

# LIFE IN REVOLUTIONARY NICARAGUA: THE BIRTH OF MY RESEARCH INTEREST IN WAR TRAUMA

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*The following narrative describes a three-year period of time the author spent in Nicaragua, and how her interest in war trauma—first as a treatment challenge and then as research—came about. During the first Sandinista period, she encountered one young man after another suffering from war trauma and was moved to want to treat them. An opportunity arrived and she began working part-time, treating young men who were returning to high school after their compulsory military service. As a result of her experiences, she decided to pursue a PhD in Social Work in order to pass on her understanding of war trauma to others.*

Massive changes in countries brought on by the upheaval of revolutions and civil wars happen off and on in the world. The Nicaraguan revolution in 1979 began with a wave of intense popularity with a people who had endured a repressive dictatorship for years. It lasted for twelve years—from 1979 to 1991—which brought about many structural changes in the society, with many attempts at reducing the difference between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” It was an ambitious project imbued with a great deal of energy and naiveté. I lived and worked as a social worker in Nicaragua from 1986 to 1989, and had previously spent four months in 1984 visiting. My interest in war trauma came from encounters with young men I met in Nicaragua who suffered from it. Prior to going I had been exposed to information on the developing political movements in Central America and resulting wars, as well as groups watching those revolutionary movements. I had traveled and studied Spanish in Mexico years earlier, and had always wanted to work in Latin America.

## **Historical Background**

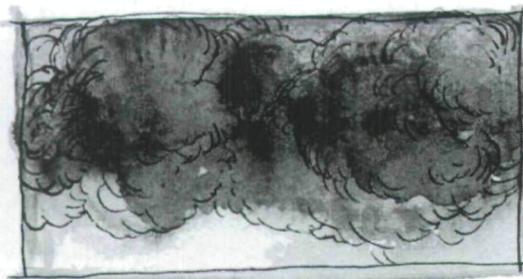
The Somoza family—a dynastic, military dictatorship spanning decades—included both a father and son. They received a great deal of aid from the United States. The father began his reign in the early 1930s, with the son staying in power until the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista

de Liberación Nacional, or FSLN) overthrew him in 1979. Like many revolutionary organizations, the FSLN consisted of several groups with differing ideologies and methodologies, with a common enemy that finally brought them together. According to someone I met from Guatemala who had been involved in an antigovernment political movement in that country, there was a great deal of surprise in the Central American leftist community when the Sandinista National Liberation Front gained power, as some thought the FSLN was less prepared than other movements in Central America.

The population had grown very tired of Somoza’s abuses. Prior to the revolutionary triumph, a battalion of 160 FSLN combatants entered the small northern city of Estelí for the second time. The rest of the guerrilla forces, occupied elsewhere, ordered them to retreat, which seemed impossible with their small numbers. The population in the street had already begun an insurrection; when the combatants retreated, 3,000 civilians joined them. Somoza’s army allowed the retreat as they mistook the civilians for a large fighting force (Ramirez, 1988, & Cordova, 2009). Not long after Somoza’s forces assassinated a well-known journalist from a major newspaper family, the entire country rose up against the regime.

Only five years from a successful revolution, euphoria on a societal scale was common, and helped people cope with the

trauma. Rapid social changes like the improved status of women and the shake-up of a rigid class structure had made many feel more empowered. People gathered regularly in demonstrations for the farmers, the women's movement, and a variety of other organizations to which large numbers of society belonged. Chants echoed across the plazas as different groups brought their own variety of celebration. The new society had created new ways of dealing with trauma, which existed alongside more traditional manners of dealing with it from years of suffering.



### My First Journey to Nicaragua

As a Spanish-speaking social worker practicing in the Child Psychiatry Department of the University of Southern California/Los Angeles County Medical Center, I had seen many clients from Central America, a few of whom were from Nicaragua, with the rest being from El Salvador. I had also known people who had gone to Nicaragua to witness the change brought about by the revolution.

The revolution had not moved me personally until I went to a talk by Allen Bolt, a charming and sincere man who was the Director of the Nicaraguan National Theater. He spoke about the blossoming of art and theatre in the new Nicaragua, and I had been impressed by the image this man presented of his country. It was so different from the vague ideas I had heard, which had left me with only a harsh militant image. A member of a health worker's organization focused on health rights for Central America asked if any health workers in the audience had interest in working in Nicaragua for a short time. I had been planning a long trip to South America and thought, why not use my skills as a Spanish-

speaking Psychiatric Social Worker and see Nicaragua at the same time.

