escalate in El Salvador three years after the war in 1995. From reports from

those recently coming out of El Salvador, it continues to climb.

My trip to the countryside was postponed while new transportation was found, I waited in the guest house watching local television. Two reports of alleged "vampires" appeared on the nightly news. One was an excombatant turned criminal and quite dangerous, while the other was a mentally ill man acting out his delusion by biting prostitutes on the neck. What a strange form of violence, I thought. An eerie feeling crept over me as I knew both had taken place in the countryside, one not far from where I was to travel. Later, as I heard the many stories of mutilated bodies found on the streets and alleys during the war, some form of demonic explanation for such mayhem began to fit better

#### The Zone of Medium War Conflict

Finally, after the Department of Public Health borrowed a vehicle, we drove through the province of Chalatenango. Descending a winding mountainous road, a white church appeared in the center of an old-fashioned, storybook village, situated in a valley surrounded by mountains on the border of Honduras. The border meandered through a low mountain range in and out of the country of El Salvador. The population of this town had many personal connections to those in Honduras, and many of those relationships had been disrupted by war. Commerce flowed back and forth across the border, and surrounding villages considered this town a place of means, in spite of its extremely modest appearance to a North American eye.

As a guest in the house of two teachers who lived modestly, but well by town standards, I settled into my room off an open patio in the center of the house. A grand flower garden filled the patio, somewhat wild but very beautiful, with pink pillars surrounding it and a hammock strung in the open area of the house next to the garden. We spent nights sitting in *la sala*, the living room, in the front

of the house, which opened out onto the patio. It was protected from the quick rains that came down in the afternoon, but allowed the breezes and fresh air to help us live with the heat and humidity. The electricity came and went regularly, and it was best to turn the television on early, as, diminished power later would make it difficult to provide the initial charge it needed.

I had come prepared, having purchased a laptop to record my data. I attempted to hook it up, but as the electricity slowly ebbed and flowed, a computer began to seem quite inappropriate. This was a place where one writes by hand. Life meandered so slowly that the agitated existence associated with computers seemed somewhat unreal.

The professors who had brought me to town situated me in a government health post to conduct my interviews. Staff sent me respondents regularly, and although I continued to insist that this was a research project and not treatment, person after person arrived as if I were a regular part of the clinic. At home I worked as a licensed clinical social worker, but in this small town they called me a psychologist, even as I explained my profession. Social workers were few and never therapists. Most of the people had never seen a mental health professional before and might never see one again. They took the opportunity to consult with someone other than the fledgling doctor just out of medical school, doing his year of social service. Though I advised them over and over that this was research, not a consultation, some asked at the end of the interview how much they owed me.

Most townspeople had relatives who had migrated to North America, mainly to Boston and Montreal, but also to Los Angeles. In a survey I conducted with the high school senior class, 97% of them had relatives in the United States. One could see the influences, especially in the stylized dress of adolescents, with big baggy pants and male earrings.



Townspople had many connections with San Salvador, and during the war many family members traveled there. They talked of relatives who disappeared or died:

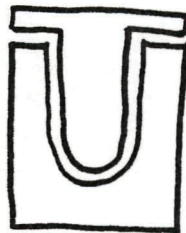
“My uncle was a student. He was going to get his title to become a lawyer. He came here to visit and we never saw him again. He returned to San Salvador. He didn’t arrive at the University. . . Now that the war has ended, we haven’t seen anything of him.”

On the last day of my stay, I hurriedly prepared to leave the health center to attend the special luncheon my household was preparing for me. Just then, a woman, age 65, ran into the clinic and demanded to speak to me. She then began to talk and didn’t stop for two hours, recounting her life—the difficulties of childhood, the problems with her marriage, and the traumas she had experienced during the war. She was a “*comerciante*,” a seller of goods, who traveled back and forth from this town to San Salvador on a regular basis. She talked about the bodies she had seen on the road, describing them:

“... On a bridge, before you arrive in Popa, we saw a girl, well dressed...stretched out, very well fixed up. (She began to demonstrate in spatial terms where bodies were placed). Here was a boy. He was there, and she was here, I remember. When we came to the bridge, there were two more dead bodies, a woman and a man, as if they were looking at you. And two other very young boys of 14 or 15 years...Then I got very bad, because I saw a dead child (smaller than the others)...He was sitting on a bench. He had on a green shirt with red leaves. And a woman with a man’s blouse. The child remained with a hand on the ground, with a face painted yellow and black. After the woman, (she came upon another body) a dead man was looking at her...”

