Violins Against Violence

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A view of Suchitlán Lake through the doorway of a small Suchitoto café. Photos by Steve O’Neill and Erik Ching.
Sister Peggy O'Neill's work sends a message of peace and hope to a war-torn country — and challenges others to a more purposeful life.  

By Mary O'Neill

"VIVA LA PAZ! VIVA LA PAZ!! VIVA LA PAZ!!!!" We work our way up to a shout (there are only five of us), and our voices roll across the rocky, empty slope — it once was the village of Copapayo — and bounce down into the water of Suchitlán Lake.

We sit on a concrete foundation, an exception among what had been mostly adobe structures. It's the only remaining evidence of the 120 families that eked out a living on this arid hillside. A ghost-colored cow, ribs poking out, sidles over for a look.

It's February, El Salvador's dry season, but the lechuga — water lettuce — forms dense mats along the shoreline, impassably thick in a small ravine about 30 yards from our spot. In the early morning of November 3, 1983, that lechuga, normally a nuisance to boaters and fishermen, became the villagers' only lifeline.

By then, nearly four years into the Salvadoran Civil War, government forces had targeted the area for scorched-earth repression. Copapayans had seen mutilated body parts left as warnings on doorsteps. They instinctively dove for cover at the sound of an airplane. They had grown accustomed to sudden evacuations, thanks to rebel scouts who warned them when state death squads were on the approach.

That November was nothing new — a secret tip-off, a quick exodus, a hide-out. After a few days, the Copapayans gingerly re-entered their village from the lake, ferrying families through the vegetation two boatloads at a time.

Once nearly 150 people were ashore, the ambush began. Two lines of government soldiers descended from the hilltop, in a vee formation, firing M-16s and cannons on the unarmed villagers who stampeded back to the two canoes in a fruitless effort to escape. The Salvadoran army threw grenades directly into the boats. A lucky few grabbed the lechuga and floated underneath.

The massacre at Copapayo was one of many perpetrated by the elite Atlacatl Battalion, a fearsome counterinsurgency unit led by Lt. Col. Domingo Monterrosa. On average, 1,000 civilians a month were murdered by the Salvadoran army in the first half of the civil war. The most notorious human rights violations by Atlacatl troops included a six-village rampage at El Mozote in 1981 that left 800 civilians dead; the 1989 slaughter of six Jesuit priests, their cook and her daughter; and the attack on Copapayo.

The 70-odd survivors on shore, mostly women and children, were rounded up for torture — a forced march, starvation, rape and, finally, execution. No agency, no official commissioner, came to take the final toll, but it is presumed to be 142 murdered.

The sole survivor of both phases of the atrocity, then nine years old, is one of our little group this sunny afternoon. Rogelio Miranda is not shouting "Vendetta!" or epithets at Monterrosa, but "Viva la Paz!" — Long Live Peace. He is joined in that sentiment by another Copapayan, Mercedes Menheva, who had reluctantly evacuated just before the killing, and by Sister Margaret Ann "Peggy" O'Neill, a 75-year-old American nun who has found her life's mission in this traumatized society.

"They stretched my soul," she says. "I needed people who were humble, strong, courageous, honest and willing to weep — but to hold on to each other." Just after her arrival in 1987, as gunfire rang in the streets, she and a fellow nun told each other, "The women will take away our fear." Only later did they discover that the women of the village were saying the same thing about them: "When the sisters came, they took away our fear."

"That's really this definition of solidaridad. It's a new word for love," Sister Peggy says. "Even Jesus needed a gang."

SISTER PEGGY is turbo-charged by her mission. Her jeep clatters from a meeting with the local mayor to her teaching post at Central American University in San Salvador, and all points between.

Much of her seemingly bottomless energy, however, is funneled into the Centro Arte para la Paz (Art Center for Peace) in Suchitoto, a cobblestoned, colonial town with majestic views of Suchitlán Lake. The site served as a convent and school before violence forced the previous order to flee in 1980. In the last eight years Sister Peggy has transformed the property from an abandoned, tumble-down shell into a centerpiece. Surrounded by bougainvillea, the center now boasts a museum and gallery space, an indoor/outdoor café, meeting rooms, music rooms, a skateboard park, a large conference hall, lodgings, a peace garden, and a 19th-century chapel on its way to restoration.

Its aim is to foster peace through creativity, holistic and therapeutic
practices, cross-cultural exchange and educational events. "Well, if you say conflict mediation, who's going to sign up for that? We use beauty instead," Sister Peggy explains. "There is something intuitive about making music, making art. Violins against violence."

Though the fighting officially ceased more than 20 years ago, "El Salvador as an entire nation is still deeply traumatized by this war," says Erik Ching, who heads Furman's study away program in Latin America. "The whole nation has PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder], and violence seeps in and pervades society as a result. Sister Peggy is meeting that head-on."

The center serves a radius of 82 villages with programs for adults and children, ranging from drama therapy and yoga to guitar lessons, dance and primers on Gandhi. Many activities, like the self-healing approach called Capacitar, or the simple recounting of the past as practiced by Rogelio and Mercedes, fit any age.