North American organization for health rights in Central America brought North Americans to a conference in Managua to observe and participate. In talking with the representative from the health rights organization, I was advised that it might be wise to go to Nicaragua and observe before actually working there. One of the attendees, a New York psychiatrist, wanted to stay for a week after conference in order to observe the mental health system. The health rights organization made arrangements for me to interpret for him. What was to be the first phase of a trip to South America soon became the focus of my journey, and I remained there for four months.

In the summer of 1984, I arrived in Nicaragua with a sense of curiosity and desire to travel. I did not have a hotel reservation, so I had the cab leave me in front of the Intercontinental Hotel in the center of town. Though it was at eleven o'clock at night, people were still milling about in the warm tropical air. There were teenage soldiers and police dressed in dark green uniforms, with the brims of their hats pressed up at the sides and their pants stuffed into high black boots. They seemed just a part of the environment as soft friendly smiles spread out over their coffee-brown faces. Three-pocketed brown bags, pistols, rifles, and even machine guns hung across their backs and sides, but those childlike smiles and loose, flowing walks made the actual use of those weapons in this environment difficult to envision.

People talked to each other with ease in this casual, friendly ambience; there was no feeling of danger at this late hour. A young Sandinista soldier approached me and struck up a conversation. His manner was relaxed, unlike my concept of a soldier standing rigidly at attention and talking minimally while on duty. He seemed filled with an air of optimism. He told me of some of the problems of the revolution, such as when they ordered a fleet of buses—with no access to spare parts—which left the buses inactive for periods of time when they needed repairs. Those parts

proved difficult to obtain later on, and the buses often remained inactive.

As I continued to walk around Managua looking for a hotel room in a city overcrowded with foreigners, the night air was filled with the sweet buzz of voices. This noise level was present throughout Nicaragua, and its warm, inviting quality made me feel a part of the outdoor tropical life. I passed more adolescent police on the way to a guest house that had been recommended, and began to feel that I had stepped into a country run by the world's largest student government.

During my stay, I visited churches, nightclubs, beaches, and small towns, and rode buses, which gave me the opportunity to talk with Nicaraguans of varying backgrounds. People from all parts of the globe (Western Europe, Latin America, even Africa) gathered in this poor, third-world country to observe and participate in this new social experiment. History was being made before my eyes, something I might never see again in my lifetime, and it drew me in. I stayed for four months and decided to search for a way to return again the following year, as I had heard about a small organization that funded work in Central America.

On the plane back to the United States, I met a Nicaraguan woman married to an American who lived in New Orleans. She told me:

I try to explain to my husband, who is a conservative Republican, that the Sandinista Revolution is not what he thinks. Why, I remember when I visited Managua after the triumph, people would gather in the park and just get high on talking about the old days under Somoza, how bad they were, and how they had won. No alcohol, no drugs, no music, they just got high on remembering."

In the early years of the revolution, these were common feelings. I had arrived towards the end of that period. That first trip, though, I remember watching crowds of youthful celebrants milling around the Plaza of the Revolution on election eve in 1984. A young

Sandinista supporter commented, "Before the revolution in a public event like this, gangs would come and fight each other." There was no fighting that night nor in any of the other gatherings. People wore Sandinista T-shirts to the rallies, on the buses, and to school. Even at the psychiatric hospital, professional workers talked about the latest style of T-shirt and where you could get it.

But far from Managua, in the mountains of Nicaragua, those same youths who in earlier times may have been fighting in the plaza, were now in a life-and-death struggle in a war zone. I met many of them throughout my stay: all with different stories, all expressing the experience in different ways, but all leaving a lasting impression on me.

### Introduction to War Trauma

My research interests were formed during those first few months in Nicaragua, when a Canadian friend asked me to talk to someone who had come back from the front and was suffering from war trauma. She invited me out that evening to a generic open-air restaurant/bar/club, the most common form of gathering place in the steamy tropical climate almost devoid of air conditioning. The man my friend was dating hoped I could talk to him, as they both doubted he was receiving adequate care.