Then she recounted a story of a child whose father was shot down in front of him and how his mother had fled with him to the States. The child had recently returned to town. I had met a young, English-speaking man in the combination telephone/post office, who had recently returned from San Francisco where he had been living for years. I wondered if he was the child in the story.

At the end of my stay, the local gossip reported that the North American woman would listen to all your problems and then give you medicine. No matter how I had explained things, the word still traveled, their needs and desires contained in the gossip.



### **The Zone of Low War Conflict**

I did not sleep in the second town as it was only a little over an hour’s bus ride from San Salvador. Early each morning, I waited for the bus, hoping that a large bus would come. I often had to settle for an ancient school bus, in which I did not fit, and had to hunch over and crowd into the tiny seat. The owner, a neighbor of the woman who hosted me during the day, owned the bus and often parked it on the street, just as a car. Although still a country town, this place had taken on aspects of the city. I saw signs on the walls in two of the neighborhoods of Mara Salvatrucha from a gang in Los Angeles, made up mainly of young Salvadoran immigrants. As people began returning home after the war, they brought with them many trappings of American culture, including youth gangs. I

even saw a sign for 18<sup>th</sup> Street, one of the largest gangs in Los Angeles, in which the majority of the members consisted of those of Mexican descent. In an area where unemployment rates were high, the nearby *zona franca*, or free trade zone, where American factories had been set up, contained the best jobs. The worst jobs could be found on the coffee fincas, where seasonal work paid poorly and the labor was difficult.

Ignacio Martin Baró, or "Nacho," as they affectionately called him, had been a parish priest here. As I heard the stories of him and how those I interviewed had loved this humble, sweet man, pictures of his gory death in the museum next to my residence rose up in my mind. He had tried to apply his form of liberation theology, which they described as developing relationships with the people and maintaining a caring, friendly attitude while developing projects for work and health. They seemed to be describing what social work is, often talking about as its mission. His death had been a communal trauma for those in the town who loved him. As he had written, war causes intense polarizations, so many others did not mourn him. Those who had even sympathized with the rebels lived uncomfortably with neighbors who supported the opposite side. Many, however, had just been nonpolitical victims and onlookers.

There had been no battles in this town but many, many disappearances. Respondents told of hearing morning reports of bodies found. They talked of the death squads, who, during the war, took people out of their homes, never to be seen again. They would sit and wait without moving as they heard the only cars allowed out in the streets after curfew drive by, and would hold their breath in hopes that the cars would not stop at their house. Bodies found became gossip, something people chattered about in the morning. Then they would go to see if the body was someone they knew. Children even began to go for curiosity. A respondent talked

about her fear of saying anything about these disappearances to authorities:

"If you had a problem, they could take you away, and you were done for. We walked with a huge fear."



Another talked about a family member taken away by the authorities or their silent partners, the death squads:

"In my family, a boy died in the *cumbre* (his body was found on the main hilltop or summit in town). They (the authorities or the death squads) went to take him from the house. He wasn't anything. He was just a drunk and, perhaps, the chief of the authorities didn't like him, because they killed all those they didn't like. He was a drunk, no more. Only because he got near a girl of his (relative of someone in authority), and he kissed her, and said something . . . and it bothered him (someone in authority)."

Each canton surrounding the main town had a health promoter who helped recruit subjects for my study. Everywhere, recruitment had been facilitated by my connection to the Catholic University. In one of the cantons, I sat around an outdoor table with a group of people: a health promoter, a man with a guitar, other neighbors, and family. They talked of the new priest, of whom they disapproved. He liked to hunt and had been connected to the army during the war. Those who flourished in the church of Ignacio Martin Baró, as did the guitarist, did not feel comfortable with the new priest. He had dismantled much that had been set up in

Martin-Baró's regime, including a sewing project, and had sold the donated machines. The husband of another health promoter, and an ex-military man, had been touching young women inappropriately in the church. The guitarist, the sad, gentle man who sat across from me, had confronted him. The ex-military man had, in turn, threatened his life, so he withdrew from the church. The wife of the ex-military man also helped me recruit in another canton, so I had to guard my information closely. The combination of potential violence left over from war, natural small town differences, and gossip exacerbated by differences in war, caused additional community problems. Even though this town saw no fighting, the trauma of war pervaded it, as this was a civil war, where everyone was suspect and terror methods were used to subdue the population.