And any country. "We're telling people to resist violence, " Sister Peggy says. "But how do you creatively resist? How do you deal with the fears and the processes you go through to resist gang recruitment or to resist running for the easy way out? Look, there will always be violence in me, in each of us. But there's an art with touching your own violence. How do I deal with it? The older I get, the more I think the Beatitudes are about geography. Where do I stand? Am I on the side of people who are longing?"

**FURMAN STUDENTS**, introduced to Sister Peggy and her work through visits during study away programs, have taken her message to heart.

Ali Boyd '11 is the legal coordinator for Annunciation House, a migrant shelter in El Paso, Texas. "I am living in solidarity with people who are torture survivors, who are fleeing violence and death squads, just as they did in El Salvador," Boyd says. "The crimes are the same, with state complicity just as in El Salvador. The whole study abroad experience with Sister Peggy was formative for me. I can trace my vocational evolution to her."

Sister Peggy makes clear that the destruction of Copapayo isn't only about Salvadorans. At the start of each visit to the site, she leads students in a reflection on Mexico, Darfur, Syria — widening a circle of compassion to include fellow sufferers across the world.

"We must see and feel the pain to want to do the changing, to be a part of the new birthing. Think about a meaningful life, not just a comfortable one." A broader audience — Furman's 2013 graduates, their friends and families — heard that encouragement from Sister Peggy in May, when she received an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree and gave the Commencement speech.

"Get a life, a real life — not just the manic pursuit of the next promotion, the larger house, the greener lawn, the bigger paycheck... Get a life where you are not alone. Find people you love, and who love you. Get a life in which you are generous. Give yourself away," she urged the graduates. "Pig out on life!"

Matthew Sturz '10, now in medical school at the University of Chicago, returned to Suchitoto for an additional six weeks after his study abroad experience in El Salvador in 2008. "I was overwhelmed by the generosity and friendliness of Latin Americans," he says. "I was welcomed there even though I didn't speak the language very well, and when that's juxtaposed with the intolerance leveled at undocumented populations here — and to imagine them facing a health issue here on top of that intolerance — a shift took place for me. It meshed with what we learned about liberation theology from Sister Peggy and shaped my focus on accessibility and availability issues in our current national healthcare policies."

Ching has been marveling at Sister Peggy's impact for 10 years. "The change you get to see in students — they always find her captivating," he says. "She somehow manages never to offend and always to inspire, even as she's saying the most provocative, challenging things. No one reels back. They jump in."

"We all have conceptions about what a nun is — reserved, wearing a habit," says Celeste Peay '13, who traveled to Suchitoto in 2012. "She is so gregarious, filled with vitality and energy. All of her days were crammed full but she was present every second that she was with you. You feel rejuvenated after talking with her.
“She’s a perfect example of what it looks like to live out your passion. She calls us to a more challenging life, but the most rewarding one.” After she completes medical school and a master’s degree in public health, Peay intends to practice in Latin America.

**SISTER PEGGY** took her vows with the Sisters of Charity a little more than 50 years ago. After earning her Ph.D. she became the chair of the theology department at Iona College in New York. She took a sabbatical in the mid-1980s to teach and serve across Latin America, and her love affair with Salvadorans — “They nourish and astound me” — began. “Wherever the need is, I’ll go, but there was a chemistry there,” she explains. “Plus there was a classical music station! That was the last thing that I checked off. Done deal. I can survive anything with good music.”

By the fall of 1987 she had resigned her faculty position and started helping Copapayans return to El Salvador from Honduran refugee camps. She has run medical supplies to hiding guerillas, defied armed soldiers, thwarted kidnappings and brought bodily remains — sometimes only severed heads — home to anxious mothers. “We were not brave. We were just doing little things that amounted to bigger things,” she asserts. “You just didn’t think.”

Those so-called little things continued even after the peace agreement was signed in 1992. The basic amenities the peasants fought for — education, tillable land, water, housing, healthcare — had to be implemented. Sister Peggy works alongside her Salvadoran friends and creates jobs at the center in Suchitoto as they try to move out of survival mode.

“In North America, we’re so interested in whether there’s life after death. But their question is, ‘Why isn’t there life for everybody before death? Why can’t we have life instead of just survival?’ That’s what they ask me here,” she says.

At the Art Center for Peace, there is life before death. Salvadoran cooks make fried plantains for conference-goers, a choreographer teaches 40 rapt teen-agers new dance moves, and carpenters measure beams for more renovations.

“When you hear someone like Mercedes speak now — an incredibly articulate, motivated individual who is politically astute and speaking out publicly — you’re seeing the power of community organizing. She’s a living embodiment of the transformation in that area,” says Ching.

Sister Peggy’s next target is a performing arts venue at the center. “To somehow continue the dream of having young people realize opportunity, to have horizons just being stretched, to have them spinning around in their bodies and shouting! There are a couple of kids we really could send to play the harp professionally. And we have saxes, two of them, but no sax teacher. Maybe Bill Clinton could come,” she jokes.

Over a mango-coconut smoothie at the center’s café, Sister Peggy cites lines from a favorite poem by Mary Oliver:

“When it’s over, I want to say: all my life I was a bride married to amazement.”

She explains: “I hope they can say about me that I died on the last day of my life — no sooner — that I continued to wonder, to struggle and to grow. Some people really give up long before they’re put in the morgue. If I could just be a bride married to amazement to the end, you know?” [F]