Juan, a twenty-two-year-old Sandinista soldier, had recently recovered from a near fatal encounter in a bombing. On leave from the army and under treatment until his nerves calmed down, he could not eat or sleep, had nightmares, and could not stay in one room for too long. Crowds made him panicky, and flashbacks of war came regularly. That night we all went out to hear music. Since there was no office or desk between us, the full force of his trauma hit me on a very powerful level.

Juan walked toward us; his slim body had hard, sinewy muscles from five years of fighting in the mountains. His huge, dark eyes shone as he smiled, and I felt myself drawn into their intensity as they flashed in pain. He joked around a lot, but I noticed that he moved constantly and that pressure resounding with each note of his laugh.

Juan made a half laugh, half strangled cry as he jokingly told the story of killing a Contra who was laughing at him. He then told us a story about a 14-year-old boy who had drowned crossing the Coco River. Juan had been his commander, the chief of a battalion, and felt responsible for him. Then he mentioned his girlfriend, who'd been killed in battle while he was away on a mission. His staccato, uneven speech and the soft, lost look on his vulnerable, childlike face, made him seem younger than his years.

Suddenly, he could not sit still. We began walking down the street as he continued, "My cousin was killed on that corner." Then he turned and said, "There's a good film playing at the Cine Dorado." He started walking faster. "Hey, Mario," he yelled to his friend close by, "Doesn't that look like Maria Julia? But it's not, I guess," he said, his smile fading. "She's dead." As he walked faster, his footsteps beat a rhythm on the pavement.

Later, while drinking a beer, he began talking again of war. "Did I tell you about the time we ran into the Contras and both sides ran the other way?" His grin stretched wide across his face, his eyes wide with what at first seemed a happy look, but at second glance revealed glazed eyes looking out in terror. A panic grew inside and rose swiftly.

"The walls are coming down on me! I have to get out of here!" A soft touch to his arm had brought him down a few other times that night, but now it had gone too far. As he left it was obvious he was trying not to run; he was holding back, yet still walking faster than a run in a 10k race.

Shortly after we all boarded a bus he suddenly cried, "I have to get off!" As he pushed past people crammed together, he moved like a small, slim tank. He shoved his way off the bus and into the open air, the mountains in the distance quietly calling him back to war.

"I don't want to kill," he cried, "I can't stand it any longer!" Yet by the next week he had returned to his army barracks, yelling, pressing, and almost assaulting, trying to get back in.

I left determined to return to live and work there. In Los Angeles, I spoke to numerous

groups accompanied by another woman who talked about women rising up against oppression. My speeches and slides had more to do with the young men who were suffering so much from a war our country supported.

### **Return to Live and Work**

Approximately a year later, I returned to Nicaragua with a small foundation that was funding numerous workers in a variety of settings throughout Central America. They did not have administrative staff in the field and wished to remain somewhat anonymous because of intense political issues around Central America in the United States. When I first arrived back in Nicaragua, I worked for a new mental health clinic for children, funded by an Italian organization

Catastrophic trauma is a part of daily life in Nicaragua. Earthquakes, wars, floods, and devastating economic problems rippled through the tiny country with a vengeance that would destroy less resilient lands. I returned after one year of waiting for papers to be processed so that I could work. However, the euphoria that I remembered from my previous year had faded, as war and economic blockade began to take its toll. The rebel forces called themselves the "Nicaraguan Resistance," made up of various organizations opposing the Sandinistas, while the Sandinistas called the rebels the counter-revolutionaries or the "contras." The United States—which sent funds to the contras—had also instituted an international trade blockade. Although I met numerous people in Managua who were not in agreement with the Sandinistas, I met few who indicated that they supported the contras. The contra fighters themselves had bases in Honduras and never walked openly in Nicaraguan cities and towns.

In spite of the war, thousands of young people from around the globe came to observe this social experiment. Non-governmental organizations from Europe, Canada, and other countries finally had the opportunity to establish influence in a former American colony. During my stay and for months and years after my return, I diligently wrote about my experiences; many of which provided the basis for the reflections in this paper.

One day after I'd been there a short time, I drove with the director of a French Canadian organization (an NGO) back to Managua from a small city, Jinotepe, after dropping off a young Canadian worker at her appointed worksite. While driving along the road, we saw signs marking a military zone. At an army checkpoint, a guard stopped us to check our identification, then asked if we could give a soldier a ride. A young man, sweating from the heat, climbed in. Four canisters filled with ammunition hung across his chest. Dressed in a jungle camouflage uniform with the brim of his hat folded up at the sides, he wore the uniform of the irregular army (BLI) made up of draftees and other recruits. He pulled in a large, green pack with a sleeping bag tied to it. This ride constituted the final lap of his descent from the mountains after ten months of fighting. The intensity of his glassy eyes was heightened by his staccato voice as he spoke a special Nicaraguan slang; so familiar, but always difficult to understand.