### **The Zone of High War Conflict**

The first two towns seemed comfortable, ordinary little towns, could be almost anywhere, compared to the town situated in a major war zone. The road was unpaved and unlevelled for at least the twelve years of war and three after it. We traveled up and down hills and around curves on a road that consisted of a path filled with huge buildups of dirt much like tiny hills, boulders, and pieces of pavement sticking up out of the dirt, conditions that would test any shock absorbers. Still, old buses roughed the terrain, and we could feel our brain, stomach, and other organs rattling around on the trip. We arrived at night in the rain, the rain that was to haunt my stay there. Most of the town lacked electricity, but a small generator connected to the Catholic church lit up the plaza and supplied electricity for the TV in the church, where the local children gathered to watch. The constant rainstorms, however, frequently cut off this tiny bit of modernity.

*La colonia*, a new housing project where I was to stay, could not be reached at night

with the rain, as the mud paths were composed of clay, made worse by trucks used in building. The pitch-black night made navigating the road impossible. The clay mud stuck to one's shoes until they became twice as big, and if one wore sandals, as I did at first, a shoe often remained behind in the mud. My hostess, a sixty-five-year-old woman, lived with one of her daughters. The health promoter, another daughter, had found me the arrangements. The senora's husband and son had been killed in the war, the husband by the army because he did not want to leave his land. Thus it became a family of women, all hard working and striving to better themselves and their community. This new cement-block house had one room that functioned as a bedroom, with an open air, covered patio in the back that served as the dining area. It became a meeting place for women in the neighborhood to commiserate and share their problems.

The house sat facing the mountains with a lovely flower garden in between, made even more beautiful by the mountainous backdrop. As I admired the view, I hoped that I had packed my bathing suit so I could wear it to bathe in the stream, as the *colonia* did not have running water or plumbing. The clay soil didn't allow the water to seep into the earth, so latrines became difficult to use. The next phase in the ongoing construction funded mainly by the Catholic Church was the arrival of special latrines for such conditions. The project included reasonable loans that could be paid in ten years by those with very modest incomes. This seemed a far cry from the same church in the United States, much maligned by sexual abuse controversies. Here one saw the progressive side of the church, attempting to help and protect those suffering abuse.

From my backyard view, I could see the corn planted on the mountain. A simple, semi-literate, country people, they had lived in cantons deep in the mountains before the war.



Now, because of their war experience and their politicization, they seemed to have a worldly sophistication and intellect in spite of their simple, rustic manner. They had lived through the *guindas*, the flights during the war, when the army drove them out of their homes and pursued them, circling and slaughtering whatever and whoever moved. Many had died of hunger in these journeys, and those injured or crippled in war had to be abandoned along the way to save others.

One woman, as a young girl, had been lost in a *guinda* and ended up in a refugee camp in Honduras. She returned with a brother who came to get her, only to find that her father had died of hunger in another *guinda*. Ex-guerrillas were everywhere. With the army chasing people and massacring them, men ran to join the guerrillas. Even when safely settled in refugee camps in Honduras, teenagers, both male and female, fled to join the FMLN, the opposition army, often against parents' wishes. One of the respondents, a woman whose house I stayed at when in the center of town, had been one of those adolescents. She had been a nurse in the war, had terrible problems with a pregnancy in midst of a march in the hills, and had a friend unjustly executed. She still suffered from vivid flashbacks of war.

Their stories were overwhelming. It made the work of social work doctoral competition, and harried, tenure-seeking academic activity, seem petty and irrelevant. If a computer seemed out of place in the other town, it was absurd in this setting with gas candles and flashlights being the only nightlights.

At first, few men volunteered to talk, but little by little they came, until I realized I had interviewed more men here than in the other two towns. I missed an appointment with one young man due to a severe rainstorm and mud, and found out later that he had told someone, "I have so much to tell her!" I would have

never known by his affect. He appeared a simple peasant, originally from Honduras, young and gawky, with the smile of a Cheshire cat. The men, in spite of their *machismo*, seemed quite shy and reserved. The women, especially those I had most contact with, seemed the more sophisticated and the organizers. Most understood the complications and problems that life brought and wanted to move forward. Feminist ideology had only touched the women. But still, they had to grind the corn and make the tortillas to survive.