"Ya pues," he said, an expression used much in Nicaragua without an adequate translation. (The literal translation is something like "well now," but that is not really the sentiment expressed.) Ten months of abstinence, dreaming, and living on adrenaline as his unit chased Contras through the mountains—making life and death a momentary happening—produced a tension, an energy in this twenty-year-old boy. Sexual vibrations jumped through the air.

"Vos tenes ninos? Vos sos casada?" he asked in a verb tense that comes out of an older Spanish, changed somewhat through the ages. *Vos* in Nicaragua is used as the familiar second-person singular tense instead of *tu*. He was asking, "Are you married? Do you have children?" The sexual energy at once drew me in and warned me off as it blended together with tones of friendly violence.

"Pues, what am I going to do when I am through with this war?" He repeated my question. "Well, if I survive...." This phrase repeated throughout his conversation, often followed by a hard, loud laugh. Then he jumped back into his staccato, lively, joking conversation. The pain, the death, and the terrible loneliness lay buried beneath the glassy

eyes, the cocky manner, and forceful movements. His voice slowed down, and his eyes seemed far away as he repeated sadly, "If I survive." But the melancholy evaporated with the next laugh. He climbed down the back of the jeep, "I'll see you again," he waved, "if I survive." The smile faded as he jumped off the back of the jeep and took large, swinging steps down the road, bent over by the heavy pack on his back. With a furrowed brow, stooped shoulders, and a heavy gait, he seemed a lonely, lost soul as he disappeared down the road. It was as if he carried the mountain with him.

I soon met another soldier, a boyfriend of a friend—Sergio, age 27—whom I began to see more as a warrior from ages long past. I spent time talking to him, and listened to his girlfriend as she told me his many difficulties. A militant of the Sandinista Front, he began fighting before the revolution triumphed and continued. By 1986, he had been fighting more than seven years. He had made his decision long before 1986 to fight till death, unless the war ended.

He had horrific nightmares of war and felt that death was haunting him. His girlfriend explained that he drank bottles and bottles of rum and only slept two hours at a time, and that when he woke up he would immediately look for his gun. A doctor told him he should quit the army, but he said, "And who will carry on the fight, if all of us with haunting fears decide to go?" He believed that all soldiers suffered the way he suffered, and that if they all quit, it would be hopeless. "No. I will fight to the death," he said, "but where and when will it come?"

He tried to use his political beliefs to shield himself from the trauma he felt, but he had seen too much and fought too long. No matter what a person's psychological strengths, the human mind can only take so much. Most people succumb to severe psychological trauma, or what has become known as complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

This young man as well as others I met were suffering from war trauma, which is a more common way of describing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The name of this disorder has changed throughout the

ages—soldier's heart, shell shock, battle fatigue, combat fatigue, combat trauma, or post-Vietnam syndrome—but the symptoms have remained the same. In the 1980s, PTSD was just beginning to be discussed at mental health centers in Los Angeles; in Nicaragua, very little was known. When I first went to El Salvador in 1992, I met a psychologist who was quite hostile to this Americanization of their pain.



### Opportunity as a Trauma Therapist

The more young men I met with this intense trauma, the more drawn I was to the idea of helping them. With the distrust of Americans and the cumbersome bureaucracy, I wasn't sure how to help, but soon an opportunity crossed my path.

An American woman I knew, an ex-Catholic nun, was living with a group of American nuns in Leon. She told me that the Preparatory (high) School, associated with the National University in Leon, was looking for someone to counsel students who had returned from their mandatory two-year military service (the draft). In 1987, I began working two days a week in Leon, one of the two city-states that dominated Nicaraguan politics before Managua finally became the capital. In the following vignettes, all names and identifying information have been changed to protect the privacy of these individuals.

The Preparatory School, a special project of the Sandinista revolutionary government, was designed to train *campesinos* from the north to enter the university. A large number of students from the first graduating class entered the medical school in order to replace the exiting upper-middle classes, who had fled with their families to the United States for political and economic reasons. These young men were future doctors; they had never experienced the wealth and accessories of either a doctor's life, nor that of the middle

class. They would return to their homes to treat their people—the peasant farmers of Nicaragua—in their own land. They would understand their problems, their lives, and would live with them. Their focus was centered on developing their community. In addition to the medical school, these students also entered the agricultural and dental schools. Services in these three fields were sorely lacking in the countryside.

All students had scholarships and lived in dormitories on campus. Their main worries were of not being able to help support their families while they were away. All felt their families had food, but very little else. They worried about mothers who either lived alone in war zones, or with fathers who had aged prematurely due to physical impairments from hard labor and war. Often, there were younger brothers and sisters who still needed care. Some felt themselves the most responsible sibling, compared with brothers who did not take enough responsibility for their families. Others had brothers at war, or sisters off at school or raising families of their own.

All of my clients in this school felt they had a responsibility to their revolution, their people, and their country, all of which had equal importance. No one that I met in the school, including the administrators, seemed to be focused on personal power. I have often wondered what Nicaragua would be like if the promises made during the revolution had been kept, allowing these idealistic, egalitarian young men to progress in either the country's structure or in that of the Sandinistas?

Esteban, one of my first clients, left a lasting impression on me; partly because of his impish character and partly because of his intense suffering. He came up to me immediately after a meeting of "*los desmovilizados*" (those who had finished military service) where I explained the help I could give. He pointed to his head and pounded on it as if to show me where the problem was. Esteban was from the mountainous country in the north, and had joined the army at the age of 13, right after the triumph. He loved to shoot and kill Contras and protect his beloved revolution. He wasn't afraid to go into battle; in fact, he said he felt wonderful with a rifle in his hand, scouting for

the enemy. But he also had a profound sadness about him and an innocent child-like quality.

He recounted finding a house where Contra fighters had slaughtered young children and an old man. To him, the Contras represented no less than the devil and needed to be destroyed for inflicting cruelty on such innocent people. He spent a total of six years at war, from ages 12-16 and then again from ages 17-19. The years that are usually spent developing one's identity, he spent amongst blood, death, and violence.

Although he had seen and experienced things even old men had never seen, he exhibited arrested development in many areas. His best friend was 13 years old. He could not sit still, got up and left class regularly, and made inappropriate comments in class. On the surface he exhibited bad conduct; yet underneath the veneer, he suffered severe headaches, which he described as feeling like a clamp on his head separating his brain down the middle. He could not sleep at night, heard voices calling behind him in the daytime, and jumped at small noises. He often experienced flashbacks of violent war scenes in the middle of the day while fully awake. He had the worst case of PTSD in the school.

He wanted so much to be useful to the revolution, to study and help in some other way, but he could not concentrate on his studies, could not read for any length of time, and constantly relived scenes of war in his head. Therapy and certain drugs (which he did not take for any length of time due to side effects or his own suspicions) calmed the voices and the flashbacks, but his concentration did not return. If he couldn't be a doctor and return to the north to help his people, he wanted to go back to war where he knew he could do a job well, even though he realized that it would destroy him. At times the pain was so great he wanted to die. He said he could not go back to his home in the mountains, which was in the middle of the war zone. The Contras knew him and where he lived, so he was sure they would attack him and his family if he returned. But he could not study, and could not pass his classes in spite of having a quick, intelligent mind. The school finally dropped him to make way for another, less-damaged young man,

and he returned to the north, one of those destroyed but not killed by the war.

He suffered from all the symptoms of chronic PTSD, or from a new condition that had not yet been codified, which consisted of multiple, continuous trauma, and delayed grief. He actually heard voices—often called hallucinations—which is not criteria for PTSD. These voices may have been an extreme form of auditory illusions brought on by unbearable anxiety. They seemed very nonspecific and had no persecutory aspects. Therapy helped him a great deal, but it did not make him better. It had also greatly affected his identity formation, as he had never had a chance to develop as a normal adolescent, and now could not move on to normal adulthood.

The army mobilized the students for a few days due to an incident nearby. I advised the director that Esteban should not be among those who went. It broke his heart as he saw the others leave, but I knew it would have been dangerous for him and possibly for others. His story, perhaps more than any other, allowed me to see inside the mind of someone so damaged by war trauma.