Respondents told of many, many accounts of massacres, killings, and dying in flight that happened during the war. A small group of 12, within the larger group of 28, lost 48 relatives in the war.

For those who experienced them, the *guindas* seemed to be the worst experience in the war. A man indicated that he felt much safer when he was mobilized in a guerrilla battalion. Another spoke of seeing the results of the *guindas* and finding the clothes of little children spread out on the trees, the cadavers of little bodies lying around. This he experienced as the worst of war. Older adults were particularly vulnerable during these flights. A woman spoke of her elderly parents running, hiding, spending time without eating so that when they arrived at the Honduran refugee camp, they had stomach problems and both died within a month (Oakes, 1998).

A woman spoke of her little girl who kept asking for sugar or soup or anything, but the soldiers had thrown away their food and there was nothing to eat or drink. The child died of dehydration. Another spoke of a woman traveling with her:

"Of all the children who were sick, there was a woman who had two children. We said to hug them to keep them warm. In two days the children died." (Oakes, 1998)

A man whose wife became so injured he had to carry her on his back while still having

to care for two children, described the final moments of having to abandon her:

“The army was spraying bullets and chasing us. They were going to catch us. Many people were falling around us. I had to carry her because she couldn’t walk. It was impossible. We were all going to die. She finally said, “No, you have to leave me. I want my children to survive.” At first I couldn’t do it. But I knew there was no alternative. If I didn’t leave her there, we would all die. So I sat her under a tree and carried the two girls on my shoulder and waist and ran as fast as I could to get away as the army descended on the place. We walked for days, and I saved their lives, but she died.” (Oakes, 1998)

The massacre at Sumpul, where the army slaughtered hundreds of people, took place not far from where respondents were fleeing, and many had heard about it (Americas Watch, 1991). From those stories, plus what had taken place before they left, they knew that the same fate awaited them if they were captured. Another talked of traveling with a newborn child suffering hunger and thirst:

“We didn’t have anything to eat, and now there were two children...The operative lasted 22 days. We ran. We didn’t drink water. I didn’t have any milk in my breast. I had to chew leaves of guayaba and put them on my breast so the water would fall in his mouth. Suddenly, here come the soldiers. We had to leave as best we could. Like cats.” (Oakes, 1998).

Perhaps, however, the most terrible story I heard I didn’t really hear clearly, due to the extreme stress and disorganization of the woman who told it, until I played the tapes at home. She appeared to be one of the most severely affected by events in war. She spoke of a large group of people who were fleeing the army and how they had to make a terrible

decision so that some could survive. She even switched from first person plural to third person plural throughout the telling, perhaps unconsciously trying to distance herself from the event:

“There were a lot of children. We were going to leave the children where these huge orasones grew. There they left a multitude of children. The smaller ones they left in the arms of the larger ones. The little ones, only sitting, and others were going to sleep, skinny as they were. They were a multitude of children. The largest sitting, others standing up, and those little ones sleeping. They left these children there, because if they didn’t, we were all going to die. The adult people said, we are going to run. Leave them there. Run, because there were mothers there who did not want to leave their children. They forced them to go...In a short while, we heard the gunfire and the children crying. The enemy was killing them. As we climbed, they killed the children. We ran more.”

It is hard to imagine that anyone participating in that event could get over it, could somehow resolve it, could come away without terrible trauma that would last a lifetime; neither the mothers who left their children to die, the other adults who organized the abandonment, nor the soldiers who killed the children.

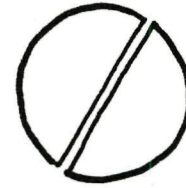
The health worker indicated that all suffered. She, herself, often felt lightheaded and had concentration difficulties. In all the towns, respondents talked of headaches and finally I, too, began to feel them. Perhaps the heat, the smallness of the towns with little means to escape from problems, and the pervasiveness of sorrow caused them. In the high war zone, I often felt the depression hanging in the air, so heavy was the mass weariness. Many, when they could get a chance, would flee to the city, either Chalatanango or San Salvador, to get away

from the pervasive gloom. Organized communally, the town attempted to provide services, such as physical therapy and massage, to help alleviate suffering. The daughter of my hostess became the mental health promoter, and a psychologist came from San Salvador to supervise her. The focus, however, centered on organizing adolescents. While in itself a noble idea to avoid future problems, it did not provide those suffering with help. All had depleted psychic energy and thus did not have enough of their own reserve to support those whose coping mechanisms had broken down.