For weeks as I settled into my new office, pregnant clouds hung in the air, announcing the coming raining season. The suffocatingly hot, humid air caused me to sweat profusely, making me feel slow, heavy, and sleepy. Nicaragua made me understand why people in the tropics take siestas after lunch. A friend told me that your brain function slows down considerably when spending a lot of time in intense, humid heat. Lunch became a daily necessity; I needed to ingest quantities of salt in order to hold water in my body so that I wouldn't become dehydrated. Eventually, I obtained one of the few available fans at the school so that I could withstand the heat during our sessions.

Another client, Omar, limped into my office one day, holding a crippled arm at his side. He placed it on the table in front of him and sat down. He had been at war several years before the draft had been instituted. He had been shot in the head, and the bullet was still lodged in his brain. At first he had been out of control and almost psychotic, but had finally calmed down. Other students sometimes

laughed at him in class for his inappropriate answers to questions. During our sessions he had no trouble talking and showed no signs of impaired intelligence. However, there had probably been brain damage, personality change, and learning impairments both from his physical wounds and the psychological trauma associated with them. He exhibited signs of both psychological and physical brain trauma.

The revolution was the most important thing in the world to him. His intense seriousness, devoid of any humor or lightness, could have been a sign of physical brain trauma. He desperately wanted to do something useful for the revolution. This need appeared to help him deny the severity of his disability. The army would no longer accept him with his serious physical handicaps, and the school could no longer carry him because of his learning problems. He had overcome most of his serious depression and sense of worthlessness, but still he could only fantasize about performing glorious deeds.

Omar imagined himself working as an internationalist: a concept the Sandinistas spoke of often, meaning one who goes beyond borders to make the world a better place. To him, this international setting would take him beyond the bureaucratic laws of armies, schools, and everyday reality. In that ideal environment, his impairments would be overlooked; people would need him because he believed in the greater good and wanted to make the world a better place. He would work to end poverty and feel that he was a part of something useful. The chance that he would accomplish his goals seemed slim, but these hopes helped him get through his difficult life. I did not have the heart to discourage him, as I felt it would only undermine his attempts to survive in a world that offered him so little.

He continued to fantasize and used denial as a defense mechanism, pushing away reality as best he could. Normally, I would attempt to help him develop more realistic goals, but no alternatives seemed possible for him, as Nicaragua did not have adequate treatment (nor training) for brain injuries. From a clinical perspective, pushing him into a more realistic view of the world was dangerous, as he

appeared quite rigid and fragile and had earlier been almost psychotic.

While Nicaragua accepted those with physical disabilities fairly readily—as disabilities from war, poverty, and lack of adequate health care abounded, and they were not isolated from society—those who had been traumatized did not get much help in order to succeed. Omar's somewhat grandiose thinking made it difficult for him to explore possibilities more appropriate for one with his disability. He, in turn, helped me understand what damage war can do to the brain, for which I had no tools.

The next young man, Oscar, walked into my office wearing a caustic, crooked smile. He had a stiffness about him that reminded me of an angry young man I had known in high school. When asked about his worst war experience, he recounted a day he had been on border duty with the frontier guard or border patrol. Four men walked about ten feet in front of him, one of them being his chief. Suddenly, he heard and saw a huge explosion. One of the men had stepped on a land mine; within seconds, a small group of disfigured bleeding bodies stood in front of him, still alive. His chief, who was missing an arm and half his face, called and began talking to him. He was telling Oscar something that seemed important, but his garbled, incoherent speech was impossible to understand. As he watched, his chief pulled a paper and pen from his knapsack and began to scribble on it. He held out the paper in his bloody remaining hand. Oscar drew back, fearing to touch the mass of mangled flesh, but instinct took over and he grabbed the paper. As he looked down at the incoherent scribbled lines, the man fell down dead. He looked over at the others. Another man had died in these few seconds as the other two lay mangled; one garbling something inaudible as he died.

Every night since that incident, he reenacted the experience in his dreams. That evening I went back to the house where the nuns lived (where I stayed one night a week) the story reverberating in my head in all its graphic horror. I sat down with an American nun and repeated the story. She just looked at me afterwards, grimaced, and said, "Ick, that's horrible!" "Too bad," I thought, "I just had to

get it out." I couldn't hold it in for another minute. It seemed necessary and therapeutic for me to tell it to another person, even if the response had been less than therapeutic. I had only heard the story, but I still needed to pass the horror on to another. However, Oscar desperately needed a sympathetic person with whom to share his horrible trauma.

In the next session he felt relieved; he no longer had the nightmare, but still remained tense with headaches. The desperation had disappeared, but in its place came anger, mistrust, and resistance to going further in treatment. When confronted with his anger, he acknowledged it. I have told his story many times in classes when talking about trauma, to show the importance of allowing clients to share their stories with another and have the therapist hold a part of it for them, which is the first step in trauma work. For me, it became evidence that the sharing indeed proved beneficial, and that experience urged me to continue on with such work.

Later as I sat at my desk, I looked up to see a tall, thin, ordinary-looking man with curly, brown hair. When he sat down and began talking, his eyes became large and intense and the sound of his voice, both soft and strong, gave off a quality of control. Gradually, his persona made him seem handsome. He had been in many battles and felt that he had not been damaged by war, but instead had gained much from his experience. He clung to his beliefs, and seemed to have come through unharmed. Two of his brothers had been killed, as well as several good friends, but he vehemently explained that it had all been necessary for the revolution. Though he experienced headaches and had trouble concentrating, he was greatly relieved by each session and looked forward to them, working very analytically—if not always emotionally—as he had learned to do in his political work. He seemed to defend himself with intellectualization, but coped in an active manner, as he did in the rest of his life. Taking active steps, including coming to treatment, helped him to move on. He also had an ability to concentrate on the positive, which seemed to protect him from the more adverse effects of war. He never delved into the great horrors

of war, but did deal with the sadness of death of those closest to him; feelings which he could at least defend against. I made no attempts to get at what was buried more deeply in his psyche; his defenses were strong and, along with his cause, they protected him. Working with him enabled me to see how I could assist even those who, on the outside, appeared to have no problems; that everyone suffered from wartime experiences and could be helped.

### **Nicaragua's Effect on My Future Work**

I missed Nicaragua greatly when I returned to the United States. In 1992 I had the opportunity to travel to El Salvador as part of a human rights investigation to be submitted to the Truth Commission of the United Nations at the end of the twelve-year civil war. It may not have been Nicaragua, but I was returning to Central America for a short stay, and would write the psychosocial part of the report on the effects of civilian bombing on the victims and their families. Again, I came into contact with the effects of war on the human psyche. One of the major reasons I decided to pursue a Ph.D. was to learn how to write for scholarly journals about these matters, as I knew little of the format or research methods necessary. I also developed an interest in teaching social work at the university level, having also first taught at a university in Nicaragua. I decided to attend the University of Texas at Austin, because of its well-known Latin American institute. I wrote a grant for a professor funded by the institute, which enabled me to travel to El Salvador as a research assistant for an ongoing research project on the health and mental health effects of war. From the material I collected, I wrote my dissertation. Now I teach social work at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and my favorite class is one I developed on the effects of war on individuals and communities.

Students have told me stories about friends or boyfriends (or themselves) who are suffering from those same effects now that we are deeply involved in two wars. I relate stories to them about some of the young men I have treated (names and identifying characteristics changed, of course) and

wonder how they are all doing now. Although the reasons for the wars are different, the effects on those participating in them remain the same. Finally, as the politics have faded, I look back on my time in Nicaragua, and realize that it is where so many life changes began for me.

### Nicaragua Now

I returned to Nicaragua in 1992, and then again in 2007. The days of war were long past; now other economic and social problems were on everyone's mind. The city of Managua is very different now, after experiencing enormous population growth and subsequent traffic jams from the number of cars on the road being tripled. It is now much more dangerous. The city has more material goods, and working- and middle-class people seem more prosperous. The poor are still very poor, and crime has risen a great deal. Like many countries with an available abundance for some—seen by all but out of the reach of many—the only way to obtain it may be to rob and steal or live a life of crime. Gone are the days when one could wander the streets safely, even in the late evening. Managuans even speak about the risks of taking a taxi in mid-day, necessitating the use of “neighborhood taxis,” where one only boards a taxi if it's driven by a familiar driver.