As I left the house of my last interview, before returning to the modernity of San Salvador, the rain continued, the rain that mixed with the clay until you felt as if you were drowning in the rain and mud, the mud that made one's shoes stick to the earth, the mud that made the outhouses nonfunctional. I began to feel as if I were in the Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel *Isabel Viendo Llover en Mocambo*, where the rains came so hard and lasted so long that inhabitants watched as the town floated by and time became distorted (1968). But then the next day the sun shone brightly and the heat enveloped us, unfortunately, without a cool soda in sight, as no ice existed in town.

When I returned to San Salvador, after taking the opportunity to get a ride in a comfortable car, I began to feel guilty for having left without interviewing the young man who had so much to tell me. I had little time left and had to get to the other town to collect data for a survey. Back in San Salvador, I tried to call the telephone/post office, but the phones were down due to the rains. At that moment, I felt that perhaps all this research might be less important than talking to someone and helping him/her through such a difficult time. The social worker in me called, even as I prepared for my career in academia. Now, years later, even the public health staff at the university has not been back to the town, as

dangers and travel difficulties mount. I often think about the town and wonder if the outhouses have been built, if running water ever came to the *colonia*, and if the people have ever recuperated from their trauma.



### Reflecting Back

As I reflect on the three towns, I remember most vividly the trauma of the high war towns, but also how they had changed. They had seemed, in spite of their illiteracy and simple peasantry, a more worldly wise population. Their town had a communal structure that had built in mechanisms for support, even if not sufficient emotional support. The other two towns had levels of experience and suffering similar to each other. Those who suffered most suffered in silence and isolation, as any other manner could have brought danger to them. Although the suffering did not pervade the community as deeply, they seemed less likely to rise above it and develop new ways of thinking, of being, than those of the high war zone. For a time, those in the high war zone, although terrible victims of war, also stepped out of their victim role to organize, to fight, and to develop new identities that included different ways of seeing themselves in the world. These respondents seemed to have shed their identities of victims. The same was not true, however, of the victims of the two towns who experienced the war more on the sidelines, who were not actively involved and did not participate.

Now eight years later, I have watched our government fund another war based on ideological doctrines, political hegemony, and economic interests, while espousing more noble causes, just as it did in El Salvador so



many years ago. In the beginning, our government said the war in Iraq would be of short duration. But as the casualties mount, there is no end of the violence in sight. As we mourn the American soldiers killed, thousands of Iraqi civilians suffer trauma directly. They have watched or will watch others die, fear that the bombs or explosions have killed or will kill or maim themselves or their loved ones, or have seen or will see the dead bodies of their loved ones blown apart. For the Iraqis, memories of this war will last a lifetime and, like the suffering of the Salvadorans, few in the United States will remember or care about their suffering for very long.

Although Iraq is a different, much more urban environment, there are some parallels to El Salvador. Despite the need for talk about trauma in all countries that suffer the effects of war, it is not easy to begin. Resistance is great, and, for some, pushing the past back and not talking helps them go on. For others, that is not possible. Public health campaigns about trauma, its manifestations, and aids in recuperation are important in areas where individual therapy may be impossible and unrealistic. Populations need to understand that what they are feeling is normal, given the abnormal circumstances, and acceptance of such expression in those that continue to suffer needs to be cultivated. That is not easy in populations wearied by war with depleted emotional resources for coping. But the wisdom, and the need to make meaning out of such horrific events that comes from such experience, needs to be tapped into to help others who are suffering. The communal nature of their trauma could aid in recovery.

## References

- Americas Watch (1991). *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Garcia Marquez, G. (1968). *Isabel viendo Llover en Macondo*. Buenos Aires. Estuario.
- Oakes, M. G. (1998). *Traumatic Effects of War in Rural El Salvador, a Field Study*. University of Texas at Austin. Dissertation.

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.