The northern city of Estelí, the revolutionary outpost where bullet holes at one time adorned the main cathedral, is now a sprawling, congested city, bustling with traffic and commerce. Even Palacaguina, a tiny country town beyond Estelí, has changed. Years ago, as I drove into Palacaguina and stopped my car, a young girl came up to me and asked if I also drove an airplane. She had seen few cars in this small pueblo, and had never before seen a woman drive. Although some residences still have no running water or electricity, Palacaguina now has a cybercafé where I could send emails to the United States. As I traveled through the new Nicaragua and watched the new generation go about their lives, I observed other aspects that were very different than the Nicaragua of my past. Cell phones, restaurants, and clubs now abound, while human conditions such as

grinding poverty and the precariousness of life remain much the same.

### Reflecting on it All

As I reflect on my experience at the *preparatoria*, I remember how different it felt to treat the students compared to treating some of my clients in Los Angeles. In spite of their terrible trauma, these students seemed easier to treat. Working with them was less emotionally draining because, unlike many of my clients in Los Angeles, they did not feel like victims. They struggled on every level to overcome the obstacles of life in rural Nicaragua. They attempted to alleviate the poverty around them through political actions and beliefs. They tried to better themselves by going to a school that would lead them to university and careers beyond what they could have imagined in their small, isolated villages in the northern mountains. They constantly grasped for new ideas and ways of being in the world, despite limitations placed on them by childhoods filled with poverty, deprivation, war, and loss. I sometimes wonder if I could have overcome such obstacles, and if I would have been able to keep struggling, in spite of serious psychological symptoms. They seemed empowered by their struggle.

My life in Nicaragua was a vivid experience that included many difficult episodes. These included hunger at night with nothing to eat but occasional leftover rice and beans; traveling in overcrowded buses where one stood up, often for several hours; water cutoffs several times a week; shortages of basic necessities such as gasoline, car parts, and the chemicals needed to make decent shampoo. Clothing stores and food variety were practically nonexistent. On numerous occasions I got caught in quick floods where I had to park and wait out the storm. There were times when I had to help sweep water out of the center of the house as it flooded. Hot, humid weather of 40 degrees Celsius with little air-conditioning anywhere had to be endured.

Despite these challenges, the most difficult experiences were not only hearing about war trauma, but seeing tiny babies in health clinics suffering from severe malnutrition, and walking into the toddler room of the local children's

shelter and having fifteen two-year-olds run up to try and climb on me, all crying out, "Mama, mama!"

Nicaragua changed my worldview forever. When I returned to the U.S., it was difficult to face a country that had started the war. Americans seemed to feel no remorse for the pain and trauma caused by their actions. I had seen those who lived at only a basic level of material existence, and yet managed to live and love with as much vitality and difficulty as those in the U.S. who had vastly greater means. For a time, it helped me understand what was important in life beyond the material.

Now, twenty years later, I have returned to a North American way of being; the effects of Nicaragua have diminished. Still, it remains one of the most intense periods of my life. I vividly remember not so much the difficulties of that time but the joys. Exciting adventures remain clear: hitchhiking trips around the country and meeting people from all walks of life; evenings at the bustling open-air restaurants where the air was filled with sounds of guitars and marimbas; New Years day excursions to the tropical Pacific beach at Pochomil. I met people from countries around the globe, and watched change happen at lightning speed as intense emotions and lasting friendships created remarkable memories of life in revolutionary times. Mixed throughout all these recollections are the young men who left an imprint on me that led me on, to know more about trauma and to do something about the effects of such dramatic events. As a result of that period, I decided to conduct research and write about war trauma, as well as teach social work at a university level, as I had in Managua.

The revolution was less about Daniel Ortega and the commandantes at the top of the party, and more about what happened at an everyday level of existence and the hope it gave to some, if not all, of the people. As a Nicaraguan woman said on my last trip, there are changes that happened during that era that will endure and cannot be erased. This includes the plight of women, especially those who participated in the struggle. They have not only gained more rights and have more to say, but

have developed more versatile self images, which have helped them continue the struggle to improve their circumstances. They have passed this attitude on to their daughters.

The revolution was a communal struggle, where you did not think of your individual goals, nor how you could be better than the next guy. Rather you focused on the larger whole, working toward something better. Living and working in Nicaragua, I gained much more than I ever gave.

The Sandinistas have returned to power, at least the upper echelons of that movement, but they cannot bring with them the spirit of euphoria of the early days. That spirit cannot be created from above, but grows from the ground level. I think those now in power have much to learn from those below them—such as the young men of the *prepa*—who struggled valiantly for their cause. Whether this happens is yet to be seen. It has not happened yet.

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